



SCHOOL OF HUMANITIES, EDUCATION
AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

**You have to change your whole system every
second of your life**

Contextual factors in adult foreign language learning

Megan Case

*Reports in Education** 25



Megan Case

**You have to change your whole system
every second of your life**

**Contextual factors in adult foreign language
learning**

*The Swedish name of the report series is *Rapporter i pedagogik*

© Megan Case, 2021

Utgivare: Örebro University
www.oru.se/HumUS/pedagogik/rapporter

ISSN 1650-0652

Summary

The purpose of this report is to contribute to an understanding of the technological, institutional, and social conditions that affect language learning and the different ways that adults can undertake the activity of language learning over two to four years within these conditions.

Data for this report was collected between 2012 and 2016 from twelve learners enrolled in beginner-level courses in foreign languages taught by distance at a regional Swedish university. From asynchronous and synchronous computer-mediated interviews over this period, a narrative of each subject's learning process was constructed to illustrate language learning contexts and trajectories. These contexts and trajectories are conceptualized through the personal learning environment (PLE) placed in an activity-theory (AT) framework. The PLE encompasses contextual factors that can affect the learning process, rather than focusing solely on ICT tools, to contribute to an understanding of how new tools can interact with old tools and with the other affordances and constraints in a learner's surroundings. This report reveals some of the contradictory pressures that teachers, curricula, institutions, social welfare systems and ICT can exert on a PLE.

Previous longitudinal and narrative research on language learning is described and placed in the AT framework to identify the factors relevant to the PLE and organized according to the AT features of subjects, objects, tools, rules, community, and division of labor as well as evidence of change over time.

Both the previous research and the empirical material analyzed in this report illustrate the significant role played by communities in shaping language-learning goals. Teachers can be seen as part of the target language community and play an important role in defining the kinds of tasks that make language studies interesting and relevant to learners' goals. Learning institutions exert pressure on teachers through curricula and program requirements. Other institutional structures determine how education is funded, which can create situations in which learners intentionally choose courses or institutions whose curricula do not match their own learning goals.

While learners express a preference for campus studies, in many cases online distance courses are the only learning form that allows for a given learner to engage in institution-based learning. However, the further a learner gets from an institution, the more difficulties they may encounter, with some online tools becoming inconvenient, incompatible, or unreliable across borders and time zones.

Social media can bring learners in contact with TL communities from afar, but it can also keep some learners from engaging in local TL communities fully.

In short, adult foreign language learners' PLEs and trajectories within university distance education in Sweden in the 2010s can take many different configurations depending on an individual learner's own goals and personal objectives, location, and even health.

Keywords: Computer-assisted language learning (CALL), distance learning, adult language learning, personal learning environments (PLE), activity theory, narrative research in education

Table of Contents

1. INTRODUCTION.....	9
2. ACTIVITY THEORY AND PERSONAL LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS.....	12
3. PREVIOUS RESEARCH.....	16
3.1. Subjects.....	18
3.2 Objects.....	20
3.3 Tools.....	22
3.4 Rules.....	23
3.5 Community.....	25
3.6 Division of Labor.....	26
3.7 Change over Time.....	27
3.8 Summary of Previous Research.....	30
4. METHODOLOGY.....	31
4.1 Data Collection.....	33
4.1.1 Stage 1: Questionnaires.....	35
4.1.2 Stage 2: Longitudinal e-mail interviews.....	37
4.1.3 Stage 3: Synchronous online interviews.....	39
4.2 Data Analysis.....	40
4.3 Research ethics.....	42
5. ANALYSIS I: THE SUBJECTS' NARRATIVES.....	44
5.1 Stefan: "One doesn't have to travel abroad only for a beach vacation".....	45
5.2 Albin: "With a bit of help from Google Translate".....	49
5.3 Christina: "I need some time for myself".....	51
5.4 James: "I don't know if there's a better way, but that's the computer guy in me".....	53
5.5 Marianne: "Age should not set limits".....	56
5.6 Helena: "It's like they're asking me not to be myself anymore at all".....	60
5.7 Roland: "I try not to see the problems but rather try to float by as well as I can".....	63
5.8 Martin: "It is actually a completely fantastic thing".....	66
5.9 Elizabeth: "You have to change your whole system every second of your life".....	68
5.10 Paul: "Then of course there's also the matter of self-discipline".....	72
5.11 Mats: "It's about the memorization grind and working your behind".....	76

