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# Age, Aptitude, and Autonomy: An Exploration of Self-Guided Learning and Autonomy Development in Adult Learners

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Age, Aptitude, and Autonomy

*An Exploration of Self-Guided Learning and Autonomy Development in Adult Learners*

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts in TESOL degree at

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Date: April 1, 2018

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Education Resource Information Center (ERIC) Descriptors

Learning Strategies

Multilingualism

Gradual Autonomy

Polyglot

Second Language Acquisition Theory

Independent Language Learning

Adult Learners

Cognitive Development

Mnemonic Strategies

## Abstract

Optimal language learning facilitation requires drawing on insights from many feeder disciplines. Key among them has been the field of second language acquisition. With the significant developments in technology and the urgency for English learners to compete in today's globalized world, there has been a particular focus on more advanced learning strategies as well as on research in the area of student autonomy. The latter type of research has tapped into insights offered not just by applied linguists but also by polyglots who have achieved high levels of fluency in multiple languages. Independent language learning has drawn further attention as it has been shown to be an important factor in the experiences of learners who have acquired exceptional levels of attainment. This has necessitated a careful analysis and some revision of extant theories of language acquisition, with some promoting self-directed language learning as perhaps the most feasible method for individuals seeking optimal language development and cultural immersion conducive to deeper, expedited learning. This research paper seeks to understand traditional theories of second language acquisition as they relate to self-directed learning, and the fostering of autonomy in adult learners with limited educational background, studying in a somewhat mixed level context. The author will examine factors such as age, motivation, and aptitude, and correlate their interpretation in the literature with observations, surveys, and analyses of students in the context under study. To these she will add an emic perspective to self-directed learning, describing her own experience with three months of self-directed language learning. The goal of this multifaceted description is to shed light on methods, learning strategies, and other variables that determine levels of attainment outside conventional language learning approaches.

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### Introduction

For as long as I can remember, I have always been fascinated with language, its sounds, imagined new identities, and the profound sense of accomplishment when communication begins to happen. Many failed attempts at self-teaching methods and reading about the success of individuals who were able to overcome much of what I failed to do has been my motivation for language learning as an adult. The process of learning language can encompass huge investments with sometimes little return. Today, language learners have access to a wider variety of learning tools than ever before, from chat rooms and free online language programs, to other web-based tutorials. Yet these resources do not often yield positive outcomes in learners' engagement with and acquisition of language. I have seen many students from a variety of backgrounds spend over ten years studying English to arrive at an intermediate level of attainment, a lack of passion for the language, and burn out. But then, there are the rare individuals who have been able to reach high intermediate to advanced levels in multiple languages without any formal instruction. What is their secret? Can this type of acquisition be attained by anyone?

This project will explore the process of learning from the perspective of an absolute beginner (myself) and thus will offer a subjective take on SLA theory. It will also shed light on the learning strategies utilized by accomplished language learners, such as Kato Lomb, whom Stephen Krashen hailed as, "possibly the most accomplished polyglot in the world" (Krashen, 1996).

For a language learner, the process of acquisition can be very confounding. For a language teacher, it can be even more challenging and perplexing. With my exploration of second language acquisition theory, the mystery and complexity of how languages are acquired has left me eagerly in search of a better understanding of the processes of developing mastery and ownership of language – moving away from a passive approach to language learning to a more active, engaged,

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and deliberate approach. Professionally, such a shift is not only significant for the future of second language acquisition and language teaching, but also necessary as we continue to evolve technologically. As society changes and English becomes the international language used as the primary means of communication, strategies and theories of acquisition also need to be challenged and re-visited. In addition, educators should remain engaged in active language learning and consider the value that multilingual language teachers can contribute to the field.

### *Acculturation, Age, and Adult Learners*

The field of language acquisition concerns itself with the multitude of factors that shape language development and ultimate attainment. This has driven countless teachers and theorists to hypothesize, test, and draw conclusions about the mechanisms behind these two aspects of language acquisition. There is no unifying theory that everyone can agree upon. However, rather than dismissing the existing language acquisition theories in search of a new theory, one can utilize the field work and research of the experts to test the usefulness of their hypotheses and observations and further expand upon them.

“Like many areas of “pure” empirical research, the study of SLA had its origins in attempts to solve practical problems. In fact, until quite recently, research in this area was widely regarded as falling entirely within Applied Linguistics, and many still see the primary motivation for this research as that of contributing directly to the solution of the complex and socially important problems surrounding foreign and L2 instruction” (Ritchie & Bhatia, 1996, p.4).

One issue with the research conducted thus far is that the field seems to lack much emic data offered by individuals with a multilingual background (see Todeva and Cenoz 2009, Stakhnevich 2005, and Lvovich 1997).



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In consideration of this type of subjective research, one can observe learners who have not only proven the validity of the *good language learner* strategies (Sykes, 2015), but also have proven the power of autonomy for highly motivated learners. In a case study conducted by Abdul Halim Sykes (2015), he identifies five key characteristics of the hypothetical good language learner. Following his description, he tested his hypothesis with an effective language learner as his case study. He concludes that “when learners accept responsibility for their language learning and actively engage in language learning activities, they have a much greater chance of success in second language acquisition” (Sykes, 2015, p.713). Sykes relies on researched criteria that determine a language learner’s success and defines these key factors as setting, aptitude, motivation, personality, use of strategies, and ability to take risks (Sykes, 2015, p. 716). It would seem that learners who do not exhibit these characteristics described by Sykes in his research would require much more teacher guided facilitation. A study was conducted with my current English language learners to examine some of the key factors for successful language learning. The primary factor that was explored was motivation.

