Exploring the Potential of In Real Life (IRL) Streaming for Language Learning: A Participant Observation Study of Japanese University Students

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Abstract
In Real Life (IRL) streaming is a rapidly growing practice of Internet broadcasting real-time video footage of daily routines, social events, personal interactions, and travel adventures. This participatory form of social media allows for a high degree of viewer interaction and collaboration through text-based chats with the streamer. Previous studies have examined the affordances of livestreaming in language learning, but there is a notable gap in the literature regarding IRL streaming and language learning. As IRL streaming takes place "in real life," there is ample opportunity for authentic language exposure and cultural immersion in every-day contexts, as well as affordances for interactive learning through the real-time chat function to communicate with both the streamer and other viewers. This qualitative study used participant observation to investigate what happens when Japanese university students use IRL streaming as a novel approach to English language learning. When learners immersed themselves in authentic, real-life language contexts they engaged in interactive learning to participate, ask questions, and receive immediate feedback, enhancing their engagement and motivation. They also were able to engage in the target language culture, gaining insights into cultural nuances, expressions, and customs. This paper also discusses the pedagogical implications for learner autonomy, cultural competence development, and integrating livestream-based activities in the language learning curriculum. Ethical considerations of IRL streaming are also covered, discussing issues of consent, privacy norms, and varying local regulations.

Keywords: In-Real-Life, Livestreaming, Language Learning, Participant Observation

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Introduction

In Real Life (IRL) streaming is a rapidly growing practice of Internet broadcasting real-time video footage of daily routines, social events, personal interactions, and travel adventures that has seen rapid growth since 2011 (Hilvert-Bruce et al., 2018). Unlike other pre-produced media found on on-demand streaming services such as YouTube, this participatory form of social media involves a streamer who broadcasts in real-time, typically responding to viewers who interact through a synchronous, built-in chat channel.

This format allows for a high degree of viewer interaction and collaboration with the streamer. Previous studies (e.g., Chen et al., 2019; Samat et al., 2019) have examined the affordances of live streaming in language learning, but there is a notable gap in the literature regarding IRL streaming and language learning. As IRL streaming takes place "in real life," there is ample opportunity for authentic language exposure and cultural immersion in every-day contexts, as well as affordances for interactive learning through the real-time chat function to communicate with both the streamer and other viewers.

In-Real-Life Livestreaming

On March 19, 2007, Justin Kan strapped a webcam to his baseball cap and hooked it up to a laptop-based rig-in-a-backpack, aiming to stream his entire life in its totality—minus bathroom and bathing breaks—a project he called "lifecasting" (Sirius, 2007). From this project, the video streaming platform justin.tv was born. Its successor platform, Twitch.TV, is currently the most popular live streaming service on the web. Staying true to its roots, Twitch launched a new streaming category called "In Real Life" in 2016, for users to share "their everyday lives, thoughts, and opinions with their communities," bringing about authentic engagement with viewers (Perry, 2020).

This format poses interesting opportunities for language learning by taking the stream from an isolated bedroom studio out into the "real world," increasing opportunities for authentic learner input in real-world contexts as the streamer negotiates meaning and interacting with the environment and others, increasing the likelihood for more cultural nuance, social interactions, and natural language use. This genre may also boost learner motivation and engagement, as the live and interactive nature of the IRL stream provides dynamic content where the viewer can drop in or leave at any time. While watching the streamer interact with the environment, viewers may ask questions, make suggestions, and receive immediate replies. The real-world context also will necessarily contain spontaneous and unpredictable situations, providing plenty of contextualized learning opportunities.

Research Question

What happens when Japanese university EFL students use IRL livestreaming as a language learning tool?

Literature Review

Streaming from the Internet as a tool for second language learning has garnered significant academic interest, particularly with its attendant technological developments in the past 15 years (Magasic, 2017; Yang & Xuan, 2023). Before the wide availability of broadband connections supported video streaming, less bandwidth-intensive media such as audio

streaming (Rizzi & Absalom, 2007), screen-recording (Ho, 2021), and video conferencing (Hampel & Baber, 2003; McAndrew et al., 1996) were investigated as other sources of authentic input delivered over the Internet.