5.12 Tessa: “It just never let me go”	79
6. ANALYSIS II: PERSONAL LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS IN AN ACTIVITY THEORY FRAMEWORK	82
6.1 Subjects	83
6.2 Objects	83
6.3 Tools	84
6.4 Rules	85
6.5 Community	86
6.6 Division of Labor	88
6.7 Change over Time	89
7. DISCUSSION AND REFLECTION	92
7.1 Discussion of Results in Relation to Previous Research	92
7.2 Methodological Reflections	96
8. CONCLUSION	98
REFERENCES	101
APPENDICES.....	107
1. Questionnaire 2012.....	107
2. Questionnaire 2013.....	111
3. Questionnaire 2014.....	116
4. Informant Letter.....	121

Abbreviations used:

AH – study at home (when contrasted with study abroad)

AT – activity theory

ICT – information and communications technology

L2 – second language

NL – native language

PLE – personal learning environment

RSU – regional Swedish university (site of data collection)

SA – study abroad

TL – target language

1. Introduction

The purpose of this report¹ is to contribute to an understanding of the technological, institutional, and social conditions that affect language² learning and the different ways that adults can undertake the activity of language learning over two to four years within these conditions. The overarching research question for this report is: what configurations can adult foreign language learners' personal learning environments and trajectories take within university distance education in Sweden in the 2010s?

Data for this report was collected between 2012 and 2016 from twelve learners enrolled in beginner-level courses in foreign languages taught by distance at a regional Swedish university (hereafter referred to as RSU) starting from their first academic year of enrollment (2011–12, 2012–13, or 2013–14). From asynchronous and synchronous computer-mediated interviews over this period, I constructed a narrative of each subject's learning process, presented in section 5 as a form of analysis to illustrate

¹ To prevent confusion caused by the overuse of the word “study” and “student”, the current study is referred to as “this report” or “the current report”, previous research is referred to as “a research article”, the verbs associated with previous research used are “to research”, “to collect data”, “to examine” and “to investigate”. Case studies are called case studies. The act of language learning is referred to as “learning” even when it is part of a course of formal study, while self-study is still called self-study. Study abroad is referred to as “SA”, which is an established abbreviation in the field. All other uses of the word “study” are idiosyncratic. Language learners in general are called “learners”, participants in a study “subjects”, those enrolled in higher education “students”, and those enrolled in secondary education “pupils”.

² The term “language” has a number of definitions, many of them controversial, and what it means to “know” a language varies from individual to individual and according to the ways that they want or need to use that language. It emerged during the data collection for this report that the participants/subjects had very different goals (objects) when they enrolled in a beginner-level university course in modern languages taught by distance, and so in this report I do not attempt to define the term “target language” beyond it being the object of the participants'/subjects' personal learning environments. The term “native language” (NL) and the difference between it and a “second language” (L2) and a “foreign language” are also controversial, particularly since many of the participants/subjects in this report consider their NL Swedish but are nearly as comfortable using English. However, a discussion of this issue is beyond the scope of this report. I have let the participants themselves define their NL(s) and the goals they have for the languages they are learning (target languages/TLs).

language learning contexts and trajectories. The process by which this analysis was conducted is described in greater detail in section 4. In section 6, these contexts and trajectories are conceptualized through the personal learning environment (PLE) placed in an activity-theory framework described in section 2.

The need to examine language learners' PLEs revolves around several issues. The first is that developments in information and communications technology (ICT), particularly social media, have greatly changed the kinds of tools that are available to learners, which affects language learning processes, the role of formal education in language learning, and the role of languages in learners' lives. As Coffey and Street (2008) put it, "The language learning project is described as an ongoing enterprise that leads the individual to occupy and participate in a series of figured worlds"³ (Coffey & Street, 2008, p. 454), and it could be said that technology has expanded the kinds of figured worlds to which language learners have access. It may be desirable for educators and educational policy-makers to be aware of what happens to learners outside the classroom so that this can be considered when structuring educational programs.

