



ISSN 2185-3762

Studies in Self-Access Learning Journal
<http://sisaljournal.org>

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Publication date: December, 2015.

To cite this article

Sundqvist, P. (2015). About a boy: A gamer and L2 English speaker coming into being by use of self-access. *Studies in Self-Access Learning Journal*, 6(4), 352-364.

To link to this article

<http://sisaljournal.org/archives/dec15/sundqvist>

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About a Boy: A Gamer and L2 English Speaker Coming into Being by Use of Self-Access

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Abstract

This is an interview study of Eldin, a 14-year-old Bosnian boy living in Sweden since the age of six. The aim is to investigate how Eldin became a gamer and how he, strongly motivated, learned foreign/second (L2) English mainly through self-access gameplay. Using language learning motivation theories, Dörnyei's (2005, 2009) L2 Motivational Self System and Dweck's (2006) concept of mindsets, the questions are: (i) By whom and at what age was the learner introduced to video games?, (ii) What was it about the games that kept the learner motivated for two years before he started to play 'for real'?, and (iii) How does the learner himself describe his process of language learning? Data consist of an in-depth interview and three university-level vocabulary/multiple-choice tests measuring English proficiency. Guided by the questions, interview data were analyzed qualitatively. Eldin's mindset seems to favor naturalistic language learning, matching his interest in gaming. Experiences of having fun and daring to use 'trial-and-error' in gaming have contributed to his English proficiency, which is equivalent to a passing grade at second-semester university level. Elements of gaming (in particular, competition, stories, and escapism) appeal to Eldin, thereby indirectly contributing to his successful learning of English.

Keywords: CALL, gaming, self-access, young learners, Ideal L2 self, motivation

There are several ways to learn a second or foreign (L2) language, and language learning motivation varies with each individual learner. Whereas some strongly believe that it is best to learn an L2 in natural settings, others may prefer to do so in school. Zlatan Ibrahimović, a current top international football player from Sweden, describes in his autobiography how he grew up under harsh and poor conditions in a suburb to Malmö. His parents, who divorced when Ibrahimović was little, had met in Sweden after having emigrated from former Yugoslavia (Lagercrantz & Ibrahimović, 2011). Ibrahimović did not care a whole lot about school, but he certainly loved football. He became a professional footballer around the age of 20 and has since then played for teams in Holland, Italy, Spain, and France and is now a mega star. As an international player, it is important to be able to speak the native language of the country in which you are currently playing. In the book, while describing the joy of having been transferred

from Ajax in Holland to Juventus in Italy, Ibrahimović reveals that Juventus decided to put him to school to learn Italian. Twice a week he was supposed to be tutored by a teacher. Such a set-up did not suit Ibrahimović at all, *because he did not believe in learning languages in that way*. Thus, instead of taking lessons, he encouraged the teacher to officially tell the club that she was teaching him (and make sure she got paid for it), while Ibrahimović himself went on a mission to pick up Italian in natural settings: in the locker room, at hotels, and in interviews with the media. From the perspective of second language acquisition in general and self-access language learning in particular, his mission is highly relevant. For instance, he set his mind to begin all interviews in Italian rather than English. Thus, Ibrahimović dared speaking even though he knew he made lots of grammatical mistakes, at least in the beginning. However, this did not bother him much, because he was confident his Italian would improve over time with enough practice. Ibrahimović says that he was strongly motivated to learn – and he noticed that fans and others appreciated his linguistic effort. In the autobiography he also gives vivid descriptions of how he was totally absorbed by playing video games – and this he did in English.

Ibrahimović's approach to learning languages accords well with the present study: an interview study about an exceptionally motivated 14-year-old boy who learned English by self-accessing *Halo* and *World of Warcraft*.

Gaming and Young Language Learners

Although the number of empirical studies targeting gaming and young language learners is still rather small, research has revealed a positive relationship between digital gameplay and various aspects of learners' L2 proficiency. For example, in a study from Canada, focus was on learning vocabulary with the help of games. The participating children were Francophone L2 English learners (aged 12–13) who were instructed to play Word Coach, an educational vocabulary training mini-game (Cobb & Horst, 2011). Based on data from one pre-test and two post-tests, the results showed, among other things, that two months of gaming coincided with one to two years' growth in the recognition of L2 vocabulary. In addition, instances of code-switching were lowered. In out-of-school/extramural contexts, there are some interesting European studies that involve young learners.

