

AUTONOMY, TECHNOLOGY AND SPANISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE

by

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### **Abstract**

Literature on self-directed language learning has only begun to explore the potential of the Internet for language acquisition. This diary case study involved the researcher-as-participant in self-directed learning of Spanish as a Second Language, over a period of 3.5 months. Only freely available Internet-based resources and communication tools were used to acquire Spanish language skills. Multiple pretest and posttest scores were recorded for all of the language skills, as well as observations of language learning strategies, motivation, and the use of multimedia in this language learning context. The results indicate that motivation was positively affected by the degree to which the learner had access to authentic language communities, through the use of authentic materials and communication tools. It was also found that self-directed learning in this environment required a high degree of metacognitive strategies, which at times had a negative effect on the learning process. Qualitative and quantitative measurements indicated that there was a significant increase in listening comprehension ability, as a result of reliable and consistent access to authentic online radio and television. The researcher suggests that Internet-based learning might be appropriate to autonomous learners who require access to authentic communities and materials in order to learn effectively.

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

This is a thesis in Applied Linguistics, within the field of Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL). In the context of this project, CALL is the use of the Internet in the self-directed acquisition of Spanish as a Second Language (SSL).

### 1.1 Personal background

The present study uses a diary study methodology to explore the process of acquiring SSL in an Internet-based self-directed mode of learning. The motivations for this project can be understood from three perspectives: my role as a language learner, as a course developer and as a language teacher. For all of these reasons I am interested in how we could revolutionize the learning/teaching of languages since in a globalized world we must have more efficient and effective L2 learning (Carey, 2000, 1999).

To understand my biases it is important to explicate my previous language learning experiences. I have always have had a strong interest in languages and my first memory of this is when I asked my mother at the age of six to speak only German with me so that I could learn it. My family was living in Iran at the time, and my playmates were all non-English speaking Iranians. I imagine that living in a non-English speaking community had aroused my awareness of other languages.

#### French

I learned basic French in high school over a period of five years. I wasn't very good at it, and didn't particularly enjoy my French classes, but since I had a desire to

become bilingual I decided to major in French at university. I spent three years at university taking French courses, but was so unsuccessful that in my third year I was evaluated as being at the same level as an eight year old. I decided that the only way to learn was to move to a French speaking community. I enrolled at Laval University, with the goal of becoming fully bilingual, to the point where a native speaker wouldn't recognize me as not being a native francophone. I achieved this goal on an aural/oral/reading comprehension level after 1.5 years, and attained written fluency after three years. The majority of French I learned in social settings: bars, dinner parties, and living with francophone people. Therefore, I was able to acquire French by physically placing myself in the target language community.

### German

Although I had grown up with a German mother and grandmother, they rarely spoke German at home. Nonetheless, I had an interest in learning this language since I had traveled to Germany to visit relatives and was aware that it formed a part of my cultural roots. While in high school, I enrolled in a German correspondence course, and continued to take some German courses at university. The correspondence course was my first experience with a self-directed mode of learning. After three months of this course, I would estimate that my German was at approximately the same level of my French, despite having taken French for five years. I stopped taking German when I thought it was interfering with my acquisition of French.

## Malay

In 1997 I had the opportunity to live in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia for one year. Upon arriving, I proceeded to learn the basic grammar and vocabulary through a self-study book, expecting to have ample opportunities for practice with local people. However, I found myself surrounded by the Chinese population who spoke English and Malay as second languages, and who preferred to converse in English. Part way through my stay, I had the opportunity to spend two months in Indonesia where being able to speak Malay was helpful. I was able to progress to the point where I had basic comprehension of aural Malay, and was able to function quite basically on a spoken level. However, I had considerable difficulty with reading comprehension and writing, probably because it bears no resemblance to French or English on a lexical and morphological level.

The success I achieved with learning French by being part of a French community, and the obvious lack of success with classroom learning lead me to reject classroom language learning as an appropriate way to learn languages. My French classes were heavily grammar-based, with few opportunities for communication. I became interested in self-directed modes of learning—specifically comprehension-based programs—through a professor at Laval University. At the time, the Internet was still in its infancy, and resource-based self-directed learning—mainly books and audiocassettes and videocassettes—were the only options available. I felt that these options were limited, since I recognized the extent to which communication with the authentic target community had made a difference in my own learning. Furthermore, I realized that the

language of the books and cassettes, which were also very grammar-based, was very different than the language of day-to-day life. In fact, a friend had told me upon my arrival in Quebec that I spoke French like a book.

However, at this time language software, CDROMs and videodiscs such as *A la rencontre de Philippe* were making their way into the language-learning world. But these technologies were also limited—they presented language in a bounded context, much like the audio and videocassettes. Furthermore, they were expensive, and required equipment that the average person didn't have, therefore limiting access time.

I decided that for myself, language acquisition could only be best achieved if I was in the community of the target language. Based on this logic, I expected that by moving to a Malay-speaking country I would have ample opportunities to learn Malay. This proved to be difficult, since I found I had very little access to and contact with this community. I eventually concluded that language acquisition was not dependent on being physically within the target language community, but on having access to that community for a sufficient amount of time. As a result of my formal and informal language learning experiences, I decided that it would be useful to see if the virtual community on the Internet was a more easily accessed and responsive medium than the live community.

My desire to learn Spanish emerged when I began to notice the language shift that was occurring in North America, in particular the United States, partially as a result of NAFTA. Since my prior classroom language learning experiences had been less than satisfactory, I looked for other ways to acquire it. And since I was unable to travel to a place where Spanish was spoken as a target language, my options seemed limited to self-

directed modes of learning. I considered self-study books and CDROMs, since they were cheap and readily available. I ruled out distance education, because it was essentially a more expensive version of self-study books. After a quick search on the Internet, I realized that many of the materials that existed in book format could be found for free on the Internet and in greater variety.

Because of my interest in this important area of research my research supervisor, Dr. Stephen Carey, put me in charge of developing a comprehensive Spanish language resource website (<http://www2.arts.ubc.ca/resources/spanish>) that could be used as a type of virtual self-access center for self-directed learners, and as a supplement for students enrolled in Spanish courses at the University of British Columbia. I became interested in knowing how this site would be used by the learners and how it could be designed in order to facilitate self-directed learning in an Internet-based environment. Having previously worked as a consultant with the design and development of Internet-based courses, I understood that certain technologies were often incorporated into online courses with little understanding as to how they are perceived and used by learners. In order to create an effective language website, it seemed necessary to know to what extent the Internet could provide language learners with their individual language learning needs, and what cognitive processes they engaged in when learning in this environment.

## **1.2 General background**

Currently it is not uncommon to find large cities whose populations are extremely diverse in ethnicity and language. This diversity is reflected in the classrooms at all levels of the education system. Teachers in these classrooms who are challenged to provide instruction to these students find themselves in situations where they might not understand the language of the students and the students might not understand the language or languages of other students. These students not only have different language backgrounds, but varying differences in linguistic competence. The variation in competence and in amount of exposure is especially true in an increasingly globalized world where languages are increasingly coming into contact with each other.

In addition, it is well accepted that there are individual differences among learners. For example, Reid (1987) found that students vary in their learning styles, and while ESL learners may have learning styles different from those of native speakers, even ESL learners themselves demonstrate different learning styles dependent on their language background. The choice of learning strategies was found by Oxford (1990, p.13) to be influenced by variables such as age, sex, nationality, motivation, learning style and personal traits. Gardner (1985) found motivation in SLA to be influenced by variables such as attitudes and socio-cultural influences. Finally, Hart (1983) provides neurological evidence that mental maturation and physical maturation do not occur at the same rate.

The movement for more learner-centred teaching has made great strides in shifting the emphasis from the teacher to the learner in an effort to provide greater individualization. As part of this shift there is recognition that encouraging individual autonomy is one of the ways to accommodate the diversity found in these classrooms.

But given this potential for multiple differences, it becomes a challenging, if not an impossible task for a language teacher to provide an appropriate level of individualization in a classroom of 20-30 students. Although classrooms can provide more individualized learning by allowing the learner to be more autonomous and to have more control and responsibility over their learning (Dickinson, 1987; Holec, 1981; Knowles, 1975) it may be difficult to achieve in classrooms where institutions make decisions about what is to be learned. Furthermore, Oxford (1990) argues for self-directed learning based on the observation that the educational system has conditioned learners to be passive and spoon-fed, wanting to be told what to do and learn in order to get a good grade or pass an exam.

Self-directed learning, where learners are responsible for managing and organizing their own learning according to their own interests, needs and goals, is one of the ways in which this autonomy can be exercised. Self-directed language learning generally refers to modes of learning that are not classroom based, such as teach-yourself courses, distance education, open learning and self-access centres. These approaches are practical in or out of heterogeneous classrooms where learners vary in linguistic competence and in the amount of exposure to the target language, or where classroom learning is not always feasible or desirable (White, 1995, p.208). For example, classroom attendance is difficult for the executive who is continually away on business, or for the single mother who can't get away from her responsibilities at home. Self-directed learning is also practical where the availability of a language teacher is not always possible. In Mexico, and most other countries, the demand for language teachers is greater than the supply, and universities have set up self-access centres to accommodate the demand (Sturtridge, 1997).

Increasingly, proponents of autonomy look to technologies as a way of providing more individualized learning. For many of us, technologies such as the Internet have a significant role in our lives. In the early nineties, email revolutionized interactions with computers by allowing fast, efficient, cheap text-based communication throughout the world. All of a sudden it became possible to communicate with somebody halfway across the world on a daily basis, whereas previously a fax or phone call was the only other alternative, and a potentially expensive one at that. With this development came chat rooms and bulletin boards, allowing communication to occur synchronously or asynchronously, one-on-one or one-to-many (Warschauer and Kern, 2000, p.12). With an explosion in cybercommunities, writing experienced a renaissance, and computer-mediated communication (CMC) was found to enhance language acquisition in the classroom context, by allowing “meaningful interaction in authentic discourse communities” (ibid, p.11).

In this context, the computer is no longer a tool for language acquisition; it is a medium of communication that needs to be acquired (Warschauer, 1997). In the case of English, “to know English well in the current era includes knowing how to read, write, and communicate in electronic environments”(Warschauer, 1998). Researchers also recognize the necessity to rethink the way languages are taught and learned “because these new forms of communication are now so widespread, it is imperative that language students be exposed to them in the classroom” (Warschauer & Kern, 2000, p.12). The Internet continues to develop rapidly, and new technologies, such as voice and sound capabilities, which were previously not available, are now becoming fully integrated into many language classrooms.

There is therefore interest in investigating how technology can be used to provide more individualized learning, while at the same time provide learning that is relevant to learners' communication needs. Because language is an inherent component of the Internet, each of these new technologies will have an impact on second language acquisition (SLA). However, it is important to underline that the context in which the Internet serves to enhance SLA is a critical component in determining its value and potential (Warschauer, 2000a). Already many studies have begun to look at the effectiveness of and the ways to implement technology for language learning, for distance education, and for classroom learning. But few of these studies look extensively at the learner's perspective in using these technologies for self-directed language learning.

### **1.3 Research Problem and Importance**

The Internet is increasingly capable of providing a wide variety of authentic language content, communication capabilities, and language support such as online dictionaries and translation. While the advantages of computer-mediated communication (CMC) to supplement classroom language learning have been the subject of many studies (c.f. Warschauer and Kern, 2000) there is little research that explores the experience of Internet technologies and individual students in self-directed language learning.

It is possible that if language skills are acquired in the very context that they are being used, in a self-directed manner, the individual differences and the individual language needs and goals of learners could be met more efficiently and more effectively.

By self-directed, I am referring to a situation where the learner is responsible for all aspects of their learning and proceeds at his or her own pace.

#### **1.4 Objective and research questions**

The purpose of this study was to investigate the use of the Internet as an environment for self-directed language learning. Specifically, I wanted to investigate the process of learning SSL using only freely available Internet-based resources and communication tools. Language learning in an Internet-based, self-directed learning environment is dependent upon the quality of information and materials available on the Internet, as well as the availability of appropriate communication tools. In addition, it is possible that language learning in this context requires the use of context specific language learning strategies. For example, how does the learner find material that is appropriate to his or her language level? How does the learner find the necessary feedback? How does the learner engage in computer-mediated discourse? What are the affective factors that enhance or inhibit learning in this type of environment?

This study is specifically concerned with the interplay of learning strategies, motivation and technology and with the advantages and limitations of self-directed language learning in this context. To a lesser extent, it will examine the question of whether there is evidence that language learning has occurred.

## **CHAPTER TWO: CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

This section focuses on the theories and literature relating to the objectives and the problems implied by my study. The objective is composed of three important themes: CALL, constructivism, and autonomy. In addition, the notions of authenticity, motivation and language learning strategies as they relate to self-directed learning are explored.

