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Out-of-school Contact with L2 English: Perspectives from Language Learners

Contacto con el inglés como L2 fuera del aula: perspectivas de los aprendices de lenguas

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This paper aims at analyzing learners' perspectives on the improvement of reading, writing, listening, speaking, vocabulary and grammar with out-of-school contact with L2 English, their interest in including out-of-school activities in the classroom, the type of activities learners report doing out of-school and their perception of the advantages and disadvantages of using out-of-school activities in the classroom. Four groups of participants took part in the study (secondary education, baccalaureate, state language schools and university). A mixed-methods approach has been followed. Findings indicate that the four groups perceived improvement in all skills but not in grammar and that all groups are interested in including out-of-school activities in the classroom. The activities they tend to practise out of the classroom involve mainly listening. Finally, improving their English skills, having fun and learning socially are the main advantages they report, while the loss of attention and learning incorrect grammar are the main disadvantages.

Keywords: *Out-of-school contact; learners' perceptions; out-of-school activities; informal learning; skills.*

El objetivo de este trabajo es analizar las perspectivas de los alumnos sobre la mejora de la lectura, la escritura, la comprensión oral y escrita, el vocabulario y la gramática con el contacto fuera del aula con el inglés L2, su interés por incluir actividades fuera del aula en el aula, el tipo de actividades que dicen realizar fuera de la escuela y su percepción de las ventajas e inconvenientes de utilizar actividades fuera del aula en el aula. En el estudio han participado cuatro grupos (educación secundaria, bachillerato, escuelas oficiales de idiomas y universidad). Se ha utilizado un enfoque de métodos mixto. Los resultados indican que los cuatro grupos perciben una mejora en todas las destrezas, pero no tanto en la gramática y todos los grupos están interesados en incluir actividades fuera del aula en el aula. Las actividades que tienden a practicar fuera del aula implican principalmente la comprensión oral. Por último, la mejora de sus conocimientos de inglés, la diversión y el aprendizaje social son las principales ventajas que señalan, mientras que la pérdida de atención y el aprendizaje de una gramática incorrecta son las principales desventajas.

Palabras clave: *contacto fuera del aula; percepciones de los aprendices; actividades fuera del aula; aprendizaje informal; destrezas*

1. INTRODUCTION

Web-based communication has opened a new path towards second language learning. The walls of the classroom have been broken down and learners can now have unlimited contact with the L2 outside their formal classroom instruction. In recent years, the area of second language acquisition has turned its attention to the effect of out-of-school contact in the acquisition of English as an L2. Studies tend to focus on the different types of out-of-school activities learners engage in and the frequency of exposure to those activities (e.g., Hannibal Jensen, 2017; Muñoz & Cadierno, 2021), age and gender-related differences (e.g., Muñoz, 2020), the relationship between their exposure to English and measures of their linguistic proficiency, especially among young learners (e.g., Lindgren & Muñoz, 2013; Azzolini, Campegher & Madia, 2020), motivation (Leona, Van Koert, van der Molen, Rispen, Tims & Snellings, 2021) and the effects of audiovisual input (Gass, Winke, Isbell & Ahn, 2019; Wisniewska & Mora, 2020). While most studies tend to focus on the frequency of exposure to out-of-school contact, Sockett (2014) mentions that the first step towards research in this area is to know the language learner. Thus, it is relevant to understand learners' views. Knowing the activities they engage in out-of-school is key to understand the type of skills they practise. This also provides information for the future design of teaching materials based on their out-of-school exposure.

Although there are studies on classroom activities promoting social networks, which show that the use of social media in foreign language teaching is a reality (e.g., McDermott, 2013; Wiemeyer, Grosskuth & Zeaiter, 2014; Pikhart & Botezat, 2021), it is beyond the purpose of this study to analyse the use of social media in the classroom. Our intention is to focus on the type of out-of-school activities they engage in, but it is also necessary to know their perception of whether extramural online activities contribute to language learning. For this reason, we also look into whether learners are open to using out-of-school activities in the classroom and what advantages and disadvantages they observe in this option. Moreover, including four different educational levels (secondary education, baccalaurate, state language school and university) allows us to observe any differences across groups. With this purpose in mind, the present paper aims at analyzing the perceptions that learners from four educational levels in the Spanish curricula have of the contribution of out-of-school activities to their L2 learning, their interest in including those activities in the classroom, the different types of activities they engage in and their views on the advantages and disadvantages of including them in the classroom.

The study is divided as follows: Section 2 focuses on informal learning background, section 3 deals with out-of-school activities; Section 4 includes the study's methodology based on quantitative and qualitative research; Section 5 deals with the analysis of results; and section 6 provides further discussion and concluding remarks.