For example, in a Finnish study, Piirainen-Marsh and Tainio (2009) examined two boys in their lower teens who played a game called *Final Fantasy X*. Again, the findings were very positive with regard to English skills. For instance, it was possible to link the repetitive practice inherent in the game to language learning. In another study, which employed data from the same boys, a relation was found between involvement in gaming and the development of interactional competence in L2 English (Piirainen-Marsh, 2011). In two studies among young L2 English learners in Sweden, the findings are equally positive. The first study, carried out among 12-year-olds, showed significant links between extramural gaming and three aspects of English proficiency: vocabulary, listening comprehension, and reading comprehension (Sylvén & Sundqvist, 2012). The second study found that when 10-year-old non-gamers, moderate gamers, and frequent gamers were compared, all the frequent gamers were strongly motivated to learn English (Sundqvist & Sylvén, 2014).

In sum, the findings reported on above are very promising from the perspective of L2 learning. The studies that target extramural gaming, where gaming can be viewed as an example of self-access learning practice, are particularly relevant with regard to the present study. With this as a backdrop, it is reassuring to see that the results from a large European project involving 10- and 11-year-olds from seven countries, Early Language Learning in Europe (ELLiE) (Muñoz & Lindgren, 2011), confirm many of the findings in the studies above, which are all much smaller in terms of the number of participants.

Self-access

In recent years, the theme of language learning beyond the classroom has caught an increasing amount of attention. In a ground-breaking volume edited by Benson and Reinders (2011), the common factor among all included chapters is that they deal with research carried out outside of classrooms. As pointed out by the editors, such studies are valuable, because they provide alternative perspectives on cognitive and social processes involved in L2 learning. In one of the chapters, Sundqvist (2011) proposes the use of an umbrella term, *extramural English*, to describe the current worldwide phenomenon of young learners picking up English outside of class through English-mediated activities such as gaming, listening to music, and watching TV series or films. She argues that “no degree of

deliberate attention to acquire English is necessary on the part of the learner, even though deliberate intention is by no means excluded from the concept” (Sundqvist, 2011, p. 107). Thus, being engaged in extramural English activities can certainly be categorized as self-access language learning, even though self-access language learning has traditionally been more linked to the idea that learners access collections of rich L2 materials at specific learning centers (at schools or higher education institutions) which, in turn, offer great opportunities for self-directed learning (cf. Benson, 2011). In the present study, gaming is viewed as an opportunity for L2 English learning.

Motivation in L2 Learning

The renowned L2 motivation scholar Dörnyei (2009) has developed a model of L2 motivation called the L2 Motivational Self System. In Dörnyei’s model, there are three dimensions of motivation: an Ideal L2 Self, an Ought-to L2 Self, and the L2 Learning Experience. The Ideal L2 Self represents the L2-specific component of the individual’s overall “ideal self”. To give an example, in a situation where the type of person a learner would like to become speaks an L2, the learner’s Ideal L2 Self functions as a powerful motivator; there might be a desire to reduce the discrepancy between actual and ideal selves. Further, the Ought-to L2 Self is linked to the attributes a learner believes he or she should possess in order to meet social expectations and avoid potentially negative outcomes, such as wishing to do well on language tests. The third dimension, the L2 Learning Experience, deals with situated executive motives that are related to the immediate learning environment (generally the classroom).

There is some agreement among scholars as regards learners’ L2 motivation. For example, most researchers would probably agree that intrinsic motivation leads to qualitatively improved learning outcomes. In general, learners who are intrinsically motivated find learning fun and personally meaningful and, as a consequence, their possible learning gains tend to be more durable.