Through observation and analysis of language learners in different classroom settings using both traditional teacher-centered pedagogy and learner-centered experiential methodologies, several acquisition theories were also explored. The most significant was Schumann’s Acculturation Model. This model suggests that a language learner’s success is determined by the extent of orientation to the target language group and culture. The various determiners that allow the learner to acculturate create a level of social distance to the target language community and ultimately result in success or failure in language acquisition (Ellis, 2015, p.207). In a monolingual and mono-cultural community in Los Angeles, 24 English language learners participated in a community circle to examine degrees of integration and motivation. Several structured questions

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were given during this community circle and participants were encouraged to respond in the L1 or L2 in order to facilitate greater understanding of the wide gap between the greater American culture and smaller monolingual Latino communities of Los Angeles. Overall, students shared similar attitudes toward the L2 culture stating characteristics of discriminatory practices and racism. One student seemed to respect the behavior of middle class American families who push their children toward higher education. Another student valued the so-called *American Dream* ideology. Others have been here strictly for monetary gains. Interestingly, none of the participants shared a desire to integrate into non-Latino communities or assimilate further into the L2 society. Consequently, families are able to survive in isolated contexts for years without ever having to learn English. This illustrates the lack of motivation to learn the “dominant” language of the adopted country.

However, with the new Trump presidency, a change in political atmosphere has occurred and a sense of urgency has taken over many of these communities throughout the United States. When the learner steps out of their community seeking to thrive and gain better opportunities, integration and language acquisition become the primary factor in determining economic advancement. The primary motivation to learn English now is fear. When asked about goals and objectives within the English speaking culture that would be considered desirable or aspects of the society they would be willing to adopt or move closer toward embracing, most students were silent. Despite an affection for American pop culture, there seems to be a lack of desire and willingness to be penetrable to change.

In contrast, an interview conducted with a former student from Saudi Arabia exhibits a highly motivated individual who has fully acculturated to American society. There are several complex sociolinguistic factors that have contributed to his desire to identify with the target

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language community. Schumann defines as influential social factors: social dominance, integration patterns, enclosure, cohesiveness, size, cultural congruence, attitude, and intended length of residence (Ellis, 2015, p. 208). In the case of this former student, he was able to identify with the appearance of social freedom that American society offers. Coming from an ultra-conservative culture, being adopted, and never feeling fully accepted by his native culture, he assumed an *imagined identity* within the American context (Pavlenko & Norton, 2007). Pop culture, video games, and social media were the primary mediums through which he sought his linguistic identity. The process of assuming a different identity and connecting with people beyond his immediate cultural community was the sole motivating factor. From religion to family, he had a strong desire to transform his identity to one where he could fully express himself and English became the bridge through which he could achieve his imagined identity. The most surprising aspect of his acquisition was his pronunciation. When speaking to him by telephone, one is completely unable to discern whether the speaker is a native Californian or not. He has convincingly reached pronunciation levels of a native speaker and is completely capable of producing academic material sufficient for his university program. On the other hand, when he resorts to speaking in his native Arabic, surprisingly he sounds like a foreigner to some degree.

The degree of acculturation with my former student and the students observed in Los Angeles can lead one to conclude that social distance can have a significant impact on optimal language learning. If the learner chooses to immerse themselves in the target language community in order to shorten the acculturation gap, then the rate of acquisition for this type of learner will inevitably be much faster. Furthermore, motivation seems to be the foundational determiner for successful language acquisition for the students observed.

### Age

According to Keely (2016), “From the perspective of a *polygot* who has learned/used multiple languages in diverse situations over the past 40 years, the argument for a CPH seems more like a rationalization for non-success rather than a serious scientific hypothesis” (Keely, 2016, p.29).

The Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH) was first proposed by Penfield and Roberts (1959) suggesting that there is a period in human development up to the onset of puberty where second language acquisition happens easily. The ability to achieve native speaker competence is also said to occur during this time after which L2 acquisition becomes “more difficult and is rarely entirely successful” (Ellis, 2015, p.27). There have been several studies conducted that suggest L2 adult learners were able to achieve either native or near native proficiency with subtle differences which can provide evidence against the Critical Period Hypothesis (Ellis, 2015, p.31). It seems to be generally believed that age is a factor but a clearly defined “window of opportunity” does not seem to be agreed upon. The more important question still is how we define successful ultimate attainment. This leads to the idea of multicompetence, first introduced by Vivian Cook in the early 1990s to describe L2 learner competency as it relates to the native speaker. “As the L2 learner is mostly (consciously or subconsciously) compared with a native speaker, he or she will inevitably always come away from this comparison as constantly falling short of perfection. The competence of an L2 user should not be measured with that of a native speaker but should compare L2 competence with L2 competence” (Franceschini, 2011, p. 348).

Timothy Keeley, a polyglot learning languages for over 40 years, states that some of the strongest proponents of the Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH) do not have experience in successfully acquiring different languages, living abroad and functioning in multiple languages

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among diverse cultural populations (Keeley, 2016). He believes that CPH, according to which language acquisition is biologically linked to age, is nothing more than a rationalization for non-success and any age-related factors are *not* insurmountable barriers. Age related factors represent specific challenges that vary according to experience, attitudes, affective variables, and habits of individual learners (Keeley, 2016). According to Smith (2009), “Continuous learning of multiple languages and interaction in multiple cultural environments helps maintain a high degree of neuroplasticity related to foreign language acquisition. This assertion is supported by the research that indicates that older brains can be revitalized through ‘mental training and workouts’ to produce functioning characteristics that closely resemble or even exceed those of younger brains” (Smith, 2009, p.549).

