A. TEACHING

Language Learners as Informed Consumers of Language Instruction

Andrew D. Cohen and Cynthia White

Opportunities for language learning are expanding and diversifying around the globe, as new virtual learning environments emerge, as opportunities for study abroad increase, and as published texts for language learning proliferate alongside a range of in-class and out-of-class language learning opportunities. Faced with an array of potential learning opportunities and ways of learning, how can learners make wise choices about what will work best for them, and how can they then make best use of those elected ways of learning? In other words, how might we characterize truly informed consumers when it comes to learning a second language (L2)?

One approach to addressing these questions is discussed in this chapter, based on our analysis of a pilot undergraduate course entitled “Alternatives in Becoming Comfortably Multilingual.” The themes we explore are grounded in a view of language learners as individuals who need to be able to exercise choice in order to find and make use of an optimal combination of language learning opportunities which suit their needs. In the latter part of the chapter we focus on an important parallel which now exists in many online, distributed and distance learning environments, where students are able to select, manage, co-ordinate and work within a range of learning opportunities. A crucial component of this approach is support for the individual learner. Making choices places demands on language learners, and requires particular knowledge and skills which cannot be assumed. It is our position that students can be assisted in meeting those demands by being encouraged to learn about and make links between issues and concepts in language learning – in short, to conduct an exploration of different language learning opportunities and approaches as they occur in real time. We end the chapter with this perspective.
The Informed Consumer

Concerns about quality and professional standards are currently a high priority within many areas of education (see for example, Cleary, 2001; Greatrix, 2001; Pascarella, 2001), and most institutions have procedures for reviewing their courses, some of which require learners to make judgments about the quality of the learning opportunities provided. Learners also make judgments about themselves and their learning in courses specifically geared to learner training and learner involvement within language learning. Relatively little attention, however, has been paid to the needs of language learners as they attempt to make informed judgments about the goals, purposes, and emphases of different language learning experiences and approaches in their environment. One study which verges on this question was carried out by Smith and Salam (2000), who pointed to the problems that face a potential learner when trying to investigate an online language school. They argue that it is difficult for learners to find out and then discriminate between what is being offered. They go on to argue that learners need a set of criteria that will enable them to evaluate cyberschools, and they offer a preliminary framework of what these might be. However, the framework itself requires students to be able to interpret the criteria and apply them to particular contexts, and many students will have had little if any experience in this kind of process; the challenges associated with assessing virtual learning environments are particularly complex in the absence of prior experience in more familiar contexts. In this chapter we focus on an approach to assisting learners in developing their knowledge base about language learning, their abilities to critically reflect on what different kinds of experiences afford them in terms of developing particular language skills, and to add value to those experiences - in other words, to make informed choices.

To return to our earlier question: How might we characterize truly informed consumers when it comes to learning an L2? What would these truly informed consumers be like? Our as-yet hypothetical wise consumers have shopped around and have located the approach to language learning that best serves their needs. Not only have they determined the method of instruction that they want to be exposed to for numerous hours of instruction. They have also selected the particular instructor(s), tutors, tandem partners, roommates, and other speakers of the L2 whom they will interact with regularly according to what works for them, given their learning style preferences, language learning strategy repertoire, and motivation for learning (Cohen, 2003; Cohen & Dörnyei, 2002).

If they are engaged in classroom learning, for example, the savvy language consumers may well have chosen a teacher whose teaching style complements their learning style preferences (Oxford, 1999). Exercising informed choice extends beyond the selection of instructional contexts and participants (such as teachers, teaching partners, native speakers) to include the kinds of experiences and activities which are conducted in the L2. Informed consumers understand and know how to make best use of the different components of language instruction: they are able to identify and describe each kind of activity that the instructor has them do, both in the classroom and outside of class. Furthermore, they have a sense of the purpose of each task and how it can contribute to their developing competence. Since they know what their options are and what is best for them in learning the given L2, when the instructor takes a particular approach to a task, they have ways of supplementing the instructor’s approach if they know that it will not yield satisfactory results for them. They know how to “add value” to the kinds of tasks and experiences they are exposed to, and how to enhance the gains they may make as they spend time learning and using the language.