In recent motivation research, Ryan and Mercer (2011) apply Dweck’s (2006) theory of so-called mindsets. They propose that one particular feature of mindsets can relate to beliefs about the relative ‘naturalness’ of the L2 learning process. In light of the fact that many countries offer almost ideal settings for involvement in extramural English activities – not least many European and

Southeast Asian countries where Internet access is high and English has a very high status in society – English encountered outside the walls of the classroom is likely to constitute a constant background presence. In such countries, a ‘naturalness’ mindset is likely to evolve. In short, many learners may feel they learn English more easily outside of school in naturalistic settings and, therefore, they are likely to find this way of learning qualitatively more effective than learning in school. There is also research that deals with rather extreme experiences of feelings of motivation, such as the theory of flow.

Flow

Twenty-five years ago, Csikszentmihalyi (1990) introduced the theoretical concept of flow. Flow is a state when individuals are completely absorbed with the activity at hand, or they might be totally immersed in what they are doing: nothing else seems to matter, such as food or time. Gaming is one activity that can lead to states of flow, as testified in several accounts from gamers around the globe. The aforementioned footballer, Ibrahimović, describes *Gears of War* and *Call of Duty* as poison (Lagercrantz & Ibrahimović, 2011). Ibrahimović has clearly experienced states of flow: he could play up to six or seven hours per day (and often late into the night) and his desire to win in the video game was as strong as on the pitch, and he enjoyed interacting with gamers of different nationalities. In short, flow can be said to be an optimal state of intrinsic motivation.

Research Questions

The present interview study involves a young learner who claims to have learned most of his English outside of school through playing video games. Further, he claims having spent around two-three years as an observer of games before he started to play ‘for real’ (using his own expression). With these claims as a background, the following research questions are asked:

- (1) By whom and at what age was the learner introduced to video games?
- (2) What was it about the games that kept the learner motivated for two years before he started to play ‘for real’?
- (3) How does the learner himself describe his process of language learning?

Material and Methods

Participant: Eldin

The participant is a 14-year-old boy (pseudonym Eldin). His parents are Bosnian and he was born in Bosnia himself. Thus, his first language is Bosnian. The family, who also includes a 16-year-old sister, moved to Norway when Eldin was four. He went to preschool in Norway for a short while, but does not remember any Norwegian. Two years later, the family moved to Sweden, where they have lived ever since. Both parents are medical doctors and Eldin aims to become a doctor too. The family lives in a semi-detached house in a multicultural part of a medium-sized town. At the age of six, Eldin started first grade in a regular class and began to learn Swedish. English was introduced as a school subject in third grade. In sixth grade, Eldin changed schools and became a student at a school with a content and language integrated learning profile; English is used as the medium of instruction in many (but not all) school subjects. (According to Swedish law, a maximum of 50 per cent of the time in compulsory school may be mediated in another language than Swedish.) At the time of the interview, Eldin was in the eighth grade.

The author of this paper met with Eldin when he had two weeks of mandatory vocational training at the university, hosted by the English department. By coincidence, Eldin heard of the author's previous research about gaming and L2 learning, and this was when he revealed that he had learned most of his English outside of school via gaming and that he had spent two or three years more or less 'waiting' before he could actually start playing. Thus, he came across as a potentially interesting learner to interview about motivation for L2 learning, in particular with regard to self-access and extramural English gaming. Eldin agreed to be interviewed and a written form of consent was collected from his parents before the interview took place.

Material and analytic procedure

There are various types of interviews, but the typical qualitative interview is one-on-one (interviewer plus interviewee), and it can be described as a "professional conversation" (Kvale, 1996, p. 5). It has the purpose of obtaining "descriptions of the life world of the interviewee with respect to interpreting the

meaning of the described phenomena” (Kvale, 1996, pp. 5-6). A semi-structured interview format was adopted, and an interview guide from a previous study focusing on extramural English among young learners was used (for details, see Sundqvist, 2012). Although the semi-structured interview includes a number of pre-set questions and prompts, the format is “open-ended and the interviewee is encouraged to elaborate on the issues raised in an exploratory manner” (Dörnyei, 2007, p. 136). Further, the topic at the core of this study – Eldin’s strong determination to do what was needed in order to be able to play games successfully in English – is approached from a constructivist perspective; that is, concepts and theories are constructed by the researcher “out of stories that are constructed by research participants who are trying to explain and make sense out of their experiences and/or lives, both to the researcher and themselves” (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 10).

