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INFORMAL LANGUAGE LEARNING VS. FORMAL LANGUAGE LEARNING:

a study on the outcomes of informal language learning strategies

Recife

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> Trabalho de Conclusão de Curso apresentado ao Curso de Letras Inglês da Universidade Federal de Pernambuco, como requisito parcial para obtenção do título de Licenciada em Letras Inglês.

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Abstract: This work seeked to verify if informal language learners of English are able to develop the same knowledge and abilities as learners coming from formal environments. Informal language learning is a predominant form of acquiring a language, although it is not recognized as such. The guiding questions in this work are if learners who learn English through informal strategies develop their writing skills similarly as a learner from a formal environment? And what are the possible similarities and the differences formal and informal learners present in their writing? Informal learning occurs in environments of authentic input on the target language, which can be at home, watching a movie or listening to a song, as well as in digital environments (PEMBERTON et al., 2004; SUNDQVIST, 2009). However, writing, especially in a foreign language, is a challenging task that involves many variables such as cohesion, organizational structure, grammatical issues, etc. (LEKI et al., 2008) that go further than simply knowing a language. This is a qualitative study that compared the writings of 6 English language learners, of both formal and informal backgrounds, and aimed at identifying the similarities and differences in outcomes achieved by each group. Their writings were analyzed in terms of cohesion and lexical choice. This research concluded that both formal and informal learners produce similar outcomes in writing in the target language. The main difference between both groups is the role that the age in which the learner begins to study the target language plays in their learning process, since younger learners may have advantages, compared to older ones, due to the age they started learning the target language.

Keywords: informal language learning; formal language learning; writing in a foreign language;

Resumo: Este trabalho buscou verificar se aprendizes informais de língua inglesa são capazes de desenvolver os mesmos conhecimentos e habilidades que aprendizes oriundos de ambientes formais. O aprendizado informal de línguas é uma forma predominante de aquisição de língua, embora não seja reconhecida como tal. As questões norteadoras deste trabalho são: se os alunos que aprendem inglês por meio de estratégias informais desenvolvem suas habilidades de escrita da mesma forma que um aluno de um ambiente formal? E quais são as possíveis semelhanças e diferenças que os aprendizes formais e informais apresentam em sua escrita? O aprendizado informal ocorre em ambientes de input autêntico na língua-alvo, que pode ser em casa, assistindo a um filme ou ouvindo uma música, bem como em ambientes digitais (PEMBERTON et al., 2004; SUNDQVIST, 2009). No entanto, escrever, principalmente numa língua estrangeira, é uma tarefa desafiadora que envolve muitas variáveis como coesão, estrutura organizacional, questões gramaticais, etc. (LEKI et al., 2008) que vão além de simplesmente saber uma língua. Trata-se de um estudo qualitativo que comparou os textos de 6 aprendizes de língua inglesa, tanto formais quanto informais, e teve como objetivo identificar as semelhanças e diferenças nos resultados alcançados por cada grupo. Seus textos foram analisados em termos de coesão e escolha lexical. Esta pesquisa concluiu que tanto aprendizes formais quanto informais produzem resultados semelhantes na escrita na língua-alvo. A principal diferença entre os dois grupos é o papel que a idade em que o aprendiz começa a estudar a língua-alvo desempenha em seu processo de aprendizagem, uma vez que os aprendizes mais jovens podem ter vantagens, comparados aos mais velhos, devido à idade que eles começaram a aprender a língua-alvo.

Palavras-chave: aprendizado de língua informal; aprendizado de língua formal; escrita em língua estrangeira;

Introduction

With the status of a global language, English is, nowadays, a widely spoken language, with a special place in several countries where it is either the second official language used in government, media and educational fields, or it is the main foreign language taught at schools (CRYSTAL, 2003). This way, in view of the fact that English has become an important means for international communication, be it professional or personal, it is a subject of great concern for non-native and foreign English learners who need to acquire the language for a number of reasons and who, at times, resort to informal ways of learning. Informal language learning, therefore, has come to be a predominant form of acquiring a language, even though it is not formally recognized as such and learners themselves do not realize the extent to which informal practices, such as reading a book or watching a movie in a foreign language, have upon their learning process (DRESSMAN, 2020). Although much of language learning still takes place through formal instruction in the classrooms, a considerable part of learning occurs informally, during everyday life, therefore it is important to discuss this kind of learning.

This work seeks to answer the following questions: Can students who learn English through informal strategies develop their writing skills similarly as a learner from a formal environment? What are the possible similarities and the differences formal and informal learners present in their writing? The overall objective consists in verifying if English language learners that make use of informal strategies and/or learn a foreign language in informal settings are able to develop the same knowledge and abilities as of learners who underwent formal instruction in the same language. The secondary objective of this work consists in a) examining the possible differences in the writing ability developed by formal and informal learners during their language learning process b) identifying where they differ and the extent to which they differ.