2. INFORMAL LEARNING BACKGROUND

Informal learning can be defined as an intentional conscious activity to achieve specific skills in a job (Cross, 2006). However, not all authors agree on its intentional purpose. Sockett (2013) considers that informal learning tends to be incidental, as several studies support (e.g., Tissot, 2004; Stevens, 2010). This means that learners may be unaware of the learning effects of the activities they are undertaking outside the classroom. As Sockett and Toffoli (2012:11) state, it is an unconscious process which "involves the learning of English from internet-based resources". Nevertheless, Sockett (2013) also points out that online informal learners may be aware of vocabulary gains since they are able to perceive, encode and produce chunks of

language they have been exposed to. This implies that although learning is incidental, learners may be conscious that learning is taking place. In fact, in Sockett and Toffoli (2012) learners claim to improve their listening comprehension and fluency thanks to listening and online chat activities. Larsen-Freeman and Cameron (2008: 135) suggest the use of 'emic' learner-centered approaches in order to obtain the perspective of the participants in a study. This can be conducted, for example, by means of self-reports using a questionnaire or a blog. In Sockett (2013) participants blogged their experience with online informal learning. Nine female students, with a B2 and C1 level of English participated in the study. Findings showed that the participants preferred to attend to meaning rather than to form and they tended to group information to facilitate a task and used a variety of contexts (e.g., TV series, Facebook). This helps to recognise patterns and imitate them, like chunks of language in TV series. They also used interaction to learn new structures. As they try to communicate, which is their main aim rather than language learning, learning may happen as a by-product. This study shows that learners consider informal language as a characteristic of their interactions in the net. Participants also report that fear of making mistakes constrains them to take an active role. It was also observed that, with time, participation in a forum requires more intimacy and makes learners move to private chats. As can be observed, this study shows evidence of their perceptions of informal learning and how the learning processes take place.

3. OUT-OF-SCHOOL ACTIVITIES

Sockett and Toffoli (2012) consider that it is paramount to investigate how widespread out-of-school learning is and what the main areas of the field are. In order to know the frequency and type of activities learners use, Toffoli and Sockett (2010) conducted a study among university students in 2009 and they repeated the survey in 2012, focussing on their exposure to communicative skills, listening being the most common. The types of listening materials students claimed to use were TV series, music on demand and films, with series-viewing increasing between the two surveys. Reading was less frequent and so was writing. Speaking was mainly conducted with voice on IP services, like Skype and written interaction took place mainly through Facebook, Myspace and Twitter. Sockett (2011) highlights that online chat, posting text or images, sharing media or commenting on the posts by other users are the most common activities. All of them involve cognitive processes like attributing status to an item or transforming information (Sockett & Toffoli, 2012: 38). In most studies, methodologies use questionnaires (e.g., Sockett & Toffoli, 2012; Muñoz, 2020) and diary writing (Hannibal Jensen, 2017). For example, Muñoz (2020) analysed age and gender differences in out-of-school contact in a group of 3,048 learners of English in the context of Catalonia curricula including three groups, younger adolescents aged 12-24, older adolescents aged 15-17 and adults aged 18 to 39. Her findings revealed that the most common activities involved listening to songs, as previous studies have shown (e.g., Barbee, 2013; Lindgren & Muñoz, 2013; Peters, 2018), followed by watching YouTube videos, reading on the internet, writing on the internet, playing videogames and watching movies with L1 subtitles. Younger adolescents tended to show lower frequencies of exposure than the rest of groups, however, age preferences were connected to the type of activity. While adults preferred reading, adolescents largely chose games and songs. Similar results were found in Peters (2018). Books and magazine reading were not frequent activities carried out by adolescents. This powerful study points out that future studies should also focus on what learners exactly do when they undertake out-of-school activities.

4. THE STUDY

The present study analyses four curricula contexts: secondary education, baccalaurate, state language schools and university. It follows a mixed-methods approach, including a quantitative test and a qualitative study. The quantitative analysis explores their views on the improvement of the four skills, including vocabulary and grammar through out-of-school activities in the classroom. In addition, they were questioned about the types of activities. The qualitative analysis aimed at looking into the advantages and disadvantages of using out-of-school activities in the classroom.

Thus, the study stems from the following research questions:

1. Do learners perceive an improvement of the language skills (reading, writing, listening and speaking), vocabulary and grammar with out-of-school contact?
2. What type of activities do they report doing out of school?
3. Are learners interested in including out-of-school activities in the classroom? If so, what type of activities would they like to include?
5. What do they consider are the advantages and disadvantages of using out-of-school activities in the classroom?

4.1 *Participants*

Four groups of students from four different educational levels have participated in the study: a group of 38 students (11 female, 17 male, mean age: 14.8) in their final year of compulsory secondary education (SE); a group of 25 students (12 female, 13 male, mean age:16) in their first year of baccalaurate (BAC); a group of 32 state language school (SLS) students (21 female, 11 male, mean age: 38.7) studying level C1 according to the European Framework of Reference for Languages —state language schools are public teaching centres dedicated to language teaching in the Spanish context. Their students must be over 16 and the schools are allowed to provide official certificates that correspond to the levels of the Common Framework of Reference for Languages, which are recognized throughout the national territory—; and finally, a group of 18 University (UNI) students (15 female and 3 male, mean age: 19.8) in their final year in the Degree of Foreign Languages at a Spanish University.

