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LANGUAGE EPIPHANY AND FLOW THEORY:

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF SUCCESSFUL LANGUAGE LEARNERS' PERSPECTIVE ON THEIR LANGUAGE EXPERIENCE

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LANGUAGE EPIPHANY AND FLOW THEORY:
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A DISSERTATION APPROVED FOR THE
DEPARTMENT OF INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP AND ACADEMIC CURRICULUM

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to my grand parents

à mes grands-parents

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Abstract

This qualitative research is a phenomenological study of successful language learners' perspectives on their language experiences. It looks at different particularities among successful language learners and extract possible shared concepts in regards to their lived experience. The analysis of the data was possible through the lens of two separate fields: Second Language Acquisition and Flow Theory (positive psychology). This study considers the perspectives of four participants from the University of Oklahoma: Emmanuelle, a French international student who is fluent in English; Rebecca, whose fluency in Spanish is near-native; Scott, whose master of French is outstanding and Andrew, who is fluent in Chinese Andrew used the word Chinese throughout the interview, whereas Emma used the word Mandarin, so both of these words will be used interchangeably although they do not have the same meaning. Although some of my participants were fluent in a third (or fourth) language, this study focused on the second language they master the most. One of the findings was that they experienced a "Language Epiphany" in their language experience. This epiphany corresponds to a feeling of being creative with the second language. They realized they were able to create complex sentences they had never heard before. From this moment in their experience with the language, their learning rate became more significant and more enjoyable. I conclude my dissertation with possible implications for teaching.

Chapter 1: Introduction

One essential purposes of research in education is to understand how individuals learn. Pondering the idea of learning is pondering the function of knowledge. Defining these two terms, learning and knowledge, is essential to understand the contribution of this research to second language learning. Learning occurs when something new is connected to something old. "Something old" refers to the knowledge the learner already possesses. When being combined with "something new" in a meaningful way, knowledge is acquired (Schiro). When and how does *meaning* take place? Among the different theories, Vygotsky brings the concept of zone of proximal development (ZPD), which he defines as "the distance between the actual development level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (86). He highlights the need to consider the current development level of the individual in order to teach effectively. It is necessary that the actual development level is exposed to a "reachable" problem in order to attain the level of potential intellectual development.

Piaget's Cognitive Theory introduces the idea of disequilibrium, which is a situation of imbalance between what is already known (Schiro's "something old") and what is encountered ("something new"). It is in the process of adaptation and restoration of the balance that learning occurs. For Piaget, learning is a constant reorganization and readaptation of mental processes to the outside world. Therefore,

the process of "re-equilibration" is very much like Vygotsky's ZPD. However, Piaget explains that if the problem encountered is not reachable, the individual can easily be alienated, which hinders the learning process. Being exposed to "something new" in a meaningful way may avoid alienation.

Another way to understand *meaning* is to see knowledge as neither residing exclusively in the object (objective knowledge) nor in the subject (subjective knowledge) but in the relationship between the two. Knowledge can then be seen as being constructed by the subject (the individual) and mediated by the object (the outside world). This transactional view of learning suggests that knowledge depends on the learner's background, which varies among individuals, the object, and the nature of the interaction between background knowledge and the object. This interaction is the experience. In other words, knowledge is constructed by the individual with the mediation of the world (Dewey) and it is a byproduct of learning (Shiro).

Among these different views, there are little nuances that characterize learning and knowledge. However, the important aspect they have in common is that knowledge is the result of a constant exchange and negotiation between the individual and the outside world, taking into account that the outside world includes other individuals constantly negotiating their own meaning. Knowledge is dynamic and socially driven. It is conditioned by the sum of experiences and assimilation of these experiences by the individual. Two beings living the "same experience" do not acquire the same type of knowledge as each brings his own vision of the world to an experience. Knowledge may be personal but can be shared and understood by

others.

The transactional view of knowledge suggests that, although it is personal, there are still commonalities between learners. The individual is composed of both particularities and universalities. Ideally, beyond the particularities in learning experiences lies the existence of a universal phenomenon shared by humans. This vision suggests there is an essence in the process of learning that individuals share. Approaching second language learning from a phenomenological-like perspective appeared to be useful to study this shared experience.

In the present study, the shared experience among participants is successfully acquiring a second language learning. In the global society in which we live, it is more and more common for individuals to know more than one language. Most of the research on acquiring an additional language falls under the field of Second Language Acquisition. In addition to Second Language Acquisition, this research provides an additional lens through the field of Positive Psychology. Before addressing the question of successful language learning, it is important to clarify some key terms.

Language, Dialect, Pidgin, and Creole

There can be confusion about the difference between learning a dialect, pidgin, and creole. These types of languages are often seen as the "other" because of the low economic status of their speakers (Meijer and Muysken). Therefore, in Freire's words, it is necessary to deconstruct the names attributed to these languages in order to move beyond the negative connotation that these names often carry. Differentiating these terms is the first step to see how they are actually similar to each other and to the mainstream idea of language. Defining pidgin, creole, and

dialect is useful to compare and contrast these terms with languages and see how languages went through the same process as these "other" types of languages. Then a brief discussion will suggest that the opposition between language, on one side, and dialect, pidgin, and creole on the other side is arbitrary and counter-productive for research on language learning.

Pidgin

A pidgin is a language that arises from the negotiation of two or more languages. In a historical context, when several individuals with different language were brought together and had to communicate, the mixture of different words, different grammars and different pronunciations was called a pidginization. Usually, the majority of the vocabulary of a pidgin language comes from one language called the "lexifier" and, with time, there is a standardization of the use of terms that stabilizes the pidgin language. Therefore, pidgin is usually a second language since the contributors to the formation of this mode of communication already possess a first language, the language from which words, grammar, and other aspects were drawn.

Creole

When second generations of pidgin speakers speak a "stable" version of pidgin as a first language, this pidgin language becomes creole. This creole language is spoken by a whole community where it becomes the mother tongue and is transmitted to future generations.

Dialect

There can be disagreement on the definition of a dialect. A dialect can be

defined as a language that is a modified version of another language or other languages. However, in France for example, we talk about a southern dialect, where the main difference is the accent and intonation. In Morocco, we talk about the "Darija" dialect, which has some similarities with the Arabic.

How are pidgin, creole, and dialect different from languages such as English or French? These two languages mainly got their words from Latin, which can be considered their "lexifier." Germanic languages also influenced them. In this sense, French and English can be seen as creole languages or dialects as they emerged from the negotiation of other languages. Although there is no evidence to show that these languages were built in the same way as Creole from Martinique, i.e. under the context of colonization and slavery, they are still the results of the negotiation with other languages.

In a way, a language is an effective, consistent way to communicate. We can consider creole, dialects, and pidgins as forms of languages. Although they are still considered as "language varieties" (Meijer and Muysken), this research intends to provide insight for language learning in its global meaning. It intends to include language varieties.

Second Language vs. Third Language

This research focuses on second language acquisition, which implies that the individual already possesses a first language. SLA research often includes any language learned after the first language. This implies that, in some research, third language acquisition can be considered as part of second language acquisition.

Lightbrown and Spada define the term First Language or Native Language

(L1) as any language that constitutes a mother tongue, the first language learned. Second Language (L2) designates any language that is not an L1. In this research, L2 will refer to second, third or even fourth languages. Falk and Bradel suggest that the mechanisms used to acquire a second language are considered the same as those used to acquire a third (or fourth) language, a phenomenon known as the "L2 status factor." Falk and Bardel mixed two types of participants: bilingual speakers of English and French having English as an L1 and French as an L2 (Eng/Fr participants) and bilingual speakers of English and French having French as an L1 and English as an L2 (Fr/Eng participants). The study focused on the participants' mechanisms used to acquire German L3. According to Falk and Bardel, the Eng/Fr participants mainly used their French lexicon to elicit the meaning of German while the Fr/Eng participants mainly used their English lexicon for the same task. Falk and Bardel concluded that language learners used their L2 more than their L1 in the acquisition of German L3. They proposed as an explanation that L2 and additional languages learned are similar in terms of "age of onset, outcome, learning situation, metalinguistic knowledge, learning strategies and degree of awareness in the language learning process" (228). In other words, Falk and Bardel suggest that there are similarities in the conditions in which the L2 and the target language (third or fourth language) are acquired.

Acquisition vs. Learning

The field of Second Language Acquisition is sometimes called Second Language Learning. For Krashen, the definition of the terms *learning* and *acquisition* differ in terms of intentionality and can be studied separately. While

learning is a voluntary activity, acquisition is involuntary. Learning stimulates the individual's consciousness while acquisition is an unconscious process. Knowledge can result both from learning and acquisition. What is learned is not automatically what is acquired and vice versa. However, this acquisition-learning hypothesis has created strong reaction, as it is very complicated to determine when knowledge results from learning and when it results from acquisition. McLaughlin makes the case that the distinction between passive and active learning is difficult to establish, as it is not easily and consistently measurable. For Klabbers, learning is a subcategory of acquisition, and acquisition is a supra category of any process that leads to knowledge (including learning). Although the definition of the terms *acquisition* and *learning* differ among researchers, they will be used interchangeably in this research as the distinction between voluntary and involuntary learning is not clear, and I do not intend to make it. SLA is a recent field of study that emerged in the 1960s and successful language learning is a fraction of SLA that developed later (Parker).

Shift in SLA Research and Introduction of Crosslinguistic Influence

The Good Language Learner is a group of academic studies that aims at improving language learning strategies by observing and modeling successful language learners' behavior. The rationale behind the study was that language learners would benefit more from studies on successful language learning than on studies of language learners who fossilized[1] at a lower stage, that is to say when an individual plateaus at a certain level in his language learning. In the mid-1970s

[1] In SLA, fossilization refers to a stage in the process of language learning where the individual perceives his level of proficiency in the target language as stagnating, or as not evolving as much.

researchers shifted their attention from trying to explain learners' obstacles and fossilization to studying good habits of successful language learners (Selinker). One of the first studies that focused on successful language learning was Joan Rubin's *What the "Good Language Learner" Can Teach Us*, published in 1975. This period marks an important turn in SLA research, as the main focus was not to explain what was done "wrong" but to study and model what was done "right." As a result, the shift from perceiving the cup half-empty to half-full correlates with the replacement of the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (CAH) by Crosslinguistic Influence (CLI) (Lado). While CAH focused on studying the nature of language learners' errors and attributing them to background languages, CLI had a more neutral connotation, as it considered both positive and negative impacts of background languages on the acquisition of a new language (Kellerman). While the CAH aimed at predicting errors, the CLI approach was more focused on social and psychological aspects. The CAH was found not to be of limited utility in SLA (Lightbown and Spada). More information on the field of CLI is provided later in the paper. It is possible to observe a general shift, which did not only take place in the study of languages, but in other fields such as psychology and the emergence of *positive psychology* (Compton).

As language is tied to culture, the views on children's different background cultures and languages were first perceived as impeding success in schools, creating a deficiency. While research between the 1950s and beginning of the 1970s attributed this deficiency to a cultural deficiency, research in the 1970s made a claim for cultural difference. Banks and Ogbu propose to change in the curriculum

to accommodate children's differences and help them reach their full potential. By reasserting the importance of cultural difference, there was also a reassertion of the importance of background languages. In research, background language were seen as promoting and stimulating additional language learning (Cenoz; Williams & Hammarberg; Christina Lindqvist).

As it is easier now for people to move from one country to another for professional, academic, personal, or vacation purposes, there is a growing interest in language learning all over the world. In a globalized world, it becomes almost compulsory to know more than one language. Whether it is for intellectual, economic, cultural, or personal growth, bilingualism and multilingualism are required to flourish and live a better life. This study focuses on second language learning as a lived experience by raising the following question: What are successful language learners' perspectives on their language learning experience?

This study suggests an answer to this question through a psycholinguistic and psychological interpretive lens, Flow Theory. In chapter 3, I describe the participants, methods of data collection, and reasons for selecting a particular qualitative research design: phenomenology. Chapter 4 describes the findings, which are analyzed, interpreted and related to the interpretive lens. Finally, the conclusion will summarize and organize the findings and provide some insight into the experience of learning a language.

Chapter 2: Literature Review and Interpretive Lens

Learning is promoted when something old (what the individual already possesses) is connected to something new (the outside world, in the context of this study, the target language). This research intends to explore how the negotiation through a *meaningful experience* promotes *successful language learning*. The following section provides a developed explanation of the two following concepts in order to provide a lens through which the findings will be interpreted:

(1) psycholinguistics and crosslinguistic influence and (2) flow theory, a part of positive psychology.

Second Language Acquisition: Psycholinguistics and Crosslinguistic Influence

Psycholinguistics

The field of psycholinguistics covers the study of the correlations between linguistic factors and psychological aspects of language learning (Jodai). Psychological aspects involve both cognitive and external factors. The main subject of research in psycholinguistics is the study of cognitive processes that underlie the comprehension and production of language and the way the cultural environment interacts with these two (Harely, 13).

The first time the word *psycholinguistic* was used was in Kantor's *Objective Psychology of Grammar*. However, psycholinguistics as a field appeared in 1954 with the publication of a report in a psychology journal and a linguistic journal from a working group of psycholinguists establishing the relationship between linguistics and psychology (Jodai). The emergence of psycholinguistics marks the recognition

of the connection of language with the brain and the world. The philosopher Borland Russell explained in a foreword of Gellner's *Words and Things*:

> The linguistic philosophy, which cares only about language, and not about the world, is like the boy who preferred the clock without the pendulum because, although it no longer told the time, it went more easily than before and at a more exhilarating pace (15).

Initially, psycholinguistics focused on the cognitive processes involved in children's acquisition and production of a first language and adults' understanding of language (Schmitt). Chomsky's work in the late 1950s redefined the study of psycholinguistics. According to Chomsky, language is an innate capacity that the brain already possesses and that develops with time and interaction. Afterwards, the sheer number of bilinguals in the world's population stimulated research on second language acquisition in psycholinguistics. The belief was that research on bilinguals might provide additional insight on the role, function, and performance of language in the human brain (Schmitt). Two of the popular questions that arose were (1) Is L2 acquisition different from L1 acquisition, and (2) To what extent does the L1 play a role in using the L2? (Jodai)

The second question focuses on the influence of background language(s) on the acquisition of a new language, which will need to be considered in the research, specifically in relationship to the ethnic backgrounds of the participants. As seen before, this type of interlanguage influence has its own subcategory in SLA, crosslinguistic influence (CLI). The following section develops more on CLI and

intends to share the three principal factors conditioning language transfer in the field of CLI.

Crosslinguistics

In CLI, many researchers (Bono & Stratilaki; Cenoz; Lindqvist) agree that background languages facilitate the learning of a target language. As opposed to previous views focusing mainly on negative impacts (Lado) or positive impacts (Ringbom) of crosslinguistic phenomena, Odlin focused on both: "Transfer is the influence resulting from the similarities and differences between the target language and any other language that has been previously (and perhaps imperfectly) acquired" (27). Lindqvist suggested that crosslinguistic phenomena are closely linked to outside factors such as language proficiency. A number of factors influence crosslinguistic phenomena, including interacting forces such as the judgment of transferability form the learner, his current proficiency level in the second language and the nature of the given second language. Lightbrown and Spada described the conscious assessment of the language learner in the transferability between two languages:

> the influence of the learner's first language may not simply be a matter of the transfer of habits, but a more subtle and complex process of identifying points of similarity, weighing the evidence in support of some particular feature, and even reflecting (though not necessarily consciously) about whether a certain feature seems to "belong" in the target language. (35)

In the case of a bilingual person who is learning a third language, background languages influence learning according to a certain number of factors (Jessner; Rothman; Williams & Hammarberg). Among all the factors influencing SLA in L3 research, three seem to be dominant: order of acquisition (L2 helps more because of metalinguistic knowledge), nature of the background languages (typological similarities between languages and language families), and proficiency (L1 helps more in most cases because this is where the LL is most proficient).

Crosslinguistic Factors: Order of Acquisition. This factor considers learners who possess at least two languages before learning a new one. Williams and Hammarberg and explained that L2 plays a more important role than L1 in the acquisition of the target language (TL) because of the similarities of acquisition between L2 and TL. In their research, they attribute the priming of L2 in the acquisition of a new language because similarities exist between L2 and TL regarding "the age of onset, outcome, learning situation, metalinguistic knowledge, learning strategies and degree of awareness in the language learning process" (228). In other words, the conditions and context in which L2 is acquired are similar to TL, whereas the conditions and context in which L1 is acquired is particular. The order in which languages are learned is a determining factor of crosslinguistic influence, but it is not the only factor that determines how background languages influence additional language learning.

Crosslinguistic Factors: Nature of the Language(s). Another factor influencing how background languages affect additional language acquisition is the nature of the background languages. In their research, Williams and Hammarberg

focused on how bilinguals of English and German use their background languages in the acquisition process of Swedish. They suggest that when eliciting linguistic aspects of Swedish, the participants' use of English was more conscious, whereas their use of German was more automatic. They attributed this language selection to typological similarities between languages. In other words, the nature of the language determines how it is used, whether consciously or automatically, in target language acquisition. In her research, Simsek focused on the similarities between Turkish and German and concluded that these similarities influence language acquisition positively. The same results are found in Singleton's research, in which bilinguals of English L1 and Spanish L2 learning French L3 were predominantly influenced by their Spanish due to the typological similarities between Spanish and French. However, noticing typological similarities between languages is not always an automatic process, and the teacher sometimes needs to point out the similarities between background languages and the target language to the language learner (Lightbrown and Spada).

Crosslinguistic Factors: Level of Proficiency. Another factor affecting crosslinguistic influence is high proficiency in the background language(s) (Muñoz). She observed that in the process of acquiring English as a TL, participants speaking Spanish and French predominantly used their Spanish to elicit meaning in English. She attributed this crosslinguistic phenomenon to high proficiency in Spanish. This implies that in the learning of L3, a background language is more useful if the level of proficiency in that background language is sufficient. The lower the proficiency in L3, the higher the role of background languages is (Lindqvist). Put differently,

the lower the proficiency in L3, the higher the crosslinguistic influence with background languages is. This implies that crosslinguistic influence is often more obvious at the beginning stages of the acquisition of a new language.

The role of a background language evolves with time. Like Hammarberg, Lindqvist suggested that L1 and L2 have different roles in the acquisition of L3 but that L1 has a dominant influence. According to Lindqvist, the dominance of the role of the L1 is due to the high level of proficiency. However, as the level of proficiency in the TL evolves, the crosslinguistic influence evolves as well. The influence of the L1 decreases. Therefore, it may not be suitable to study crosslinguistic factors as a stable phenomenon. Lindqvist's study suggests that crosslinguistic phenomena are dynamic and evolve with the level of proficiency of the target language.

The crosslinguistic factors of individuals who possess more than one language can be summarized in the three factors explained above: *order of acquisition* (of L1 and L2), *nature of the background languages* (typological similarities with the TL), and *proficiency* (in the background language vs. in the target language). Overall, there are different ways in which background languages can influence and orient the acquisition of a new language. Beyond the purely linguistic factors mentioned in crosslinguistic literature, a successful language learning experience may occur at the psychological and sociocultural levels, as suggested by flow theory, which can frame the linguistic experience.

Theoretical Lens: Flow Theory and the Psychology of Optimal Experience

Optimal experience is often regarded as "the frosting on the cake made with solid ingredients like health and wealth … Only with a solid base of these more real advantages does it help make the subjective aspects of life satisfying" (192). However, for Csikszentmihalyi, "subjective experience is not just one of the dimensions of life, it is life itself." (192)

Consciousness

The definition of consciousness varies among different fields, as it is not a field of its own. Csikszentmihalyi defined it as "a phenomenological model of consciousness based on information theory" (25); information theory deals with the dynamics of attention (selection of bits of information from the outside world or from our inner body) and memory (storage and ordering of these bits of information). Furthermore, he elaborated that consciousness is "intentionally ordered information" (26). Information is selected by attention and processed from experiences through our senses and the understanding of our senses. Sometimes, we focus our attention; other times, events come to our attention. The pieces of information allowed in our consciousness are responsible for our experiences and thus our quality of life. Controlling consciousness can improve our quality of life. Personality traits such as "extrovert, high-achiever, or paranoid refer to specific patterns people have used to structure their attention" (33). When information is processed and stored, it creates a structure, a basis for new experiences. The new structure as a basis for new experiences rejoins Dewey's concept of using students' experiences to build new knowledge. Learning is connecting "something old" with

"something new" (Schiro). Therefore, the approach to language heavily depends on the structures participants developed, which in everyday language are called *personality traits*. In addition, Csikszentmihalyi explained that certain cultures are predisposed for certain personality traits because of traditional, social, and personal practices.

He calls attention a *psychic energy* that determines the consciousness order or structure. The self is part of our consciousness. In a way, we are a sum of experiences. When the self applies a structure to a new experience, the self is altered in a negotiation between what is new and what is old, already part of the basis of the self. Therefore, "the self directs attention and attention determines the self" (34) in a dialectic relationship that is mediated by the experience, whether the experience is intentional with conscious attention or unintentional with events brought to our attention. On the other hand, psychic entropy cancels psychic energy. Psychic entropy, including such elements as pain, fear, rage, anxiety, or jealousy, threatens the goals on which the self is focused and impairs the effectiveness of the attention dedicated to a certain goal. In effect, it alters the order of the self.

The opposite state of psychic entropy is optimal experience, or *flow* (sometimes referred to *negentropy* as opposed to entropy). When outside information is congruent with goals, psychic energy flows effortlessly. The battle is not against the self but against the entropy that brings disorder to consciousness: "It is a battle for the self; it is a struggle for establishing control over attention" (Csikszentmihalyi 40).

Complexity and Growth of the Self

Consciousness is allowed to grow and become more complex through two psychological processes: differentiation and integration. The mind must be able to differentiate itself from an idea and reconcile with it in order to assimilate it. Complexity involves not only differentiation but also integration of autonomous parts that work together since they are integrated. When "thoughts, intentions, feelings, and all the senses are focused on the same goal, experience is in harmony" (Csikszentmihalyi 41).

Enjoyment vs. Pleasure

"The bottom line is, rather, how we feel about ourselves and about what happens to us. To improve life, one must improve the quality of experience." (Csikszentmihalyi 44) Experience determines us; however, one cannot always choose his experiences, but one can change one's relationship to those experiences. Csikszentmihalyi articulated the difference between pleasure and enjoyment. Pleasure is "a feeling of contentment that one achieves whenever information in consciousness says that expectations set by biological programs or by social conditioning have been met" (45), such as the taste of food when we are hungry or using a new cell phone, which allows us to still belong to a trend.

Nevertheless, pleasure is not the information that is best recalled as meaningful when one reflects on one's life. The difference between pleasure and enjoyment lies in the involvement of psychic energy and attention. While pleasure does not require those components, enjoyment does. When one eats food, one feels pleasure through satisfying a biological need. However, when eating certain food

that is meaningful, such as a home-cooked meal eaten frequently during childhood, one feels enjoyment. Enjoyment makes one grow. Dialectically, growing in a meaningful way (such as being a long-life learner) is a source of enjoyment. According to Csikszentmihalyi, the elements of enjoyment are similar between individuals regardless of their differences although the means by reach the individuals reach the enjoyment differ. These elements can be summarized in a list of eight components:

1. The task should be perceived as challenging but reachable and requires skills that we possess.
2. Concentration can take place with no insurmountable obstacles.
3. The task has clear goals.
4. Immediate feedback is provided.
5. Deep but effortless involvement that temporarily disconnects the individual from worries and frustrations of everyday life is required.
6. The individual feels a sense of control or mastery over the action.
7. Although the self disappears during the experience, it reappears stronger after the flow experience.
8. One's sense of time is altered: Hours seem like minutes.

Clear Goals and Feedback

When undertaking an activity, clear goals and immediate feedback are necessary. Clear goals involve a certain type of order, and immediate feedback keeps the mind concentrated on the activity. In addition, some type of challenge must be present in order to feel enjoyment. If I set as my goal to stay alive while

remaining on my couch all day, then I would have set clear goals and received feedback, but I would not feel the same type of enjoyment as a rock climber receiving constant feedback of the inches he has climbed that get him closer to his objective of completing the climb. Similarly, writing a dissertation can be made enjoyable when the author answers a question within a specific amount of time, receives immediate feedback as the pages get filled, organizes thoughts, clarifies ideas, and transforms the research from an academic assignment to a personal adventure. As the experience becomes optimal, the individual becomes the action.

However, goals and feedback are not always clear, especially in an open-ended activity such as writing a dissertation or learning a language. How does one know that one responded to a problem in a satisfactory way? One might receive external feedback, but still feel that something could have been done better. Similarly, when can a language learner claim that he or she has attained proficiency in a language? Some SLA literature attempted to define language proficiency as ease of speech and fluidity (Guillot; Kormos; Riggenbach; Schmidt; Segalowitz). However, there seem to be no universal standards for what a proficient speaker is. Although we can more or less assume when second language learning starts, is it possible to observe when it ends? In fact, proficiency is subjective, although there can be some type of agreement on the measurement (such as the Test of English as a Foreign Language, or TOEFL).

For activities such as language learning, which can yield open-ended results, the individual performing the action should set the goals and find a way to obtain immediate feedback about his or her performance. A language learner can set the

goals of being intelligible, speaking like a native speaker, or publishing and presenting work in a setting using the target language. This way, the individual has already established a type of control over the activity, thus bringing order to his or her consciousness. When the individual controls his or her consciousness over the activity, this improves the quality of life according to Csikszentmihalyi. Therefore, control over the activity is actually the control over the representation of this activity in the individual's consciousness. After setting goals and setting a system of rewards through immediate feedback, it is important that the individual reach his or her goals to complete the optimal experience and be in a state of flow. In the process of reaching the desired result, the individual can reflect on the struggle, the overcoming of the struggle, and the satisfaction obtained when deciding to undertake the same activity again.

Because individuals have different particularities, they are sensitive to multiple forms of input. The type of feedback indicating satisfaction depends on the individual's response to it. Although activities that provide a state of flow vary among individuals, Csikszentmihalyi made the case that they are similar in essence. They bring order to consciouness and strengthen the structure of the self. "Almost any kind of feedback can be enjoyable, provided it is logically related to a goal in which one has invested psychic energy" (57).