It may also be helpful for learners to understand how different aspects of their environment may help or hinder them in achieving their own learning objects. This was well expressed by Harrison and Thomas (2009), who collected data from six master's-level students of linguistics in Japan (both Japanese and international students) and how they used the social-networking language-learning site LiveMocha to learn a language that was new to them. Harrison and Thomas note that research in computer-assisted language learning (CALL) often misses the ways that "the learning process impacts on [learners'] overall personal development" (p.114). They found that "a significant type of user" preferred self-study, both offline and with LiveMocha, to formal classroom learning, which, they claim, demonstrates "the ways in which learners will actively choose the tools they feel they need to achieve the goals they set for themselves, and create their own learning environment from the options available" (Harri-

³ Coffey and Street describe figured worlds as follows: "The concept of figured worlds extends the Bourdieuan field of reproduction to denote 'a socially and culturally constructed realm of interpretation in which particular characters and actors are recognised, significance is assigned to certain acts, and particular outcomes are valued over others' (Holland et al., 1998, p. 5)" (Coffey & Street 2008, p. 454). This concept is not part of the analysis in this report, but the narratives in section 5 could be analyzed through this lens.

son & Thomas, 2009, p. 119). Subjects compared the kind of interaction with other speakers of the language on LiveMocha as being comparable to the interaction one has in real life in target language (TL) environments: dormitory common rooms, work, university, cafés, and bars (Harrison & Thomas, 2009, pp. 119–120). Most significantly for the purposes of the current report, Harrison and Thomas state that

what we are witnessing at this moment in time is a radical shift in the way people are learning languages independently through the use of a growing range of Web-based tools that are presented in the context of a more participatory framework. Perhaps the most radical consequence of this is that learners are provided with tools enabling them to create their own Personal Learning Environments (PLEs) by assembling a range of free or open-source Web-based applications. [...] As well as examining the ways in which new technologies such as Web 2.0 can transform learning, it is as equally important to investigate how the technologies are also being transformed by the users. By this, we mean that as learners become more technically sophisticated, the tools themselves assume more of a background role in the learning process itself, and are appropriated by the learners in ways that could not have been expected (Harrison & Thomas, 2009, pp. 120-121).

In other words, language learners are appropriating the ICT tools that they have available to them to create environments that they believe help them to meet their own learning objects.

The term “personal learning environment” was coined in 2001 by researchers Olivier and Liber, who described it as a “consistent user interface” that meets “lifelong learners’ needs [...] for a learning profile of their own necessary for (co-)managing their learning career” and “to be able to carry on learning while temporarily disconnected from a remote learning server” (Olivier & Liber, 2001, p. 1). Since then, the definition of a PLE has evolved and has been used in different ways by designers, educators, and policymakers, such as the European Commission, which described PLEs as follows:

Created and developed by learners themselves, PLEs increase the learners’ control over their own learning processes and promote self-direction and self-learning, thus helping learners to establish their personal educational goals. The PLEs are a clear move away from [...] institution-based platforms that have quite a little (individual) learning support readily available and have a fixed structure. Making use of the social media tools and applications, PLEs merge the boundaries of informal and formal learning. Web

2.0 tools, such as wikis, blogs and social bookmarking, are often used by students in their spare time, but the potential of the tools is seldom put into use for language learning purposes. The social media applications hold a great potential for language learning, as they respect its interactive nature, open the classroom to the global Internet community, enable creating and sharing content, and support meaningful communication and knowledge building (European Commission, 2007, p. 62)

In other words, the European Commission's definition of the PLE moved away from Olivier and Liber's conception of it as a set platform, instead viewing it as the sum total of ICT tools to which a learner has access.

In this report, the concept of the PLE is widened to encompass contextual factors that can affect the learning process, rather than focusing solely on ICT tools, to contribute to an understanding of how new tools can interact with old tools and with the other affordances and constraints in a learner's surroundings. This report reveals some of the contradictory pressures that teachers, curricula, institutions, social welfare systems and ICT can exert on a PLE. Activity theory was chosen as a framework to help illuminate the connections between these different factors.

2. Activity Theory and Personal Learning Environments

An activity theory (AT) based framework of the PLE is used in this report for its ability to describe activities in terms of the interplay between different factors present in a learning context—the *subjects, objects, tools, rules, community, and division of labor*—and how they *change over time*. In this section, I describe AT and how it is used to contribute to an understanding of the technological, institutional, and social conditions that affect language learning and the different ways that adults can undertake the activity of language learning over two to four years within these conditions.

In *The Concept of Activity in Soviet Psychology*, Wertsch (1981) provides an overview of the six major features of AT (pp. 27–27). These features and what they mean in this report are described in greater detail later in this section, but briefly, the features are: 1) activities can be analyzed on three levels; 2) activity is goal-directed (described henceforth as the *object* of an *activity system*); 3) activity is afforded and mediated by *tools*; 4) activity should be explained through a developmental, or longitudinal, perspective; and activities take place through 5) social interaction and 6) internalization. It is by social interaction that “[h]uman activity and the

means that mediate it have arisen” (Wertsch 1981, p. 29), and this takes two forms: the interpsychological, where the individual externalizes the action with the direct assistance of others (i.e. the zone of proximal development, see Vygotsky, 1930, 1978), and the intrapsychological, or internalization, “the ontogenesis of the ability to carry out socially-formulated, goal-directed actions with the help of mediating devices” (Wertsch 1981, p. 32), or the use of *tools*.

