

This chapter should be cited as:

**Cotterall, S.** (2005). "It's just rules ... that's all it is at this stage ...". In Benson, P. & Nunan, D. (Eds.) *Learners' stories: Difference and diversity in language learning*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 101-118.

## Chapter 8

### "It's just rules ... that's all it is at this stage ..."

#### Sara Cotterall

Many learners who wish to learn a language choose to enrol in a formal course. Their subsequent experience generally involves some degree of compromise between their agendas and those of their teachers. So, how exactly does the negotiation of learner and teacher agendas occur? To what extent is it possible for the learner to subvert the teacher's agenda, or for the teacher to take account of the learner's agenda? These and other related questions prompted **me** to take advantage of the opportunity to track an adult student as he participated in a first-year Spanish course at university. The goal of the project was to explore the learner's goals and beliefs about language learning as part of his ongoing experience of learning the language during a 12-week course. **My** interest lay, in particular, in the extent to which the learner assumed control of his learning process.

Therefore this chapter documents, largely in his own words, a student's experience of participating in a beginner level language course at university. The learner repeatedly compares his study of Spanish with his experience of studying other subjects at university, and reflects on the social context in which his learning takes place. **No claims for the representativeness of this account are made.** On the contrary, I argue that the only way in which a collective and comprehensive understanding of learners' experiences of taught courses can be gained is by accumulating a significant number of individual accounts.

#### Previous research

A number of accounts of individual learners' experiences of learning a language have appeared in the research literature. These include both first-person accounts, such as those found in Bailey (1983), Schmidt & Frota (1985), Jones (1994) and Belcher & Connor (2001) and also biographical accounts, where the reporter of the experience is a researcher with privileged access to the learner, either through interviews, diary entries or some other means. This chapter falls into the second category. One early example of a biographical study of a learner was Schmidt's (1983) account of the naturalistic experience of "Wes" learning English

as a second language in Hawaii. A completely different approach is adopted by Evans (1988), who seeks to present a picture of the discipline of modern languages teaching and learning in the United Kingdom based on interviews with 50 students and 50 staff. While Evans' aim is achieved by presenting the voices of individual learners and teachers, ultimately his focus is on profiling the discipline as a whole, rather than on the experience of individual learners.

A much more detailed picture of individual learner histories is presented in Norton's (2000) longitudinal case study of five immigrant women learning French in Canada. Her data are based on both the subjects' formal language learning and their experiences of acquiring the target language after formal instruction had finished. Norton is primarily concerned with interactions between native speakers and non-native speakers of the target language, and the social context in which these interactions occur. Accordingly, she maintains the importance (in second language acquisition contexts) of paying attention to relations of power between language learners and target language speakers in order to fully understand individuals' language learning trajectories. Her case studies illustrate how the life and work contexts of her case subjects had profound effects on their willingness and opportunities to interact with members of the target language community. To see the act of language learning in isolation from this context, she claims, is to see only part of the picture.

Learners' perceptions of classroom learning in foreign language settings have also been investigated by researchers. Slimani (1989, 1992) obtained learner reports on uptake, which she defined as "what learners claim to have learned at the end of a lesson" (Slimani, 1989: 223). She asked thirteen Algerian first-year university students to complete an "Uptake Recall Chart" at the end of six lessons which she observed and tape-recorded. Analysis of her data revealed that items initiated by fellow learners were more likely to be identified as "uptake" by learners, than were items initiated by the teacher. Furthermore, a learner who initiated a topic was less likely to report that item as having been learned, than his or her classmates. Slimani's studies provide some tentative evidence for the priority of learner agendas over teacher agendas.

Block (1994) also focused on the micro level of classroom activity, exploring the different perceptions of 12 learners, their teacher and an observer of a day's tasks in an English class in Barcelona. Block shows how the learners and the teacher had quite different views on the purpose and salience of particular tasks. Block (1996) reports on a study in which six MBA candidates who were participating in a compulsory English course, and their English teacher kept an oral diary "reporting on what they thought was going on in class on a day-to-day

basis” (1996: 171) for a period of one month. Once again, Block found considerable variation in the accounts, particularly between teacher and individual learner perceptions. He devotes the second part of his article to a detailed discussion of the reactions of one student, and to an examination of the extent to which his diary entries (which were highly detailed and analytic) paralleled or diverged from those of the teacher. Block concludes that the learners in the study were often unclear of the purpose of the tasks they were asked to perform in class, and as a result felt that they were wasting their time in class. These studies provide substantial evidence of learner “agendas” which are at odds with those of their teachers.