In his research, Keeley not only offers support to the argument for neuroplasticity in adult learners, but also indicates the need to differentiate between a critical period for *primary* language acquisition and a critical period for *second* language acquisition. He also argues for the *interactionist* instinct that humans have as it relates to adults and the desire we have for social and emotional affiliation. Our willingness to create new linguistic, social, and cultural identities are the key components of successful language acquisition in adults (Keely, 2016, p.48). Variables such as age, and ultimate attainment, the rate of acquisition, and the path toward second language acquisition have all been the object of exploration that I have been currently exploring with my adult learners both as a teacher and learner of languages.

### Adult Learners

*“From the point of view of a new language, all of us are infants” (Lomb, 2008, p.78).*

Diminished memory and “intellectual farsightedness” are well known phenomena that occur as we age. Cognitive maturity is our biggest advantage as adult learners, with our ability to make

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associations playing a significant role in (memory) recall and retention. This is especially true if the associations we have made are of significance and relevance to our lives. Relevant meaning in vocabulary acquisition is what Steve Kaufman, Canadian linguist and former diplomat, fluent in nine languages and currently working on two more, prescribes for effective lexical retention (Kaufman, 2005). An example of relevant meaning in vocabulary acquisition is choosing vocabulary from a reading text that is of interest to the learner, if the word appears several times in the text, innately one can infer that this word must be important enough to remember. Choosing a visual image to associate with the word or reflecting on the significance of this word to one's life experience and using it contextually will also allow for better retention and recall. This strategy is in contrast to the arbitrary memorization of lists of high frequency vocabulary words from textbooks that have neither relevance nor are of any interest to the learner. In addition, cognitive learning strategies, or metacognitive learning, is a major advantage that adult learners have over children. It increases the awareness of one's own learning, such as knowing *what* to learn and how to go about learning it. Determining which strategies are effective and which are wasted labor is essentially dependent on the learner and their learning style. The teacher should facilitate the exploration of a plethora of strategies and let the learner decide which are best suitable to meet their needs. It is for this reason that autonomy is of significance in the language acquisition process. If a teacher is able to consciously facilitate methods which invite the learners to reflect on how they learn best, learners can gradually shift toward more independent and responsible learning. By the teacher creating an optimal space to engage in exploration with students, the shift becomes a dynamic space of mutual enrichment and students begin to see a world of tremendous opportunity for sharpening their language learning skills and goals.

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This notwithstanding, the challenges that adult learners face are still quite complex. As Niels Ege, a renowned Danish polyglot states, “If you start learning a language as an adult, you must acquire it by *walking backward*, and what is more, not on a smooth terrain but on a rather rough one. There are psychological and biological obstacles, prejudices and inhibitions, blocking the way to proceed” (Lomb, 2008, p.159). Frequency of exposure is also another challenge that adult learners face but if this challenge is overcome, language learning may become easier once cognitive learning strategies have been adopted. Todeva and Cenoz (2009) refer to Bowden, Sanz, and Stafford (2005, p.122) who observed that, “multilinguals behave like successful learners in the way they approach the task of learning a language. They look for more sources of input, make an early effort to use the new language, and show self-direction and a positive attitude toward the task” (Todeva and Cenoz, 2009, p.6). Clearly, there is an advantage that successful adult learners can have if they have taken responsibility for their learning and are willing to implement self-directed learning strategies. This type of optimal learning can outweigh the challenges found among adult language learners.

In my observation of adult learners, I have discovered that it is in the *process* of language acquisition that the mind sharpens. Many adults do not have the patience required for process learning. It is for this reason that rapid acquisition programs and books on accelerated learning are becoming extremely popular. According to the research on accelerated learning conducted by Georgi Lozanov (James, 2000) and according to successful language learner studies by Rubin and Thompson (1995), language acquisition can be achieved in relatively short periods of time by adult learners. However, the challenge is that most adults do not have the time nor the ‘know-how’ required for effective accelerated learning and they simply quit before any noticeable gains are made. For optimal language learning to occur, it seems that pedagogy should be learning-centered

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rather than learner or teacher-centered. A balance of inductive and deductive teaching that includes proper scaffolding and is both strategic and engaging would likely result in the expedited acquisition that adults desire.

Born in 1909, Kato Lomb, a native of Hungary, had always been indifferent to foreign languages in school and university. To find work, she acquired English on her own and eventually became one of the first *simultaneous* interpreters in the world. Her autobiography, *Polyglot: How I Learn Languages*, is full of reflections and language learning strategies while also illustrating her high linguistic abilities of a polyglot.

Many of her principles have yet to be explored by Second Language Acquisition research, for example, the method of including extensive reading in one's learning program from the very beginning, may seem premature and retrogressive but she accredits this method as the primary way she learned Russian. Lomb believes that imagination plays a greater role than is commonly understood (the "imagined self") and that school is not conducive to real learning. Furthermore, she believes that success is determined by motivation, perseverance, and diligence, not by innate ability. She argues that good methods are more important than the vague concept of innate ability but also points out that one's education level may play a role in a how successful acquisition is.

Interestingly, her philosophy is that languages are the only thing worth knowing, even poorly because they build bridges with people and therefore are pragmatic (Lomb, 2008). Lomb's beliefs and strategies for successful learning are in harmony with some of the major studies of successful language learners in SLA research. In order to fully understand the complexity of acquisition, we need both quantitative and qualitative data and both experimental and experiential research, which is what this project seeks to do.