The present interview lasted 1 hour and 10 minutes (audio-recorded). Interview data were analyzed qualitatively bearing the specific research questions in mind. More specifically, in a first phase, data were trawled through and instances that responded to the questions were marked up. In a second phase, a selection of quotes was made, mainly to serve the purpose of illustrating key findings. In addition, three university-level vocabulary/multiple-choice (VOC/MCT) tests were administered. As part of his training, Eldin had volunteered to take these tests together with the university students. The purpose of the VOC/MCT test is to measure students’ level of English proficiency and for the purpose of this study, Eldin’s scores are thus indicative of his level of L2 English proficiency.

Each test consists of two parts. The first part (called ‘Vocabulary’) employs a MCT format; there are 120 items (one English word; five options in Swedish; the correct option should be ticked). The second part (‘Text’) also employs a MCT format, testing mainly grammar and idiomaticity. Here, there is a running text in English and in certain places the test-taker is supposed to tick the correct option from a number of suggestions, such as selecting the correct English preposition, phrase, or grammatical form. Each part of the test renders a score which is converted to another score on a 1–10 scale; the two converted scores on the 10-graded scale are then added up, yielding a possible highest total score of 20 for the whole VOC/MCT test. The passing grade is 9 for first semester English

university students (distinction: ≥ 11), 12 for second semester students (distinction: ≥ 15), and 16 for third semester students (distinction: ≥ 18).

Results and Discussion

The interview began with the researcher asking about what language Eldin would prefer for the interview. He responded “English”, because he had an “easier time with the words” in English than in Swedish. After some warm-up questions about his background, the interview focused on Eldin’s interest in playing video games and his beliefs about his own language learning.

With regard to research question 1, “By whom and at what age was the learner introduced to video games?”, Eldin revealed that it was his parents who first introduced him to video games when he was around seven. They had given him an Xbox with the game *Halo*, an alien science fiction first-person shooter game (later also available as a real-time strategy game). Eldin claimed that his parents told him that they did not think he would be affected in a bad way by playing video games, adding that they did not think he would become aggressive or start using bad language.

Research question 2, “What was it with the games that kept the learner motivated for two years before he started to play ‘for real’?”, focuses on aspects of gaming that appeal to Eldin. When talking about *Halo*, Eldin revealed that he did not understand anything at all in the beginning. Everything was in English and he only knew Bosnian and some Swedish at the time. He remembered being unable to finish the first game and also how he got amazed one day when he suddenly realized that there were plenty of more games to play in *Halo* (besides the game he had already tried). He described that there was a whole world out there, in the game, and he “wanted to know what they were talking about, what was going on”. Despite the fact that he was so young, Eldin convincingly disclosed that he spent about two or three years observing, reading, listening, and trying to connect visuals with audio in order to understand what was going on in the game. He really appreciated that everything was in a context and the game was pure entertainment to him, and in hindsight Eldin describes his experiences as “three years of informally learning English by trial and error”. As for game genres, he said he had been particularly fond of online strategy games and, at first, he usually played as a single player but later he switched and played multiplayer.

In the interview, Eldin frequently touched upon his own process of learning various languages. In addition to Bosnian, Swedish, and English, Eldin started studying Spanish in sixth grade as part of the mandatory language option in the Swedish curriculum. To facilitate learning Spanish, Eldin made sure to game with native speakers of Spanish every now and then, thereby forcing himself to use Spanish naturally. He understands some Croatian and Russian (because they are Slavic languages like Bosnian) and wants to learn German too. In a potentially threatening future (a third world war), quite extraordinarily, Eldin explained that “if you learn German, you will be a lot safer”. All these languages relate to the third research question (“How does the learner himself describe his process of language learning?”); below, focus is mainly on English.

According to Eldin, he has learned English mainly outside of school. When English was introduced in school in third grade, Eldin had already spent a great deal of time with *Halo* and, therefore, learning about colors and animals et cetera came across as too easy and the teacher decided to let Eldin join the fifth graders for English. Eldin praised his teacher for her decision, but unfortunately the fifth-grade solution did not work out: the older children did not appreciate the presence of a much younger learner who knew as much as them (or perhaps even more). Thus, Eldin returned to his regular class but was bored with English there. According to Eldin, *the main thing in life is not to get bored*, which at least partly explains the extensive amount of time (cf. flow) he has spent on gaming over the years.