Informal language learning is an unstructured learning that usually happens through social interaction and experiences of real communication in the language (MONTRUL, 2020; LIGHTBOWN; SPADA, 2013). It occurs in environments of authentic input on the target language, which can be at home, watching a movie or listening to a song, as well as in digital environments (PEMBERTON et al., 2004; SUNDQVIST, 2009).

Furthermore, communication is increasingly driven by digital texts and writing allows the articulation of ideas and perspectives that go beyond the limits of time and space, therefore, being able to communicate through written texts is an important skill. However, it

is a difficult task since it takes a lot of factors into account, such as grammar, the organizational structure and cohesion (LEKI et al., 2008). Two points of interest in this research are cohesion and lexical choice. Cohesion refers to linguistic elements, in the text, that make it possible for readers to make connections between ideas in the text (CROSSLEY, MCNAMARA, 2010). While lexical choice has to do with selection of vocabulary for the text. This selection can reveal the level of fluency that a foreign language learner has in his/her target language (KECSKES; CUENCA, 2005).

This is a qualitative study that aims to compare and analyze the writings of two small groups of English language learners, one group who learned the language informally and the other who learned it through formal instruction. The main purpose is to examine the writing skill developed by learners of both environments, identify the similarities between them, and where they differ. The analysis of their texts will be based on the cohesive devices used by the participants, and the lexical choice in their texts.

1. Formal and informal language learning

A good way to illustrate what exactly is informal learning is to explain it together with its contrasting notion of formal learning. Montrul (2020) differentiates informal learning from formal learning saying that the former takes place in situations of natural use such as at home, the workplace, at school, etc., while the latter happens in a language class in which "amount, frequency and type of input and use of the language are much more restricted than in naturalistic settings" (p.63). Formal learning is intentional and usually leads to certification. It is structured in its organization and it holds a clear aim which is to acquire knowledge and skills in the target language. Informal learning, on the other hand, is not structured and it does not lead to some kind of certification. It is often referred to as learning by experience and is a result of quotidian activities.

Christianson and Deshaies (2020) state that any discussion about informal learning must acknowledge and address first-language acquisition since any language learning that happens before a certain age (such as when formal education begins) is informal learning. They move on to talk about the kind of learning children and adults perform when learning a language. While adults are able to treat language as an object of explicit learning, that is, of conscious problem-solving and deduction (ELLIS, 2002), children learn a language through stimulus from the environment, therefore, they learn implicitly. However, not only children but people of all ages are able to learn a foreign language through implicit strategies. As Ellis explains:

> We learn language while using language. When things go right, when routine communication flows easily, this time on task tunes our skills without us giving much thought to the learning process. When things go wrong, when communication breaks down, we try hard to negotiate meaning, and we learn a lot about linguistic construction in the process. Implicit learning of language occurs during fluent comprehension and production. (ELLIS, 2005, p. 306)

Hence, informal language learning is comparable with implicit learning as both have language use as a basis for learning to take place. Therefore, it can be said that implicit learning is equivalent to learning through experience, during real communicative situations. The following section addresses this matter, providing a discussion on the different ways informal learning can happen.

1.1. Socially situated language learning

Speaking about the environments for foreign language acquisition, that is, the contexts for learning a foreign language, Montrul (2020) asserts that an informal language learning environment is any place or situation in which learners are exposed to the target language and in which they can interact with others. These environments can be one's home, the workplace, school, etc. In other words, while formal language learning is a more structured and organized form of instruction, informal language learning relates more to the circumstances that a learner develops his/her ability in the language through use.

Similarly, Lightbown and Spada (2013) speak of language learning settings and the differences each one has on learning. Natural acquisition settings are places that expose learners to L2 in a social interaction, as opposed to structure-based instructional settings whose focus lies on the language rather than on the message, and the teacher's attention is centered on the vocabulary and rules of the target language. This way, informal language learning is closely related to the social context in which the learner is situated.

Likewise, Kurata's (2010) study on the opportunities for using and learning a foreign language in natural settings makes an analysis on "sociocultural perspectives that regard L2 learning as socially constructed in and through interaction in situated activities" (p. 383). She then uses activity theory[1] to analyze the conversations between a learner of Japanese with 2 native speakers of the language. One of the findings of her study was that a low level of proficiency could give the learner access to exposure in the language as well as learning

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[1] Activity theory is a framework that comes from the socio-cultural tradition in Russian psychology. It was developed by Russian psychologist Aleksei Leontiev and it understands 'activity' as a purposeful, transformative and developing interaction between actors and the world.

opportunities in the L2. This is an important finding as it demonstrates the close relationship between language learning and day-to-day interactions.

