



LEARNER EXPERIENCE USING SELF-INSTRUCTED CALL: METHODOLOGICAL AND LEARNER INSIGHTS¹

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Abstract: This paper describes the pilot study stage of a research project investigating learner experience using a commercial computer-assisted language learning (CALL) software package designed for self-instruction. As is the case with most pilot studies, the purpose of this undertaking is to identify any cracks in the methodological foundation and generally flag any issues that may interfere with the smooth running of the main study. Methodological insights resulting from the pilot study relate to: technical problems, need for increased diary training, and need for participant observation. However, aside from methodological insights, the pilot study data, although only a small corpus, does yield some useful insights into the research questions addressing the experiences of learners working in this context. Learner insights relate to: need for increased self-discipline, and need for additional materials. Both methodological and learner insights are described here.

Key words: SLA, CALL, self-instruction, methodology, learner experience

Özet: Bu çalışma öz eğitim için tasarlanmış ticari amaçlı bir bilgisayar destekli dil öğrenimi yazılımını inceleyen bir projenin pilot çalışma safhasıdır. Çoğu pilot çalışmada olduğu gibi, bu çalışmada da amaç yöntemsel kurgudaki olası hataları belirlemek ve ana çalışmanın sorunsuz ilerlemesine engel olacak sorunları saptamaktır. Pilot çalışmadaki yöntemsel çıkarımlar şunlarla ilgilidir: teknik sorunlar, daha fazla günlük yazma eğitimi ihtiyacı, ve katılımlı-gözlem ihtiyacı. Ancak, yöntemsel bildirimlerin dışında, küçük bir bütüncü olmasına rağmen pilot veri bu bağlamda çalışan öğrencilerin tecrübelerini yansıtan araştırma soruları hakkında faydalı kavramlar sunmaktadır. Öğrenci anlayışları şunlarla ilgilidir: öz disiplini artırma ihtiyacı, ve ek materyal ihtiyacı. Bu çalışmada hem yöntemsel hem de öğrenci bazlı çıkarımlar açıklanmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: İkinci Dil Edinimi, Bilgisayar Destekli Dil Öğrenimi, öz eğitim, yöntem, öğrenci tecrübesi

1 Introduction

Benson (2001:131) describes self-instructed language learning as “the situation in which learners study languages on their own, primarily with the aid of ‘teach-yourself’ materials”. These materials are sold in packages containing, traditionally, a course book and audio cassettes/CDs or, with the advent of a more computer-savvy public, CALL software. Selling for as much as £229/package, these programs are big business and there is money to be made. However, once the money has changed hands, how alone is the lone learner? Anecdotally, self-instructed learners working outside of the target language context confront a difficult and lonesome task with high levels of learner drop-out (Jones 1993, Umino 1999). Yet, empirical investigations of self-instructed learners working without classroom or institutional support is scant (Benson 2001; see Jones 1994, 1995, 1996, 1998 for an important exception) and consequently, “much of its justification has to come indirectly: from general language acquisition theory or from classroom-based research” (Jones 1994:441).

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Moreover, in contrast with materials intended for the classroom, “those intended for home-study are less exposed to critical scrutiny, the market in them taking place directly between the publishers and potential learners, with no teachers or curriculum planners in between” (Roberts 1995:513). Consequently, within the self-instruction industry, there seems to be “a strong and repeated tendency for the introduction of some new technology...to be accompanied by a retrograde and unreflecting pedagogy” (Gremmo and Riley 1995:153).

Furthermore, while it has been argued that a high degree of autonomy is essential to successful self-instruction (Benson 2001; Jones 1994), it would be a mistake to conflate the two concepts (Holec 1988). While self-instruction, as described by Benson (2001), implies transferring teaching responsibilities from a human teacher to self-instruction materials (i.e. Levy’s (2000) computer-as-tutor model), autonomy has been famously defined as “the ability to take charge of one’s own learning” (Holec 1981:3). Crucially, Holec’s idea of “taking charge” must go beyond simply purchasing some CALL software online; rather, it must be a constant imperative in every learning activity. And while successful self-instruction is said to be reliant on a high degree of autonomy, research has shown that a high degree of autonomy is reliant on a number of learner variables, of which metacognitive knowledge (Wenden 2001) and learner beliefs (Cotterall 1995; White 1999) are often cited. Developing the knowledge and beliefs necessary for increased autonomy takes time and careful reflection, a process that can be supported by a teacher or learning program (Benson 2001); yet it has been found that self-instruction materials generally fail to foster learner autonomy (Benson 2001).