4.2 *Research instrument*

The questionnaire consists of closed and open-ended questions which focus on their frequency of contact with films, music and videogames, reading, writing and speaking, the type of activities they engage in, and on their views of out-of-school contact with English. It was adapted from previous studies conducted by Hannibal Jensen (2017) and Muñoz and Cadierno (2020). The questionnaire was first piloted in a group of ten students. After the piloting a modification was added: a question regarding which out-of-school activities they did most was included. The present study only analyses four questions in the questionnaire: their perceptions on the effects of out-of-school contact on the improvement of the four skills, including vocabulary and grammar; their perceptions on including out-of-school activities in the classroom; the type of activities they are exposed to out-of-school; and their perceptions of the advantages and disadvantages of using out-of-school activities in the classroom. Teachers were sent the questionnaire by email. Students filled in the questionnaire in class. They were allotted 20 minutes to complete the task. Participants were asked to answer all the questions and they were informed that their answers would exclusively serve for research goals.

5. DATA ANALYSIS

Chi-square tests have been used to analyse the results on the perceptions of the effects of out-of-school contact in the improvement of language skills, vocabulary and grammar, and on the perceptions on including out-of-school activities in the classroom across the four groups. The significance value is set in $p < 0.05$. This type of test was used as our data are categorical and chi-square shows the relationships between categorical variables.

The types of activities they are exposed to were coded in an excel file so as to analyse the frequency of occurrence of each of the activities. Finally, thematic analysis was used for the qualitative analysis on the advantages and disadvantages of using out-of-school activities in the classroom. Following Braun and Clarke (2012) a six-phase approach was used: (1) familiarising with the data; (2) producing codes; (3) searching for patterns; (4) reviewing theme; (5) defining themes; and (6) connecting themes and interpreting the data.

6. RESULTS

6.1 Perceptions on the improvement of the language skills, vocabulary and grammar

Table 1 shows the percentages of occurrence of the language skills the participants considered they improved by being exposed to out-of-school activities. A chi-square analysis was conducted so as to observe any differences across groups.

Table 1: Perceptions on improvement with out-of-school contact

GROUP	LISTENING	READING	SPEAKING	WRITING	VOCABULARY	GRAMMAR	ALL OF THEM
SE	25	13.9	19.4	16.7	16.7	2.8	5.6
BAC	27.3	25	15.9	11.4	18.2	2.3	0
SLS	28.6	19.8	11	12.1	19.8	4.4	4.4
UNI	24.4	20	8.9	4.4	31.1	2.2	8.9
Total	26.6	19	13.9	11.9	20.6	3.2	4.8

Note: SE= secondary education; BAC= baccalaurate; SLS: state language school; UNI=university.

As can be observed, Table 1 shows that the skill they consider to learn the most is listening, followed by vocabulary, reading, speaking and writing. In contrast, participants do not claim to learn grammar to a large extent. Results revealed similarities across the four groups regarding their perception of improvement in the skills of speaking, χ^2 1.361, df 3, $p=0.715$, reading, χ^2 0.476, df 3, $p=0.924$ and writing, χ^2 4.248, df 3, $p=0.236$, as well as the learning of grammar, χ^2 2.044, df 3, $p=0.563$, and all of the skills (all of them), χ^2 5.643, df 3, $p=0.130$. In contrast, a significant difference was found in the skill of listening, χ^2 9.976, df 3, $p=0.019$. The SLS group considered that they improved the listening skill to a larger extent than the rest of groups. In the BAC group, a significant difference was also found in the learning of vocabulary, χ^2 13.824, df 3, $p=0.003$, i.e., this group claimed to learn vocabulary to a smaller extent than the rest of groups, still they reported improvement in vocabulary acquisition.

6.2 Types of activities practised out of school

The participants in the four groups were asked about the different types of audiovisual material, videogames and music in English they were exposed to out-of-school, as well as the different types of reading, writing and speaking activities they engaged in. The frequency of occurrence of the activities that each of the groups reports practising out-of-school are included between

brackets (in Tables 2-7). The frequencies indicated here show the number of times these activities were mentioned by the participants in the different groups. It must be said that this was an open-ended question and not all participants provided an answer. Table 2 shows the types of audiovisual activities learners reported being exposed to and the number of times those activities were mentioned by learners.

Table 2: Types of out-of-school audiovisual activities

SE	BAC	SLS	UNI
Films (5)	YouTube (16)	YouTube (17)	YouTube (14)
	Netflix (15)	Netflix (15)	Netflix (10)
	Tiktok (12)	Films (9)	Films (6)
	Films (1)	HBO (6)	Series (5)
	Series (1)	Series (4)	Tiktok (3)
	HBO (1)	News (4)	Cartoons (1)
		Amazon prime (2)	Twitch (1)
		Teds talks (2)	Instagram (1)
		Tiktok (1)	
		Cartoons (1)	
		Instagram (1)	
		Twitch (1)	
		Podcast (1)	
		Facebook (1)	

Note: SE= secondary education; BAC= baccalaurate; SLS: state language school; UNI=university

SE students do not claim to be exposed to a large variety of audiovisual input. In contrast, BAC students reported watching YouTube and Netflix to a larger extent. SLS students also make use of YouTube and Netflix. The same applies to UNI students. The SLS group seems to be involved with a larger variety of audiovisual activities. Table 3 shows the results of the different types of videogames learners were exposed to.