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Historically, the language learning methods of each generation tend to suit the social demands of the time period. Currently, there is an enormous contribution that technology makes in terms of the immersion experience and it is for this reason that I contend that future of language teachers will become less and less important. Support for this claim can be found in Lomb's concept of a *microclimate* versus a *macroclimate*. In general, a *microclimate* is a small restricted area that differs from the surrounding climate or the greater overall *macroclimate*. She believes that the microclimate is much more significant than the macroclimate that the learner creates. Technology allows for a simulated immersive experience in the target language and culture unlike any other time in human history. Many learners fail to acquire a language even when they have lived in the target language community for decades. This failure can be attributed to the wall they have built around themselves in their native language. Lomb states that, "no one is just good at languages, success in language learning is determined by a simple equation: time invested x interestedness = result" (Lomb, 2008, pg.49).

$$\frac{\text{Time Invested} \times \text{Motivation}}{\text{Inhibition}} = \text{Result}$$

At the SIT Graduate Institute 2017 Sandanona Conference, we had the honor and privilege of having Dr. Pier Antonio Abetti as our plenary speaker. Not only was his charisma at 97 years old intoxicating but his life experience and language learning journey is also of significant interest to current research on age and multilingualism. Born in Florence, Italy in 1921, he finally retired at the age of 95, with over 20 years of teaching entrepreneurship and collaborating with the United Nations in over 20 different countries. He states that he lived and worked in 23 countries where he learned the local language and enjoyed cultural interaction, a propensity that he seems to have inherited from his parents who had an affinity for language.

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Dr. Abetti presented a timeline that illustrated his language learning and teaching career from the age of 1 with Italian being his native language. From the age of 4 until 86 years old, Dr. Abetti learned and studied over 20 languages. What is striking about his language learning experience is that many of the world languages that he learned/studied were acquired in the latter years of his life. When asked by an audience member whether his youthful vigor at the age of 97 could be attributed to his acquisition of so many languages, he responded affirmatively. Dr. Abetti shares the sentiment that I have about language learning exchange partnerships as became clear from his description of the way in which he learned Japanese. Not only are such exchanges feasible and pragmatic but they also promote linguistic equity among people from all over the world. Dr. Abetti (2017) states that,

“Languages are still very much alive because they represent the unique identity of a country or people...language fluency helps facilitate communication, friendship and also helps promote world peace” (Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=47CUn7I4jCI>).

### Successful Language Learner Strategies

Developing an expertise in anything requires discipline, time, and patience, and in this respect we were all at one point beginners. Because the process of becoming a disciplined learner is a developed skill, it is imperative to first illustrate what the good language learner *is not*. Many teachers are keenly familiar with the type of learner who is present but not engaged, unmotivated, unwilling to speak in the target language, fearful of making mistakes, or simply cannot remember anything taught for the past week. Some linguists have had the very same experience at one time or another, the experience of being an unsuccessful language learner, one who fails to achieve goals set or fulfill their desire of language acquisition.

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On the basis of my own experience as a teacher and a learner, I have identified several characteristics that are generally associated with ineffective and unsuccessful language learners.

These include:

- Lack of interest or passion for the language or culture
- Poor study skills
- Undiagnosed learning disabilities
- Lack of confidence
- Fear of taking risks with the language
- Continual reliance on the L1
- A high affective filter causing learning anxiety
- Insecurity due to an inability to communicate thoughts intelligently
- Poor time management
- Unrealistic goals
- Unawareness of one's own learning style
- Low education background
- Lack of personal responsibility
- Perception that the teacher is “all knowing” and the “giver of knowledge”, which can result in either lack of learner agency or overdependence on a “more knowledgeable other”.

These characteristics can contribute to a passive approach to learning and an inability to utilize available resources to further acquisition. The important question is, how do we assist this type of learner in becoming a *good* language learner, and what exactly does that look like?

According to studies on successful language learners, it is generally believed that the “good” language learner is qualitatively different from most learners (Sykes, 2015, p.716). It is

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hard to pinpoint the exact configuration of features for each successful learner. These days the field of Second Language Acquisition seems to be moving toward Complexity Theory approaches and away reductionist interpretations of successful learning. Prescriptivist slants are carefully avoided too. Todeva and Cenoz (2009) refer to Kramsch and Whiteside (2008, p.390) stating that Complexity Theory promotes “language learning and language use as a nonlinear, relational human activity, co-constructed between humans and their environment, contingent upon their position in space and history, and a site of struggle for the control of social power and cultural memory” (Todeva and Cenoz, 2009, p.5). The authors also state that, “multilinguals use languages in natural contexts and report that they have an ability to play with various linguistic codes that goes beyond linguistic and communicative competence, closer to what Kramsch defines as ‘symbolic competence’, i.e. an ability to navigate between languages using all the semiotic resources one has” (Todeva and Cenoz, 2009, p.5). Such a description perhaps justifies views according to which *good* language learners are perhaps being qualitatively different from most language learners. When referring to multilingual language learners, it would be appropriate to categorize them as successful language learners. However, the question of whether this quality is innate or developed is one of debate.

According to Joan Rubin, the Good or Expert Language Learner (GLL) has a Learner Self-Management (LSM) system that is in continual interaction between the learner’s control mechanism (metacognitive strategies) and the learner’s knowledge and beliefs. The prescribed planning system involves four steps: defining/selecting goals, setting criteria to measure the goal/achievement, task analysis, and setting a time line (Rubin, 1983, p.37). The GLL sets realistic goals within a realistic time frame. This type of learner is motivated to learn and believes they are capable of learning. “Typically, they have a high tolerance for ambiguity, are patient with

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themselves, aware of their own learning styles and cognizant of effective learning strategies and they are not afraid to ask questions or make mistakes. Most of these learners have good organizational skills and willingly accept suggestions of how to become even more organized” (Rubin, 1983, p.37).

The commonality that is shared among the successful language learners analyzed for this project is that they seem to be aware of how to record, remember and retrieve new information and also they actively seek opportunities to use this new information. They become more involved with the target language culture and community, whether imagined, virtual, or actual. They have a desire to interact with members of this community, practice the target language, and adopt a more pliable identity. All students I observed and talked to have experience learning the language independently without the guidance of a teacher, yet when a teacher was available, they were able to use her as a resource and benefit from the relationship. They are able to see the teacher as a facilitator and equal partner, rather than an “all knowing” entity.