Some reasons for the appeal of livestreaming for language learning has included social interaction, a sense of community, a chance to meet new people, a source of entertainment, a way to find information, and an extra avenue of support in life (Hilvert-Bruce et al., 2018). Livestreaming has been found to motivate learners in engaging in real-life language use through instant feedback and increased engagement (Chen et al., 2019), interactivity (Samat et al., 2019), an association with lower learner anxiety (LaPointe & Barrett, 2005; Lloyd, 2012), and access to authentic language and verbal and paralinguistic features (Magasic, 2017).

Although there have been multiple studies on video streaming in language learning, and some research on livestreaming for language learning in general, to the best of my knowledge, there has been no study undertaken on IRL livestreaming for language learning.

Methodology: Participant Observation

This study used participant observation, a "method for collecting information about people and matters related to them in some situation" (Jorgensen, 2020). As IRL streaming provides authentic, context-rich, and culturally significant data on language learning experiences, strategies, and outcomes, participant observation provides a way to understand how language learners negotiate with real-world use of language, adapt to diverse contexts, and develop both language proficiency and cultural competence. This methodology made it possible for me to immerse in real-life language contexts, observe language learners in action, and gain insights into the complexities of language acquisition in authentic settings.

Procedure

Four second-year sports majors at a university in Central Japan participated in this study. They were native Japanese speakers, male, and aged 19–20 years old. They were unfamiliar with livestreaming platforms in general. We met four times for about one hour each to discuss, view, and participate in IRL for the purposes of language learning. We selected the "IRL" genre on the Twitch.tv platform to find streamers. As the sessions were all held on weekday mornings in Japan, some care had to be taken to select English-speaking streams, as there were fewer streams from North America and Europe at this time, where it would have been late night or very early morning.

After a stream was found, the participants and researcher watched the stream while observing language use and cultural practices. Verbal and nonverbal communication, phrase structures, idiomatic expressions, and social norms were also noted. Data collection was taken through detailed field notes, capturing observations, interactions, and language-related insights such as phrases, gestures, and cultural customs.

After the observation session, the participants reflected on the experiences and observations made. This was done through conversation as well as through reflection worksheets. Through thematic analysis, the themes of language use, communicative strategies, discourse patterns, and cultural implications emerged.

Throughout this process, we continuously reflected on new insights and made adaptations to language learning strategies. For example, in one session, the prevalence of Internet acronyms such as “BRB” (be right back) and “GTG” (got to go) caught participants’ attention. “JK” (just kidding) was a surprise, as the abbreviation in Japanese stands for “joshi kōsei,” or “high school girl.” The emphasis of data collection often moved from what the streamer was saying to what was happening in the chat function.

In the first session, I introduced the concept of streaming in general. Although all participants remarked that they enjoyed watching videos online, they were unfamiliar with the livestreaming. Some vocabulary terms such as “stream,” “viewer,” and “content” were covered.

Finding an appropriate IRL stream for language learning involves identifying streams that offer opportunities for authentic language exposure and cultural immersion. The second session focused on the best ways to find streams. The first choice we made was selecting the streaming platform. Twitch seemed to be the easiest, as it had its own IRL genre to select. Care had to be taken that the stream was in English, as there were plenty of livestreaming in Spanish, German, and Japanese, for example.

The participants looked for streams where the “streamer can read comments,” and where there were “few viewers.” Large streams’ chats had many comments flying by, but on the other hand, in smaller streams often had the streamer responding to the chat. One participant remarked that “I chose it because [the streamer] responds to comments quickly.” Often, a streamer would respond to every remark that popped in the chat, making it kind of virtual conversation. The participants in this study were able to interact directly in English with the streamer this way, for example by indicating preferences for food, asking questions about the streamer’s plans, and giving advice on where to go.

In the third session, we examined the common difficulties associated with IRL livestreaming in language learning, analyzed the impact of drawbacks on language acquisition and cultural immersion, and developed strategies to address or overcome these challenges. The first challenges involved connectivity, lagging, and battery issues. Being out in public, IRL streams rely on cellular networks that are not always equipped for such high bandwidth activities, and streaming rapidly discharges mobile batteries.

I presented a few streams where issues were evident, such as lack of engagement, privacy concerns, and cultural barriers. Participants then found their own streams and noted difficulties and challenges, along with solutions or alternative approaches, and we discussed strategies to overcome challenges encountered during an IRL language learning session.

