

Students' Out-of-Class Activities for Practicing English as a Foreign Language: A Log Study

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ABSTRACT

In recent years scholars have indicated that students learning a foreign language benefit from work with the structures of the language along with use of the language itself for communicative purposes if they are to achieve a high level of proficiency. This paper examines the out-of-class choices in this regard of a group of 22 first-year university students in a degree in Modern Languages and Translation in Spain. The data were taken from their learning logs, a course requirement for their English class. The objective of this study was to determine whether the students focused on the components of the language or on meaning as conveyed through actual language use, and in particular, what types of activities they sought out to improve their level in the target language in their free time and if any changes occurred over the course of the semester-long study. It was found that the students reported more activities related to language use, specifically listening, but that they also examined vocabulary, grammar or pronunciation while doing them. In addition, it was found that they shifted their focus to speaking and writing activities related to course assignments. The results shed light on the learning habits of young adults at a time when learning opportunities abound so teachers can link in-class work to students' outside interests and learning habits.

Key words: EFL, Extramural learning, Informal learning, Language learning strategies, Learner autonomy, Tertiary level

INTRODUCTION

Foreign language teachers often see that their students who make an effort to work with the target language outside class make more progress than those who do not do so. Recent literature on language learning has started to support this idea (Benson, 2011a; Benson & Reinders, 2011; Richards, 2015). In fact, scholars in the field have started suggesting that it is beneficial to combine traditional classroom work on grammar and vocabulary with activities focusing on meaning since both types of work seem to complement each other (Ellis 2008; Benson 2011b). Nevertheless, research into what students do outside their foreign language classes is an area of only recent interest within the area of work related to autonomy

(Benson, 2006) and to date little work has been published (Benson, 2011b).

The fact that students in language classes normally have limited contact with their instructors – in terms of the numbers of class hours during a week and the overall months that a course meets – means that students must make a considerable effort on their own to make progress in learning a language (Gabrielsen, 1990; Litzler, 2014a). If instructors are familiar with what their students do outside their language classes, they can offer suggestions on how to make independent work with the target language more effective. At the same time, teachers can make connections between classroom work and activities done after classes if they know what their students are doing beyond the walls of school (Richards, 2015).

This exploratory study examines the activities that a group of 21 first-year university students in Spain reported undertaking in their free time in order to improve their levels of English. Specifically, it investigates whether the students focused on the traditional aspects of the foreign language, such as grammar and vocabulary, or on meaning

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as conveyed through actual communication activities, such as listening, speaking, reading or writing. It takes the data from the students' learning log entries and considers the changes observed over the course of the study. Over the years, the students in the first year of this university degree program in Modern Languages and Translation have indicated that they have not received any instruction on how to study and learn English effectively but, because the degree program is well ranked in this country and high marks are required for acceptance, the students can be considered models among their peers. In this sense, as a whole, they can be assumed to be good language learners.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The present study examines what Sundqvist (2011) refers to as "extramural English." This is a cover term for "any type of contact that young people (learners) have with English outside the walls of the classroom" (107). It includes everything from traditional grammar exercises to participation in conversation exchanges with other speakers of the language and the playing of video games. Because this study makes use of student learning logs that were completed as part of an English class and involved the listing of activities undertaken with the explicit objective of improving proficiency in the target language, the out-of-class practice reported must be considered either "self-instruction" or "self-directed naturalistic learning," as opposed to "naturalistic learning" (Benson, 2011a: 76-77). In this paper, "self-instruction" is understood in a loose sense of the word to refer to student work that focuses specifically on the form of language, such as grammar and vocabulary or pronunciation work, as opposed to work undertaken on a long-term basis without an instructor. "Self-directed naturalistic language learning" relates here and according to Benson's explanation to any activities undertaken for other purposes but also with the intention of learning the language, as could be listening to music or watching films, both activities that are a source of entertainment that can be exploited for linguistic purposes. Finally, "naturalistic learning" takes place during actual communication using the language with other speakers or with target language texts but *not* with the explicit intention of learning the language. However, because the activities reported in the student logs were undertaken with the objective of increasing language competence, this concept does not apply here.

