YouTube for second language learning: What does the research tell us?

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Abstract

Since its inception in 2005, YouTube has grown to become one of the most trafficked online platforms in the world. Accordingly, second language (L2) research interest on the topic has also increased, with studies investigating its use in formal and informal settings. Given this, the goal of this conceptual paper is to identify patterns within L2 research concerning YouTube in order to develop a better understanding of the benefits and limitations of the video streaming service for language learning purposes. This conceptual article is divided into four primary sections. First, the author justifies the use of YouTube for L2 learning using two theoretical frameworks. Secondly, studies pertaining to YouTube in formal and informal L2 environments are reviewed. The reviewed studies are then analyzed in order to highlight relevant benefits and limitations of the platform for L2 learning. To conclude, L2 research and pedagogical implications are discussed.

Keywords: YouTube, video streaming, informal language learning

Introduction

YouTube is one of the most visited sites in the world (Alexa, 2022). Unsurprisingly, research on its use for second language (L2) learning has increased over the past decade and a half. Yet, no research synthesis has been conducted to understand relevant themes across YouTube-related L2 studies. As a result, this conceptual paper adopts a theory synthesis approach to fill this gap in the literature. Theory synthesis conceptual papers "contribute by summarizing and integrating extant knowledge of a concept or phenomenon… helping to identify and underscore commonalities that build coherence" (Jaakkola, 2020, p. 21). Systematic review papers also share this goal; however, while this type of research can be helpful in identifying research gaps in more mature fields, the goal of a theory synthesis is to provide a macro-level view of a narrow phenomenon in order to develop a new

conceptualization of the topic studied (Jaakkola, 2020). Thus, the aim of the present conceptual paper is to create a clearer understanding of how YouTube can support L2 learning in formal and informal learning environments.

Theoretical case for YouTube as a L2 learning resource

The use of YouTube for L2 learning is supported by both socio-cultural and cognitive frameworks. From a socio-cultural perspective, the utilization of YouTube in informal and formal learning environments follows within the tradition of New Literacy Studies (NLS). Compared to cognitive theories which view literacy as an individual cognitive skill, advocates of NLS assert that literacy is a culturally embedded social practice (Street, 2005). While NLS has traditionally investigated print-based practices, Mills (2010) notes that the ubiquity of internet technology has resulted in increased attention on digitally mediated social practices that contribute to language learning such as social media (Zheng et al., 2018), online communities (Black, 2005) and mobile devices (Veum et al., 2021). Given that it is one of the most widely used internet platforms in the world, the use of YouTube in and outside of the classroom for L2 learning aligns well with NLS principles.

Grounded in cognitive science, Mayer's (1997) theory of multimedia learning lends further justification for the use of YouTube for L2 learning. This theory posits that humans process information through dual channels–an auditory or verbal channel which processes aural input and a visual channel which processes pictures or video. Although the theory of multimedia learning was not developed with L2 learners in mind, preliminary evidence suggests that adding video to an audio lecture significantly improves listening comprehension among L2 English learners (Mayer et al., 2014). In other words, the use of dual channels (auditory/verbal and visual) rather than a single channel seems to best promote L2 comprehension, thereby lending credence to the applicability of the theory of multimedia learning in L2 contexts. Considering these findings, it is not a stretch to think that YouTube, which involves both auditory/verbal and visual input, could also better support L2 processing compared to reading or listening alone.

YouTube in Formal L2 Learning Environments

This section will detail L2 studies involving YouTube in formal learning environments. Benson's (2011) four dimensions of language learning will be used to distinguish between formal and informal learning contexts. Under this framework, formal L2 learning refers to in- or out-of-class language learning that is other-directed, for example, by a teacher or researcher. In contrast, informal L2 learning describes out-of-class, naturalistic language learning that is self-directed.