A longitudinal approach to narrating one classroom learner’s experience is adopted by Swain and Miccoli (1994) who tracked an adult ESL student enrolled in a graduate course in Education over a university term. The course in which the learner was enrolled - entitled “Collaborative Learning in Second Language Classrooms” – required her to participate in group work in every session, and to participate in a collaborative research project in the second part of the course. A number of group work sessions in which the case subject took part were video and audiotaped, with one of the authors observing and taking field notes. These field notes were later used in generating questions to ask the subject during interview sessions. The group work method was neither familiar nor comfortable for the learner. The article highlights the salient role played by the learner’s feelings and beliefs in her classroom experiences. Indeed, the authors argue that the learner’s “conscious reflection about her negative emotions and their sources allowed her to act on them, resulting in enhanced second language learning” (Swain and Miccoli, 1994: p. 15). In this way, the research methodology may have contributed positively to the learning outcomes of the course.

Block (1998) also adopts a longitudinal approach in documenting an adult language learner’s efforts to learn English at a language school in Barcelona during the course of a trimester. Block’s goal in interviewing the learner was to obtain his dynamic and evolving evaluation of the language course in which he was enrolled. This was part of the author’s attempt to question the validity of a “simple pen-and-paper, end of course evaluation form based on a one-to-five number scale”. Block concluded that his subject’s complex reactions to the unfolding course could not be adequately captured by any formal objective evaluation form. He comments in particular on the ambivalence of many of his informant’s comments. In this paper, he also commented on his previous research, saying:

This research showed me that while learners might agree in general on what they do during lessons on a day-to-day basis and even why they are doing it,

for the most part they tend to focus on their own individual concerns when providing accounts. (Block, 1998: p. 150)

The most striking difference between the learner perceptions Block reports on in his articles (1994, 1996, 1998) and the commentary provided by the informant in this chapter is the object of focus. While Block's informants report in great detail on the minute-by-minute tasks of their language classes, the subject reported on in this chapter is primarily concerned with fitting language learning (as it is constructed in his course) into his broader perspective of learning and into his life.

The type of university context in which this chapter's subject was learning a language is considered by some to be a hostile setting for the fostering of learner autonomy, or the incorporation of learner agendas. Hurd (1998: p. 72) comments:

realistically, only a partial autonomy can be exercised by students in a university context, precisely because the goals and objectives are already in place before a student enrolls.

While this is undoubtedly true, it is important to seek insights into how learners make sense of the curriculum. The outcome of such research is likely to be an enhanced understanding of the range of agendas, which learners bring to their language courses, and the way in which learner and course agendas interact.

## **Research Methodology**

The case study presented in this chapter conceived of the subject as research partner in the exploration of his experience of the language course. The interviews were highly interactive, with the subject leading much of the discussion, following an initial prompt by the **author** at the start of each session. Six interviews were held over a four-month period, with the interviewer asking open-ended questions at the beginning of each session, and encouraging the learner to raise issues or topics which were salient to him from that week's classes. All interviews were audiotaped and later transcribed. Once the interviews were over and the data analysed, the author sent a copy of the draft account to the subject for comment. The informant agreed that the article reflected his experience of the course, and contributed a number of comments on his experience of participating in the research project (some of which are included in this paper).

In this chapter, the interview data are treated as "a product of the interaction between interviewer and interviewee" (Block, 2000: p. 759), acknowledging the extent to which interviews are "co-constructed discourse events". Consequently, the interview data are

deliberately presented, as far as is possible, in the learner's own words. According to Block (2000: p. 759):

The conceptualization of interviews as co-constructions means that interview data are seen not as reflections of underlying memory but as *voices* adopted by research participants in response to the researcher's prompts and questions. These voices might or might not truly represent what the research participant thinks or would choose to say in another context and on another occasion.

Block summarizes his view of the dynamics of research interviews by presenting a diagram, which depicts a continuum on which different perceptions of interview data can be located. The methodological approach adopted in examining the interview data reported on here tends towards the symptomatic (as opposed to veridical), presentational (as opposed to representational), social, interactive and co-constructed ends of Block's continuum.

## **Context**

The subject, Harry<sup>1</sup>, was recruited for the research project following the writer's visit to a first year Spanish class in the second week of the first trimester of 1999. Harry was selected as a research subject (together with two other students) on the basis of his availability at times convenient to the researcher. He was a 29-year-old native speaker of English enrolled in his first year of study towards a Bachelor of Arts degree at Victoria University of Wellington. In addition to Spanish, Harry was enrolled in courses in English Medieval Poetry, French, and Religious Studies. His previous language learning experience included a year of French at secondary school, and a brief period spent living in Spain with his brother, a fluent speaker of Spanish.