As mentioned in the Introduction, research is now showing a link between students' work with foreign language outside the classroom and their proficiency level. While the direction of causality is not clear, studies are revealing that students who work more with the target language

outside their classes tend to have higher proficiency levels. For example, Halbach (2000) reports that the students who were more successful in her university level English course tended to use a set of learning strategies in their work after class more often than the unsuccessful ones, as measured through an examination of the learning logs that twelve of the students completed for the course. Sunqvist (2011) found in a study of 80 ninth graders in Sweden that their use of the language outside class correlated with oral proficiency and vocabulary knowledge and that more productive activities such as video games and surfing the internet were more important in this sense than less active ones such as listening to music and watching films. Lai, Zhu & Gong (2015) also report that the nature of out-of-class learning activities correlated with students' marks, their enjoyment of learning the language, and their confidence in their ability to learn it. When the 82 middle school students, who had revealed that their classes were traditional because they focused on form, were involved after school in activities related to meaning and use of the language, such as watching films and listening to songs, they enjoyed the language, felt they could learn it and obtained better marks. Conversely, the students who continued to focus on form when working at home obtained lower scores on the three measures.

Previous studies of foreign language learners' out-of-class activities have revealed a tendency for learners to focus on the receptive skills of reading and listening. For instance, Pickard (1996) found that his group of 20 German undergraduates of Business studying English preferred reading newspapers and magazines along with novels and they also tended to listen to the radio. They selected these activities because they had discovered gaps in their learning and because the activities were of interest to them personally and, at the same time, they were unable to find opportunities to practice the oral skills. Hyland (2004) found that her group of 228 English teacher trainees in Hong Kong also tended to work with English focusing on the receptive skills and in a way that did not involve face-to-face interaction, the most frequently-cited activities being reading academic books and articles, surfing the internet, watching videos, DVDs or TV, reading newspapers and magazines, and listening to songs as well as the productive activity of writing e-mails. In her case, the students tended to avoid using English outside their school situation due to possible negative connotations of using the language, such as looking superior to others, but they also indicated that there were few opportunities to practice with native speakers.

Recent studies reveal similar tendencies to practice the receptive skills including substantial use of the internet for this purpose. Sockett's (2014) research into online

informal learning of English revealed that a group of 225 university students in France not specializing in English or other foreign language areas of study listened to English on the internet more than they read, spoke or wrote in the language. The most common activities undertaken by the participants were the viewing of television series and films and listening to music, with an increase in the watching of television series in detriment to listening to songs over the course of their four year study. Lai, Zhu & Gong's (2015) middle school students in mainland China also showed a preference for listening to songs and watching English language movies along with attending private language classes after school. These students did work on exercises related to the grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation of the language, possibly because they were studying at the middle school level in what they had reported were "boring" classes related to grammar and vocabulary (288). Finally, in a study of 309 English teacher trainees in Turkey, Inozu, Sahinkarakas & Yumru (2010) found that the most frequently reported activities undertaken for language learning purposes were use of the internet for looking for information, email and chatting, along with listening to music and the radio and watching TV programs or movies.

Objectives

To the best of our knowledge, no study on students' out-of-class English language learning practices has been done for young adults in Spain. It was with this gap in mind, along with the increased presence of technology and internet in society nowadays, that this exploratory study was undertaken. The overall objective was to determine what this group of students did in order to improve their level of English outside their classes at university. In particular, three questions were raised: 1) Did the students focus on meaning or on form when they were working with the language outside their classes? 2) What different kinds of activities did the students report doing after classes to improve their English skills? 3) Were there any changes in the kinds of activities reported over the period of the study?

METHOD

Participants

A group of 22 students enrolled in a first semester English course for a degree program in Modern Languages and Translation in central Spain participated in this study. All of them were aged between 17 and 22 years old and five of them were boys while the remaining ones were girls. Fifteen of them were Spaniards, four were Eastern Europeans, and two were from South America, but all of them had received their high school education in Spain. Upon entry

into the program of study, they had levels of English in the range between B1 and B2.