The Autotelic Experience: "Flow People"

"The key element of an optimal experience is that it is an end in itself" (Csikszentmihalyi 67). This might provide some insight into why the language learners in this study experienced things differently when they started to be

intelligible. Although not completely correct using the grammar, they reached an intermediate goal of communicating, which is the primary function of language, and enjoyed doing so for a while although they may not have been using the language properly. Csikszentmihalyi calls such an experience an *autotelic experience*, that is, an activity that "is done not with the expectation of some future benefit, but simply because the doing itself is a reward" (12). However, an autotelic experience can start out as exotelic, one that is done only for benefits that are exterior to the process itself. Autotelic experiences bring enjoyment because "life is justified in the present, instead of being held hostage to a hypothetical future" (69).

Csikszentmihalyi enumerated five characteristics that could stimulate an autotelic approach to experiences: clarity, centering, choice, commitment, and challenge. Clarity is knowing exactly what is expected. Centering is, for example, parents showing interest in the individual's present rather than in his or her future. Choice is the feeling of having possibilities, including breaking parental rules, as long as the child takes responsibility. Challenge is consistently presenting complex opportunities for action to children.

Another quality that "flow people" possess is the ability to find opportunities that match the skills they already have to take action, given the context and the situation. They then set goals and monitor their progress through the feedback they receive. Rather than waiting for the right challenge matching their skills, they create challenges with the skills they already have. For example, while waiting in the doctor's office, one can start counting the number of people, counting how long it takes for one patient to get in the doctor's office, and multiplying the time by the

number of people to get an estimate of when he or she will see the doctor. Although patients do not stay for the same amount of time in the doctor's office, this example shows that the individual is trying to restore order to consciousness with this game. Given the skills of each individual, the game can be more or less complex as long as it brings a mini-state of flow.

Flow Activities

One way to access a state of flow is to alter reality by giving it a game-like dimension. French psychological anthropologist Roger Caillois proposed four different categories of world games, and Csikszentmihalyi used the expression *world game* to include specific kinds of pleasurable activities. These four activities are as follows:

> *Agon* includes games that have competition as their main feature, such as most sports and athletic events; *alea* is the class that includes all games of chance, from dice to bingo; *ilinx*, or vertigo, is the name he gives to activities that alter consciousness by scrambling ordinary perception, such as riding a merry-go-round or skydiving; and *mimicry* is the group of activities in which alternative realities are created, such as dance, theater, and the arts in general. (72)

According to Csikszentmihalyi, games provide opportunities to go beyond the limits of ordinary experience. For example, in agonic games, the players on opposite sides must expand their skills to beat each other, which is the root of the concept of competition. They should use each other's skills to push themselves

further. Soccer, basketball, and tennis are examples of agonic games. In aleatory games, players compete against chance or the future. Playing such games may create a state of flow by providing the player with a sense of control over the future. Playing poker or games of chance possess an aleatory dimension. Vertigo is the most explicit way of altering the perception of reality. Bungee jumping can be considered a vertigo game because it simulates the impression of falling while being attached to a large elastic cord. Mimicry is a type of game where the perception of the self is altered instead of the perception of reality. By pretending to be someone else, such as someone more powerful, a certain state of enjoyment and pleasure can be attained. For example, acting, singing, or children playing with figurines stretches the ordinary limits of experience and provides a certain enjoyment.

Although separate, two or more of these categories can be observed in the same game. For example, when a soccer player prepares to shoot a penalty kick, in addition to the agonic dimension in which two or more players compete against each other, this specific aspect of the game possesses an aleatory dimension as it is about guessing what the other player will do, which requires predicting the future (Bar-Eli & Azar). For the purposes of this study, observing how these categories alter the phenomenon of language learning through the language game may prove interesting.

By practicing an activity in a state of flow, the self acquires a certain set of skills that will determine higher challenges to attain, which, in return, will increase skills. This process is reciprocal and cyclical; therefore, the self grows and becomes more complex. However, this is possible only if the skills and challenges match in a

certain timing. Unattainable challenges lead to anxiety, which prevents the individual from enjoying the experience. On the other hand, if the experience is not challenging, then the individual, not being able to use his skills at their full value, will experience boredom instead of flow. The following is a diagram representing the evolution of the self in a flow state, contrasting it with experiences involving feelings of anxiety and boredom.

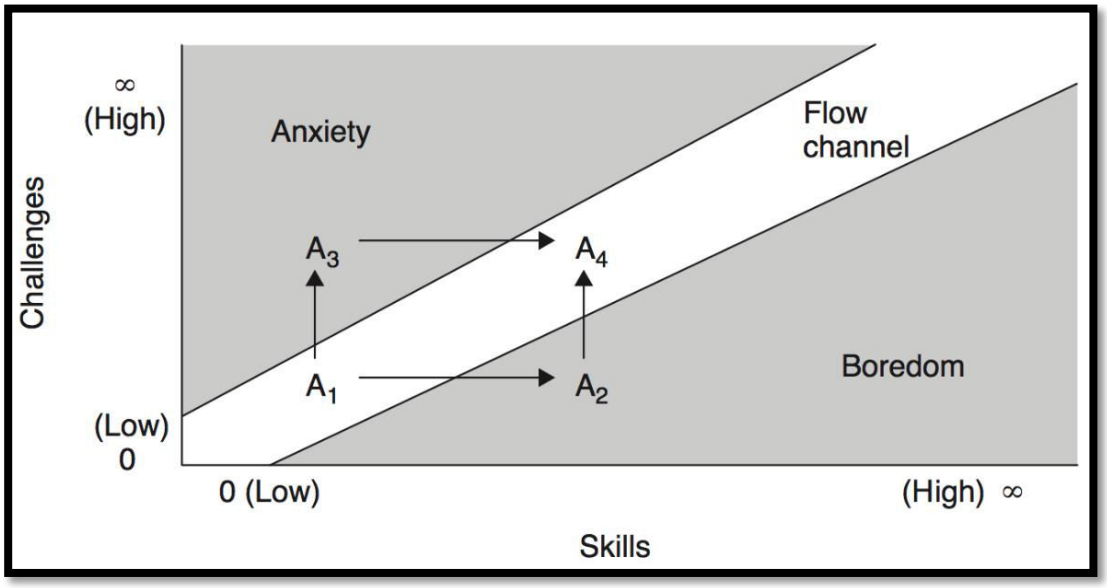


Fig. 1. Growth of the self in a state of flow (Csikszentmihalyi 74).

Challenges and skills, the two most important aspects of the experience, are represented on the two axes of the diagram. In his book, Csikszentmihalyi uses the example of Alex playing tennis (74-75). The letter A represents Alex at four different moments: A1, A2, A3 and A4. In this research, I will use the example of Alex learning French as a second language to explain the diagram. When he started to learn the language, Alex was in state A1. His skills were not developed, and the challenges he faced were not too difficult. He was asked only to memorize a declarative and an interrogative sentence: (1) "*Je m'appelle Alex*," which is "My name is Alex," and (2) "*Et toi, comment t'appelles-tu?*", which is "And you, what is

your name?" He had to introduce himself in French and then turn to his classmate and ask him what his name was. First, the sentences were written on the board, and then the French teacher erased the sentences while students in groups were still repeating the task. During the first couple of classes, Alex was enjoying the class because the difficulty of the task matched his rudimentary skills. For example, he used his memory to remember the sentences and used his ear to listen to the pronunciation of the words and reproduce them correctly. We can infer that he is in a basic state of flow. However, this state does not last long.

Boredom and Anxiety

There are two possible evolutions in experience. In the first case, Alex might grow bored of having to repeat preconceived sentences. He was doing well in performing the task, but he felt as if he was not learning the language because he was still not able to communicate in the target language. Therefore, since the challenges were not difficult enough, he went into state A2. Since this state was not an enjoyable experience, he tried to modify it to make it enjoyable. He was able to do so by increasing the challenges that he was facing to match his skills. However, if he did not encounter a sufficient challenge, then he might give up learning French altogether (at least until he encountered a challenge that matched his skills).

In the second case, Alex's skills were not high enough to match the new challenges he was facing perhaps because Alex's teacher increased the difficulty of the course too quickly or because Alex had not done the work to acquire the necessary skills to understand the new content in class. He was in state A3 and felt anxiety. He had only one option to keep being in a state of flow: increase his skills

to match the new challenges. Although he could lower the difficulty of the challenges and go back to state A1, Csikszentmihalyi suggested that "in practice it is difficult to ignore challenges once one is aware that they exist" (75). If Alex could not go back to a flow state, i.e., if the new challenges he was facing are beyond his reach, then he might feel alienated and give up learning French.

A4, although enjoyable, is not a stable state. Alex will need to always encounter or create challenges that match his newly acquired skills in order to keep being in a state of flow and avoid falling into a state of anxiety or boredom.

Flow and Complexity of the Experience

Flow is created by sustaining an enjoyable state of growth and discovery. Although the state of A1 is as enjoyable as A4, A4 is different in that it is a more complex experience that demands higher skills to face challenges that are more difficult. In order to maintain a state of flow, one has to keep facing challenges that match one's skills. One cannot enjoy doing the same thing at the same level for too long. Flow is a state that is dynamic in essence, although it can be experienced in the same activity, and it primarily takes place in the inner self rather than in the experience. This inner self evolves and becomes more complex with the mediation of appropriate experiences.

Csikszentmihalyi nuanced the expressions *appropriate experiences* and *appropriate skills* by explaining that another factor involving flow is that they are *perceived* as being appropriate. "It is not only the 'real' challenges presented by the situation that count, but those that the person is aware of. It is not skills we actually have that determine how we feel, but the ones we think we have" (75). Flow

depends heavily on perception, which is another reason for choosing such a theoretical lens for a phenomenological study on successful language learners' perceptions of their experiences. In summary, flow has a subjective and temporal dimension.

Flow, Culture, and Ethics

Csikszentmihalyi defined culture as a set of "defensive constructions against chaos, designed to reduce the impact of randomness on experience" (74). Culture establishes norms, goals, and other rules that explain us how to live. It prescribes self-established boundaries that keep us safe from randomness but also prevent us from exploring beyond these boundaries. In this "cultural script," as Csikszentmihalyi (74) called it, gaps and interludes must be filled to avoid chaos. They are filled with games in the broad sense of the term. "They enhance action and concentration during 'free time', when cultural instructions offer little guidance, and a person's attention threatens to wander into the uncharted realms of chaos" (Csikszentmihalyi 81). In other words, flow activities define us as human beings. They are the particularities of the individuals behind the universality of the culture. However, it is necessary to point out that "a culture that enhances flow is not necessarily 'good' in any moral sense" (Csikszentmihalyi 186). Optimal experience can exist with morally questionable activities. For example:

> It is certainly true that for great segments of the European population, confused by the dislocating economic and cultural shocks of 1920s, the Nazi-fascist regime and ideology provided an attractive game plan. It set simple goals, clarified feedbacks, and allowed a renewed

> involvement with life that many found to be a relief from prior anxieties and frustrations. (186)

In other words, optimal experience and enjoyment can happen at the expense of someone else; flow can be unethical.

The Obstacles of Flow

Flow is a state that the individual must sustain with the mediation of his or her environment. When skills increase or challenges increase, the individual can easily slip into a state of anxiety or boredom, which prevents the feeling of flow when performing an activity. Csikszentmihalyi presented two obstacles that could lead to the development of such states: anomie and alienation.

Émile Durkheim, a French sociologist, explained that anomie is a social condition where the norms of behavior are unclear and disorganized. Anomie affects individuals who are expected to behave in contradictory ways according to societal expectations. For example, in today's French society, the growing Muslim population is expected to live their religion in the private sphere, as is promoted by French secularism, but at the same time, they are accused of being too secretive with their religion. The situation is more complex than this, but there is confusion between the lifestyles of members of a society and the expectations of public opinion, which leads to a condition of anomie. At the psychological level, anomie occurs when the individual no longer knows what he is supposed to do in order to take the next step in his evolution. In the context of flow, anomie happens when an individual stagnates at one specific level and does not know what skills he needs to acquire to face higher challenges. When learning a language, this feeling of

stagnation is comparable to the SLA notion of fossilization, or when an individual plateaus at a certain level in his or her language proficiency.

Alienation is in many ways the opposite of anomie. It is a condition where society's norms are clear and they stand between the individuals and their goals. For example, in some Muslim theocracies, society imposes constraints on the population, especially on women, who do not have equal rights to men. This creates a condition of alienation for this portion of society. At the psychological level, alienation occurs when the individual knows what the next step is in his or her evolution but cannot take it because of external factors.

When in a state of flow, an individual exposed to a challenge will face obstacles. If he or she does not know what the next step is to continue to be in a state of flow, this will lead to a state of anomie. If, on the other hand, the individual knows what the next step is but is cannot take it because of an external constraint, this will lead to a state of alienation. By overcoming these obstacles, an individual can remain in a state of flow.

The Body in Flow

Flow, experienced primarily in the mind, is a subjective state that is conditioned by the nature of the experience and the nature of our interaction with the experience. The body being the medium between the experience and the mind, it is logical that the way we sense things can determine how we make meaning out of them and the extent to which we will enjoy things. Therefore, according to Csikszentmihalyi, there is a correlation between the mind, the body, and the experience. Rather than saying that the body experiences flow, it is more accurate to

say that the mind experiences flow through the body. The input made available by the body allows the mind to evaluate the data, which informs future actions in creating what can become a memorable experience. For example, in language acquisition, out of the four primary skills (writing, reading, speaking, and listening), reading and listening are input-based, and writing and speaking are output-based. Therefore, listening or reading becomes an experience that can inform speaking and writing (and the other way round) and create an enjoyable experience. If the experience is repeated in a way that makes it more complex through a system of increasing challenges, immediate feedback, and clear goals, then it will be possible to talk about a state of flow. The body then becomes the instrument through which data is evaluated qualitatively, appreciated emotionally, and reproduced frequently in order to remain in a flow state while performing a specific activity. Although the above example focused on input-based skills, it is possible to experience flow with output-based skills.

Because experiences come to the individual instead of the individual's choosing his or her experiences, the individual must be able to analyze the experience; extract the relevant challenges that match his or her skills; and try to bring some order into his or her consciousness through a system of challenges, goals, and immediate feedback. For example, a child who is in the school hall waiting for his parents to be done talking to his teacher may find some type of enjoyment walking on the black squares of the checkered floor in the hallway. He has analyzed his environment, extracted the relevant information of black and white squares, and created the challenge of jumping on black squares only when he knows

he possesses the skills to do so. At a certain point, if his parents take too long, he might lose interest in this activity and increase the speed or the number of squares he can jump on in order to face more difficult challenges. Although this mini-flow activity seems simple, it requires the child to know his body in order to enjoy the experience by taking control over the activity. With the development of technology, the mind becomes less and less predisposed to experience flow as freely.

The body is the instrument allowing flow. Performing with the body and understanding the role of the body increase the possibilities of flow. A good language learner usually has an ear for language. A good writer usually enjoys reading. Although there are no clear causal relationships involved here, there is a correlation between the development of sensory perceptions, self-regulatory outcomes, and specific skills.

The Flow of Thought

Although flow has previously been described as taking place in the mind with the mediation of outside experiences through the body, Csikszentmihalyi made the case that another type of flow experience still takes place in the mind with the mediation of the mind: *the flow of thought*. Thoughts and experiences are not to be dissociated, but in the flow of thoughts, the primary source of experience is the mind itself. When recalling an experience, the memory of the experience provides enjoyment to the mind instead of the experience itself.

In other cases, the main sources of flow are not only the memory but also logic and conceptual thinking. It is difficult to separate conceptual thinking from memory since "all forms of flow depend on memory, either directly or indirectly"

(121). Conceptual thinking is an important function of the mind. One analyzes outside experiences and classifies them among known experiences in order to create rules and respond to a given problem better. The ability to create concepts is the basis for at least for the creative part of speaking. When Chomsky proposed the concept of Universal Grammar, he raised the question of how the human mind was able to create sentences that it had never heard before. He suggested that the brain possesses an innate capacity to analyze a sentence, extract the underlying rule (the concept), and apply the rule to a new situation that appears similar to the old one. For example, when a child says "two tooths," he is just using the concept of adding an S to make a plural. Therefore, the concept-making device is important in the ability to enjoy optimal experience because it is the function that helps one recognize the experience and apply the right set of skills.

When the process of conceptualizing becomes a game with clear goals, immediate feedback, and a match of skills and challenges, the individual can experience flow. When learning English, I quickly became fascinated by the extent to which the language was flexible compared to French. It gave me a sense of control over the language. For example, it is possible to use a proper noun and make it a verb: "Facebook me," "Google it." Even more surprising, English allows a full sentence to be used as an adjective: "Oh, be careful, she is in her 'I don't wanna talk to anyone' mood." Although slang, some of my classmates and I quickly started to create longer sentences exploiting that richness of the language: "Today, the teacher seems to be wearing his 'I don't wanna appear too serious, but I still need them to read' glasses." The teacher liked our game for a while even though it did not match

the syllabus. At this point, we were not interested in learning the language as much as we were interested in playing with the concept. However, knowledge of the language was still a required skill in order to play the game. When we could not make longer sentences, or when the challenge became too high, we looked for a different challenge to keep the game going. We would take every new sentence that was on the board and use it as an adjective in a sentence that had to make sense and still be odd enough to be funny. The challenge went from using the skill of memory to using the skill of creativity, which are two key elements in language learning. As the task became more complex in a competition with each other over a certain amount of time (in fact, we still send each other messages using this type of sentences out of nostalgia), we can talk about a flow state that deeply involved us as we were enjoying the process regardless of the goal. The experience was more internal thinking rather than external. Therefore, language as a symbolic system or a communication tool is an experience that can take place both in the mind and in the outside world.

Interpersonal Intelligence

An autotelic personality promotes a state of flow and improves the quality of experience. The ability to control the experience requires certain knowledge of the self or a sense of intrapersonal intelligence. Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences values both intrapersonal intelligence, or possessing a certain sense of the self, and interpersonal intelligence, or possessing a certain sense of interaction with others. Csikszentmihalyi explained that the nature of our interaction with others contributes to the quality of life and can be a source of enjoyment or pain.

"The same person can make the morning wonderful and the evening miserable" (166).

Human qualities, such as generosity, compassion, or empathy, and human defects, such as stinginess, jealousy, or egocentrism, exist only in relationship to others. As human beings, our qualities and defects exist because of others. Csikszentmihalyi suggested that individuals possess an innate need to bond with others. Being alone quickly leads to a feeling of not belonging, not having a purpose, or depression. Being alone can then stimulate negative experiences, especially if there is nothing that needs to be done.

Finding something to do on our own time is not easy to do because "keeping order in the mind from within is very difficult" (Csikszentmihalyi 169). It is easier for the human mind to find an external activity to focus the mind on to keep a certain structure within the consciousness. Therefore, when there is no external activity that is imposed on us, such as work, what people do in their free time is the ultimate test that determines "if they had achieved a creative life" (171). Learning to control consciousness and, by the same token, to control the experience, or, perhaps, to control our interaction with the experience, is key to self-growth, enjoyment and quality of life. People who enjoy solitude usually have an ability to structure their consciousness with a few external cues. The structure of their consciousness is often reflected through the structure of their schedule. Being able to enjoy oneself in solitude with a self-imposed discipline but no external tasks is a quality that increases the possibilities of flow.

"Cheating Chaos"

As mentioned earlier, experiencing flow can be hindered by obstacles that present anomie or alienation. However, as humans are evolving creatures, some have developed an ability to overcome situations of hardship more readily than others have. To understand how hardship can be overcome, it is necessary to highlight the importance of mind over body. Of course, the mind can take over the body to only a certain extent because of our biological needs, but as long as the complexity of the experience increases and calls for higher challenges, a biological handicap can turn into a rewarding experience. For example, Professor Fausto Massimini of the Psychology Department at the University of Milan explained how a group of paraplegic people has managed to experience flow by setting clear goals of "learning to live again" (193) and reaching them through the breaking up of these goals into challenges with immediate feedback. Incredibly, Massimini found that the participants reported their accidents to be both the most negative and most positive events of their lives (193). "Cheating chaos" is not a matter of avoiding chaos but facing and responding to it. The self grows (or is destroyed) through experience, but there is no such thing as neutrality to the experience. In other words, humans are constantly evolving. The individual can overcome a situation of hardship in different ways. He or she can use external support, which are resources available to cope with an obstacle such as money, and psychological resources, which are personal traits such as patience. In addition, the individual possesses coping strategies, which can be divided in two categories: neurotic defense and mature defense.

Neurotic defense is the refusal to deal with the problem by avoiding it or by transferring it onto something else, such as alcohol. Mature defense, on the other hand, is the ability to temporarily put aside emotions, analyze the problem rationally, and reassess priorities. "Few people rely on only one or the other strategy exclusively" (Csikszentmihalyi 208). Rather, people go through the neurotic defense stage before entering a mature defense stage. One aspect of the mature defense stage is that the individual is able to "capture chaos and shape it into a more complex order" (Csikszentmihalyi 208). He or she transforms adversity into an opportunity for growth. Therefore, a mistake is not considered as an end but as a necessary stage for growth. In that sense, people are not wrong, so to speak; they are just getting closer to the truth.

Csikszentmihalyi developed three main steps involved in transforming adversity into a reachable challenge:

1. *Unselfconscious self-assurance*: the idea that the individual is self-assured of his qualities without having a strong ego. Rather than seeking to dominate the environment, the individual seeks to live in harmony with it.
2. *Focusing attention on the world*: the ability of looking less inward and more outward. Achieving unity with one's surroundings involves perceiving oneself as part of the surroundings instead of outside it.
3. *The discovery of new solutions*: the ability to perceive discrete goals and find a solution to them one by one. At the same time, it is the ability to perceive and reassess the goal to replace one discrete goal with another. People possessing these skills are generally practical learners and are able to

overcome unexpected situations with their ability to adapt.

These three qualities are necessary to face adversity and transform it into a meaningful experience or at least neutralize it. This is another facet of the autotelic self.

The Making of Meaning

What Csikszentmihalyi suggested as being the meaning of life is to have a purpose that is enjoyable only if it has clear rules for action and ways to focus concentration and develop a sense of immersion. In other words, the purpose is to turn life into a unified flow experience. However, one limitation of such a statement is that flow does not seem to take into account a possible objective moral value or ethic. Flow is what is needed by the individual alone regardless of what consequences it may have for others. The experiencing of flow can happen at the expense of other human beings. Csikszentmihalyi used the example of Napoleon and his quest for power to illustrate the selfishness of flow. Although Napoleon was experiencing a state of flow throughout his life by setting higher challenges of conquering the world and obtaining positive feedback as his empire was expanding, this experience of flow was happening at the expense of the many who died defending their lands from Napoleon's invasion. Life has no meaning, but it can be given a meaning according to Csikszentmihalyi.

Meaning is tightly related to the concept of flow, as it is three-fold. It can be understood in the sense of purpose, as in the question "What is the meaning of life?" In addition, it can be understood in the sense of intention, as in the question "What do you mean?" or the statement "She usually means well." Finally, it can be

understood in terms of ordering information, as in the expression "Red sky in the evening means good weather in the morning." Csikszentmihalyi divided the word *meaning* into purpose, intention, and ordering of information to better tie it with the concept of flow since it meets the same requirements: a clear goal, a possibility for action, and a breaking down of the goal into discrete challenges that provide immediate feedback. Ideally, the individual will be able to reach harmony in the sense that everything he has done, everything he is doing, and everything he will do fit together into a clear purpose.

Although it is not possible to reach perfect harmony, the participants of the study experienced certain moments of flow and described the experience in diverse ways. Flow is a general concept that can happen at any time with anybody. Like other psychological concepts, it is not an exact science and cannot be measured in a positivistic way. However, it is possible to break down flow into possible causes and expected effects:

Table 1. Possible Causes and Expected Effects of Flow

Possible Causes of Flow	Expected Effects of Flow
- Having or setting clear goals - Being provided with instant feedback - Skills match challenges - Having an autotelic personality, possessing intra/interpersonal intelligence (knowing yourself and/or others)	- Lose track of time - Feeling a sense of enjoyment and growth - Performing the activity regardless of the goal

Chapter 3: Methodology

Phenomenology

An important element of this study is to attempt to define the epistemological and ontological views of the researcher. The research is interpretive (constructivist) as knowledge is not external to the individual who needs to "grab it", it does not reside in the object (objectivism, positivism), nor is it essentially in the individual who builds it independently from the outside world. Rather, it resides in the interaction between the individual and the world through experiences. Cresswell summarizes this view:

> In this worldview, individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live and work. They develop subjective meanings of their experiences. (...) These meanings are varied and multiple, leading the researcher to look for the complexity of views. (...) Often these subjective meanings are negotiated socially and historically. In other words, they are not simply imprinted on individuals but are formed through interactions with others (hence social constructivism) and through historical and cultural norms that operate in individuals' lives. (20-21)

Although not strictly phenomenological, this study uses some views of transcendental phenomenology. It is a phenomenological-like study in that it focused on the participants' experiences of their everyday life and social action (Schram). What drives this research is the meaning that the participants made about

successful language learning. The aim is not to propose a recipe for successful language learning. Rather, it aims to provide insight to better understand characteristics the participants had in common. Phenomenology focuses on shared experiences. It is based on the assumption that there is an essence or essences to shared experience. These essences are the core meanings mutually understood through a phenomenon commonly experienced. The experiences of different people are bracketed, analyzed, and compared to identify the essences of the phenomenon: for example, the essence of loneliness, the essence of being a mother, or the essence of being a participant in a particular program. The assumption of essence, like the ethnographer's assumption that culture exists and is important, becomes the defining characteristic of a phenomenological study. (Patton, 106)

The shared experience is the perception of successful language learning. This research is interpretive, as I assumed my subjectivity and assumed its necessity to understand the participants' experience of a phenomenon I have lived myself. Although subjective, in the primary stages of my research, while conducting interviews, it was necessary for me to reduce myself to the phenomenon I was observing, successful second language learning, in order to reduce the bias. This process is called Bracketing.

Bracketing

As the investigator, I perceived my subjectivity as initially being an obstacle, and, finally, a strength. During interviews, it was important to distance myself from my own experience as a language learner. In order to do so, it was necessary for me to deeply reflect on my own experience to know what I had to distance myself from.