The three levels of activity described by Wertsch (1981) are *activities*, *actions*, and *operations*. These can be seen respectively as 1) one’s overarching reason for doing the activity, that is what one wants to be able to do; 2) the processes by which one approaches the activity; and 3) the tasks one engages in as part of these processes. Described in another way, *operations* are driven “by the conditions and tools of action at hand”, *actions* are driven “by a goal”, and *activities* are “driven by an object-related motive” (Engeström & Miettinen, 1999, p. 4). In this I see a parallel with what Holec (1979) identified as the three levels of language learning goals; the lowest being learning tasks, the middle completing a formal course, and the top how the language is actually put into use (pp. 10–11). Because this report seeks a description of the PLE in a broad and longitudinal perspective, the primary focus does not lie at the level of direct observation of *operations*, or language learning tasks, as the word “activity” might imply in a general sense. Instead, the *activity* in question is the process by which adults pursue the *object* of their language learning, their enrollment in a beginner-level language course RSU is an *action* that is common for all *subjects*, and the narratives that form the empirical portion of this report were constructed from questionnaires and interviews about, rather than observations of, *operations*. This issue is further examined in section 4, in which I describe the approaches to data collection.

Today AT is most closely associated with the work of Engeström et al. (see particularly Engeström, 1987, 2006; Engeström & Miettinen, 1999; Engeström & Sannino, 2010). Engeström developed the *activity system* triangle made up of three smaller triangles (Figure 1). At the corner of each of the triangles is one of six features of the *activity system*: the *subjects* who carry out the activity; the *objects*, or goals of the activity; the *tools* used in the activity; the *rules* that affect the way the activity is carried out; the *community*, or relationships that influence the activity; and the *division of labor*, or roles played by various agents in the activity.

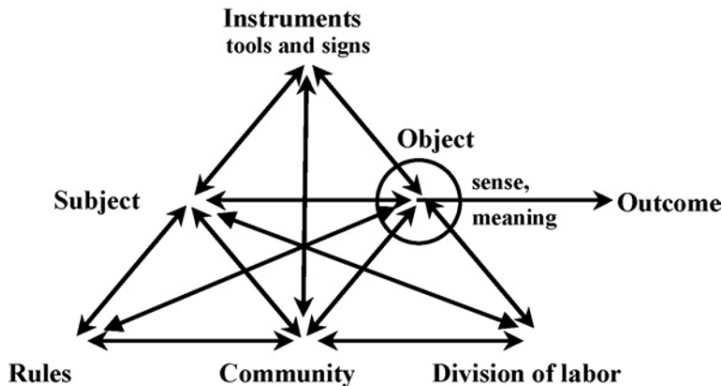


Figure 1 General model of an activity system (Engeström, 1987, p. 78)

In 2011, Buchem et al. proposed a conceptualization of the PLE that is based on the above activity triangle, shown in Figure 2:

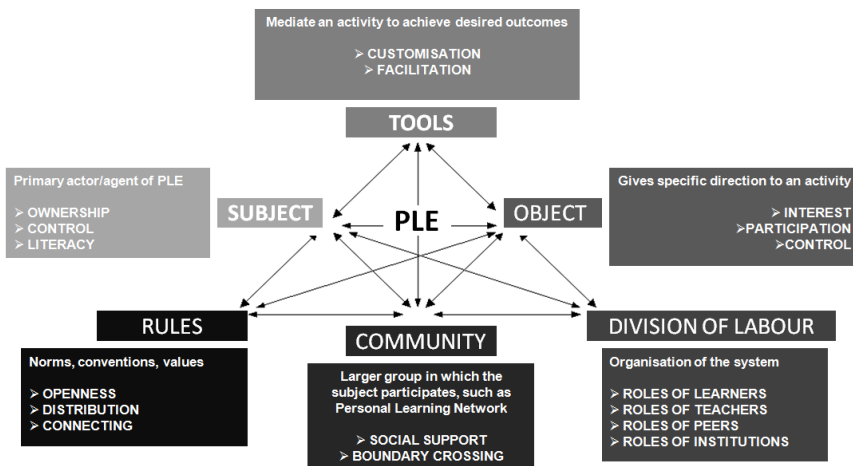


Figure 2 The personal learning environment as an activity system (Buchem et al., 2011).