Similarly, Marsick and Watkins (1990) discuss that the main feature of informal and incidental learning is learning from and through experience. Other factors are involved as well, such as context which, according to Marsick & Watkins, also plays an important role in language learning.

> We believe that context is more important to learning from experience when the nature of the task is interpersonal or social in nature, and thus subject to a greater number of differences in interpretation. On the other hand, even when people learn in a highly technical environment, context plays a role since many decisions about data are dependent on the judgment of people and are taken through some kind of collaborative, social interaction. (MARSICK & WATKINS, 1990, p. 27)

Experience-based learning is a social process that involves other learners or people, and one which is highly dependent on the different understandings of specific situations of use. Whether one learns at school or at work, the social factor is internal to the process of learning.

Regarding authentic contexts, they can be referred to as sources of authentic input as well, since, according to Gilmore (2007), one can attest the authenticity of an input by reference to the source of the discourse and the context of its production. Moreover, besides interaction with other speakers of the language, informal learners use technologies for language learning, such as watching movies and TV series or listening to a song. These types of input are also considered to be authentic materials for offering the language input necessary for learning to happen (LIGHTBOWN & SPADA, 2013; PEMBERTON et al., 2004).

In summary, informal language learning is directly connected to the social situation it is placed in. According to Bo (2015) the principal function of language is to communicate, therefore language is a social phenomenon. Thus, as a construct that happens socially, it is reasonable to say that the best way to learn a language is through social interactions. One cannot affirm if it is the best way, though it is undeniable the power language use has to boost language learning.

1.2. Informal learning in digital platforms

With the current dissemination of smartphones and new technologies, it is only natural that these devices can be used as a tool for learning. Since most people have a personal smartphone, and they are within hand reach, they use it to access all kinds of information,

including learning a language. This is done by digital tools such as apps and sites, which serve as a means for learning that is personal and independent. Hence, informal language learning, specifically, can be boosted by digital tools which facilitate the access to information.

Studies on this matter show that the use of digital technologies for informal learning can lead to the improvement of vocabulary and oral proficiency in the target language (SUNDQVIST, 2009; SUNDQVIST & WIKSTRÖM, 2015; LEE & DRESSMAN, 2017). Technologies enable learners to access knowledge that is visually, textually and audibly acquired, helping to raise their critical thinking, intercultural communication and collaboration skills, etc. (YU & ZADOROZHNYY, 2020).

Furthermore, it is noticed that digital language technologies, specifically digital game-based learning such as Duolingo, Babbel and Memrise, provide positive results regarding learner motivation and autonomy, two crucial elements within the informal language learning scope. Motivation emerges from the app/game's offer of challenge, stimulus of learners' imagination and curiosity and the sense of satisfaction and control, maintaining user's attention (KRYSTALLI et al., 2014, p. 1566). While autonomy arises from learner's freedom of choice inside the app/game, and opportunity for evaluating his/her strategies according to feedback provided. Besides that, learners must be able to identify and understand their weaknesses in order to develop skills according to their needs (ARVANITIS, 2020). With this in mind, it is possible to assert that technologies are transforming the learning space into an informal environment that can be accessed anytime and anywhere, thus democratizing language learning.

In a world where communication is increasingly driven by digital texts, knowing how to write, and specifically knowing how to write in English, is fundamental. This way, the next section discusses the essential skill of writing.

2. Writing in a foreign language

Communication nowadays is primarily textual, with news and knowledge in general spread in the form of articles and books. However, writing in a foreign language is an extremely challenging task, as it involves many variables such as composing process, cohesion, organizational structure, grammatical issues, etc. (LEKI et al., 2008) that go beyond simply knowing a language.

One way writing can be explained is as a product of the grammatical and lexical knowledge of the writer, being developed through the use and imitation of models of writing (HYLAND, 2003). This way, writing emphasizes language structure, consisting of syntactic and lexical combinations, and leaves the communicative content aside when it takes the texts from their context. However, according to the author, this view of writing, which teaches learners to focus on the structural patterns of the text, prevents the learner from expanding their writing and it makes it difficult for them to develop their writing in other situations. Moreover, writing is not only rules and syntactical patterns, but an answer to and a result of the context it is situated in. As Cumming explains: "[w]riting is text, is composing, and is social construction." (1998, p. 61). Therefore, writing carries the socio-cultural context of the writer just as much as the linguistic features that are part of it.