At 29, Harry was a little older than the majority of first year students, since he had trained as a chef on leaving school and worked in this profession for a number of years. Harry explained that his decision to enrol at university and in a Spanish course was part of a plan to "get my brain functioning I'm really interested in languages I'm really interested in writing and words words are I love words" [1/7.00]. A few years previously, Harry reported, he had taken stock of his life and decided, "there was nothing that I have ever done that I really thought that I wanted to do as far as a career was concerned". Enrolling at university was therefore part of a plan to acquire new skills and knowledge which might suggest a new direction in his life.

The Spanish course for which Harry was enrolled was a 12-week (one trimester) introductory course. It involved five hours of class contact per week: three one-hour language classes (lecture format), one audio-visual class, and one oral tutorial. The course outline

identified the course aims as being to “introduce students to the basics of the language through practice in speaking, listening, reading and writing.” The course objectives were stated in the following terms:

Upon completing the course successfully you will be able to:

- understand simple spoken Spanish;
- relate Spanish sounds to their written forms;
- pronounce a simple Spanish text with a fair degree of accuracy and fluency;
- demonstrate a knowledge of basic Spanish grammar;
- write simple sentences about yourself, using present and past tenses and a basic vocabulary;
- demonstrate knowledge of the Spanish language appropriate to a variety of everyday situations;
- translate and answer questions on simple Spanish texts.

(SPAN 111 Course Outline, 1999)

Harry and **I met in my office** once every two weeks from March to June 1999 throughout the 12-week trimester. At the time of the first interview, Harry’s course was in its second week. In the first session, **I** explained the objectives of the research, outlined the format of the sessions and obtained written consent for the sessions to be audio recorded (and transcribed) and the material used (anonymously) for research purposes. Each session lasted approximately one hour, after which an appointment for the next session was made. Harry participated in six interview sessions in total.

Block (1995) identifies four social constraints which operate in exchanges between researchers and informant interviewees: the social construction of the interviewee, power imbalances, performing, and the nature of the discourse processes. While each of these constraints is acknowledged as having played a role in the current study, the informant’s confident, open nature and the rapport **that we established** helped reduce the normal distorting effects of these constraints. In an attempt to validate the perspective documented here, **I** sought feedback from Harry on a draft of this chapter and was reassured by the following comment:

as an interviewer ... you made me feel absolutely comfortable. Apart from anything else, you became the person upon whom I unloaded my anxieties, and with whom I shared my triumphs, re my Spanish. In that light then, it is easy to understand why things seemed to flow with great fluidity.

(Harry, personal communication, July 29, 2002)

This account of Harry's language learning has been organized around three main themes which emerged from the transcripts. Within each theme, material is presented chronologically - since changes in the learner's perceptions over time are of ultimate importance. The key themes which emerged from the interview data were: the gradual narrowing of the learner's goals; the learner's fluctuating affective state, and his changing conceptualizations of the nature of language learning. Each of these themes is explored in what follows.

## Goals and Motivation

Harry's goals in enrolling in the Spanish course fitted into his broader motivation for enrolling at university. In explaining his decision to enrol at university as a "mature student", Harry reported: "this is a year to prove something. I really just want to get as much out of it as I can" [1/12.00]. In one of the interviews Harry made the point that he had made a deliberate decision to give up his job and pay substantial fees in order to study, suggesting a high level of commitment and motivation. This was in contrast to his experience of enrolling at university several years earlier [1/7.00]:

I mucked around at Otago University a couple of y- about s- five or six seven years ago achieved very little arrived there with a hangover and .. ended up just having a lot of fun and going to heaps of parties and ... virtually did nothing

A number of different motives contributed to Harry's decision to include a Spanish paper in his first year at university. Firstly, Harry saw the study of Spanish as linked to his interest in English literature and language:

I kind of thought French and Spanish ... having these associations with the English that we speak today ... I don't know there is a tie there and I just kind of thought this this medieval poetry number it kind of starts at about the thirteenth century and moves up to sort of the time of Shakespeare and ... I thought that would be quite an interesting sort of thing to slot in there next to it all and it kind of ... there are little bits that sort of feed all three including the English that we speak now ... [1/1.00]

Harry also indicated that visiting his brother in Spain several years earlier had contributed to his desire to learn Spanish. When prompted to specify his Spanish-related goals in more detail, Harry [1/15.00] stated that he wanted to go to Spain and be able to talk to people in the street one day, as part of his personal "10-year plan". At the end of the first interview session, he explained:

South America is ... at arm's length ... I'm afraid to go there ... that's where I want to live that's where I want to go there and stay there you know but I'm just holding it off for now and just keeping it at bay but I'll certainly I want to get there and stay there for a long long time [1/32.00]

In discussing his travel-associated motivation, Harry explained that he liked to “fit in” when he was in a foreign country, elaborating as follows:

I don't want to go to a place like Spain and have people think, oh he's not Spanish ... I'd like to be as Spanish as I can possibly be ... when in Rome, do as the Romans ... [1/29.00].

