

El Efecto del K-Pop y la Interacción dentro de la Comunidad K-Pop en Estudiantes de Inglés como Lengua Extranjera

The Effect of K-Pop and the Interaction within the K-Pop Community on EFL Learners

Mónica J. Valerio-Ramos^a, Elizabeth M. Hernández-López^b

Abstract:

Korean-Pop (K-Pop) has become a global phenomenon, reaching parts of the world that no one could have imagined before. The recent surge in popularity has brought about an enormous number of fans from all over the world, all wishing to engage in the content and discourse present online. Due to this widespread reach of the fandom, English has started to be used as an informal lingua franca on the internet. English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students who have an interest in Korean Pop music can potentially benefit from this use of English online. Using a qualitative approach, this research focuses on the effect participating in the K-Pop online community has on EFL students. The participants –six young adult females, all studying the same university major, all fans of K-Pop who frequently interact in the online community– were interviewed about their experience participating in the K-Pop online community and how it affected their learning of EFL. Based on this study’s findings, though there was not a direct association between interaction in the K-Pop online community and motivation, interaction with this community showed to have a positive impact on vocabulary, receptive macro skills development and confidence on the participants EFL learning.

Keywords:

Internet Aided Learning, IDLE, EFL, K-Pop

Resumen:

Korean Pop (K-Pop) se ha convertido en un fenómeno global, llegando a partes del mundo que nadie podría haber imaginado antes. El reciente aumento de popularidad ha generado una enorme cantidad de fans de todo el mundo, todos deseosos de participar en el contenido y el discurso disponible digitalmente. Debido a este alcance generalizado del fandom, el inglés ha comenzado a usarse como lengua franca informal en Internet. Los estudiantes de inglés como lengua extranjera (EFL, por sus siglas en inglés) que tienen interés en la música pop coreana pueden beneficiarse potencialmente de este uso del inglés en línea. Utilizando un enfoque cualitativo, esta investigación se centra en el efecto que tiene la participación en la comunidad en línea de K-Pop en estudiantes de inglés como lengua extranjera. Los participantes-seis mujeres adultas jóvenes, todas estudiando la misma carrera universitaria, fans del K-Pop que interactúan con frecuencia en la comunidad en línea- fueron entrevistadas sobre su experiencia al participar en la comunidad en línea del K-Pop y cómo afectó esto su aprendizaje de EFL. Según los hallazgos de este estudio, aunque no hubo una asociación directa entre la interacción en la comunidad en línea de K-Pop y la motivación, la interacción con esta comunidad demostró tener un impacto positivo en el desarrollo de vocabulario, macro habilidades receptivas y la confianza en el aprendizaje de inglés de los participantes.

Palabras Clave:

Aprendizaje asistido por Internet, Aprendizaje digital informal del inglés, inglés como lengua extranjera, K-Pop

a Mónica Jacqueline Valerio Ramos, Universidad de Guadalajara, <https://orcid.org/0009-0007-8885-747X>, Email: mjvalerio2001@gmail.com

b Autor de correspondencia, Elizabeth M. Hernández-López. Universidad de Guadalajara, <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2982-4444>, Email: elizabeth.hlopez@academicos.udg.mx

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Introduction

Over the last few decades, digital technology has evolved exponentially. The limits of what was thought possible have been surpassed, and whole countries-like Korea-have undergone a massive digital takeover (Jin, 2017). Alongside this evolution came worldwide communication, a phenomenon that cemented globalization in a manner that has not been seen since the colonization of the Americas –the trade of cultural, social, economic, and intellectual information. Except that this time, with social media, this was possible to be done in a matter of seconds. Kessler (2013) believes that social media created a new form of interaction, one that allows for instant feedback and retribution from participants all across the globe. This new type of interaction brought about an endless list of advantages and disadvantages; in education, the opportunities born out of internet aided learning are significantly more relevant than the losses.