Table 3: Types of out-of-school gaming activities

SE	BAC	SLS	UNI
Among us (4)	Among us (2)	League of Legends (1)	League of Legends (2)
Fortnite (4)	Fortnite (2)	GTA (1)	Fortnite (1)
League of Legends (3)	League of Legends (1)	Star craft 2 (1)	
Fifa (3)	Pokemon (1)		
GTA (2)	Omegle (1)		
Rainbow (2)	Rocket League (1)		
Siege (2)			
Valorant (2)			
2k (1)			
Games of war (1)			
Sky (1)			

Note: SE= secondary education; BAC= baccalaurate; SLS: state language school; UNI=university

Playing videogames is not a common type of activity in the groups across the four educational levels. Both the SE and the BAC group claimed to play a larger variety of games. In contrast, the SLS group only claimed to play three types of games and the UNI group only reported playing two types of videogames. In general, exposure to gaming activities is scarce. Table 4 shows the types of out-of-school activities related to music.

Table 4: *Types of out-of-school music activities*

SE	BAC	SLS	UNI
YouTube (23)	Spotify (21)	YouTube (17)	YouTube (12)
Spotify (21)	YouTube (10)	Spotify (13)	Spotify (12)
Vinile (1)	Amazon music (1)	Radio (7)	CDs (2)
Apple music (1)		CDs (5)	Apple music (1)
Essound App (1)		Apple music (1)	Mp3 (1)
Deserez (1)		Prime music (1)	
Radio (1)			

Note: SE= Secondary Education; BAC= Baccalaurate; SLS: State Language School; UNI=University.

Out-of-school exposure to music happens mainly via YouTube and Spotify. The BAC group showed to be mainly exposed to music on three platforms. In contrast, the rest of groups claimed to use a larger variety of platforms, especially the SE group. However, in the SE group only one occurrence of each type of activity was found. Table 5 shows the results of out-of-school exposure to reading.

Table 5: *Types of out-of-school reading activities*

SE	BAC	SLS	UNI
Song lyrics (15)	Online pages (19)	Online pages (34)	Online pages (13)
Online pages (14)	Books (9)	Books (16)	Books (10)
Books (6)	Song lyrics (7)	Song lyrics (14)	Song lyrics (4)
Comics (2)	Emails (1)	Comics (2)	Magazines (2)
Magazines (1)	Apps (1)	Magazines (2)	Comics (1)
Online Shopping (1)	Comics (1)	Forums (1)	Twitter (1)
Short stories (1)		Apps (1)	
Twitter (1)			
Online newspapers (1)			

Note: SE= secondary education; BAC= baccalaurate; SLS: state language school; UNI=university.

Reading online pages, song lyrics and books is a common activity across all groups. All groups show diversity concerning reading practices, but SLS and UNI students seem to prefer reading books to a larger extent than SE and UNI students. Table 6 shows the results of writing activities.

Table 6: *Types of out-of-school writing activities*

SE	BAC	SLS	UNI
Chats (19)	Chats (9)	Emails (10)	Emails (6)
Stories (8)	Copying texts (5)	Copying texts (5)	Chat (4)
Twitter (6)	Twitter (3)	Chats (4)	Copying texts (4)
Copying texts (4)	Instagram (2)	Stories (1)	Twitter (2)
Emails (4)	Emails (2)	WhatsApp (1)	Stories (1)
Instagram (4)	Messenger (1)		Messenger (1)
Snapchat (1)	Computer games (1)		WhatsApp (1)
Online messages (1)			Tandem (1)
Computer games (1)			Translation (1)
			Writing poetry and fiction (1)
			Snapchat (1)

Note: SE= secondary education; BAC= baccalaurate; SLS: state language school; UNI=university.

Chats are used by all groups but they are more frequently mentioned by SE and BAC students. The same applies to emails, but they are mainly used by SLS students. The four groups engage in various writing activities, but the UNI groups seems to be the most active in

engaging in a larger variety out-of-school writing activities. Table 7 shows the results for speaking activities.

Table 7: Types of out-of-school speaking activities

SE	BAC	SLS	UNI
Speaking with friends (10)	Speaking with friends (6)	Speaking with friends (10)	Speaking with friends (9)
Online (7)	Online (2)	Skype (6)	Online (3)
Speaking with family (4)	Videogames (1)	Speaking with family (3)	Skype (2)
Skype (1)		WhatsApp (1)	Speaking with family (2)
Playstation (1)		Teams (1)	

Note: SE= secondary education; BAC= baccalaurate; SLS: state language school; UNI=university.

As Table 7 shows, speaking activities do not seem to be widely practised by any of the groups, but speaking with friends in English seems to be the favourite activity across groups. Platforms like Skype are not widely used, although six occurrences are found in the SLS group.