A simple example could be the commonly assigned task of learning a list of vocabulary. Wise consumers would be able to identify which words from the list they deem to be important to retain, and they would be able to detect the extent to which classroom and out-of-class exposure would be adequate to ensure their retention of the words; they would also know which strategies to use in order to enhance the learning of the selected words.

On another level, wise consumers have a sense of how they may best combine different learning opportunities, and the gains that may be made from exploring other learning opportunities. In other words, the knowledge base of an informed language learner would include ways for complementing formal classroom instruction with other forms of language learning - whether they be through a tandem-partner arrangement with one or more native speakers of the target language, a study-abroad experience, a language immersion camp, a short crash course, or a distance learning opportunity.

Most likely, average language learners are not like these informed consumers. Rather, they find themselves in language classes or independent language learning situations that may or may not be suited to their needs (White, in press). If you ask them, they will indicate that, unlike in cases of informed consuming, they did not carefully select from a series of options...
the specific course they are taking at their local institution or the independent learning package purchased off the shelf at their local bookstore. They may also admit that they were not aware of the alternative options, and are simply following the method of language instruction adopted by their high school or college. If they are studying in a high school, they may have only the instructor teaching at their proficiency level. At the college level, perhaps they got the teaching assistant who was teaching a section at the time they were free to take college Spanish. Even if they have a choice in the selection of a teacher, they probably have little or no role in determining the instructional methods that will be used in the given course. By the same token, they would probably not know much about the methods of instruction being used in the course from one moment to the next, and consequently not really know what the other options might be. And unless their teachers have practiced styles- and strategies-based instruction (Cohen, 1998; Cohen & Weaver, 1998), they may have had little if any experience in identifying their needs and preferences as learners, nor in reflecting on how particular opportunities for learning and using the L2 may contribute to meeting those needs.

In this paper we will first describe a freshman seminar that co-author Cohen taught in the Fall of 2003, which had as its goal to make the participants better informed about their options for language learning. Next, we will look at selected students’ course projects, the comments that the students had about the contribution the seminar made to them as consumers of language instruction. We will interpret these contributions as six key themes. We will then demonstrate how the insights and principles emerging from the seminar experience are related to the demands and opportunities for language learners offered by many emerging online, distributed and distance contexts language learning. To conclude we look ahead to the significance of informed choice for the language learners of the future who will in all likelihood look toward an increasing range of language learning environments and experiences in an increasingly globalized world.

**A Seminar on Becoming Comfortably Multilingual**

In the Fall of 2003, co-author Cohen offered a freshman seminar at the University of Minnesota on the topic “Alternatives in Becoming Comfortably Multilingual.” The main goal of the seminar was to have wide-eyed and eager freshmen consider the various program alternatives that were actually available to them as entering college students – including formal university offerings, non-university courses such as accelerated or crash courses, structured and independent web-based courses, summer immersion camp experiences, study abroad, tandem partner programs, and other forms of independent language learning (home study through books, tutoring of non-natives, going to bilingual church services, and so forth). The fourteen students who took part in the seminar carried out work in four main areas, all of which are interrelated.