In Mexico, a country with a highly traditionalist approach to education and language learning, internet aided learning has not yet been a topic of wide discussion nor one that has been implemented within classrooms. This issue became evident when the COVID-19 pandemic started and Mexico's education system faced many challenges in trying to implement internet aided learning, one of which was the lack of accessibility a lot of students possessed (Cortés & Islas, 2021). Before this, there have been many attempts to incorporate Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) in education, but the effort has been mainly done through the equipment of classrooms –the actual use of it depends on each teacher, as is the approach taken to the linguistic policies of each education center, given that there currently is no national policy on the teaching of a foreign language (Martinell et al., 2014). This lack of policy handicaps the learning of English in students, as the government has made the implementation of English classes mandatory since 1926, but it wasn't until 1992 when programs started to arise in schools across the country and, still, to this day, there is no generalization of these classes (Reyes et al., 2011). Because of this, this research aims to delve into the activities a sector of Mexican university students partakes in outside the classroom, and how these activities play a part into their motivation, perception, and improvement in EFL learning. This is done with a particular focus on K-Pop as a whole, and specifically the participation within the K-Pop community of six Mexican B.A. students, and how it affected their EFL learning experience.

Internet Aided Learning

Across the world, many authors have explored the benefits of internet use as a tool to aid both teaching and

learning. These tools are utilized upon availability to students, and can be deeply varied, as described in Hoshi's (2002) study on Japanese EFL learners' use of internet-based language learning. From the analysis made in his work, two distinct concepts of media consumption and digital tools are noted: Content-Focus and Language-Focus, both of which are themes present across the literature explored for this project. Content-Focus refers to what can be considered typical internet usage that just happens to be in English, an aspect that can be a motivator in and of itself, as Hoshi (2002, p.10) stated: "most of the information on the Internet just happens to be presented in English, and understanding the English language is essential for that reason." Along those lines, Language-Focus is concerned with the tools specifically designed and intended to be used as an aid to improve one's language skills. Besides these two foci described by Hoshi (2002), another important aspect present in the research is the sense of community that can be formed within some online forums and digital spaces, as the similar goals and issues discussed in them can decrease levels of isolation and increase learners' motivation.

Related to this sense of belonging, the participants in Lee et al.'s (2022) study reported a significant help in their learning journey thanks to the connection created out of the online communities they were part of, and their shared interests and experiences. As part of Internet Aided Learning, Informal Digital Learning of English (IDLE), defined as: "a fully autonomous English activity in extramural digital environments that is unrelated to formal instruction (e.g., talk with others in English on online communities)" (Lee et al., 2022, p.2) has flourished. This term helps us to better understand the students' out-of-class internet usage and how it can help their in-class performance, as the language used within classrooms tends to be unauthentic and predictable. Additionally, Lee et al. (2022) divide the IDLE practices performed by learners outside the classroom (their extramural activities) into Receptive (i.e. watching videos, reading novels, listening to music) and Productive (i.e. interacting with other people online). A combination of these activities is what is needed in order for students to be able to have a higher proficiency and an overall willingness to learn and communicate in English, both in and out of school. These concepts are in line with what Lai et al. (2015) found in their research; the mixture of what they deem Form-Focused and Meaning-Focused activities (a division similar to Hoshi's Content and Language Focus), and the variety of the participants' out-of-class technology-advanced learning is what assists them to improve their language, as these two types of non-school activities complement not only with each other, but also with the students' in-class activities as well.

Lee's (2019, p. 116) research had similar results and claimed that "EFL learners can develop and acquire English knowledge through massive exposure to English as well as interaction with other English users in various IDLE contexts".

However, in a previous study, Lee and Dražati (2019) found that students are more widely engaged in receptive IDLE activities, rather than productive, reducing the variety of their extramural activities. In any case, this is still of benefit, as learners are exposed to different varieties of English through the distinct users, their singularities and accents, which in turn leads them to have a wider appreciation and better perception of English varieties, something that is not always present in the EFL learning process.

In a globalized world, another contribution of IDLE activities is the opportunity they grant for students to be in contact with people from different linguistic, ethnic and cultural backgrounds, which may allow the enhancement of cross-cultural communication skills inside and outside the students' digital devices. Because of this, it is important for EFL practitioners to be aware of the pedagogical potential their online activities have, and for teachers, who work as guides and facilitators to encourage their learners to get involved in their own IDLE practices.