6.3 Interest in including out-of-school activities in the classroom

Table 8 shows the percentages of occurrence of participants' views on including out-of-school activities in the classroom.

Table 8: Results on including out-of-school activities in the classroom

GROUP	YES	NO	NO ANSWER
SE	81.6	15.8	2.6
BAC	60	24	16
SLS	43.8	37.5	18.8
UNI	61.1	38.9	0
Total	61.1	29.2	9.7

Note: SE= secondary Education; BAC= baccalaurate; SLS: state language school; UNI=university.

All groups agreed that they would like to include out-of-school activities in the classroom. A significant difference was found in the SE group, χ^2 16.824, df 6, $p=0.010$. SE students claimed that they would like to include this type of the activities in the classroom to a larger extent than the other groups. Participants were also asked which activities they would like to include in the classroom. Raw figures in brackets indicate the frequency of occurrence of the different types of activities, i.e. the number of times each of the activities was mentioned. The following results were reported: SE students would like to include films (19), Tiktok (9), videogames (9), Instagram (9), Twitter (3), Discord (1), song lyrics (1), and speaking to English people (1). As for BAC students they suggest to include films (9), Tiktoks (5), Instagram (5), Twitter (2), videogames (1), snapchat (1), Skype (1), videos (1) and listening to music (1). SLS students also suggest using films (8), videogames (2), Tiktok (1), Instagram (1), Twitter (1), singing (1). Finally, University students would like to include films (4), Tik tok (3), Instagram (2), video games (1), TV shows and series (1). As can be observed, films are their favourite activity, as well as Tik tok and Instagram.

6.4. Learners' perceptions of the advantages and disadvantages of using out-of-school activities in the classroom

Thematic analysis has been used to analyse the advantages and disadvantages of using out-of-school activities in the classroom. The percentage of occurrence of the themes is also included. Tables 9 and 10 show the results and the percentages of occurrence of the different themes. The explanation of themes is illustrated with explicit examples produced by the participants. All examples are verbatim and have been left unedited.

6.4.1 Advantages

Table 9 indicates the main themes on the advantages of using out-of-school activities in the classroom as well as their percentages of occurrence. The percentage of the total number of occurrences of each theme is indicated in the final column.

Table 9: Percentages of occurrence of themes regarding the advantages of using out-of-school activities in the classroom

THEMES	SE	BAC	UNI	SLS	TOTAL
Improve English skills	40.6	15	22.7	16.7	25.5
Have fun	25	25	0	8.3	15
Learn socially	12.5	30	27.3	16.7	20.4
Promote attention/interest/motivation	12.5	10	13.6	12.5	12.2
Improve vocabulary	6.3	5	13.6	8.3	8.2
Use real language	0	10	13.6	8.3	7.1
Learn another register	0	5	4.5	12.5	5.1
Talk to friends/family	0	0	4.5	8.3	3.1
Improve pronunciation	3.1	0	0	8.3	3.1

Note: SE= secondary education; BAC= baccalaurate; SLS: state language school; UNI=university.

Participants reported that the main advantages of using out-of-school activities in the classroom were improving their skills in English, making learning in the classroom more fun, the possibility of learning socially and the fact that out-of-school activities can encourage them to pay more attention and be interested and motivated. SE, BAC and UNI students considered that the main advantage was to improve their English or their skills in English, while for BAC students it was the possibility of learning socially.

Participants considered that being exposed to out-of-school activities in the classroom led to an improvement of English as an L2 or of their language skills. This finding supports the results in the first research question, i.e., they claimed to observe an improvement in the learning of the skills:

- (1) *Learn more English (SE student)*
- (2) *We improve in the listening, speaking and reading (BAC student)*
- (3) *Improve language skills (SLS student)*
- (4) *You can improve your language skills (UNI student)*

SE, BAC students mentioned that using out-of-school activities in the classroom makes learning more fun. Two SLS students also pointed out this advantage, however UNI students did not include fun as an advantage. It appears that for younger students being engaged in out-of-school activities is considered to be more entertaining than for adult learners:

- (5) *Classes will be funnier (SE student)*

- (6) *Entertaining and amusing classes (BAC student)*
- (7) *Learning doing something entertaining (SLS student)*

Learning in a social environment was considered to be an advantage. For example, participants indicated that the possibility of meeting people and interacting online was an advantage, especially for the group of BAC students. While SE and BAC students pointed out meeting people, SLS and UNI students tended to emphasize interaction with other cultures. In both cases, intention to communicate lies at the heart of social learning. As Sockett (2011) mentions the process of informal learning is driven by the intention to communicate:

- (8) *Meet more people (SE student)*
- (9) *You can know a lot of English people and learn (BAC student)*
- (10) *Being in contact to worldwide students (SLS student)*
- (11) *Interact with other communities (UNI student)*

Promoting attention, interest and motivation were also suggested as positive aspects. SE and BAC students tended to focus on motivation and attention. SLA and UNI students pointed out the appeal of these activities and the interest that can be generated. The learner factor of motivation seems to be relevant for the participants in the four groups:

- (12) *It will keep our attention (SE student)*
- (13) *You learn English with many motivation (BAC student)*
- (14) *It could be more appealing (SLS student)*
- (15) *Can generate more interest in students, it would be closer to generational interests (UNI student)*

To a minor extent, participants also mentioned that out-of-school activities could help them improve their vocabulary and pronunciation. They could also learn the different varieties and registers of the language, as well as interaction, with friends and family. However, those themes were not as relevant for participants as the ones mentioned above.