This view takes into account ICT- and non-ICT-based *tools*, relationships to other people, and a number of other factors (Buchem et al., 2011, p. 8). As mentioned in section 1, the term “personal learning environment” was coined at the beginning of the 21st century to describe ICT-based learning

platforms (Olivier & Liber, 2001), but in this view, the PLE can be seen as a theoretical model for describing any kind of learning situation, including those in the pre-ICT era. The *tools* do not have to be ICT-based; rather, they can be mental, such as language or other abstract concepts (see Vygotsky, 1930, 1978), or physical, such as pen and paper, or even mud and a cave wall. Seen in this light, technological development does not change the structure of the PLE; instead, it changes the variety of *tools* available, which, in turn, can affect the way the other features of the *activity system* relate to each other. For example, before rapid electronic communication, a learner's *community* may have been more limited to people in direct physical proximity; now it can include people on the other side of the planet, an issue to which I return throughout this report. This makes this AT conceptualization of the PLE particularly appropriate for examining language learning, even if Buchem, et al. did not specify a particular subject area for the PLE as *activity system*.

According to Wertsch (1981), in AT “the most important way of explaining (as opposed to simply describing) human mental processes is to examine their origins and development” (pp. 26–27). Wertsch notes⁴ that this is often interpreted to mean a comparative approach. However, he further explains that such an examination does not necessarily need to be explicitly comparative. This is the “changes over time” aspect of the research question in this report, taking a longitudinal approach to examining the developmental feature of the *activity system*, which I interpret to mean changes *over time* in any of the features of the AT triangle: *objects, tools, rules, community, and division of labor*.

The PLE as *activity system* developed by Buchem, et al. is used as an analytical tool throughout this report. The features of AT informed the data collection process, which is described in greater detail in section 4. In

⁴ “A sociocultural approach to mind begins with the assumption that action is mediated and that it cannot be separated from the milieu in which it is carried out. Most of the extant studies that fall under this heading involve some kind of explicit comparison between historical epochs, institutional settings, or cultural contexts. Indeed, comparative methods have provided the major tools in sociocultural research: [...] But a sociocultural approach to mediated action need not involve explicit comparison; the main criterion is that the analysis be linked in some way with specific cultural, historical, or institutional factors. And even in the case of sociocultural studies that involve no explicit comparison, the comparative method lurks just beneath the surface, since the notion of situatedness implies a contrast with other possibilities” (Wertsch, 1991, p. 18).

order to illustrate *subjects'* learning processes and the *change over time* in their language learning *activities, actions, and operations*, a narrative format was chosen to present the empirical data in section 5. This empirical data is also analyzed in terms of the AT categories of *subjects, objects, tools, rules, community, and division of labor* in section 6. The latter type of analysis is also applied in section 3, in which I describe previous longitudinal and/or narrative research on language learning, which in turn facilitates a synthesis of the previous research and the empirical findings of the current report in section 7. The terms *subjects, objects, tools, rules, community, division of labor, change over time, operations, actions, and activities* are italicized throughout this report when they are used in the AT sense of the term. This is both to differentiate between other possible uses of the terms (e.g. an academic subject versus a research *subject* or a community of language speakers versus the *community* that contributes to an individual learner's PLE) and to clearly illustrate in which portions of the report an AT analysis is actively employed.

3. Previous Research

In this section I describe and examine previous longitudinal and narrative research on language learning and place this research in the AT framework described in section 2. The purpose of this is to identify factors relevant to the technological, institutional, and social conditions that affect language learning and the different ways that adults can undertake the activity of language learning over two to four years within these conditions. This analysis of previous research facilitates a comparison with the results of the empirical portion of this report in section 7.

I conducted an initial search for relevant research in 2018 using a meta-database that included results from The Education Resources Information Center (ERIC) and ProQuest's Education Database, as well as 228 other research databases, to search for peer-reviewed articles with the keywords "foreign language learning", "university" and "longitudinal" or "narrative" between 2010 and 2018. This yielded few results focused just on university students in the 2010s, so the search was widened to include all adult learners and secondary school pupils and articles published between 2000 and 2018. Of the approximately 1000 articles the search generated, which the database sorted by relevance, I examined the titles of the first 200, choosing 50 to read in-depth for descriptions of contextual factors that contribute to language learning and change in those factors over time.