Tool

As one of the requirements of their English class, the students completed a learning log during a total of 8 weeks spread over the 15 week semester. The exercise involved briefly reporting their daily work with the target language outside their classes with the objective of their becoming more aware of their language learning processes (see Litzler, 2014a for a description of the exercise). In most of the cases the students wrote one activity per day but occasionally they noted down more than one. While logs and diaries are not without their limitations, which will be discussed below, they are potentially able to reveal interesting information about student preferences for language learning, particularly in exploratory studies (Nunan, 1992). At the same time, they enable the researcher to obtain information over a period of time and, hence, can provide insight into changes in processes (Dörnyei, 2007).

Procedure

The entries for weeks 1, 4 and 7 of the log activity (corresponding to weeks 3, 9 and 12 of the semester) were selected for consideration in this study because these weeks would include changes that students might have made in their study habits over the course of the semester. The information on all of the individual activities reported and any descriptions provided were typed into a table in Word and then analyzed using key word analysis (Nunan, 1992) focusing on the four language skills of reading, writing, speaking and listening and the form aspects of grammar and vocabulary. In addition, the descriptions of work done were examined to determine if there were any patterns. When more than one activity was reported for the same day, separate entries were recorded into the table. It should be noted that not all of the students included a description of the work that they did on each occasion, so less information was gathered in this regard. Finally, some statistical analyses were completed to determine if sex, origin of birth, or the final mark obtained in the course showed any relation to the total number of entries reported in the tables.

RESULTS

A total of 387 entries were obtained from the three weeks of log data for the 22 students. The lowest number of entries recorded by one student was seven, while the highest was 40. The overall results are summarized below in Table 1:

The first result observed from this table is the fact that the receptive skills of listening and reading, both of

which involve use of language as opposed to a focus on form, were reported more often than the other skills and aspects of language, particularly when grammar and vocabulary are considered separately. This finding confirms the tendencies found in the studies mentioned above. At the same time, larger numbers can be seen for the use of English overall as opposed to a focus on form in the language. Nevertheless, a closer examination of the results below shows that some students worked with the four skills of listening, reading, speaking and writing in ways that centered on form.

Focus on Form

In terms of specific practice with grammar and vocabulary outside class, fourteen students reported working on grammar or grammar and vocabulary together, while sixteen of them reported working on vocabulary as a separate activity at least once during the three weeks under consideration for this study. They tended to use a combination of traditional textbook work and, in some cases, online resources for studying these areas of the

language. Tables 2 and 3 list the activities they described in their logs.

The students provided fewer descriptions of what they did when working on grammar than when working on vocabulary. Nevertheless, Tables 4 and 5 do reveal a few practices used by the small group of students who actually listed information.

The descriptions reveal a combination of activities that served to aid comprehension and discern meaning along with tasks that would have helped the students to be more able to use the concepts and words more actively at a later date. In this sense, the students sometimes used tactics for language learning, as described in Oxford (1990, 2011).

Focus on Meaning

All of the students reported practicing listening in their logs during the three weeks used for this study. A variety of activities were listed for practicing this skill, as noted in Table 6 below.

Two of the most popular activities, watching television series or films and listening to music, enable viewers to decide whether or not to use subtitles or lyrics. In the case of series and films, six students reported using subtitles, while five reported not using them, but another nine people varied their use of them back and forth, unlike Kusyik and Sockett's students who showed a preference for moving from mother tongue subtitles to English ones before abandoning them altogether (Kusyik&Sockett, 2012; Sockett, 2014). In terms of songs, eleven of the students reported using the lyrics but the twelfth student did not. A variety of descriptions for working with series, films and songs overall were recorded in the logs, as can be seen in Tables 7 and 8 below:

Table 1: Aspects of language reported in the learning logs each week

Aspect of language	Log 1	Log 4	Log 7	Total
Grammar	13	11	14	38
Vocabulary	6	12	7	25
Grammar and vocabulary work together*	7	4	7	18
Listening	48	39	39	126
Reading	30	26	27	83
Speaking	5	21	23	49
Writing	4	20	16	40
Miscellaneous activities	1	4	3	8
Total for the week	114	137	138	387
Average per student per week	5.4	6.5	6.5	6.1

*In a number of cases the activity reported was a combination of both grammar and vocabulary practice

Table 2: Activities reported to practice grammar or grammar together with vocabulary