1. **Developing a basic framework of the field**

   This exploration started by having the fourteen students in the seminar read a textbook chapter or journal article on a series of topics, carefully chosen to provide both a broad overview of what L2 teaching and learning are, and a brief description of a number of approaches to becoming proficient in an L2 (see Table 1). The readings were all intended to be of a relatively introductory nature, not presupposing any special expertise in the given area. Cohen gave the students a set of reading questions prior to the class at which the reading was discussed, which were accompanied by a PowerPoint presentation for most of the themes. Usually each reading was discussed by the students in small groups, and these groups then jointly prepared responses to the reading questions, which were presented to the whole class. In this way, the discussion of the readings was more participatory than if the reading points had solely been delivered by the instructor.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 1: TOPICS COVERED IN THE UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA FRESHMAN SEMINAR</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. The Principles of Second Language Acquisition</td>
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<td>2. Concepts of Second Language Proficiency</td>
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<td>3. Issues in the Design of College-Level Foreign Language Curriculum</td>
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<td>4. Communicative-Based, Proficiency-Based &amp; Interactive Teaching</td>
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<td>5. The Role of Content-Based Foreign Language Instruction</td>
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<td>6. Foreign Language Immersion</td>
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<td>7. Accelerated &amp; Intensive Language Courses</td>
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<td>8. Study Abroad as a Means for Language Learning</td>
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<td>9. Attaining Multiliteracy</td>
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<td>10. The Role of Interlanguage Pragmatics (Speech Acts) in the Curriculum</td>
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<td>11. Approaches to Teaching Grammar in the Curriculum</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
12. Independent Language Learning
13. The Interplay of Learning Styles, Learning Strategies and Motivation
14. Language Learning at Different Phases in Life
15. The Critical Period in Language Learning
16. Age as a Factor in Language Learning
17. Describing and Catering to the Adult Second Language Learner
18. Learner Background & Sociocultural Factors in Language Learning
19. The Role of Technology in Foreign Language Learning
20. Tandem Partner Programs

ii. Developing basic concepts and metalanguage
As an incentive to get the students reading the articles and engaging with the basic terminology relating to the learning of an L2, there was a midterm quiz on concepts covered both in the readings and in the PowerPoints. The intention was to get the students more comfortable in using some of the basic terms, such as proficiency-based instruction and communicative drill, which comprise an important part of the metalanguage for language learning and teaching. A working knowledge of those terms was required for the next part, investigating methodology in context.

iii. Investigating methodology in context: Student projects
The seminar called for the conducting of a small-scale study in which the students were to gather information on three different approaches or language teaching/learning methodologies. Each study involved both observation of the methodology (in many cases) and interviews with participants (students and teachers) whenever possible. The purpose of this inquiry was to assist the students in reaching their own personal conclusions as to which language learning methods were most appropriate for them. In addition, this personal exploration was intended to enhance the students’ own current and future efforts at success in becoming a functional multilingual. As part of their interpretation of the findings, the students were asked to indicate the extent to which each language teaching/learning methodology “worked” for them. If it was one that they currently used, then they were to indicate its strengths and weaknesses. If it was one with which they had no experience, they were to indicate the appeal that it had for them.

iv. Critical reflection via online journals
A WebCT site served to facilitate the various components of the seminar for the duration of the course. All students had their own private journal space where they could exchange messages with the instructor, and where they would have opportunities to critically reflect on the readings and their experiences, observations and investigations relating to language learning. This journaling space was divided into three sections. In the first section, they posted to the instructor any insights they might have had from doing the readings and completing the reading question sheets. In order to do these postings (three times during the course), they needed to be conversant in issues regarding the readings. In the second section, they posted their insights about language instruction and about themselves as learners, as based on class presentations and discussions, and from observations and interviews with learners and teachers. In the third section, they posted questions about the preparation of the seminar paper which was to report on their research study. The journaling served as a means for staying in regular contact with the freshmen, and as an incentive for them to do the readings, as well as providing a vehicle for thinking about the insights they were getting about their personal language exploration.

During the semester the students made links between things they were learning about through the seminar and the language learning contexts they accessed, investigated or experienced. The seminar and the journals provided opportunities for students to reflect on and develop their understandings about themselves and language learning; throughout the course they made connections between the published literature, the ideas discussed in class, and the realities of language learning which they encountered. Students articulated these links as their ideas evolved across different language learning contexts and approaches. The extracts from student coursework presented in the next section reflect the process of referencing issues and concepts against their emerging beliefs and lived experiences – as language learners, teachers and researchers.