Independent vs. Assisted Learning

In a study developed by Sayer and Ban (2014), the authors propose the question: "what do children do with English when the teacher is not around?", a consideration that is important to bring forth in the pedagogical conversation of extramural activities. As stated before, the constant evolution of technology has made teachers around the globe reconsider their instructional practices, and out-of-class IDLE practices are one of the most obvious to tackle first. People of all ages spend a big chunk of their day online, with Forbes (2020) reporting that the average of content consumption as far back as 2020 was six hours and fifty-nine minutes. Of course, this number was affected due to the COVID-19 pandemic that trapped everyone in their homes, allowing only digital communication for the most part. For example, an online study performed in Germany revealed a 50 to 70% increase in people's online consumption (Lemenager et al., 2021). Even now, after the pandemic, there is no denial that we are now in the digital age, and we should adapt our teaching practices accordingly. Sayer and Ban (2014) wrote about how teachers consistently complained about the time they had during class and how it was not nearly enough to achieve the objectives set. With the aid of the internet, there are now endless possibilities when it comes to out-of-class learning tools, even when it entails

using search engines or browsing video channels; two of the most used strategies by higher education students (García et al., 2020). The opportunity to take advantage of them in order to fulfill learning objectives, even if they are not done during the class time, is one that can now be considered entirely plausible.

With this, another question arises: should teachers be of help to students when choosing IDLE activities, or should students be allowed to freely decide what tools to utilize in their free time? As a metacognitive tactic, Kilickaya and Krajka (2010, p. 59) believe that successful students "intentionally select, consciously monitor and evaluate the strategy they use for the fulfillment of their aim"; based on this, it is best to leave learners to their own devices. However, it can also be possible for learners to be influenced by other outside parties, like parents or other figures of power, as shown in the results of Lai et al.'s (2015) study, where the middle school students' out-of-class learning activities were entirely dictated by their parents. Depending on the students' age and aiming to boost their self-learning process, this may lead us to conclude that learners should be presented with different extracurricular strategies for them to select the one that works best for them. When choosing these aids, aspects such as cultural differences need to be taken into consideration as they can affect the students' technology use as well as their learning strategies and perceptions (Lai et al., 2017).

Onto the linguistic and pedagogical aspects of choosing appropriate IDLE activities for oneself or one's students, Benson's (2011) concepts of language learning beyond the classroom, namely: location (setting), formality (formal or non-formal), pedagogy (self-instructed, non-instructed, and naturalistic), and locus of control (independent, self-directed, or autonomous) are highly regarded within the field. According to the literature presented thus far, we can infer that an appropriate IDLE activity would be non-formal, naturalistic, and independent. Furthermore, Lai and Zheng (2018) talk about the dimensions of out-of-class language learning with mobile devices. They talk about personalization, authenticity, and connectivity; dimensions that are likely to be absent within the classroom. Because of this, it is highly encouraged that students take more control over their learning process and aim to enhance their language proficiency through extramural activities.

K-Pop as a Cultural Phenomenon

When thinking of helping students to choose their out-of-class learning activities, one can take advantage of the personalization aspect of it and aim directly to their personal taste. Korean Pop, most commonly known as K-Pop, is a cultural phenomenon that has risen among

young people all across the world, and is particularly popular with Latin American young women. The Korean Wave (also known as “Hallyu”) is a term coined by Chinese media after the Korean entertainment boom that took place in the late 1990s centering on TV dramas, pop music and idols (Kim & Ryoo, 2007 as cited in Vargas Meza & Park, 2015). The term has now expanded to include anything Korean, considering the rapid growth this Asian country has had over the last few years in regard to economy, globalization, social media, and entertainment in general (Min et al., 2019). The arrival of this wave to Latin America was not significant until the 2010s, but has grown exponentially ever since. Many aspects of Korean pop music and its culture in general are highly appealing to a big part of the Latin American population, and although it can still be widely looked down upon, as fanaticism among young women tends to be, the affinity spaces created by the K-Pop community in Latin America can be a great space for interaction and learning.