### **2.1 CALL in the classroom**

SLA research has focused on language learning in classroom contexts, and attempts to assess the value of CALL in these contexts has emphasized the role of CALL as a tool and not “as a means to and ends in itself” (Warschauer, 2000). Early applications of CALL consisted of computer tutorial programs and ‘drill to kill’ exercises that simply moved from paper to the monitor. Instructors questioned the value of these expensive applications, and many classroom comparison studies were conducted in order to assess the amount of learning that resulted (c.f. Chapelle and Jamieson, 1989 for a review of these studies). Researchers were quick to recognize that these types of applications merely represented a return to the structural approach to language learning, at a time when it was believed that a more cognitive approach was needed (and was already being implemented in the classroom) (Warschauer and Kern, 2000). Furthermore, Chapelle and Jamieson (1989) noted: “Because the process of second

language acquisition is not completely understood, it is difficult to make direct recommendations for evaluating learning tasks on or off-line” (p.48).

Interactive videodisks such as *A la rencontre de Philippe* (1993) launched CALL into what Warschauer and Kern (2000) call its “second generation” (p.9). These applications attempted to create learning environments in which the learner, and not the computer, controlled the learning process, providing a new approach to CALL development that was more in line with cognitive approaches. Despite such innovations, in the early 1990s it was possible to draw a general conclusion from CALL research that the computer was a useful tool, whose application was better suited to certain activities than others (Kenning and Kenning, 1990; Elkabas, 1989).

It is important to recognize that language learning in a classroom context is computer-assisted, not computer-based. Early CALL applications were designed as supplements to classroom learning, although it is questionable as to who benefited, the teacher or the learner. For example, online tests simplified evaluation, but did little to enhance learning. Few studies took CALL out of the instructional or classroom context, and looked at computer-based language learning as being a context in its own right. This may be due to the fact that, in the 1980s and early part of the 1990s, Krashen’s (1985) theories about “comprehensible input” as being necessary and sufficient to the development of “communicative competence” were a foundation of many studies. Interpretations of Krashen’s ideas persuaded teachers that it was important to create “an environment in the classroom that promotes realistic communicative use of the language” (McLaughlin, 1987, p.48). The language classroom allowed learners to be exposed to an authentic language model (the instructor) and authentic texts, and provided an

environment for oral communication. As a result, CALL tasks revolved around trying to make authentic input more comprehensible, resulting in research, for example, that evaluated the effectiveness of glossaries in aiding reading comprehension (Leffa, 1992), or examined whether the availability of a reading passage during question and answer tasks resulted in greater comprehension (Pederson, 1986).

Some researchers recognized the potential for CALL in non-classroom based learning contexts. This is best illustrated by Otto (1989), who examined the potential of CALL in non-resident language training programs. Non-resident training programs share several characteristics with self-directed learning programs: students are accountable for their progress, they are self-paced and responsible for the control of their instruction, and classrooms may be made up of learners who have varying levels of proficiency. He noted that the computer may be one of the best ways of meeting the demands of this type of instruction, but care must be taken to develop courseware specifically designed for these contexts (as opposed to regular classroom contexts).

## **2.2 Multimedia and the Internet**

The Internet, in addition to being a context where multiple forms of discourse take place, has also become a primary source of information and multimedia content. Multimedia, in its broadest sense, is “the use of multiple types of media to convey a message” (Gray, 2000). In the past, multimedia took the form of slide shows with synchronized tapes, educational television and videos. The 1990s brought the widespread use of CDROMs, video games and the World Wide Web (WWW). In general,

multimedia systems have an “aim of communicating knowledge to users in more interesting and effective ways” (Pham, 1998).

Today, multimedia that previously was confined to CDROMs and Videodiscs—expensive technologies—are now more likely to find their place on the Internet. There are several reasons for this. First, users increasingly wanted the Internet to be more than text and found ways to include visual information within the constraints of tables and forms. Visuals, in the form of JPEG and GIFs, lead to the development of animated GIFs, which in turn lead to the development of sophisticated animation software such as Flash and Director, which have the capabilities of supporting sound, video, and animation. Second, the global nature of the Internet has made it an important marketing tool for businesses, and more effort has been made to improve the appearance of consumer-targeted websites. Lastly, unlike other forms of media, the Internet has the advantage of being a dynamic system, whose content can constantly be modified, updated and expanded.

As a source of content, instructors have turned to the Internet in order to supplement class material. Motteram (1998) suggests that the Internet is useful for letting learners find their own texts, downloading texts for use in class, finding pictures to illustrate meaning, and for compiling a list of useful sites to visit. This is a useful but limited view as to how the Internet can be used for learning.

A more expanded view of the Internet recognizes its potential as a multimedia system for language learning through “the universal availability of authentic materials, the communication capabilities through networking, the multimedia capabilities, and the non-linear (hypermedia) structure of the information” (Chun and Plass, 2000, p.161).

First of all, as we have seen, it is an important context for multiple types of discourse, allowing a variety of communication possibilities. For example, computer-mediated communication that was previously limited to text has now expanded to include oral capabilities (e.g. <http://www.wimba.com>). Second, the nature of the Internet allows for the continual expansion of content that is authentic. A language learner can feasibly find all of their language learning needs on the Internet, at no cost (dictionaries, translation, exercises, cultural content, etc.). Both Warschauer and Kern (2000) and Egbert and Hanson-Smith (1999) recognize the potential of the Internet as more than just a tool, yet they remain focused on the use of the Internet in a classroom mode of learning.

### **2.3 Constructivism**

Constructivism is an old idea, built on psychological theory of learning and cognitive development (e.g. Piaget, Vygotsky), which has re-emerged in language education in various ways. Numerous variations of the term, such as sociocognitive and social constructivism have emerged but they share the essential idea of the importance of active learning and collaboration with others in the construction of knowledge.

The advent of Internet technologies, in allowing computer-mediated interaction with others (a central component of constructivism) has made the implementation of new constructivist approaches possible: "Information-processing technologies and constructivism, separately and often together, have remade substantially our conception of the challenges of learning" (Perkins, 1992, p.51).

For social constructivists outside the field of applied linguistics, technologies bring learners into contact with multiple dialogues and context-dependent perspectives. According to Gergen (2001) technologies have challenged the idea of an authority of knowledge, since technology “brings us into communicative connection—directly, symbolically and/or vicariously—with an enormously expanded domain of others—with more people, from a richer range of backgrounds, for more hours of the day, and with an increasing range of interdependencies” (p.1). He proposes what is “required are pedagogic processes that enhance the multi-vocal capacities of the individual, that enable one to speak in many discourses, each sensitive to the particular relationship in which one is engaged.”

For language learning researchers, CMC technologies allow students to enter into authentic discourse communities, resulting in a shift from “learners’ interaction with computers to interaction with other humans via the computer”(Warschauer and Kern, 2000, p.11). This interaction is meaningful because it helps students to “enter into the kinds of authentic discourse situations and discourse communities that they would later encounter outside the classroom” (p.5). In this way, reading and writing are “processes embedded in particular sociocultural contexts” (ibid).

It is important to underline that the addition of a computer component to supplement classroom learning does not guarantee a more constructivist learning environment. Warschauer (2000a) describes a case where a teacher integrated computer use into the course, but the computer activities were largely of the ‘drill to kill’ nature. The students’ perceptions of the tasks as irrelevant and non-communicative merely reflected the tightly controlled classroom environment and had a negative impact on

some students' attitudes and motivation. On the other hand, Carey (1999, 1999a) describes how the addition of a WebCT bulletin board with extensive linked resources and the appropriate incentives was effective in encouraging the participation of ESL students in a graduate seminar, and thereby improving their command of the English language. The asynchronous nature of the bulletin board gave learners the opportunity to reflect, exchange and contribute to discussions without the anxiety of a classroom environment. They were able to collaborate with other students online and through their participation became active members of the learning community. The ESL students acquired the language through the content of the course and through their interactions with other students. Discussion that normally could have only taken place within the limited timeframe of the seminars was extended beyond the spatial and temporal constraints of the classroom. In this example, the technology facilitated the implementation of a constructivist learning environment.

#### **2.4 Autonomy**

Autonomy was originally defined by Holec (1981) as a capacity to take charge of one's own learning. However, in a teacher-centred classroom autonomy was viewed as being a 'technical skill' with which learners would complement their classroom learning by seeking out additional materials and working at their own pace.

In a constructivist, learner-centred context, autonomy takes on a more psychological value, whereby each learner constructs his or her own version of the target language (Benson, 2001, 1997). By allowing students to construct their own knowledge,

it encourages them “to be more confident, independent and responsible for their own actions” (Pham, 1998, p. 5). In other words, autonomy is about active learning, not passive learning, which is a central idea in constructivism. These ideas, which originated with twentieth century scholars such as Dewey, Piaget and Vygotsky were redefined by proponents of autonomy and self-directed learning (e.g. Knowles, 1975; Holec, 1981; Dickinson, 1987) who argued for autonomy from a political perspective. From this traditional position, autonomy in individuals is suppressed by the structure of learning institutions and the role of the teacher as a disseminator of knowledge. They proposed that the teacher’s role should be more of a facilitator of learning. Although these ideas did contribute to a growing recognition of the importance of learner-centred learning, it came to be practiced in different ways. In a classroom context, the teacher gives the students the opportunity to exercise their autonomy by allowing more freedom in the selection of materials and activities and through the sharing of responsibility for learning between the teacher and the learner. In an institutional context, self-access centres were set up to foster learner autonomy and independence by providing places where learners could go to access materials for their own learning and be facilitated by a language facilitator. Many self-access centres appeared in parts of Europe, Hong Kong, and the Middle East. While these centres provided a wide variety of content, the discourse with authentic communities was likely limited (as it was in language classrooms.)

Technology, specifically the Internet, has had a noticeable influence on distance education, which is perhaps the most well-known mode of self-directed learning. A new form of distance education, under the title of ‘technology-based distributed learning’ emerged making distance a more attractive option for many learners. As a result,

“autonomy and independence have become linked to the growing role of technology in education, a link which has supported the growth of self-access language learning” (Benson and Voller, 1997, p.6).

The link between self-directed learning and technology is also supported by the view that learners need exposure to multiple language contexts, which is difficult to get in a classroom environment. In contrast, an Internet environment is not limited by temporal and geographic constraints and has become a interactive place for many types of communities. Warschauer and Kern (2000) see the learning implications in this: “if those discourse communities are increasingly located on-line, then it seems appropriate to incorporate on-line activities for their social utility as well as for their perceived particular pedagogical value” (p.13).

For Healey (1999) technology provides additional sources of language data that could not be provided by a sole language teacher. She views technology as a valuable tool for autonomous learning, by allowing the learner to access this data anywhere, anytime, and to have control over the pace of learning and the path to the goal. However, this is dependent on four learner conditions: a certain degree of self-motivation, preference for an independent style, knowledge of how one learns best, and knowledge of what one needs to learn (p.394).

In a language course that incorporated technology to encourage autonomous learning in Japanese ESL learners, Murray (1999) found that the learning environment lead to changes in motivation, metacognition and personal growth. The learners “took satisfaction in pursuing their own interests, having freedom of choice, learning about computers and the Internet, making their own decisions, and collaborating with friends.”

Yet this meant acquiring a host of metacognitive strategies and modifying their perceptions and beliefs about language-learning” (p.13).

## **2.5 Self-directed learning and self-access**

Self-directed learning is largely associated with adult education, specifically with Knowles (1975) who provides a very clear and complete definition of the concept: “a process in which individuals take the initiative, with or without the help of others, in diagnosing their learning needs, formulating learning goals, identifying human and material resources for learning, choosing and implementing appropriate learning strategies, and evaluating learning outcomes”(p.18). He is careful to point out that this does not imply isolation of the learner.

Self-directed learning in language education is associated with Holec (1981) who provides clear distinctions between autonomy and self-directed learning. Holec defines autonomy as “the ability to take charge of one’s own learning” (p.3) while self-directed learning is the process of taking charge of one’s learning by fixing the objectives, defining the contents and progressions, selecting the methods and techniques, monitoring acquisition and evaluating learning (p.9). In other words, self-directed learning is a mode of learning that allows the learner to exercise his or her capacity for autonomy.

Self-directed learning favors learning as opposed to teaching, and is therefore believed to provide certain advantages over ‘traditional’ instruction (Holec, 1981; Dickinson, 1987). Importantly, it can provide a more individualized learning environment. Learners who are given the freedom to choose their objectives and

materials and who are allowed to learn at their own pace will more likely have a learning experience that conforms to their needs. In a classroom situation where the instructor must teach to a group, any level of individualization is difficult or impossible to attain. Like Knowles, Holec and Dickinson also emphasize that self-directed learning does not mean the learner is working in isolation.