Student Seminar Projects
Seminar participants varied in the set of approaches to language learning that they chose to include for their project (see Table 2). The three approaches that most came under examination by the students were their own current college language class, another college class, and high school language classes. The next most popular approach was study abroad. There was, however, considerable variation in how students went about describing study abroad experiences, high school classes, and college classes other
than ones in which they were currently studying. For example, some looked at another level of college instruction from the one they were currently in, while some looked at another section at the same level. Some looked at classes in other languages. One student compared American sign language classes both at the University of Minnesota and at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee with an ASL class at an elementary school in Milwaukee. In exploring the differences between high school and college classes, one student found a college instructor who was also teaching at the high school level and compared the same teacher in these two different roles. And with regard to study abroad, students who themselves had been on study abroad reflected on their experiences retrospectively, while others interviewed either current participants in study abroad (through e-mail) or those who had recently returned from study abroad.

Other approaches to language learning included observing classes in a private language teaching center near the university, observing a middle school foreign language class, interviewing those who had participated in the Concordia Language Villages immersion summer camp program (see Hamilton & Cohen, 2004), and observing learners engaged in conversation with a tandem partner (where the time is split speaking in the language of one partner and then in the other language). Still other approaches included either observing or participating in independent language learning. And still other approaches included taking note of the language they learned by tutoring others: one student being engaged in tutoring two children (ages 7 and 3) in Spanish and observing the impact this had on her own Spanish development, and the other looking at the Spanish that she learned while tutoring Spanish-speaking immigrants in English as a second language at a local community center. The latter student, Chelsea (to be described in full below), also observed her learning of Spanish by participating in bilingual (Spanish/English) church services at a local congregation with a racially, socio-economically and culturally diverse population.

Let us look at six students (Aaron, Alissa, Chelsea, Katie, Lauren, and Suzy) in terms of their total set of programs and what they had to say about the experience in their term papers. The students’ own voices here best underscore the value of these personal explorations on the part of entering freshmen at the University of Minnesota. These students were selected from the seminar group because of the range of their program choices, the novelty of the choices, the breadth of their inquiry, and because of the insights they had about their exploration. Although they were only freshmen, they also tended to be highly articulate in describing the experiences that they had in the course. At the end of the report from each student we have identified a particular theme which emerges from their accounts of the process of bringing together knowledge of language learning and the exploration of their experiences.

TABLE 2: APPROACHES TO LANGUAGE LEARNING
SELECTED BY SEMINAR STUDENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Their Own College Language Class</th>
<th>Another College Language Class</th>
<th>High School Language Class</th>
<th>Middle School Language Class</th>
<th>Language Immersion Camp</th>
<th>Tandem Language Learning</th>
<th>Independent Language Learning</th>
<th>Study Abroad</th>
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<td>Aaron</td>
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<td>Allison</td>
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<td>Alissa</td>
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<td>Alissa</td>
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<td>Brandy</td>
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<td>Brian</td>
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<td>Chelsea</td>
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<td>Katie</td>
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<td>Lauren</td>
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<td>Melissa</td>
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<td>Suzy</td>
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(a) Bilingual church services, tutoring in a language.
(b) One at the University of Minnesota and one at the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee.
(c) The student observed all the beginning Spanish classes in 7 high schools in the Minneapolis metropolitan area.
Aaron: College, Immersion Camp, and Study Abroad

Aaron did the following:

- He observed the Portuguese for Spanish Speakers class in which he was currently enrolled.
- He studied the Concordia Language Villages summer immersion camp program because he found that the program provided an interesting methodology for language learning from what he had read in the course. He conducted interviews with three different people who had been to the villages (one in a 2-week Spanish program at age 10, a second who attended 2-4 week programs in French eight times from age 8–17, and a third who attended 2-week French programs three times in 7th, 8th and 9th grades).
- He interviewed three students who had gone on study abroad – one to Costa Rica, one to Venezuela and Chile, and one to Paraguay.

