

Piloting Netflix for intra-formal language learning

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Abstract. The expansion of the *Netflix* TV-network around the globe has made foreign language films and TV-series accessible for formal and informal language learning experiences. As students in educational settings are starting to engage in informal second language (L2) *Netflix* viewing, it is time that new pedagogical approaches support learners to optimise the resource for successful language learning. This pilot study reports on a project conducted with 12 intermediate level German students who watched self-selected German TV-series. For three weeks, students described and commented on each other's viewing experiences in their weekly blogs. In a final report, participants reflected on their affective and cognitive engagement with the series. Findings of this study indicate that previous informal exposure to *Netflix* series positively impacted on the participants' willingness to engage in extensive out-of-class listening. The learning experience in the formal context positively affected subsequent informal L2-series watching.

Keywords: Netflix, German, intra-formal language learning.

1. Introduction

Foreign language movies have long been a popular resource in language education. The emergence of *Netflix*, available in over 190 countries and in 26 languages, however, has made foreign films more accessible. Second language (L2) students who enjoy TV-series in their native language might also feel inclined to look up similar programmes in other languages. It is this potential predisposition to engage in L2 entertainment that opens a new foundation for alternative language learning approaches. This paper explores the idea of using *Netflix* as a resource for extensive listening in an intermediate level language class and proposes the concept of intra-formal language learning as a pedagogical framework.

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1.1. Netflix

Accessible around the globe, on demand, and on mobile devices, *Netflix* has taken the television experience to a new level (Jenner, 2018). Popular TV-series are released as entire seasons, tempting viewers to engage in addictive binge-watching. The powerful appeal of some of the series makes them not only an easily accessible but also highly motivating resource for language learning. Further, the language features provided by *Netflix* can support language learners at all levels.

Viewers are able to watch a foreign language film or series in its original version, dubbed, with subtitles in their native (L1) or target (L2) language. The options are multiple. One can even choose to watch a film in one's L1 with L2 subtitles. Vanderplank (2016) has for a long time and more recently, again discussed the benefits of captions for language learning. Initially conceived for the hard of hearing, they present a beneficial learning tool for language learners. The variety of choices available on *Netflix* multiplies learner options, as also shown by Dizon (2018) who used *Netflix* for English language students in Japan.

The language learning community outside academia has also been quick to point out the learning potential of *Netflix*: language learning blogs such as *FluentU* have written about How to Navigate Netflix for Learning Languages², *Lindsay does Languages* published The ultimate guide to Netflix for language learning³, and *The Guardian* reports on How Netflix could transform the way we learn languages⁴. In addition, some web browsers have developed extensions to add functionality to *Netflix* subtitles (e.g. *Language Learning with Netflix*⁵, *Mate translate*, or *LingvoTV*).

The convenient access to the language resource, its inbuilt and extended learning tools, as well as the ability to download many programmes to mobile devices make *Netflix* an appealing tool for language learning in either the formal or informal learning context.

1.2. Intra-formal language learning

The terms *formal*, *non-formal* and *informal* have been used to describe the nature of learning (other-initiated or self-initiated), and where it is taking place (in an

2. <https://www.fluentu.com/blog/netflix-languages/>

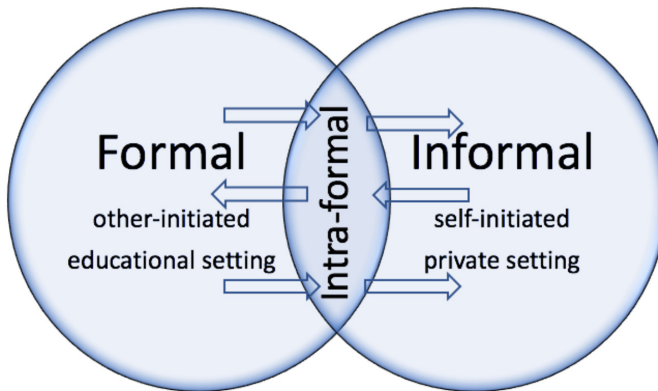
3. <https://www.lindsaydoeslanguages.com/the-ultimate-guide-to-netflix-for-language-learning/>

4. <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2019/mar/02/netflix-languages-education>