Grammar and grammar & vocabulary activities	Times in Log 1	Times in Log 4	Times in Log 7	Number of students
Working with textbooks (class textbook or others)	17	7*	14**	14
Working with test preparation materials	1	3	1	3
Using online practice materials	2	4*	2**	6
Doing homework for private language schools	0	2	3	3
Reviewing notes from class	0	0	2	1
Helping a child with grammar homework	0	1	0	1

*Two entries indicated that the student had worked with the textbook and internet on the same occasion. **One student reported working with the book and internet together

Table 3: Vocabulary activities reported

Vocabulary activities	Times in Log 1	Times in Log 4	Times in Log 7	Number of students
Working with textbooks (class textbook or others)	3	5*	2	7
Using test preparation materials	1	0	0	1
Working with online practice materials	1	2*	3	4
Doing homework for private language schools	1	2	1	4
Vocabulary notebook	0	4	1	5

*One student reported working with the textbook and internet on the same occasion

Most of the activities listed while working with series, films and songs are similar in that the students indicated the same things for all three types of listening situations. The differences can be accounted for largely due to the nature of the media. For example, series and films are longer and reveal part of their message through images, making it more interesting for writing summaries and a more natural situation for guessing meaning from context during viewing. On the other hand, the short duration of songs and their catchy nature lends them to being more easily manageable as dictations and for memorization.

Table 4: Descriptions of grammar activities reported

Descriptions of grammar work	Total students
Using a dictionary	4
Repeating all or part of a difficult exercise	3
Translating some of the exercise	1

Table 5: Descriptions of vocabulary activities reported

Descriptions of vocabulary work	Total students
Using a dictionary	4
Reviewing words and expressions at a later date	4
Inventing sentences with new vocabulary	3
Writing a list of words and expressions	2
Guessing meaning from context	2
Looking for related expressions on internet	2
Teaching new vocabulary to a child	1

Few students described other activities to practice listening and in all the cases the students did similar things to the above. Specifically, two people made reference to noting down vocabulary and another person mentioned listening additional times and checking textbook listening exercises. In addition, one person pointed out that she had taken notes during an exam preparation exercise at a private language school.

All but two of the students reported practicing reading in the three weeks of journal entries used as data for this study. If the entries related to other classes at the university are ignored, the most popular activities reported were reading novels and using the textbook, as revealed in Table 9.

To practice reading the students used a combination of actual use of English and traditional textbook practice. The students who reported reading for another university course were required to find online information in English in order to write a journal on history readings or to prepare for a debate for a Spanish class and, hence, can be said to have practiced actual use of the language. This was also the case of the students who used internet for miscellaneous items, such as reading Instagram quotes and reading about the situation of street people in New York City. On the other hand, the students who used the textbook normally did so to do reading exercises, but in one case the person stated that she had read the tapescript from the listening exercise done in class that day.

The students described more activities and provided a larger number of them when practicing reading outside the

Table 6: Listening activities reported

Listening activity	Times in Log 1	Times in Log 4	Times in Log 7	Number of students
Watching TV series or films	22	19	20	20
Listening to music	14	6	3	12
Watching documentaries/BBC	7	8	5	9
Watching videos about the English language	0	1	2	2
Watching miscellaneous videos online	2	1	4	3
Using a textbook or practicing at a private language school	1	3	3	5
Using a test preparation textbook	1	0	2	2
Attending a film festival session for language students	0	1	0	1
Watching an NBA match	1	0	0	1

Table 7: Descriptions of listening activities for series and films

Descriptions of listening activities related to series and films	Number of students
Noting down ideas, words or expressions of interest	8
Repeating part or all of the series or film to understand or check meaning	7
Using a dictionary to check the meaning of words	5
Checking comprehension using the subtitles afterwards	3
Repeating parts of the series or film to practice pronunciation	2
Guessing the meaning of words from the context	2
Looking for additional information on cultural references that were not clear	1
Writing a summary afterwards	1

classroom than when working on listening. Nevertheless, small numbers of people reported doing each of them, as seen in Table 10.