I eliminated articles that did not contain information on sociocultural aspects of language learning, such as those using neurological and cognitive approaches, as well as those that did not have at least one of the features of tools, rules, community, and division of labor, and change over time. The remaining twenty-eight articles chosen for inclusion in this report are outlined in Table 1.

Table 1 Previous research analyzed

Author	Year	Data type	#	Subjects	Object of inquiry: language learning +
Alred & Byram	2002	Semi-structured interviews	12	SA students 10 years after	Intercultural competence
Busse	2013	Questionnaires, interviews over one year	59	UK uni students of German	Motivation
Busse & Walter	2013	Questionnaires, interviews over one year	12	1st-year students of German at UK unis	Motivation
Campbell	2016	Interviews over 14 months	8	English-speaking SA students in Japan	Career trajectories
Coffey	2010	Autobiography, interviews	3	Brits who studied in France	Cultural capital
Coffey & Street	2008	Autobiography, interviews	2	Brits who studied in France & Germany	Identity positions
Conroy	2016	Diaries, pre- and post-tests	42	Hong Kong students SA in Australia	Use of phrasal verbs
Derwing & Munro	2013	Recordings of speech	22	Immigrants in Canada	Oral fluency
García-Amaya	2017	Daily linguistic questionnaire	43	US students on 6-week SA in Spain	Context and language use
Gearing & Roger	2018	Diary, interviews	1	English teacher in Korea	Motivation
Harrison & Thomas	2009	Observation and learner reports	6	MA students using LiveMocha	Effects of social networking systems
Håkansson & Norrby	2010	Pre/post-tests	35	Australian uni students AH and SA	Grammar, pragmatics, lexicon
Karaman & Tochon	2010	Interviews, observation	1	Student teacher SA	Intercultural development
Kiely	2009	Diaries, interviews, observation	7	MA TESOL students in UK	Academic literacy
Klapper & Rees	2003	Pre/post tests	57	UK uni students of German	Grammar
Korhonen	2014	Diaries	1	Finnish adult learner of English	Personal agency
Lafford	2004	Interviews pre- and post	46	SA and AH US uni learners of Spanish	Communication strategies
Llanes	2012	Pre/post tests	16	Catalan teens learning English AH/SA	Fluency, accuracy, complexity
Müller	2017	Questionnaire, interviews, e-journals	1	Canadian student SA in Germany	Pronunciation
Nair-Prakash & Stapa	2013	Interviews	6	Adult ESL distance learners in Malaysia	Online forum use
Pomerantz	2010	Questionnaires, observations, interviews	8	Uni students of Spanish in the US	Use of TL outside classroom
Ritzau	2018	Diaries	49	Swiss uni students learning Danish	Beliefs about learning styles
Róg	2017	Autobiography	1	Polish learner of Turkish in Turkey	Motivation, context, personality
Scholz	2017	Questionnaires, observations, interviews	14	Learners of German aged 15-37	Linguistic transfer from gaming
Serrano, Llanes & Tragant	2016	Pre/post-tests, questionnaires, observation	112	Catalonian teenagers, AH/SA in UK	Grammar, written & oral production
Stewart	2010	Diaries	8	US students SA in Mexico	Social factors & fluency
Thompson & Vasquez	2015	Interviews	3	Foreign language teachers	Motivational profiles
Yu, Brown & Stephens	2018	Interviews	20	PhD students learning English in China	Identity

As illustrated in the final column of Table 1, the researchers had different objects of inquiry, examining the relationships between aspects of the language learning process and metrics such as acquisition of lexical items

or mastery of grammar concepts. I conducted a meta-analysis of these articles by focusing on their empirical results to identify the factors relevant to the PLE as conceptualized by Buchem, et al. (2011), and organized them according to the AT features described in section 2: subjects, objects, tools, rules, community, and division of labor (Engeström 1987, Buchem et al., 2011). To analyze the developmental feature of AT (Wertsch 1981), evidence of change over time in the articles was also identified; that is, I looked for descriptions of how aspects of objects, tools, rules, community, and division of labor were different for the subjects at different points in time. The findings are described in the sub-sections to follow.

3.1. Subjects

In the AT view of the PLE described by Buchem et al. (2011), the subject of the activity system is the primary actor or agent. In the case of the previous research analyzed for this report, the subjects are the language learners who provided data about their learning processes. In this sub-section, I describe the biographical information provided in the articles that is salient to the other features of the activity system.

The subjects of much of the previous research were undergraduate university students or people speaking retrospectively about their undergraduate studies. These included those for whom foreign languages were a specialization or major, as well as those for whom language learning was a complement to other academic subjects. In some of the previous research, it was not explicitly stated whether the subjects were specializing in foreign languages.