The idea, mentioned above, that writing is structure, comes from the general sense that a good text is associated with cohesion (CROSSLEY, MCNAMARA, 2011). For this reason, this matter will be discussed in the following section, as well as lexical choice, another textual feature that has a significant role in writing.

2.1. Cohesion and lexical choice in texts

A property that is inherent to the text, cohesion is an essential part of the textual compositions since, without it, there is no way to consider that the sentences present in the text compose a totality. As Halliday and Hasan (1976) first explained, it consists of the relations of meaning within a text and it happens when an element of the text depends on and presupposes another in a way that one cannot be interpreted without the means of recourse to the other.

Cohesion is an essential part of a text, it represents a series of meaning relations in all sorts of written works that differentiates them from what is not a text (SILVA, 2006). Therefore, it is important to study this particular feature of writing. And so, with this purpose, when studying this property in a text, what is looked upon are the tools used by the writer to link the ideas in a text. As described, textual cohesion is constructed by the use of linguistic devices that allow the reader to connect ideas present in the text, such as the use of connectives like *thus*, *firstly* and *also* (CROSSLEY, MCNAMARA, 2010).

Writing is a thinking process in which the writer is, at all times, making decisions regarding the structural organization of the text, as well as lexical choice. Lexical choice has to do with the meaning in the text and it is achieved by selection of vocabulary. A word can

convey multiple meanings beyond its primary "dictionary" meaning, therefore, choosing the right one, for the specific situation and objectives of the writer, is a difficult task. Moreover, Kecskes and Cuenca (2005) claim that "the selection of lexical items and structures reveals the level of conceptual fluency in the target language", which directly affects the linguistic system of foreign-language learners. Shormani (2014, p. 43) asserts that "for those who consider communication the ultimate goal of language acquisition/learning process, lexes are needed for the development of fluency, proficiency and accuracy." Words are the first thing when learning a language, since no one can learn a grammatical structure without any knowledge of lexis.

3. Methodology

This is a qualitative research that compares the writings of informal English learners with those of formal learners. The main objective is to verify if students who learn English through informal strategies are able to achieve equal or similar skills on the language as learners that come from formal settings. Besides that, this study seeks to look at the potential differences in the language abilities, achieved by the participants, that might emerge during the analysis of the data.

Moreover, in order to best investigate the linguistic outcomes of both groups of subjects, this research analyzes the short texts produced by the participants. The writing skill was chosen for the purposes of analysis in this study because writing entails knowledge and use of the other 3 language skills (listening, reading and speaking) (KLIMOVA, 2014). Furthermore, writing is a challenging task that involves memory and thinking ability, therefore composing a text indicates successful learning of a foreign language (FAREED et. al, 2016). Thus, this research addresses foreign language writing and uses it for the purpose of elucidating the effective outcomes of informal language learning.

For the collection of data, a questionnaire was administered to the participants (see Appendix A), with the purpose of setting each participants' profile as an English language learner and, finally, collecting their writings. Comprising 9 questions, the majority (8) aim at informing their history at learning the language, while in the last question it is asked of them to write a short text answering a writing prompt. The questionnaire was mostly written and replied in Portuguese, with the exception of the text produced by the subjects.

The subjects of the research are 6 young learners of English, ranging from 20 to 26 years old; all of them are current undergraduate students of various fields of knowledge; their

learning experience varying from 5 to 15 years of learning; and all of them have a post-intermediate (B2) level in English, which is the minimum required level to participate in the research.

The participants were divided in two groups: one group comprising advanced English learners that have never had any formal instruction in the language and so, they have learned it informally; and the other one consists of advanced learners of English as well, however they have, at some point in their life, had some kind of formal instruction in the language.

4. Analysis and results

In order to verify if informal English language learners are as successful in learning the language as formal learners, this research compares the writings of 6 learners. This way, this work focuses on the text level as a way of showing their language proficiency. According to Koch (2018, p. 6, author's translation), text is a "highly complex *interactive activity* of production meanings, that materializes itself, evidently, based on the linguistic elements present in the textual surface and in its form of organization [...]."[2] Therefore, although the process of composing a text centers on meaning, it is done so through the use and production of a linguistic structure. Hence, the choice of analyzing the writing skill of learners of English from both formal and informal backgrounds. The categories of analysis chosen are the cohesive devices and lexical choices made by the participants.

In view of the fact that all subjects of this study marked their level of proficiency in the English language as being post-intermediate (B2), this variable will not be considered for the analysis. Besides that, all of them said that they felt motivated while studying the language, so this is another variable which will not be used as a measure for comparison. The names of the participants will not be displayed in this research, instead, they will be referred to by what type of learning they had, see Table 1.