According to Rubin and Thompson (1983), a GLL carries several of the following learning characteristics at any given point in their acquisition process: an ability to organize information about language, finding their own way of learning, being creative and experimenting with language, seeking opportunities and finding strategies for getting practice in and out of the classroom, learning to live with uncertainty and developing strategies for making sense of the language *without wanting to understand every word*, recording information in an easily accessible way, using mnemonics effectively (learning memory techniques), making errors work, drawing on their linguistic knowledge of the first language to master the second, letting the context help in comprehension, learning to make intelligent guesses, learning chunks of language as wholes and formulize routines to help perform beyond one’s competence level, learning production techniques

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(techniques to keep a conversation going), and learning different styles of speech and writing, and varying the language according to formality (Rubin, 1983).

### An Experiment in Self Directed Learning

Initially, the idea of learning a language as an absolute beginner can seem like a daunting act. My intention was to document my own subjective experience of learning a language as an absolute beginner in order to reflect on the learning process through the eyes of an experienced language educator. The language I wanted to engage with had to include a different writing and phonological system and spark a deep personal interest. The catalyst that prompted this attempt was when I first discovered a book called, *Fluent in 3 Months*, by Benny Lewis (2014). I began investigating strategies used by the Foreign Service Institute and language schools such as Middlebury in Vermont, known for its good language programs. During this initial period, I did not know what self-directed immersion actually meant. I knew about input and output, but what about the process?

The most important skill I had to develop was the ability to self-regulate and assess whether I was *in the zone* or not. The Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) was developed by Lev Semenovich Vygotsky in the late 1920's to describe "the current or actual level of development of the learner and the next level attainable through the use of mediating semiotic and environmental tools and capable adult or peer facilitation" (Shabani, 2010). From a Vygotskian perspective, the goal for learners is to seek interactions in the ZPD as often as possible. By utilizing tasks that are engaging, meaningful, and slightly difficult to accomplish alone, one makes the need for a more competent peer or teacher an essential feature of this model. (Shabani, 2010). For the learner, this process of collaboration allows the learner to be able to complete the task independently the next time around.

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The difficulty with self-regulation and assessment is that it requires discipline, creativity, and a system of accountability. I had to do it all alone, and in the beginning stages, it all seemed like an insurmountable task. I had to start at the place I was drawn to and that was with prayers. Choosing Amharic, an Afro-Asiatic language of the Semitic branch from Ethiopia, descended from Ge'ez and cousin to Egyptian Coptic and Arabic, was a choice made due to an attraction that I have with the ancient form of Christianity practiced there for centuries. The first time I heard the *Lord's Prayer* chanted in Amharic I felt transported back in time. Until then, Arabic had been the most difficult writing system for me to decipher since first learning Ancient and Modern Greek. Decoding alphabets is a challenge I have learned to take pleasure in but Amharic was even more complex than Arabic. The Fidel, the Amharic writing system, contains 7 vowel sounds that combine with 31 consonants forming clusters, or phonemes totaling 231 characters, for example, “አቢሲኒያ” Ah-Bi-Si-Ni-Ya.

I designed a large color coded chart and displayed it on my wall as a strategy learned from exploring the Silent Way approach of Caleb Gattengo (1963). I would stare at the chart and try to discern patterns or create a chant for the first column since the 6 other vowels follow the same pattern with different consonants attached. Two things developed from this action: my awareness that I am a visual learner and the discovery of mnemonic strategies for information. Some strategies that I used were songs, note organization, finding cognates with Arabic, and using color to highlight gender and suffix patterns. I discovered podcasts in Amharic that I would listen to on my commute to work to familiarize myself with the stress and intonation contours of the language, maybe even recognizing a word or two. I also downloaded the Foreign Service Institute free textbook and audio files in addition to finding anything online I could use as a resource. I was determined to work daily, even if only for 5 minutes. At this point I had been following a strict

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data collecting system because I was determined to discover the possibility of fluency in 3 months as promised. For a full time language teacher who commutes 4 hours a day, a single parent of 2 children, and a graduate student, time was the biggest constraint. I set out to see if it was possible to acquire 100 new vocabulary words a day as mentioned by an instructor in my Language Analysis and Lesson Planning course. I would test myself every 2 days to see how much vocabulary was actually retained. This method of vocabulary acquisition lasted for about 2 weeks because it was not a realistic long term method for the type of acquisition I desired.

The entire Amharic language learning experience lasted for 2 months, and despite my heroic attempts, the process of learning independently created very noticeable shifts in how I learn languages now. My eyes soon began to notice familiar patterns and what was once viewed and heard as gibberish and indiscernible, began to be recognizable. My ear was able to separate words and pull out the pieces that I knew. Despite the complexity of the Fidel system, the phonology of Amharic now seems a little more linguistically natural to me. The ease in replicating many of the sounds in the language was surprising. The pronunciation is very desirable to me and the glottal phonemes almost sound like a click consonant that is very difficult for me to imitate. With regular practice, exercises in ear training, and focused effort, I do believe it is something that can be accomplished.

Rather than abandon all attempts at autonomous language learning, I chose to continue my efforts with a language that is more practical with daily opportunities for usage. Developing my Spanish language skills was a more feasible choice but less desirable. I work in a Spanish speaking context with a minimum of 5 hours of exposure to the language. Each student became my teacher and during breaks and after school I took advantage of the many speaking opportunities presented.