Most L2 research involving YouTube for formal learning has investigated L2 students' and/or teachers' experiences and perceptions of the video streaming service. Sun (2014) analyzed pre-service teachers' attitudes towards the use of YouTube to teach L2 English writing. Although using the video streaming service encouraged innovative teaching practices and educator autonomy, it was found that YouTube also increased anxiety among the pre-service teachers. In the context of students, Sun and Yang (2015) explored the perceived language improvements and views of L2 English students towards the use of two Web 2.0 technologies (YouTube and Facebook) in a service learning task, that is, problem-based learning which revolves around providing a useful service to the community. While the participants' views were largely positive, namely, they thought YouTube improved their public speaking skills and increased speaking confidence in the L2, they also were found to have spent more time on the aesthetic features of their videos rather than original learning objective (i.e., practicing L2 public speaking). In a mixed-method study, Alobaid (2020) found that young L2 English as a foreign language (EFL) learners thought YouTube supported language

learning by making it easier and more interesting to improve L2 writing. Kim and Kim (2021) studied the experiences and attitudes of international students at an American university towards the use of YouTube for educational purposes. Findings from their analysis revealed three themes regarding YouTube: enhanced cross-cultural sensitivity, development of knowledge and skills in the L2, and a deeper understanding of English as a lingua franca. In a large-scale study involving both EFL students and English instructors, Aldukhayel (2021) explored the participants' views towards YouTube for L2 learning. The researcher's findings indicated that well-structured in-class tasks involving YouTube videos could support L2 skill development and make language learning more authentic and interesting.

Relatively fewer studies have looked at how YouTube can enhance language skills in the L2. In addition to examining the L2 English learners' views, Alobaid (2020) investigated if the video streaming service had any influence on multiple features of L2 writing. Based on the results of his analysis, significant differences between the pre- and post-tests were found with respect to only two out of the five of variables studied. In an action research study, Yaacob et al. (2021) examined if a YouTube-based treatment consisting of video podcasts and accompanying listening tasks could enhance listening comprehension among young L2 English learners. Results from their analysis revealed that the treatment did have a significant effect on the participants' listening comprehension.

Instead of using a pretest–posttest design like Alobaid (2020) and Yaacob et al. (2021), Arndt and Woore (2018) utilized a quantitative, experimental approach which focused on incidental learning of pseudo-words to avoid the influence that pre-testing can have on vocabulary assessment. This approach ensured that the participants did not know the target vocabulary prior to the treatment; thus, increasing the validity of the study. The L2 English participants were divided into two groups, one which watched YouTube videos and another which read the transcripts from those videos. After watching the videos or reading the blogs, an assessment was administered to evaluate if the participants were able to incidentally learn the target pseudo-words. Although no significant differences were found between the two groups in terms of overall vocabulary learning, the YouTube group did outperform the blog group when it came to three aspects of vocabulary learning.

YouTube in Informal L2 Learning Environments

To the best of the author's knowledge, only two studies have explored the use of YouTube in informal L2 learning environments. The first is Benson's (2015) exploratory study which focused on an analysis of YouTube comments to discover if there was any evidence of language learning or intercultural learning in the comments. The data set analyzed by the researcher was made up of 8,850 comments from YouTube videos related to film and television. Comments from these videos were made either in Mandarin Chinese, Cantonese, or English. From this data set, 32% or 2,840 of the comments were found to have exhibited evidence of language or intercultural learning. A macro and micro analysis of the comments also revealed that they offered ample opportunities for interaction and negotiation for meaning when translanguaging occurred, i.e., the use of two or more languages. These results suggest that YouTube comments have the potential to be a rich source of informal foreign language learning.

Wang and Chen (2019) took a different approach in their investigation of YouTube for self-directed language learning. Rather than analyzing YouTube comments as in Benson (2015), Wang and Chen interviewed university students to better understand how they used and perceived L2 English YouTubers or content creators who specifically develop videos for English-teaching purposes. Analysis of the interviews revealed that the participants viewed YouTubers for three main reasons: to expand learning resources, increase interest in L2 learning, and learn more about foreign cultures.

The participants were also found to more frequently engage in passive behavior such as liking certain videos or sharing them with friends than productive behavior (e.g., commenting). Concerning the participants' perceptions towards YouTube, they thought it was more flexible and motivating than classroom-based learning. However, they also expressed concerns that YouTube was not an effective means to improve English ability when compared to more formal learning environments. These results indicate that while L2 learners may find YouTube to be an interesting and flexible language learning method, they do not perceive it to be as useful as teacher-led L2 learning.