Malik and Haidar (2021), whose studies tend to focus on K-Pop Stan Twitter—the community on the social media platform Twitter that was born out of K-Pop fans interacting—believe that taking part of these micro-communities can create an unconscious and unintentional (naturalistic) EFL learning process due to the fact that they came together because of their shared interest and not their wish to learn a foreign language. It can also develop confidence and self-sufficiency in the participants (Malik and Haidar, 2020), as the community can be quite supportive.

The use of English within these self-defined fandom spaces comes from a need born out of the natural multiculturalism of the space. Regardless of the fact that Spanish is one of the most spoken languages in the world with around 548.3 million speakers (Ethnologue, 2022), English has worked as a makeshift *lingua franca* online for quite some time. Christiansen (2015) believes that English has been the most influential language for over twenty years now, with an estimated 1.5 billion speakers across the globe (Ethnologue, 2022), something that has given it the privilege to remain the default language for many sites. On top of this fact, the K-Pop industry in itself targets its content more towards English speakers, shown in the fact that the subtitles for the online content created is first and foremost presented in English. An example of this is when the official Twitter account of the popular K-Pop group Stray Kids announced that their YouTube content was subtitled first in English and Japanese (Stray Kids, 2022), but is now also available in Chinese, Spanish, Indonesian, and Thai (YouTube, 2022). Fans that do not speak English often need to rely on what is deemed as *fansubs*, the act where Korean speaking fans informally subtitle and/or translate the content, traditionally to English, but also to many other languages.

This happens very regularly on Twitter, and on the popular app *VLive*, where in order to enjoy the content made by their favorite groups and/or idols, fans need to wait for English subtitles first, and then in their native language. Because of this, many K-Pop fans tend to feel the need to interact in English in order to take part in the community, to be heard or just taken account of.

Methodology

As it was previously mentioned, the goal of this study is to discover how students' extramural activities, such as interacting in the K-Pop online community and specifically on stan Twitter, take part into their motivation, perception, and/or improvement of EFL learning. Thus, the research question that drives this study is:

What is the educational aid that participating in the K-Pop online community brings to EFL students?

Setting and Participants

The participants of this study were 6 female university students, currently enrolled in an English Teaching as a Foreign Language undergraduate program at a public university in Mexico; who had openly expressed to like K-Pop and to have benefited linguistically and/or academically from interacting from the K-Pop community. The program's length is eight semesters (4 years), and aiming to include variety of perceptions, the participants correspond to different semesters; respectively: 2 from second, 2 from fourth, and 2 from sixth semester. Their ages ranged between 19 to 22 years old, and although the purposive selection criteria included interacting with the K-Pop community, having a shared background of at least three years of participation within this community was coincidental.

The lack of gender variety is rooted on the fact that the pre-graduate program, in which the participants are part of, is in its majority dominated by women, and although there were several attempts to reach a male participant, the few that could potentially take part in the research did not meet the criteria to do so. So, we can consider that even if the sample of participants is small and specific, it provides an accurate picture of the “population”.

Data Collection

For the instrument of this research, it was decided that it would be best to use a semi-structured interview, as it allows to inquire more specific points of the topics and themes being discussed while also being flexible enough for the participants' input to be discussed more in depth (Denscombe, 2010).

All six interviews were done face-to-face in one of the campuses of the university both the participants and

the researchers are in; for consistency, they were all conducted at around the same time (noon), and had a similar duration (10 to 20 minutes). The language used was Spanish, as it gives participants more freedom to express themselves, given that it is their L1, and studies –such as one done by Dewaele (2011) in the University of California– showed results that argue bilingual and multilingual people can express themselves better and feel less anxious when speaking in their L1, no matter how proficient they might be in their L2.

The interview itself consisted of ten open-ended questions that were piloted with two people, one that was aware of the topic of the research and had followed along the first stages of the process, and another one that had no previous knowledge of the investigation. Both pilot testers met the criteria for the participants and gave helpful feedback to improve the final draft of the interview. As for the ethical considerations taken, before each interview, all the participants were shown a Participant Information Sheet (PIS) and digitally gave their consent to have their data recorded and analyzed for academic purposes. The interviews were audio recorded and later transcribed to make the analysis of the data smoother, but were erased once the research was completed. Pseudonyms were assigned to safeguard the participants' identity.