Aaron summed up his exploration as follows:

> Obviously, the three methods discussed have their own strengths and weaknesses. What one methodology is poor at, another might excel at. Thus an enthusiastic language learner should take advantage of a number of different methodologies in order to develop his or her proficiency across the spectrum of language skills. Also, an excellent language teaching methodology should in most cases make use of a well thought out eclectic mix of teaching methods.

Key theme 1: Exploration and awareness
Exploration is necessary for awareness: exploring a range of alternative contexts and approaches for language learning is important if learners are to develop an awareness of what each affords them – of the strengths and weaknesses of those approaches, and of how they may be optimally combined.

Alissa: College, High School, Study Abroad

Alissa did the following for her project:

- She observed an intermediate-level college course in Spanish and interviewed the instructor.
- She observed and interviewed this same teacher teaching in a high school classroom.
- She looked at study abroad by interviewing her roommate who had just returned from a year of high school abroad in Thailand.

The rationale she provided for comparing the teacher in these two roles was:

> I wanted to compare the goals and methods of her college classroom to that of a high school room where factors, such as the level of motivation of students enrolled, play a critical role.

She summed up her seminar experience as follows:

> Aside from the teacher’s viewpoint, once a student recognizes their best learning strategies, they can greatly enhance the quality of their education. After reading many of the articles in class, I paid closer attention to how I enjoy learning. Surprisingly, I found that I was more motivated and more active in class once I recognized those methods. Moreover, when I recognized my learning strengths, my motivation level increased, leading to higher grades and a boost in confidence. Once one discovers their strategies for maximizing learning, these same methods can be applied throughout their entire educational experience, whether it is in the classroom or abroad.

Key theme 2: Added value
The process of identifying optimal learning experiences can add value to learning experiences: it can stimulate interest in engagement with learning, and it has the potential of adding value across all learning contexts.

Chelsea: High School Abroad, College, Study Abroad, Other

Chelsea took on a whole host of approaches, including:

- a retrospective look at her own learning of Afrikaans during an 8-month period in South Africa just prior to starting college,
- inspection of her current experiences with beginning-level college Spanish with a technology component,
- observation of the same level course but without the technology component,
- interviews with two study abroad students, one just back from her
senior year of high school in South America, and the other currently on
a semester abroad in Spain,

• reflection on the value of bilingual (Spanish/English) church services
  (as described above),

• self-observation of her use of Spanish while tutoring ESL (as described
  above).

Chelsea wrote the following about her experiences in the seminar:

By taking "Alternatives in Becoming Comfortably Multilingual" I have
been exposed to many different types of language learning approaches
and alternative instruction methods. I feel that the development of my
awareness and knowledge in this subject has begun to shape my
language learning journey. The information and class discussions
have changed the way I think about languages and how we learn
them. I’ve learned about different programs, environments, techniques,
methodologies and theories in which languages are learned. By taking
this course my understanding of my personal beliefs and learning styles
has grown. I now feel equipped to make sound decisions based on the
knowledge I’ve gained and I plan to meet my language learning goals.
The process of observing different language learning environments
and tools for this paper has served as an essential part of my journey
to multilingualism. During this portion of my journey I have looked
into the past, at the present and I am now planning for the future.
Looking into many of the linguistic pieces of my education and
past experiences and conducting a retrospective evaluation has been
beneficial in making examples of the information presented in class.
Through research, discussion, and readings, this course has given
me the tools and resourcing skills needed to achieve my multilingual
aspirations. As I continue on this life-long journey, I look to the future
with excitement and anticipation.

Key theme 3: Lifelong learning
The knowledge and awareness which language learners develop both of
themselves and of learning experiences is central to lifelong learning.