6.4.2 Disadvantages

Table 10 shows the themes that emerged from the analysis of disadvantages, together with the percentages of occurrence of those themes.

Table 10: Percentages of occurrence of themes on the disadvantages of using out-of-school activities in the classroom

THEMES	SE	BAC	UNI	SLS	TOTAL
Lack attention	56.5	75	21.7	25	44.7
Learn incorrect grammar	4.3	0	17.4	17.9	10.6
Become addictive	8.7	25	0	10.7	8.5
Waste time	8.7	0	17.4	7.1	8.5
Have no privacy	13	0	17.4	3.6	6.4
No disadvantages	4.3	0	17.4	3.6	6.4
Lack control by the teacher	4.3	0	4.3	10.7	5.3
Not finding a topic everybody likes	0	0	4.3	7.1	3.2
Not having availability of social media	0	0	0	7.1	2.1

THEMES	SE	BAC	UNI	SLS	TOTAL
Reduce face to face interaction	0	0	0	7.1	2.1

Note: SE= Secondary Education; BAC= Baccalaurate; SLS: State Language School; UNI=University.

The main disadvantages participants perceived were loss of attention, learning grammar which they did not consider “appropriate”, and the fear that exposure to out-of-school activities in the classroom might become addictive, a waste of time, or might have their privacy exposed.

All groups considered that the main disadvantage was lack of attention in the classroom. It seems that out-of-school activities were considered a constraint to establishing attention. This is closely connected to the lack of control by the teacher. Fear that out-of-school activities would make them less attentive to the teacher or would result in them being easily distracted from what is being taught was a common concern:

(16) The students don't attention in the classroom (SE student)

(17) Maybe we lose our attention (BAC student)

(18) The attention spam, distraction. (SLS student)

(19) It is a distraction (UNI student)

The four groups of participants considered that using out-of-school activities in the classroom might lead them to learn grammar that is not considered to be correct. This is closely connected with the notion of register. They seemed to be afraid of being influenced by the informal register of the language and establishing patterns imitating the “wrong” constructions used in the input they receive. This explains the results found in the first research question. The four groups of participants claimed not to learn grammar to a large extent, when compared with the results found in the four skills and in vocabulary:

(20) The grammar (SE student)

(21) You make mistakes because the grammar is not perfect (BAC student)

(22) Low quality grammar (SLS student)

(23) The grammar isn't always the most correct (UNI student)

Fear of becoming addicted to out-of-school activities, as well as wasting time with them and not focusing on learning, as well as having their privacy exposed were also some of the disadvantages they pointed out. This fear of lack of intimacy was also found in previous studies (e.g., Sockett, 2013). In contrast, all groups, except for the BAC group reported seeing no disadvantages:

(24) Addiction (SE student)

(25) You can be addict to social media (BAC student)

(26) No privacy (SLS student)

(27) They waste a lot of time (UNI student)

To a minor extent, participants indicated that out-of-school activities were not available to everyone, namely to students who might not have a mobile phone or computer that they could use in the classroom. The difficulty of finding a topic to be used in out-of-school activities that could please all the students in the class was also a concern for the SLS group, as well as the possibility of having less face-to-face interaction due to the use of out-of-school activities. However, these minor concerns were found mainly in the SLS group:

(28) Not everybody has a computer

7. DISCUSSION

Our first research question focused on determining whether learners perceive an improvement in their language skills by being exposed to out-of-school activities. The comparison of the four groups reported similar results in all skills, except for listening. Listening is the skill they claim to improve the most, followed by reading, speaking and writing. The SLS group claimed to improve their listening to a larger extent than the other groups. This may be due to the fact that they are adults and they are exposed to a larger variety of audiovisual activities. Similar results have been found by Sockett and Toffoli (2012) in that listening tends to be the most practised skill. With regard to vocabulary and grammar, the four groups claim to improve their vocabulary but they report little improvement in their grammar. Only the BAC group claim to learn vocabulary to a smaller extent than the rest of the groups.