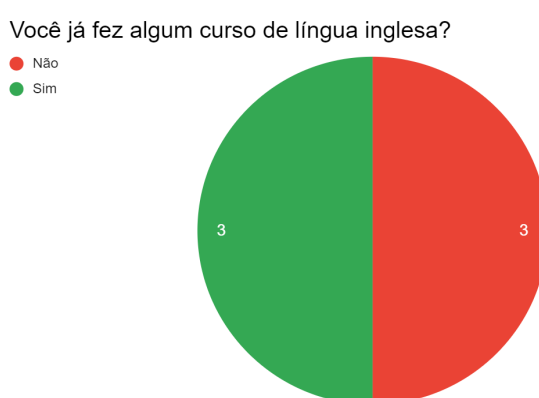| Informal learner	Formal learner
I1	F1
I2	F2
I3	F3

Table 1: Distribution of participants by their type of learning

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[2] "uma atividade interativa altamente complexa de produção de sentidos, que se realiza, evidentemente, com base nos elementos linguísticos presentes na superfície textual e na sua forma de organização [...]"

4.1. The questionnaire

The first question of the questionnaire inquires whether participants have, at some point in their learning, attended an English language course. The aim was to separate the learners into two groups, the ones who have attended an English language course and the ones who have never attended. This way, the learners were divided into two groups of three, as it is presented in Figure 1. Table 2 shows the chronological history of the participants as learners of English.

Figure 1: Distribution of informal and formal learners

Você já fez algum curso de língua inglesa?
- 🔴 Não
- 🟢 Sim

Source: Author

	Began studying during childhood/6-10 years of study	**Began studying during adolescence/2-5 years of study**	**Began studying during adulthood/2-5 years of study**
Informal learner	I1 and I2	-	I3
Formal learner	F1	F2 and F3	-

**Table 2**: Chronological history of the participants as learners of English

An important point to be raised is that, all three learners who said that they have already attended an English language course, have also answered that they consider to have achieved their current English level through informal strategies, as can be seen in Figure 2. This is important as it can be interpreted that despite having experienced an environment of formal instruction, with a structured curriculum and a teacher mediating their learning process, they

consider informal learning strategies to have a stronger role in their process to achieve fluency in English.

Figure 2: What strategies, formal or informal, led the participants to achieve fluency

Você considera ter atingido seu atual nível de proficiência na língua inglesa a partir do ensino formal ou através de estratégias de aprendizado informal?

● Estratégias de aprendizado informais.

6 (100,0%)
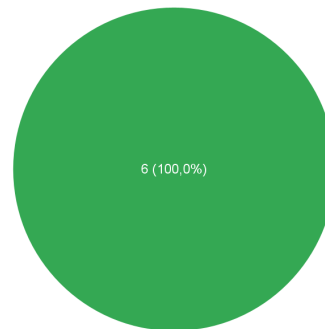
Source: Author

With regard to what strategies they have used, Figure 3 shows their answers. Considering that they could mark more than one of the options, all of them answered that watching movies and TV shows, listening to music in the target language, and using apps or other technological tools for learning English were methods they used for acquiring the language. As it was previously discussed, the aforementioned methods are common techniques of informal language learning.

The second option that was most answered in the questionnaire, regarding the methods used for the acquisition of the language, was real communication with native speakers and/or other speakers of the English language. Among the participants who marked this option are learners of both formal and informal learning. This is relevant as it demonstrates the role social interaction has on acquiring a language. As pointed out by Thompson and Lee (2014), language experience abroad, be it a long-term formal exchange program or a short-term touristic travel, has shown to bring positive results in learners' language proficiency. Although not all participants have had some sort of experience abroad speaking the English language, and this information was not inquired in the questionnaire, experience abroad implies the use of English in a real communicative context, which involves interacting with speakers of the language.

Figure 3: Methods used, by the participants, for learning the target language

Quais métodos você utilizou para aprender a língua? (mais de uma opção é válida)
6 respostas
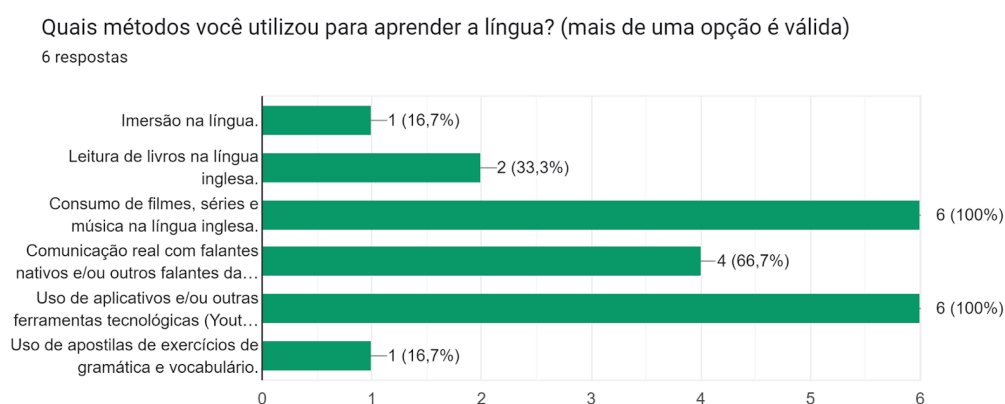
Source: Author