A further motivation for Harry's decision to learn Spanish was his wider interest in the Hispanic world:

Just the exposure to all aspects of the Hispanic ... region is kind of where I'm thinking ... I just happen to be concentrating solely on the language, but I want to get the movie thing, the people thing, the art thing ... you know, all that sort of stuff ... fashion and you know music ... I want to ... it's all part of the picture for me. [2/13.00]

It would appear, therefore, that Harry's language learning goals were significantly broader and considerably more ambitious than the course goals of introducing students to “the basics of the language”.

As evidence of his positive motivation towards learning the language, Harry explained in the first interview that he had become involved in the university's Spanish Club:

We all sort of got together like and ... last night was great ... it was the first meeting and thirty-seven people turned up and paid up and it was you know it was five bucks and we watched a film ... we talked away and there were people from all different backgrounds ... I walked home talking all the Spanish words that I knew you know ... it's kind of cool [1/14.00]

It later emerged that Harry had been elected President of the Spanish Club, a role that he maintained throughout the trimester but which caused him some frustration, as will be reported in the next section. His participation in the Spanish Club and his enthusiasm for organising social functions through the Club were testimony to his integrative motivation.

As far as the course itself was concerned, Harry reported that the lectures were the most motivating component:

I like ... the lecture because we've got (lecturer's name) the man with his you know ... it's not just what he says coming out of his mouth but how he says it you know and it's this whole thing of moving his arms and expressing himself with his body as well and his posture and his ... you know ... I think's an important part of learning a language you've got to understand the delivery as well as the content.

The lecturer concerned was in fact a native speaker of Italian who had a native-like command of Spanish and taught both Italian and Spanish language courses at the university.



Harry also displayed awareness of factors likely to feed his motivation to persist with the course. One of these was his desire for contact with a native speaker; he hoped that by meeting with a native speaker he would be able to use what he had learned of the language. Several weeks into the course, I was able to introduce Harry to a student from Spain whom he arranged to meet for conversation practice. In the fourth interview, Harry commented that meeting the native speaker outside of class was “essential ... need it to keep me interested” [4/28.00].

However, as the weeks passed, Harry’s goals narrowed dramatically. In the fifth session (during Week 10 of the 12 week course), he identified his goal as being simply to pass the course:

My goal ... my focus now is not to give up and say oh stuff it I’ve failed this paper ... my goal now is to draw still as much from this paper as I possibly can [5/26.00]

This kind of pragmatic orientation was, in fact, relatively commonly observed amongst the foreign language learners who attended the Language Advisory Service. Despite this disappointing conclusion to his first experience of Spanish at university, in the final interview Harry professed an ongoing commitment to the language, reporting that he intended to remain involved in the Spanish Club [6/7.00] although he had decided to cancel his enrolment in the second trimester Spanish course [6/18.00]. His decision not to continue with Spanish at university seemed to be based on his perception that Spanish required a type of learning and a time commitment which he was not prepared to make:

In giving the second Spanish paper away I’m thinking what do I do ... do I take an easy paper or do I you know what I mean ... it’s hard [6/11]

This comment and Harry’s subsequent explanation indicated that he considered selecting one of the other subjects he was studying – Medieval Poetry, Religious Studies and English Literature – to be an “easier” option than continuing to study Spanish.

## **Affect**

The second major theme running through Harry’s contributions to the interviews is that of his fluctuating affective responses to the course. The role of affect in language learning is well documented (Arnold, 1999) and generally understood to play a major role in learning. Initially, Harry was extremely positive about the idea of learning Spanish and of acquiring proficiency in another language. As indicated above, he was particularly enthusiastic about the staff leading the lecture and oral tutorial sessions. However, he was less keen on the audio-visual classes:

You listen and you repeat and that's it you know [1/22.00]

He contrasted this apparently tedious experience with the stimulating “performance” given by the principal lecturer in the lecture sessions. However, Harry admitted to being reluctant to respond to the lecturer’s questions, explaining that there were people in the class who were better than he was. This response suggests that he was unwilling to risk making a mistake in the public situation of the class, despite his comment below that he felt little empathy with the majority of his classmates.