Most of these activities listed for reading practice were already reported for listening, a finding that might be explained by the fact that the two skills are both receptive. Nevertheless, Table 10 reveals that some of the students took advantage of written texts to do additional activities, such as paying attention to their linguistic aspects. For example, four students practiced reading out loud to improve their pronunciation ability, a situation that is slightly different from that described in Lee & Heinz (2016), where students read out loud for various reasons including as a memory technique. In terms of the students who indicated that they had been paying attention to grammar

or vocabulary, this was a technique mentioned by the professor in class; it involves paying active attention to the grammar and vocabulary while reading a novel to determine whether the student recognizes why the grammar is being used in the context in which it appears. It is also interesting to note that, both for listening and reading, a number of students used a dictionary for words that they did not know, whereas in Pickard (1996), the participants did not report doing so often.

The 14th students who reported having practiced speaking out of class revealed a variety of types of exercises including natural conversational opportunities with speakers of a different native language and more artificial speaking situations, such as talking to themselves out loud or recording exercises for their classes.

Table 8: Descriptions of listening activities for songs

Descriptions of listening activities related to music	Number of students
Repeating the song to practice pronunciation (different people from above)	3
Checking comprehension using the lyrics afterwards (one person reported doing the same for films/series above)	3
Using the audio as a dictation	2
Repeating the song to understand or check meaning	1
Noting down ideas, words or expressions of interest	1
Trying to memorize the song	1

Because these activities take place in different contexts, the descriptions that the students provided about them can be expected to vary. In other words, conversing with a foreign visitor one meets on the street and talking to oneself at home alone in order to practice language are different situations, so they require different ways of operation. However, this was not observed to be the case since only one of the students wrote down any information related to interaction; the rest of the descriptions reported were connected to speaking alone, either in recording an assignment for class or talking out loud alone at home, as seen in Table 12.

Table 9: Reading activities reported

Reading activity	Times in Log 1	Times in Log 4	Times in Log 7	Number of students
Reading a novel	21	11	14	11
Reading material for other university courses	5	7	6	9
Using the textbook	3	4	3	7
Reading things on internet related to hobbies and interests or miscellaneous items	1	3	3	4
Reading texts related to English language learning	0	1	1	2

Table 10: Descriptions of reading activities reported

Descriptions of reading activities	Number of students
Consulting a dictionary	9
Taking note of words or expressions	5
Reading part of a passage out loud to practice pronunciation	4
Guessing meaning from context	4
Paying attention to vocabulary	4
Translating some or all of a text into the student's native language	3
Paying attention to grammar	2
Listening to words and practicing pronunciation	1
Copying a text	1
Re-reading part or all of a reading to understand or check meaning	1
Writing a summary of the passage	1
Underlining aspects of grammar in the text	1
Underlining expressions in the text	1

Table 11: Speaking activities reported

Speaking activity	Times in Log 1	Times in Log 4	Times in Log 7	Number of students
Preparing recordings for class	0	0	14	8
Conversation with a person who has a different native language	1	5	3	6
Speaking during a private language school class	2	3	2	5
Conversation with a person who has the same native language	0	6	2	5
Speaking out loud alone	1	3	2	4
Pronunciation practice	1	2	0	2
Using test preparation exercises to practice speaking	0	2	0	2

Table 12: Descriptions of speaking activities reported

Descriptions of speaking activities
Repetition of a recording to improve speaking ability
Using a dictionary
Attempting to use expressions learned in class
Asking the person to slow down when speaking
Paying attention to language including syntax and words
Paying attention to "speak slowly, clearly and with good intonation"
Recording self "to see if I speak well"

Table 13: Writing activities reported

Writing activity	Times in Log 1	Times in Log 4	Times in Log 7	Number of students
Preparation of homework	1	11	7	13
Doing self-generated exercises such as journaling	1	2	1	4
Using WhatsApp to exchange messages	1	1	2	4
Writing an e-mail to a person with a different L1	0	2	3	4
Exercises for a private language school	0	1	1	2
Working with test preparation books	0	1	1	2
Writing paragraphs for a language exchange website	0	1	1	1
Chatting online as part of a videogame	1	1	0	1

It is interesting to note at this point that, even though only a small number of students reported what they had done while practicing speaking, the majority of the descriptions reveal a tendency for them to seek improvement in their ability and to self-monitor their production. Up to this point, this aspect of their learning has appeared to be less frequently considered than their comprehension of language.

The 18 students who practiced writing according to the log entries tended to do work related to homework assignments. Nevertheless, the other activities showed a fair amount of diversity.