Other methods mentioned by a lesser number of participants were the reading of books written in English, the use of grammar and vocabulary practice handouts, and immersion in the language. With the exception of language immersion, none of the other learning strategies can be directly linked to informal learning. Therefore, the fact that the only participants who marked those options belong to the group of formal learners of English is coherent with their learning process, as they must have had these experiences in formal instruction environments. Regarding the only subject who deemed immersion in the language as having a role in her language learning, she claimed to have never attended an English course before. This way, her immersion happened, most probably, in a context of real communication with other speakers of English, once again, evincing the power that environments of authentic language input have upon language learning.

4.2. The writings

In relation to the writing of the participants, all of them wrote a short text consisting of only one paragraph, describing their hypothetical stay at a hotel, with the positive and negative aspects of it. The main points to be analyzed in their texts are the cohesive devices they used, and the choice of vocabulary made by the participants.

4.2.1. Use of cohesive devices

In general, all 6 participants made use of cohesive devices appropriately in their texts to display the contrasting opinions they had upon the theme. The cohesive element that was used the most by them was the term *however*, as the excerpts below show. As a contrastive

connector, *however* functions as a way of introducing an idea that is opposite to the ones said previously in a text. Its use in the participants' texts is consistent with the main objective of their writings: to write a review on the problems of their stay at a hotel while also mentioning the positive characteristics of it.

Me and my friend have recently visited the Cais do Porto hotel, and it was a great stay, <u>however</u>, we had a few problems. (F2)	[...] the hotel was close to may touristic attractions. <u>However</u>, we had many different issues, [...] (F2)
The employees welcomed us very well. <u>However</u>, when we arrived to the room [...] (I3)	<u>However</u>, the good points of our experience certainly overcome these negative aspects! (I1)

<u>However</u>, although I had many problems with the room and the food, the employees were very helpful and kind, [...] (F1)

Other connectors that introduce contradictory ideas, and which were used by a lesser number of participants, were *but* and *although*.

[...] I've had a good time in the spa, the jacuzzi and the view of the room, <u>but</u> not all that's beautiful is perfect. (I2)	[...] i'm sure everybody did their best <u>but</u> <u>still</u> looked like a job made in a rush and not too thorough. (F3)
I spent some days at your hotel, and <u>although</u> it was quite a good stay, I had some problems. (F1)	However, <u>although</u> I had many problems with the room and the food, the employees were very helpful and kind [...] (F1)

In addition, there was an occurrence of a misuse of a connector. In the excerpt below, the use of the term *meanwhile* is improper. The term means that something is happening at the same time as another, however it has a more chronological sense. In the excerpt below, the use of the term made by the participant is a contrastive one, putting the preceding and following sentences in a place of divergence. Therefore, the term connective should be replaced for connectors with contrastive meanings such as *although*, *despite* and *albeit*.

In conclusion, the hotel is a good place tp enjoy a summer day, <u>meanwhile</u> does not meet cleaning and hygiene requirements. (I3)

Besides, another set of connectives which appeared recurrently in their writings were linking devices of addition. This way, connectives such as *and* and *also* were used by the

participants to add information to their text. However, since their texts were short, not many additive cohesive devices were used and not all participants used it.

Me and my friend have recently visited the Cais do Porto hotel, <u>and</u> it was a great stay, [...]. (F2)	<u>Also</u>, the maid did not show up everyday as we previously requested. (I1)
<u>Furthermore</u>, there was dust under the beds. (I3)	<u>Besides that</u>, the food on offer was not that good as well. (F1)

The use made by the participants of the aforementioned cohesive devices reveal their knowledge on English language writing, as well as how to correctly employ such linguistic tools in the text. A cohesive text is one that is correctly tied together through textual tools, be it lexical or grammatical. In this sense, as stated by Bahaziq (2016), if the reader is able to make sense of what is being said in the text, then the writer accomplished the use of cohesive devices.

Furthermore, since all six participants made use of these connectives, this reveals that both formal and informal language learners were able to develop knowledge on the right use of these terms to a similar degree. In addition, Yang and Sun (2012) claim that the accurate use of cohesive devices is related to the proficiency level of the learner, and that the more advanced the learner, the more accurately he/she will be able to use cohesion in his/her text.