The purpose of the final session was to identify criteria for selecting high-quality IRL streams for language learning purposes, develop effective strategies for interaction and engagement with streamers during live sessions, and reflect on the impact of quality streams and interactive engagement on language acquisition.

We looked at what made a quality stream, focusing on content relevance, stream quality, and level of engagement. I provided some examples, then the participants selected streams based on the above criteria and rated them. The chat function was a crucial tool, as they were able to interact with the streamer directly, as well as with other viewers, enhancing the learning experience.

Discussion

IRL livestreaming provided English language learners with access to real-life, unscripted English language interactions, enabling them to experience. It allowed learners to access authentic, unscripted language interactions.

This format also allows learners to engage with English speakers and other learners through interacting via the chat function, immersing themselves in the target language culture, gaining insights into cultural nuances, expressions, and customs. Teachers can guide learners to explore streams that showcase cultural events, daily life, or interactions with native speakers. Encouraging interaction in the chat function enables learners to understand cultural nuances, expressions, and customs, fostering cultural sensitivity and awareness.

IRL livestreaming platforms facilitate real-time interactions between learners and content creators, enabling learners to actively participate, ask questions, and receive immediate feedback, enhancing their engagement and motivation. Teachers can design tasks such as asking questions, participating in discussions, or even collaborating on language-related challenges that involve learners actively engaging with streamers.

Engaging with livestreamed content helps learners develop their listening and comprehension skills as they encounter natural speech patterns, intonation, and vocabulary usage in authentic contexts. IRL livestreaming offers exposure to a wide range of vocabulary and idiomatic expressions used in real-life situations, allowing learners to expand their lexical repertoire. Educators can curate and recommend streams to expose learners to various accents, speech patterns, and vocabulary in natural contexts. Post-viewing activities such as comprehension quizzes, summaries, or discussions aid in assessing and reinforcing listening skills.

Challenges and Considerations

While In-Real-Life livestreaming holds promise for English language learning, certain challenges and considerations arose in this study. Livestreamed content may be challenging for learners with lower language proficiency levels, as the pace, vocabulary, and complexity of authentic language use can pose difficulties. One participant remarked that the “streamer is talking too fast,” and another lamented he “can’t rewind [the] stream,” and that he was “not used to hearing new words.”

The quality and reliability of IRL content may vary, and learners need to navigate through the vast array of available channels to find suitable and reliable sources of language input. As for the surfeit of choices, one participant remarked, “I cannot find what I want because there are so many streamers.” Another issue was with the time difference between many streamers’ online feeds and Japan Standard Time (UTC+0900). One participant responded that, “I can’t see it when I want to see it.” Some streams were listed as English, but another language was spoken. “I’m looking for a streamer, but I can’t find one in English.”

The issue of “nontent” in IRL livestreaming also merits mentioning. Nontent signifies streamed content lacking substantial or meaningful information, entertainment value, or purpose. This is a common complaint, as there can be long stretches where the streamer may not be actively engaging with viewers, periods of silence, or mundane activities. Especially in a compressed time frame such as a class period or data collection session, nontent can be disengaging or counterproductive.

Conclusions

The use of IRL livestreaming in English language learning carries several pedagogical implications, as discussed above. By foregrounding place, educators can incorporate IRL livestreaming into their teaching practices by curating and recommending appropriate livestreamed content, designing activities around it, and promoting learner engagement and interaction. IRL livestreaming empowers learners to take ownership of their language learning journey by allowing them to explore and select content according to their interests and learning goals. This can be through a targeted locale, a favorite streamer, or by the happy accidents of stumbling on something new.

It can also be argued that IRL livestreaming can be an asset in cultural competence development. IRL livestreaming platforms facilitate cultural exchange and help learners develop intercultural competence by exposing them to diverse perspectives, traditions, and communication styles. This especially true by using the chat function and communicating with the streamer or other viewers.

The use of IRL livestreaming in English language learning offers numerous benefits, including authentic language exposure, cultural immersion, interactive learning opportunities, and vocabulary expansion. However, challenges related to language proficiency requirements, content quality, and the lack of structured curricula must be considered. Pedagogical integration and learner autonomy play crucial roles in leveraging the potential of real-life livestreaming for English language acquisition. Future research should focus on investigating effective instructional strategies, designing appropriate curricula, and assessing the impact of real-life livestreaming on language proficiency outcomes.

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