Seven of the 28 articles analyzed centered on research conducted among university students of languages in the UK, such as the 42 students in the first year of their studies of German at “prestigious” universities in the UK (Busse & Walter, 2013) and the two groups of undergraduate students of German in the UK who had received “focus on form” instruction and “focus on formS” instruction⁵ respectively who also participated in study-abroad (SA) programs in German-speaking environments (Klapper &

⁵ The difference between these two types of instruction is the topic of many pedagogical discussions, but the crux is that focus on formS prioritizes the explicit introduction of grammatical concepts to learners and shapes the instruction around them, while in focus on form, the instruction is communication-focused, and learners are taught to seek grammatical patterns in the corrective feedback they receive.

Rees, 2003). Alred and Byram (2002) interviewed British university students of European languages during their year of SA and again 10 years later to learn how SA affected their lives in the long-term. Coffey and Street (2008) interviewed several British adults who had achieved a high level of proficiency in a foreign language, and in a related article, Coffey (2010) focuses on one of these cases in particular, a learner of French. Other research in which the subjects were clearly majoring in the TL includes Kiely's (2009) case studies of two Chinese speakers in the UK learning to be teachers of English, Karaman and Tochon's (2010) case study of an American doing a year-long teacher training in Ecuador, and Thompson and Vásquez's (2015) motivational profiles of three American foreign language teachers of Chinese, German, and Italian respectively.

A number of the research articles focused on undergraduates in SA programs, but it was not clear whether the subjects were foreign language majors. The larger-scale research articles included 13 students in an advanced Spanish-language course at an American university (Pomerantz 2010), 43 students of Spanish from the US during a six-week SA program in Spain (García-Amaya 2017), and eight American students on an SA program in Mexico (Stewart 2010). Campbell (2016) described the experiences of eight Australians who had completed their SA in Japan ranging from six months to sixteen years prior to the start of data collection, and Conroy (2018) examined Chinese speakers enrolled in university programs in early childhood education on a six-week SA trip to Australia. Another article focused on 20 PhD candidates from China in New Zealand in a variety of non-linguistic fields who were also learning English as a foreign language (Yu et al., 2018). There were also several single-case studies of undergraduates on SA programs: Róg's (2017) research focused on a Polish learner of English on an exchange program in Turkey, and Müller's (2017) analyzed the reflections of a Canadian student who spent a year in Germany.

Another type of research involving SA programs were those comparing SA and at home (AH) learners from the same educational institution, such as Håkansson and Norrby's (2010) research article on Australians learning Swedish, in which the SA learners spent a year in Sweden. Lafford (2004) investigated the differences in the use of communication strategies between a group of 20 undergraduate students of Spanish in the US and a group of 26 who participated in an SA program in Spain. Ritzau (2018) explored learners of Danish in Switzerland, all of whom had a multilingual background and/or previous experiences of foreign language learning

(on average knowing three languages before Danish), who learned Danish AH in Switzerland and participated in SA in Denmark.

In a non-university environment, Serrano, Llanes, and Tragant (2016) collected data on Catalonian teenagers enrolled in an intensive short course in English in which some of the subjects learned AH and others lived in the UK for the duration of the program. In a related research article, Llanes (2012) compared two groups of Catalonian 11-year-olds, one of which learned AH while the other spent two months in Ireland living with host families.

The subjects of the remainder of the previous research cannot be characterized as undergraduates and/or students on SA programs: Gearing and Roger's (2018) case study of a native English speaker learning Korean while teaching English in Korea; Nair-Prakash and Stapa's (2013) research on learners of English in Malaysia; Scholz's (2017) examination of learners of German who were playing the online role-playing game World of Warcraft in German; Korhonen's (2014) case study of a Finnish adult completing her secondary school language courses in English over the course of three and a half years; and Derwing and Munro's (2013) research in which they followed 11 speakers of Mandarin, seven speakers of Russian and four speakers of Ukrainian who were immigrants to Canada over seven years. Harrison and Thomas's (2009) action-research project, described in section 1, was conducted among six master's students from four different countries in Japan, as part of a course in applied linguistics. The subjects were not learning the TLs as part of their degree programs, but they agreed to register for a course on LiveMocha and report on their language learning processes.

To sum up, the subjects of these longitudinal and narrative research articles on language learning in recent decades span a large portion of the globe—Europe, North America, Asia and Oceania—and ranged in age from teenagers in secondary school to elderly immigrants, but the primary focus is on students who attended or were attending university directly after completing secondary school. In sub-section 3.2, the reasons why these subjects were learning foreign languages is examined.