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I realized that my herculean efforts with Amharic language learning led to burn out. Language learning should be fun, enjoyable, and even exhilarating when spontaneous communication occurs.

At this point, I was better equipped. I just completed Kato Lomb's book, *How I Learn Languages* and Steven Kaufman's, *The Way of the Linguist*, but most importantly, I had my desire and determination. My motivation for developing my Spanish language skills has always been low. My earliest memories of the language had left a cultural imprint that was hard to disassociate from. I grew up in a predominantly Latino and African American community where Spanish was used often and was not an exotic language that held mystery to me. My grandmother was the last Spanish speaker in my family and when she passed away I wanted to learn the language better in memory of her. This continued effort has not diminished thanks to my current students. The essential part of language learning should include a passion for the language so I decided to also further my skill in Modern Greek. After a 90 minute lesson online with a Greek language teacher, I discovered that I would be starting at a B-1 level based on the CERFL scale. I searched for conversation partners online through a conversation partner website and explored the virtual world of language learners and would-be polyglots. I had a minimum of 3 days of contact with a speaking partner each week for at least an hour a day. In the process, relevant vocabulary was acquired throughout natural and authentic conversation attempts. I decided that I didn't have to be an advanced learner to try and explore the world of Nikos Kazantzakis in Greek and so I set out to study one of his famous writings called *The Ascetic*. I was inspired by Dr. Kato Lomb's strategies for learning languages through reading texts of interest regardless of comprehension level. She advises implementing reading from the very beginning.

In the spirit of socio-cultural theory, I used a method of finding native speakers of the target language on various online forums and social media groups to interact with via texting or Skype.

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The lesson I had with a Greek language teacher for 90 minutes was a significant contribution in self-assessment. She was able to do for me what I could not do for myself. Using simple strategies, she reinforced concepts and methods that I use with my learners but had never had the opportunity to learn from as a learner. Also, actively listening to Greek movies and documentaries allowed me to consciously pick up the musical intonations that are necessary and oftentimes ignored because I had always felt like I was not being authentic. I realized that every muscle in the mouth and the quality of my speech must change in order to sound more authentic. I maintained conscious effort to implement the four skills of language acquisition. Reading was vital to my learning process and I would always read out loud as a pronunciation exercise. I memorized poetry and religious scriptures while noticing variations in writing style. Listening was a challenge because of the spontaneity of the task unlike reading. Many times I would record a conversation session in order to play in several times for comprehension. Ted Talks were invaluable because there are talks in many languages, including Greek, and if subtitles are needed, they are always an option as well. Writing was the skill that I enjoyed the most. I installed Greek fonts on my phone and throughout the day would text with my conversation partners, sometimes leave a comment on a Greek language learner Facebook group page, keep a diary with quotes, lyrics, prayers or thoughts I would have in Greek.

Although writing is a productive skill that I found enjoyable, speaking was something that always gave me anxiety because I discovered I was very shy and insecure about having a hint of an American accent. I would record myself and compare my speech with that of my conversation partners and often times record a Screencast to assess not only my speaking, but also my mannerisms and body language when speaking. Finally, the greatest resource I used was an audio reader. So much learning occurred for me when I was able to hear the speaker read a text in front

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of me as I followed along. The beauty of this tool is I could play the reader as many times as I needed to and even record myself reading the text until I was able to read faster with accurate pronunciation. Lastly, if many of the lifestyle factors were removed, the language goals I have would be much easier to attain. Language learning is a process, whether pursuing acquisition autonomously or using traditional classroom instruction. The intention of this experiment in language learning autonomy was to be able to direct my own experience, become an active learner and develop effective learner strategies that I would be able to impart on my learners, and to be fearless when tackling difficult tasks in order to learn something new, like my current venture in Mandarin Chinese.

### The Road to Autonomy (Creating Independent Learners)

Is it possible to completely remove the teacher and how autonomous is autonomy? After my experience with an online professional Greek language instructor, I noticed that the short moments of encouragement from her and verbal pats on the back did wonders for my confidence. Her patience as I struggled to find the correct word and her ability to integrate all four skills into a 90 minute lesson left me wanting more. In fact, it felt like a luxury to have had this experience rather than try and search for it by being as resourceful as I could. There needs to be a balance in all things and it took independent learning for me to really utilize my teacher to the fullest. Rather than be passive and wait for her to give me what I needed to learn, I was actively engaged, asking questions, and adopted much of what we did in our time together to use on my own. I was able to see myself as a learner, notice my gaps while feeling supported, while all along my skillful teacher managed to keep me *in the zone*.

According to Dimitrios Thanasoulas (2000), “One does not become autonomous; one only works towards autonomy.” This is where the notion of gradual autonomy enters as opposed to

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radical autonomy, which is the distinction between maximal learner independence as in the Silent Way methodology and mediated learning. Teacher-less learning is not what is being advocated here. There is tremendous advantage to having a skilled teacher as long as the intended purpose of the instructor is toward greater learner responsibility. By encouraging autonomy, the instructor is able to teach learners how to tackle the complexity of language acquisition in their own way.

With the evolution from traditional teacher-centered instruction to more learner-centered experiential forms of instruction, strategies like Communicative Language Learning (CLL) are proving to be highly effective methods for creating student generated curriculum and lexicon while allowing for a more engaged learning experience - lessons in giving advice, making suggestions, describing things, and even more complex discourse such as argumentation and debate. Such methods of learning become an authentic and meaningful way to gradually lead students toward independent learning. In mixed level contexts, which is common in adult education, differentiated instruction embraces such methodologies.