Harry’s involvement with the Spanish Club was evidence of his overwhelmingly positive attitude to things Spanish. When asked if his Club activities might distract him from his study, Harry assured the researcher that, on the contrary, his involvement with the Club complemented his study of the language:

It’s kind of throwing yourself into this really cool place ... and being able to identify a few things with the words you know [2/13.00]

However, the social context of the course did not appear to contribute positively to Harry’s experience. In the very first interview, Harry explained that he felt little rapport with many of his classmates [1/20.00]:

You look around in the lecture theatres and a lot of the people are ... eighteen to twenty and ... you know I really don’t give a stuff, you know I’ll probably never see them again

This theme surfaced again during the third interview, when Harry explained that collaborating with some of his colleagues in the Spanish Club to organize events was “like being a kindergarten teacher” [3/18.00]. He elaborated by explaining that of the large number of classmates who had volunteered to be members of the Spanish Club Committee, very few had shown any inclination or ability to help with organising events and performing other functions usually associated with committee membership. During the same interview – almost half way through the course – Harry explained that whereas he had a classmate in his Religious Studies class with whom he regularly exchanged ideas on the course –

There’s nothing ... with the Spanish ... you need someone not only that you can talk to but ... someone that you actually like I think ... you need to have some sort of connection there .... [3/25.00]

It was at this point (in the seventh week of the course) that **I** offered to introduce Harry to **a student who was a native speaker of Spanish** so that the two could meet for conversation practice. Harry leapt at the opportunity. Throughout the remaining sessions, he remained very positive about his conversation partner, suggesting that he saw their conversations as a way of meeting his social needs, as well as enriching his linguistic

environment. Harry never reported making a friend in the Spanish class with whom to study or discuss the course. Given his gregarious nature, this was quite surprising, but could perhaps be explained by the fact that he was several years older than most of the course members and conspicuously more extroverted.

Harry's initially positive attitude towards the Spanish classes began to wane half way through the trimester, when he reported that the course had stopped being fun and seemed to focus too much on grammar. He claimed not to have spent much time learning verb forms and memorising vocabulary in the first few weeks of the course, and reported that he now realized that this was beginning to pose a problem. In the fifth interview, Harry complained:

It's just rules ... that's all it is at this stage, it's not ... a whole lot of concepts that you've got to sort of unwind and unravel ... there are no great mysteries ... the mystery is – how the hell do I remember it all? [5/12.00]

This comment was very revealing of Harry's expectations of the nature of the language learning experience. He appeared to be disappointed with the lack of *conceptual* input which had characterized the early weeks of the course, explaining:

I don't want... completely immerse myself in the grammar, just find it boring, that's horrible but ... initially it was wonderful, there were all these sounds which er you know and making all these words and there's all these connotations and ... you just kind of think wow this is really cool and then that kind of novelty ... it hasn't worn off but ... you know, the reality of a whole lot of exercises [4/12.00].

Harry's reaction can be better understood by examining the way in which he had conceptualized language learning at the start of the course (discussed in the next section), and observing how this contrasted with the language learning reality which the course delivered.

### **Conceptualization of language learning**

At the beginning of the second interview, Harry contrasted his experience of learning French<sup>2</sup> with his study of Spanish. He mentioned, for example, his conviction that the pronunciation of Spanish was easier to “grasp” than that of French [2/4.00], that French was a lot more “formal” [2/6.00], that the French course was moving “very quickly ... of the two it seems to be the faster” [2/3.00] and (in discussing problems associated with learning the correct gender of nouns) that:

there's a lot more clues in Spanish ... than there are in French ... I guess the difference is the rules in Spanish are easier to understand or work out for yourself ... there's a lot more things that you've just got to know in French [2/7.00].

This discussion occurred in the context of Harry explaining why he had decided to withdraw from the French course.

In the third interview – about half way through the course – a new theme emerged in Harry’s characterization of what learning Spanish required. He explained this in terms of “discipline”, saying that “the Spanish side of the ... whole study I see er as a disciplinarian thing ... it’s really a er discipline [3/6.00]. He then elaborated:

you can’t just ... sit there and let your mind ... spin off onto tangents ... and then write about that. You’ve got to do it in such a way that you can be understood”. [3/7.00]

Harry seemed to be referring both to the mental discipline involved in, for example, learning verb paradigms and the gender of nouns in a new language, and to the place that Spanish occupied in his study experience as a whole. Spanish was definitely the “odd one out” of the courses in which Harry was enrolled, in terms of the type of mental activity it required and the focus of learning. Whereas his other courses encouraged open-ended discussion and speculation, his Spanish course required him to accurately internalize a specified body of knowledge.

Later in the same interview Harry reported having realized that before it is possible to express ideas in a new language, it is necessary first to master the language system, which, according to him [3/12.00] is “the hard part”. He then commented that he hadn’t started trying to make jokes in Spanish or to use the language to express his own meanings:

I probably shouldn’t cos it’s sort of ... starts verging on the undisciplined approach. [3/16.00]

This intriguing comment seems to suggest that Harry believed it “undisciplined” to use the new language to express his own ideas. Using the target language to say what he wanted (fluency-focused language use) seemed somehow less legitimate than the accuracy-focused activities apparently favoured in the course. Yet, in the first interview, when asked about the relative importance to him of the goals of fluency and accuracy, Harry had responded - “the accuracy is important but fluency is crucial” [1/30.00]. By the sixth week of the course, the course goals appeared to have replaced his own.