In the interview, Eldin explained what intrigues him about video games: “The story and things that I wouldn’t do in real life”. The quote is important and has pedagogical implications (see below). He also gave a concrete example of language learning while gaming; for some reason, Eldin thought the letter *s* should be pronounced with an *h*-sound. Thus, when playing *World of Warcraft*, Eldin had used “helling” instead of “selling” a number of times until a co-player enlightened Eldin about this specific phonemic confusion, and Eldin immediately corrected his mispronunciation. Other concrete examples of language learning (most likely) thanks to gaming would be his excellent English oral fluency on the one hand (displayed throughout the interview), and his high level of English proficiency on the other (displayed through excellent results on the university VOC/MCT tests, see Table 1). In brief, Eldin scored high on all three

examinations. Had he been a university student, Eldin would have been awarded the grade ‘pass with distinction’ as a first-semester student and ‘pass’ as a second-semester student.

Table 1. Eldin’s VOC/MCT test scores (10-graded scale score in brackets)

Test	‘Vocabulary’	‘Text’	Total (max: 20)
1	81 (7)	124 (7)	14
2	80 (7)	114 (6)	13
3	76 (7)	124 (7)	14

Implications for Self-Access Learning and Young Learner Classrooms

This interview study may have practical applications to the field of self-access in terms of learners’ access to online video games, bearing in mind the caveat that only one (possibly exceptional) learner was included in the study. Although most young learners’ access to games probably needs to be monitored – perhaps not all guardians dare trusting their children with games the way Eldin’s parents trusted him – there is a great deal to learn from the case of Eldin. By having self-access to games, he was prepared to ‘study’ hard for years in order to be able to play. He was extremely motivated and wanted to become a gamer (cf. L2 Ideal Self) and in order to succeed, Eldin needed to learn English. This study also has pedagogical implications. More specifically, with regard to self-access centers, it is possible that L2 learners who lack the opportunity to try online gaming from their homes could do so from the center; it might be worthwhile to consider pairing up novice gamers/learners with more experienced gamers (peers/staff). Moreover, teachers may want to consider the inclusion of more stories in young learner classrooms, and more often design language tasks that encourage role-playing/escapism. At least based on the results of this study, such aspects may be highly motivating for young learners. As for further research, more in-depth interview studies are needed, preferably with more participants and multiple sessions of interviews coupled with observations.

Conclusion

There are some limitations to the present study. Most importantly, there is only one participant, Eldin, and he was interviewed on one occasion. In other words, it is necessary to view the results of this small-scale study with great caution.

In many ways, Eldin is like any other boy his age: he has friends, likes gaming, and goes to school. However, he is also different. Not just any boy aspires to become a medical doctor and chooses the university for his vocational training. Not just any boy sits relaxed and talks – using L2 English – for more than an hour to a researcher. It is the author's firm belief that Eldin's experiences from gaming strongly contributed to his ability to carry out such an interview: he is fearless when using English. Admittedly, there are other potentially influencing factors that may have contributed to his fearless attitude, such as the fact that he was born and raised in a highly educated, international family and the fact that he started attending a school with an English profile in the sixth grade. Having said so, based on the findings in this interview study, key factors for Eldin's successful learning of L2 English include experiences of having fun and of daring to use 'trial-and-error' while gaming. Furthermore, elements of gaming such as competition, stories, and escapism appeal to Eldin and, thereby, indirectly contribute positively to his process of learning. Using terminology from Dweck (2006), Eldin's mindset clearly seems to favor naturalistic language learning, even though he does not come across as reluctant to learn languages also in school because, using his own words: "I think it's awesome to learn new things".

Notes on the contributor

Pia Sundqvist holds a PhD in English linguistics from Karlstad University, Sweden, where she is Associate Professor of English. Her research interests are extramural, out-of-class, informal English language learning, CALL (especially gaming), L2 vocabulary acquisition, and assessment of L2 oral proficiency, with a focus on primary and secondary school learners.

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