However, in reality it is often the case. Until recently, self-directed learning has been largely resource-based: the learner studies the language through self-study books, CDROMs, television, etc. The obvious advantage with self-directed learning is that it is flexible and learner-centred. However, this mode of learning is usually isolating to the learner, since it can be difficult to have opportunities for communication with others, access to materials is not always possible and it can be especially difficult to have access to authentic materials. In addition, it can be difficult to maintain motivation in self-directed learning. It is therefore not surprising that some programs, such as distance education, have high attrition rates.

Nonetheless, there are studies that have observed some success with self-directed learning approaches. One study looked at young francophone ESL learners in staged, self-directed learning process where learner responsibility and autonomy was emphasized (Forsyth, 1990, Lightbown, 1992). The approach was comprehension-based with an emphasis on extensive reading and listening from the very beginning. The learner was theoretically self-motivated by having a vast amount of ESL materials at his or her disposition. In the program, available technology such as computers, videos and audio-cassettes played an important part in facilitating learning. An evaluation of this program showed that students performed as well or better than the students in the regular

classroom program, in both comprehension and speaking skills. Since the learners never spoke in class these results came as a surprise to the evaluators (Lightbown, 1992; Lightbown and Spada, 1993).

The results of this experiment lead Lightbown (1992) to conclude that “young francophone children are capable of a considerable degree of independent learning in a second language which offers interesting material for reading and listening and gives students freedom to make choices about what they will read and listen to” (p.362). She notes that the experimental groups seemed to be capable of solving their language problems on their own. Lightbown states that learners can and should be responsible for their own learning and believes that the experimental subjects in the New Brunswick study seemed to have acquired this autonomy.

In another study, Jones (1994) kept a diary of himself using self-study books in learning Hungarian independently over a period of eleven months. He was able to progress from an elementary to an intermediate level and attributed extensive vocabulary work to his progress. He also found that progress was made in the area of speaking but not in listening comprehension, since he had no access to aural input. Although it isn't discussed, the improvement in speaking is likely due to the fact that he wrote his journal in Hungarian and was therefore using production skills throughout. This study is useful in that it reveals how a language can be acquired despite limited access to a variety of resources and target language speakers.

Self-access centers attempt to overcome the isolation that learners experience by providing a place where learners can go to access language learning materials and seek help for their learning. They are viewed as pragmatic solutions to the individualization

of learning and as an ideological solution to the shift from teacher-centred learning to learner-centred learning, and to the promotion of independence (Sheerin, 1997). In this way, self-access gives learners a “more active part in determining their own objectives and their own learning programmes”(p.65).

Sturtridge (1997) underlines the importance of self-access as a solution to a worldwide increase in foreign language learning. Because the electronic revolution has allowed self-access to flourish by making delivery possible anywhere anytime, he foresees that self-access centres “will become more providers of distant learning than library-like places to go to study” (p.67). Although there is an abundance of literature on self-directed learning and self-access centres, there is very little that recognize the potential of the Internet within these programs. This comes as a surprise, since recent CALL research has underlined the value of computers in promoting autonomy in learners (in a classroom context), and since the central focus of many self-access centres is to foster autonomy and independent learning.

Benson (1997a) has noted the potential of the Internet as ‘virtual self-access centres’, and provides examples such as Dave’s ESL Café (<http://www.eslcafe.com>) and Planet English as websites that effectively function as online self-access centres. But we know very little about learners who use these sites and for what purposes.

At least one study has attempted to gain insight into the area of virtual independent language learning. Hoshi (2000) examined the perceptions, beliefs, practices and expectations of Japanese independent learners learning EFL on the Internet. This study is important in demonstrating the advantages of the Internet for self-directed

learners, and in revealing that the Internet is being used as a type of virtual self-access centre.

A recent development in technology that could facilitate self-access learning using the Internet is the area of learning portals. Portals are generally “sites that provide information to suit an individual’s needs” (Stillwell, 2000, p.13) and vary in the depth and amount of content. However, portals provide an additional element that websites are unable to provide: customisability and the ability to provide a variety of ‘channels’. For example, <http://www.parlo.com> provides learning materials in Spanish, English, French, Italian and German. At this site, learners can access a variety of content: there are links to culture and news, structured (free) language courses, a word of the day section with sound, and a window that pops up to provide translation. It also offers communicative capabilities in the form of chat rooms, bulletin boards and pen pals. Virtual self-access portals such as this one could offer a pragmatic solution to barriers of geography, expertise, materials, and time.

## **2.6 Authenticity**

The communicative approach is responsible for suggesting the importance of authentic materials and tasks in language learning. In a classroom context, ‘authentic’ refers to the use of materials and simulations that a learner would encounter in a real-world situation. Exposure to these materials and tasks would facilitate the transition from the classroom to the real-world and therefore enhance language learning. Chapelle (1999), in defining authentic task, views the notion of authenticity as relying on “an

analysis of the correspondence between a second language learning task and tasks that the learner is likely to encounter outside the classroom” (p.102). She recognizes that authenticity is difficult in a classroom where the teacher is making decisions about what is being learned.

Little (1997) underlines the role of authentic texts in the development of learner autonomy. Learners exposed to authentic texts from the very beginning develop a level of confidence, and are able to explore the relationship between language use and language learning. Little argues that language learning and language use are inseparable and believes that authentic texts can and should be used from the beginning: “learner autonomy properly understood embraces the domains of language learning and language use in constant interaction with one another” (p.230).

The notion of authenticity also applies to audience. Since collaboration is an essential part of a constructivist learning environment, and since communication itself is dependent upon the context and influenced by the audience to which the communication is addressed, then it becomes important to define what authentic audience means in an Internet-based language learning context. In examining the notion of authentic audience we encounter a certain vagueness of the term itself. Johnston (1999) provides an interesting discussion of the problems of defining audience and authentic audience, and eventually arrives at this definition: “whether or not the message is being read or listened to for meaning” (p.61). However, in this definition it is difficult to distinguish between audience and authentic audience. Furthermore, it could be argued that a measure of communicative competence is the extent to which a language learner is able to communicate with and be understood by a member of the target language community.

Authentic audience, therefore, could be defined by the linguistic characteristic of the audience. Admittedly, this is also simplistic, especially in an increasingly global world where people are increasingly diverse and multilingual.

It is likely that the notion of authentic audience in language learning is inherently individual, since it is directly related to their needs and goals as a learner. An English language learner in Singapore might define their authentic audience as other Singaporeans who do not share the same L1 as his/herself, and who themselves are not native English speakers, but who rely on English for their daily communication. The same Singaporean might define authentic audience as British, but not American, since they intend to work in Britain at some point in time. In contrast, a French immersion student in Canada might define their authentic audience as being Quebecois or French.

For the purposes of this study, authentic audience is defined as being the target language community. In an Internet environment, the constraints of access to authentic materials and target language communities are no longer there. Most activities can be 'real-world', if the learner chooses. The learner can access sites that the target language community would access, and interact and participate in these online target language communities. Therefore, the primary disadvantage of self-directed learning and self-access centers as being unable to provide authentic communication and interaction in the target language is eliminated. In fact, Benson (1997) views interaction with the target audience as essential to promoting autonomy: "constructivism tends to support self-directed learning and self-access as a positive means of promoting autonomy and an emphasis on authentic interaction with the target language community" (p.24). CMC has increased the potential audience and "learners are no longer restricted to their physical

geographical location. Along with this change is an increase in the range of potential interlocutors, who may be of any age, background, and so on” (Johnston, 1999, p.61).

Opp-Beckman (1999) echoes Johnston’s view of importance of the Internet in expanding the audience.

While researchers such as Johnston, Opp-Beckman, and even Warschauer (2000) have recognized the importance of authentic tasks and audience for classroom learning, Little extends this importance to self-directed learning contexts: “it is possible to think of a ‘virtual’ target language community, available to language learners anywhere in the world. If we can have a ‘virtual’ target language community, however, we can also have a ‘virtual’ self-access center”(p.236).

Therefore, the role of authentic materials, tasks and community/audience is enhanced in self-directed, Internet-based language learning.

## **2.7 Motivation**

Proponents of autonomy and self-directed learning cite this mode of learning as beneficial to learner motivation. While on one hand it is recognized that motivation is difficult to maintain in some self-directed learning contexts, it is also recognized that motivation is increased when learners are in a position to make decisions about their learning (Knowles, 1975, p.14; Dickinson, 1987, p.29).

In an informative overview of motivation as it relates to autonomy, Dickinson (1995), cites Deci and Ryan’s (1985) theory of extrinsic and intrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation, the desire to learn for one’s own sake and not for extrinsic rewards,

is considered to be the more desirable of the two. According to Deci and Ryan, two conditions are necessary for intrinsic motivation to be developed. The first one refers to the perception of the learning environment—it must be ‘informational’ and not ‘controlling’. The second requires that the learning environment allow the learner to exercise his or her autonomy (p.166). Dickinson concludes:

There is substantial evidence from cognitive motivational studies that learning success and enhanced motivation is conditional on learners taking responsibility for their own learning, being able to control their own learning and perceiving that their learning success or failures are to be attributed to their own efforts and strategies rather than to factors outside their control (p.174).

According to this idea, self-directed learning is a mode that enhances motivation.

Institutions have traditionally emphasized extrinsic motivation, through a reward system based on grades and evaluation. It is now recognized that an emphasis on extrinsic rewards can be detrimental to learning. Yet, the presence of a certain amount of extrinsic motivation might actually be helpful to learning, especially in a self-directed context. Jones (1994) for example, found that intrinsic motivation was enhanced through activities and tasks such as real conversations and authentic texts. But he also recognized that the need to complete the research project, an extrinsic reward, had a role.

There is therefore interest in taking a closer look at motivation in a self-directed, Internet-based language learning context.

## 2.8 Language Learning Strategies

Strategies are important in self-directed learning because they are tools for independent, involved learning. Oxford (1990) believes that when students take more responsibility, more learning occurs. She defines learning strategies as “steps taken by students to enhance their own learning” (p.1) and recognizes them as being necessary to any learning that is self-directed. Furthermore, since individuals vary in the choice of strategies they may use, self-directed learning provides the flexibility for learners to exercise these strategies (Dickinson, 1987, p.22).

Learning strategies have also been subject to variations of definitions and classification, but there are generally two broad categories of strategies: cognitive and metacognitive. Cognitive strategies refer to the mental processes that the learner engages in while performing tasks and activities, while metacognitive strategies “involve both knowledge about learning (metacognitive knowledge) and control or regulation over learning (metacognitive strategies)” (O’Malley & Chamot, 1990, p.105). O’Malley and Chamot also include a third category, social/affective strategies, but this differs somewhat from Oxford’s (1990) classification of direct (cognitive) and indirect (metacognitive) strategies.

The importance of metacognitive strategies has been largely ignored because most of the research has been conducted in classroom settings, where most decisions of planning and organizing learning are decided by the institution and not the student. In some cases a student might be allowed some flexibility in choosing and organizing the task, but decisions about the language program itself would rarely be made by the

learner. As a result, research on strategies has largely focused on cognitive strategies and metacognitive strategies as they relate to tasks and activities. In some self-directed learning contexts where the learner is responsible for all decisions about their learning metacognitive strategies are necessary for the global planning and monitoring of the language learning program.

At least one study focuses on the use of strategies in the self-instruction mode of learning. White (1995) comparatively examined the effect of classroom based learning and distance learning on metacognitive, cognitive, social and affective strategies. She found that the distance learners employed significantly more metacognitive strategies, such as planning, monitoring and evaluation. Self-management strategies, when “learners draw on their understanding of how they learn best to set up the learning conditions which they have found to be favourable (though not necessarily ideal), and to manage their interactions with the TL” were the single most important strategy in her research (p.215). She concludes: “autonomy in language learning results from the way in which, and the extent to which, the learner manages his/her interactions with the TL, rather than from the use of any specific set of cognitive strategies” (p.217). In other words, strategy use likely depends not only on the learner and the task, but the learning context as well. This project explores the use of metacognitive and cognitive strategies in a self-directed learning context.

## **2.9 Spanish on the Internet**

The feasibility of acquiring language skills in this context is dependent upon the quality of the materials available and the communication tools. Internet materials in Spanish can be separated into two broad classifications. First, there are a wide variety of materials that target the learner who is learning Spanish as a Second or Foreign language. These include grammar materials found on university Spanish department sites, interactive exercises and reference materials such as dictionaries and translation tools (Appendix A). Second, there are an incredible amount of sites that target the hispanophone population. These sites include online newspapers, culturezines, community portals, and special interest sites (Appendix B). In terms of communication tools, there is the option of text-based communication through email, asynchronous forums, and synchronous chats. Therefore, given the availability of materials and communication options for Spanish, it is reasonable to suggest that Spanish language skills could be acquired in an online environment.