Egbert (2005, in Figura and Jarvis 2007:449) defines CALL as “learners learning language in any context with, through, and around computer technologies.” With the advance of multimedia technologies, such as interactive video and voice recognition software, self-instructed CALL is becoming a popular alternative to more traditional self-instruction materials. Significantly, CALL programs, with their capacity to incorporate text, sound, images, and video all at the click of a button, have the potential of being more interactive, more appealing, and more effective than other self-instruction materials. However, while there is an ever-growing body of research on self-instructed CALL used within institutional contexts (Murday *et al.* 2008; Murray 1999a, 1999b; Stracke 2007; Ushida 2005), empirical research on learners working outside institutional contexts is scant, likely because these learners are, by definition, difficult to locate. Similarly, while there is a strong tradition in applied linguistics of research on learner autonomy, this field of inquiry tends to focus on classroom research, investigating how teachers can support learners in attaining greater autonomy (Crabbe 1993; Cotterall 1995; White 1999), rather than looking at learners working outside of the classroom context. It is to this gap in the literature that the present study is directed.

2 Literature review

Because research on learner experience in the self-instructed CALL context is largely absent in the literature, it is necessary to turn to research examining this experience in related CALL contexts. This review focuses on both the methods and findings of such studies in order to set the stage for the present study.

In his exploration of the CALL experiences of 23 French second language (L2) learners using an interactive videodisc program as part of a university-level module, Murray (1999a, 1999b) adopted a multi-method case-study approach incorporating language learning histories, learner diaries, video observation, think-aloud protocols, interviews, and pre-/post-

tests. He found that this combination of data collection methods yielded a more complete depiction of learner experience than any single method used alone. In particular, Murray found that methods such as histories and diaries, which asked learners to reflect on their experiences with minimal prompting, often produced scant or unfocused entries. It seemed that “many of the participants were not quite sure what to write about. They did not know which aspects of their experiences were noteworthy” (Murray 1999b:186). To counter this, interviews conducted after the histories and diaries had been collected emerged as an extremely useful way to clarify and expand on gaps in the learners’ narratives. Factors that emerged as salient to shaping the learners’ experiences included: increased freedom to determine pace and learning path, decreased performance anxiety, increased self-discipline required to commit to self-instructed CALL in contrast with classroom learning, and increased real-world verisimilitude of activities afforded by the software’s interactive video design.

These findings are both confirmed and contradicted by findings from Murday *et al.*’s (2008; see also Ushida 2005) investigation of the perspectives of university-level French and Spanish L2 learners who elected to enroll in a “language online” (LOL) module as opposed to an equivalent classroom-based module. Data was collected using module results, learner biographical data, observation, and individual and small group interviews. Contrasting with Murray’s (1999a, 1999b) findings, learners in this study who expected the LOL to afford more freedom in terms of pace and learning path, were distraught at the tight schedule enforced by the module leaders. Moreover, whereas Murray’s learners identified increased real-world verisimilitude of activities as a factor relating positively to their experience, Murday *et al.*’s learners cited a decrease in verisimilitude, primarily due to the lack of human interaction. In keeping with Murray’s findings, however, many learners accustomed to classroom learning, where “repeated exposure to the target language...involved little more effort on their part than simply showing up for class” (Murday *et al.* 2008:131), found procrastination to be a frequent issue (Ushida 2005), and the added self-discipline required to regularly engage with the LOL materials to be a huge obstacle to their learning.

Revealing a more extreme position, Stracke (2007:57) cites “rejection of the computer as a medium of language learning” as one of three reasons why learners dropped-out of a blended language learning (BLL) module for university-level French and Spanish L2 learners. Of the 32 learners involved in this study, three chose to leave the module early, and Stracke used a case-study design incorporating learner biographical data and semi-structured interviews to investigate the reasons behind the drop-out. Along with rejection of the computer (for reasons of isolation and lack of human interaction, corresponding with Murday *et al.*’s (2008) study), other reasons cited for drop-out included: lack of connection between the CALL and classroom components of the BLL, and lack of printed materials. The latter, in particular, proved to be a major obstacle to the CALL component. Learners expressed a strong desire to have paper-based materials to complement their CALL activities. Such materials were referred to by the students as “conventional, traditional, and normal” (Stracke 2007:71). Learners expressed wanting to have materials they could carry with them, something to pull out and read on the bus, or even bring to bed. Learners also expressed a need for printed materials for writing practice, stating their preference for writing by hand over typing on a keyboard. This finding is interesting because it contrasts the oft-cited temporal flexibility of self-instructed CALL (i.e. the learner is free to choose when to learn and to determine learning pace) with spatial inflexibility (i.e. the learner is restricted to working at a computer, perhaps even a particular computer or computer-lab).