Katie: College, High School

Katie did the following:

• She observed an intermediate French communication course because
  it followed a communicative approach, focusing on speaking but also
  emphasizing listening comprehension, reading and writing. Katie re-
  ports that the course was content-based, focusing on current events in
  French. The teacher practiced the direct method and the reading method
  through exclusive use of French, through grammar review by exposure
  and some focus on form, and through reading French newspapers.

• She observed fourth-semester French, where according to Katie, 40%
  of the class time was spent on pseudo-communication, 40% on reading
  and writing, and 20% on grammar.

• She observed her own beginning Russian class, an example of form-
  focused teaching, with attention to penmanship, correct grammar and
  spelling rules.

• She looked at her own Hebrew class, which did not follow a specific
  method, but which, according to Katie, had a teacher who ascribed to
  a humanist curriculum, focusing on the learner, and who provided
  numerous meaningful activities.

• Finally, she looked at a beginning high school French class, taught
  using the Total Physical Response Storytelling (TPRS) method, and she
  interviewed the teacher.

Katie’s conclusions about these specific approaches were as follows:

The college French communication course, the college Hebrew class,
and the high school French class are excellent examples of success in
balancing meaning and form, where as college Russian class needs
more meaning and fourth-semester French needs more of both form
and meaning.

In summing up her experiences in the seminar, Katie wrote the following:

Imagine someone wanting to grow a tree. They go out and find a
random seed lying on the ground. They plant it, nurture it, and work
hard to ensure its growth. Soon the seed grows into an ugly blade
of crab grass. This happens to people of all ages who rather than
a tree, desire foreign language proficiency. Instead of learning about
how languages are best learned, they just pick a method up off the
ground and assume that it will work for them. Years later most will
have nothing to show for their hard work and expenditures. So now I
will not just pick up a random seed off the ground. I’ll make sure that
it is a seed for me. This research has been very beneficial in preparing
me for future language classes. I know that I do not want to take the fourth-semester French [class that I observed]. If I could go back and do it all over, I would still take Russian, and I would study more for Hebrew. I would also like to try a TPRS class sometime.

Key theme 4: Exercising choice
Exercising choice is a critical component in language learning, and learners need to know how to make choices which will enhance the effectiveness of their investment in learning a language.

Lauren: College, Independent Learning

Lauren had a program which was heavy on independent language learning:

- She looked at a Portuguese for Spanish speakers class.
- She observed her ability to learn Portuguese through the activity book and CD set in Random House's Living Language: Portuguese.
- She tried "the movie method" by staging a marathon viewing of three Brazilian movies.

Her conclusions were as follows:

...all the methods that I tried were in some way effective, yet for me the one in which I will get the most amount of Portuguese comprehension and usability in a short amount of time would be the Portuguese for Spanish Speakers course. The other two ways, the movie method and the boxed sets, could work fine as enhancers to my classroom work, yet on their own are not half as effective because they do not provide the motivation necessary for me to pay attention and try to learn.

Key theme 5: Make connections between experiences
Independent learning experiences need to be evaluated in terms of how well they meet an individual's learning needs and also how they relate to or enhance ongoing or scheduled classroom work.

Suzy: College, Tandem Program, Private Language Center

Suzy had the following to say about how she structured her term project and what she found:

Until you remove yourself from language learning, evaluating the proper methods for learning cannot occur. This is a concept to which I was blind prior to researching methods in language acquisition. My goal in researching these was primarily to evaluate the current method of learning with which I am involved and then to explore other options to enrich and possibly accelerate my second language acquisition. In other words, I wanted to find an ideal way to become more proficient in speaking Spanish. In order to do this exploration, I considered many factors, including "What programs characterized by close proximity and permissible access are available to me to research?" "Do I want to evaluate substitutes or complements to learning?" and finally "What characteristics define a mode for enriched and accelerated learning?" I then chose three very dissimilar programs from which to extract a spectrum of learning modes.