Benefits and limitations of YouTube for L2 learning

Using thematic analysis, several themes have been identified concerning the use of YouTube for L2-learning purposes. Given (2008) describes thematic analysis as "a descriptive strategy that facilitates the search for patterns of experience within a qualitative data set" (p. 2), thereby making it a suitable approach considering the goal of a theory synthesis-based conceptual paper is to identify patterns pertaining to an emerging research topic (Jaakkola, 2020).

Authenticity

Exposure to authentic materials in the L2 is one cited advantage of YouTube according to the identified studies. Alobaid (2020) states that informal language often used in YouTube videos "helps learners learn and practice authentic useful English language for everyday situations" (p. 8). Similarly, the student participants in Aldukhayel (2021) believed YouTube afforded them exposure to authentic L2 aural input. The pre-service teachers in Sun (2014) reported that microteaching via YouTube provided a more authentic setting in which to learn how to teach compared to textbook-based learning, as illustrated in the following quote by one of the study's participants, "It provided me a real situation to teach, rather than simply absorbing knowledge from textbooks" (p. 188). The students in Sun and Fang (2015) also perceived YouTube to be an authentic learning environment for the creation of service-learning videos. The benefits of the streaming service also extended to the students' target audience, who gained useful information about the community "the authentic nature of service learning established a mutually beneficial relationship between students and the members they served…the international students not only provided helpful comments on students' language use, but also benefited from the content presented in the videos" (p. 215).

Language development

L2 skill development in another theme that emerged from the analysis of the literature. For instance, the learners in Sun and Fang (2015) believed that YouTube supported English speaking improvements and enabled them to identify gaps in their linguistic ability, particularly when it came to L2 pronunciation. This mirrors what was found in Aldukhayel (2021), namely, the students in his study believed that pronunciation improvement was one of the key advantages of watching YouTube videos or vlogs, as shown in the following quote by one of the participants, "Sometimes, I thought my pronunciation for a word was correct; however, when captions appear I'd discover that my pronunciation was not accurate and I'd immediately correct myself" (p. 1095). It is also important to note that the teacher-participants in Aldukhayel (2021) had the same opinion, that is, they believed YouTube could help learners improve their language-related skills. Arndt and Woore (2018) found that students who viewed YouTube were able to make significant gains in incidental vocabulary learning, albeit to the same degree as those who read blogs. In another quantitative study, Yaacob et al. (2021) found that YouTube could enhance listening comprehension among young learners. Finally, in a study that explored the topic of L2 writing, Alobaid (2020) found watching YouTube videos led to significant improvements in writing accuracy and organization among English learners,

which suggests that the streaming service can have an impact on these two facets of L2 writing. The findings in these studies demonstrate that YouTube has the potential to positively affect linguistic ability in a variety of ways.

Intercultural learning

YouTube has also been found to develop intercultural learning in multiple studies. An example of this can be seen in Wang and Chen (2019), as enhancing cultural knowledge was one of the top reasons why the participants viewed L2 English-teaching YouTubers. Watching these videos was especially useful among students who lacked the ability to study abroad, "I like watching those clips about other countries. Some YouTubers may go abroad and make videos about these countries. I cannot go abroad, but I can watch these clips" (p. 339). Even among international students, YouTube can be a valuable resource for intercultural learning due to the demands of living and studying in a foreign country. That is, YouTube can support multicultural competence by highlighting cultural norms in the host culture, as shown in the quote below by a Korean international student in the U.S.:

> I am studying in America, but sometimes I have no idea how I should do [things] because I cannot understand all the cultural norms . . . It's too tough for me. YouTube videos or vlogs help me a lot. I have learned a lot about real-life stories and manners in surviving here. (Kim & Kim, 2021, p. 8)

In his interactional analysis of YouTube comments, Benson (2015) posits that YouTube affords learners opportunities for intercultural communication and learning. Specifically, he provided evidence that YouTube videos which feature translanguaging are often the catalyst for discussions on culture-related issues.