I reflected on my experience before studying flow theory and also as I was studying it, in order to have an understanding of my own language learning experience. Most of the questions were a follow up of the participants' answers in a way to keep the conversation going. I tried to let the participants change the topic as my questions were mainly asking for clarification.

When analyzing interviews through a lens of flow theory, I assumed to be first and foremost a subjective being, which implies that meaning comes from a combination of my lived experiences and what I am exposed to. Subjectivity came into play in the coding process of the data. I believe my lived experiences of a language learner were an important aspect in the understanding of the lived experience of my participants. For example, when one of the participants, Andrew, first mentioned the word "language epiphany", I managed to perceive an understanding of what it meant throughout my experiences. After my first trip to England when I was 14, I experienced a similar feeling. However, I did not assume that Andrew's epiphany was the same as mine before he clarified what it meant to him. Therefore, through a process of confirming and disconfirming the essence of what he called "language epiphany" throughout my experience and my participants', I suggested a more inclusive definition of language epiphany in the light of flow theory that is developed in Chapter 5.

Reflexive: My lived experience of the phenomenon

I was born and raised in France and both of my parents are Moroccan immigrants. I grew up speaking French and Berber, which is a language spoken by some regions of Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia. By definition, I am a simultaneous

bilingual, which means I acquired two languages at the earliest age. As I grew up, I developed an interest in languages and more specifically in English. It gave me the opportunity to become someone else. I enjoyed the fact that our English teacher gave us "English names" on the first day. Mine was Nigel and I kept this name for four years. Later in school, I took Spanish but it is only when I traveled several times to Spain and when I arrived in Oklahoma, that I developed a better mastery of the language. Because of the later acquisition of English and Spanish in my life, I am also a sequential bilingual. In Second Language Acquisition, there is a differentiation between sequential and simultaneous bilingual at the psychological, social and linguistic levels. Learning French and Berber was not like learning English and Spanish. In the case of my first languages, the process mainly took place naturally, whereas in the case of English and Spanish, I had to consciously invest myself in order to grow more confident and more skillful with the language. However, I am still improving my French and my Berber by learning consciously and I have acquired some skills in Spanish and English that I noticed only once I used them. Language learning/acquisition is not an exact science, but I believe that my experiences with languages were an asset in conducting the interviews. If the creation of meaning comes from two (or more) connecting forces, it is important to acknowledge my side of the experience in order to better understand my participants'.

Intentionality, noema, noesis

Based on the premise that consciousness is always directed towards an object, consciousness cannot be directed towards nothing. "Consciousness" is

always “consciousness of” (Brentano). Also, one might argue that the object might exist because of a conscious being. Within a phenomenon of interconnectedness between the consciousness and the object exists meaning.

In intentionality there is a distinction between noesis and noema. The noesis also known as the I-pole, is the meaning-maker that assigns a value to the object. It refers to the intentional acts by which we create meaning out of objects: perception, judgings, and rememberings. It is a lens through which we perceive reality. The noema, also known as the object-pole, is the version of the object that the mind perceives or from which meaning is extracted. It depends on the lens or, in other words on the noesis. During the noetic activity (which involves the act of noesis and the creating of a noema), the mind can approach the object through multiple noesis and complete the noema. In a way, this research provides insight to the general body of information on language learning. It is only by multiplying the types of insights that it is possible to obtain a more accurate idea of the phenomenon. The multiple noetic activities performed in order to create a unity of a noema is called the synthetic noetic activity (or the unifying noetic activity). How this is relevant is that it deconstructs subjectivity into noesis and noema. Everything that we see has part of our understanding in it.

Originality of this research

Flow Theory has been subsumed into the field of positive Psychology. Although Csikszentmihalyi started to focus his research on optimal experience during the 1970s, it is not until 1990 that he published *Flow: the Psychology of Optimal Experience*. Most of the research involving both Flow theory and Second

Language Acquisition is fairly recent. For example, Mirlohi, Egbert, and Ghonsooly (2011) focused on the phenomenon of Flow in Translation. Azizi and Ghonsooly (January 2015) explored Flow Theory within TOEFL texts. The densest body of research involving Flow and Languages is in the study of Flow in language classrooms (Entürk; Tardy & Snyder; Xiaowei). Although this study briefly discussed implications for teaching, the primary focus is to describe and interpret perception of language learning outside the classroom. Experiences have been investigated within second or foreign language learners (Schmidt & Savage; Schmidt, Boraie, & Kassabgy) but it is not until 2003 that Flow Theory, as proposed by Csikszentmihalyi, was tested in the area of foreign or second language learning (Egbert).

Flow and SLA

Psycholinguistics studies the psychological phenomenon intervening in the process of acquiring a language. It describes linguistic phenomenon taking place in the brain. This research is diverging a little bit from this view. As it is developed in chapter 5 and 6, this study focuses on language learning - first and foremost - as a learning phenomenon. Therefore, it attributed psychological phenomenon not to language learning specifically but to learning in general. Through the use of Flow Theory, I intended to highlight the learning processes and perception of learning and acquisition that take place in the individual's mind throughout the experience of learning a language. As the researcher, I admit that some psychological processes are specific to language learning and others are specific to experiencing in a more general way.

The use of Flow as a theoretical lens does not intend to replace previous psycholinguistic research, but rather to add another perspective. For example, Lightbown and Spada observed that "if we can make our classrooms places that students enjoy coming because the content is interesting and relevant to their age and level of ability, where the learning goals are challenging yet manageable and clear, and where the atmosphere is supportive and non-threatening, we can make a positive contribution to students' motivation to learn" (57). Although their observations were made through the lens of SLA, psycholinguistics and sociocultural theory, it is easy to make the leap to positive psychology and suggest a similar, yet more nuanced approach to the language learning experience. "Learning goals" and "challenging yet manageable" are explicit dimensions of Flow, although the theory considers all of them as part of a same phenomenon that promotes a state of flow.

The participants

I selected four participants, Emma, Scott, Rebecca and Andrew[2], to conduct my study. They all knew each other, as students at the University of Oklahoma. I initially selected six. Emmanuelle (Emma), is a French international student who has been in Oklahoma for three years pursuing a PhD in World Languages and Education. I met her in a class we took together a year and a half ago. During her first intervention in class, I could not tell she was a French native speaker, as her usage of English seemed flawless. Emma's boyfriend, Scott, is fluent in French and what is interesting about him, is that he is the only participant who did not major in language arts or a field related. Rebecca is also pursuing a PhD in Education and

[2] Real names were used with the permission of the participants and appropriate documentation

Second Language Acquisition and I met her four years ago through her husband, Carlos who is a good friend of mine. I was amazed at Rebecca's mastery of Spanish. Last but not least, I met Andrew a year ago while taking a summer class and he told me about his journey to China, where he spent three years. What I found interesting about Andrew's experience is that his second language was not a Latin-Germanic language as for my other participants. Unfortunately, the two other participants who turned out to be unavailable were a Chinese speaker of English and an Arabic speaker of English. Although this setback reduced the variety of my research, the focus was not on *how to learn a language,* as the perfect way does not exist, but rather on *what happens when an individual learns a language successfully*. Understanding through processes and perspectives were the driving force of this study. All in all, I intended to choose participants who were proficient in another language but, most importantly, who were able to reflect on their proficiency.

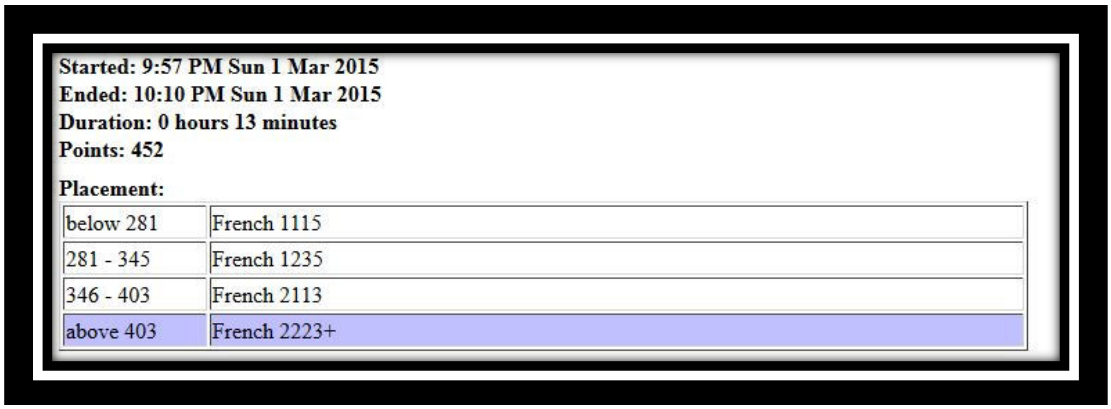
As most of their information is developed in the descriptive part, I will exaplain the nature of my relationship with the participants and the rationale for selecting them. First, all of them were proficient in a second language at first sight. As I speak French, English and Spanish, it was easy to get an idea of how proficient Emma, Rebecca and Scott were in these languages. As I have known them for a while, I had several opportunities to chat with them in all three languages. For example, when chatting in Spanish with Rebecca, I was not able to distinguish any type of American accent. She actually has a strong Castellan accent from Northern Spain. As a French citizen who spent many weekends in Spain, I can assure with confidence that Rebecca's Spanish is native-like. They were proficient *in my*

opinion. However, I still asked them to provide me with any type of proficiency test they had to take throughout their academic or professional career.

"Official" level of proficiency

Although the aim of this research was not to determine how proficient they were, I believed it to be useful to ask participants to provide verification of their expertise. After he came back from China, Andrew took the Chinese Oklahoma Subject Area Test (OSAT) and obtained a score above 70%. According to him, he could have done better but this was enough to let him teach Chinese in high school. It is important to point out that before travelling to China, Andrew's level of proficiency in Chinese was near zero. He is now working on his "academic Chinese" in order to retake the test and score higher.

Emma majored in English and areas related to English while going to school in France. Before coming to Oklahoma, she taught university level classes in English. As her advisor in Oklahoma already knew Emma before she came, he waived the required Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) required for international students before studying in an American university (the TOEFL is one of two required test, the other one being the iElts, the international English language testing system). Scott did most of his studying on his own. The only official proficiency test he took in French was the placement test administered by the University of Oklahoma Language Learning Center. This test serves to place students in a class matching their level of proficiency. When Scott took the test, he placed into the highest possible level and provided me with his test's results:



Started: 9:57 PM Sun 1 Mar 2015
Ended: 10:10 PM Sun 1 Mar 2015
Duration: 0 hours 13 minutes
Points: 452

Placement:

below 281	French 1115
281 - 345	French 1235
346 - 403	French 2113
above 403	French 2223+

Fig. 2. *Scott's results to the French placement test*, screen shot, March 12, 2015.

Rebecca took the American Council on The Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) Oral Proficiency Interview and was rated as a superior speaker, the highest level. She is now working on obtaining more recognition not only in her proficiency in Spanish but in her ability to teach it as a second language. It can be misleading to normalize levels of proficiency as some of the participants acquired the target language in different settings and therefore developed different skills. However, although there is a discrepancy in the way participants learned a second language, this study will highlight similarities in the experienced phenomenon of language learning.

Data collection

Interviews

The rationale for the usefulness of interviews as one of the primary methods of data collection is tied to the nature of the study. This study looks at perspectives of successful language learning and relies primarily on participants' insights on the question. Therefore, a suitable mean for the data collection is the interview, as Patton explains:

> We interview people to find out from them those things we cannot directly observe. (...) We cannot observe feelings, thoughts, and intentions. We cannot observe behaviors that took place at some previous point in time. We cannot observe situation that preclude the presence of an observer. We cannot observe how people have organized the world and the meanings they attach to what goes on in the world. We have to ask people questions about those things. The purpose of interviewing, then, is to allow us to enter into the other person's perspective. (340-341)

Beyond the ability to better understand someone's perspective, interviews allow to have some insight on previous experiences. Depending on the extent to which the researcher know a phenomenon and the type of information he is looking for, Merriam makes the difference between three types of interviews: highly structured (or standardized), semistructured, and unstructured (or informal).

The interviews were semi-structured/ unstructured. Questions were open-ended and were usually sequenced in a way that reflects on previous answers in order to be able to not orient the participants and let them freely recall their experiences. For example, some questions revolved around two main topics although they became specific according to the participants' answers:

1. What feelings, impressions have you experienced during your language experience?
2. In what context did you experience them? Do you see a correlation between outside experience and inside impressions?

These questions served as the "skeleton" of my interviews in order to have a starting point although there were other types of questions related to information about the participants rather than their experience such as where they came from geographically, socially or culturally.

I had an understanding of the phenomenon of successful language through my own experience, but did not assume my experience was the same as everyone else's. However, I did assume that, behind experiences, including mine and my participants', there were some universalities, or at least, some points of convergence.

Logistics

In order to collect data on the participants' perceptions of their language learning experience, interviews were administered in different locations on the University of Oklahoma campus. Most of the interviews were conducted at the Student Union, or in offices in Kauffman Hall. The interviews were taped using a smart phone voice recorder. In addition to the smart phone, I took notes. In my notebook, I wrote impressions at specific moments of the interviews in order to use them to elaborate further questions, ask for further elaborations or for other reasons. For example, when a participant described an experience that seemed similar in essence to that of another participant, I would write down the time of the interview and the name of the other participants in order to compare it later under the scope of my theoretical lens. The interviews lasted for about an hour.

During the study, the participants were able to tell me to erase a part and re-answer it. All interviews were mainly in English. During Emma's interview, she

preferred to answer a couple of questions in French but the majority of the interview was done in English. After interviewing each participant twice, on two different days, I proceeded to the transcriptions. During the transcription process, I emailed and sent text messages when an answer required further details or clarifications. Also, participants were able to contact me if there was more information they wanted to share. For example, one participant contacted me afterwards to clarify the feelings she had during specific moments in her language learning experience.

In addition to the interviews, texts, and emails, participants were able to share reflective papers they wrote for a graduate course that contained relevant information about their perception of the experience. As three of my participants took classes in the World Languages department at the University of Oklahoma, they already had written reflective papers about their language experiences. Reflective papers were collected after administering the interviews and mainly served to confirm or disconfirm interview data.

Transcription and Description

Once the interviews were finished, I transcribed them. After transcribing all the interviews, I started writing a description based on the participants interview in which I reorganized, most of the time chronologically, information that were given during the interview. During the interviews, participants sometimes felt the need to return to previous experiences they had already talked about to add information or nuance. It was therefore necessary to reorganize their ideas in an academic format in order to make it intelligible and to show clear transitions to the analysis section. The content of the information was kept the same. The main difference between the

interview transcripts and the description sections is the sequencing of the experiences.

Also, to improve the accuracy of the description, some participants provided me with some of the writing they did for themselves or for an academic assignment. The description enabled a global view of the whole experience as well as a global meaning. In the description section, some statements made by the participants were preceded by expressions such as "According to Scott"; "Emma perceived this as being..." However, not all the subjective statements were introduced by these expressions and it is assumed that feelings, emotions and perceptions in the description sections are to be attributed to the participants. For example the expression "Andrew was nervous" is to be interpreted as "Andrew said that he felt nervous when recalling this specific moment."

Also, when quoting the participants directly, quotation marks were used and the notation of [he] or [she] within the quotes in order to keep the flow of the sentence, as in the following example: Emma explained that she "enjoyed her English class because [she] felt..." Although the original quote would say "I", the notation [she] was used to keep the sentence grammatically correct.

Analysis

The next step was to extract important, relevant information and significant statements relevant to my research question and, more exactly to my understanding of participants' experiences. I divided these "bits of information" and organized them into units, themes or "clusters of meaning." These units were then subject to "free imaginative variation" to determine which ideas and which connections were

essential to answer the research question. The consideration of every variation imaginable helped to determine what was going to be lost before the process of "losing their identity." Meanings that were not useful for the essence of the phenomenon were limited or eliminated.

Chapter 4 - Participants' experiences

Andrew's experience

"If you want to learn the language, you gotta use it over and over in context."

Andrew is currently an English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher at CESL. He is 28 years old, and he is in his second semester of a master's degree in world languages education at the University of Oklahoma. After an experience as an ESL teacher in China, he is fluent in Chinese and is now trying to get a teaching certificate in the Chinese language. His stay in China marked a turning point in his approach to languages and, in a more general way, in his academic and professional life. He grew up in an upper-middle-class family in Tulsa, Oklahoma. He went to a public school, which he qualified as being "very good and very diverse, although the majority of the kids were white." He has two older sisters, one younger sister, and since his father remarried, Andrew has a half-brother and three stepsisters. His stepmother is Colombian "so half of [his] family is Hispanic."

"Risk-taking involves not being afraid of change"

He perceives himself as being "highly risk-taking." Most of the people in Oklahoma are scared of change, he says. He is the opposite. He is scared of "non-change." He describes his family as not being risk-taking, which probably influenced him to be the opposite. His mother has left her hometown only a few times in her life. He perceives his brothers and sisters as "not really being into languages." From a very early age, he knew he would leave the state at some point in his life. All he had to do was to wait for the opportunity to come.

Interest in Languages

Although he does not recall the exact moment he started to be interested in foreign languages, he remembers that his interest in video games and animated movies from Japan helped a lot. This "manga culture," as it is called, helped trigger an interest in foreign languages in Andrew. As he liked Japanese culture a lot, he used to read a lot of Japanese literature as well. Although the readings were in English, he perceives this intense experience in foreign literature as having had the biggest impact on his interest in cultures and languages. He tried learning Japanese with tapes but stopped because there were no opportunities to interact with native speakers or other people learning the language.

Another factor influencing this interest is Mr. Smith, his geography teacher in seventh grade. He remembered the way he taught geography by connecting it with culture, which made the class more lively and interesting. In university, he had good geography teachers as well, which maintained his interest in traveling. Being interested in religion and sociology, he believes that these different topics were remote factors (as opposed to direct factors) that led him to be interested in languages. Taking classes in both fields intensified his interest in cultures, human interactions, and, to a certain extent, languages. The last factor he mentioned influencing his interest in languages was music, as he can play the guitar. He connected his interest in playing the guitar with his interest in languages because he thought that music "is another type of language." According to Andrew, the process of learning to play the guitar, or any other type of musical instrument, is similar to learning a language in that music is a "combination of sounds that make a

meaningful piece." Just like in language, the instrument produces different tones, and it is possible to "play the same thing in ten different ways." What seemed to attract Andrew in the experience of playing the guitar was the possibility of creating music by varying the combinations of chords, rythms or speed.

Overall, Andrew perceives his interest in languages as being part of a whole interest in different cultures and traveling. He does not see himself as a language person but experiences led him to languages, especially his trip to China. "It is not like I was born for languages," he said, as he explains that although he was interested in and exposed to foreign languages such as Spanish before his trip to China, he could not speak another language.

"Unsuccessful" Exposure to Spanish

"I tried learning Spanish in University, but it did not do anything." Apart from the required work in school, Andrew tried memorizing long lists of vocabulary words, which led him to increase his lexicon. However, the opportunities to practice were scarce, which is why he could not use his Spanish. In class, "learning from the book was not enough," and he felt that Spanish was not spoken enough in his Spanish class. "How many people are actually speaking Spanish? How much do you hear it? How do you pick up patterns if you don't hear it constantly?" Because of this lack of immersion, Andrew lost his motivation. He is convinced that the best way to learn a language is to be immersed in it. Using it right away gives a sense of usefulness to the language.

In addition, another problem he encountered was in the organization of the content paired with language practice. "They don't teach you in a way where you

put together sentences in your mind, kind of like when you play the guitar." He kept using the same analogy with music and explained that learning different chords helps one create one's own music. With the same four chords, it is possible to create different types of melodies depending on the rhythm, speed, or style. With words, it is possible to create different sentences, which is what he perceives as missing in his recollection of his Spanish instruction. In addition, "nobody was taking it seriously in the classroom", which might be partly because students were not expected to be creative with the language. Andrew said, "Once you learn the vocabulary list, you take the test, you move on, and then you forget."

He recalls being an excellent student in his Spanish class. His grades were good, but his inability to speak Spanish made him lose motivation. What would have changed his approach to Spanish, in his opinion, would have been "more repetition in class and going to a country like Mexico."

Undergraduate

Andrew thought that he made poor choices during his undergraduate years. Because he did not have a precise idea of what he wanted to do, he enrolled in classes that were not closely related in order to be counted under a specific major. He first took pre-medicine classes toward a future career in the health sciences and then took some classes in sociology and religion based on personal interests. He graduated with a bachelor's degree in multidisciplinary studies. He is "not proud of it" because he thinks of his degree as a "bunch of credits pasted together."

Making the Decision to Go to China

Deciding to go to China was an "impulsive decision." Andrew defines himself as being an impulsive person, which he sees as being both a benefit and a drawback. Since he had spent most of his life in Oklahoma and had a deep desire to travel, he decided to look for job opportunities outside the state once he graduated. After graduation, he had two job offers. The first one was working in a vineyard in Oregon. This experience attracted him mainly because it was going to be in nature and the salary was attractive. The second job offer was to work with an established company, but he realized he was going to hate the job and would have ended up quitting because he was unhappy. Therefore, the best option was Oregon until he received an email that, according to him, "looked like a fraud": "It looked fake: 'Go to China and teach!'" That email was sent to many students, and he did not question it. "I saw an opportunity to go abroad, and I just took it. I was ready to leave Oklahoma." He took the chance, was approved, and applied for a visa. He realized the opportunity was "not a scam" when getting a working visa to go to China. He explained later on that most of his motivation for traveling came from playing video games. His initial plan was to stay for a year.

Evolution of Goals Once in China

Before going to China, Andrew did not set goals for himself, or, at least, he did not have any linguistic goals in Chinese. The plan was to travel to a foreign country, teach English, and be able to travel around as much as he could. Learning Chinese was not on his bucket list. He wanted to be able to understand it more or less in order to be functional in his everyday life, but he believed that English was

going to be "enough to get around." As an impulsive choice, he admitted that "[he] did not know what he was doing."

Andrew explained that it is very beneficial to have a mentor or friend who is proficient in the language and can answer questions that arise while learning the language. When he first arrived at the Shanghai airport, he was lucky enough to become friends with a fellow teacher who had been learning Chinese for four years. They exchanged contact information. Since they lived close to each other, he would talk to the other teacher daily to ask him how to use or say words correctly. At that moment, this encounter became his biggest motivation. "It is not like I wanted to be as good as him," he said, but seeing an American speak Chinese so well made him realize that he wanted that skill for himself.

Learning Functional Chinese is Learning Applicable Chinese

Andrew perceived curiosity and being outgoing as being two of the more important characteristics for success when learning a foreign language. There was a saying in Chinese that an old man on a train once told him: "Your facial skin needs to be thicker than the Great Wall." Having thick skin and being fearless are traits that Andrew perceived as being common among the people he had encountered who had successfully learned a second language.

First, he decided to study topics that were related to "realistic situations such as going to the bank, buying train tickets, or buying food at the supermarket." He found that if he studied this way, then he would have more opportunities to speak to people while conducting his daily activities. He was creating opportunities to practice the language by building his prior knowledge. He would always carry a

notebook with a list of new vocabulary terms to refresh his memory when practicing in public. He also carried a notebook to be able to take notes about characters that would be useful to know in certain situations or even just to remember general information that he learned during a conversation.

After learning new vocabulary terms and grammatical rules, he would write sentences using those words and rules as he felt a need to "apply the language" to feel that it was real. He realized that if he learned vocabulary words but did not practice them in this manner, then it would be nearly impossible to use them to communicate in public. He also explained that it is necessary to practice writing new vocabulary words at least an hour per day to progress in the language and maintain confidence when using the language. In his experience, it typically took three days of practice before he could remember a new list of vocabulary words or grammar rules well enough to use them without referring to his notes. He put a lot of importance in repetition when learning from a textbook or through oral communication. "If you say a word once, you will inevitably forget the word. If you say a word a thousand times, you will remember it for many years."

Andrew also attributed his language success to understanding as many cultural aspects of the language as possible. "In Chinese, it is customary to learn about the regional differences in cuisine, the customs of the 56 minority groups, the major festivals, and famous works of literature." He would often use cultural references to food at restaurants, recite poems during meetings, and talk about the differences in culture when traveling. At all times, he was "performing" with the idea of using the language in a real situation. If the language is directly usable, then

the specific experience in which the language is used facilitates memorization, and the experience becomes meaningful.

A little Incident That Became a Turning Point in His Language Proficiency

At some point during his stay, Andrew had become somewhat proficient in Chinese. He had memorized sentences such as "nǐhǎo," (你好, "hello") or "duōshǎo qián" (多少钱, "how much money"), and he was more or less understood on the street. However, he still had a hard time understanding natives. When in a taxi, for example, his American friend, who was fluent in Chinese, would communicate to the taxi driver. From knowing chunks of the language to having to be creative with it required him to go a step further, which Andrew called "an epiphany."

It happened about three months after his arrival in China. Andrew had been studying for about two hours a day. At some point, the apartments he was living in lost electricity. As a result, there was "no light, no access to the Internet, no TV, nothing." As a result, Andrew used all this newly acquired free time to study intensively. He explained that he would spend eight hours a day studying. He would study before work, go to teach, return home, and study again. He lived in a small apartment next to the school where he was teaching. He had a notebook in which he would practice drawing Chinese characters. He would draw and memorize "about 40 characters in three days." He would write characters in his notebook ten times, and then he would flip the page and try to rewrite from memory. He would copy dialogue using those words out of a book. After memorizing a character with its corresponding tone, he started studying grammar. He would try to use the previously acquired words with a new grammatical rule. He would go outside after

studying and practice the sentences or words he had memorized with locals. He would ask them questions such as "Where is the library?" to start a conversation and use the language in real contexts. When doing so, he always had his notebook with him. However, the content he was using did not vary much because he memorized sentences in chunks. "I would say the same things over and over." He used repetition of the newly acquired linguistic aspects of Chinese in his language learning. "You could do something once, and you will never remember how to do it again. You can do it a thousand times, and you will never forget." Although some of his trials with the locals were successful, he would still practice them repeatedly not to forget what he had acquired. Andrew saw this method as being necessary to improve in a language like Chinese, although it was "a tedious work."