These were the three approaches to language learning that she selected:

- A different section of the same fourth-semester Spanish class in which she was enrolled.
- The Tandem Conversation Partner Program run by the University of Minnesota English Center – looking at an interaction between a native speaker of English and a native speaker of Spanish.
- An intensive beginning Spanish course at a private language center.

Suzy's conclusions were as follows:

While I did not encounter my "ideal" methodology to language learning through observations of the fourth-semester Spanish class at the University of Minnesota, the session of the Tandem Conversation Partner Program, or the accelerated Spanish I course at the [private] Language Center, my research fostered the development of a scrutinized system for evaluating options for language learning in the future. My observations of the unsatisfactory nature of the U of M Spanish class in which I am currently enrolled prompted me to explore even more options. Then, looking to complements to language learning like the Tandem Conversation Partner Program and substitutes to university classroom learning like the accelerated courses offered at the [private center], my horizons for learning methodologies was broadened. These findings will help me evaluate the merit in other language learning programs in the future. However, without first removing myself from the current blind track on which I was traveling, I would never have recognized which type of learning I was practicing.
and/or which type would help me most. The observations of these three programs assisted me in evaluating these “ideal” types, and with the knowledge gained from them, I will have the tools necessary to critically evaluate future language acquisition programs.

Key theme 6: Critical evaluation
Developing the ability to evaluate current learning contexts requires first-hand experience in critically reflecting on learning experiences, as well as a knowledge of alternatives and what they might afford.

So we see the varied nature of the students’ individual explorations and can get a sense from their own comments of the benefits that accrued to them from doing this kind of exploration. As Suzy remarks, they have tools that they can use for evaluating current and future language study.

Learners as informed consumers and course developers:
Parallels with online language learning

From the University of Minnesota study we have a view of language learners as informed consumers who exercise choice in how they invest their time, energy, and resources in language learning. We also have a view of language learners who actively construct and fashion a way of learning for themselves based on the alternatives available. This view of language learners as individuals who actively seek out and evaluate the possibilities for language learning in their context characterizes many of the key processes required of students who work within distance, online and distributed learning environments which are not always directly mediated by the teacher (White, 2003, 2006). While some distance learning experiences have traditionally been lock-step in nature, many current models require students to choose and navigate between different learning environments; in effect students make selections from a range of alternatives in line with their individual learning needs with ongoing support and guidance from the teacher. What arises out of this process is “the course.” In this sense it is possible to see those language learners as course developers who are engaged in a collaborative process of selecting and developing their use of appropriate target language sources with the teacher and often other learners.

Through the process of appraising different ways of, say, going about learning vocabulary (e.g., beginning with a video of the words in context, seeing them in context in a reading, using a list, and so forth), selecting particular tasks and combinations of tasks, students develop both knowledge of themselves as learners and of how particular learning experiences can assist in developing language skills. The following reports are from distance language learners of Spanish and Japanese at Massey University New Zealand who reflect on their experience of this aspect of the distance language program:

The key thing is to work out for yourself how you will move forward and make progress. Really you... have to find out what works for you, and what is available in the course which works for you. There’s plenty of choice, but picking out the best bits and bringing them together in ways which work is quite an art. And then of course it changes as you move forward and learn more about the course, about yourself and about the language. Most of this you can only sort out for yourself. (White, 2004a)

Now I have begun to work more with the video – I relate a lot of what I learn now to the video. It has made me focus more on speaking and I feel more confident than before. I use it in different ways and now the speaking is driving my learning. This has been quite a breakthrough for me. (White, 2004b)