A bias for activities related to class work and traditional homework exercises can be observed in these ways of practicing writing. However, two of the students used the WhatsApp mobile phone application to practice writing with each other, and two more people did so to keep in touch with friends in the United States and Germany. Another person communicated with people in other countries playing a videogame by using the chat function. As in the case of speaking, some of the descriptions of

Table 14: Descriptions of writing activities reported

Descriptions of writing activities	Number of students
Consulting a dictionary	3
Looking for information on internet to know how to explain ideas	1
Noting down new words	1
Using a list of common mistakes to revise work	1
Correcting the other person using WhatsApp	1
Paying attention to language including syntax and words	1

work carried out while practicing writing relate to attempts at improving production and self-monitoring with the same aim, as seen in Table 14.

The miscellaneous activities reported included translation of texts either into or out of English (three comments by three different students), practice with exam preparation books (three comments by three different students), and web searches to find ideas (two comments by two different students). One of these students compared her version of a translation with her mother's copy,

which was completed as part of her job, a form of self-monitoring.

DISCUSSION

Overall the 22 students involved in this study showed a preference for practicing the four skills of the language outside their English class as opposed to working with traditional grammar and vocabulary exercises. In other words, their extramural English contact appears to involve “self-directed naturalistic learning” more than “self-instruction” (Benson, 2011b: 76-77). In particular, they showed a preference for listening to music and watching television series and films in order to practice the receptive skill of listening, a result which supports the findings referred to above by Lai, Zhu & Gong (2015) and Sockett (2014) among others. This finding reflects a clear tendency to seek out activities related to popular culture, often on Internet, which involve an informal register of language. They also tended to practice reading, the other receptive skill area, frequently through the use of novels for native speakers.

Nevertheless, it must be pointed out that many of the other activities reported for the different language skill areas were directly related to completion of homework assignments, as was the case of the students who noted down that they had practiced the productive skills of writing or speaking when they were actually preparing a digital story to upload to YouTube for the English class. In this sense, the students in effect used the target language but in what might be considered pseudo-communicative situations. At the same time, some of the descriptions of work done during the activities related directly to a focus on form, as in using a listening activity as a dictation, reading part of a passage out loud to practice pronunciation or underlining aspects of grammar in a text. This more “serious” type of work is most likely a result of transferring classroom practices outside the school and it has loosely been associated with students having a high level of motivation or a need to obtain an official diploma certifying their language knowledge (Bailly, 2011: 124-125), the case of this group of students. For these reasons, the initial finding of a preference for use of the language through practice of the four skill areas must be understood with caution.

In terms of changes observed over the course of the semester based on the three weeks of log entries, it was found that the participants tended to focus more on homework assignments for the English course and for other university courses in the 4th and 7th weeks of the logs. This situation involved an increase in grammar and vocabulary practice prior to the final exam and more

speaking and writing work in order to prepare recordings and papers before the end of the semester. Logically, this shift in focus after the start of the semester led to a drop in entries related to the other more entertaining activities. In light of recent research that reveals the potentially positive effect of extensive viewing of television and films on language proficiency, such as Cole & Vanderplank (2016) and Sockett (2014), an adjustment in classroom assignments is worthy of consideration.

The descriptions of tasks completed while working on the different areas of the language suggest some use of language learning tactics and strategies (Oxford, 1990, 2011). The use of a dictionary and noting down of interesting words and expressions were frequent practices, regardless of the aspect of language. However, it is striking that only 4 students mentioned reviewing or using these lists at a later date, revealing a possible lack of awareness with regard to strategies. In this sense, the work done seems to be related more to immediate understanding than to long-term recall of words. The students also indicated that they repeated activities or sections of activities to improve comprehension or their own production depending on the skill. At the same time, the nature of the different skills led to variations in types of work, as was the case of using written texts to underline grammatical characteristics or the use of songs to do dictations. Finally, it is worthy of note that some students tended to monitor their own production when doing writing or speaking exercises.