## **CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY**

### **3.1 Diary as Inquiry**

The objective of this project was to explore the challenges, limitations and advantages of self-directed language learning in an Internet environment. There was interest in knowing what conditions are needed to acquire SSL skills, and what strategies were necessary for language learning in this environment. Having recognized that self-directed learning is essentially individual, I wanted to understand the perspective of a learner in this context. For this reason a case study method was used to investigate this perspective.

Johnson (1992, p.76) emphasizes that case studies are valuable in providing information about an individual learner. She notes that case studies “can inform us about the processes and strategies that individual L2 learners use to communicate and learn, how their own personalities, attitudes and goals interact with the learning environment, and about the precise nature of their linguistic growth”. Furthermore, “The essence of a case study is that it focuses holistically on an entity, whether a student, teacher, or program. The purpose is to understand the complexity and dynamic nature of the particular entity, and to discover systematic connections among experiences, behaviours, and relevant features of the context.” (p.84).

In order to gain insights into psychological processes such as language learning strategies, affective responses and motivation, language researchers have developed a type of case study research method known as a diary study:

A diary study in second language learning, acquisition, or teaching is an account of a second language experience as recorded in a first-person journal. The diarist may be a language teacher or a language learner--but the central characteristic of the diary studies is that they are introspective: the diarist studies his own teaching or learning. Thus he can report on affective factors, language learning strategies, and his own perceptions – facets of the language learning experience which are normally hidden or largely inaccessible to an external observer”(Bailey & Ochsner, 1983, p.189).

According to Chaudron (1988): “Diary studies usually involve the researcher-as-learner 1) recording events in a language classroom or language learning context, 2) preferably reflecting on the diary entries soon afterward, in order to add appropriate interpretations before they are forgotten, and then 3) compiling and summarizing key elements” (p.46).

Diary case studies involving the researcher-as-learner have been used by Bailey in the study of French (1978), Schmidt and Frota (1986) in the study of Portuguese, Jones (1994) in the study of Hungarian, and Schumann and Schumann (1977), in the study of Farsi. More recently Campbell (1996) used a diary study in the acquisition of Spanish. These studies have explored the acquisition of language in multiple contexts: the

classroom, the target language community, and in resource-based self-directed learning. Diary studies have also been used to explore the oral production of vocabulary (Altman, 1997), and reading and vocabulary development (Grabe & Stoller, 1997). The use of diary studies to investigate language learning over the past twenty years reflects its value as a research tool.

To my knowledge, diary studies have not yet been used in examining Internet-based language acquisition. However, the importance of research in this area has been underlined by Warschauer (1998) who states: "there has as yet been insufficient qualitative research on technology-enhanced language learning" and "what these new practices mean from the perspective of the learner". He suggests expanding research paradigms to "engage in critical qualitative research which attempts to take into account broad sociocultural factors as well as questions of human agency, identity, and meaning."

Diary case studies, and case studies in general, have an obvious disadvantage in that they are highly subjective, and by involving only one case, are rarely generalizable. However, unlike experimental type research, they have strong ecological validity, in that the individual is being studied in the setting (Palys, 1997). They are also capable of generating more data. Although this type of research is very subjective, it could also be argued that there is greater validity when the researcher is analyzing their own narrative, in that they are not imposing their interpretations on the thoughts of others. Furthermore, the use of quantitative measures can help to reduce subjectivity. Chaudron notes: "Most researchers adopting qualitative or ethnographic techniques have recognized the need to continue their analysis with some quantification of events, whether frequency of turns or

other units of participation, amount of language of a certain function produced, duration of activities, or other quantitative analyses” (p. 47).

### **3.2 Design**

The design of this study followed the guidelines outlined by Bailey and Oschner (1983) for a diary study, and included additional sources of evidence such as standardized proficiency tests.

### **3.3 Participants**

This project involved the researcher-as-participant in the self-directed acquisition of SSL via the Internet.

### **3.4 Procedure**

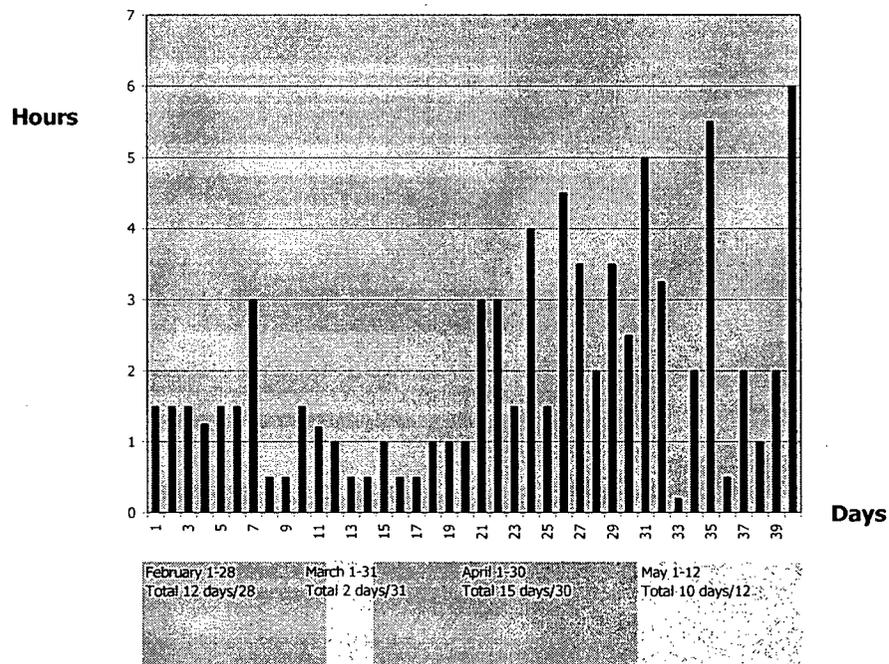
As the “researcher-as-participant” I was responsible for all decisions related to the learning. The researcher followed some of the suggestions outlined in Dickinson (1987) for self-directed learning. For example, the University of Cambridge Needs Analysis was completed in order to give the researcher a better idea as to how to plan the program (Appendix C).

At the outset, I identified Spanish language websites that could be used to acquire language skills. The only criteria for the Internet-based materials and communication tools was that they had to be freely available at no cost to the learner.

The participant communicated by email to a native Spanish friend in Spain, and participated in text-based asynchronous and synchronous forums. Upon initial exploration, voice communication, using asynchronous voice forums, voice email, and synchronous voice chats, appeared to be widespread. However, after the first month of the project there were many 'dot-bombs', which lead to the disappearance of almost all of the voice options. Appendix A and B provide some idea as to the types of materials used.

In addition, a record was kept of the amount of time spent learning Spanish online. This time totaled 70 hours in 40 days, over a period of 3.5 months. However, almost no time was spent in the second month due to external constraints. Therefore, the 40 days were concentrated in a 2.5 month period. Figure 1 shows a distribution of this timeline.

Figure 1. Distribution of time spent learning Spanish online over a 40 day/3.5 month period.



### 3.5 Pretests and Posttests

Although quantitative measurement of learning was not a major objective of this study, there was interest in knowing objectively whether any Spanish had been learned after 70 hours of contact with the language. In an effort to reduce subjectivity, a number of standardized pretests and posttests were used to measure SSL knowledge at the beginning and the end of program. This included the *DELE Inicial*, a standard, internationally accepted test of Spanish, and the University of British Columbia Spanish department proficiency tests.

#### DELE

In the case of the DELE, the same test was used for both the pretest and posttest. The decision to use the same test was based on several constraints. First, DELE exams take place only twice a year and require substantial advance registration. The evaluation of the exam is based on a pass/fail, and 70% qualifies as a pass. It can take up to six months for a participant to receive their results, and since the exam is not returned to the examinee, it would be impossible to compare the two exams. Fortunately, sample copies of the exam can be obtained from the Spanish consulate, and an answer key is provided. Therefore, the researcher completed a sample copy (an exam from the previous year) at the outset of the program and at the end of the program. Three and a half months passed between the pretest and posttest, and the exam was not consulted during that time. In self-administering the DELE exam, the researcher was able to simultaneously make comments about the comprehension of the questions.

The researcher also registered for the *DELE Basico*, which is the next level above the Inicial. The reason for registering for this exam was to obtain a measure of evaluation that took place in an official DELE exam setting. The decision to register for the Basico was to see whether the researcher had advanced beyond the Inicial level. The researcher wrote the Basico on the last day of the program. Because the official scores for this exam will not be available for another six months, they are not included in this report, but a description of the event is well documented in the diary.

#### UBC proficiency tests

The UBC proficiency pretest and posttest were different, although similar. The pretest was written approximately 2 weeks after the beginning of the program, and the posttest was written about 2 weeks after the end of the program. Therefore, 3.5 months had passed between the pretest and the posttest. Both the pretest and posttest were written under the supervision of the coordinator of the University Spanish department, who was also the evaluator of both exams. A different professor in the Spanish department provided a more in-depth analysis of these exams and provided insights as to how my performance compared to students at the Spanish 100 level in that department.

#### Self-evaluation

In accordance with the true nature of self-directed, autonomous learning, self-evaluation (Appendix D), as outlined by McCafferty (1982, in Dickinson, 1987, p.52-53) was used as a measure. This evaluation was taken about one week prior to the commencement of the research and the post-evaluation took place one week after the end

of the program. It is important to note that self-monitoring occurred throughout the program, and is well documented in the diary.

### **3.6 Equipment**

This study used a Compaq Presario 1235, 288mhz, 64K RAM, Windows 98, Explorer 5.0 and Netscape 4.5, DSL broadband connection, headphones and microphone. It later used an ibook 366, which had to be purchased when the Compaq crashed.

### **3.7 Setting**

The entire study took place in my home, on a laptop computer with a high-speed Internet connection. The workspace was located in a large closet, surrounded by many books and papers but no windows.

### **3.8 Data Collection**

The primary source of data is the diary, whose purpose was: 1) a record events, details, and feelings about the language experience (Bailey & Oschner, 1983) and 2) as a self-monitoring record of the language program (Dickinson, p.146). A secondary set of data is the quantitative measures of learning based on the pretests and posttests.

The diary was kept for the entire 40 days over a 3.5 month period, and was a corpus of 12 000 words. Most diary studies rely on retrospection of a day's events for data collection, recorded in a hand-written journal. Because this study was Internet-based, the researcher was able to document the process almost simultaneously by keeping

a text file open at the same time as the Internet browser. This data collection technique was also advantageous because I was able to type much quicker than handwriting. It could be suggested that the ability to record reflections in this manner contributes to the validity of the study by narrowing the time between the moment and the recording of that moment.

### **3.9 Data Analysis**

Analysis of data was ongoing and simultaneous. Data analysis in case studies “involves a continual process of looking for meaning by sorting reiteratively through the data” (Johnson, 1992, p. 90). As suggested by Johnson, the analysis of the data involved the identification of important variables and themes and how they pattern and interrelate, and the explanation of how the interrelationships influence the phenomena under study.

The guidelines set by Bailey and Oschner (1983) suggest that major themes will emerge from the diary. Since research questions were established at the outset of the program, the diary entries tended to respect these questions. Yet, several additional themes emerge from the diary, and these form an important part of the results.

## CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS

This section will use the first person singular in reporting the results, as consistent with Bailey and Oschner (1983) who argue that diary study reports are more authentic when they don't adopt the academic tone and distance typical of social science reports.

### 4.1 Summary of the program

The important themes that emerge from the diary relate to the influence of a self-directed mode of learning in an Internet-based environment. The advantages and limitations of language learning in this context are revealed through comments about strategy use, motivation and language acquisition. There was considerable interplay between these themes, and it is difficult to present them in clearly defined categories, since they often overlap. For clarity of presentation a few of the major examples from the diary that correspond to these main themes are selected and discussed.

In order to understand the challenges, limitations and advantages of language learning in an online environment, a chronological description of the various phases is adopted, followed by a discussion of the major themes emerging from the data. It is possible to identify six key chronological stages in the diary. What follows is a summary of the diary entries as they correspond to these six stages.

#### Stage one: Days 1-5

The first part of the program was a great deal of planning: finding and selecting materials and websites, evaluating resources, organizing the information. The availability of a vast amount of information for learning Spanish created a distracting learning environment, through which I had to spend a considerable amount of time navigating and evaluating this information. This part was also characterized by a great deal of technical problems—I was constantly downloading plugins, coming across broken links, old pages that haven't been updated, and technical glitches.

#### Stage two: Days 6-9

At this stage I realized that I want aural input, so I started listening to CNN in Spanish. I wasn't satisfied with just looking at grammar. I commented on how the authenticity of everything was so interesting. I discovered an online concordancer and I attempted to write my first email in Spanish. At this stage I was still having technical problems but a lot less than before.