4.2.2. Lexical choice

Another point that was taken into account during analysis of the texts was the errors, made by the learners, regarding the lexical choices they made in their texts. In this research, lexical errors are understood as being any misuse of a term in a sentence which is regarded as a misunderstanding of the correct use of a specific word.

Most of the lexical errors made by the participants are regarding interlingual transfer. Interlingual transfer happens when the learner fails to express him/herself in the target language and, therefore, resorts to first language (L1) transfer. This happened in a few texts from participants I3, F1 and I2, as it can be seen below. In the first two excerpts, there occurs a drop of the subject of the sentence, a common error from speakers of Portuguese, since the subject is often already contained in the verb.

[...] meanwhile <u>does</u> not meet cleaning and hygiene requirements. (I3)	[...] <u>found</u> hair on the floor of the bathroom right at the moment I arrived [...] (I2)
[...] the employees were very helpful and kind, and they solved <u>much</u> of the problems. (F1)	[...] but we realized that some of the pools had <u>much</u> chlorine and dead bugs. (I3)

The third and fourth excerpts show the misuse of the adverb *much* instead of *many* and *a lot of*. In Portuguese, all terms are represented by the same word (muito). These errors also relate to their poor ability in differentiating countable and uncountable nouns when making use of these terms. Moreover, other lexical errors were observed in the text of the participant I3, all of them relating to this same issue of L1 influence.

The excerpt below shows a sentence with a higher occurrence of errors that made it difficult to comprehend. The first line could be rewritten as *Some people were irritated*, and if that was the intention of participant I3, then the error was caused by some kind of influence from the mother language. In Portuguese, the word *some* can be directly translated to *algum* or *alguma*, however, another way of expression is through the use of *uns* and *umas*, which literally stands for *a*, *an*, therefore, explaining the reasoning behind her choice of words.

In the last line, the phrase *and looks like old* is another case of L1 transfer with the omission of the subject and, consequently, of the verb. The correct writing, in this way, would be: *and **it** looks like **it is** old*. On top of that, verbal cohesion is another problem, as it can be seen, the sentence begins with the past tense then ends in the present tense.

<u>A people</u> were <u>irritating</u> because the food from one of the restaurants wasn't good and <u>looks like old</u>. (I3)

Furthermore, a second lexical characteristic analyzed in the research was the use of lexical bundles. Lexical bundles refer to lexical units of two or more words that have a frequent use in both spoken and written discourse (CROSSLEY; SALSBURY, 2011). In the excerpts below, the lexical bundles are formed by the combination of coordinating conjunctions and first person pronouns.

A friend of mine <u>and i</u> have very recently stayed in this hotel [...] (F3)	When we arrived, the room was not tidy at all, <u>and we</u> had to call the room service in order to get it ready for us <u>and we</u> waited for about an hour to unpack our bags. (F2)	[...] <u>but we</u> realized that some of the pools had much chlorine and dead bugs. (I3)

Another common structure of lexical bundles in the participants writings was the formation of a NP + post-modifier fragment, as in:

<u>The frontage of the</u> hotel is marvelous (I3)	[...] <u>the environment and hospitality of the staff</u> [...] (F3)
I had <u>a lot of</u> fun. (F1)	I ended up paying <u>a lot of</u> extra money in order to have a healthy breakfast. (F2)

If it is considered the short length the participants' texts have, lexical units, as the ones shown above, appeared frequently. The knowledge of how to use lexical bundles is important for evaluating writing proficiency. According to Vo (2019), "the frequency, structure and functions of lexical bundles can also be useful indicators of writing development across proficiency levels." Therefore, these features are able to show the writing ability of a learner.

Through the analysis of these and other lexical bundles produced by the participants, it was possible to verify that all of them, regardless of what learning background they had, made good use of lexical combinations in order to convey their messages. The use of words and expressions served to enrich and add meaning to their texts.

4.2.2.1. The case of participant I3

The text of participant I3, in particular, had a high frequency of errors, ranging from the lexical sphere, such as the ones shown previously, to simple typos, which made her text unnatural. As it is highlighted below, she made many errors that show her lack of knowledge as to what articles and conjunctions are used with certain verbs.

However, when we <u>arrived to</u> the room, [...].	We <u>complained it</u> and they quickly cleaned the room.

As it was previously shown in Table 2, participant I3 had never attended an English course before, meaning she is an informal language learner. Additionally, she was the only participant who claimed to have begun studying the language already as an adult. Besides that, the time she took to achieve her current B2 proficiency level in English was short (2-5 years). The fact that other two participants, coming from formal environments of language learning, have reached the same proficiency level in a similar amount of time, and had better results than I3, might be a counterpoint against informal language learning. However, the other two informal learners, I1 and I2, who also had better results than I3, both began studying from a younger age and took a longer time to achieve proficiency.