Experiencing a "Language Epiphany"

This period of intensive studying lasted for a week. At some point, when practicing his sentences in a store, Andrew realized that he was able to have a conversation with a native speaker. He observed a considerable improvement in his listening and speaking skills. He explained that "it is not like from one day to another; I understood everything," but he was able to be functional in Chinese with natives. He was able to put together little chunks he had acquired and be creative with the language. He would combine several sentences together, use words he had learned, and ask questions to negotiate meaning. "Suddenly, things started to click… huh, and that's the best way to describe it." He explained that he was also able to analyze where he was still lacking in the language, which he was not able to do before. "You can pick up words that you don't know, write them down and look

them up later, or you can ask." Being functional in the streets helped him gain confidence and continue to study on a regular basis even after the electricity in his apartment was fixed. He did not study at the same rate but was assiduous. He could still observe an improvement in the language. "You start to pick up these other things, and it all hits you at once first, but you can put together this words in your speech, and it all speeds up." Andrew did not qualify his Chinese level as being fluent at that point, but he understood this anecdote as what he remembered to be the turning point in the evolution of his language proficiency. In describing his epiphany, Andrew stressed two aspects of his experience: the ability to be creative as things "click in" and the suddenness of the experience as he realized for the first time in that shop that he could have a basic conversation in Chinese. He explained that he might have had the skills before, but because he had not used them, to him, they did not exist.

Before losing electricity, Andrew had been "slightly motivated to sit down and study Chinese" but never really studied seriously. During this "massive studying," as he called it, he felt boredom, which increased his motivation to do something productive in this free time. He remembered that his level in the language "popped up really fast" after a week. He acknowledged that the "regular studying" he was doing before helped him acquire a certain level of competence. He is convinced that this week of studying brought results that motivated him to keep going.

Extension of His Stay in China

When signing up to go to China, Andrew's original plan was to work for a year and then return home. At the end of his first year, he decided to stay longer. He did not determine how much longer he would stay, but he knew that he wanted to extend his adventure in Asia. His decision was a combination of many factors. There was "always something to do." Compared to Oklahoma, Andrew qualified the place he was in as being livelier. He met many Westerners working in China. His experience there, whether working or having free time, was pleasant. He started to enjoy teaching, which was "a whole new experience that was challenging and fun." Learning Chinese was also a factor in staying in China. He was starting to become better at Chinese, and he wanted to continue learning the language. He enjoyed this feeling of challenge with the language, which he also experienced in other aspects of his stay. He liked the city in which he was working because it was diverse. He spent time socializing with French, British, and American people he had met. Another reason was that he loved traveling and started to get interested in photography. While abroad, he met people, some of whom were journalists, who influenced his interests, and he started to take photos while traveling around the country and around the continent. "It is not until the following year that I got really good at it," he said in justifying his extending his stay in China. At the end of his first year, he felt that he had just started to improve in Chinese and enjoy his time doing things he had not been doing in Oklahoma, and he wanted to continue doing those things. "My first year, I was not doing any of this stuff." During this year, Andrew explained that he had faced many challenges with the language. He felt a

sense of empowerment in having overcome these challenges on his own, and after having started to understand "how things work around here," he ended up turning a one-year contract into a three-year contract.

In those two extra years, he made a transition in his studying routine from mainly using books to mainly interacting with locals. As he became "very functional," he could learn from talking to people. Although he still used books, he did not use them as his main source of input. He was up to the fourth textbook in the *Chinese Practical Reader*, a book series designed for Chinese as a second language learner. Rather than experiencing a "second epiphany," he felt that all the other knowledge he acquired built on top of what he called his "first epiphany." Near the end of his stay, his level of Chinese plateaued, as he was not "working as hard" because of external factors keeping him busy.

Developing a Passion for Photography

During the interview, Andrew started to talk about photography. He knew that my research focused on foreign language acquisition. He just said, "I know you want to hear about languages, but I just want to share this with you, however it might help." One similarity that he observed between photography and language was the difference of perspective that changes the outcome. For example, when seeing buildings, flowers on campus, or people walking, everyone has his or her own perspective. The importance of the perspective is what seemed to attract Andrew to photography. "One can take a picture, but it does not look that good. The way I see it is in a different light. When I see the flowers, I think, *What can I do with this*?" He explained that the day before the interview, he walked by some

flowers on campus and found an opportunity to take a good picture. He went to a nearby building to ask for a ladder and took the picture "he had in mind." According to him, "most people would not do that." He believes that effort is a quality needed in both photography and learning a language.

The similarity between language learning and photography is that the differences of perspective determine the quality of the outcome. Andrew emphasized being active in photography rather than being passive. Instead of waiting for the right shot, the right angle, or the right moment to take a picture, a photographer should create the moment by looking for the right angle or perspective to take a picture. When learning Chinese, Andrew explained that it was essential to be active in creating experiences by going outside and talking to people rather than learning a word and waiting until a situation to use it arises. A language learner should create the situation. Exposure is not enough; one should be active in the experience for it to be meaningful. Another parallel he drew with learning and teaching a language is that photography is "repetitive, but it changes." The use of certain skills to obtain certain results is repetitive. However, acquiring more skills yields better results. He developed this idea by saying that repetitiveness is good as long as there is still some type of challenge rather than relying on routines. There seems to be a type of evolution within a repetition, which Andrew appreciated in language learning, teaching, and taking pictures. Andrew continued to take photographs even after his return to Oklahoma and created a website featuring his best shots as another way to connect with people, to share his love for traveling, and to introduce different perspectives on different cultures.

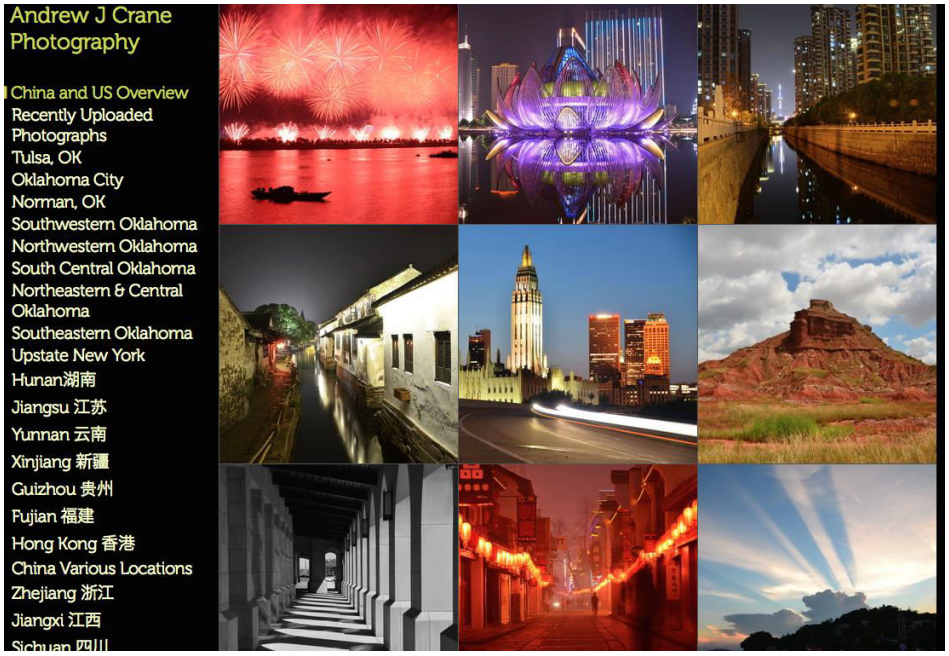


Fig. 3. Andrew Crane Photography, screenshot from *http://andrewcrane1.500px.com*, taken on December 5, 2014

His Level of Chinese Now

Andrew believes he has far surpassed his original goal of learning basic Chinese. However, he realizes that he needs to work more on his academic Chinese because his current goal is to be certified in it. His immediate action is to talk to Chinese people in Chinese, as it was the case when he first started working at CESL, where there is a high population of Chinese students, even if he had not spoken Chinese for a while. He is aware that he might make mistakes, but making mistakes is "part of the game. Who is the best in class? Whoever speaks and tries, right?" He then explained his vision of what the good language learner looks like.

His Current Philosophy about Language Learning and Teaching

Andrew is currently teaching two Chinese courses in a high school and English at CESL. He is currently learning Arabic since he plans to teach English as a foreign language in the Middle East in the near future. When thinking about his

intensive study period in China, he confessed that he could not do the same thing with Arabic while being in the US. What is missing is that "language needs to be immediately applicable." It needs to be used "consistently in a real context." In this way, a language learner is repeating words or grammatical structures in a way that is "not studying but fun." He could not study from his books in Arabic because he does not have as many opportunities to practice. Therefore, he is afraid that he will forget all of his work, which will influence his motivation.

According to his experience in successfully learning Chinese, Andrew teaches words in meaningful combinations. For example, he teaches a verb with an object, first separately, then together. His goal is to have his students be creative with the language and make sentences he never taught them. As he emphasizes the practicality of language, he chooses to teach his students high-frequency words to build their knowledge. For example, he teaches his students vocabulary to use in a restaurant because the most likely place for his students to speak Chinese, apart from meeting a Chinese speaker, is in a Chinese restaurant in the state. That way, his students would be able to use the language right away. However, he admitted that not all of his students are as highly risk-taking as he is. "All you need is have opportunities and take them." Being exposed to an opportunity to use the language is not enough if the language learner does not do "his part of the job" and steps out of his bubble.



Fig. 4. Andrew Crane, *Zhouzhuang Ancient Town*, Suzhou, Jiangsu, China (http://andrewcrane1.500px.com/).



Fig. 5. Andrew Crane, *Taohuajiang Sea of Bamboo*, Yiyang, Hunan, China (http://andrewcrane1.500px.com/).



Fig. 6. Andrew Crane, *Guangxi Scenery*, Guangxi, China (http://andrewcrane1.500px.com/).

Analysis of Andrew's experience

Andrew's approach to languages has become increasingly systematic with time. When he was first exposed to foreign languages, he did not have the metalinguistic skills to be autonomous in the process of learning a language. With his experience in China, he had to develop these skills to survive. He would acquire vocabulary, memorize it in certain sentences, and use the vocabulary words in real contexts in order to create an experience with the word. As for grammar, he believes that patterns can be acquired with regular exposure to the language, which is called *implicit grammar instruction* in the field of SLA, as opposed to *explicit instruction*, which relies on teaching the rule first.

Andrew's Experience with Spanish

It is interesting how Andrew managed to become fluent in Chinese but not in Spanish. According to flow theory, his Spanish classes lacked adequate challenges and did not provide students with a sense of control of the experience. Although he was a good student and had remembered endless lists of vocabulary, he became bored because the challenge did not increase in quality. The number of words he knew increased, but the challenge of memorizing words stayed the same. He still learned grammatical rules and memorized sentences, but most of the instruction was in English. This made the experience of learning the language artificial and "boring." The challenges, remaining the same in quality, did not match the skills, which were increasing. The accumulation of vocabulary requires a certain free usage of the vocabulary. What he described as his Spanish instruction was mainly input-based. He received the information. In his recollection of the classes, there was not enough emphasis on production from the students. Therefore, it was difficult to feel a sense of control over the experience of learning a second language. In Freire's words, the student was the object rather than the subject of his education. In addition to the lack of control over the experience, Andrew mentioned the lack of immersion. He believes that if the whole class were taught in Spanish, it would have had a positive effect on his learning experience. It would have probably increased the challenges in quality because students would have developed "an ear for the language" and other skills, such as making inferences. This increase in the complexity of the self might have sustained students in a state of flow.

On the other hand, his "unsuccessful learning" of Spanish cannot be fully explained with what he perceives as an inadequate instruction. Opportunities to use the language were abundant since he grew up in Oklahoma, where there is a considerable Hispanic population. Someone with an autotelic personality, as Csikszentmihalyi explained, seizes opportunities or even creates them in order to experience flow. Since Andrew never really experienced flow with Spanish, he did not feel the need to seize opportunities to practice the language, like with his stepmother, for example. A student must realize that an activity can provide enjoyment before engaging in it repeatedly. for me, it is not until I discovered the "joy of reading" that I engaged in reading on my free time. Before that, I would read only what was required in my studies.

Andrew's Experience with Chinese

A possible reason to explain why being immersed in a country can provide a state of flow more easily is that it is easy to set goals, find challenges that match one's skills, and receive regular instant feedback while monitoring the evolution of one's proficiency daily while accomplishing life tasks. However, as seen before, a meaningful experience requires the individual to have a certain personality. In Andrew's case, he studied specific topics that he would likely experience, such as "buying food at the supermarket," in his free time. This shows how Andrew tried to control the experience according to Csikszentmihalyi: by *preparing the kind of interaction* he was going to have. As his skills were evolving, he had to create higher challenges and set higher goals.

From being functional and understood in the language, he sought accuracy by repeating a combination of challenges, setting goals, receiving instant feedback, and taking a certain control of the experience. With these strategies, he managed to sustain a state of flow. For example, acquiring vocabulary and new grammatical structures allowed him to create sentences he had never created before. Therefore, being creative in the language was a challenge that required skills and that provided him with a sense of control of the experience through positive feedback from the people with whom he was interacting. In the context of learning a second language, control of the experience is highly related to being creative in the target language, which is developed further in the study. Being creative with the language implies producing the language. In SLA, Swain argued that language use has a prominent role in the learning of the L2. In other words, language output has a role of input by being a means to provide feedback to the speaker. Practice helps to routinize the language and hence become fluent. It is known as the *output hypothesis* in the field of SLA. By repeating this output practice in a state of flow, Andrew was able to develop his own stepping stones to learning the language. Beyond his practice of rehearsed sentences, Andrew's interaction with native speakers helped him improve in the language in a way that was increasingly challenging. He went from being able to greet people and introduce himself to being able to take a taxi and buy items in a supermarket. His learning was based on the socio-cultural theory (SCT). Language intake took place socially. Beyond the SLA theories that influenced his method of learning, a situation of flow in which one approach to language learning is repeated to obtain expected results can be observed. Flow theory does not contradict SLA

theories; rather, flow theory is the mode by which these theories influence the individual. While output hypothesis and SCT are theories that take place in the objective world, flow is a subjective state that depends on the learner's perception of his or her emotions and improvement while performing a particular activity. Flow helps language learners gain skills to allow them to face greater challenges than they would have imagined. This will be discussed later, as perception of this was common among all participants.

In Andrew's case, another important factor is that the experience to learn a language must be situated within a broader experience: getting around in a new country. One of the necessary skills that Andrew required to face that higher challenge was to be functional in the target language. However, other skills are needed to control the experience of living abroad, such as being sociable and taking risks. In a way, language became part of the skill set that was required for him to experience flow in China. At the end of his first year, Andrew started to be fluent in Chinese, and he had acquired particular knowledge of how to get around. Possessing these new skills and enjoying the feeling of having acquired them, he decided to increase the challenge by staying in China for two more years. His Chinese experience can be described as being the activity that was at the source of flow.

Overall, Andrew managed to adapt to his environment, analyze the required skills, and acquire skills to be efficient in his new habitat. He developed techniques to acquire those skills and then used them to acquire additional skills. A connection emerged between his love for the language and his love for photography that went

beyond an interest in the culture. There were similarities in the flow experiences he went through as a language learner and as a burgeoning photographer.

Emmanuelle's experience

"Learning languages is learning about people"

Born in France to a Family of Spanish immigrants

Emmanuelle (Emma) is twenty-seven years old. She is a French international student at the University of Oklahoma (OU). She is currently a graduate student in the World Languages Education program, and she teaches English at the Center for English as a Second Language. She never thought, until recently, that she would be a teacher. Although, she started to become interested in languages very early, the desire to become a language teacher is more recent.

Emma was born in France to an immigrant family from Spain. She learned her second language, Spanish, from her grandparents at the same time she was learning her native language, French. She is, by definition, a simultaneous bilingual... Every two generations, her family migrates. Since her parents worked most of the time, she was raised by her grandparents who only spoke Spanish; not that they did not know French but they refused to speak it as Spanish was their heritage. Therefore, Spanish was the main language at home. French was everywhere outside and with everyone, except when she was at her grandparents' house where two generations of Spanish Civil War immigrants were speaking "a mix of Castilian, Catalan and broken French." Although French was the language from "outside", she grew up being more exposed to Spanish than to French. This

was her life until the age of six, when her great aunt passed away. Despite the fact that she had spent about fifty years in France, she had always refused to use French for the same reasons as her grandparents. This was part of her heritage. She was the matriarch of the family, so, in a way, her death marked the end of an era, Emma says. Therefore, when she turned six years old, Emma stopped using Spanish on a regular basis. The official language at home became French. From this childhood experience, she started developing empathy for immigrants in general. She was sensitive to the phenomenon of immigration, as her grandparents had to flee from Spain during the Civil War (1978). With the stories of her grandparents and the emphasis they put on speaking Spanish, Emma realized from an early age that language was intermingled with culture. At age six, she entered the public school system.

Languages in School

Emma started to learn English in middle school. She also took Latin and Spanish. In high school she started to learn Greek and "added Hebrew outside of school just for fun." Afterwards she studied Hungarian when she was in college "just for a semester to be exposed to a different language family that was not Hindo-European." She is now learning Mandarin and Cherokee. For some of these languages parental encouragement guided her choices, whereas for others it was intrinsic motivation.

First Exposure to English: not exactly the best she could have imagined

When she entered the educational system, language was not part of the curriculum until junior high. In junior high choosing a second language is

compulsory in French public schools. When she turned eleven, she first started to learn English and she immediately liked it, though she also liked other subjects the same way. She just liked school in general. She recalls being a very studious child who was motivated and excited to go to school. She liked language classes and put a lot of effort into them because she "liked to have good grades in general" and to receive validation from both her teachers and parents.

She explains now that she is disappointed that her English language education was very grammar-based and not very meaningful to her at the time. She cannot recall "any instance of cooperative learning strategy such as turn-to-your-partner, team building activity, jigsaw, think pair share, concept cards, brainstorming, or multi-sensory activity." Instead, they did a lot of group repetition as a whole class, or individual repetitions. The interaction was only between teacher and students. She remembers that her teachers were very fond of repetition activities in middle school and Total Physical Response (TPR) exercises, which she hated as a teen, although she does not hate it anymore. The way TPR was utilized in her school is a language teaching method that coordinates teacher's commands using the target language and student's physical movements. One reason she hated it was because students were passive in regards to language learning in this type of activity. She really liked the flag of the United Kingdom, which was the only cultural element of the classroom. She was disappointed that it was not as colorful as the other language classes she had, but it was still more laid back than non-language classes.

Her general perception of her early English education is that it could have been better. She believes that "pedagogy and creativity were not part of the

education these teachers had received as students nor as student-teachers, or maybe the curriculum was so intense that it prevented them from having time to help them learn through games." Later, she developed a deep interest in American culture, which had been present in her family. Although she did not pay attention to it at the time, she mentioned that her dad was very interested in Native American cultures. In addition, her grandmother always spoke highly of the United States during her childhood, which made Emma have a preference for the United States rather than other English speaking countries. It is interesting to note that in France, English education is linguistically and culturally based on United Kingdom standards, specifically England. As she learned English more and more, her interest in American culture increased.

"My dad insisted that I take Latin, but I liked it too."

At age twelve, she started to learn Latin because she was very interested in mythology, and "because [her] dad forced [her]." Although these are the words she used at first, she explained later that he was actually very encouraging. Her father had put the emphasis on knowing the French language and speaking it well. He explained that Latin (and later Greek) would contribute to her ability to speak and write French well. Having a certain mastery of the language was important for her integration in French society. He also told her that it is important for other reasons she will understand later.

Her Latin experience overall revolved around grammar and repetition of cases and lists of vocabulary. The approach was very behaviorist. It was a lot of memorization and application of memorized concepts. At that time, she felt that the

only usefulness of language was to write it and translate it. Now, she has a more positive opinion as she feels that Latin has helped her gains in logic and application of rules, but also to understand words. Latin has mainly helped her at the lexicon level with her learning of English and Spanish. She was able to understand new words and to spell, as a lot of words had a Latin (or a Greek) root. Also it helped her understand concepts better than her peers in subjects such as philosophy, biology, and physics, among other things, and "therefore expanded [her] ideas through language." When developing on this idea, she explained that Latin helped her be "more creative with the language." For example, when working on her Master's thesis in history, she came up with the word *retroactive,* which she thought she had invented using her knowledge of Latin and French. Before then, she did not know that the word existed. She was creative with language, while respecting certain rules of the language such as grammar.

Spanish, Reconnecting with the Roots

At the age of thirteen, it was compulsory to choose a second foreign language in middle school. Depending on the school, there are two, three or more second foreign languages to choose from, the most popular being Spanish, German and Italian. Emma chose Spanish, mainly because of her family heritage. She wanted to know more about the culture, the people, and the country her grandparents had fled. Like all the other school subjects, she loved it. However, it was taught the same way English was, "with lists of vocabulary and expressions no single thirteen- year-old Spanish student would ever say, and documents so old that [she] did not feel connected to the stories of the people: old expressions, old

pictures, old texts, old movies." She explained that her motivation was intrinsic, which is why these outside factors did not influence her interest in the language. However, other students were affected by this educational approach.

She kept studying Spanish in high school and, as she improved her knowledge of the language, she grew more interested in the culture. At this point, she enjoyed studying Spanish "for the culture and not for the grades anymore." She felt that she could connect better with her roots as she had reactivated a skill she mastered when she was younger. She called her first Spanish experience that she had until she was six years old "an aborted bilingualism." She put the emphasis on the fact that her interest and motivation in the language grew as she was learning more about the culture and the people.

Ancient Greek

At the age of fifteen, she started learning Ancient Greek because she was fascinated by Greek history and mythology, and "because, again, [her] father had decided so." She started Ancient Greek while she was still studying English and Spanish. Similarly to her other language classes, learning Ancient Greek was mainly memorizing vocabulary. In all of her language classes, Emma bought a notepad on which she would write all the new vocabulary in alphabetical order. She would keep this notebook with her most of the time and look at it while riding public transportation, for example. Greek, like Latin, appeared to her as a subject that would not help her connect to more people or other topics outside of the Greek class. However, one hour every week, her teacher would teach a "civilization" hour that Emma always looked forward to. During this hour, the teacher would

emphasize how Ancient Greek civilization contributed to modern-day Europe. Emma remembers feeling excited about connecting to the people of Ancient Greece, although she admitted that it was not the same as her regular foreign language classes since Ancient Greece is a dead civilization. The teacher used a words-in-context approach, where history is a means to introduce the new vocabulary. Emma did not remembered the etymology and the stories better than the grammar and vocabulary. She also learned a lot through exercises connecting ancient culture, events, and practices with her social studies class as the Roman and the Greek civilizations are perceived as the cradle of European culture. Her Ancient Greek and her social studies teachers would cooperate and build bridges between the courses' content, and Emma saw it as being more meaningful, as helping her to have a more holistic view. The impression of meaningfulness through a holistic view became even more concrete in her philosophy course in senior high, which was probably what her father meant by "you will understand the usefulness of taking Latin and Ancient Greek later."

Overall Impressions of Languages in Middle School

As mentioned earlier, Emma had good grades in language classes because she liked to have good grades in general. However, she did express a preference towards language classes, as they were more colorful from her perspective as a child. The walls were decorated with a couple of cultural items that appealed to her. She also mentioned feeling the same about her history and literature classes. In addition to the classroom decorations, another factor was that language classes were more "laid back" as opposed to other classes. She felt more freedom in these

classes, just like she did in history and literature, as they enabled her to create more than in other classes that were more rigid. What she appreciated particularly is that there was not automatically a right answer. Although she learned grammatical rules, spelling, dates, and events, she appreciated the parts of the course where the student was expected to give his opinion and express himself rather than "apply mechanically something previously acquired." For example, in all of her language classes, what she learned first was to introduce herself, which made the class more interactive and interesting in her opinion.

Extra-Curricular Activities

Overall, Emma was not satisfied with her education. At the time, she did not think anything specific about it, but as she reflects on it now, it is clear that she believes it could have been better. At the time of the interview, she was finishing her Master's program in World Languages, so she was able to better reflect on her experience and on her childhood education. Emma qualified her middle school as being located in a rural area. She believes her language education could have been better because that she received the basics. One thing she would have changed about her classes is that they could have been more connected with the outside world, emphasizing culture rather than an index of vocabulary and grammar rules.

She also perceived interdisciplinarity as being missing in her middle school education. To a more general extent, she believes that French education, which follows a national curriculum, does not incorporate subjects together. She explained that, "In theory, they're supposed to look for it [interdisciplinarity], but in practice, each subject is locked within itself." Before she turned fifteen, she needed real life

educational stimulus, specifically related to languages that she enjoyed because "it was spoken by other people." Therefore, she gradually started to reach for material outside of the classroom, and even outside of the school. Progressively, she started reading original versions of English books and movies on a daily basis. She both read the original version of *Harry Potter* and watched the movie with English subtitles "about a hundred times." As she was reading and watching the movie, she started to keep track of the new vocabulary. She would pause the movie in order to have the time to check a word in a dictionary. For example, when watching the movie *Gladiator*, she noticed the expression "busy like a bee" which she wrote on her notebook and memorized. She was aware that she would not get this type of language in the classroom not only because it is an idiomatic expression but because she perceived her classroom instruction as being too simplistic and mechanical. She would also listen and try to understand the lyrics of her favorite music bands and play video games in English. She perceived these repeated activities as helping her with vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation. Although it was "a lot of homework", Emma explained that she "was trying to improve, but at the same time, it was fun" which is what kept her going. This made her feel empowered in the sense that she was getting something that was not really available in her classes--authentic material. Although English homework and extracurricular activities were interconnected, Emma explained that watching movies, listening to music, and reading in English were her hobbies and what she spent most time doing. She would learn new expressions that she would include in her homework for her English class. There was no actual separation line between schoolwork and hobby as she

considered both to be fun and inter-related. Lately, as she started taking free Chinese classes with the Confucius Institute, she is observing the same type of intensive consumption of Chinese movies and music, which she perceives as fun and also necessary for her improvement rate in the language.