These researchers all investigated learner experience in the CALL context, making use of qualitative, often introspective methods of data collection, such as language learning histories, learner diaries, interviews, think-aloud protocols, and observation. To afford the learners as much freedom as possible to articulate their own experiences, several of the researchers (Murray 1999a, 1999b; Stracke 2007) avoided proposing *a priori* themes and categories. Indeed, these studies underscore what Conole (2008:124) refers to as “listening to the learner voice” in their willingness to allow learners to speak for themselves in identifying the factors most salient to shaping their CALL experience. This experiential focus is in keeping with a recent shift from learning product to learning process, and is well-precedented in the CALL literature (Jamieson *et al.* 2005; Ma 2008), where there is a growing appreciation of the immense influence of learner perceptions, perspectives, and attitudes (Bordonaro 2003; Conole 2008; Murday *et al.* 2008; Murphy 2008; Murray 1999a, 1999b; Stracke 2007; Ushida 2005) on learner experience.

3 Methodology

3.1 Research questions

In light of the need to investigate self-instructed CALL, the present study is approached conscious of the fact that “[s]mall-scale studies usually have to make a choice between objective rigor (hypothesis-driven, controlled-variable, single-issue experiments) and subjective richness (open-ended, holistic explorations); only larger studies can afford the luxury of both” (Mitchell 1989, in Jones 1994:443). Moreover, “[w]hen exploring and mapping out a virtually unknown field, we need a maximally open-ended approach, for we do not know in advance which details are relevant and which are not” (Jones 1996:367). Therefore, in search of subjective richness in this relatively unexplored field, the following open-ended questions were proposed for the main study:

1. What are the experiences of learners working with commercial CALL programs marketed for self-instruction?
2. What common themes emerge as most relevant to shaping learner experience?
3. What are the pedagogical implications of learner experience for CALL theory and program design?

However, for the pilot study, an additional question was proposed:

What methodological and technical issues arise during the pilot study, and how can these be resolved for the main study?

For the purposes of this paper, which describes only the pilot study stage of the research, this final question has particular relevance, and is discussed alongside a brief treatment of question 2, resulting from a preliminary analysis of the pilot study data. Due to the small corpus of the pilot study data, questions 1 and 3 must wait for a forthcoming treatment of the main study data.

3.2 Participants

Three participants, whose names have been changed here to protect anonymity, volunteered for the pilot study after having learned about it via word of mouth, flyers posted around the city, and/or emails sent out to various mailing lists. Recruitment was difficult, as the longitudinal nature of the study required participants to be self-selected and motivated (high levels of motivation were assumed based on the participants' eagerness to volunteer even after learning of the longitudinal commitment). Additionally, the following conditions for participation were set: participants must not be attending classes in their selected language during the study; and selecting English as the language of study would not be possible, as the research was UK-based and aimed to look at language learning outside the target language context. In light of these considerations, it seemed satisfactory to conduct the pilot study with such a modest number of participants.

Paul, a 41-year-old professional, was born and raised in the UK and speaks English as his first language (L1). He elected to study Spanish, a language he claims to already speak at low-beginner proficiency. He has had some experience learning Spanish in the past. The first occasion was during a holiday in Guatemala, where he spent several weeks living with a Spanish-speaking family and taking language classes during the day. The second occasion was upon his return to the UK, when he signed up for Spanish night classes. However, he stopped attending these classes after several weeks because he found he didn't enjoy classroom learning, feeling that it was lacking in the authenticity that had been so stimulating in Guatemala. He has since tried to learn Spanish on his own using a commercial audio series, but he finds he has trouble staying motivated and desires some outside pressure to keep him going. He reports that his primary motivation for learning Spanish is to be able to converse with local people during his travels abroad.

Seri, a 28-year-old postgraduate student, is originally from Malaysia and speaks Malay as her L1. She has been living in the UK for four years and is a proficient user of English in her day to day life and advanced studies, which are in the field of phonological linguistics. She elected to study Spanish, a language she claims to already speak at low-beginner proficiency. She has had only a little experience with Spanish, mostly during her travels, and has never studied it formally. She reports that her primary goal for learning Spanish is to correspond with a Spanish L1 friend she met while traveling, along with general interest and self-improvement. She has previously used self-instruction to improve her English language proficiency.

Ahn, a 23-year-old postgraduate student, is originally from Vietnam and speaks Vietnamese as her L1. She has been living in the UK for about a year. Prior to moving to the UK, she spent several years living in Australia, pursuing undergraduate studies. As such, she is a proficient user of English in her day to day life and advanced studies. She elected to learn French, a language she claims to already speak at low-beginner proficiency, having studied it in secondary school in Vietnam. Her motivations for learning French are general interest and to prepare for the possibility of spending a semester of her postgraduate degree at a university in France. She has used self-instruction in the past, primarily to improve her English language proficiency.