Some researchers like Cross (2006) consider that informal learning is intentional, while Tissot (2004) and Stevens (2010) indicate that learners may not be conscious that actual learning is taking place. For our groups of students, however, exposure to out-of-school activities is considered to lead to learning, especially to listening and vocabulary acquisition. It is generally believed that learners may not be aware of the contribution of their activities to their language development (Sockett, 2013), however, the results in our study indicate the opposite, although they may not know the extent of the language gains. It is interesting to observe that all groups reported improvement in their learning irrespective of their language level and all of them agreed that exposure to informal learning did not lead to much progress in grammar acquisition. As Toffoli and Sockett (2010) claim, learners are mainly aware of vocabulary improvement and gains in listening comprehension but not so conscious of language gains in other areas. This lack of awareness may lead them to believe they do not improve their target grammar. Nevertheless, in their answers to the fourth research question, they report that exposure to out-of-school activities may imply exposure to poor input in grammar. They seem to consider the classroom as a serious learning environment while the grammar used in out-of-school activities may expose them to the risk of imitating “wrong” constructions. In other words, they are concerned about the quality of the input. This may be the reason why they do not perceive that they improve their grammar.

The second research question aimed at identifying the activities they engaged in out-of-school. Findings showed that the youngest group, i.e., SE students, did not engage in audiovisual out-of-school activities to a large extent. In contrast, the rest of the groups engaged in a variety of activities, mainly watching YouTube videos and Netflix. Opposing results were found with regard to their exposure to videogames. None of the groups reported being engaged in this activity to a large extent. In fact, only a few students reported to use them, but SE students claimed to use a larger variety of games, i.e. playing videogames. This was more common within the group of younger participants, as most studies indicate (e.g., Muñoz, 2020). Exposure to music outside the classroom was a more common activity and all groups preferred to listen to music through YouTube and Spotify, although they also used other platforms, especially the SE group. Thus, listening to songs was one of their favourite activities. Similar results are found in other studies (e.g., Barbee, 2013; Muñoz, 2020).

With regard to their exposure to reading, all groups mainly opted to read online pages, song lyrics and books and they all report a great variety of reading practises. Their interest in reading may be surprising, yet reading has also been found as a relevant activity in other studies (e.g., Muñoz, 2020). The SE group read books to a lesser extent than the rest of groups. This

contrasting finding may be age-related. i.e., the younger group preferred reading song lyrics whereas the oldest, the SLS group, read books to a larger extent.

As for writing activities, chats and emails were the most common, but emails were more frequently used by the older groups. The UNI group engaged in a larger variety of types of writing activities than the rest of groups. This is probably due to their educational level. They are studying a degree in foreign languages and they are used to being exposed to different types of writing activities. Finally, speaking was not a common out-of-school activity across all groups. It was mainly practised among friends. The SLS and the UNI group also used Skype, while the SE group preferred online activities but Skype was only mentioned once. The BAC groups did not claim to practise speaking frequently.

As can be observed, the most common activities involve listening to platforms like YouTube or Netflix or listening to music by means of YouTube or Spotify, but not so much to videogames. These results support the findings by Sockett (2014: 33). This author reported that exposure to listening was a reality for 80%–90% of learners overall. Our results also show that not many participants provided examples reporting the practice of speaking activities. This seems to be also found in Sockett's study (2014: 35-37). This author points out that writing and speaking are not equally frequently undertaken when compared to listening. Sockett also indicates that platforms like Skype are hardly ever used. In fact, 66% of the respondents in his study claimed to have never used Skype which is attributed to the fact of not knowing English users who would be available for synchronous video communications and also to the fact that the penetration of Skype is not complete, when compared with platforms like Facebook. In our data, Facebook is not mentioned by any of the groups. This may be interpreted as differences in the penetration of online informal activities in the social context. It may also be the case that Facebook is not a common anymore among young people. Sockett's study was conducted in 2014. New tools like Instagram, Zoom or Teams are more popular now.

The third research question dealt with their interest in including out-of-school activities in the classroom and with the type of activities they would like to include. All groups claimed to be interested in including them as classroom activities, especially the SE group. As the thematic analysis shows, younger students tend to consider these activities to be entertaining and fun. For this reason, they may be more interested in including them in the classroom. Some studies have suggested the possibility of including out-of-school activities in the classroom, Thorne and Reinhardt (2008) propose the model named "bridging activities" within the context of technology-mediated language education. Lomicka and Lord, 2009 (p. 260-261) defend the advantages of using social networks in the classroom on the basis that they can foster students' engagement and linguistic gains. It is also beneficial to share classroom resources and news. For these reasons these authors propose using tools such as Facebook, LinkedIn or Twitter for the writing skills, PodOmatic, VoiceThread or video messaging sites for speaking and tools that enhance sharing images such Instagram, Pinterest, or Snapchat. The participants in our study support including some of these tools, i.e. Instagram and Twitter but they do not mention tools like Facebook, LinkedIn or sites that promote speaking. They all tend to prefer watching films, short videos like Tiktok, or Instagram. It seems that they associate classroom practice to activities promoting listening or sharing images, like Instagram, but none of them suggests using activities for the explicit practice of speaking, like Skype or PodOmatic, except for one SE student who suggests "speaking to English people". It may also be the case that tools like Facebook or Skype are preferred by older generations. Apart from Twitter or Instagram activities, they do not suggest activities that enhance the use of reading and writing either. This may be related to the fact that film excerpts or images have traditionally been used by teachers as supplementary materials in the classroom, but out-of-school activities promoting speaking, reading or writing are not so commonly used. Another possibility is that they already provide a large variety of reading and writing activities in their answers to the activities they usually