Hebrew as an Extra Curricula Course

At the age of sixteen, as she continued to work on her English outside of school mainly because she was fond of American pop-culture, she started to learn Hebrew in a Jewish cultural center. Her main motivation was that she was interested in the history of Israel, which she was introduced to in her history class. The Jewish Diaspora "was all around [her]" in her daily life: her dad had traveled several times to Israel for his job, and also the Second Intifada with the Palestinian people was "everywhere on the news." The next year, she was seventeen and for the first time, she spent a month away from her family in California, in a host family; completely immersed in American culture. This was a great experience as she finally "got what [she] wanted" in that a language without a context to practice is a big loss of its value. Her host mother picked her up at the airport, and Emma felt a little intimidated but was excited to use the language and be able to communicate with people "from so far away." Similarly, when she visited Venice Beach with another non-native speaker (not French), there was a satisfaction to be able to "get around" without the help of a native speaker. The following summer, she repeated the same experience in Pennsylvania.

Graduating and Opening New Horizons

Emma kept an interest in the English language and in American culture as she decided to pursue a Bachelor of Arts in English. Among the different types of specializations (Linguistics, British/American Literature, British/American History, Australian studies, etc.), she decided to specialize in Native American culture. Emma graduated when she turned twenty-one. After that, she spent a month in England. This new language immersion experience "did something to [her]": it turned her into an outgoing young adult. Before that episode, she would describe herself as being an extremely shy and introverted teen. It is not the only reason she is more open now as her experiences in California and Pennsylvania also helped her to become less introverted. However, although in another country, being in a host family was still a way to be more or less "sheltered." She perceives her experience in England as playing a significant role in the evolution of her personality. When her parents visited her, they did not speak English, so they relied on her to translate, which made her feel empowered and helped her parents realize she had adapted to her new environment. Emma reflect on the experience, "The fact that my parents kinda needed me for the first time affected my personality in a good way and made me feel empowered." Overall, living alone outside of France for a month had contributed to her emancipation to a certain extent.

At the age of twenty, she started learning some Lakota words because she had always been interested in Native American cultures in general and Lakota history more particularly. She wrote her Master's thesis on Native American history and came to Oklahoma for the very first time as an exchange student in 2009. As

she planned to travel to Italy for vacation, she also taught herself to read Italian. In order to do so, she used her previous knowledge of French, Spanish and Latin "as bridges", because she was about to travel to Italy.

Brief Exposure to Hungarian

While doing a Bachelor of Arts in English at the University of Bordeaux Montaigne, she started to learn Hungarian, "but this time, not by passion but because [she] was required to take a semester of a non-Indo-European language." Her initial choice was Arabic. However, since the classes were already full, she decided to turn back to her second choice: Hungarian. She believes that the frustration she got from not being able to study Arabic influenced her motivation in her Hungarian experience.

Her Hungarian teacher taught in a complete immersion context: French or English were not allowed in the classroom. She cannot remember any moment in which he addressed her, even in the hallway, in something other than Hungarian. It was extremely stressful for Emma. She recalls that her teacher was "trying hard" as he would bring real materials such as grocery ads, but in spite of this, she did not feel the need to learn the language: she was having fun because the atmosphere was relaxed with her classmates, and she knew she just needed to pass the class. Additionally, she did not have any particular interest in Hungary and its culture, at least not as much as she had for Arab cultures.

As she reflects on it now, she believes that it could have been otherwise had she decided to get more involved in the class and bond a little bit more with her instructor. In her opinion, "this is why [she does] not remember anything but

greetings in Hungarian, even though it was very recent" compared to other language experiences such as Latin or Hebrew.

Native American History and First Contact with Oklahoma

After graduating with a BA in English Studies with an emphasis in Native American History, Emma decided to enroll in a Master's in English Studies with an emphasis in Native American History and Culture at the University of Bordeaux Montaigne. She had previously also majored in history, which is what led her to be more interested in English language because her specialization was Native American history. Emma took a course in Native American Literature for which she was not earning any credit, but she was doing it "just for fun." In 2009, she participated in an exchange student program between her university in France and the University of Oklahoma. For a year she studied history and Native American cultures. The normal requirement for exchange students studying in an English speaking country is to take an English proficiency test called TOEFL. However, as Emma was majoring in English studies and because of the policy at the time and her proficiency, her advisor decided to waive this requirement.

The goals that Emma set for herself in Oklahoma were not primarily linguistic goals. While many students initially decide to go on an exchange program abroad to learn the language, Emma's first motivation was to meet the people and learn about the culture. She was confident that her English skills were good, although she still wanted to improve. However, this was not her primary goal. When being asked whether she started to "think in English" once in Oklahoma, Emma replied that it is something that she was already able to do before arriving. She does

not know exactly when she started to think in English but she remembers that "one time, when [she] was in London (twenty-one years old), [she] was not thinking in French anymore, [she] was just speaking to people."

She took three classes, all of which had a connection with Native American cultures: Native American History, Native American Literature and Native American Studies. In addition, her Master's in France was in Native American History. Having always been interested in this topic, she had acquired "little bits of information" throughout her life that "were finally coming together." She felt that the challenges of her experience in Oklahoma made her connect everything she had learned on the topic of Native American cultures. "Everything was finally coming together. It is like everything was making sense together," she recalled. When asked to explain that feeling a little more, she drew an interesting parallel between knitting and connecting thoughts. "It is like I was knitting or sewing my education together." Later on Emma sent me a text message saying that it was like making a blanket or quilt. She also added that what she experienced was a "*gestalt*, you put everything together and it becomes greater than the sum of its parts." It is also important to point out that Emma loves knitting and sewing. It is another one of her hobbies.

Her first experience in Oklahoma was very positive. Emma liked American culture, a culture she had studied in school and for fun. Also she was conscious that the context in which she was a very particular culture: studying in an American university. At the end of her school year at the University of Oklahoma (2009-2010), she really wanted to come back but was not able to, as she still had to take courses in France to finish her Master's program. She kept in touch with people she

met in Oklahoma and eventually managed to come back in January 2013 and enrolled in a Master's in French as she already had acquaintances in the department.

Back to Oklahoma, She Experienced "a revelation"

Initially, her main motivation for enrolling in a Master's in French was not linguistic or academic but purely socio-cultural. Emma had to find a way to come back to Oklahoma but not as a tourist, which she had been doing between her exchange student year and the year she enrolled in French at OU. When learning about the different programs that OU offered, she was seduced by the idea that the M.A. in French was a 2 to 3 year long program. Also being a student in an M.A. in French and being a native speaker would make it easier to teach as a teaching assistant in the department of French and to have her tuition waived by the department. The financial advantage of pursuing her studies in French represented a considerable factor in her decision. All in all, while some international students might come to the United States to be able to study, Emma was studying to be able to be in the United States.

The first year she started her program, she was also a French instructor in the department of French. This was what she called a "revelation" to her: "there is nothing like teaching your own culture, your own references, and therefore your own language." As a consequence, she decided to make her language class a culture class. The way she organized her class was by making the French language a means to learning French culture. Therefore, the course was more content-oriented than grammar-oriented and she was still respecting the "syllabus imposed" as she called it. To her, this approach seemed natural, as she cannot conceive teaching language

without culture. “There would not be any fun for me, because I had no fun when I was taught without it [the culture] being the center.” When she told me these words in the interview, she recalled her Hungarian class with which she drew a parallel: “the Hungarian class was fun and engaging!”

Controversy with her Teaching Style

Using her own experiences as a learner, but also the evolution of her learning style and preferences, she focused her classes on French culture using real meaningful activities, and authentic materials. Her parents would send her magazines and newspapers on a regular basis as well as food and candies. She organized a “candy week” trying a different type every day. In addition she used pictures, cartoons, songs and music videos, maps, and timelines to help her students better understand her culture and her country. As a result, she says, some of her students decided to minor in French, rather than taking two or three classes as initially required. “I really bonded with my students, and met several of them in France last summer and this summer, while they were studying or traveling in France.”

However, she explained that her coordinator did not completely agree with her teaching methods as his were more language-based with an emphasis on a more “traditional approach” to language. As a result, she did not get along with her coordinator but still appreciated her students’ evaluation as they emphasized that Emma’s approach to culture and language made the class “real and alive.” The positive student evaluations enabled her to earn a distinction by the Provost, awarded to the top 10% of the graduate teaching assistants last year, encouraging

her to continue to grow through her teaching, and to keep culture at the center of her teaching and as the core of her learning experience. This comforted Emma in her idea that language is a by-product of culture. When she reflects now on her teaching experience, she realized that there is room from improvement as she learned about cognitive processes in foreign language learning and lesson planning.

Teaching French was one of the most meaningful experiences for Emma, which came as a surprise. Although she had taught other subjects in other settings, it seems that what provided her with excitement and a sense of fulfillment was teaching her language to non-native speakers. When asked about what she specifically enjoyed, she replied that it was "the fact that she could share her culture with other people and by the same token learn from my student's culture." After her year of teaching French, she accepted a position at the Center for English as a Second Language (CESL) at OU to teach English to non-native speakers. She accepted the position as the curriculum was more flexible. Eventually she created her own seminar: American Popular Culture in History through Movies.

CESL and Teaching Non-American Students

CESL is an English Intensive Program (EIP) school. It prepares foreign students from non-English speaking countries to pass the TOEFL test and start their program of study in an American university (or a university in another English speaking country). It is in this same school that Andrew teaches as well.

In January 2014, Emma started her new job at CESL, which has a considerable population of Chinese students. As she had met two international students from China during her first semester in Education, and heard that the

Confucius Institute was offering free Mandarin classes, it became obvious that learning Mandarin would be the next step in her adventure. She could already imagine what it would look like: she would learn in the Confucius Institute and practice with her students at CESL and her two friends. When practicing with her CESL students, they immediately bonded with her because they saw she was willing to communicate with them in their native language. She has experienced it as a student and now she was experiencing it as a teacher. The same excitement happened with students from other cultures, maybe, she said, because she demonstrated a genuine interest in their cultures and languages. However, at this specific moment in her life, she had an obvious preference for Mandarin. She could see that students responded well to the fact that she was French, teaching English, and trying to learn Chinese. She emphasized the importance of respect and curiosity of other cultures in her everyday teaching.

She perceives her status as a non-native speaker of English as an advantage in the context of teaching English to non-native speakers. Among other things, it "shows to the students that it is possible to learn a language and then teach it." She was also conscious that she made mistakes and wanted to use that as a way to show her students that risk-taking is part of the learning adventure.

Today

Last summer (2014), Emma started to teach herself Cherokee using simple smart phone applications. She explained that it made her keep in touch with her former interest, Native American history. After graduating from her Master's program, she started a Ph.D. in Native American history and has ended up switching

to a Ph.D. program in education. Her experience as a French teacher and then as an English teacher made her enjoy teaching languages or what she calls "teaching about cultures." However, just as she took extra-curricular classes in Native American literature while in France, she is now taking a Cherokee course with the Cherokee Nation. She is still learning Mandarin by taking classes at the Confucius Institute, and she still teaches English as a second language at CESL. She expects to graduate from her Ph.D. program in 2017.

Her perception of language learning has evolved throughout her education as a student, and her perception of education has evolved as a language teacher. She cannot dissociate language and culture. "What I realize though, is that when I choose to learn a language, it is motivated by other reasons than the language itself: I am interested in the culture, I want to understand more, or lately, I want to bond with my students and understand where they come from, culturally and therefore linguistically speaking." Emma has understood that the first use of language is to communicate and therefore to connect. She believes the best way to learn a language is through immersion, which is why in her language classes she tries to incorporate real-life material and real-life experiences in order to recreate the feeling of immersion. "Therefore, immersion makes a language meaningful, and turns its mastering into a need."

As for her everyday language use, Emma is eager to speak French when she is on the phone with her parents. When she spends her summers in France, she feels a "burning need" to speak English as she misses it. With English, she knows that she makes errors but she enjoys the fact that she "can really play with the language."

She can create a lot with it, and it is accepted. In French, Emma does not feel that the language is as flexible. “I feel that there are limitations with the language. We can create, but it is still considered as not correct, maybe as a joke.” She perceives French as being more rigid and stricter, although she loves it.

She emphasized that being able to express herself, work in English and connect with others on a daily basis made her want to do the same with other languages. For one of her classes, Emma drew her language experience and allowed me to share it in my study as it gives an overview of her language experience.



Fig. 7. Emma's language experience, drawing she submitted for a class in May 2014 to represent her language learning experience

Analysis of Emma's experience

Emma's approach to languages is interesting in that it seems to be a by-product of a greater interest in cultures. Her interests in cultures and history seem to have been what led her to learn languages. Her experience was different as the target language she was trying to acquire (English) was more available for socio-economic reasons than Chinese was for Andrew mainly because of the American movie and music industries or what we call the 'the Pop Culture': "*I love movies and I love to read and the music that I used to listen to and that I still listen to is primarily in English and so I read a lot. I remember like I did kind of a homework: I read Harry Potter in English when I was fourteen, in middle school*." Having the available challenges and input from an early age, Emma did not experience an epiphany while in the United States as her level of proficiency in the second language was already high before traveling compared to the other participants.

An important aspect that an individual needs to have in a particular activity to experience flow is a sense of autonomy. If the individual has the ability and the possibility to repetitively play with the skills he possesses, it is possible to promote a certain state of flow. For example, Emma explained that she enjoyed her language classes, as they were "less rigid" than other classes where a particular answer was expected. When making mistakes in her English class, she did not have the impression that she was wrong, but that she was in the process of being right. She had a certain autonomy within an established framework, a certain control over the experience within the limits of the experience. Slowly, she exported this feeling of enjoyment of learning languages outside of the school context. She started learning

on her own by watching movies, listening to music, and reading in the target language. She did not perceive this as homework but as a mean to reproduce the state of flow with the same activity. She would encounter new words and expressions that she would keep track of in her notebooks. She explained that she would do this for hours and hours without realizing time had passed by. The advantage of this type of homework is that she was the one setting challenges that matched her skills, and it gave her a knowledge of where she was and where she wanted to be in her study of English. It provided her with a *metaknowledge*. This was another way she experience a certain control over the experience. In addition to learning the language, we can hypothesis that she was also *learning to learn*. She would lose track of time as she was performing the activity of studying a language. She was enjoying the process regardless of the end goal, which might be one of the secrets to motivation. It was therefore an autotelic activity.

When an individual exports an activity outside of the context in which he has to perform this activity, we talk about motivation. For example, if a soccer player goes to run or to shoot the ball to improve his skills in his free time, it is possible that he enjoys the training process regardless of the end goal of reaching a certain level. In the case of Emma, the countless hours she spent watching movies and reading Harry Potter were enjoyable as it was an entertaining process.

As she earned a distinction for teaching a language class through culture (which is how she learned the language herself), this provided her with the necessary validation to continue to seek flow within the "language-culture" experience. She continued an activity that provided her with a certain psychological

state mixing enjoyment, sense of control over the experience, and sense of complexity. As human beings, from an earliest age, we go through a process of research-action. For example, it does not take long for a child to realize that fire is hot and that he should stay away from it. Our thoughts inform our actions, and our actions inform our thoughts in order to evolve in this world. The place of the experience is fundamental in the process of living. When an individual feels enjoyment within an activity, she will reproduce this activity for the sake of enjoyment. He will reproduce this activity as long as it provides him with enjoyment. He will increase the level of complexity of the activity in order to keep feeling enjoyment. Throughout his journey, he might need feedback to let him know that he is performing the activity well. In the case of Emma, the teaching award she received for approaching the language the way she does was the necessary feedback to keep her going and reach a more complex state within her activity.

Beyond receiving explicit feedback such as a teaching award, Emma received implicit feedback such as when she realized that she was able to "live in English", that is to say function, work, and socialize in another language. From these types of implicit feedback, she was motivated to learn other languages to be able to function in other cultures. In a way, learning English and being functional in it was a skill she acquired and she set a higher challenge of learning another language in order to remain in a certain state of flow. In order to set higher challenges, she observed her environment and tried to make the best of it, which is a character trait of the autotelic personality. For example, because of the large Chinese population at the University of Oklahoma, and especially at the Center for

English as a Second Language, Emma started to have a rising interest in Chinese culture and language. In addition to the available opportunities to meet natives, she seized the opportunity to take free Mandarin language classes at the Confucius institute. We can hypothesis that the flow activity she has been performing repeatedly is to be immersed in an unknown culture and work her way up until she manages to have a certain autonomy in that culture. Learning a language is a micro-flow within a bigger flow activity. Repeating the experience is a means to recreating the feeling of flow. It is important to highlight the connectedness of the different activities providing the individual with a state of flow as there is a probability of a connection between them.

Rebecca's experience

"I like when people say they cannot hear my American accent"

Rebecca is currently pursuing a Ph.D. in Education and Second Language Acquisition and works as a first year Spanish Language Coordinator at the University of Oklahoma. After practicing yoga for a couple of years, she became a yoga instructor. She is also a salsa dancer, which is a skill she learned after traveling to many Spanish-speaking countries.

Foreign languages valued outside more than inside the house

She was born and raised in California in a neighborhood that was mainly Caucasian and Hispanic. Neither of her parents spoke another language, and they did not value speaking another language either. Rebecca perceives them as not having been "very encouraging" with her Spanish language learning. Her

grandmother on her father's side was Italian and grew up speaking Italian. She constantly spoke Italian at home. Therefore, Rebecca's father grew up hearing Italian but "never learned anything." Although she recognized that he might know some Italian, he never purposefully taught her and her siblings any other language. After taking some Spanish classes in college, she became more confident about her skills and went to study abroad a couple of times for several months. She is now married to a native speaker of Spanish with whom she has a daughter. The main language at home is Spanish and her daughter, who is four, is a simultaneous bilingual, as she has been proficient in English and Spanish since she was able to speak.

Language in her childhood

As she grew up in California, she had early regular exposure to Spanish. Her childhood best friend in elementary school was from Mexico. According to her mother, they would come home singing songs in Spanish, or "trying to sing in Spanish." Rebecca admits she has no recollection of that though. However, she remembers spending a lot of time with her and coming home trying the new words she learned from her friend. What she enjoyed was to be able to imitate her friend's accent and her tone. As her relationship with her best friend allowed Rebecca to have early exposure to different sounds, which happened until she turned nine years old, she believes that it helped her with her current accent and pronunciation in Spanish. She mentioned this experience had a positive influence on her *Critical Period Hypothesis* (CPH). CPH is a theory in the field of Second Language Acquisition that posits an age after which language acquisition is not natural, or not

as effective. This age is accepted to be around the language learner's adolescence and may vary between individuals. Although the theory is controversial, one of its fundamental concepts is the accent and pronunciation dimension of language learning. According to the CPH, learning a language before puberty increases the chances to have a native-like accent. According to Rebecca, her interest in imitation before comprehension helped her to have a native-like accent today. She explains that her interest in Spanish then was more like a game of imitation rather than anything else. "Early exposure to language, I think for me, made it so that I know how the vowels are supposed to sound like, the consonant are supposed to sound like and I can imitate them." Beyond her friendship with her Mexican-American friend, "half of her town" in California was speaking Spanish according to her. This made it easier to have opportunities to hear the language and imitate the sound. She would also imitate foreign accent and different voices in English. "That's something I have always done, so I noticed it was easy for me to imitate. That's what you do at the beginning when you learn a language anyways."

First "real exposure to Spanish"

Rebecca does not perceive her "playing around with the language" as being the beginning of her Spanish learning experience. She recalls it more as being a game and as having helped her with the pronunciation, but she never really paid attention to the meaning. What she liked was the exotic pronunciation and the unfamiliar sounds that she tried to reproduce while making her friends and surrounding laugh.

When she entered high school, she started having regular Spanish exposure as opposed to irregular use of the language with her childhood friend. The first tasks they had to accomplish were to memorize words and plug them into sentences. She recalls being a good student, although she got a C in her first class because of poor behavior, she says. She was bored because teachers would make her repeat words and rules although she would understand the first time. She recalls not being the only one in the same situation. The first time (or times) she would see a word or a rule, her mind would automatically incorporate it. "I would not need a million repetition of the same thing so I acted out." She did not like the class because of the teaching practices but loved the language because she remembers it being fun from her previous experiences. "In class, I would imitate accents and goof off and make my own funny version of things." She emphasized that imitation of sounds and accents was something that kept her going with the language. The rest of her high school experience was the same. She was a good student and kept improving her pronunciation, intention, and accent in the foreign language, which was a plus given that there was almost no oral practice in class. She recalls that speaking and using the language was an important aspect of her language instruction that was missing. As she graduated from high school, she transferred her Spanish credit to college and was immediately placed in an intermediate level class.

College: stepping stone to studying abroad

When graduating from high school, Rebecca had the impression that her knowledge of Spanish was "good," it was something "easy and enjoyable." Once taking Spanish classes at the university level, she felt lost, as she did not have the

same type of faculty she had in high school. Classes were more intense and more difficult, maybe because she was directly placed in a third or fourth semester level class or because the teaching practices were different. Although she felt behind, according to her professor, she was doing well. He would tell her that she was good at languages and that her pronunciation sounded almost like a native speaker. Of course, this helped her to keep motivated with the language in a moment when she was starting to doubt. She does not remember what her level of Spanish was before travelling, but she remembers that in her first semesters of Spanish in college, having positive feedback and good grades in her class helped her to keep going, although she perceived her level of proficiency as being very poor. As this is all she recalls from her pre-traveling experience, she sees her first experience as a student abroad as being a turning point in her language proficiency and her academic and professional interest.

Studying in Spain

She decided to go to Spain because she was going to earn university credit for going to Spain and also because she liked Spanish and perceived Spain as the cradle of standard Spanish (although there is a disagreement on that in the Hispanic world). It was during her undergraduate years that she seized the opportunity to go study abroad and make it a meaningful experience, not only for her communication skills but also to improve her accent. She wanted to sound like a native Spanish speaker and more specifically, she wanted to sound like a Spaniard and have a Castilian accent. Castilian Spanish is considered as Spanish, but within Spain it is considered as speaking the Spanish that is most commonly used in the Madrid

region as opposed to Galician, Valenciano, or Catalan. Castilian is a dialect of Spanish that conveys higher socio-economic status because of geographical and historical factors. Before making the decision to go, she was hesitant, but she perceived this step as being necessary in the evolution of her proficiency in Spanish. "It was the only way I could learn the language if I ever wanted to."

Before traveling, the goal she had set for her self was to be fluent in another language. That was her end goal. She explained that she wanted to be as fluent as a native speaker. "Might have been a little bit over the top (to expect to become as fluent as a native speaker), but I felt I could do it because I have been successful before." One aspect of the language that she was determined to improve was her accent. Although she knew that grammar and accuracy were important, she wanted to sound Spanish and speak with the same speed. I must say, as a former ESL teacher, that this is a concern of many second language learners. It is common to want to speak with a native accent, and at the same speed, but this endeavor often sacrifices accuracy for fluency.

When arriving in Spain, she lived in "una residencia" which is very similar to the American dormitories, with the main difference being that she was living in an apartment complex for women only. In her complex, there were other non-native speakers who had come to study in Spain. There were three Moroccan girls, two Irish girls, two American girls and six Spanish girls. At that moment Rebecca says that she "did not know the language." She explains that she knew words and rules she had learned in class but she was not able to communicate. She believes that

since her college classes were in English, she did not acquire this "language competency" that is necessary in order to communicate.

"At the beginning, I had experienced a silent period"

At the beginning of her experience in Spain, she had what she calls a "silent period," and this was really frustrating because she "could not be Rebecca in Spanish." Because of this impossibility to be friendly, funny, or sarcastic with natives without "looking stupid," she naturally spent her first weeks with the American girls and the Irish girl as they spoke English. Also, there was one Moroccan girl in her group of friends as she could speak English really well. Rebecca described her as being the type of girl who steps out of her bubble to learn new things. This Moroccan girl also spoke Arabic, French, and Spanish. When being with her group of friends, Rebecca explained that she could be herself more. She was "too scared to talk" around natives as she was afraid of making mistakes, which was a surprise to her as she had always been extroverted with the Spanish language while taking classes in the US, maybe because in a Spanish class, everyone is learning, while in Spain, natives already know the language, she says. In her classes in Spain, she was silent although she usually likes to participate because she was "afraid to mess up." Not being able to express herself, and "be herself" in another language increased this feeling of insecurity and this necessity to learn the language "in order to be able to exist." She believes that this sense of insecurity was beneficial in the long term to her motivation to study and the intensity with which she studied.

Studying the language actively

However, as she knew she wanted to make the most out of the experience in Spain, she spent her time observing native speakers' ways of speaking, observing what they would say and how they would say it. "I would just try to experiment things I would hear and try to imitate the pronunciation." She recalls reading local newspapers out loud in her bedroom "so I can get rid of my accent." As she was immersed, she would try to pick up new words; she would write them in sentences and try to use them in different contexts. She believes that the context helped to memorize the word. Since it is used in a real situation, she can remember the whole word by "experiencing it." She also found it useful to create association with her first language, and the linguistic proximity of Spanish and English helped her to create a lot of association through the existence of cognates. At the beginning stages of language learning, studying cognates can increase the language learner's confidence in his ability to learn the language (Williams & Hammaberg). "It kind of demystifies the language," Rebecca says.

She remembers reading a lot in Spanish. She does not recall how many hours she would spend reading per day, but she thinks it was probably more than what she could realize as she was enjoying it. What she was enjoying more specifically was to be able to pronounce the words like a native speaker. She had the impression she could speak, although she was missing accuracy in the grammar when she wanted to create sentences on her own. As she continued to work on her grammar and on "trying out new stuff with her Spanish roommate," she was conscious that her level of Spanish was improving, day after day, but she did not seem to be able to see how

she was going to be able to communicate fluently with native speakers. “Eventually, I guess around month four of being there, I felt like I just woke up one day, and I could speak.”

Experiencing a “language explosion”

As she described her “language explosion,” she is conscious that it was not that sudden, as she had been improving day after day since she arrived in Spain. Her intensive work played a significant role, but she explains that her perception of a better language proficiency was sudden. She did not realize she had these skills until she was able to better understand the language and use it in a more natural way. While some people have explained that they finally can “think in the language,” Rebecca illustrates this turning point in her life with a dream she had in Spanish. Her language epiphany, although not sudden, was marked by a dream she had in the language she was learning. “I mean, it sure was not that dramatic, but I had a dream in Spanish, and all of a sudden, I was putting strings of sentences together. It just seems like it took off from there.”