In the span of one year, I have seen many of my current learners move from disengagement and passivity to active and engaged approaches to learning. They are also choosing methods of study and learning activities that best suit their needs. Since our context is mixed level with new students arriving every day, new learners learn to function as adult learners capable of being responsible for their own learning. The learner's goals and degree of motivation are assessed including interests and learning styles. My primary role is to facilitate the exploration of strategies, support and encourage the learners, and push them slightly further than they are capable of pushing themselves.

Learners who have been conditioned to teacher-centered education seem to require more guidance initially and are reluctant to make decisions based on their interests. Eventually the

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learner will decide what he needs more or less of from the teacher. It is my belief that we are supposed to be experts coaching learners how to acquire language, but how can we fulfill this role if we ourselves are deficient learners?

A learner's readiness for change, their beliefs about learning and about the the role of the teacher, their study habits, motivation and level of personal responsibility, their ability to use metacognitive strategies and be resourceful outside of class are all ways of promoting learner autonomy in classroom environments. The willingness and capacity that each learner has will differ among students but the gradual transition toward more independent learning reduces anxiety so that the affective filter is not very high. The value of reflective learning in transitional learning environments cannot be overstated; equally important, it is essential to offer and give students their voice in order to further facilitate learner responsibility.

### Student Surveys and Analysis

Throughout the school year, in the context where I teach, there is on average about 25 students in class at any one time. During our community circle an optional survey was presented to the 18 students present and 12 chose to participate.

The following questions were asked in the students' L1:

1. *In general, how satisfied or dissatisfied are you with the program?*

11 students responded as "very satisfied" and 1 responded as "somewhat satisfied."

2. *Which of the following words would you use to describe your learning experience in this school? Circle all words that apply.*

11 students responded as "motivating", 3 responded as "challenging", 10 responded as "useful", 9 as "helpful", and 1 chose "unstructured."

3. *What is the highest level of education that someone has received in your family?*

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9 of the participants stated that someone in their family has received an education at “12<sup>th</sup> grade or above” and 2 stated “between grades 9-12.” Many of the students themselves have received on average an elementary school level of education and lived in rural communities where there was not much importance placed on education. The ability to work and provide for one’s family superseded education.

4. *How would you rate your motivation for learning English?*

2 students responded with a vague “normal”, 3 responded as “very high”, 1 “not very high”, 1 chose not to respond, and 6 stated their motivation level is “pretty high.”

5. *How much extra time are you able to dedicate to learning English at home?*

The majority of the respondents indicated that time outside of the classroom was “very limited”, 5 stated “0-1 hour” was all they were able to contribute to further their acquisition, 2 stated “no time”, 4 stated “1-2 times per week” (no hours indicated) and 2 answered “3 or more hours per day.”

6. *In your opinion, what is the role of the language teacher?*

10 of the participants stated that the role of the language teacher is to “keep students motivated”, 10 also responded that the teacher’s role is to “show students how to learn”, 5 students stated that the teachers role is to “tell them what to do”, 6 stated the teacher is the “giver of information”, 1 stated the teacher’s role is to “give a lot of homework” and 1 stated the teacher is “not to be personal with them.”

The two primary variables in my teaching context that make a significant difference in the learning experience of the students are the mixed level class that meets 3 hours a day and the different points of entry each student has due to the school’s open enrollment policy. I was surprised to find that 9 came from a family with an education of grade 12 or higher but I realized

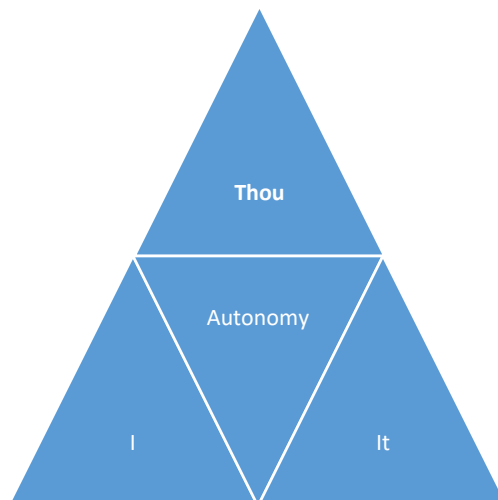
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I should have inquired about their personal level of education or restructured the question in a way that would elicit the information I needed since many are reluctant to offer accurate information about themselves. This question is important and delicate at the same time because it is debatable whether education background plays a role in the ultimate success of the language learner. Pertaining to motivation levels, the students' responses were generally accurate from what I have observed throughout the school year. The challenge is understanding how and if autonomy will work for learners who have stated that their motivation is rather low and also have indicated that it is the teacher's role to motivate them. The final question regarding the role of the teacher was quite interesting since 10 students indicated that the teacher's role is to keep students motivated. The students also indicated that it is the teacher's role to show them how to learn.

To sum up the results of the survey, students in my context have demonstrated that they are capable of full autonomy and language acquisition utilizing the strategies of the good language learner (GLL) within the given variables and challenges. There is a significant need for artful facilitation of learning strategies that keep learners in their ZPD while engaging and inspiring them toward further language and culture explorations. Accomplishing these objectives can be a slow process that must include constant feedback and motivational inquiry since motivation is not static; rather it is quite dynamic and constantly shifting.

### Teaching Implications

A noticeable shift in learner attitudes within my teaching context made me take a fresh look at David Hawkins' framework of *I, Thou, It* (1974), as I wanted to add a new dimension to it, which to me seems of great importance.



In my framework of the relationship between the learner, teacher, and content or context (I, thou, and it), I include autonomous learning as the core territory that teacher and learner mutually explore for optimal learning. This paradigm illustrates the intimate three-way relationship that unfolds within the realm of the self-directed learning experience. Once a learner is able to be weaned from a passive approach to learning and is encouraged to be a more engaged, active, and responsible caretaker of their own intellectual and cognitive development, the role of “I”, “Thou” and “It” also begins to shift because learning spaces are dynamic and completely dependent on the living energy of all participants. In this triangular relationship, the roles of “I” and “Thou” are constantly interacting and changing because both are dependent upon one another. As the learner in the relationship gradually shifts toward greater knowledge of himself as a reflective learner, he will be able to adopt the strategies and discipline required to facilitate his own learning and the teacher’s role will become less significant.