3.3 CALL software

The pilot study participants used Auralog's *Tell Me More* program in Spanish and French. This program boasts high-end graphics, cutting edge speech recognition software, and claims to be based on sound pedagogical theory, developed by experts in both language teaching and technology. *Tell Me More* is advertised as an "all-you-need" package, "addressing all the skills you need to learn a language: reading, writing, listening, speaking, vocabulary, grammar and culture" (Auralog 2009: website). It claims to contain "up to 950 hours of language learning...5,000 exercises and 37 types of activities" (Auralog 2009: website). It offers three modes to navigate the software: Guided Mode, which suggests a learning pathway based on pre-set learning objectives; Free-To-Roam Mode, which allows learners to select their own learning pathway; and Dynamic Mode, which "evaluates your progress as you work and adjusts your activities based on your results, just as a teacher would" (Auralog 2009: website). The program additionally offers grammatical explanations as help files separate from the activities themselves, and there is a built-in glossary to look up word meanings.

Although *Tell Me More* claims to teach L2s the way people learn their L1 (c.f. "Auralog has developed a solution that enables students to learn another language in the same environment as their native tongue" (Auralog 2009: website), the basis of this claim is unclear, as the program appears to focus more on word games than it does on interaction. Among its 37 types of activities are crossword puzzles, word searches, hangman and many other games that treat target language items in isolation, rather than in communicative contexts. It is perhaps on account of this feature that a participant in the present study referred to *Tell Me More* as "a book of puzzles" (Paul, diary). In her review of *Tell Me More Spanish*, Lafford (2004:32) summarizes:

Tell Me More Spanish is a technologically sophisticated multimedia program with high-end graphics and excellent speech recognition software that provides the learner multiple opportunities to practice speaking, listening, reading, and writing skills and to gain knowledge about some isolated cultural facts. It is suited to the needs of individual learners, who are given a great deal of control over various elements of the program so they can forge their own learning path. However, the program's focus on pronunciation, structurally-based curriculum, mechanical exercises, decontextualized interaction, and use of culture capsules (mostly isolated from vocabulary and grammar exercises and listening, speaking and writing activities) causes this program to be out of step with modern communicatively-based views of task-based foreign language pedagogy—views which are grounded in cultural authenticity and the notion of language as social practice.

Lafford's (2004) review is an example of what Jamieson *et al.* (2004) have termed a judgmental, rather than empirical evaluation. Her analysis is based on expert knowledge resulting from her experience as a language teacher and CALL practitioner, rather than on empirical data elicited from actual learner use of the program. Through an investigation of learner experience with *Tell Me More*, the present study endeavours to provide some of the missing analysis to complete this picture.

3.4 Procedure

At the first meeting, each participant was briefly interviewed in order to obtain a language learning history and given a copy of the *Tell Me More Spanish* or *French* program on CD-ROM, to be used at the location of their choosing. As a general guide, it was suggested they spend two to three hours per week on their program for about six to eight weeks, which is about the same commitment as a university-level foreign language module. After each learning session, participants were asked write a diary to record the session, addressing whatever factors they found to be relevant to their experience. Prior to beginning the study, participants were provided with diary training to assist them with this task. During the study, participants were contacted twice via email to collect diaries and once to arrange an interview. Participants were provided with no training in self-instruction or how to use the *Tell Me More* program. To have offered training would have compromised the researcher's ability to answer the research questions, which enquire into the self-instructed CALL experience. By definition, participants in this context do not have a human teacher to provide self-instruction training (e.g. offering advice on goal-setting, setting-up learner contracts, monitoring progress, determining pace, and self-assessing). Nor do they have access to a human-led CALL tutorial. For the researcher to have taken on this role would have worked against the aims of the study.

3.5 Data collection

3.5.1 Case-studies

It was felt that the research questions could best be addressed by conducting multiple longitudinal case-studies incorporating language learning histories, learner diaries, and interviews, in keeping with Murray's (1999a, 1999b) multi-method approach. In Bailey's (1991) discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of case-studies, she identifies the two most troublesome weaknesses as being internal and external validity. Since the researcher is essentially the gatekeeper of what does and does not count as data, there is the risk with case-studies that important data will go unaccounted for or be discarded, compromising the internal validity. Likewise, the generalizability of case-studies has been seriously called into question. It is difficult to extend the findings of small samples of case-study participants to larger groups of learners, compromising the external validity. Yet, there is still a strong case to be made for case-studies, when treated as one piece of a larger mosaic. To quote Abramson (1992, in Jones 1996:88):

[C]ase-studies should not be judged in isolation, but relative to other methods of examining the same issue. Thus, in a predictive sense, a case-study can generate hypotheses for a later, more objective study. And in an illustrative sense, a case-study can add vital real-life structure to the bitty, disparate data provided by multi-subject surveys, experiments or literature reviews.