One manifestation of the language explosion was the ability to use complex sentences that she had not heard before. The consciousness of being able to be creative with the language was a psychological turning point in her perception of her language proficiency. She explains that she might have had the skills before, but before she gained confidence in these skills, her learning seemed to have been slow and unproductive. After realizing what she could do with the language, she says that her experience became more enjoyable, although “it was fun already.”

In her classes with Spanish native speakers, she found herself participating more. She was volunteering more, mainly by asking questions. She "did not feel afraid of making mistakes" or more exactly she was not as nervous as she was before. Proving to herself that she had acquired some type of language competency lowered her anxiety to publically use the language, which made learning "easier." When traveling abroad, there is a certain pressure of not "making the most out of it" and the smallest goal she had fixed for herself was to improve her language and be functional with native speakers. Once realizing that she reached that goal, it became less stressful to learn other aspects of the language. It became a more enjoyable experience, as she was able to "be herself in Spanish." In her recollection of her language learning evolution, she starting feeling that she could speak better. She noticed it when she was having a conversation with her roommate, a Spaniard. As she understood her roommate better, she observed the change with the beginning of her experience. "I understood everything she said, and I could express myself. We started singing songs on our guitars and it was just really exciting." What she called "exciting" was this ability to communicate and be herself in the language. Having felt a frustration because of her language limitations when she arrived, this change made her feel a sense of accomplishment, of overcoming a handicap. From that point on, she explains that her motivation to keep learning increased, as there was a certain consciousness of evolution.

Her language proficiency changed the nature of her experience

As her level of proficiency was improving, she started spending more time speaking in Spanish. Rebecca was not sure whether her level of Spanish allowed her

to speak more or the activity of speaking more improved her level of Spanish. She believes it is more complicated than that as there are external factors that intervene. As she really wanted to spend more time with Spaniards outside of class, she realized she had to push herself to speak more when an opportunity comes with a native speaker.

"So basically from month 4 to the end of my trip, I kind of made a mental goal to be spending more time in Spanish because I was going to have only one opportunity to get it, and I encouraged them (her American friends) to speak more Spanish too." After her fourth month in Spain, Rebecca realized that she had spent too much time with English speakers and that she needed to spend more time with locals in order to make the most of this experience. She wanted to go out with them, eat at the restaurant with them, and in a more general way, live like them. The linguistic experience is richer with the social experience, she thought. It is not possible, or at least not as beneficial, to dissociate the language from the people speaking it. The social environment informs the language and a good practice of the language informs about the social environment, which is something Rebecca intends to reflect in the Spanish classes she teaches at the University of Oklahoma.

Extending her stay in Spain

Before going to Spain, Rebecca's original plan was to stay for five months, which is a semester in Spanish universities. At the end of her five months stay, she had acquired a level in the language she was satisfied with, a certain metalinguistic knowledge and a certain understanding of the customs and codes. However, there was a feeling of incompleteness, of being able to reach a higher point in her

development. She realized that if she was going to leave at that moment, she was going "to miss a lot." The only problem was that she had arranged with her advisor in Oklahoma to come back and re-enroll in classes at OU. In the end, because what she was going to gain seemed superior to finishing her degree earlier, she decided to stay for an extra two and a half month before she came back to Oklahoma. "I thought to myself: 'Man, I am just getting started you know, I think I am going to stay', so I just stayed." During the rest of her stay, Rebecca continued enjoying total immersion and really improved her pronunciation. She regularly received compliments from the locals on her language competency. Her pronunciation was something that was dear to her from the beginning to the end of her stay.

Reflection on her overall experience in Spain

Today when reflecting on her experience in Spain, she believed that it was a "mistake" to have based her learning on trying to understand every single part of the sentence because when doing so, she quickly felt "overwhelmed." This made it difficult for her to see the improvement she was making in the language as she "was shooting for perfection" from the beginning. "The main thing is to understand the message of what is being communicated." She believes that if she had known that from the beginning of her experience, it would have made it easier and more enjoyable. Because she was trying to understand every single word in addition to the grammar, she was able to focus on the semantics of what was being said, but not on the general meaning of the utterances. She believes that slowed down the evolution of her language proficiency. "It does not mean subject-pronoun and then indirect object-pronoun and then verb... and then trying to process all these components of a

sentence but rather just kind of having the exposure and repetition of things so that you have a grammatical feel for what should be right." She emphasized the importance of repetition of linguistic features and the conscious and unconscious acquisition of grammar.

Coming back to Oklahoma

After coming back home, although she was happy to see her family and friends again, she missed her life in Spain. She started to spend more time with Latin friends and Spaniards. She started going out with them and learned salsa. She remembers that her Hispanic friends would be amazed when she would speak and complimented her on her accent saying she has a "typical Castilian accent." When speaking with them until today, she realized that she "increased her vocabulary substantially." Also she realized over time she kept improving in terms of linguistic nuances, more complex verb tenses and uses of grammatical structures. Part of this was because she met and married a native speaker with whom she would speak Spanish most of the time. She met him while volunteering in the Peruvian Student Association at OU. All in all, her improvement of Spanish did not stop after traveling. Rather she observed an evolution in her acquisition of the language while being in Spain and she intended to keep that evolution going once back in Oklahoma.



Fig. 8. Rebecca (middle) and Carlos (right) performing at the 2009 Peruvian Cultural night at the University of Oklahoma

Spanish in her life now

When comparing her previous experiences with the language, Rebecca has acquired more metalinguistic and contextual knowledge about the language, which allows her to make inferences more easily, but she explains that the way she perceives the good language learner is the same: someone able to make inferences. She believes that this approach to language increases language intake exponentially. "The more you know, the more you learn." According to Rebecca, knowledge of language depends on the previous knowledge and the type of social interaction they occur in. She can see that now, she possesses more vocabulary. So, if there is a word she does not know, it is easier for her to use the context to infer meaning.

Today one of the things she enjoys the most about speaking Spanish is how her ability to speak is natural. “I do have moments where I think about the fact that I have been talking for hours in Spanish and it is just coming out like it comes out in English and it is kind of a cool feeling.” She can think in Spanish and she does not have to use English references as an intermediate means to understand and create meaning in Spanish. Her Spanish has become a system of its own. It is still informed by her knowledge of English, but it also informs her knowledge of English. She perceives her Spanish and English as having a reciprocal relationship. She acknowledges being sometimes surprised by herself when she realizes that she was able to talk about a complex topic in Spanish. In situations where she is under pressure with the language, she feels nervous about the language and not confident about her skills. For example, when she needs to send an email in Spanish to a hierarchically higher professional who is a native speaker, she sometimes asks her husband to double check the email and provide her with feedback, not only about the grammar and vocabulary, but also about the tone and pragmatics. In linguistics, pragmatics is the way language gives a meaning in a certain context, be it social, psychological, or axiological. It answers the general questions related to speech act theory such as “what is performed by what I say?” Rebecca relies on metalinguistic skills in order to not mistakenly express an idea she did not intend to.

Now that she is married to a native speaker, she has the opportunity to use the language all the time. Before she got married, there were periods when she did not have the opportunity to. When she had an opportunity to use it again, she would feel what she called a “reignited excitement.” Also she pointed out that this

happened rarely as there is a considerable Spanish-speaking community in Oklahoma and all she had to do is "step out of her bubble and go look for opportunities to use the language."

Future goals in Spanish

Before going to Spain, Rebecca had the goal of being fluent in Spanish. She wanted to be able to speak "almost like a native speaker." Although this goal has not changed in essence, her perception of the viability of the goal has changed. Because of her professional orientation, her goal now has a double dimension. First she wants to keep improving her "standards of language proficiency." She says that her goals in terms of language proficiency have become more academic than they were at first. Speaking like a native speaker means different things, depending on which type of native speaker is inferred by the statement. In addition, she wants to keep improving her skills teaching the Spanish language. All in all, her experience with Spanish has opened up new opportunities for continuing improvement.

Analysis of Rebecca's Experience

Rebecca is now a teacher's coordinator in the Spanish department and a Ph.D. student at the University of Oklahoma. Her background and expertise in second language acquisition helped her describe language experience using terminology from the field of language acquisition. For example, she describes her childhood experience with language as being behaviorist in that most of what she did was imitating. Beyond imitating sentences only, she started imitating accents, making it almost a game.

"I was acting out by imitating accents"

As she perceived her high school Spanish instruction as being "too easy" for her skills, instead of falling into a state of boredom, she created new challenges with the imitating of accents to keep the class interesting. As explained before, flow is maintained by a constant reassessment of challenges and skills. This requires an initial interest in the task at hand. Rebecca was initially interested in the language. As the challenges were not high enough, she went into the state A2 (table 1 p.25). As this state was not an enjoyable experience, she tried to modify it to make it enjoyable. This is why she "modified" the experience by setting up new challenges with the available situation and decided to fake accents.

We can raise the case that the skill she developed for imitating accents is a game that falls under the category of *mimicry* (the other three categories being *Agon*, games of competition, *Alea*, games of chance, and *Ilinx*, games that alter reality). By "acting out," as she would say, and by imitating different accents, she created her own game with rules, goals, and feedback, which allowed her consciousness to remain structured while performing the activity of learning Spanish. This prevented her from wandering off into different thoughts and being disconnected from the activity. It is interesting how she perceives the activity of imitating accents as being an activity that kept her more or less focused until she faced a higher challenge.

We can hypothesize that Rebecca altered her own reality by giving it a "game-like" dimension. Whether she unconsciously or consciously did it to remain

in a state of flow is subject to further research. At this point, I cannot determine whether she altered reality because she was in a state of flow or whether she was in a state of flow because she altered reality. Some students experienced flow "accidentally," in which case they take actions to maintain it, while others start by learning specific skills in an area and end up pursuing a field of interest because they experience flow while pursuing it. It is a phenomenon of dialectic causality.

"In College, I felt behind but my professor said I was good with languages."

An important aspect of learning and motivation is the perception of the self, the perception of the object (the language), and the perception of the "intake" of that object (learning the language). Rebecca had the impression she was not doing well because of her perception of where she was in the process of learning the language and where she wanted to be. Setting goals is a necessary step for improvement. However, setting realistic goals is a necessary step for experiencing flow. Realistic goals involve matching goals with skills. The individual needs to have a certain knowledge of skills and a certain awareness of his progression. Although she was not proficient as she wished initially, Rebecca kept improving, which was the determinant factor in her experience of learning Spanish. It was not about the level she reached but the constant progression and the awareness of this progression

Traveling to Spain

Traveling provides an infinite array of possible outcomes. "Choosing" the right challenge requires having a knowledge of the skills already possessed. In addition, traveling provides continuous instant feedback, and the end goal beyond learning the language, as stated before, becomes to survive in a different

geographical setting. This might explain why the state of flow in the language learning experience can be multiplied while being abroad. Just like for Emma and Andrew, Rebecca benefitted from her experience abroad. However, she benefitted in her own way as her skills and personality were specific to her. During her stay, there was a constant reassessment of her challenges and goals as new obstacles appeared. She realized that she "could not be herself in Spanish" which made her set the objective to be functional enough to be able to convey her personality in another language. This was a necessary skill for the end goal of fending for oneself.

Language epiphany

Like Andrew, Rebecca tried using new words in different contexts with different people in order to remember them. By generating causes and obtaining the expected effects, such as positive feedback, it provided her with a certain control of her experience. In her spare time, she would read a lot in Spanish without realizing that so much time had passed. A perception of time that is altered is a common effect of the individual being in a state of flow. All the different activities she was involved in while being in Spain had their own purpose, but they all converged in a way to her acquisition of the language. Another interesting aspect is that she experienced her own type of language epiphany about three to four month after being there, which corresponds to what Andrew experienced. Both had been cramming in their language books in their free time and the results had some similarities. Rebecca explained that it is not her Spanish that suddenly became good, but her perception of her skills in Spanish that improved. However, she did not observe a progression in the same way as Andrew did. While Andrew was able to

understand others more readily, Rebecca was able to express herself in a more coherent way because her understanding was fairly decent. She was able to form complex sentences and use new vocabulary. Like Andrew and Emma, Rebecca explained feeling in a state of flow as she was able to be more creative with the language. She went from "learning the language" to "owning the language." Andrew's epiphany was experienced in the way he understood the language, whereas Rebecca's was in the way she produced the language. This suggests that "language epiphany" and flow can be experienced with different aspects of language learning. Language learning is the result of an acquisition of many skills and the overcoming of challenges (in a high quantity or high quality). Language epiphany, as described by the participants, is a subjective state.

Increased complexity of the self, increased motivation

After this "language epiphany," her experience became less stressful as she had reached the minimum goal she had set to herself, the rest being "bonus" to keep her going in a state of flow. Her motivation increased, her anxiety using the language decreased, and slowly she felt a certain feeling of meaning as her consciousness was becoming more complex. She was able to perform complicated activities in Spanish, such as to calling for assistance with her Internet problems. One of her strengths was that she was able to observe her environment and draw what she needed out of it. For example early in her trip, she stopped spending time with English speakers only as she realized it was obstructing her end goal.

Saying that she experienced flow with the Spanish language might be over-interpreting. Rather, she experienced flow with people speaking Spanish. The

language was a required skill to remain in a state of flow. When she came back to Oklahoma, as she had acquired certain types of interpersonal skills with Latinos, such as jokes and other cultural codes, she spent more time with them, and even became a great salsa dancer and eventually a salsa instructor. It seems that what the individual is looking for in the end is the experience of flow and that she is ready to multiply experiences in quantity or go deep in certain experiences to maintain flow.

Scott's experience

"Learning a language requires to crack the code"

Scott is not like the other participants in that he did not major in a foreign language, nor did he major in a field related to linguistics. Instead, his major was initially Asian Studies. He also took classes in Mandarin for a semester. As a result of peer competition and feeling that liberal studies were "worthless," Scott switched to engineering, wherein he remained for two and a half years. He occasionally took humanities classes for his general education requirements and tried to work on his Spanish minor whenever he could. Although he was a good student in his engineering classes, he grew bored and felt trapped in an "uncreative, stifling program." He took the decision to switch majors again and enrolled in International Studies. He excelled in the new field and was instantly one of the best students in his class, giving him confidence that he had made the right decision to switch majors.

When talking about his childhood, he mentioned that he was born and raised in Oklahoma apart from one year that he spent in Colorado. He is an only child. He

defined his socio-economic background as working class and his parents as typical blue collar workers. He perceives his background and childhood to be "fairly typical" given the geographical context in which he grew up. He attended a public school and when he got into high school, he joined what he called "the nerdy kids," which were mainly composed of Asian Americans and white Americans. Although his group of friends was diverse to a certain extent, he explained that linguistically, it was a pretty homogenous English only speaking group. Apart from the Asian American kids, he was not close friend with any other foreign language speakers. Elaborating more on the place of languages in his childhood, it is interesting to note that no one in his immediate or distant family speaks a foreign language.

Brief exposure to Spanish and French

Until graduating from high school, his exposure to foreign languages was during class time. However, Scott qualified this type of exposure as "passive exposure." In elementary school, he used to have a weekly Spanish class that lasted for an hour in which they learned "essentially nothing" to use his words. It was mainly basic reading. However, compared to French, his Spanish exposure was more substantial as he was able to see many bits of the language outside of school. He could count to ten before he could remember, he could make the difference when using the restrooms in a Mexican restaurant between *damas* and *caballeros* (ladies and gentlemen) and he also knew some colors. However, when he would practice his newly acquired words with his uncle, he dismissively retorted, "Next thing you know we'll be spending pesos at the dollar store!" Scott explained that his

family was neutral at best and defensive at worst toward foreign languages and multiculturalism in general.

In middle school, he took a sampling French class of six weeks. He does not consider this class as having "taught him a lot." He learned *very* basic phrases such as "comment allez-vous, une feuille de papier." which means "how are you, a sheet of paper." It was more to know about French rather than to know French. The teacher transferred to a new school after two weeks. There was a three-week interim, and he got a new teacher for the last week or so. "For all intents and purposes, though, I did not learn anything of note."

Latin as his first "foreign language"

It wasn't until high school that Scott got seriously involved with foreign languages when he took Latin, which is a little peculiar, as it is not considered a foreign language but an ancient language.

His initial motivation for taking Latin was that "it sounded cool." He considered it "an exotic class," and it made him feel special, as most of the other kids would take French or Spanish. Also, his growing interest in history influenced his choice of selecting an ancient language. He studied Latin for two years in high school and realized that he was good at it by the grades and other types of recognition he got. He won twice in a row the best Latin student award and he also obtained the best grade of the school in a scholastic test about Latin.

This success, paired with the encouragements at school had a positive effect on his growing interest in language. His teachers and fellow students "put into [his] head the idea that [he] was good at languages." Another memory that Scott

perceived as a turning point in his language learning experience is a book he read in high school called *The Unfolding of Language* by Guy Deutscher. This book is an introduction to linguistics intended for a nonlinguistic audience. Among other things, it looks at Latin, its different inflections and the evolution of its inflections in romance languages. It also deals with the evolution of languages in general and intends to explain language evolution. Scott explained that this book helped him in his new interest in languages as it was well-written and very accessible. Also, it was related to his studying of Latin.

Spanish for romance

He studied only Latin in high school. When he entered college, he did not know Spanish, but he had a girlfriend at the time who was good in Spanish and could speak it fluently. She was Caucasian and had taken Spanish since middle school and enrolled in Advanced Placement Spanish. That motivated him to learn Spanish to be able to communicate with her although they could speak English. Therefore during his first semester of college, he studied Spanish autodidactically. In his free time, he would learn and directly apply the structures and vocabulary on a piece of paper. He recalls writing a lot. For example, when he learned the progressive tense in Spanish, he would start "doodling sentences like *estoy escribiendo en español"* (I am writing in Spanish) and practice everything else repetitively as soon as he learned it to make sure he knew how to use it.

Afterwards he would consistently practice with his girlfriend because it allowed him to receive some type of feedback and also because it was a fun activity to do. He perceived his level of proficiency in Spanish as evolving quickly to get

"natural" within a few weeks. According to him, a lot has to do with his previous exposure to Spanish, his geographical situation, and his background in Latin. He explained that the first two factors allowed him to know random sentences such as "donde esta el baño?" (where is the bathroom?). These were sentences he remembered as a chunk, but this is pretty much the case for most of the people raised in Oklahoma. However, he asserted that his background in Latin gave him a head start. It allowed him to acquire the conjugation and vocabulary "very naturally."

Apart from practicing with his girlfriend, he did not have a lot of other opportunities. Every now and then, he would try to watch movies or read some Pablo Neruda poems just to test the Spanish he has acquired and see how much he could understand of these other registers of Spanish.

From self-learning to earning university credit for Spanish

During this first semester in college, Scott studied on his own, practiced with his girlfriend, and watched movies and read books in Spanish, and he soon realized that his accomplishments in the target language were significant. As a consequence, he decided to take a placement test to place as high as he could in the next semester Spanish class. However he realized his current level of proficiency was not enough to obtain a good score which is when he decided to "jump into it [Spanish studying] headfirst." He bought flash cards and grammar books, and for a period of two or three weeks, that is all he did in his free time. This intensive period of Spanish studying involved memorizing vocabulary, going through the grammar, and conversing as much as he could with his girlfriend. He perceives this intensive

studying period as a turning point in the evolution of his Spanish proficiency: "I'd say there was a two or three week explosive growth period in which all the vocabulary and grammar sort of congealed into something I could use to actively communicate with Spanish speakers."

After taking the test, he obtained a grade that allowed him to place directly in the fourth semester of Spanish. After these three weeks of intensive studying and test-taking, he felt that his level of Spanish "plateaued a bit," in the sense that he did not believe he would make much more progress that quickly, so he stopped being involved as much in the language until he took that class that helped him to exit this "plateaued state." Also he felt that he had proven to himself that he had a correct understanding of the language. Since he was going to be taking a course the next semester, there was not much incentive to put a lot of effort into it. In addition, his regular classes became more intense. All of these reasons contributed to him stopping to study Spanish independently.

Traveling to Spanish Speaking Countries

The summer that followed his first semester of Spanish, Scott spent a month studying in Guadalajara, Mexico. Then he came back and studied Spanish for two semesters and after that, he went to Spain for a month. While telling me about his academic travelling, he drew a parallel between his experience in Mexico and his experience in Spain. In both cases, he described his experience as coming after a period of "plateauing" and as being determinant in helping him to improve significantly in the language. He perceived his several successions of improvements and stagnations as "a staircase, a punctuated equilibrium of plateau and

improvement." Beyond these similarities, there were some differences between these two experiences.

Mexico

The time he spent in Mexico was great but very limited at the same time. Though his academic knowledge of grammar and composition was good, he had very little working knowledge in the language when he arrived. The fact that his host mother was very soft-spoken was not helpful; he cannot recall how many times he had to say *¿cómo?* or *¿mande?* when he wasn't able to understand her. He was only in the country for a month and classes were with other American students, many from OU, so he didn't have much time or opportunity to meet actual Mexicans outside his host residence.

His introverted nature was amplified in Mexico. Because he was shy and "not a partier," he declined a couple of invitations to go to bars or clubs with a Mexican student residing at the same house. He remembers being absolutely paralyzed by not knowing whether to address someone as *tú* or *usted* (informal vs. formal *you*) and "would go out of [his] way to avoid making sentences that would force [him] to try one of them." He did not experience much improvement in his language fluency, and the time that he could most strongly feel a change in his Spanish ability was when he was talking to the cab driver on the way to the airport to head home.

Spain

Spain, on the other hand, presented him with numerous challenges and opportunities for growth in the language. His first day there, he had to make phone

calls in order to find an apartment, and talking on the phone in another language was a skill he had had no former experience in. Working at the embassy placed him into a lot of uncomfortable positions: he had to arrange and conduct meetings with Spanish government officials, and interview them and compile their responses into a report. He attended conferences and celebrations, had to listen to lectures in Spanish and "learn to *schmooze* in Spanish." He was forced to be even more careful with the language than he already was in his leisure time. He spent time with many Erasmus students (exchange students from around the European Union), and thus the academic level of Spanish was not as high but interacting with friends purely in Spanish broke down all his barriers of discomfort.

It was in Spain that he ceased to be introverted about language. Because of the dual nature of his language learning in Spain – professional during the day, casual at night – he came to be the most polished speaker out of his friends, and one of the most fluid and comfortable out of his fellow interns at the embassy, and those combined to really help him with his confidence in the language.

The most relevant experience testing his abilities was the time towards the end of his three months in Spain when he decided to take a trip, alone, to the south of the country – Cordoba and Granada. Navigating bus stations, asking directions in a strange city, buying things in stores, all alone, was an exhilarating experience that left him feeling prouder of himself than he had ever been.

Coming back from Spain and taking on new challenges

After his return from Spain, the entire Modern Language department knew he had been abroad, and all the Spanish instructors began conversing with him in

Spanish. He had many long conversations in Spanish with his Mexican-American coworker. He tried to use Spanish sources in research for his classes whenever he could. But his interest in Spanish had always been more professional than cultural; he wasn't particularly interested in Spanish music and literature, and "let's be frank – Spanish wields less cultural, diplomatic, and academic clout than French does. And so as I started to learn French, I found it much more relevant to my studies and personal fulfillment than Spanish is, and thus I gravitated that way." This is his explanation for the transition from Spanish to French, but before studying French, Scott started to be curious about other languages. His positive experience in Spanish and in languages in general soon triggered an interest in other foreign languages such as Japanese, Chinese, then French.

Japanese and Chinese as a hobby

After studying Spanish and reaching a satisfactory level in the language, Scott started to get interested in Japanese and Chinese. He did not qualify his interest in these two languages as being consistent enough to call it "studying." Rather he preferred to call it "dabbling." His goal in both of these languages was to be functionally communicative to a certain extent. Just as in the beginning stages of his Spanish experience, it became what he called his "primary form of entertainment" where he would enjoy the discovery of a new language regardless of the result. At some point, he ordered Rosetta Stone in Japanese and studied it by himself for three weeks. Part of his motivation was that he had two friends who were studying Japanese in college. He would just "go home, lock [himself] and basically wanted to pop out after three weeks and try to communicate with them and

surprise them." He explained that he was convinced he had an ability to demystify language from his previous experiences and that he needed to prove it to himself. In order to do so, he had to demonstrate it and had it validated by others. He stressed the fact that impressing his friends just to impress was not his end goal. What gives him satisfaction and to be able to approach the language and "decode" the structure, extract the concepts and apply them in multiple other situations.

At that point, he drew an interesting parallel with playing the piano. When trying to learn the piano, he explained that he tried to apply the same methodology of deconstructing the skill to observe progress, but he did not reach the same result. He explained that he started to learn but could not see progress, which is why he stopped. However in languages he could see immediate progress (to a certain extent) from day to day which kept him going. When he played the piano, he did not feel like he was getting better regardless of whether he was actually getting better or not, so he quit. With languages he "can go back the next day and read over the things that [he] tried to do the day before" and observe his own progress. Self-perception was a necessary component of how consistent he was in learning a new skill: "I guess it is this feeling of instant gratification and instant self-edification that I get when I learn a language that keeps me going."

Coming back to learning Japanese during these 3 weeks of intensive studying, Scott would spend a daily number of six hours memorizing new vocabulary, learning new grammatical structures, and trying to apply them in his writing. The only problem would be that he did not have any type of feedback during this self-studying. Although it was an intensive schedule, Scott explained

that he would get "some type of perverse pleasure" out of this studying as he realized he would spend all of this time on it. He felt some type of enjoyment in the long difficult process of learning a language as long as he would get some type of feedback.

Scott explained that he did not actually "stop" learning Chinese and Japanese. It is just that the opportunities became scarcer. As for other languages, it depends on whom he had around him to practice with. With the Japanese language, Scott's two Japanese friends left a month or so after he had started to learn the language. As for Chinese, he was able to attend the "Chinese Corner," which is a get-together/communication activity organized by the Confucius Institute. As his new schedule did not allow him to attend more of these events, he became less and less "connected" to the language. Lately, Scott's girlfriend, Emma, started to take Chinese classes at the Confucius Institute. As a result, Scott had a partner to practice Chinese with, which got him motivated to study Chinese more and he asserted that "if [he] can keep up the motivation and perhaps find additional conversational partners, [he] would hope to become functionally communicative in Chinese within the next year."