While students in both contexts (the University of Minnesota seminar and the Massey University Distance Language Programme) report on the process of developing awareness of themselves and of learning experiences, there was a crucial difference in their affective reactions to this process. The Minnesota freshman seminar students recognized the value of the process of exploration and trial and error as part of becoming an informed consumer – this was also the purpose of the course. The distance language learners – who were submerged in the process of exercising choice – tended to undervalue the knowledge they gained about how they could best learn a language, and were rather frustrated at the time they needed to invest in identifying the learning experiences which were optimal for them. An example of this come from the following distance learner of Spanish, who was part of the study reported in White (1999):

... I wish I had known this much about learning a language at the start – it would have saved me so much time. I had to spend ages figuring
out how I go about things. The tutor was really helpful but I still had to make so many decisions on my own until I found out what really works for me – now I really learn well from video. I know now when I go to Spain I can probably figure things out better for myself...

The gains students made in their ability to manage themselves as language learners and to identify and orchestrate optimal learning experiences were very much undervalued. What this suggests is the importance of an explicit focus on developing the knowledge and skills of language learners as informed consumers in a context where the process itself is overtly validated and recognized by the assessment procedures.

A further insight we can draw from comparing the two contexts concerns an aspect of the “informed consumer” metaphor which is central to distance language learning, namely the kinds of follow-up services which are available following purchase, in this case, learner support. A common view of distance language learning is that most of the aspects relate to the quality of the course materials as a package. However, this is a serious misconception about what is required for high-quality learning experiences. Support for learners once the course is underway – whereby they can get an individual response to their issues and concerns and can gain feedback on their developing understanding – is integral to quality distance learning experiences. First e-mail and then integrated electronic learning environments such as WebCT, First Class and Virtual-U have vastly increased the potential for interaction and ongoing learner support in a range of learning contexts. The use of online journaling space in the University of Minnesota freshman seminar shows how there can be an ongoing collaborative process of support for learners as they engage with, reflect on, and make connections between different learning experiences in a course, in their immediate environment, and in their lived experience as language learners.

Before concluding, since this is a Festschrift in honor of Elite Olshtain, it is fitting to mention that she served as curriculum advisor on a federally-funded University of Minnesota project to develop a website for learning complex speech behavior of “speech acts” (requests, refusals, compliments, thanks, and apologies) – first in Japanese (2002–4) <http://files.umn.edu/IntroToSpeechActs/> (accessed 17/8/2007) and then in Spanish (2005–6): <http://www.carla.umn.edu/speechacts/sp_pragmatics/home.html> (accessed 17/8/2007). Learners of Japanese and Spanish have been provided with empirically-validated information on speech acts and suggested strategies for realizing these speech acts (Cohen, in press; Cohen & Ishihara, 2005; Cohen & Sykes, 2006).

Conclusion

To conclude, we return to the six students whose insights have formed much of the substance of this piece. As increasingly informed consumers, they identified the importance of the process of exploration in developing awareness in language learning, and the way in which identifying optimal learning experiences added value to their language learning. They emphasized that there was an important connection between increasing knowledge and awareness and the gains that were to be made for lifelong learning. In addition they underlined the importance of exercising choice, and argued that learners need practice in and different experiences of critical reflection and evaluation. The responses of these students are important because they reflect how new generations of language learners may best take part in a range of language learning opportunities – both real and virtual – which may be available in their immediate environment. As the range of opportunities for language learning continues to expand around the globe, learners will be faced with an increasing array of choices in terms of learning environments, learning partners, and learning experiences.

What is important in the way ahead is that learners are equipped to make informed judgments about how they can best invest their time, energy and resources in learning, what constitutes a quality learning experience, and how they may further enhance that experience. At the end of the Minnesota seminar the overall rating for the course was 6.3 on a scale from 1–7, which is considered very high, and students indicated that the instructor set high expectations for performance and that the course stimulated them to think critically. In their open-ended comments at the end of the course evaluation form, one student singled out the value of student “self-research” and noted that “students learn more than they would ever expect to, which they do not notice until the end of the semester.” Another student wrote: “I hope to one day publish a study in language learning and have [Prof. Cohen] smile about it.”
References