3.5.2 Learner diaries

Many researchers (Jones 1994, 1995, 1996; Murray 1999a, 1999b) now use introspective methods such as learner diaries in their studies of SLA, and regard them as "well suited for looking at, *inter alia*, individual learner factors and the status of declarative knowledge" (Jones 1994:443). These researchers promote the usefulness of diary studies as

being an ideal way to gather thoughtful and reflective data on the acquisition process. Bailey argues that “diary studies can provide us with important missing pieces in this incredibly complex mosaic—pieces which may not be fully accessible by any other means” (1991:87). Moreover, in a comparison of classroom research methods, Brown (1985:125) reports that “[t]he diary study is one of the best methods for getting at the individual learner variables”. Brown cites other advantages of the diary study as being “the most natural of all possible research choices” (133), with minimal “research intrusion” (125), and having the most “immediate use for learners...[by allowing] for self-evaluation, improvement and growth” (133).

In light of the fact that learner diaries can often yield disappointing data (Murray 1999a, 1999b), careful preparations were made for the use of learner diaries in the present study. As stated above, prior to beginning the study each participant was provided with a brief diary training session. During the session, the participants were asked about diary-writing experience (two had used diaries in the past), and provided with two examples of actual diary entries along with several open-ended prompts to use if they were ever stuck for something to write about (e.g. How did today’s session go? What did you do? What did you learn?). Although the researcher hesitated to provide any prompts at all, feeling that to do so may influence the content of the diaries and direct participants towards certain themes over others, Murray’s (1999a, 1999b) study found that not all learners are comfortable with this genre, and it was reasoned that a few optional prompts may improve the richness of the diary data. Twice during the study the participants were contacted via email and asked to submit an electronic copy of their diaries. This was timed first towards the middle of the study, and then again towards the end, prior to conducting the interview.

3.5.3 Interviews

While diaries can be used to capture reflections on language learning, allowing the learner to address the factors most salient to shaping her/his experience, interviews can be used, as Murray (1999a, 1999b) describes, to fill in the gaps, clarify and draw out expanded expositions of the diary entries, and allow participants to comment on issues that may not have come up while writing. Used in combination, learner diaries and interviews can provide many useful insights into the language learning experience, resulting in a more complete picture than either of these methods used alone.

Interviews in the present study were semi-structured and lasted approximately 30 minutes. The interview schedule was largely based on emerging themes from the diaries. Prior to the interview the participants were asked to submit all of their diaries to date via email. After reading through the diaries a list of possible points to cover during the interview was created, based on recurring themes and issues in need of further exploration. As such, each set of interview questions was designed uniquely for the participant, along with a few generic questions (e.g. How is your language study going?). The interviews were conducted in a private room either on campus or at the researcher’s home (according to participant preference and convenience). The interviews were digitally recorded with the participant’s permission and later transcribed. A copy of the transcribed interview was emailed to each participant, inviting comments and/or questions. None of the participants chose to comment, although they all reported having read the transcripts and deemed them acceptable.

3.6 Data analysis

Following from related work investigating learner experience using qualitative methods (Bordonaro 2003; Murday *et al.* 2008; Murray 1999a, 1999b; Stracke 2007; Umino 1999), a grounded approach to qualitative content analysis was adopted for the identification of recurring themes emerging from the learner diaries and interviews. In this way, the data was approached without *a priori* themes and categories, thus allowing the participants themselves to determine the factors significant to their experience. In this approach “[i]t is necessary to do detailed, intensive, microscopic examination of the data in order to bring out the amazing complexity of what lies in, behind, and beyond those data” (Strauss 1987:10). Bailey (1983) divides qualitative content analysis into three steps (see also Silverman 2001):

1. To protect anonymity, the researcher revises the texts (e.g. learner diaries and interview transcripts) to conceal identifying features of the participants.
2. The researcher studies the texts thoroughly, carefully coding and recoding in order to identify recurring themes. The researcher identifies these recurring themes as being significant factors contributing to the language learning experience.
3. The researcher discusses these factors.

4 Findings and discussion

4.1 Methodological insights

The following discussion addresses the pilot study question: What methodological and technical issues arise during the pilot study, and how can these be resolved for the main study? Three major issues arose, relating to: technical problems, need for increased learner diary training, and need for participant observation.

4.1.1 Technical problems

As may be expected in any undertaking relying heavily on new technology, there were technical problems. In particular, Seri experienced a technical problem that interfered with her ability to use the program. *Tell Me More* is run from a CD-ROM, which must naturally be inserted into a computer’s CD drive to run. Once running, the learner must install various components from the CD-ROM onto the computer so that the program will run smoothly. However, Seri’s preferred workstation was a university campus computer, which forbids student access to the CD drive and downloads. Because she was unable to use the program at her preferred workstation, Seri explains that she did not use it as much as she had hoped. Indeed, of the three participants, Seri logged the least amount of time: only three learning sessions in contrast with Paul’s seven and Ahn’s five. This finding raises the issue of spatial inflexibility (Stracke 2007), illustrating the tensions that exist between the supposed freedom of CALL learners to determine *when*, but not necessarily *where*, to engage with the materials.