#### Stage 3: Days 10-14

I spent a considerable amount of time focusing on grammar, where I started doing online exercises. I also continued going to authentic sites, especially multimedia sites. I started to look for voice chatrooms, in anticipation of a later stage. I eventually had to stop the program for a month because of teaching commitments that took up all of my time.

#### Stage 4: Days 15-22

After a one-month absence, I took up the program again with a goal of several intensive hours a day, in anticipation of the exam which was only four weeks away. After being away for a while, I found I had to familiarize myself again with all the links. At this stage I tried to use authentic materials to learn grammar and spent a lot of time with these authentic materials. Grammar time was spent almost entirely on learning verbs. I started to feel pressured by the impending exam.

#### Stage 5: Days 23-30

At this stage I began to notice improvement. I caught myself trying to compose sentences in my head while offline. I continually felt the pressure of the exam, and started to concentrate a lot more on grammar. However, I always listened to CNN while doing this, in an attempt to maximize efficiency. I also started to use a few non-Internet based resources.

#### Stage 6: Days 31-40

My listening comprehension shows a big jump in improvement, but I realized that my comprehension and the ability to produce language were at hugely different stages—I was amazed that I was able to read and listen to complex news reports and understand them, but didn't know the vocabulary for simple things like clothing or family. I made a vocabulary list of 1000 common words and spent some time memorizing it. I also spent a lot of time doing grammar for the exam and got really tired of it. I discovered streamed online television and got hooked. On the final day, I wrote the DELE exam.

## 4.2 Learning

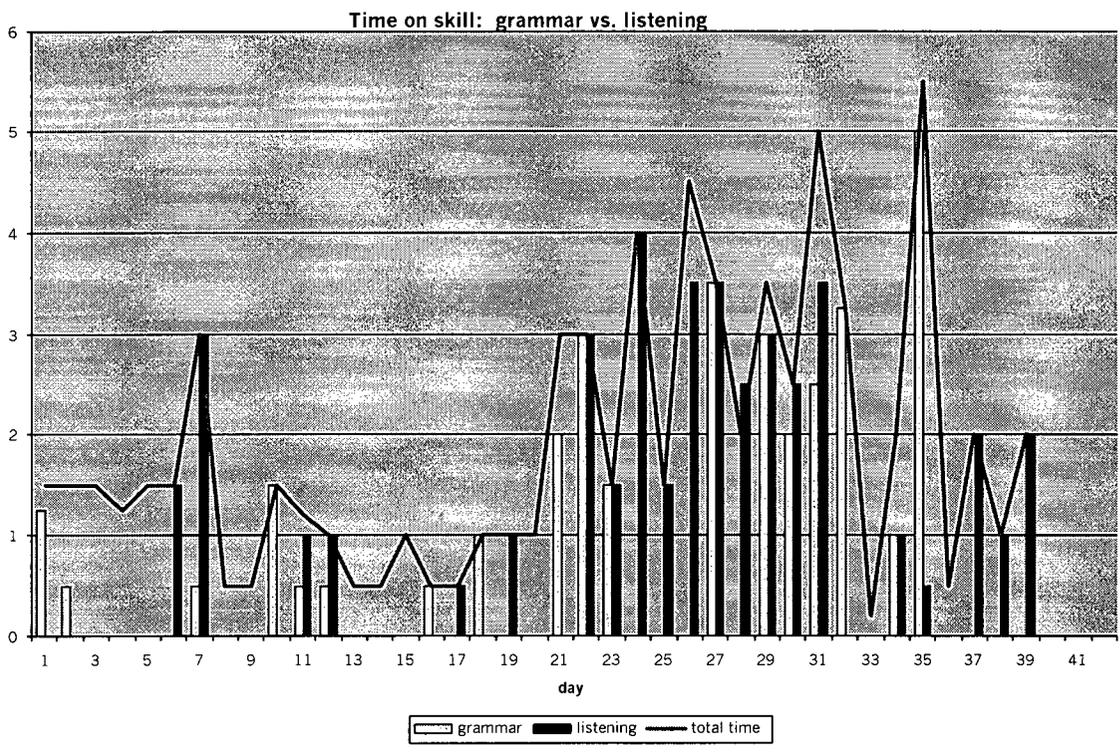
Although empirical measurement of the amount of learning was not a primary objective of this study, I was interested in finding out whether any degree of language acquisition occurred as a result of 70 hours of contact with the language. Three different pretests and posttests were used to measure learning at the outset and at the end of the program. A description of these tests are provided below. In addition, the diary provided a consistent record of monitoring of progress.

At the outset of the project, I decided that I would sequence my attention to the four language skills, starting with reading comprehension, listening comprehension, then the production skills of writing and speaking. This decision corresponded with my preference for comprehension-based approaches. Having identified my language needs and goals, I had established that I did want to acquire all of these skills. I then investigated whether it was possible to do in an Internet context.

In the 70 hours that I spent learning Spanish online I never really progressed to the point where I felt ready to speak, and had only just begun writing short emails. For the most part, I concentrated on reading comprehension and listening comprehension. Because I spent a large part of my time online accessing authentic materials, reading comprehension happened incidentally—it is impossible to be on the Internet and not be reading. As a result, I was unable to keep accurate records of exactly how much time I spent on this skill. In contrast, I was able to keep accurate records of time spent on listening comprehension.

The diary shows that my activity online became divided between working with Spanish language learning materials (usually in the form of grammar explanations and exercises/tasks) and accessing authentic listening and reading materials. Figure 2 shows how this time was divided over the 40 days. The largest block of time was 6 hours and the shortest was 15 minutes. The average amount of time was 1.75 hours.

Figure 2. Distribution of time spent on grammar versus authentic listening activities.



### 4.3 Tests

This study used the *DELE Inicial*, an internationally recognized test of Spanish language proficiency as a pretest and posttest, as well as the UBC Spanish department proficiency test as objective measures of Spanish language ability. In addition, a self-evaluation of skill level was measured using a published self-evaluation tool (Appendix D). The results of the *DELE Inicial* pretest/posttest, which measured reading and listening comprehension and written production, show higher scores in all of these skill areas. This test consisted of short text reading comprehension with multiple choice, listening comprehension with multiple choice, grammar focused questions with cloze and multiple choice, and a 100 word writing task.

The UBC Spanish department proficiency test measured listening comprehension and written production skills. The test involved transcribing Spanish passages from aural to written and then written production of short questions in Spanish. A different pretest and posttest was used to minimize test inflation of scores due to test familiarity. The posttest was written 1 month after the last day of the program. The results also showed improvement of 17 %, from 60% to 77%. Upon closer analysis, many grammatical errors such as accents, verb conjugations and prepositions did not improve at all. The exams were reviewed by a Spanish department professor who was able to make general statements as to how I compared to first year Spanish students who had had approximately the same amount of hours of instruction. In her opinion, my ability to transcribe oral words and statements into writing while respecting the Spanish spellings

was above average. Written grammar errors were typical of first year students, but on the whole she evaluated me as being on the higher side of a beginner class.

The McCafferty self-evaluation scale is a subjective measurement of the four language skills. While completing the posttest I realized that the skills of listening and speaking are grouped together, and I had to adapt the descriptors and separate them in order to give an accurate measure. There were higher scores in all of the skill areas. The scores are indicated in Appendix E.

#### **4.4 Diary**

The diary provided consistent records and observations of progress, through self-evaluation and monitoring. In particular, it is possible to chart the progress of listening comprehension.

The diary suggests that listening comprehension improved considerably, which is not surprising since I spent a significant amount of time listening to CNN in Spanish. Self-evaluation shows that I understand about 25% of what is being said on Spanish CNN on Day 4, compared to 70% comprehension on Day 31, after about 37 hours of listening. What is surprising is that I never felt like I was focussing 100% on trying to listen to everything that was being said. Often I would put CNN on while I was writing papers for other courses and attending to other computer tasks. My original intention was to be efficient with my time, and I hoped that by listening to Spanish radio, I would, at the very least, familiarize myself with the accent and rhythm of the language. In fact, I never had CNN on for the sake of listening to the radio; I was always doing something else at the same time. Despite this, the diary suggests that my listening comprehension improved.

Day 6

*"Listened to CNN in the background all afternoon...didn't make any effort to understand what they were saying, and didn't really understand, tended to be a background noise."*

After about six hours of authentic listening, the input is becoming comprehensible.

Day 12

*"Got CNN on while I'm doing some other work. Recognizing a lot of words. Is it because they speak so well or because I'm improving? Will extensive listening help production?"*

Finally, after 37 hours of listening, I am able to detect a non-native speaker from a native speaker, and am able to visualize spoken dialogue as written dialogue.

Day 31

*"Got CNN on, was able to visualize every word from one of the reporters. Was hearing things like the 'se' at the end of the verbs. Talking about baldness, know that because I remember seeing the discussion on the CNN website yesterday...Guy who's talking about baldness is obviously (I think) a second language Spanish speaker. He's the professional expert. Wow, 13-50,000 USD's for a hair transplant!"*

The difference in the level of acquisition between different language skills becomes evident, when, on Day 31 I notice that my comprehension vocabulary is much larger than what is available to me for speaking:

*“Was trying to speak Spanish in my head, trying to have an imaginary conversation. Realized that my knowledge is news related, talking about simple things like my family, shopping, etc. It would be hard because I’m not able to produce the vocabulary. I tend to look for the French word and then try and translate. Comprehension at this point is at a very different level than production...”*

Based on this realization, I attempt to find out whether I’m able to produce simple sentences in Spanish. I ask a friend to ask me questions in English and I try to respond to him in Spanish in order to evaluate my progress.

Day 31

*“Just had a mini session with B where he asked me simple questions in English e.g.: “What did you eat for lunch, what are you wearing” and I had a lot of difficulty to find the vocabulary in order to respond to him in Spanish. My comprehension is so far ahead now, and I realize how the Japanese students who come here are able to understand pretty well but can’t speak hardly at all. Comprehension vocabulary and production vocabulary are two different things.”*

This becomes even more obvious, when, during the *DELE Basico* exam, I'm finding I'm having not too much trouble understanding the listening comprehension part, but during the oral exam I struggle, especially around topics such as "Where are you from, where do you live, what do you do at university?" The second part of the oral exam allowed me to choose a topic such as "Should cars be allowed in the city centre?" and express my opinion of it. I was much more at ease with this type of question, most likely because it was the type of language I encountered listening to a news radio station.

Strategies: influence of prior language knowledge

Prior language learning experiences and beliefs about language learning had an influence on learning in this new context. This manifested itself in the use of strategies at a metacognitive and cognitive level. In terms of the global organization and planning, I chose a delayed production strategy, based on my belief that comprehension-based programs are more effective than approaches that encourage production at the beginning stages.

On a cognitive level I relied on language transfer from French. Linguistically, French is much closer to Spanish than English, so this is not surprising. As expected, knowledge of French greatly facilitated acquisition of Spanish on most linguistic levels: lexical, morphological, and syntactical.

Early in the program I comment that I'm noticing similarities with French, but I deliberately ignore accents because I feel overwhelmed by the amount of language input:

Day 3

*"Finding I'm ignoring accents, don't see how to relate to pronunciation and seems like cognitive overload."*

Nonetheless, I am aware that knowledge of French is facilitating comprehension.

Day 4

*"Can totally understand sentences like: esta actriz colombiana de 27 anos es, ante todos, mas que simpatico y sabe como seducir."*

Day 11

*"Just did the daily Parlo...Hablar vs. Contar, conversar vs. Platicar. Seems to be the same as in French, even platicar sounds like placoter."*

I also used knowledge of French with the production skills. In my attempt to speak with B on Day 31, I make this comment:

*"During this session, I was throwing in French vocabulary and using French structures. For example, I'm more comfortable with using the pronoun verb structure than tacking on the pronoun at the end of the verb (Spanish allows the option of either), because that's the way it's done in French. I know my*

*pronunciation is a bit French sounding, especially with the stress on the last syllable (as opposed to the second last) and the r's."*

#### Strategies: influence of the Internet environment

The availability of a vast amount of information for learning Spanish created a distracting learning environment, through which I had to spend a considerable amount of time navigating and sorting through this information. At times, this metacognitive overload seemed to have a negative influence on learning. On Day 4, I find myself hunting for a free online Spanish course, because I felt overwhelmed by the responsibility of having to determine my own organization of learning. Later, I struggle with the sequencing of the learning, and make this comment.

