Review of Informal Contact with English: A Case Study of Italian Postgraduate Students (2020) by Maria Pavesi and Elisa Ghia. Pisa: Edizioni ETS, 176 pp., ISBN: 978-884675936-8.

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With the explosive expansion of digital content in the present media landscape where almost every aspect of our lives is intertwined with the online interconnected spaces, extramural English—otherwise known as informal learning of English—has gained remarkable popularity among the youth, most notably the digital native generation or the tech-savvy. Informal learning of English in general, and extramural English in particular, occur outside of classroom settings—be it online and in real life—through learner-initiated activities. Notable examples of such activities include, among other things, watching films and TV shows, listening to songs, or playing video games (Sundqvist, 2024). Indeed, (online) informal learning of English, as Lee and Lee (2021) and Jurkovič (2019) note, consists of self-directed activities in digital settings, often driven by personal interests and undertaken independently, without teacher supervision. Typically, users engage in these activities without the explicit intention of improving their L2 skills. On this ground, the legitimacy of researching informal contact with English is rooted in a confluence of various factors, including contemporary communication practices, the evolving nature of language learning and the proliferation of free and user-friendly online resources and technologies worldwide.

Extramural English is a young, albeit flourishing and vibrant area of enquiry within language education (Rød & Calafato, 2023) as attested by ample research, highlighting various advantages. These encompass not only psychological benefits like increased self-efficacy (Zadorozhnyy & Lee, in press) and reduced negative affective states (Uztosun & Kök, 2024) but also language and intercultural gains (Arndt & Woore, 2018; Lai et al., 2022; Rezai et al., in press).

Maria Pavesi and Elisa Ghia's book provides a much-needed study of extramural English in the Italian setting and showcases learners' out-of-class English language activities in an Italian university, offering a nuanced understanding of their informal English learning experiences outside the classroom. Our enthusiasm for reading this publication is undeniable, as it aligns well with our previous work in the Iranian context (Ameri & Ghodrati, 2019). As such, it deserves a thorough and critical review. *Informal Contact with English* is structured in seven interconnected chapters with an introduction and appendix. Indeed,

the initial chapters lay the groundwork for the study, introducing related concepts, presenting a theoretical foundation, and surveying the relevant empirical literature. Subsequent chapters detail the research method and present empirical data, providing concrete evidence to support the arguments presented earlier.

The introduction of this volume acts as a standalone section—not as a chapter. It discusses the informal learning and use of English worldwide and outlines the research questions and objectives of the study before giving a brief overview of what readers can expect from the chapters. In more detail, **Chapter 1** navigates the theoretical views, holding that English is now the dominant language of international communication in this globalized world where such factors as travel, work mobility, migration, and internet communication have a vital role. Therefore, English now interacts with national and local languages on various socio-linguistic levels, shaping the modern linguistic landscape. The authors then maintain that a shift towards informal and naturalistic exposure to English is occurring in Italy, mainly motivated by the increasing access to the language through media and technological tools, which highlights the evolving nature of multilingualism and language learning. The chapter then opens a discussion surrounding context in language learning, including linguistic co-text, physical settings, geographical areas, previous knowledge, social roles, attitudes, and online communication—all crucial factors facilitating spontaneous access to learning L2 English. This prompts the authors to argue that a dramatic change has now taken place in language acquisition, which "is now defined by the vast and diversified availability of L2 input outside institutional settings, via the media, globalisation, travelling and migrations" (p. 28). One notable consequence of this transition is the increasing dominance of informal L2 acquisition facilitated by exposure to audiovisual materials, especially English TV shows and films. This chapter ends with a critical discussion of the importance of English as a global language and the issue of linguistic inequality, where some countries have limited access to English; therefore, their people may struggle to master it.

What **Chapter 2** aims to accomplish is an overview of the current literature on informal language learning. The chapter begins by discussing the concept of language learning beyond the classroom walls, questioning the traditional view that language learning primarily occurs within a classroom and underscoring the importance of activities and interactions beyond formal education. This is followed by presenting various concepts and labels, such as extramural English and language learning beyond the classroom, which have been used to describe this approach to L2. Given that the book adopts the term informal language learning, the authors felt it necessary to clearly define the concept and make a distinction between incidental and intentional learning, where informal learning is primarily associated with incidental learning. They maintain that when learners are immersed in media, they become emotionally receptive to the language input they receive, which can facilitate incidental learning and L2 acquisition. The authors then challenge the assumption that the informality of the learning context necessarily equates to the informality of the language (i.e., spoken or colloquial) learners may acquire. In this context, the language of media can be informal, formal, or even colloquial. Following this, the focus of the chapter shifts to media input and L2 acquisition in the upcoming sections.

The authors delve into the discussion of media input, specifically subtitles, in the context of L2 acquisition. They explore how media input, such as subtitled audiovisual content, can aid in comprehension-based L2 acquisition and informal language learning. They also present the benefits of different types of subtitling and offer evidence supporting the idea that exposure to subtitled content in naturalistic settings can contribute to language learning. In informal contexts, learners access English for information, entertainment and socializing, which can trigger incidental acquisition. Several theories back up the authors' argument and discussion, including the input hypothesis by Krashen (1989), which emphasizes the importance of frequency and exposure to language in the acquisition process. The volume then cites several large-scale studies that investigated the impact of media input on language skills, including receptive and productive skills. It then turns our attention to the benefits of subtitled audiovisual texts in assisting the development of various skills in a foreign language, including listening comprehension, vocabulary and syntax. This chapter finally concludes with some arguments concerning incidental learning through exposure to subtitled content and how different types of subtitles, such as interlingual, bimodal, and reversed subtitles, can positively affect language learning in different ways.