This issue is largely resolved in the main study, as participants are using a program delivered over the Internet that does not require program-specific downloads to run. As such, participants are able to access the program on any computer with an Internet connection and that meets the modest system requirements, thus providing more opportunities to use the program, and hopefully increasing the number of learning sessions.

4.1.2 Need for increased learner diary training

As stated above, prior to beginning the study each participant was provided with a brief diary training session. However, despite the training session, the diaries were, on the whole, disappointing. The following three main problems were encountered:

- Diaries written even more retrospectively than necessary. In several instances, participants chose not to write up their diaries immediately after the learning session. Instead, they report having made a few hand-written notes and then waiting for a more convenient time to type up several entries at once. This is obviously cause for major concern, as the validity of introspective techniques decreases significantly when there is too great a time lapse between the learning session and the introspection (Brown and Rodgers 2002).
- Diaries characterized by short, unfocused entries, often unrelated to the self-instructed CALL experience, yielding few insights (also reported by Murray 1999a, 1999b).
- Diaries missing log information, such as time spent on the program.

Looking back, it seems likely that these problems were caused by the researcher's concern about imposing too much on the participants. When three participants finally volunteered for this highly demanding study, the researcher was so grateful that she probably minimized the work involved and was too casual about the diaries. However, because this effort to be flexible likely came at the expense of rich, insightful data, the main study incorporates the following measures to clarify expectations:

First, an FAQ handout is provided that brings together questions raised by the participants, as well as questions they may not have thought to ask. Within the FAQs, the diaries are emphasized as an integral part of the learning session, not as an optional add-on. The participants are asked to judge how much time they have for a given session, and build in time for diary-writing (e.g. if they have time for a one-hour learning session, they should allow 45 minutes for program use, and 15 minutes for diary-writing). The FAQs also include a diary template for participants to use, which specifies the key information to record at the beginning of each diary entry (i.e. session number, date, lessons covered, and time spent). To emphasize the importance of the FAQ content, participants are provided with their own copy of the handout at the first meeting, and asked to read through it at that time to enable further clarification, if needed.

Second, routine diary checks are conducted early on to ensure that diaries are following the specifications necessary to yield insightful data. A week or two after the first meeting, the participants are contacted via email and asked to submit an electronic sample or two of their diaries. In this way, they receive early feedback on diary form and content. Participants generally express appreciation for this feedback and seem happy to make the recommended adjustments.

Third, in addition to the optional diary prompts, a series of questions are provided that address themes predicted to be central to learner experience, based on the literature on self-instruction and SLA (Bidlake 2005; Jones 1994, 1995, 1996, 1998). Again, these are provided reluctantly because it is the researcher's intention to allow the participants themselves to dictate the themes of the study through their diaries without prompting. However, in the pilot study it was found that many learners do need guidance to keep them focused on the self-instructed CALL experience, and that, while these prompts do not necessarily prevent other themes from emerging from the data, they do help to ensure that insightful data results from

the diaries. These themes focus on the areas of motivation, confidence, strategies, learning style and progress.

4.1.3 Need for participant observation

During the interview, many participants expressed difficulty in describing certain aspects of the CALL software, not having the program open and running beside them to refer to or draw examples from. To account for this in the main study, participant observation is incorporated into the case-study design. Moreover, it is probable that observations of the participants working with their CALL programs may yield additional insights (such as in Murday *et al.* 2008; Murray 1999a, 1999b; Ushida 2005), allowing the researcher to observe how they approach the learning sessions and to ask questions as they work through one or two learning activities. The observation sessions in the main study are video-recorded with the participant's permission and later transcribed for visual analysis.

4.2 Learner insights

The following discussion addresses research question 2: What common themes emerge as most relevant to shaping learner experience? The pilot study data, although only a small corpus (i.e. language learning history, diary, and interview data from three participants, covering a total of 14 learning sessions, over a period of six weeks), does yield some useful insights into this research question, suggesting at least two factors as being relevant to shaping learner experience. These factors reflect findings from the literature, and relate to: need for increased self-discipline and need for additional materials.

4.2.1 Need for increased self-discipline

Reflecting a very common finding in the self-instruction literature (Jones 1994, 1995, 1996, 1998; Murday *et al.* 2008; Murray 1999a, 1999b; Stracke 2007; Umino 1999; Ushida 2005), the participants all experienced a need for increased self-discipline to engage regularly with their CALL programs. For Ahn, this was a need that came in stark contrast with her experience with classroom-based learning. At the time of the study, she was also enrolled in non-credit English L2 and Spanish L2 modules, both of which she found easier to attend to regularly than her French self-instruction.