Given the fact that this research was born out of personal experience with the K-Pop community and own ideas could potentially affect the process and results of this research, some steps were taken towards ensuring no bias was present in it. The participants were selected through purposive sampling, but the criteria were clear and followed at every moment; the questions for the instrument were drafted and reviewed several times by different people, including novice researchers and the research professor that overviewed this project; and the analysis of the data collected was done following a specific method and with careful consideration to stay critical and objective towards the actual results of the project.

Data Analysis

The data analysis method used for this research was the Systematic Text Condensation (STC) coined by Malterud (2012). With four steps to it, this qualitative method of data analysis felt the most organic and useful for the data collected in this particular project. The steps described by Malterud: total impression, identifying and sorting meaning units, condensation, and synthesizing, not only allow the data to be decontextualized and recontextualized in a way that allows the researcher check the conclusions drawn from critical analysis, but also provides an easier pathway to present the participant's data both as individual entities and as a

whole. Generalization is not a possible feat to accomplish in qualitative research, but themes, codes, similarities and differences can be found through every participants' experience, and, like Malterud (2012) says "STC aims for thematic analysis of meaning and content of data across cases".

Findings

The findings of the data analysis are divided into three sections to shed more clarity to each theme found, and to separate the similarities and differences between each of them.

Real Interactions, Good Practice

Every participant mentioned during their interviews that they joined the K-Pop online community to interact with people who share similar interests, not with learning in mind. A couple of them stated that they were aware of the helpfulness it brought to their English proficiency, but only after they saw the progress they had made. 22-year-old, second semester student, under the pseudonym of Alicia, pointed out that although she had an intermediate to advanced level of English by the time she started interacting with the community, it had helped her to reinforce her knowledge and to have real practice outside of the classroom. Similar to what 21- years- old, sixth semester, Valentina, had experienced: real interaction that had helped her to stay in touch with the language, given that it was her sole practice besides her private classes. To this, she said:

Here in person... We all speak Spanish, right? So, it is really hard to speak in English with the people I physically have around me because they speak Spanish. I mean, here in school, yes, in university because it is the BA; but if we're on a break –Spanish. And only when I am online, like I told you, I have friends from other countries and we use English, so I use it more, and it's useful for me to practice.

This significant practice mentioned by two participants was mirrored by comments of the rest of the group in regards to a meaningful increase in their usage of English.

Linguistic Improvement

As for the linguistic skills of the participants, none of them saw a significant improvement in their grammar. Only 22 years old, fourth semester student, Ximena, mentioned that her interactions online were helping her to put into context what she was learning in class. However, outside of this instance, no other participant stated anything similar. Still, something that was present in all of the

interviews was the improvement of vocabulary, given that all of the participants mentioned that they acquired a lot of new vocabulary, both as general part of conversations and discussions, and lingo more relevant to the K-Pop environment in which they found themselves in. Luna, 22 years-old, sixth semester student acknowledged:

you start using more...concepts, or more language that only the K-pop community knows, so you start improving your vocabulary, because of the lyrics of a song, the conversations, and all that.

They put this newly acquired vocabulary into practice when writing to friends, reading about the latest news in K-Pop, or listening to their favorite idol speak in English. Thanks to this, the receptive skills (as well as writing) were mentioned to be improved during the interaction with the community.

Confidence and Motivation

In regards to motivation, which was originally believed to be the biggest benefit taken from the intersection of K-Pop online interaction and English learning, it was not cited to be a factor in whatever improvement the participants saw in their learning journey. Only one student, 19 years old, second semester, Karina completely attributed her wish to learn English to her desire to understand and participate with K-Pop and the K-Pop community. Outside of that, the rest of the participants simply saw it as a way to make friends, and practicing and improving their English was a convenient plus to it. What the majority of participants did mention was the boost of confidence they got after interacting with the community in regards to their language skills and proficiency. Karina pointed out:

It wasn't so embarrassing for me to speak because before it was like 'no, how embarrassing for people to hear me talk in English, they're going to say I'm pretentious and things like that'. But because I was using it all the time there, I didn't...I didn't see it so weird anymore (...)everyone was using it and I thought it must not be so bad. I had to use it if I wanted to communicate, and I was so much more willing to speak.