Day 19

*"Still feeling like I need a plan, have got to get it on track. Maybe I should refer to a textbook to see what order they do things in. Or maybe follow the UBC Spanish course outlines."*

However, this improved over time. In my retrospective comments about the online learning experience the day after the DELE exam, I write:

Day 41

*“After reading the beginning days of diary, I realize that by the end of the program I had really gotten a better grip on my learning, was easier metacognitively. Wasn't such a vast sea of info that it was in the beginning. Felt more in control of my learning.”*

In retrospect it seems that half way through the program the organizing and planning takes a turn when I realize that the Internet is not able to provide me with everything I need for my learning. While the Internet gave me access to materials that I would never normally be able to access (Puerto Rican television, European news sites, Spanish CNN), I recognized that at times a book would be able to give me what I needed with less hunting and surfing. When it becomes imperative that I learn the verbs quickly and efficiently, I go out and buy a *501 Spanish Verbs* book because I like the format. This book presents a verb and all of its tenses on one page, making it a handy and quick reference. I was unable to find anything like it on the Internet, and it proved to be very useful.

Day 24

*“Should mention that yesterday I went and bought a 501 Spanish Verbs book, because I need a handy reference for all those tenses. I think it will help; the book/paper format has a definite advantage over the web for quick and easy consultation (at this point anyways). Maybe I'm just old-fashioned, by I need to see all those tenses at once so I can compare and contrast. Haven't found a site that will let me do that yet.”*

The influence of the Internet environment was also evident in the planning, monitoring and cognitive processing of tasks. In this project tasks are defined as language activities (usually grammar) and authentic tasks, which consisted of reading online Spanish newspapers, listening to Spanish radio, and participating in Spanish chatrooms. Comprehension of these tasks was facilitated by and through the availability of intelligent feedback, Internet conventions, presentation of content, and cognitive tools.

### Intelligent feedback

I appreciated the instant, intelligent feedback that was available with Internet-based language activities. At one point I'm doing an exercise on the preterit and the imperfect tense, and am excited by the level of interactive feedback.

Day 10

*"Fantastic, clicking on the question mark icon gives access to grammar hints, where you can verify your answers, and if you're wrong it keeps prompting you to try again. When you click on 'help', it fills in the answer for you letter by letter."*

### Conventions

In terms of authentic tasks and activities, the design and interface conventions of the Internet made it easier to access these activities almost immediately, by facilitating

the navigation of authentic sites and therefore allowing me to understand technical terms such as *cargando* (loading). At one point, while spending time at a Spanish news site, I make this observation:

Day 4

*“Conventions of the web transfer to other languages, making it easier to understand what the button labels mean.”*

In the case of Spanish radio, it is the conventions of the medium itself that facilitates comprehension.

Day 6

*“Realize that I am most comfortable with CNN, not because I think the content is so great, but because I’m familiar with its conventions—it is very much modeled after American news television, even the voices seem familiar. I feel like I’m understanding it better, because I understand the context better. Also, the news segments are very short and change frequently.”*

#### Presentation of content

Due to bandwidth constraints, audio and video clips on the Internet tend to be short. On Day 4 I see the advantage of this for beginner language learning.

Day 4

*“Best thing is still BBC and Parlo, because they are reliable, have audio and video and are in small, manageable chunks.”*

The BBC and Parlo sites referred to in this entry are sites that target the Spanish language learner—they provide lessons and exercises on various topics. It is interesting to note that by the end of the program I almost never used these sites, perhaps because I had progressed beyond the level, and had an increasing preference for authentic materials and tasks.

By providing multiple modes of presentation of information, the Internet environment also allowed me to manage authentic tasks more easily.

Day 11

*“I’m at Euronews.com. Keep forgetting how many video reports they have, it’s fantastic. Unlike TV, you can keep playing them over and over if you want or need. Nice short segments, don’t get bored.”*

Then I comment on my use of strategies with the authentic content at this site.

*“Am able to listen to the report and figure out words and visualize their spelling. I remember I used to visualize like this with French. I went back and read the text, which is almost the same as what is in the video. Very practical. Am finding*

*I understand it so much better. Am printing it out so I can study the verb tenses used.”*

### Cognitive tools

On Day 8, I discover Babylon, a freely available online tool that allows you to load language dictionaries, so that with a simple right click of the button in any application, you get instant translation of the word or phrase. As a language learner, I have never used language dictionaries for reading or listening, because the effort of looking up a word is distracting. As a result, I have developed strategies of guessing by context and making inferences. However, with the ease of the Babylon tool, I find myself looking up unknown words all the time.

#### Day 10

*“Hay que + infinitive, very useful lesson, very easy! Plus, they present certain verb vocabulary with their opposites, which is a very useful juxtaposition. Made great use of Babylon—had 2 opposites that I didn’t know the meanings for and couldn’t derive from the context, reir/llorar, and I got an instant translation in 2 seconds.”*

I also find this to be a useful tool for writing.

#### Day 26

*“ Ok, it certainly takes me a long time to produce a sentence. Can get my point across very easily, but not in grammatically correct fashion. Am using Babylon a lot to translate. Realize I still don't have a clue about por vs. para, and reflexive pronouns.”*

### Monitoring anxiety

Communication anxiety, something I experienced frequently in language classrooms, was reduced in an online environment, thanks to the degree of anonymity that the Internet provides. This is noticeable when I decide to participate in a Spanish chatroom.

### Day 34

*“Spent some time at Starmedia (a chat) and then joined in finally. Quite a bit of anxiety, but the fact that you have little chance to run into the same people and that you have guaranteed anonymity is good. Chatted in private with L from Barcelona. Had enough time to look up words quickly in the dictionary, but verb conjugations and expressions were hard to come by. Ended up using the present tense all the time. Think he got bored quickly, but was a good introduction for me. Was like a slowed down version of face to face.”*

The trouble I experienced with verbs in during this chat session lead me to devote more time to studying them and getting the conjugations down. In fact, the next day I spend 5.5 hours doing only verb drills. It is important to note that at this point in the

program I was only six days away from the exam, and my apparent struggles with verbs was a concern since I knew they would form a significant part of the exam.

### Efficiency

The online environment also allowed me to be more efficient in my learning. One language learning site sent a daily Spanish lesson to my email, which I found both convenient and helpful. However, the limitation of 'free' Internet becomes apparent when I stop getting it everyday.

Day 11

*"Just did the daily Parlo lesson. They inform me that they will only be sending me 3 lessons/week, due to client requests. I doubt it, they probably do that after a set period of time, you can only get so much for free. That's the problem with free Internet, nothing is really free."*

Efficiency was also apparent when I realize that I am able to stream CNN and listen to it in the background while doing other things.

## **4.5 Motivation**

In self-directed learning, motivation is a key determinant in the success or failure of a resource-based approach. Particularly in settings where the learner is relatively

isolated, and where there are no marks given for attendance, the learner is responsible for maintaining their level of motivation. While it was predicted that motivation would have a role in this learning context, the extent to which it was multi-faceted came as a surprise.

### Motivation and authentic communities

Motivation was positively affected by the degree to which I felt I was accessing authentic Spanish language communities, and was engaging in authentic language activities, through authentic materials and communication tools. I spent a significant amount of time going to Spanish news and community portals, where I could find everything from my horoscope to chat rooms, to online entertainment television.

#### Day 5

*“At this point, am finding the authenticity of everything very interesting. Feel like I’m peeping into another culture...I’m listening and watching the same news that Spanish people listen and watch, checking out the same news sites, peeping in on forums where real Spanish people participate it. It is very motivating.”*

#### Day 11

*“I’m loving [starmedia.com/multimedia](http://starmedia.com/multimedia)—there are so many reports, videos, lots of Latino culture stuff, it’s like watching Entertainment Tonight in Spanish. Get to discover Latino music e.g. King Changa, something I might not be able to hear otherwise.”*

May 11 (Day 39)

(Found a drama on Puerto Rican television)

2:15

*"Feeling guilty about watching TV! It's actually entertaining, but I feel like I should be working on my verbs. I'm going to need them for the exam tomorrow. I'm forcing myself to turn it off, and I'm going to get a grip on reviewing my materials."*

A desire to participate in an authentic community leads me to forums and chats. While the need to be part of an authentic community is important, I realize that it isn't sufficient to sustain my interest. In addition, I recognize that I want to communicate with native speakers, and not L2 learners like myself.

Day 19

*"Entered a few chats today, but still haven't produced. Find the topics very boring. The forums seem more interesting. Went to Webspanol where the forum is for Spanish language learners. Had an interesting discussion posting on good websites for learning Spanish and how to learn Spanish online...don't want to participate because they're all L2 like me. Need to find an authentic but learner-friendly chat or forum."*

Nonetheless, I continue to visit the L2 message board to read the messages, although the only time I actually post a message is to find out whether anybody knows of a good voice chat forum.

### Motivation and authentic tasks

I found some satisfaction in engaging in authentic tasks, such as writing emails in Spanish to friends. I find this to be a useful way of acquiring some skills.

#### Day 14

*“Maria wrote me a letter in Spanish, and it obviously can’t wait, so I wrote her back. Using my wonderful Babylon tool, I put together a decent letter. Helped that I knew some tenses, e.g. conditional and future. It’s much easier and more interesting to write letters and learn verbs that way than to do verb exercises.”*

However, despite this observation, I spend a lot more time doing verb exercises than writing emails. At one point I decide I’m going to keep a Spanish journal to help myself write more, but I never carry out this plan. The effort required is too much for me, and the motivation to communicate in this way isn’t sufficient.

Interestingly, my preference for authentic materials makes me feel guilty, and I feel torn between this ‘easy’ way of learning and the more painful chore of learning grammar. On Day 11, I spend a lot of time going to Spanish sites with entertaining videos, Spanish news sites, looking for chat rooms. The next day, I start my journal with

a comment that reveals the struggle between what I want to do and what I feel like I need to do.

Day 12

*“Very conscious today that I only have so much energy when online and have to maximize it. Need grammar, can’t get distracted by other things. I’m focusing on verb tenses. Printing out all the grammar stuff now, then will try and do related exercises. Have to force myself to do exercises, because I don’t feel like production. Just want to absorb, become more conscious. But will forget unless I start using it. Going to have to organize my binder more effectively.”*

In this schizophrenic statement, there seems to be a conflict between prior learning experiences and language learning preferences. My acquisition of French involved a lot of grammar learning, and although I see the value of a grammatical foundation, I find that authentic materials play a greater role in my learning.

#### Motivation and technical problems

Motivation was affected negatively when hindered by technical problems, although these are more noticeable at the beginning of the diary. I had problems with dead links, frozen computer and plugins throughout the program.

Day 2

*"My motivation is down, dead links are very frustrating, make you feel very unproductive."*

Day 4

*"Found some videos! Oh, but I need a new plugin...more time lost. Now computer just froze!"*

After a few days where I spend I considerable amount of time on the computer, I have almost no motivation to sit down again.

Day 33

*"Kind of sick of working on the computer."*

#### Motivation and difficulty of content

At times I found certain grammar language tasks too difficult. When this occurred, I resorted back to authentic materials, which usually helped boost my motivation.

Day 30

*"Juan's exercises are really hard, they make me feel dumb again. Should do something else. Don't feel like grammar, think will go find a chatroom."*

Day 35

*“Doing some of the Juan exercises that I had printed out, they are so difficult, makes me discouraged, remember how I felt when I was learning French. Got to remember that can only study them so much, have to read and listen and be immersed to get a real grasp. Having a very difficult time with the irregulars though, it’s really tricky.”*

What is interesting is that I never felt this discouragement when interacting with authentic materials that were beyond my level. It is possible that the academic (as opposed to real-world) nature of the grammar tasks encouraged a desire to perform well, and by not understanding these tasks I feel it was somehow a reflection of my intelligence.

#### Motivation and autonomy

Throughout the diary, I appreciate the flexibility to determine my own learning experience, according to my own individual needs and preferences.

#### Day 5

*“Even though I’m supposed to only be concentrating on reading comprehension stage, I’m finding I want aural input, even if I’m not understanding it. Am also finding that I’m not simply satisfied with just looking at grammar, in fact, I’m consulting grammar when I have a specific need: for example, para versus por, verb tenses, etc. (This is not entirely true).”*

I also appreciate being able to make decisions about my own language readiness.

Day 23

*“Should note that yesterday I found myself trying to compose sentences in my head while I was walking. I think it’s time to move onto the production skills, I have a real desire to try and communicate. Perhaps this will help with the listening skills, by acquiring vocabulary and being able to associate it in a listening context. Also, I should probably be reading more informal language, the news is always a bit more formal.”*

There is also evidence of extreme autonomy, a point where I try and create my own language tool to facilitate my own learning. I had found a verb conjugation tool that was really useful, but didn’t test enough verbs. I decide I’m going to try and find a way to make my own, where I could then test the verbs that I think I need.

Day 22

*“Downloaded hotpotatoes to see if I could make my own conjugator. Doesn’t really do it. Maybe I could do it in Director, with Lingo? Do I really have time?”*

### Extrinsic motivation

Extrinsic motivation, in this case a fixed deadline for the DELE exam, was also critical in ensuring that I continued the program. DELE exams are offered only twice a

year and require advance registration. The exam is six hours long and costs 110\$.

Having a fixed posttest was a key motivator in ensuring that I stayed on track.