engage in. While Lomicka and Lord (2009) favour the use of this type of activities in the classroom, criticism has also emerged regarding this option. For example, Suárez and González Argüello (2020) conducted a study on the creation of a BookTuber community for recommending books in the class setting. Eighty-three students from the University of Barcelona participated in the study. In the third phase of the study students were asked to comment on their peers' videos, few students provided an answer to the posted comments. In other words, interaction was scarce. Sockett and Toffoli (2012) consider that Lomicka and Lord (2009) focus their attention on the classroom environment, this implies neglecting the role of informal and incidental learning, which happen outside teacher control. These authors suggest forums as a better classroom activity as identities are not exposed. The results in our study seem to indicate the willingness of learners to welcome out-of-school activities in the classroom. In fact, all groups showed their interest in including them in the classroom practice. This indicates that these types of activities would be welcome in the classroom. However, they should be introduced with caution since studies like Sockett and Toffoli's (2012) have shown problems in implementing these activities and Suárez & González Argüello (2020) have suggested lack of engagement by the students. Our fourth research question focused on the advantages and disadvantages of including out-of-school activities in the classroom. The main advantages appear to be the improvement of English skills, having fun and learning socially. The first advantage participants reported supports the findings mentioned in the first research question. They seemed to learn with exposure to informal learning. The second main topic they mentioned was the ludic nature of these activities. Having fun with these activities, especially for the SE and the BAC group, i.e., the youngest learner groups, was considered to be an advantage. This also shows that younger learners value having fun in the classroom, while for older learners this is not so relevant. The third main advantage refers to the fact of learning socially. This is a key issue in informal learning, as the process of informal learning is driven by the intention to communicate and this involves learning socially.

The analysis of disadvantages indicates that their main concern is that attention may be lost. While some students consider that exposure to this type of activities is an advantage as it improves attention and motivation, others view it as a hindrance to establishing attention. This opposing view provides evidence that the perception of the benefits of out-of-school contact is highly individual. As Sockett (2013:4) mentions, in informal learning the experience of each learner is unique, not only in terms of their views on learning but also in terms of individual differences. Our participants suggested some other reasons as disadvantages, such as the fact of being addictive, which may be linked to the idea that introducing out-of-school activities in the classroom can be considered a waste of time which involves no language learning. Moreover, their comments also support the criticism by Sockett and Toffoli (2012) in that they seem to perceive lack of privacy and some danger associated to being exposed in the net. They were also concerned about the lack of control of the teacher, which might lead students not to pay attention. It must also be said that three of the groups (SE, SLS and UNI) mentioned they see no disadvantages in using out-of-school activities in the classroom. Nevertheless, some participants across the four groups agreed that introducing this type of activities in the classroom might not bring beneficial effects and the disadvantages they mention should be taken into account in the future design and introduction of online extramural activities in the classroom.

8. CONCLUSION

This paper has explored the perspectives of out-of-school activities in L2 English by four groups of learners. Findings have shown that the learners in our study perceive an improvement

in the skills of listening, followed by vocabulary, reading, speaking and writing by being exposed to out-of-school activities. In contrast, they do not observe relevant language gains in grammar. It has also been shown that the participants in the study were interested in including out-of-school activities in the classroom and they would like to include mainly films, Tik tok and Instagram. Results have also indicated that the activities they tend to practise out of the classroom involve mainly listening, especially to audiovisual input and music. They also report reading online pages, song lyrics and books. Writing and speaking activities are not so common. These results support findings obtained in previous studies (Sockett, 2011, 2014; Muñoz, 2020). Finally, thematic analysis has shown that the main advantages of including out-of-school activities in the classroom are improving their English skills, having fun and learning socially and the main disadvantages are lack of attention, learning incorrect grammar and addiction to out-of-school activities.

Some pedagogical implications can be drawn from these results. Learners use out-of-school activities and consider their exposure to these activities results in language learning. Teachers should take advantage of this and encourage students to engage in out-of-school activities. It has been observed that speaking seems to be the least practised activity. Teachers should design activities that involve practising speaking outside the walls of the classroom and make learners become familiar with platforms like zoom or Teams so that learners get used to speaking in English online. Learners claim to see advantages in using out-of-school activities in the classroom. Teachers can exploit those advantages, but the mixed results found in previous studies (e.g., Lomicka & Lord, 2009; Sockett & Toffoli, 2012) should also be considered. Therefore, introducing out-of-school activities in the classroom seems to be positive but it should be carried out with caution, step by step, minimizing the disadvantages and promoting the advantages that participants reported. Finally, this study is not without its limitations. It cannot be forgotten that not all participants provided an answer to the open-ended question of the types of activities they engaged in out-of-school, therefore only the answers provided could be considered. Furthermore, the study has been conducted in the context of Galicia. Future studies should include different contexts so as to observe whether geographical context implies differences in the use and perceptions of out-of-school activities.

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