This might have made an influence on their learning, since younger learners may have advantages, compared to older ones, due to the age they started learning the target language. Christianson and Deshaies (2020) claim that learning a foreign language, especially as an adult, does not go hand in hand with implicit learning, which is a kind of informal learning. The learning outcomes of adults are more likely to fade over time than that of children, therefore calling for monitoring and revision of rules, which makes a laborious job, for adults, to achieve fluency. Thus, it is possible to hold that informal language learning, done in a short amount of time at a more mature age, might not have the same effect as when it happens from a younger age.

5. Conclusion

Through the analysis and discussion made in this work, it is possible to see that informal language learning is a topic of great relevance in the field of second language acquisition. In general, and based on the data from this research, it can be concluded that both formal and informal learners produce similar outcomes in writing in the target language. Results from the group of informal learners were akin to the ones of formal learners, be it positive or negative.

In general, both groups have made good use of the cohesive operators to link the sentences and the ideas of their reviews. Their problem seems to be on the lexical level, seeing the number of errors all of them presented in their texts. All six produced errors that relate to their L1, which means that they turn to their first language when using the target language. However, the fact that all participants from both groups showed similar results demonstrates that both formal and informal language learning have comparable power in aiding learners' language acquisition. Additionally, when analyzing their use of lexical

bundles, participants demonstrated a good knowledge as to how to combine words for proper sentence formation, thus, making their texts make sense.

Regarding the review written by participant I3 that contained a high number of lexical errors which made it difficult to correctly apprehend the text. Her late acquisition of the language and short period of learning seemed to have had an important role in her learning outcomes. Adding to that, other learners that come from formal environments, and had similar histories on the language, had better performances in writing compared to participant I3, which is an informal learner. This fact might be a sign that informal language learning, while in a later age and during a shorter amount of time, is not as effective as formal language learning.

As for the differences and similarities of both groups, they showed more similarities than differences. The main point of variation was in terms of the age they started learning the English language. The participant who began learning the language as an adult was the one who presented the most errors in her text, as compared with the other ones showing, as a result, that age is a key factor when it comes to language learning. However, the results do not clarify if the age issue is only applicable to informal language learners or to language learners regardless of their background.

This way, the main conclusion is that informal language learners do develop the same abilities as learners from environments of formal learning. Nevertheless, the methodology of this research is too limited. The number of participants is too small and their texts are too short, therefore the results cannot be generalized. So, it is important that more research is done in this area, looking for the possible differences between learners from informal and formal environments. At last, this research seeks to broaden the scope of knowledge in the field regarding this subject.

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APPENDIX A - Questionnaire

Link for the online questionnaire: https://forms.gle/ttCiKNZ6YNDXL9G48

1. Have you ever attended an English language course?

( )Yes

( )No

2. What do you consider to be your level of proficiency in the English language?

( ) Beginner (A1)

( ) Basic (A2)

( ) Intermediary (B1)

( ) Post-intermediary (B2)

( ) Advanced (C1)

3. Do you consider yourself to have reached your current proficiency level in English through formal instruction or through informal learning strategies?

( ) Through formal instruction

( ) Informal learning strategies

4. How many years old did you start learning English?

( ) 0-12 years old

( ) 12-18 years old

( ) 19-30 years old

( )more than 30 years old

5. How much time did it take for you to achieve your current proficiency level?

( ) 0-1 year

( ) 2-5 years

( ) 6-10 years

( ) more than 10 years

6. What reason led you to learning English? (more than one option is valid)

( ) Traveling

( ) Professional and/or academic reasons

( ) To communicate with native speakers

( ) Reading books and watching movies in the original language

( ) Understanding song lyrics

( ) Getting to know the culture

( ) Exercising the brain

7. Did you feel motivated to study the language?

( )Yes

( ) No

8. What methods did you use for learning the language? (more than one option is valid)

( ) Immersion on the language

( ) Reading of books in the English language

( ) Watching movies and TV shows and listening to music

( ) Real communication with native speakers and/or other speaker of the language

( ) Use of apps and/or other technological tools (Youtube, blogs, etc.)

( ) Use of grammar and vocabulary handouts

9. Write a short review on the following topic:

You and a friend recently spent time in a resort in an expensive hotel. On returning home, you have decided to post a review of the hotel on a travel website. You enjoyed much of your stay at the hotel, but found significant problems with cleanliness and the quality of the food on offer. Mention these in your review while also praising the aspects of the visit that you enjoyed.