Motivation

Watching YouTube also seems to have a positive effect on motivation. The participants in Alobaid (2020) expressed that the video streaming service enhanced their interest to write in the L2. Similarly, some of the participants in Kim and Kim (2021) stated that YouTube increased their L2 enjoyment despite the difficulties of learning a foreign language "I can see the videos again and again…Learning is always challenging but is mostly fun and enjoyable on YouTube" (p. 9). This echoes the findings of Wang and Chen (2019) whose participants used the streaming service to strengthen their L2 learning motivation. Results from Aldukhayel (2021) indicated that the student participants in his study thought YouTube was much more interesting than textbook materials, although the teacher participants were less positive about YouTube's effect on learner engagement and interest. While the participants in Sun (2014) were initially hesitant to use YouTube to teach L2 writing, their motivation to use the streaming service increased as they gained more familiarity with the digital tool. The findings in these studies indicate that most L2 learners view YouTube positively when it comes to motivation, but teachers may have less favorable perceptions in this regard.

Efficacy

Despite the above-mentioned benefits of YouTube for L2 learning, there are mixed results when it comes to the efficacy of the video streaming service to enhance L2 skills. As stated earlier, Arndt and Woore (2018) did not find a significant difference in the overall vocabulary learning gains between a group which viewed YouTube and another which read blogs. In terms of different aspects of vocabulary knowledge, the blog group outperformed the YouTube group in orthographic knowledge, whereas the YouTube group proved superior in three other vocabulary-related variables: meaning

recognition, meaning recall, and grammatical function. This finding indicates that viewing YouTube may have differing effects on individual sub-metrics related to vocabulary learning compared to reading tasks. Alobaid (2020) found that viewing YouTube led to significant enhancements in writing accuracy and organization of ideas, while no statistical differences were found with respect to the other variables studied (writing fluency, lexical complexity, syntactic complexity). Again, this highlights the variability that YouTube has on the L2 learning process. Finally, even though the participants in Wang and Chen (2019) had mostly positive things to say about watching YouTubers for L2 learning, some of them were wary about the impact that it could have on improving English: "When students learn at school,…their textbooks are edited, so they can provide more knowledge or vocabulary. So, if students want to learn English more efficiently, learning from teachers (in the classroom) may be faster" (p. 342).

An additional important finding in Wang and Chen (2019) as it relates to language development was that commenting on YouTube was reported to be relatively uncommon compared to other passive behaviors such as liking videos or subscribing. This is important as this suggests any learning gains that are to be made from YouTube are likely the result of passive input rather than any interaction that L2 learners may have on the video streaming service.

Conclusion

The goal of this conceptual paper was to identify commonalities among L2 studies related to the use of YouTube for language-learning purposes. Based on the identified literature, it is clear that the positives outweigh the negatives. Specifically, YouTube has been found to promote language development, intercultural learning, and motivation within an authentic L2 learning environment. However, research regarding its efficacy to positively impact linguistic ability is still limited; thus, more studies are needed in this area to better understand if the use of YouTube improves L2 skill development. Another area that is in need of further exploration is the use of YouTube to learn non-English foreign languages. Out of the reviewed studies, only one (Benson, 2015) involved the analysis of another language besides English. This reflects the predominance of English within the field of computer-assisted language learning (Sauro, 2016). Therefore, there is a need to explore the potential of YouTube and other video streaming-related digital tools to promote language development among L2 learners of less prominent languages. Finally, although there is some research illustrating how YouTube is used in out-of-class contexts, this area is underexplored compared to studies in formal settings. As a result, it would be worthwhile to conduct ethnographic or case study research to gain deeper insight into how L2 learners use the steaming service for informal language learning.

The findings from this theory synthesis present a few pedagogical implications. First, research shows that YouTube provides a rich source for intercultural learning and language development. Because of this, the video streaming service may be a valuable resource in foreign language contexts where students do not have much access to the target language and culture. Additionally, YouTube could be used as an alternative or supplement to traditional teaching materials (e.g., textbooks) to increase engagement and motivation among L2 learners. In this regard, the procedure outlined in Aldukhayel (2021) provides a useful guide on how to incorporate YouTube within the classroom (York, 2011) is an additional resource for L2 teachers looking to use YouTube in a formal setting. Another important consideration for language instructors when implementing YouTube is to match the chosen videos to the needs, interests, and abilities of their learners. While the authenticity of YouTube and other digital resources afford students distinct benefits, these technologies can also pose comprehension difficulties if the material is too advanced for them (Reinders & Hubbard, 2013). Thus, teachers must

understand the limitations associated with the use of YouTube and identify ways to utilize the streaming service that are appropriate for their context.

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