Day 9

*“For me, having established a formal DELE exam in May is a good thing, because I can’t let busyness prevent me from continuing the project. In self-directed learning it’s easy to find reasons not to do it, there has to be some external motivation. A 100 hour program could stretch over 8 months as opposed to 3 if you’re not willing enough.”*

Day 15

*“Having registered for the exam gives me a sense of urgency, I really want to crack down.”*

However, to a certain extent, the exam guides the planning of the learning, which can be viewed as being both a positive and negative influence. In the following entry, my beliefs about language learning (e.g. the benefit of delayed production) are conflicting with the knowledge that the exam will be testing all four language skills.

Day 19

*“Still wanting to produce language, but I know that I’m not ready yet. Need lots and lots of comprehension first. But for how long? I’ve got an exam to do! Might be able to pull off the writing but the speaking? No way. Maybe because*

*I'm more comfortable reading and not very comfortable listening? Maybe if I stepped up the listening parts?"*

Day 25

*"Today I don't feel like doing any grammar, because I think it's time to start producing. I've got 3 weeks left before my exam, and I need to acquire writing and speaking skills in the meantime."*

At times, the exam also shaped the choice of tasks and activities.

Day 27

*"Ok, for exam, need to outline what I need to learn. Pronouns, verb tenses, adverbs, prepositions, differences between por/para, ser/estar."*

Finally, the exam had an influence on my affective state.

Day 35

*"Did some reflecting and realized I am feeling really anxious about the exam because it tests the four skills and I don't feel ready in them. I know that I'm not ready to speak, and only feel ready to start writing. The external exam deadline has been good in getting me onto a schedule, but I'm feeling overloaded with the intensive grammar cramming I've been doing. The verbs just seem to go on forever. I would rather just absorb more content on the comprehension level and*

*automaticize the verbs and grammar that way. I realize you have to do the grammar explicitly, but I don't see the point of doing exercise after exercise."*

In other words, while the decision to include the DELE exam in the program was determined by the methodology of this project, it actually influenced to a large degree decisions about my learning, particularly at the end. While the UBC and self-evaluation tests were largely informal, it is possible that the formality of the DELE—the cost, the time requirement, the location—drove the desire to perform well on it, even though it had very little to do with my personal language goals.

## **CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION**

In general I found self-directed learning in an Internet-based context to be a good way of learning Spanish, at least at the beginning level. Yet, as in other self-directed learning modes it required considerable effort, particularly in the use the metacognitive strategies for planning and organizing learning. Prior language knowledge of French seemed to facilitate the process considerably, and the ability to transfer this knowledge in a highly individualized learning context translated to enhanced motivation, as well as a certain amount of learning efficiency.

### **5.1 Prior language learning experiences**

In a discussion of her language learning diary which she kept while studying Spanish in Mexico, Campbell (1995) makes a strong connection in the way that her Mexican experience was shaped in a large way by her prior language experience in learning German. She found herself seeking similar social opportunities and eventually achieved a situation where she was able to socialize on a continual basis with the L1 community. Campbell believed that most of her acquisition of German in Germany took place in social situations. In this study the classroom learning part of the diary did not have a significant role. Campbell points out that while prior language experience in relation to language transfer is well documented in SLA research, the way in which prior language learning background manifests itself in new language learning experiences of learners has not been explored.

In the present study, prior language experience influenced my behaviour and choices in an Internet environment. I did not want to participate in the many forums for Spanish language learners; I preferred to spend time at sites that were targeted at the hispanophone community. At the same time, prior language experiences manifested themselves in the way that I thought I needed to ‘study’ the language—spending time trying to learn grammar, memorize vocabulary lists and conjugating verbs. This behaviour was somewhat contradictory to my own beliefs and knowledge about how languages should be learned. It is possible that this obvious study strategy was shaped by the need to complete an exam, and I reverted to exam preparation strategies that were already in place.

## **5.2 Authentic learning**

The importance of interesting authentic materials, which has also been discussed in the diary study of Jones (1994), Grabe and Stoller (1997) and to a lesser extent in Schumann (1980) were key in creating an authentic experience and in sustaining motivation. In the Grabe and Stoller (1997) diary study, using newspapers as a source for learning to read in Portuguese was essential for maintaining motivation, since “the reading was purposeful and was not overly frustrating; and the newspaper permitted the use of a large network of background knowledge from previous days, from TV, and from English-language newspapers” (p.113). The advantage of the Internet in allowing learners to access a wide variety of these materials—news, television, radio, even literature—must be highlighted. It is particularly relevant in a self-directed learning context.

In addition, the Internet was able to provide multiple sources of language input. Through this input I became aware of the complexity of the Spanish speaking world and the existence of so many varieties of language and culture. Moreover, the fact that much of the content on the authentic sites changed everyday gave me a reason to access them daily. In the case of online television, I continued to visit the sites even after the project was completed.

Of course, it cannot be denied that the positive transfer of my L2 to Spanish made it easier to understand these websites, and facilitated access to these materials and communities. How interaction with authentic materials from the beginning stages with a completely different language occurs could be the subject of another study.

### **5.3 Strategy use**

Language learning in this mode required a great deal of metacognitive strategies. In a language classroom, the metacognitive decisions are usually taken care of by the institution or teacher, leaving the cognitive processes up to the student. This study supports the view that encouraging students to be more autonomous could be facilitated by providing more metacognitive strategy awareness, and by encouraging more self-directed learning. The risk of metacognitive overload from extensive surfing for appropriate materials could be reduced by creating online virtual self-access centers, which, as language portals, would reduce the time and energy required by learners to find and evaluate materials.

The ease of using cognitive tools such as online concordancers allowed me to use strategies that I wouldn't have used in other learning modes. But strategies that dominated in prior learning modes, such as memorization of word lists and verb conjugations, reappeared in this mode, and were used extensively despite my belief that they tend to be ineffective. It could be suggested that even in a self-directed mode of learning, critical awareness and evaluation of why we use certain strategies does not occur automatically, and is perhaps necessary.

#### **5.4 Language transfer**

The prevalence of my L2 language transfer as a dominant cognitive strategy likely occurred because it seemed to be a successful strategy in this study. The use of language transfer as a strategy is well documented (c.f. Bialystok, 1983; Ellis, 1986). According to Bialystok, "inferences based on knowledge of other languages are particularly useful when the native and target languages are related" (p.109). She cites an example where students who spoke fluent Italian were able to better understand French reading comprehension than classmates who didn't have that knowledge. She claims that the more languages the learner knows, the more success they have in using inference and communication strategies. On the other hand, some SLA research, specifically in the area of L2 vocabulary research has shown that a certain language threshold must exist before abilities in the first language can transfer, although the nature of this threshold is not well understood (c.f. Laufer, 1997, p.21).

In this study, language transfer occurred more from my L2 (French) to the L3 (Spanish). There is almost no evidence of my L1 (English) transferring to Spanish. Obviously, the awareness that French and Spanish were closely related allowed me to process input differently. But in language classrooms, a teacher may or may not be aware of the students' prior language knowledge other than their L1 and cannot adjust their instruction accordingly. Again, individualization of learning might lead to greater efficiency if this prior knowledge can be put to good use. For example, I was able to 'learn' all of the verb tenses in less than a week, where as a language classroom might have spent a week on the subjunctive alone.

Bialystok also discusses the process of inferencing from the context: "context is created by both the language and the physical environment in which it occurs" (p.110). In this study I commented on how the design conventions of the Internet made it easier to navigate authentic Spanish sites. But a learner who is not familiar with this environment and Internet conventions might be at a disadvantage when trying to access authentic materials. As Johnston (1999) points out in his discussion of Internet audiences, "Computer-mediated communication offers new opportunities and new challenges to learners" (p.64) and "language learners must become familiar with new conventions and new conditions if they are to participate effectively in these new forms of communication" (ibid).

## **5.5 Motivation**

This study supports the view that motivation is enhanced when learners have the opportunity to make decisions about their own learning (Holec, 1981, Dickinson, 1987). In another diary study, the Schumanns (1977) also reported the importance of the desire to maintain one's own learning agenda. It is important to note that technology influenced choices of content particularly when consistency was necessary. For example, my choice of CNN as a daily authentic listening activity was motivated because it was more reliable and had better sound than other online news radio such as BBC. Currently bandwidth constraints determine to a large extent the choice of content that users access. The extent to which motivation is negatively affected when technology fails is certainly an important consideration for online developers of virtual self-access—regular maintenance is key to the learners' success, since the learner is completely dependent on the environment for their learning.

I would suggest that in this study the extrinsic motivation, preparation for and completion of an exam, had more of a negative effect than a positive one. While this motivator was helpful for keeping me on track at the beginning stages of the study, it had a negative effect when I began to direct my learning to study for the exam. I could be suggested, within the framework of Deci and Ryan (1985) that eliminating the degree of control that I had over my learning reduced intrinsic motivation—the exam became the controller. While I recognize that extrinsic motivators are essential for some learners, it is perhaps necessary to carefully consider our extrinsic motivation in this type of learning mode, and how it will affect our learning.

## 5.6 Comprehension and production

Research on second language vocabulary acquisition has noted the difference between 'receptive' and 'productive' vocabulary. In another diary study, Grabe and Stoller (1997) observed the development of reading and vocabulary skills through extensive reading of authentic newspapers and listening to television news reports while living in Brazil. There was considerable improvement in listening comprehension and "listening comprehension followed closely along with reading comprehension in its development" (p.117). But this comprehension was very context specific—by focusing on news genre he was not able to understand conversations and lectures at the same level as the news stories. His study, like this one, does not answer the question as to "when (and if) such genre-specific skills would expand and transfer into good comprehension of other spoken and written genres" (p.117). Although as language teachers and learners we are well aware that comprehension precedes production, production ability is often subconsciously or consciously used as a measure of language competence. We are reminded that learners may be able to comprehend at a very high level, with almost no ability to produce language.

## 5.7 Learning

Researchers are well aware that allowing learners to govern the rate of the input is beneficial to learning. In a self-directed mode of learning this is possible, since learners are in control. The asynchronous nature of the Internet facilitates the control of input. While research has noted the advantages of asynchronous text for language learners (Carey 2001, 2000, 1999, 1999a) much Internet multimedia content is also asynchronous—in this case, video and audio clips—and a language learner can replay a clip as often as they need. In some instances, video is also supported by text. This control facilitates the ‘throughput’ (Carey, 1999); the cognitive processes that learners engage in to construct meaning. Learning is also enhanced when learners have control of the choice of input, and the choice of who to interact with. In an Internet environment, learners can choose to interact with an L1 or L2 community, or both (Carey, 1999).

In measuring learning we often rely to using quantitative measures of evaluation. In considering the question of whether or not there is any measurable evidence of Spanish acquisition it is necessary to be critical of the quantitative measures used in this study. Although the tests suggest that there was improvement between the pretests and the posttests, this measurement of improvement is not necessarily valid. First, there are obvious limitations to using the same test for pretest and posttest, as was the case with the *DELE Inicial*. In the case of the UBC proficiency tests, the type of vocabulary encountered on these tests was of a completely different genre than what I encountered for the most part on the Internet. It is also necessary to consider the extent to which a test cannot not measure all learning. For example, I observed when taking the UBC posttest that much less effort was needed for the oral/written dictation section, probably because of the improvement in listening and reading comprehension. This subjective observation

cannot be measured in most standard tests. What was interesting and enlightening were the comments I had written during the *DELE Inicial* tests about the difficulty/comprehension of the questions themselves on both the pretest and posttest. In considering evaluation, perhaps there should be room for learners to document their subjective understanding of test items.

Although the testing served a practical purpose in providing an objective way of measuring learning, it was not a particularly useful measurement in the context of self-directed learning. What was more beneficial to myself as a learner was the self-monitoring that occurred throughout the diary. For example, the entries that mark my progression of listening comprehension, or the realization that I have begun to compose sentences in my head provide evidence of the process of second language acquisition.

There is also the question as to whether or not spending such a considerable amount of time on grammar made a difference. The diary reveals that I feel that the extensive work on verbs was helping with comprehension. Yet, the UBC posttest reveals that when I was required to produce language, I made little progress in that area—I still struggled with gender, prepositions and simple verb agreement, even though, at least in the case of verb agreement, I had devoted considerable time to it. It is possible that if I had spent more time in the production stages I would have committed these concepts to memory.