Chapter 3 covers the research questions that guided the project and details the methods employed to answer these queries. Having elaborated on the research questions, the authors initially describe the questionnaire development and validation, where 83 questions in three sections measured students' attitudes and experiences on the types, sources, extent, reasons, and preferences for informal contact with English. This is followed by the description of the participants of the study; 305 first-year Italian students majoring in various disciplines at the University of Pavia. The data were gathered during regular lectures at the university to encourage participation and minimize bias towards motivated students. The final section of the chapter is devoted to research (de)limitations. The Italian version of the questionnaire is also available in the appendix of the book.

The study was based on two core questions and each is answered in the **Chapters 4** and **5**, and the most interesting sections in this book are included in these chapters. More specifically, **Chapter 4** presents the data analysis for the first question, which examined the extent of exposure to English among Italian university students in informal, out-of-the-classroom situations, identifying the main sources of this exposure and exploring patterns of behavior among the respondents. The overall results suggest that most students access English through web pages, songs, social media networks, YouTube, and films/TV series, respectively. For example, a majority of students (71%) watch English films and TV series, with a preference for TV

series, and do so frequently, with many watching them for at least an hour per week. YouTube is an even more popular resource, with over 75% of students using it in English, although the exposure time is generally shorter, with most using it for less than thirty minutes at each time. Another interesting result reveals that opportunities for authentic language practices and interactions in English outside of the classroom are limited for many students. In fact, most students (54%) do not have direct contact with English-speaking partners, and even among those who do, only a small percentage (13%) interact regularly. Further analysis of the data indicates that high-exposure subjects are characterized by frequent access to English input. They engage with various English resources on a weekly basis, spending at least thirty minutes per session on each source and they are mostly language specialists in English, and have had a study-abroad experience. Low-exposure subjects, on the other hand, have little or no exposure to English input, and are primarily enrolled in technology and hard science majors. They have a lower self-assessed proficiency level in English and have not had a study-abroad experience. The majority of students, however, fall into the moderate-exposure category, showing varying patterns of English exposure.

Chapter 5 offers a comprehensive analysis of participants' exposure to English through audiovisual materials, including their preference for subtitled content, viewing modes, and genres. Students' views regarding the learning benefits of audiovisual content and their exposure to other foreign languages through similar media are scrutinized in this chapter. The authors report that a majority of students watch English films and TV series. Specifically, most students watch films and TV-series in both their original and dubbed versions, but there is a slightly higher preference for watching TV-series in their original language due to various reasons, especially language learning. When it comes to subtitling, the majority of students prefer to watch content with subtitles, with a slight preference for same-language (English) subtitles. The main benefits of same-language subtitles are improved understanding, visual reinforcement of spoken language and vocabulary acquisition. Also, only a small percentage of students prefer to watch without subtitles. These respondents found subtitles distracting, too quick or lengthy, or poorly transcribed. Additionally, only 25% of students watch films and TV programs in other foreign languages, with English being the most accessed foreign language. Finally, the majority of students believe that their L2 competence has improved due to watching subtitled films and TV series in English, with most mentioned improvements in listening skills and vocabulary knowledge.

Chapter 6 proceeds to engage in a critical and insightful comparison of the findings with the behavior of students in other European countries. The comparative analysis indicates that Italian students and their peers in France and Germany share common ground in their media consumption habits. They all prioritize receptive activities, such as watching TV series and films, listening to songs, and browsing the internet. The chapter further explores the features of audiovisual language, particularly in films and TV shows, which may contribute to L2 acquisition in non-instructional settings. The authors point out that informal English input can provide opportunities for incidental language acquisition, particularly in the context of English for specific purposes. This kind of exposure, especially to specialized language use in authentic contexts, helps learners hone their language skills and multiliteracies in a more spontaneous and natural way. What is particularly interesting in the upcoming section of the chapter is the authors' argument about how the traditional distinction between English as a foreign language (EFL) and English as a second language (ESL) has become more blurred. This is because students are shifting from being just learners to becoming actual users of the language in their everyday lives. However, given that the previous chapter's results indicated that students are consuming English content rather than producing it, signaling their productive skills are less frequently put into practice, this claim may be somewhat less convincing. Pavesi and Ghia argue that the identity of English learners is multifaceted and context-dependent. They might see themselves both as learners aiming for near-native competence and as users simply engaging in practical communication in diverse, multilingual environments.

Chapter 7 is fairly brief and concludes the volume with some final thoughts by emphasizing that the increasing informal contact with English is a complex and dynamic issue that demands thorough further investigation to understand its implications for language learning, identity, and communication.

Overall, this volume is a timely read for teachers, students, and researchers. The book mirrors the complexity of English language use and learning in informal settings. Although the book arguably serves as a solid introduction to the essential elements of informal English learning, there is room for improvement and refinement. First, the conceptual side of the book could be enhanced by conducting a more in-depth examination of the input hypothesis, multimedia learning theory, working memory theory, or dual-coding theory. Incorporating insights from these related theories presents a comprehensive understanding of the cognitive processes involved in L2 learning. Additionally, the research could benefit from analyzing individual differences in terms of motivation, grit, and self-efficacy (e.g., Azari Noughabi & Ghasemi, in press; Liu et al., 2024). The widespread adoption of advanced language models (e.g., GPT or Gemini) among youth is transforming extramural English learning activities, demanding scholarly attention (Liu & Ma, 2024; Liu et al., in press). Cross-cultural studies of extramural English learning activities within several cultures and settings can yield valuable insight into how different socio-cultural contexts influence language acquisition. These studies can unravel patterns and strategies that learners from diverse backgrounds employ to enhance their English proficiency outside formal education. As a closure for this review, we are of the view that the volume certainly remains an informative and ideal read for seasoned scholars and young researchers.

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