5. <https://languagelearningwithnetflix.com/>

accredited or non-accredited educational or private setting). The boundaries between these categories have become fluid over recent years as formal educational contexts often include out-of-class experiences, and as informal (prior) knowledge is increasingly recognised in formal contexts (e.g. badge system). It is, however, useful to maintain conventional definitions to discuss the conditions of different learning experiences and the impact they have on each other. I further use the term *intra-formal* to describe the interdependent nature of informal (self-initiated and out-of-class) and formal (classroom-bound) learning experiences. Intra-formal language learning draws on prior informal L2 exposure and world knowledge (students use *Netflix* in their L1, have L1 viewing habits), raises the learners' metacognitive awareness (through discussion and self-reflection), and prepares them for more significant subsequent informal L2 engagement (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Intra-formal language learning



This paper reports on a pilot study on the use of *Netflix* for language learning. It investigates the metacognitive strategy development of a group of intermediate language learners, influenced by both formal and informal elements, by the task design, and the personal prior experiences and preferences. The wider study seeks to explain from the perspective of formal learning, under which conditions learners engage in self-study, as well as from the perspective of informal learning, and the behaviour learners display based on prior (informal) experiences and their personal preferences for extensive listening (TV-series watching). This short paper focuses on the learning strategies participants developed based on their out-of-class learning experiences.

2. Method

2.1. Participants and task description

The study involved 12 intermediate level German language students (B2) who watched self-selected German TV-series in their own time. The participants were introduced to German TV-series on *Netflix* and on other video streaming services. In addition, strategies for one-way listening were discussed in class. For three weeks, students watched their individual series and wrote about their viewing experiences in their weekly blogs. Participants were guided to write in their first blog entry about their first impressions of their chosen series, in their second post where and when they watched the series and in their third post how they ‘viewed’ and ‘listened to’ the series, reflecting on their learning strategies. Their final report was structured in three parts, covering (1) the content of their series, (2) adopted listening strategies, and (3) their learning experience. Participants were able to read and comment on each other’s blogs and final reports. They granted permission for their work to be used for this study.

2.2. Data analysis

The participants’ blog entries (28), the comments on these entries (35), and their final reports (12) were manually processed. Following the coding criteria of [Ellis and Barkhuizen \(2005\)](#), the data was first read line-by-line. For this open-coding procedure, the texts of individual learners were combined in separate word documents. The learner experiences and observations were coded and organised into themes. The themes were then compared across all documents and a new document was created, grouping extracts with similar themes into categories. The following strategies emerged: selection and planning strategies, and listening strategies, which were divided into the following categories: subtitle use, use of background information, listening for global understanding, replay, looking up words and directed attention. The collective use of these strategies is presented in the next section.

3. Discussion

Participants chose a range of different TV-series, from *Netflix* and other video streaming services (*ARD Mediathek*, *MySpaas*, *YouTube*): *Babylon Berlin* (6), *Charité* (2), *Die Heiland* (1), *Meuchelbeck* (1), *Hilfe Hochzeit* (1), *Jim Knopf* (1).

The selections reflect personal interests and preferences, also providing different learning conditions for individual participants (e.g. no subtitles on *MySpass*). Their approaches consequently varied from person to person. The strategies listed below represents a collection of strategies representative for a minimum of three participants. Phrased as recommendations, they reflect the insights participants gained during the activity:

- *Selection*: find a series that is interesting, at the right level, and fits in with daily activities (length of episode). This creates realistic goals from the outset.
- *Preparation*: read episode guide – recommended by most participants (“I don’t know why I haven’t done this before”).
- *Develop regular routines*: the ability to make viewing a habit was seen as a major factor for both enjoyment and language development.
- *Time management*: related to routine, the need to put enough time aside to read the episode guide, to watch the programme, and to replay scenes with difficult vocabulary or complicated storylines. Choose times when rested, to improve focus.
- *Getting into it*: listening for the gist, instead of listening for individual words which slow down the viewing process. Don’t make this a vocabulary learning exercise only. Focusing on body language, movement of lips, setting to support understanding. Some find it important to watch whole episodes (not sections) for a sense of achievement which in turn fosters commitment.
- *Replay*: the magic word to improve understanding. Replay whole episodes, scenes or only specific words, and write them down to remember. The inbuilt replay function in *Netflix* and many other providers makes this an easy option.
- *Vocabulary app*: some participants liked the idea of using an app to review the vocabulary they had learned.

4. Conclusions

The ability to choose their own series, guided by personal interest and preference for content and format, increased the willingness of the participants to fully engage

in this project. Prompted to reflect on their strategy use, they shared and discussed their viewing and learning experiences in their individual blogs. The development of planning and listening strategies in collaboration with their classmates equipped participants with a range of useful strategies for future viewings beyond the classroom.

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