Their interactions online, and the support they got from their digital friends, helped them to build courage and be confident to interact with other people face to face.

Discussion

The interaction within the K-Pop community is something common among fans of the genre, so it is important to explore how this interaction can be utilized to enhance EFL learning. One way to do this is to take a student-centered approach, allowing learners to explore the different tools and resources available to them. As Lee (2019) discusses in his study, students' IDLE activities are incredibly varied, and attempting to control them can either be highly successful or really rejected by students. In Lai et al.'s (2015) study, they found that incorporating technology into language learning outside the classroom can be highly beneficial to students, as it allows them to engage with the language in a way that is meaningful and relevant to their interests. A similar study conducted by Sun et al. (2017) also suggests that more targeted social media practice outside the classroom leads to improvement in fluency. However, it is important to note that both studies were done in China, a country known for its authoritarian school system, and with young children, who are often deeply influenced and controlled by their parents. These elements are pointed out in each of the researches, but it is important to consider the implications of culture and age might bring to the table. Especially when considering that in this project, it can be suggested that the freedom to choose an IDLE activity was one of the factors that benefited the students, given that the sense of community and belonging was the biggest element of aid to their learning journey.

This sense of community was also relevant in Malik and Haidar (2020), as their results suggest that community gives students a place to make mistakes without feeling embarrassed and allows them to practice with support and feedback from whom they see as their peers. This support can lead to the students feeling confident in their language skills, which in turn can drive students to feel more motivated. In this study there were no results that suggested a noticeable direct association between participating in an online community and motivation, but studies done by Wu et al. (2011), and Jiang et al. (2022) suggest otherwise.

Something that was mentioned by the participants, though, is how communication online gave them the practice and confidence necessary to start doing it face to face. This is in line with Lee and Drajiati's (2020) study, where results suggest that students are more willing to communicate with native speakers online rather than participating in small groups face to face. It also mentions the need to look into other scenarios to factor in willingness to communicate (WTC), like fandom, which this project has done. The differences or similarities can be attributed to cultural monolingual and/or multilingual preferences (Lee & Sylvén, 2021), but it is similar to those

studies performed in South Korea, as the monolingual culture there, is comparable to the one of Mexico.

Another important aspect to note, and one that was mentioned by the participants, is that even if the interaction with native speakers is frequent, the multiculturalism of the community also shines through within the engagement online. This allows them to interact with more varieties of English, and although it is difficult to narrow down and pinpoint the exact characteristics of Standard English, World Englishes or International Englishes are more prevalent in interaction for EFL (Jenkins, 2006). The participants also expressed the importance of using various tools and resources available to them, beyond those typically provided in traditional language courses. As Estefania stated, "and sometimes it's like, we only focus on some tools that can help us, when in reality there are many more that are very useful and far more interesting to students". This suggests that incorporating extracurricular activities, such as participation in the K-Pop community, can be a valuable supplement to traditional language learning approaches.

Conclusion

Based on the findings of this study, it can be concluded that participating in the K-Pop online community can have a positive effect on EFL learning among students regarding vocabulary, receptive macro skills development and confidence in the language. However, it is important to note that this was a very small-scale study and further research is needed to fully understand the extent of these effects. It is also relevant to explore how to best utilize this extracurricular activity in language learning contexts and how to effectively integrate it into traditional language courses.

The results of the project also suggest that incorporating extracurricular activities, such as participation in the K-Pop community, can be a valuable supplement to traditional language learning approaches. This has important implications for language educators, who should consider incorporating student-centered approaches that allow students to explore their interests and engage with the language in a meaningful way. Next steps could include conducting a larger-scale study to further explore the effect of participating in the K-Pop community on EFL learning, as well as developing specific strategies for integrating this activity into language courses. Given that, as it was previously mentioned, this study was limited in terms of its scope and sample size, the findings should be interpreted with caution and cannot be generalized to all EFL students. Additionally, the study only focused on female students, which may limit the applicability of the findings to male students. Further research is needed to address these

limitations and to fully understand the impact of participating in the K-Pop community on EFL learning.

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