Latin, Spanish, and now French

Scott does not recall any formal beginning date to when he started studying French. Rather he perceives his experience with French language as being two-fold. He calls the first part of his experience "French for Flair." In high school, he found an online paper in French, which was about the avian flu. When reading it, he realized that he was able to understand most of it. As a result, he started trying

producing the language by practicing random little phrases regardless of accuracy in the language. One thing that attracted his attention was the usefulness of his previous knowledge of Latin in making inferences when reading the article. Today, when looking back at his experience and comparing it to his current knowledge of French, Scott perceives his high school knowledge of French as being artificial: "I thought I knew French because I could read it [the article] and understand most of it, but I did not realize that it was all academic terms where you have a high incidence of cognates between English and French."

In the second part of his French experience, which he is still in today, he became an active learner of French and became less active in his Spanish learning, although it still occupies a part in his life. For several years in a row, he would set his new year's resolution to learn French, but he never actually started. He would try to initiate the same process of intensive language learning that he did with Spanish, Japanese, and Chinese. It was not until the beginning of 2013 that he committed to what he defines as his "period of intense French learning." Another term he used was a "spell," some combination of challenge and passion. "Sometimes I'll have a bike riding spell or a baking spell, or other times I'll have a language spell." To him, these different spells depend on his mood at a certain point and on "what else is going on in my life than I would like it to be."

After graduating, he has been working at the Language Learning Center (LLC) at the University of Oklahoma. He worked at the LLC from fall 2008 until spring 2014. The LLC is a computer lab in the department of Modern Languages where students are able to practice and learn a foreign language through different

types of computer softwares, which are designed to develop the four principal skills (speaking, listening, reading, and writing). Scott's primary job was technical support. He was in charge of fixing the computers. Being immersed in an environment of constant language learning, he started socializing with the students and asking them questions such as "How do you say this in French?" "How do you say this in Chinese?" He took advantage of this language availability and enjoyed the "on-demand ability to get access to whatever foreign language [he] was interested in" as he puts it. Therefore he learned little aspects of the language he was interested in without feeling any pressure to get committed to it on the long term. As he was enjoying the exposure to French, he purchased a dual-language book, which had French on one page and English on the other. Although he had purchased it before 2013, he started to study it intensively in 2013. He would read French and see what he understood then check over the other page for comprehension and words that he did not know. He was able to self assess himself and determine what the next step to take was. He started working with a coworker who was studying French, and he perceived his several hours on the work place with him as having had a positive influence on his commitment. He also got some flashcards in French. Later he got *Le Petit Prince* by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry in French, which is a popular 1943 novel for children and started reading it with the same methodology of inferring meaning and trying to see how much he knew. At that time, he explained that his motivation was purely intrinsic, that "it was for fun." When asked about the roles of his background knowledge of English, Spanish, and Latin in the learning of French, he explained that these languages were "absolutely necessary, The way I

learned French I would say is not as a discrete language, but I began learning French as how it was different from Spanish and Latin." For example, he would look at the *passé composé* (simple past) in French and would extract the similar concepts from Spanish or Latin and learn the different French inflections before he would practice again and again. He would repeat this methodology for every aspects of the language that would allow him to do so. In other words, he would "learn what he already knows" of the language. He would "mutate Spanish and Latin into an ability to communicate in French."

French for romance

Another determining factor that helped Scott commit to French on the long term was his encounter with a new French T.A., Emma, who had arrived in the department of Modern Languages in 2013. She came from France and was pursuing a degree in Native American History and then in World Languages. She was also very interested in languages. Naturally, Scott seized the opportunity to meet her. He found her interesting given her cultural and linguistic background and he asked her for help with his French. "She seems nice and personable in many ways, and I thought why not kill two birds with one stone." They started spending time together, and Scott realized that it was his opportunity to put into practice all the background knowledge and language he had acquired in his countless hours of cramming with his books and flashcards. Although he would still have brief conversations at work in which he could use his French, whether it was with his coworker or with students, he started to have regular opportunities to practice the language with a native speaker when he met Emma. There was a shift in the type of instruction he relied

on. He went from relying a lot on input as he did not have many opportunities to practice to actually rely on communication, to output and positive reinforcement from a native speaker.

The first times they met, as they socialized more and more, Emma was extremely impressed by Scott's level of proficiency in French. He told her he had never taken a French course and that all of it was his own work and self-studying. She was surprised by the extent to which Scott could communicate in French. "She was blown away and so there was that feeling of instant gratification and proving to myself that I had learned it. And I guess also the fact that I can impress ladies with it. That was useful." Soon they started dating and their mutual interest in languages brought its pros and cons.

The good side was that they both had an interest in languages and could reflect on the proficiency of their respective foreign language. Scott was learning French while Emma was looking for more opportunities to speak English. However, Scott explained that he had to insist to speak in French. Being in the US, French is not something that Emma was keen on practicing too much although she loves her language. Rather she had a constant desire to improve her English. "She wants to speak in English all the time, and I come from the exact opposite direction." Every now and then, they speak in French and when they do, they have "pretty natural conversations," which contributed to improve his French.

Unlike Spanish, Japanese, or Chinese, Scott did not have an intensive period of three weeks straight studying, but it was more spread out. However he was still able to observe a sudden considerable improvement as he had been able in the other

foreign languages he had learned. When being asked to describe this feeling of "considerable improvement," he called this improvement a *crystallization*.

Crystallization in French language learning

When studying the language, Scott would learn "bits of the language" and put them (or try to put them) directly into practice. It was not easy to put everything into practice as it depended on outside factors such as context, level of proficiency of the interlocutor, topic of the conversations, etc. However after a month of having regular conversations with Emma, he was able to put most of what he had learned into practice, along with new aspects of the language he learned. He started perceiving many aspects of the language that he had learned come together into functional communication. During a follow-up interview, Scott gave a more complete definition of his feeling of crystallization:

> When I refer to crystallization, I'm thinking about the crystallization of a super-saturated solution wherein all the particles are jam-packed and eager to cling to something, and only need a nucleus on which they can all fall into place. I think the analogy is apt for my experience with France because I felt "supersaturated" with my prior knowledge and vocabulary, and just needed the opportunity for that knowledge to precipitate out into a useful form.

It seemed that he possessed all the prior knowledge but did not know how to use it to "sound French," He explained that his biggest problem was that his French was not academic but literary and heavily influenced by Spanish. For example, he would use phrases like "*Il ne m'importe pas*" and Emma would correct him and tell

him that French people say "*je m'en fiche*" or "*peu m'importe.*" All three expressions mean "I don't care," but the first one is a literal translation of Spanish. I can relate to this when I first learned English and I would say, "to relax the pressure" instead of "release the pressure" or "blow off some steam." I would remember that my English professor in France would tell me that my writing still sounded "too French." Scott's French sounded Spanish. This crystallization did not only happened with idiomatic expressions and phrases but also with details related to grammatical structure such the separability of the French simple past "*Tu as pas mangé"* (literally "you have not eaten"), which is not possible is Spanish "(Tu) no has comido" (literaly "you not have eaten"). What Scott wanted to explain with these different examples is that these were mistakes that he needed to make once to not make them again. He would remember how such or such structure in French is similar or not to Spanish.

He kept practicing his conversational French. In summer 2014, as he was still in a relationship with Emma, he travelled for to France the first time to meet his girlfriend's parents. He stayed there for a month. When he first arrived, he described his level of French as being functional, and after a month he observed a significant improvement.

Second Crystallization in French vs. First Crystallization

When comparing his intensive "alone time" studying French and his experience in the country, Scott did not automatically qualified his time in France as being "better" but just different. He felt that he would not have improved as much had he not spent countless hours with his flash cards and then conversing with his

girlfriend while being in Oklahoma. In his three weeks of cramming, the learning was more internal and personal. It was a lot of "textual reading, mental production, and pronunciation." His vocal production happened both in a solitary time and with his girlfriend. Before going to France, what he perceived as his strong points were reading, writing, and pronunciation. He was still lacking in oral comprehension. He has had opportunities to interact with French people on campus. and he realized he still had problems understanding when French people (other than his girlfriend) were talking to him.

After a week or two in France, he noticed a considerable improvement in his listening skills that he called a "second crystallization," From day to day, he observed a crystallization of skills he did not know he had as people were speaking to him. From his experience with Spanish he knew he was okay in a direct one-on-one conversation, but not in a conversation of multiple people. However, listening in a conversation with multiple people was the skill in which he noticed his "most poignant crystallization moment ever," and from one week to the next he felt his listening comprehension in larger conversations "jumped from 40% to 80%."

He first perceived the phenomenon of crystallization as being divided into the four primary skills of language, that is to say speaking, writing, reading, and listening. He had experienced crystallization in the first three skills when he was still in Oklahoma because he had consistent relevant opportunities to practice them. In addition, he experienced crystallization in listening while being in France because of consistent exposure to different people speaking the language. However, another phenomenon happened while being in France. He also improved his speaking skills

and experienced another crystallization in this area. Before going to France, his speaking was functional and after spending a month in France he considerably improved his fluency. It felt like he had to think less and less before speaking in French. He was conscious about his limitation in oral comprehension, but became conscious about his limitations in speaking only once he considerably improved in this area of the language.

He perceives his current level of French as being "fairly proficient." He is able to have casual conversations in French with his girlfriend and with her family on Skype or on the phone. As her parents do not speak English, it makes it sometimes difficult when Scott does not find a word in French. He would first try it in English hoping it is a cognate, a borrowed word or something else. "It often works but ninety-five percent of the time is in French." He realizes that he has improved in French, but he is conscious "that there is still room for improvement" because of his several experiences in languages.

Perception and interest in languages overall

Given that his parents are not "language people at all," Scott mainly attributed his successful learning to a demystification of the language. He managed to overcome the stereotype that language learning was a painful and difficult process to acquire when he accepted that all that he requires is enough time: "It's only a matter of time. It's not like I lack the skills or the mental faculties. I can do it if I put the time into it." The skills he referred to are his background in Latin and the metalinguistic knowledge he had acquired learning different languages (and also reading Deutscher's *Unfolding of Language* in high school). He also mentioned the

usefulness of his different experiences. Not only was the process of learning an internal activity, but he managed to take opportunities that came to him such as travelling abroad or working at the Language Learning Center.

Although he did succeed in learning French as he put the time and effort into it, he did not put the same time in Chinese for example, but he just did it "for fun." He would spend an hour here and there learning German or Portuguese "just to try to see the way they work." He also tried learning other skills (such as playing the piano as mentioned previously), but gave up quickly as it is not as easy to set concrete goals like it was with languages. When it is comes to language, Scott had developed a methodology to approach every language the same way. "I think I actually do very well beginning with grammatical structures, going at it from a linguistic perspective. I look at it like a system. So, if I understand how the structure is created I can learn the vocabulary to put into it." He explained more in details that grammar provided him with templates in which he had to plug in different vocabulary words in order to learn the language. Before memorizing the vocabulary, he would try to understand the grammar of a language in relation to other languages. Rather than viewing French as a system, Spanish as a system and so forth, he perceives language as a big system that is broken down in different inter-related subsystems. With this approach, Scott feels that if he can understand the "internal logic of the language, then [he] can improve quickly."

He explained that one of the reasons he was so methodological with the language was because he tries to avoid embarrassment. In English he perceives himself as being someone very articulated who has a good diction and

communication competence. This is one of his strengths. He has the skills to express exactly what he is thinking. When he starts learning a foreign language, he loses that strength as he does not have the linguistic tools, and he easily feels embarrassed. He does not want to speak up, which is why he prefers to spend hours cramming alone at first. He does not want to reveal himself as lacking in his ability to communicate his thoughts, which motivates him to learn languages but one step after another: "I despise the idea of starting at the very beginning and jumping into the middle." The example he gave to illustrate that statement was that the idea of going to a foreign country without knowing the language is not appealing to him at all. He would be constantly embarrassed and would avoid communicating. What he perceives as necessary is learning as much as he can in his own time and then applying it, which is what he perceives as a necessary step to skip the "embarrassment period." He wants to avoid making mistakes as much as he can.

It is important for him to be right the first time. For example, he would check online and look at different usage of a word and see if his usage fits the context. When being wrong, he feels "horrible" and does not want to speak anymore. "I want to correct myself privately and not reveal my weaknesses to people." This uncomfortable situation would stop him from trying to speak but would not make him lose his motivation, as he would study more in his own time to try "to make up for the mistakes." On the short term, he might feel less excited to learn the language, but his long-term motivation would not be affected. When first meeting a person, he "would think the sentence a thousand times in [his] head to make sure [he] will say it correctly" because it is very important to make a first

good impression with a foreign language. He explained that this feeling of good impression is something he is seeking specifically when using a foreign language with a person who is fluent in it. He described himself as a risk-averse person who is generally introverted.

Playing the Game of Language

While trying to "decode" French, Scott realized that it was not the same as decoding Japanese. As French is closer to Spanish, it was logical that he could use his previous knowledge of Spanish and modulate it to progress in his learning of French. However as he improved in French, he did not need the Spanish "training wheels" that were slowing him down in his French learning at this point. However with Japanese and Chinese, the structure of the language is different. Here is Scott's impression on the game-like aspect of learning a language:

> To a certain extent it is definitely a game-like mentality, I think that's a very strong analogy, yes. If you play a game for a week and come back at the first level you think '*My gosh, this is so easy, how did I ever get confused about this!*' and with language it's often the same, but the extent to which one can view a language as a code-like system is highly dependent on the language family and structure of the language. Japanese, for example, functions very much like a programming language such as Java. In Java you might say "string Name = 'Scott'" which means you are declaring a variable "Name," declaring it as a string (a line of text) and setting it equal to "scott." In Japanese you would say *watashi no namae wa Scott desu* to mean "my name is scott",

and you do that by putting the first person pronoun, *watashi*, setting it to the possessive state (by adding the no), invoking "name" and setting it to subject (*namae* and *wa*, respectively), and then completing the equation as "=Scott", in this case *Scott desu*. To look at it again in Java syntax, *Possessive I Subjective Name = "Scott."* Chinese, in contrast, does not function much like an object-oriented programming language, and is often compared to "Lego" – like in English, the word order determines meaning, and like German small words can combine into larger accumulations for more complex meaning. In either case though, or in any language in between, learning the syntax and morphology is the skeleton of the language and what I feel truly makes one language, aside from the culture, unique from another; after one understands the syntax and morphology, the rest is mostly vocabulary and practice.

This explanation from Scott illustrates his vision of languages under the same category of linguistics. This way it is obvious for Scott to approach languages as something that he already possesses a background knowledge in, which is his experience and expertise with metalinguistic knowledge.

Analysis of Scott's Experience

Scott's successful experience with language is all the more interesting as Scott does not perceive himself as a "language person." As opposed to the other participants, he did not major in languages or in any field related to linguistics. However a great quality that Scott has is to be able to deconstruct a language.

Rather than emphasizing the socio-cultural dimensions of language, his approach to language as a system made of different pieces is a skill he has acquired over time.

Learning to learn: a Metalinguistic approach

Like other participants, Scott's journey has been to learn how to learn a language. In his experience of learning, he went through a process of trial-feedback-validation until he developed his own approach to learning a language, an approach that is not universal but particular to his own perception of the self and of the language. Learning involves creating a connection between the self and the object, here the language. When learning Spanish, Scott would memorize sentences as a chunk, such as "Donde esta el baño?" (where is the restroom). In SLA, this formulaic approach to language learning follows the behaviorist perspective. Learning is first and foremost acquiring a behavior. In the late 1950s Skinner developed an approach to learning that perceives knowledge as a behavior, that is to say, a product of a "stimulus-response" combination. By repeating specific sentences over and over, Scott's first approach to language allowed him to possess basic skills to express certain ideas in the target language. However this approach has its limits, and it did not easily allow Scott to go to the next step of the language, which is being creative.

Knowledge of the self and of the environment

As he improved in Spanish, he reached a point in which he plateaued mainly because there was no incentive. Again, there is a necessity of developing skills while encountering matching challenges in order to keep developing a more complex self while enjoying the process. He managed to exit the state of plateauing

by traveling to Spanish speaking countries, first to Mexico, then to Spain. He described it as "a staircase, a punctuated equilibrium of plateau and improvement." He plateaued until he was exposed to the challenges that matched his skills. It seems that traveling abroad provides the language learner with an array of challenges. In addition to that, it provides the learner with a certain autonomy that he does not automatically have in the classroom. What the successful language learner acquires is the knowledge of the language and a better understanding of the process of acquiring such knowledge.

Depending on the environment and the available opportunities, Scott set challenges that were dependent on the language availability and popularity. The goals he set for himself with Spanish were not the same as for Japanese, for example. His goal with Japanese was to decode the language and get validation from his friends. Being able to decode the language, extract concepts, and reapply them to make new sentences provided him with a sense of control over the experience. Again it is the ability to be creative with the language paired with regular feedback that provided him with a sense of enjoyment. Scott demonstrated that he had this personality trait of making the best of his environment to create learning opportunities in order to test his skills, get validated, and go to the next step. This type of personality is the type that is active with the experience and not passive with it. Like other participants, Scott demonstrated an ability to be the subject of his experience rather than the object. However, he did not describe himself as being risk-taking to any extent.

From languages to Language

Scott's interest in learning French came as a continuity of having reached a certain level of proficiency in Spanish. "The way I learned French I would say is not as a discrete language, but I began learning French as how it was different from Spanish and Latin." It is not uncommon that bilinguals of Spanish and English try to "play with French." Some, like Rebecca, make it a future goal to learn French. Some, like Scott, actually learn it. It seems as if it was a higher challenge to be set after speaking English and Spanish in the mind of some language learners. Among my participants, at least three, Rebecca, Scott and Emma, showed an evolution in their perception of languages. Little by little, they started perceiving languages in a more holistic manner. It became *one language* rather than *many languages*, especially for Scott.

In the case of Scott, there were obviously external motivations such as his girlfriend and everything that it implied, such as meeting her parents in France. What is interesting in his experience in French was the level of autonomy and discipline he was able to reach while studying on his own. The greatest achievement he made was to have a particular schedule to study French. As Csikszentmihalyi explains, taming the time is taming the self. In his free time, he would choose his own goals, set his own challenges, and with a system of trial and error, he would find appropriate materials to match his skills and sustain a state of flow. With a knowledge of the self and of the world in the context of language learning, he sensed a control of the experience. Having the ability to have an organized schedule with no imposed activities is a quality that promotes flow. Did taming the time promote flow or does being in a state of flow while performing an activity enable

easy time management? Perhaps both ideas are valid, a dialogic circle in which the individual has to jump from one end or another.

Scott is a language engineer

All in all, after reading Deutscher's *Unfolding of Language*, after experiencing language learning, after merging different fields in which he has an expertise, he developed a metalinguistic sense about language, what he called the 'language game,' a game in which he defined his own rules, his own structure, his own system of assessment and instant feedback, and his own goals. In other words he performed a game repeatedly to be in a state of flow. It can be said that Scott experiences flow when he is able to break down a skill into pieces of a system and reconstruct this system in different ways to obtain different outcomes. A good illustration is the way he adopted Grimm's Law in his language learning experience. Grimm's Law is the group of rules that govern changes between Romance and Germanic languages. For example, the letter *p* in a Romance language would translate in a *f* in a Germanic language. Hence, in Latin *pesc-* would be *fish* in English. Another similar rule is that in Romance words of Germanic origin that begin with a *g*, the English equivalent has a *w*, as for example *guerre*/*war*, *guêpe*(from *guesp*)/*wasp*, *garde*/*ward*, and *Guillaume*/*William*. Scott says that "knowing rules like these allows an instant, rapid expansion in one's vocabulary in a target language."

Scott created a *language engineer* approach to language, which is accessing language from the inside as opposed to Emma whose approach is more from the outside. Scott perceived a language like French in its linguistic and historical

context, that is to say as a Latin language that finds its roots in Latin and in Indo-European languages. Knowing this, he would use his previous knowledge of other Indo-European languages he knew (English and Spanish) not only at the level of cognates but at the level of semantics as all three languages use an Subject-Verb-Object pattern for example. He perceived languages as part of linguistics before considering it as part of a sociocultural context as he explained it in terms of computer games in the last quote of his description. He is now better equipped to understand where he stands as to his "adventure of the language." Scott knows that he is doing well but that there is still room for improvement.

Chapter 5: Cross Analysis

In this section, rather than analyzing participants individually, I intended to extract the commonalities and look at each experience from a more holistic perspective. While each description was followed by a short analysis of the participants' particularities, this section intends to look at their experience under the light of SLA theories, psycholinguistics and most importantly, Flow Theory. The emphasis is put on the participants' perspective rather than on "objective performance," if we may call it so.

1. Influence of crosslinguistic factors

The level of proficiency in the target language varied from one participant to another. While Rebecca spent time in Hispanic countries, is married to a native speaker, and lives in a state where there is an important community of Spanish speakers, Scott spent a month in France, has a girlfriend who is a native speaker, and mainly studied on his own. Emma lives in the country where she uses the target language on a daily basis, and Andrew seeks opportunities to use Chinese every now and then. Beyond the different types of exposure and the availability of the language in terms of quality and quantity, there are crosslinguistic factors. As seen before, crosslinguistic is the field that studies how background languages influence the acquisition of a target language. Although my study focuses on personal and psychological factors, it is important to mention how the nature, the level of proficiency, and the order of acquisition of the languages influenced the target

language intake.

While Andrew's goals were not as high as Rebecca's, both seemed to have experienced the same intensity of self-fulfillment and self-realization after their epiphany. Rebecca's goals in learning Spanish and her level of proficiency were higher than Andrew's in Chinese. From a crosslinguistic point of view, one explanation for the difference in performance in each of these languages might lay in the differences in proximity between Spanish, English, and Chinese. Flow suggests that the individual uses the skills he possesses in order to set reachable challenges. Crosslinguistics suggests that at the beginning stages of language acquisition, the language learner predominantly uses her background language (Lindqvist). At the beginning stages of their target language learning, Andrew and Rebecca both spoke one language, English. Research suggests that their background language determined the challenges they set in the target language. It becomes understandable that Spanish learning and Chinese learning occurred at different rates at the beginning stages, although final proficiency can be the same depending on other factors than the linguistic ones. Because English and Spanish are close Indo-European languages, Rebecca already possessed a "headstart" in her acquisition of Spanish. However, Andrew's English did not influence the learning of Chinese as much.

2. Periods of intensive studying

The interview of all the participants revealed a period of intensive studying. During this period, participants showed similar skills of organization, knowledge of the self, knowledge of the content, and knowledge of the nature of the interaction of

the self with the content. During this period, beyond the end goal of being proficient in a language, the language learners showed a motivation in the performing of their studying. The studying was making sense by itself. It was an autotelic activity. Students showed autonomy and organization skills that they seem to have acquired by performing the activity of studying on their own repeatedly. Undertaking the task of studying intensively has been maintained because the participants made it a flow state. What is interesting is that the state of flow can be triggered in two ways. Either the activity focuses our attention, in which case we can talk about an *extrinsic state of flow*, or we invest attention in an activity that is not "fun" in the first place, in which case we can talk about an *intrinsic state of flow*. An intrinsic state of flow is essential to the individual. It is created primarily inside. An extrinsic state of flow comes from an outside activity and is then internalized inside the mind.

State of flow vs. motivation

One important nuance I want to make is that an intrinsic state of flow does not automatically correspond to intrinsic motivation. For example, when Scott learning French, the motivation was mainly intrinsic, as he was not obtaining any type of reward from learning the language. His state of flow was also intrinsic. However, when cramming on his Spanish, the motivation was extrinsic as he was preparing for a placement test that would allow him to save time and place in a more advanced level. Although this type of motivation was external, the flow state he created was internal. He organized his time and set up goals that he broke down into challenges. These challenges would provide him with the necessary feedback to keep going. His skills would improve, and he would set high challenges that

correspond to the current amount of skills he would possess. Thus, we can infer that he internally triggered a state of flow with an activity that was not "flow friendly" in the first place, the activity of studying. He "created" a state of flow out of an activity that was "imposed." He explained that he probably would not have studied Spanish that much if not for a placement test.

Another example of intrinsic state flow while the motivation is extrinsic is Rebecca. While Rebecca was learning Spanish in high school, the motivation was extrinsic as it counted as credits that she wanted to earn. Although the class was "boring," she managed to actively create a state of flow as she came up with the game of imitating accents which kept her interested in the content of the class.

Therefore, the type of motivation and the type of flow state are independent from one another, although they are closely related. One does not determine the other, but one is more likely to happen in the presence of the other. The important dimension here is that a flow state can arise from an activity that is not intrinsically motivating at first. Emma and Rebecca both created 'mini-flow' states by being exposed to the language.

To come back to the intensive studying, they had to invest psychic energy in the task at hand in order to maintain it with the same intensity and same enthusiasm. For this reason, I would rather talk about an intrinsic state of flow regardless of the type of motivation they had. They generated a state of flow in an activity that is not intrinsically motivating. By setting up a time, a number of words to acquire, a certain grammatical unit to cover in a certain amount of time, and a certain amount of skills to possess, they were able to *monitor* their own learning.

3. Controlling the experience

Monitoring provides a sense of control over the experience

While metaknowledge is being developed, it promotes a certain control of the experience. Controlling the experience is actually controlling the perception of the experience and the self. It means that the individual has a good knowledge of the skills she possesses and of the corresponding challenges that are available in her environment. Being able to determine what the next step is is a faculty the four participants had. In SLA, there has been research on how to reach the linguistic content beyond the language learner's current knowledge. Vygotsky's zone of proximal development (ZPD) provides an explanation to describe the ways learners reach a higher point in the process of acquiring a language. Although these concepts are different, they both refer to a type of knowledge that is within the language learner's reach. The nuances that Flow Theory adds to these approaches is that it focuses both on exposure and the subjectivity of the language learner. Rather than only being exposed to a type of knowledge that is within his reach, the language learner should develop skills to analyze, select, and interact with what is within his reach. He should be active about it. "Opportunities alone, however, are not enough. We also need the skills to make use of them." (author 83). Flow and SLA theories do not cancel each other. They inform each other about the mode and the method by which language can be acquired. Flow is a mode and SLA theories are a method. The participants seemed to all have this ability to be 'their own teacher.'