It's just mainly that, you know, you know that people are there, so you don't want to miss all the fun, or miss the session. Because you think 'Okay, they, they are moving it, or they're advancing, and I'm not.' However, the software, it's just, like, you know, it's always there. So you, you can just do, like, learn it whenever you want. (Ahn, interview)

For Ahn, temporal flexibility, which is often described as one of the great advantages of self-instruction (Dickinson 1987), appears to enable procrastination in a way that classroom-based learning does not. The self-instructed learner is not only *free* to determine when learning will take place, s/he is *obliged* to do so. In this way, the increased freedom of self-instruction can actually be experienced as an obstacle to success.

If I try the program last day then I tend to, like, repeat, come back in the next day. But if I just leave that for a longer, then I'll be, like, 'No, it's taking too much time' [...] I find it would be better if I had, sort of, like, you know, be disciplined and keep it on a

regular basis, rather than just, like, you know, do it whenever I feel like. (Ahn, interview)

Although Ahn recognized the need for increased self-discipline, especially in terms of setting up a regular schedule and following it, she found that other commitments kept getting prioritized ahead of her French self-instruction.

I just realized that I have been neglected my French studying for quite a while. Maybe I should set up a regular timetable for French and stick with it. Currently, all the assignments keep coming in and I find myself constantly chasing one after the other [...] I wonder how can I create a similar pressure from the software, haha? OK, maybe I just need to be more disciplined and self-motivated. (Ahn, diary)

The competing demands of a busy schedule are also cited by Paul and Seri as reasons why they were unable to regularly find time for their learning sessions. At the time of the study Paul was interviewing for a new job, and found he had less time for his Spanish self-instruction than he had hoped.

I've probably not done as many [sessions] as I could have done, but that's been part of other distractions. Time-wise, in terms of interviews, and just general things. (Paul, interview)

Seri was a busy postgraduate student juggling credit-bearing modules and original research.

Things with the Spanish learning CD is good so far, but I have to tell you the truth, I've only used it for three times because of time constraint. (Seri, interview)

However, the participants' inability to engage in self-instruction regularly does not seem to be related to a dislike for the program, rather a struggle to muster the self-discipline necessary to fit learning sessions into a busy schedule. For example, despite his other commitments, Paul found that when he did find the time to "sit down to do it", he often enjoyed himself.

I have enjoyed the session even after the slow start and again time seems to fly by which for me is a sign I am enjoying it. Motivation levels are OK when I sit down to do it, but job interviews and such have slowed me down. (Paul, diary)

If not a dislike for the program, why do learners have such a difficult time persevering with self-instruction? The lack of regularly scheduled class times and group gatherings seems to enable procrastination (Umino 1999; Ushida 2005) in a way that classroom learning does not. This need for increased self-discipline is possibly the greatest and most inherent challenge to learning in this context. Hopefully the main study will shed more light on this important recurring theme.

4.2.2 Need for additional materials

Reflecting the finding from Stracke's (2007) study, the participants all felt the need for additional, often printed, materials. These materials tended to be either supplementary (i.e. covering information not found in the program) or complementary (i.e. covering information found in the program). Seri, for example, found herself confused about Spanish sentence

structure after one learning session, and consequently sought out supplementary information online.

I took the liberty to searched more about Spanish online (particularly the sentence structure). (Seri, diary)

She later describes how she pasted this into her diary, thus allowing for quicker and more convenient access to the information than an online source or program-embedded explanation could provide.

If you have the diary you can just write whatever you feel at that time and after that maybe you, like, for the sentence structure of Spanish, I purposefully pasted [the online explanation] into my diary so that whenever I feel confused about the, the structure I can just look right at it. (Seri, interview)

Ahn also cites the need for supplementary materials. She mentions turning to textbooks for help with pronunciation and when attempting activities of a more advanced level.

Ahn: I think it needs more support in, yeah, say, sort of, like, an additional text or textbook or some, sort of, like, say, for pronunciation, if it gives me more hint about, like, you know, how to pronounce the correct sounds, it would be better.

I: Okay, and how are you overcoming that at this point, then?

Ahn: If I have time I will consult my textbooks which I happen, happen to get, have, and, yeah, and generally I will repeat the question and, like, try again. (Ahn, interview)

I found I could answer Level 1 questions quite easily, but when level 2 started to bring in new stuff, I found myself clueless [...] Maybe I should used my other textbooks along with the software. (Ahn, diary)

Paul cites the need for complementary materials in the form of vocabulary lists, as he found the program's lists were not organized according to his preferences. First, vocabulary in these lists is presented in alphabetical order, whereas his preference is for vocabulary to be grouped into semantic categories (e.g. parts of the body)². Second, nouns are marked as either masculine or feminine, rather than appearing with an article to indicate grammatical gender, and verb paradigms are listed without their pronouns.