## **5.8 Limitations and Implications**

The limitations and advantages of a diary study are well documented (see Bailey, 1991 for a discussion of this issue). The most obvious limitation is the fact that diary

studies generally are a study of one individual. The individual nature of this study makes it impossible to make any generalizations about the findings. There is also the question of the potential bias of the researcher-as-participant. However, it is recognized that the data that emerges from using this type of methodology is effective in gaining important insights into learning processes that cannot be observed using any other method. Perhaps an ideal diary study would consider the diaries of several learners. This study, like most other diary studies, only documents the beginning stage of acquisition. In addition, it does not document the production stages, which may require a different methodology, such as think-aloud techniques. In order to document the production stages the study would have to be longitudinal, perhaps taking place over a period of a couple of years. A diary study documenting several stages of acquisition, over the course of several years would undoubtedly shed light on the complex process of acquiring additional languages.

## **5.8 Conclusion**

In discussing the extent to which learning is enhanced in an Internet-based environment, and the advantages and limitations of learning in this context, it is useful to refer to Egbert et.al (1999) who present eight conditions that SLA research has pointed to as important for language learning.

1. Learners have opportunities to interact and negotiate meaning.
2. Learners interact in the target language with an authentic audience
3. Learners are involved in authentic tasks

4. Learners are exposed to and encouraged to produce varied and creative language
5. Learners have enough time and feedback
6. Learners are guided to attend mindfully to the learning process
7. Learners work in an atmosphere with an ideal stress/anxiety level
8. Learner autonomy is supported. (p.4)

This study has shown that with the exception of the sixth condition, self-directed learning in an Internet-based context is able to meet all of these conditions. The most significant limitation of learning in this context is that it is heavily dependent on the proper functioning of the technology. The implication of this study points to the need to investigate whether specially designed websites could guide the learner more efficiently in their learning, thereby reducing the metacognitive load required of them. Of course, since very little research has looked at individual processes of learning in an Internet-based environment, much more research is needed in order to have a better idea as to how to meet the needs of self-directed language learners as well as learners who use the Internet as a supplement to their learning.

Although this study focused on self-directed learning using the Internet to provide more individualized learning, it is not being suggested that this mode of learning will become the exclusive answer to a more constructivist language learning environment. Similarly, it is unlikely that classrooms are going to disappear in place of virtual learning. What is likely is the coexistence of several options for learning, which are independent or dependent of each other. For example, the language classroom of the future might

combine face-to-face with computer-mediated communication. Conway (1998) argues for a rethinking of the way the classroom-learning environment is designed. She states: "A fundamental question for classroom designers is: What can be done best in the (face-to-face) classroom environment, and what can be done best in the (virtual, or asynchronous) on-line environment?" (p.203). She envisions a variety of environments, ranging from computer labs, multimedia classrooms, and laptop-enabled classrooms to virtual classrooms. These environments would facilitate constructive and participatory learning. The essential idea in reconceptualizing the classroom model is that classrooms can provide collaboration and community, whereby the participants in these communities are "agents of change by trying to improve the activity systems in which their development takes place" (Wells, 2000, p.60).

For learners who choose not to learn in a classroom setting, I would suggest that Internet learning might be suitable for learners who need to feel like they are in contact with authentic communities and are engaging in authentic experiences. Although 'e-immersion' will never be as wonderful as actually being physically located within the target community, it certainly has the potential to be the next best thing for some learners. And as some research has already shown (Carey, 2000a, 1999) it is effective for L2 learners as a supplement to face-to-face learning. Internet technologies provide a new context for language learning that may be more suited to the learning styles and goals of certain learners. By taking language learning out of the classroom, or by using it to supplement classroom learning, we are providing a legitimate context for learning that is not only relevant to real-world discourse, but one which can be accessed almost anywhere and anytime.

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## Appendix A. Materials for the language learner

- Spanish resource portal  
<http://www2.arts.ubc.ca/resources/spanish>
- Grammar/linguistic explanations (text, audio, video)  
[www.parlo.com](http://www.parlo.com)  
[www.studyspanish.com](http://www.studyspanish.com)
- Interactive exercises (text)  
[www.indiana.edu/%7Ecall/ejercicios](http://www.indiana.edu/%7Ecall/ejercicios)
- Dictionaries (text and audio)  
[www.dictionary.com](http://www.dictionary.com)
- Translating tools (text)  
[www.babylon.com](http://www.babylon.com)
- Language games and activities  
[www.quia.com](http://www.quia.com)  
[www.language-spanish.com](http://www.language-spanish.com)
- Downloadable software

**Appendix B. Materials for the target community.**

- portals (text, audio, video)

[www.terra.es](http://www.terra.es)

[www.starmedia.com](http://www.starmedia.com)

[www.yupi.com](http://www.yupi.com)

- News sites (text, audio, video)

[www.euronews.net](http://www.euronews.net)

[www.elmundo.es](http://www.elmundo.es)

- Cultural sites (text, audio, video)

[www.trixel.com](http://www.trixel.com) (Puerto Rican zine)

[www.diegorivera.com](http://www.diegorivera.com)

[www.literatura.org](http://www.literatura.org) (Argentinian literature)

- Special interest sites

[www.mccsc.edu](http://www.mccsc.edu) (HTML tutorials in Spanish)

[www.arrakis.es](http://www.arrakis.es) (El mundo de las tapas)

## Appendix C. University of Cambridge Needs Analysis (in Dickinson, 1987, p.96)

### 1. Motivation

What is your attitude towards the community whose language you want to learn?

*Very good, it is a community that I am interested in, have a good Spanish friend. Am aware of the economic value of learning Spanish as well.*

How much does it matter if you don't succeed?

*Don't know.*

Do you need to learn the language to be able to achieve certain specific tasks or do you want to learn enough to be accepted as a member of the foreign community?

*Enough to be able to speak to Spanish people without them wanting to switch to English. Would like to be as close to fluent as possible, without hesitations.*

### 2. Aims

What do you want to be able to do in the language?

Do you want to communicate in the written or the spoken language? Or both?

*Both.*

Will it be enough if you just understand the language (at least in the first instance)?

*At first, yes.*

For you, is it sufficient to learn just enough language for communication to occur?

*No, it has to be with almost no accent and errors for oral communication, very good written communication. Full comprehension.*

### 3. Functions

What use will you be making of the language?

*Academic, work, social.*

What kind of situations will you have to perform in? (Telephone? Lectures? Seminars? Shops? Etc.)

*All.*

What functions of language will you primarily need? (Explaining, persuading, seeking information, contradicting, etc.).

*All.*

What will your relationship be with the people you will be dealing with? (friends, inferiors, superiors, etc.)

*All.*

#### **4. Information**

What kind of linguistic information do you need to meet your needs?

*How people communicate orally on a general level. E.g. Colloquialisms.*

Which are the most important: technical vocabulary? The precise meaning of the intonation? Correct pronunciation? A set of ready-made sentences to get by with?

*Ease and confidence in communication, excellent pronunciation.*

#### **5. Activities**

What need you do to learn what you want?

*Need lots of oral and written input, so that I can then imitate. Need a couple strong peer relationships to facilitate practice.*

How much time can you devote to it?

*5-10 hours per week.*

What are your learning habits?

*Generally need to be in country of target language in order to be highly motivated. Become bored easily.*

Do you like working on your own?

*Somewhat.*

Is the language lab suitable?

*Detest language labs.*

Do you need help? (Dictionary, radio, newspapers, grammars, contact with native speakers, etc.)

Do you know native speakers who would agree to talk with you in their own language?

Do you make full use of other possibilities, e.g., the radio? Sub-titled film? Etc.

*Entirely internet based.*

TARGET SKILL	LISTEN/SPEAK	LISTEN/SPEAK	LISTEN/SPEAK	WRITE	WRITE	WRITE	WRITE	WRITE	WRITE	WRITE	WRITE	READ	READ	READ	
SCALE	<i>Give, exchange information, check, report, repair.</i>	<i>Give, exchange, ask for views, comment, discuss, clarify.</i>	<i>Socialise, react, register, vary attitude.</i>	<i>Enquire, sound out, ask for information, initiate correspondence.</i>	<i>Report factually, comment, draw conclusions, summarize.</i>	<i>Explain, propose, convey attitude, relationship.</i>	<i>Extract gist, find relevant information.</i>	<i>Extract detailed info to situation.</i>	<i>Follow argument of complex discourse, group connections.</i>						
9	Presents clearly and follows all that is said in group discussion.	Can negotiate at all levels, responds effectively, persuasively.	Can deal effectively with total strangers even on the telephone, control and initiate.	Can gather information from any source or make almost any initial contact.	Can prepare minutes of meetings, report on proposals, progress.	Can prepare planning proposal with comments on pros and cons.	Skim reads effectively and extracts small pieces of information from long texts quickly.	Can evaluate importance and relevance of accurately understood abstracted information.	Can read a series of articles, papers and forms and see argument clearly.						
8	Can report clearly on events, meetings and follow what is reported individually.	Can offer appreciation, alternatives, evaluate possibilities and means.	Can recognize and respond to irony, jokes, misunderstandings.	Has wide range of styles and registers and has a clear, logical approach.	Can report on visits, visitors' situations, decisions with comment.	Can defend, support, oppose a course of action or decision or proposal.	Can find what is relevant, important in wide selection of materials.	Can use files and reference material efficiently and make logical connections.	Can read a file of correspondence and understand whole.						
7	Recognises different styles of interaction and implication and colloquial language.	Can discuss a detailed plan or proposal with those with shared knowledge.	Can function in group of strangers, discuss topics outside work.	Can choose appropriate form of language to suit a range of correspondents.	Can prepare briefs for visitors, meetings, describe situation.	Can write effective memos, letters, in response to a range of problems.	Can find key words, phrases, concepts and make correct associations.	Can produce accurate information on request from files or reference books.	Can follow argument of newspaper, magazine articles.						
6	Can get and give information face to face with native speakers.	Could interview or be interviewed by non-hostile native speaker.	Could act as guide/official, host to visitors, colleagues.	Can sustain logical chain of questions, direct or implied, in familiar topic areas.	Can give information in reply to queries one point at a time.	Can explain problems with own work, give reasons, complain.	Can recognise drift, sort correspondence, articles into topic areas.	Can extract implicit as well as explicit information.	Can follow straightforward chain of reasoning in sequential paragraphs.						
5	Can report and understand simple events and actions in the past.	Can express approval, doubt, hesitation, but misses finer points of degree.	Can present himself, make introductions, invitations, accept, refuse over meals.	Can make standard enquiries of a routine, impersonal nature.	Can describe functions of posts, processes, procedures in simple language.	Can make arrangements for meeting, check or cancel appointments.	Can recognise relevance at paragraph level and vary pace accordingly.	Can extract factual but not logical or implied information.	Can understand each point of argument but often fails to see connections.						
4	Can make appointments, arrangements, check, cancel, alter.	Can discuss aspects of own work and immediate work environment.	Can express personal likes, dislikes, preferences, opinions.	Can produce individual 'stock' questions, one at a time.	Can write routine 'standard' letters in answer to simple queries.	Can write 'stock' letters or memos of apology, assurance, promise.	Can cope with short memos or letters but not with anything longer.	Can follow and act correctly upon routine letters, memos, instructions.	Can understand a process or procedure from a description.						
3	Can describe job, give and follow routine instructions.	Can state own position in very broad terms, but not able to justify.	Can function in shops, hotels, travelling, and exchange personal details.	Can produce simple yes/no or 'WH' question forms.	Can give personal details or describe job in short.	Can give straight-forward directions, instructions in memo or 'standard' format.	Reads at sentence level, digests each sentence before going on to next.	Can work from familiar forms, notices, work sheets.	Can see simple relationships showing cause, effect and simple conditions.						
2	Can give personal information, recognise predictable questions.	Is limited to 'good', 'bad' and 'don't know' or 'don't care'.	Can survive on a set of 'stock phrases' in defined situations.	Can produce a very few memorised questions about time, person, place.	Can fill in form, work sheet, about own work.	Can complete appropriate forms using one verb sentences.	Reads word by word from beginning, cannot predict or vary pace.	Can follow simple instructions, time or place.	Can establish relationship between sentences but treats each sentence individually.						
1	Knows a number of words and phrases but is limited by poor production and recognition			Can produce the odd question when most of the information is supplied by the situation.	Can complete forms which require one word or simple 'stock phrase' answers.	Can complete appropriate forms using one verb sentences.	Reads and digests at simple sentence level - one sentence at a time.								
0	Can exchange the odd word or phrase but no meaningful exchange outside situation.				Can write name and address and a few personal details, some numbers.		Recognises individual words, street names, public signs, shop names.								

**Appendix E: Pretest and Posttest Self-evaluation based on McCafferty's Performance Chart****Pretest: January 7, 2001**

## Listen/ speak

1. 0-1
2. 0-1
3. 0-1

## Write

1. 0-1
2. 0
3. 0

## Read

1. 3-4
2. 3-4
3. 2

**Posttest: May 13, 2001**

## Speak

1. 1-2
2. 2-3
3. 1-2

## Listen

1. 4-5
2. 4
3. 4

## Write

1. 4-5
2. 3
3. 2

## Read

1. 6-7
2. 4-5