With the benefit of hindsight, in Week 10 of the course, Harry identified one of the elements required for successful language learning as being “hard work”, especially in the first four weeks of the course:

that's the crucial part of the paper, you've got to hit that hard, if you're going to hit that paper hard at all, you've got to do it then, because if you don't do it then, you're playing catch-up all the way through [5/19.00]

While he stopped short of admitting that he had spent less time than he had needed to on his Spanish in those early weeks of his course, Harry went on to identify the kind of learning which he believed was required for Spanish. According to him, because of the:

categorical nature of ... learning something like Spanish ... you have to learn something small and file it, learn another small and file it ... In Spanish you can't sit down two nights before and go oh man I've got to learn the whole first er present tense and and the past tense and you know all the words for shopping all the words for food ... just doesn't work like that" [5/24.00]

The implication is that this systematic, quantitative approach to learning did not suit Harry. The kind of learning, which Harry believed, was necessary for language learning contrasted starkly with his experience studying English Literature, where he claimed that "cramming" sessions could be successful in the short term. In one interview Harry claimed that he could read a book or a poem the night before a tutorial and contribute confidently to a discussion of that work the following day. His excellent English Literature grades suggest that he was very successful at studying literature. Clearly, in his view, learning a foreign language demanded a different learning approach involving systematic, cumulative effort over time.

When, during the third interview, Harry commented that it was "rather sad" that he didn't have a Spanish conversation partner since "that's really the vehicle that is going to get you places I think with any language" [3/8.00], he was expressing his understanding of the need for language knowledge to be complemented by opportunities for language use. A little later, he added "it's the conversational thing that ... I'm finding is ... starving me at the moment" [3/24.00]. In voicing this need, Harry appeared to be seeking not only an opportunity to practise his language skills, but also an outlet for his own ideas. He compared his experience of learning Spanish with the experience of studying his other subjects in the following way:

I suppose it [Spanish]'s a reversal of these other papers ... rather than ... chew through your own ideas ... see if you can chew through somebody else's in a very basic sense 3/11.00]

Two things are striking about this analogy. Firstly, Harry characterized language learning as essentially a matter of focusing on ideas contributed by others ("somebody else"). This apparent lack of ownership and of personal relevance **could well have affected** his motivation. Secondly, Harry chose the phrase "in a very basic sense" to describe the approach to ideas which might occur in the language class. The impoverished intellectual context of the Spanish course eventually became the overarching theme of his comments.

In an attempt to further explore Harry's conceptualization of the language learning process as reflected in the course, the researcher asked him to explain the difference between the various subjects he was studying. In week eight of the course, Harry put it like this:

the English and ... the Religion, it's real brain food ... I can really sink my teeth into it and I can just sit there and my mind can just whizz around at a million miles an hour in a hundred different directions at once ... and all these possible .. it's just such a ... vast scope ... it's exciting [4/24.00]

In stark contrast, Harry reported his experience of the Spanish classes as follows:

but now it's it's the routine exercises, exercises, exercises, homework, homework, homework ... it's the discipline side ... so this monotonous sort of drill has ... been implemented [4/26.00]

The critical difference between Harry's descriptions of the Spanish course and of his English Literature and Religious Studies classes was that, in his view, the latter allowed him (perhaps even *required* him) to contribute and integrate his own personal experience and knowledge in open-ended discussions. The very words he chose to describe his Spanish classes reflect mechanical, repetitive, uncreative processes. The metaphor of the machine drilling away monotonously says it all! He described his English and Religious Studies papers, on the other hand, in terms of depth, scope, speed and excitement.

In summarizing what he needed in order to remain motivated when learning, Harry claimed the "interest factor" was essential for him, and the ability to actually use the language. In stark contrast to this idealized conceptualization, is his view of what was required in order to pass the Spanish course:

it's just a matter of doing it, you do it, you learn it, you write it down, it's that easy ... you don't have to learn any grasping concepts ... it's just a matter of remembering a whole lot of stuff I suppose [4/Tape 2/2.00]

While this view of the Spanish course might be termed "mechanistic", Harry certainly did not find the course easy. Much of his discourse reflected the challenge it posed for him. In the fifth interview, when asked to characterize the challenge which learning Spanish represented for him, Harry explained:

it's intellectually demanding in the sense that you've got to memorize and contextualize everything that you learn independent from the last or the next ... English has a certain context ... it doesn't change ... Religion is the same depending on what topic you you're looking at ... and while Spanish is is presented in you know shopping one week clothes the next week eating the next week ... it is a different sort of context because you've got to ... you're constantly having to switch your mind from okay verbs in the present verbs in the past and then it's like okay well hang on there's this mountain of nouns

that I'm also supposed to know and you know I suppose it does kind of help to have these .... titles of shopping or clothes or food .... [5/10.00]

What Harry appeared to be reflecting on here was the challenge of making sense of the course designer's way of organising and sequencing material in the course. Clearly the "hooks" on which course members were encouraged to hang the lexical and grammatical items presented in the Spanish classes were not meaningful for him. While he accepted the course designer's view of what the learning content ought to be, clearly Harry found it difficult to find coherence in the menu of language items presented.