I have come across the vocab list at the end of [presentation] 2, still its not great for learning [it's in] alphabetical order like a dictionary. Also just appear to be random words, rather than say 'sust masc' I would prefer to see the 'la' or 'el' bits. And just to carry on this line in the verb conjugations to see the pronouns as well just to help learn them. (Paul, diary)

To accommodate these preferences, he cites the need to create his own vocabulary lists.

What I think I'm going to have to do, and what I haven't done yet, is have an exercise book to create my own work. I'm purely doing the work on the computer at the minute. But I think, I don't know what I'm meant to do, but what I will start

² In fact, *Tell Me More* does offer vocabulary organized according to semantic categories, but Paul was unable to locate this feature, a concern related to "user-friendliness" that is discussed in greater detail within the context of the main study.

introducing, probably in the new year, or after Christmas, is my own sort of vocab lists. (Paul, interview)

This need to work “outside of the software” is something Paul frequently mentions as a way to bridge the distance between the program’s way of teaching and his perceived way of learning.

Paul: You know, the simple, the temporary, and the permanent state of ‘to be’, they’re the basics of Spanish, aren’t they? And I’m still struggling with those. Partly because I haven’t learned the conjugations properly, and because I haven’t put them to memory.

I: What do you think it would take for you to really learn them?

Paul: To write them down [...] To actually do something outside of the software, which is something that I haven’t been doing up to now, and it’s something that I need to do [...] I could have an exercise book, where I know the front page will be the verbs for ‘to be’. (Paul, interview)

In reference to these additional materials, Paul and Ahn echo Stracke’s (2007:71) learners in describing them as “conventional, traditional, and normal”.

I’m more used to traditional method, like books or direct teaching. (Ahn, interview)

The creating vocab lists I think is going back to old methods of learning. (Paul, interview)

However, while Stracke (2007:71) reasons that “it should suffice to point out that many students missed these materials simply because they were used to them”, the participants in this study seem to differ from Stracke’s learners, in that they did not simply make reference to the spatial *inflexibility* of CALL programs, expressing a longing to take the materials to bed with them or so forth; rather they seem to view the lack of additional materials as an inadequacy of the programs to meet their learning needs in terms of understanding grammatical concepts and retaining content. Considering the fact that many commercial self-instructed CALL programs are advertised as “all-you-need” packages, the need for additional materials is arguably a significant and overlooked challenge to learning in this context.

5 Conclusion

This paper described the pilot study stage of a research project investigating learner experience using a commercial CALL software package designed for self-instruction. The pilot study yielded both methodological insights, which have implications for the methodology of the main study, and learner insights, which may contribute to the findings of the main study, but are as of yet limited by the small corpus of the pilot study data. Methodological insights include: technical problems, which contrasted self-instructed CALL’s oft-cited temporal flexibility (Dickinson 1987) with the issue of spatial *inflexibility* (Stracke 2007); the need for increased learner diary training in order to ensure rich, insightful data (Murray 1999a, 1999b); and the need for participant observation as a means for participants to illustrate their usage of the programs more directly to the researcher. Learner insights include: the need for increased self-discipline, which is possibly the greatest and most inherent challenge to learning in this context and a leading cause of learner drop-out (Jones 1994, 1995, 1996, 1998; Murday *et al.* 2008; Murray 1999a, 1999b; Stracke 2007; Umino

1999; Ushida 2005); and the need for additional materials as a way for participants to both complement and supplement their programs in order to accommodate learning preferences (Stracke 2007). As a result of the methodological fine-tunings described above, the main study is expected not only to touch on some of the learner insights presented here, but also reveal new and different recurring themes, thus contributing to the field's understanding of learner experience in the self-instructed CALL context.

The limitations of the pilot study are many, and include: the small number of participants (n=3), the short period of the study (6 weeks), the limited use of the program by the participants (14 learning sessions), and the use of only a single program (*Tell Me More*). These limitations all combine to make the findings here extremely tentative and wholly ungeneralizable. To that end, the main study, which is larger in scale, may offer some comment on the findings presented here, either in support or in opposition. Moreover, another obvious limitation of the study is the disregard for quantifiable proficiency gains. No pre- or post-tests were administered to measure the participants' L2 learning while using *Tell Me More*. Because the aims of the study were to explore the self-instructed CALL context and better understand the experience of L2 learning without classroom or institutional support, it was felt that pre- and post-tests delivered extraneously to the program would be artificial and compromise the findings. However, future research addressing proficiency gains would no doubt add an important layer to this line of inquiry, extending beyond learner experience and into CALL effectiveness. Future research could also be directed towards a greater understanding of learner experience, through studies that continue to privilege the learner voice (Conole 2008) by allowing learners to speak for themselves in identifying the factors most salient to shaping their experiences in the self-instructed CALL context.

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