Creativeness and sense of control over the experience

Participants showed an evolution in their perception of successful language

learning when they were able to use the language more creatively. This affected not only their proficiency but also the extent to which they experienced flow. We can suggest that using the language creatively, although subjective, facilitated the maintenance of a state of flow and the learning of the language. Participants explained how they were able to analyze certain concepts from the input they were exposed to, extract them, memorize them, and reapply them to form sentences they have never heard before. This combination of memory and creativity is the heart of language learning as Chomsky's Universal Grammar suggests. The ability to extract concepts from the language we are exposed to reveals an ability to analyze the environment and select the challenges that match our current skills. It is only by recognizing the concepts and understanding how they relate to possessed skills that the learner can acquire and reuse these concepts. This implies that not everything we are exposed to is learned. In SLA, this differentiation is translated by the term *intake*. *Input* represents the content exposed to the learner, and *output*, the content produced by the learner. *Intake* stands for the knowledge acquired through experiences, a knowledge that is connected to previous knowledge already possessed by the learner.

By being able to use previously acquired concepts and apply them to a new experience, the language learner uses the universality behind the language to reapply it to its particularities. For example, when a child is exposed to the following pairs: "one chair, two chairs"; "one cat; two cats", she unconsciously extract the concept of the plural formation - which she believes to be the adding of an "s" - and reapplies it to other words she has never heard the plural of. She will

then be able to say “one book; two books” or even “one tooth; two tooths.” Therefore, when a kid says “two tooths”, she is just using her capacity to extract the concept of the “s” plural rule to reapply it to the particularity of the word *tooth*. Although this is a mistake in our system of language, it shows how the language learner is creative with the language. This research suggests that there is a similar phenomenon with Second Language Acquisition. This implies, as the participants stated, that they were not automatically correct when being creative with the language, but they were managing to express new ideas by making a new use of the language.

Extracting concepts does not automatically translate in using them creatively. It requires repetition. It is by multiplying experiences and exposure to the language that the participants, through a process of confirming and disconfirming, built their own concepts and applied them in real situations. The building of skills or concepts is tied with the occurrences of challenges.

Managing to play with the language this way and having a direct influence on the exterior world provided the participants with a sense of control of the experience. For example, when Andrew would use the language accurately while shopping in China, obtaining the item he asked for provided him with the necessary feedback to let him know he was on the right track. In speech act theory, the utterance of a question is a performative activity: as it is enunciated, it alters the reality by performing an action, which in the case of this study provides valuable feedback to the performer of the utterance. When asking a question to the shopkeeper, Andrew was able to receive instant feedback as to whether he

communicated well enough or not. The constant availability of feedback contributed to feeling a sense of control on the creativeness of the language and on the experience.

Playing the language game

A recurrent impression among the participants was this feeling of playing a game. It is interesting how the control over the experience allowed students to feel more enjoyment while performing the activity. Some participants like Rebecca felt some type of anxiety during her first weeks in Spain, but as she improved with intensive studying, she acquired the necessary skills to face a challenge that appeared out of reach at first. After experiencing an 'epiphany', what was an anxiety had become a language game. Although Rebecca's game was different from others participants' games, what they all had in common was that these games were all tailored by participants to match the skills they possessed or the perception of the skills they possessed. The whole process of learning, from acquiring skills to finding corresponding challenges, took place in the form of a game, with skills, challenges, and points under the form of feedback.

Even more interesting was the ability that Scott had to decompose language and analyze it as a system detached from the culture it represents. He was convinced that each language had an underlying structure and that once you crack the code, learning the language becomes easier. To a certain extent, we can make the case that the challenge he first set was to crack the code of a language before learning it and that multiplying the number of languages to learn was just a way to recreate an experience of cracking the code. At some moments, he might have been more

interested in cracking the code than in language learning itself.

4. Language Epiphany

One of the most interesting aspects of this study is what Andrew called "an epiphany." This phenomenon occurred for all the participants, although Scott called it "a crystallization," Rebecca referred to it as *an explosion*, and Emma viewed it as "a *gestalt*" or "knitting knowledge together." From a flow point of view, it seemed that little discreet activities, which were providing a state of mini-flow, have come together in an activity that provided a greater sense of Flow. For example, while Rebecca was still working on her Spanish accent, she started to study intensively grammar and vocabulary, two separate and related areas of language. After a certain amount of time, she was able to be functional in all of these different areas under to activity regrouping all three, language. In the case of Emma, as she was improving her English, she was also developing expertise in Native American literature and Native American history. As she managed to connect all of the skills she had acquired, she experienced an epiphany, not a language epiphany, but what she cleverly described as a gestalt, where the sum is greater than the parts. For example in my case, the knowledge of four different language is not limited to a sum, but it is superior to this sum as I have acquired a certain metalinguistic knowledge and also a metalinguistic intuition for certain languages. I perceive the value of being a polyglot as going beyond the mere knowledge of four languages.

Crystallization of multiple skills to face a greater challenge

Three of my participants, Rebecca, Andrew, and Scott, experienced an epiphany after an intensive period of studying. When describing their feelings, I

believe the best depiction was Scott's. He referred to a phenomenon of crystallization, a term borrowed from chemistry that refers to a precipitation of crystals forming a solid. By connecting all the linguistic aspects into sentences and into a conversation, Scott experienced "a crystallization of language." Another reason he had to use the term crystallization was to represent metaphorically the lack of control over this phenomenon. Although the use of language is voluntary and conscious, Scott, Rebecca, and Andrew seemed to have been surprised about the extent to which they were able to have a regular conversation with a native or a native-like speaker. It is as if "everything came together on its own." From a flow point of view, it seemed that the period of intensive studying helped to build a considerable amount of skills in a short amount of time, which allowed the participants to skip steps in what used to be their pace of learning. Additionally while cramming alone on their books, participants explained that they did not receive the feedback they were used to. For a certain amount of time, they were 'their own source of feedback' as opposed to when others' validation would be a source of feedback. I hypothesize that there was an improvement with no clear feedback that translated into an epiphany while they "went out there" to practice with people. To a certain extent, the feeling of crystallization could be considered a specific state or phase of Flow where the challenge met appears to be high, but the deep effort over a short amount of time to build the necessary skills allows the language learner to overcome the challenge and receive greater feedback.

Merging Flow Activities

When improving skills and facing challenges while performing an activity,

the learner experiences a state of flow and seeks to experience this state again. However, the only way he knows to experience this state is through a particular activity. We can suggest that he reproduces this activity with the end goal of feeling a state of flow. The finality is flow and not only the activity itself. At some point, the learner may experience a state of flow in a different activity and now, he has two different activities in which he experiences flow. To a certain extent, this is what we call developing interests. If the learner manages to merge his two activities into a single activity, it is highly possible that the state of flow will be more constant and deeper as the challenges, and therefore the self, become more and more complex. This is comparable to what happened to Emma. Emma developed different flow activities such as Native American literature, American culture, etc. What she defined as "knitting her education together" may have been the merging of different flow activities into a more complex one that is more psychologically rewarding one.

It is interesting that in the process of merging flow activities, the end goal of each activity turns out to become a challenge in the more complex activity. For example, in the case of Rebecca, she managed to merge her interests in Spanish and education into a more complex activity where mastering Spanish and mastering theories in education became challenges in the activity of teaching Spanish as a second language. She discovered a connection between language and education in which her experience of flow was deepened.

In the case of Emma, her interest in other cultures from a very young age provided her with a sense of flow. As she developed a growing interest in American culture, she increased her involvement in learning more about it. As she learned

more about it, she developed skills in a parallel but related field: the English language. After merging American culture and English language, we can hypothesize that she created a more complex activity that provided her with a greater sense of flow. As she developed skills in American culture, she also developed interest in Native American cultures, which led her to study Cherokee and other languages later. Today, she has developed an interest in languages and cultures that she cannot dissociate from each other.

Scott also merged activities in which he previously had expertise to continue to experience flow. As he had an interest in engineering and languages, he merged these two flow activities into a more complex one by considering language as a system that he could deconstruct and reconstruct. He reapplied this strategy to many languages he started to learn. By doing so, he created his own methodology matching his skills with the available challenges. He was able to use the methodology he developed and apply it to many different languages, sometimes successfully, sometimes less successfully. When applying his methodology with success, as in French, he would experience a state of flow and develop a growing interest in the French language.

Andrew developed an interest in traveling from a young age. He went to teach in China where he developed an interest both in education and Chinese. This led him to start a Master's degree in World Languages and to get his teaching certification. Following this logic, I suggest that Andrew would have experienced a deeper state of Flow had he managed to incorporate another flow activity he possessed, photography. Merging activities requires the participants to have skills to

analyze and reflect on the outside world to discover the existing connections between their different fields of interests and to take actions.

5. From Flow to Flow

Language is not a discreet activity and by treating it as such, it loses its purpose. The primary function of speaking a language is not to speak it well but to communicate.Disregarding this primary function and focusing on endless lists of vocabulary and grammarruns the risk of emptying the language of its essence. As seen in this research, interests in language rose from interests in the culture, in traveling, in fending for oneself in another country, or in other languages as an engineered system. To put it differently, interests in language learning can come from peripheral activities connected to language. Similarly, interests in language can lead to other activities related to language. Flow is first and foremost subjective. It happens in the learner's mind. Outside experiences can be perceived as a stimulus to create a feeling of Flow. According to Csikszentmihalyi experiences are means that transport us from one flow activity to another. The interconnectedness of the world is the fuel that keeps the feeling of flow alive. Beyond describing their experiences of language learning, the participants also described which piece of the puzzle language occupied in their lives. They were able to define language not as its own independent system but as its relationship to other things. Emma is the most obvious example as for her, language is culture and culture is language. Scott paid more attention to language as a system and, more specifically, as an evolving system, which led him to explore roots, and in a more general way history. Andrew's approach to Chinese was different. He still considered culture and history important

but put a specific emphasis on interaction and action. His approach to language was more pragmatic than Emma and Scott.

Why do some experiences lead to others, and some experiences do not lead to more experiences because they aren't experienced? American educator and philosopher John Dewey highlighted a similar concept in *Arts as Experience*. According to him, a true experience is when the material experienced has fulfilled its course. There is a sense of completeness in the *true experience.* In Csikszentmihalyi's word, the experience is autotelic. It provides fulfillment by itself. Dewey explains that "in such experiences, every successive part flows freely, without seam and without unfilled blanks, into what ensues" (206). Following this view, a case can be made that meaningful experiences are different manifestations of the same psychological phenomenon. Although Dewey did not think of flow, there are possible connections to be drawn with Deweys' view of experience. Dewey sees a universality among individuals through "a single quality that pervades the entire experience in spite of the variation of its constituent parts" (206) According to Dewey the essence of the experience is the same across individuals and the particularities of the experiences. I suggest that language learning is just another experience or another learning experience, another opportunity for growth. Throughout this research, language learning was considered as being another learning experience, which some SLA theorists like Chomsky disagreed with. Language learning might have particularities that are not found in the learning of other skills; there is still a universality in the way language and other skills are learned.

6. Implications for Language Teaching: from being object to subject of learning

Flow, as a subjective condition, describesa psychological state in which the language learners in this research acquired the target language. Rather than being the direct cause of their learning, what is suggested in this study is that it was the form under which learning and acquisition took place. The participants' perceptions of their language experience showed different stages of flow states and different forms of flow personalities. By intending to reproduce this condition in language classrooms, we might promote successful language learning. Reproducing a flow condition implies being able to deconstruct it as a theory and reconstruct it as a practice in the context of the language classroom. Although this approach would require more research, this section of the paper intends to make some suggestions in this area in order to illustrate the usefulness of research in Flow theory and language instruction.

Students should learn to become their own teachers

One dimension of Flow that all the participants had was the ability to extract useful information from their experiences in order to set challenges that are matching their skills. Being able to do so required them to have a certain knowledge of their skills and their potential. Through a consistent system of feedback, the participants were able to calibrate the challenges they set according to their growth in the second language. All the participants personalized their own teaching to fit their learning preferences and to maximize their language intake.

This idea of "taking it to the next step" is popular in SLA. Whether we talk

about Vygotsky's ZPD, or Piaget's stages of cognitive development, there is always the idea of scaffolding. In this research, participants were active in altering the evolution of their second language proficiency. While SLA theories in the classroom suggest that the teacher or the content available incarnates and determines "this next step," Flow theory suggests that it is the student's duty to determine, under the supervision of his teacher, what next step she can take. It is in the process of setting goals that are too challenging or too easy that the student learns to calibrate her own learning pace and rate.

As seen in this research, there were as many approaches to language learning as there were participants. While Scott's approach was very systematic, Emma's approach was very social. Andrew's approach was more behavioristic as he relied a lot on repetition and practice, and Rebecca's approach was more output-based. How can a language class reflect everyone's approach or preferences? This is where research needs to extract the universality behind the particularities of the participants. Although students had different approaches in their language experience, they all had autonomy in their learning. To meet this need classrooms should leave room for different learning strategies to take place within the frame set by the goal of making students their own teachers.

Since education should be personalized within a universal frame, it would make sense to form teachers to represent this universal frame and have students personalize their own teaching. This would go beyond giving a choice to the students while providing them with basic skills of self-evaluation and reflection of their progression. Students have to become their own teachers under the supervision

of a facilitator of the experience. However, this type of autonomy should also be promoted to the service of the collective in order to discourage individualism in society.

The study of the shared experience of language learning would be an example of intending to reproduce a state of flow in the classroom as the end goal would be to provide students with a sense of control over the experience of their learning. Therefore, one of the main roles of education is not to accumulate knowledge but to accompany students in their transformation from an object to the subject of their education.

Being creative with the language is owning the language

It has been observed throughout this study that the feeling of experiencing an epiphany correlated with a strong sense of creativity with the language. Participants were able to use all the skills they had acquired creatively. The words "playing with the language" were often used to describe the sense of control that the participants had over the experience.

It would be interesting to see how classroom activities and practices could encourage students to be creative with the language and what consequences this would have. Beyond teaching them language content, this could encourage them to grow a certain interest in a skill over which they slowly feel control. I believe one objective would be to own the language. Motivating students to grow an interest in a language is more important than increasing the density of the curriculum content, and the language rules a student should master by a certain age. Although classrooms already value creativity to a certain extent, curriculum objectives could

switch from emphasizing skills such as "demonstrated an ability to use the past tense" to *metaskills* such as "demonstrated an ability to be creative with the language." In spite of the research that suggests that there are learning sequences in the language content (Lightbown and Spada), it would be interesting to suggest a different curriculum that focuses not so much on the order in which the language is acquired but on the mode, which in this case is illustrated by the psychological state of flow. Therefore, beyond focusing on content, the curriculum focus would switch to a "metacontent," or to skills demonstrating a control over language content rather than over a specific aspect of the language such as the past tense.

From content to metacontent

As stated before, the flexibility of the language curriculum should always be within a certain frame established by the teacher who knows the students and can diagnose his students' skills in order to anticipate which level they can go to next. As the student should also develop a certain ability to diagnose her skills and what step to take next, setting an objective frame and a goal to reach should be a mutual process that engage both the student and the teacher. During this process, students learn more about the "art of diagnosing skills" while teachers learn more about "the different difficulties of learning," Therefore, the student is a teacher, and the teacher is a student. Incorporating some aspects of Flow does not automatically guarantee a state of flow.

Although, language instruction already incorporates some "flow-like" features in its content and in its teaching practices, what is proposed by this research is to consistently reproduce a "flow-friendly" atmosphere in the classrooms. Providing

students with feedback is not recreating a flow-like experience if it does not include other features of Flow Theory.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

1. Flow is subjective

Flow theory is a perpetual circle in which the language learner needs to jump from one side or the other. Performing well in an activity can bring interest in the activity, and interest in the activity can increase the performance. This dialectic relationship between the individual and the outside world holds the phenomenon of learning. Learning is connecting something old with something new. Because learning, or more generally growth, can occur under a state of flow, the relationship between subject and object takes place in flow. There is a constant influence from both sides in the process of learning, the process of experiencing and the process of living. There are many ways to learn, experience, and live. This research focused on successful learning. Throughout this research, it was suggested that performing well in an activity such as language learning depends on the participant's perception of the evolution of his skills in the language. This evolution depends on the challenges she sets for his skills and on the nature of the feedback she received. In other words, successful exposure to an experience can lead to a state of flow and similarly, a state of flow can enhance further exposure to the experience. If the experience is language, being good at language learning can make the language experience an enjoyable one and having an enjoyable language experience can enhance the language intake, that is to say, the rate and quality of acquisition.

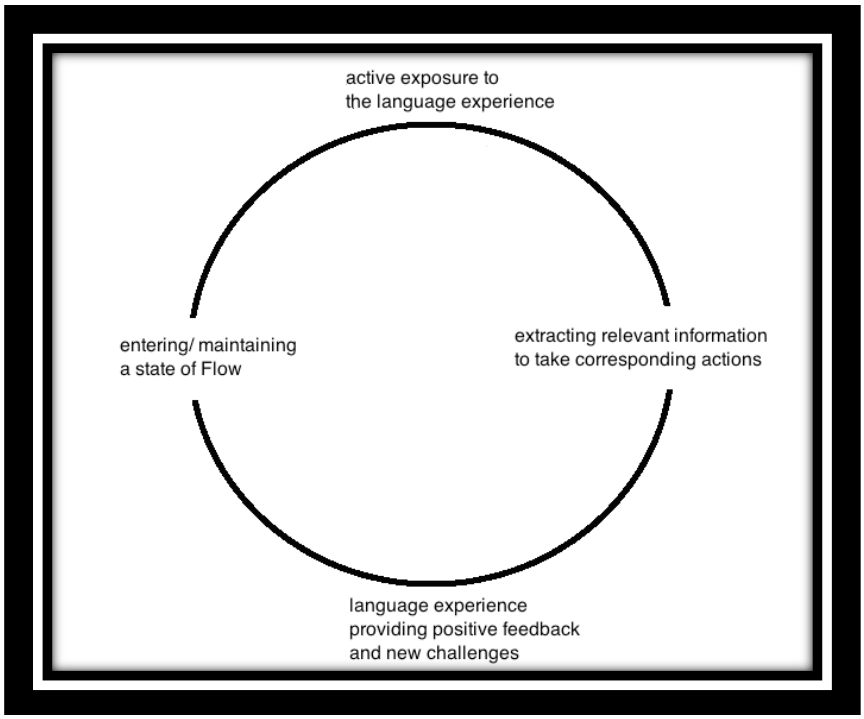


Fig.9. Language Experience and Flow

A state of flow will lead the individual to enjoy the language experience by being an active *experiencer* rather than passive. Being active means the individual will have the capacity to extract relevant information from his experience to set challenges that will match his skills. If the selection of the challenges is well calibrated, which implies a knowledge of the skills and of the self, the language learner will more than likely experience a positive feedback, which might reinforce his state of flow. In the figure above, "state of flow" and "taking corresponding actions" are inside the circle as these are mechanisms that intervene inside the mind. On the other hand, the experience occurs outside. In this research, the participants had limited control on the outside experience but had developed a control over the nature of their interaction with the outside experience, that is to say, their learning methodology. Experience is not a factor but a vector of Flow. This means that two language learners can be exposed to the same experience, but the linguistic intake

will be different from one language learner to another. Therefore, in this vision the experience is the means while the mind is the cause and the effect.

Flow is subjective. It starts and ends in the mind with the mediation of the experience. It depends on the language learner. For example, a language learner can be extremely satisfied with her level of proficiency in the language, although it is lower that another language learner who might be more perfectionist and not be happy about his level of proficiency. This comparison raises the following question: is linguistic knowledge subjective?

What this research suggests is that there were different particularities in the acquisition of the language among the participants and that these particularities fall under a universality of the mode of acquisition. The mode of acquisition was Flow theory, but the particularities in the different approaches were more related to SLA theories. Similarly, we can infer that the linguistic knowledge possessed by a language learner is subjective within an objective frame.

Although we are all different, we possess different ideas of what it means to be proficient in the language. For some, it can mean to be able to communicate and get around when traveling as a tourist in a foreign country; for others it can mean to be able to work and live in the country, or even to teach the language. As time goes by, if the individual becomes a lifelong learner, an end goal she had set, such being able to get around in the country, can turn into a challenge, a stepping-stone to a higher goal, such as getting certified in teaching the language.

These differences in goals reflect, among other things, a difference of perception of the usefulness of the language. Some learn Spanish to be able to be

functional, whereas others end up making it their major. Some start learning the language with the goal to be able to exchange and soon this goal of being able to communicate switches to being accurate with the language. Classrooms should reflect these differences. Teachers should not assume that everyone needs to become bilingual, but that everyone can if they learn how to own the language. Nevertheless, it is useful to have certain objectives that involve the acquisition of specific aspects of the language such as being able to use the past tense. The problem is when the emphasis of the content becomes more important than the emphasis on learning. If the practice is emptied from its principle, instruction is disregarding its finality, which is to give students the tools of their own learning.

2. Flow in the classroom

Good students are their own teachers

As suggested before, one feature of the successful language learner is the ability to reflect on her own learning and take informed decisions in order to "keep going" in his language experience. This implies that as language educators, we should accompany students in the acquisition of the language and also teach students – (or provide them with experiences) to monitor their progress to be able to be autonomous learners and subjects of their education. It is only by giving them the skills to create their own learning stepping-stones that students will become lifelong learners. Although some language curricula already emphasize the importance of reflection through portfolios for example, it would be interesting to develop a classroom curriculum that intends to recreate or promote flow. For this reason, more research is needed in the field of metalinguistics and metaknowledge instruction to

be able to present it in a way that is understandable for students of all ages in order to create autonomous language learners. To me, learning is like pushing a cart, and when it has momentum, you jump in it. What is essential is that schools make "pushing" interesting, engaging, and relevant enough for students to keep pushing before the cart is running, in other words, encouraging students to become lifelong learners before they leave school.

Making learning enjoyable and making enjoyment an engine for learning

Sigmund Freud's approach to the pleasure principle does not explain life's purpose, but it provides an understanding of human behavior. It does not explain what we should do, but what we are. It states that as dynamic individuals, we are prewired to seek pleasure and avoid pain. Using the pleasure-seeking force in language classes or using it more seriously as the center of our teaching could have a positive effect in the students' experience of schooling. It can help create a bridge between the inside and outside of the classroom. This study suggests that enjoyment is possible mainly through the subjectivity of the individual, through the active rather than passive status of the individual. If the student invests in an activity, this activity starts to have more value to him. In the case of our participants, the investment was not always voluntary. Rebecca's imitation of accents, although she was doing it "for fun," was an investment in Spanish. It allowed her to create skills that helped her face other situations with the language where the challenges were higher.

Crosslinguistic Factors and the Language Classroom

As seen throughout this research, beyond the influence of the participants'

personality in their learning experience was the influence of the background language(s) already possessed. Recognizing that students do not come to class with an empty brain but with previous knowledge, be it a language, a dialect, or experiences in general, is a step toward helping students to own their education. In the field of language acquisition, research is needed to examine language teachers' understanding of the role prior language acquisition and experience has on learning an additional one. Issue over the usefulness and legitimacy of background languages in classrooms vary among teachers and parents. On the one hand, In the United States, proponents of English-only education believe it is confusing or demeaning to use background languages in schools. Some Hispanic parents and teachers in the US decide not to use Spanish in classrooms in order to avoid language interference (Au). On the other hand, there is relevant research that supports the legitimate place of background languages in classrooms and its usefulness in the process of learning (Au). It is necessity to incorporate background languages in classrooms to teach the whole child and to treat diversity in the classrooms with respect (Dewey).

3. There is a "successful language learner's" culture

What is important to highlight here is that although Andrew, Scott, Emma, and Rebecca had different emphases on the perception of their language experiences, they still acknowledged the importance of the factors that influenced each other. Andrew agrees that language is culture just like Emma agrees that language is practice. However, the way I approached them and the way I interpreted their thoughts and interviews highlighted certain factors more than others. Subjectivity is a non-negligible factor. What I retain from their responses is the

similarities in the essence of their personality through the particularities of their approaches. This research provides an understanding of some skills or behaviors that the participants shared in the process of acquiring a language, such as controlling the experience and being creative with the language. The differences in practice revealed a similarity behind their perception.

This culture is promoted by a "flow-friendly" environment, or an environment that provides a wide array of different linguistic challenges with a wide possibility of feedback. I suggest that this is why a second language is more easily acquired when being immersed in the country where it is spoken. When traveling abroad, the language learner is exposed to the availability of an infinite number of different challenges. It becomes easy to "pick an experience" rather than to create one. However, traveling abroad is not a necessity in the acquisition of a language, depending on the available experiences in the country of origin. The learner has to constantly be aware that his learning is conditioned by the outside world and that it is not separate from it.

For the language learner who does not travel, it is still possible to experience flow while learning the language. Since there is a lesser number of challenges available, it becomes important to improve the skill one's analysis of the environment to select useful information and create reachable challenges. In the case of Scott, he managed to create a certain state of flow and reached an acceptable level in the language while learning French in Oklahoma before traveling to France. Emma stated that her level of English was already high before she visited England for the first time.

4. Life, language and subjectivity

Language is power and this power is determinant in the action over reality: the self and the environment. In order to be subject, there needs to be language. Using the language makes you a subject, and in order to learn language you need to be the subject. Therefore, the concepts of subjectivity and language are intertwined in a more complex relationship than a simply causal one.

We are unfinished individuals, and we are constantly in the process of becoming and being. Experiences shape us and, as seen in this research, we have an ability to shape experiences, at least in our consciousness. We are, in a way, the result of the sum of our experiences. For this reason, Flow Theory suggests that improving the quality of experience has a direct effect on the quality of life: it makes it more meaningful. In the context of language learning, the participants found a way to connect it to other parts of their lives in a way that is enjoyable. Linking languages to work or personal life strengthens the feeling of flow and purpose in life. In a way, the ultimate flow feeling is life, and it is broken into an infinite number of pieces that are experiences. Work, interests, hobbies, friends and other experiences we have can provide us with a sense of flow. When coming together, they make the difference between making a living and making a life.

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