In the final session, Harry again contrasted what went on in the Religious Studies classes with what happened in his Spanish course, saying:

in many ways [the Religious Studies lecturers are] forcing you to look at things that you believe in you know and hold true and ... see them from somebody else's point of view ... Spanish doesn't you know, it's not, it's just not required [6/24.00].

For **me**, this is one of the most poignant statements of Harry's frustration. When he signed on for his introductory Spanish course, he expected to be exploring another world view. He was hoping to gain some insight into the literature, art, history and cultural experience of another people. Instead, he encountered the challenge of attempting to master the language system which, in the end, overshadowed any enjoyment he gained. While there is no doubt that certain aspects of the course involved appreciation of Hispanic culture, it is equally clear that for Harry the Spanish course lacked the intellectual challenge of the other courses he was taking.

The last insight into Harry's perspective on the Spanish course arose during the fifth interview when he proposed an analogy between cooking (in which he was professionally trained and qualified) and language learning. In this extended analogy, Harry identified *memory* and *practice* as attributes of successful cooks and commented that he had no difficulty memorising recipes. In attempting to explain why he found it hard to memorize vocabulary and grammatical rules, he explained that when learning to cook, material is first learned theoretically in class, and subsequently put into practice in the environment of a working kitchen. Attempting to remember something abstract can be hard, he explained, but once the knowledge had been applied a number of times in producing a dish, a sauce or a dessert, it became difficult to forget. He later reiterated that when he was learning to cook "there was definitely the division between working and studying" [5/Side B/17.00]. The parallel between the roles of abstract knowledge and practice first in cooking, and then in language learning, is striking. Though he did not spell it out himself, Harry appeared to be saying that successful

language learning depends on a balance between the two. It is interesting to speculate about the difference it would have made to Harry's experience of learning Spanish, if the course had included more opportunities for learners to use what they knew of the language.

Harry's experience highlights just how problematic beginner level language learning at university **can be**. While "hobby" language classes in which adult learners often enrol carry with them no expectation of intellectual stimulus beyond the satisfaction of being able to use the language for (albeit modest) communication purposes, the same cannot be said of language classes offered at universities. For learners whose goals are to gain a basic proficiency in the language, a university language course such as the one Harry enrolled for may be quite satisfactory. But for those who wish to dream and think and engage with the language, its history and ideas, the experience **may** be a frustrating one.

## **Conclusion**

**As long ago as 1977, Schumann & Schumann (1977) wrote about the potential for the learner's personal agenda in language learning to contrast with that of the teacher. Schumann and Schumann were reporting on their experiences of learning Arabic in Tunisia, and Farsi at UCLA and then in Iran. So, what does studying transcripts of Harry's interviews tell us about his agenda?** Firstly, Harry's "agenda" in enrolling for the introductory Spanish course was part of a broader educational plan for his life. His interest in the language was motivated by a desire to learn about the culture, history and ideas of the Hispanic world, and to explore the linguistic relationship between Spanish and English. Accordingly, the goals that Harry specified in early interviews related broadly to acquiring the ability to use the language to express himself and to explore the culture of the people who spoke the language. Yet the interviews provide evidence of a consistent narrowing of Harry's goals until the course agenda dominated completely, forcing him to reduce his focus to the memorization of grammatical rules. In the fifth interview, Harry revealed that he believed he had a poor memory for grammatical rules, terminology and vocabulary, but not for ideas. Given his belief that much of what is required for successful language learning depends on memory of discrete linguistic items, it is no surprise that, at the end of the course, he was unsure whether he would pass [5/9/00].

Harry eventually completed the Spanish course with a bare passing grade of "C". Yet, in his second and third years at university, he went on to major in English literature, achieving 9 "A" passes, 7 "B" passes, and 2 "C" passes (of which Spanish was one) in his subsequent papers. **My** observations suggest that Harry was a highly original, intelligent, confident,



autonomous individual. But the experience of enrolling on this language course was one of narrowing his goals to memorization for survival. The data illustrate that the course carried with it a powerful set of assumptions about the respective roles of teachers and learners, which indicated that goal setting was not the domain of learners.