In the Greek language, the word “μορφωνω” means “to educate”, literally, “to morph”. The educator is using process learning to morph learners into individuals who can further lifelong learning. The teacher who understands the complexity of language acquisition theory and the myriad of factors that can influence each learner in achieving their goals seems to be better



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equipped to support, encourage, and regulate the learner's needs. Virtual immersion and mnemonic techniques such as strategically spaced interval vocabulary building, or Spaced Repetition System (SRS) which aids in long term memory retention skills, are two methods that lifelong independent language learners can adopt rather than spending years in a language classroom (Wyner, 2014, p.254). Books are no longer given to students in many schools today and are being replaced with electronic resources and online forums for assignment submission. The impact of this reality is that the need for an actual teacher in the classroom is likely to become more and more insignificant and autonomy now is at the forefront of much research in education.

### Final Reflection: A Permeable Identity Hypothesis

When you connect to a culture through language, the desire to be “accepted” into the inner circles of the culture, can be quite frightening. But you push through, like a young child, navigating and finding oneself amidst all things “foreign” until ultimately you connect with an ancient or modern possibility. The possibility of oneself “just passing through” this lifetime as an English speaking American, a Hellenic soldier, a Chinese immigrant, or an 1800's French mistress. The idea is, you can be whoever you want. We create these layers of identity that make life so rich and colorful, we bask in the beauty of sounds in communication that move from unintelligible gibberish to structured poetry. It is in this process of discovery that one's identity must remain fluid like the water that Bruce Lee spoke about, “empty your mind, be formless, shapeless like water, you put water into a cup, it becomes the cup, you put water into a bottle, it becomes the bottle, you put water into a teapot, it becomes the teapot, water can flow or it can crash, be water, my friend” (Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cJMwBwFj5nQ>).

One never becomes one thing and then something else, but rather a culmination of all things. In languages, we come to understand the world in different ways. The Amondawa tribe of the

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Amazon lacks the linguistic structures that relate time and space and has no word for “time”. Additionally, the Piraha tribe of Brazil has no grammatical distinction between singular and plural, hardly using any words related to time. This is why the past tense does not exist (Palmer, 2011). In contrast, the English language verb tense and aspect system is time focused where there are specific differences relating to past time. What does this say in terms of how the culture perceives the world? Clocks, watches, and the English speaking world’s frantic busy lifestyle goes hand in hand with how we express action.

My permeable identity hypothesis is based on a sociocultural linguistic model proposing that our identities must be willing to shift into a membranous, thin, and pliable entity taking on the characteristics of the target language community. Assuming this kind of entity allows the learner to become an imagined member of this linguistic community. There must be some “thing” about the language or culture that a learner falls in love with until it permeates through their existing identity, not assuming an entirely new identity, but rather shifting and retreating in and out of cultures and languages each time they use the language.

## Conclusion

Throughout this examination, the notion of learner responsibility, the role of the teacher in the student - teacher - context paradigm, and the effects of technology, have been critically examined relating them to the conventional ideas of how languages are learned and why independent learning strategies need to be the focus of ESL pedagogy in today’s world. Through personal experimentation and observation, as well as through research into the lives and strategies used by accomplished language learners, I came to realize that the ultimate goal of this project had been to discover how I could be a more efficient learner of languages. By becoming a more

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efficient learner, one can develop a better understanding of how to engage in conscious learning and achieve ownership of one's own cognitive development and ultimate acquisition.

The formal study of Ancient and Modern Greek has always left a residual yearning to uncover every aspect of the Greek language, including the culture. Even the moments when I fully immerse myself in this endeavor, I resolve to the fact that it will take more than a lifetime for me to uncover what it is I truly desire from this language. Our connection to language and the learning of languages is deeply personal and individual. The standard of achievement should also be the same. When I compare my experience and relationship with the Greek language to that of Arabic, Spanish, Amharic, and currently Mandarin Chinese, the only difference is the length of time I have spent in each relationship. If I had invested the same amount of time in Amharic as I had done with Greek, it could have been as rich of an experience. As humans, we need interaction with one another. This is why we communicate. The autonomous experience does allow for more optimal and disciplined learning but I have discovered that it is essential to actively seek out members of the target language community in order to develop a richer and more meaningful connection to the language. With my current adult learners, this is an aspect of their language learning journey that is the most difficult for them. From what I have discovered in my own language learning journey I now feel better equipped as a language facilitator to coalesce what is difficult for them and what is needed for a stronger and richer experience with the language.

When we look to Europe, we can clearly see the value of linguistic and cultural diversity that is lacking ideologically in the United States. Multilingual citizens seem to be much more economically and professionally advantageous than their monolingual counterparts. From my experience teaching adult learners and being an adult learner, I have come to realize that the vision of a multilingual America starts with ourselves and our children. This realization is vital to the

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democracy and equity that is prevalent in our modern political values. In an interview with *The Guardian* in 2011, former British Education Secretary Michael Gove states, “learning a foreign language, and the culture that goes with it, is one of the most useful things we can do to broaden the empathy and imaginative sympathy and cultural outlook of children” (Watt, 2011). Secretary Gove eloquently speaks of the future of our children and the importance of language learning. For adults, this understanding is crucial and must be perpetuated from teachers themselves to learners and ultimately through lifelong learning strategies that autonomous learning can provide.

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