An eyeball comparison of the students’ activities and their marks revealed that the total number of log entries and the final mark obtained for the course could suggest a pattern. Although the final mark is not a direct indication of language proficiency, a student’s level and ease of using the target language can have a direct impact on completion of the course requirements and was, hence, considered to be acceptable as a measure given the exploratory nature of this study. With this in mind, it can be stated that, generally, the students who had the largest numbers of entries tended to obtain grades in the middle range of the group, while the participants who had smaller numbers of entries earned either the highest or the lowest marks in the group, a pattern reported in the past (Oxford, 2011). The middle range students in this case may have been aware of their limitations and worked on more activities to compensate them, while the higher level students may already have automatized their language learning strategies thanks to their proficiency levels (Green & Oxford, 1995). They may also have felt some resistance to the log activity due to a higher level of the target language upon entry into the degree program, a finding observed in an earlier study (Litzler, 2014b). Nevertheless, this finding was not found to be statistically significant after calculating a Pearson

Correlation Coefficient (0.127) and a Pearson Chi Square with the results in three groups (0.669).

It is worthy of note that two of the four students who obtained the highest marks for the course spent time watching different types of documentaries on Internet from the start of the semester, an activity that few of the others reported doing on a regular basis. However, the rest of their language learning activity resembles that of most of the members of the group in terms of use of language and focus on form. In fact, some students with lower marks actually practiced use of the language just as often, as was the case of a student who played video games with other people around Europe and took advantage of his hobby (basketball) to watch matches and read about their results in English. Sex and origin did not appear to show any patterns with the number of student activities reported.

Certain limitations to this study must be considered at this point. On the one hand, the length of the study (one semester as observed over three separate weeks) with the end of the data collection period towards the end of the semester led to a skewing of the data in favor of work related to homework assignments prior to the final exam and before the deadlines for submission of papers and projects. A study that examines more weeks over a longer period of time will better track student tendencies despite the existence of their university requirements. On the other hand, the use of logs as the source of data, like diaries, can lead to distortions despite the advantages mentioned above. The students may not have reported certain activities because they may have felt that they were ridiculous or obvious, a notion that students have mentioned in conversations over the years. They may also have included activities that they thought would help to gain the approval of the professor, as the exercise was counted as part of their participation mark in the course. In any case, years of working with student logs and discussing language learning both formally and informally with students has revealed that trends in preferred activities do exist and that the patterns reported throughout this paper reflect actual student behavior more than invented ideas to please a professor. For this reason, this form of data was deemed acceptable for this exploratory study. Nevertheless, further research will benefit from a more complete method such as grounded theory or a case study, as described in Oxford (2011).

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study regarding student preferences for out-of-class language learning practices agree with a number of trends observed in other studies but in the

context of first-year Spanish university students specializing in modern languages and particularly English. Like other young people in China, Sweden, France, Germany and other countries, these students reported more often practicing the receptive skills of listening and reading, with much of the listening taking place online through listening to music and the viewing of television series and films. Thanks to the longitudinal nature of this study, the data revealed a new finding, which was an increase in the practice of the productive skills of speaking and writing over the course of the study but in direct relation to individual homework assignments as opposed to actual spontaneous communication in the target language. At the same time, the students' descriptions of their work reveal that they often focused on grammar and vocabulary -not necessarily meaning-when using authentic materials in English.

These findings have a number of implications for the teaching of English as a foreign language. Students will benefit from and appreciate teachers' efforts to promote actual *use* of the target language on their part outside the classroom. In addition, they can be encouraged to focus on meaning, particularly on what they understand, instead of concentrating on what is beyond their level because the latter often causes them to look at formal aspects of the language. Out-of-class assignments and projects, such as those described in Richards (2015) or indirectly in Benson & Reinders (2011), can be set for students to go beyond their classrooms and textbooks and into the world of real language as a way to acquire English.

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APPENDIX

Background Data on Participants

Log number	M/F	Spanish/Foreign	Final mark (max. 10)	Entries reported
1	F	S	7	21
2	F	S	5	7
3	F	F	9	13
4	F	S	7.5	11
5	F	S	8.5	17
6	F	S	7	14
7	M	S	8	14
8	F	F	9.5	15
9	F	S	7.5	30
10	M	S	6	16
11	M	S	7.5	18
12	F	S	6	17
13	F	S	7	12
14	F	S	6.5	22
15	F	F	6.5	21
16	F	S	6.5	15
17	F	S	7	13
18	F	F	7	25
19	M	S	8	40
20	F	F	8.5	13
21	F	S	7	14
22	M	F	7.5	18