It seems appropriate to let Harry have the last word. After reading a draft of this chapter, he sent a long e-mail message to the writer commenting on various aspects of his experience of learning Spanish at university. Most central to the focus of this chapter was the following remark:

I personally think that living languages require learners who actively participate in breathing life into them. For me, Spanish was transformed from an enticingly colourful exciting promise into something flat, boring, uninspired and tedious ... as the course went on, I felt little affinity with my classmates and therefore felt no desire to contribute to their experience ..

What Harry describes as a “transformation” was the process by which his personal learning agenda gradually gave way to the course agenda. However, somewhat surprisingly, his 12 weeks of introductory Spanish did not put an end to his interest in the language. Harry concluded his message by reporting:

I will pursue Spanish, indeed, my girlfriend and I have just enrolled in conversational classes at the community centre around the corner.

An optimistic conclusion to this study would be to see Harry’s agenda as ultimately having survived the university language course he enrolled in. This case study of his language learning experience has highlighted the importance of personal investment in learning. Indeed, the relationship between the learner and the learning experience is particularly crucial in the case of language learning. Norton claims (2000: p. 142):

It is only by understanding the histories and lived experiences of language learners that the language teacher can create conditions that will facilitate social interaction both in the classroom and in the wider community, and help learners claim the right to speak. Likewise, unless learners believe that their investments in the target language are an integral and important part of the language curriculum, they may resist the teacher’s pedagogy, or possibly even remove themselves from the class entirely.

Norton’s words are relevant for all language learners. Whether learning a foreign language in their own country, or trying to acquire the majority language of the country in which they are living, learners’ contribution to the curriculum – in terms of goals, interest and effort – must not only be acknowledged but also utilized in order for the classroom experience to be meaningful.

## Notes

1. This is the pseudonym which the research subject chose for himself.
2. Harry withdrew from the French course at the end of the second week of the trimester.

## References

- Arnold, J. (Ed.). 1999. *Affect in language learning*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bailey, K. 1983. Competitiveness and anxiety in adult language second language acquisition: Looking *at* and *through* diary studies. In H. Seliger and M. H. Long, eds. *Classroom oriented research in second language acquisition*, pp. 67-102. Rowley, MA: Newbury House.
- Belcher, D. and U. Connor, (Eds). 2001. *Reflections on multi-literate lives*. Clevedon, England: Multilingual Matters.
- Block, D. 1994. A day in the life of a class: teacher/learner perceptions of task purpose in conflict. *System* 22 (4):473-486.
- Block, D. 1995. Social constraints on interviews. *Prospect* 10 (3):35-48.
- Block, D. 1996. A window on the classroom: classroom events viewed from different angles. In K. M. Bailey and D. Nunan, eds. *Voices from the language classroom*, pp. 168-194. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Block, D. 1998. Tale of a language learner. *Language Teaching Research* 2 (2):148-176.
- Block, D. 2000. Problematizing interview data: Voices in the mind's machine? *TESOL Quarterly* 34 (4):757-762.
- Evans, C. 1988. *Language people: The experience of teaching and learning modern languages in British universities*. Milton Keynes: Open University Press.
- Hurd, S. 1998. Too carefully led or too carelessly left alone? *Language Learning Journal* 17:70-74.
- Jones, F. 1994. The lone language learner: a diary study. *System* 22 (4):441-454.
- Norton, B. 2000. *Identity and language learning: Gender, ethnicity and educational change*. Harlow, Essex: Longman.
- Schmidt, R.. 1983. Interaction, acculturation and the acquisition of communicative competence: a case study of an adult. In Wolfson, N. and E. Judd, eds. *Sociolinguistics and language acquisition*, pp. 137-174. Rowley, Mass.: Newbury House.
- Schmidt, R. and S. Frota. 1985. Developing basic conversational ability in a second language: a case study of an adult learner of Portuguese. In R. Day, ed. *Talking to learn*, pp. 237-326. Rowley, Mass.: Newbury House.
- Schumann, F.M. and J. H. Schumann. 1977. Diary of a language learner: An introspective study of second language learning. In H.D. Brown, C. A. Yorio, and R. Crymes, eds.

*On TESOL '77 Teaching and learning English as a second language: Trends in research and practice*, pp. 241-249. Washington, D.C.:TESOL.

Slimani, A. 1989. The role of topicalisation in classroom language learning. *System* 17 (2): 23-234.

Slimani, A. 1992. Evaluation of classroom interaction. In C. Alderson and A. Beretta, eds. *Evaluating second language education*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

*SPAN 111 Introduction to the Spanish Language. Course Outline*. 1999. Wellington: Victoria University of Wellington.

Swain, M. and Miccoli, L.S. 1994. Learning in a content-based, collaboratively-structured course: the experience of an adult ESL learner. *TESL Canada Journal*, 12 (1): 15-28.