3.2 Objects

In AT, the *object* of an *activity system* is sometimes defined as the *subject's* goal and at other times defined as the outcome of the activity. Buchem, et al. (2011) define the *object* of an *activity system* as “giving direction to an activity” (p. 3). In this sub-section, I outline the *objects* of

foreign language learning identifiable in the previous research. Not all *subjects* described in sub-section 3.1 are represented in this sub-section, as not all of the previous research mentioned factors that could be identified as an *object*.

In Busse and Walter's (2013) research, *subjects* described how over the course of the year the source of their motivation changed from one of enjoyment of the learning process to a desire to master the language. Busse (2013) noted this as well in her related article and also found that enjoyment of language learning was tied to particular *operations*.

Thompson and Vásquez's (2015) *subjects* noted how they had been motivated by adversity; in the Italian learner's case, by a feeling of isolation when participating in SA in Italy; in the Chinese teacher's case, by the stereotypes about the Chinese language and by the lack of role models; and in the German teacher's case, by academic challenges toward the end of university that could have ended his formal language learning but instead motivated him to work harder.

Yu, et al. (2018) researched the change over time in the self-identities and motivations of students from China in New Zealand. The researchers identified several contextual factors affecting the *subjects'* identities as language learners and their motivations for learning, which included a sense of personal responsibility, the pressure to meet the expectations of others (primarily family members), the necessity of passing an English proficiency test to qualify for a good job in China, and the possibility of further education in English-speaking environments. Nair-Prakash and Stapa (2013) also characterized their *subjects* as having a desire to earn good grades.

Alred and Byram (2002) noted that their *subjects'* "initial emphasis on language *per se* had given way to attention to the use of language in social exchange and intercultural mediation" (p. 339), and Kiely (2009) describes how one of the two *subjects* energetically sought out a variety of different learning opportunities, while the other focused on course objectives.

Müller's (2017) *subject* had participated in SA in Germany in high school, and as a university student studying abroad for a second time he was determined to focus more on his coursework and less on his social life than he had during his first SA experience. Gearing and Roger's (2018) *subject*, an English teacher learning Korean, also expressed her language learning in terms of personal development rather than a particular desire to use the language, saying that the mastery of an L2 was a life goal of

hers. Harrison and Thomas's (2009) *subjects* were also different from many of the others, in that the *subjects* were learning languages on a particular platform, LiveMocha, as an exercise in an applied linguistics course, and hadn't necessarily set out to use the TLs beyond the confines of the course.

In brief, what can be seen in the previous research are *objects* that appear to have more to do with academic or professional achievement and personal fulfillment than the desire to acquire the ability to use a language for a particular purpose. (In sub-section 3.7, I return to the issue of *objects* when I summarize the *changes over time* are described in previous research.)

3.3 Tools

In Buchem et al. (2011), the *tools* of an *activity system/PLE* are what "mediate an activity to achieve a desired outcome" (p. 3) and contribute to the facilitation and customization of the activity. Artifacts which could be defined as *tools* were not frequently mentioned explicitly in the previous research, perhaps because much of the research was conducted among pupils and students learning in schools and universities and it was assumed that readers are familiar with the *tools* of these contexts. However, Harrison & Thomas (2009) focused on how *subjects* used a particular *tool*, the LiveMocha platform, for language learning. They found that the *subjects* were uncomfortable with the openness of the platform and that they and many other users deliberately obscured information that would lead to their identities and location being discovered. Nevertheless, users of the platform were shown to be more interested in using LiveMocha's social networking features to connect with other speakers of the language rather than enroll in the more formal courses offered on the platform, described further in sub-section 3.5.

Nair-Prakash and Stapa (2013) describe "the contextual factors that mediated distance learners' participation in an online forum" (p. 100), but these factors are all connected with peer relationships and are examined in more detail in sub-sections 3.5 and 3.6. Scholz (2017) concludes that it is "advantageous [...] to encourage L2 [second language] learners who are seeking additional means to develop their L2 proficiency to seek out games and play them in a foreign language" (Scholz, 2017, p. 54). Róg's (2017) case study of the Polish student in Turkey noted that much of her language learning was mediated with ICT; she took an online course, used online grammar and translation applications, listened to music, and com-

municated with other Turkish speakers via Skype. Korhonen's (2014) research article on the Finnish adult completing her secondary school English courses quoted the *subject's* description of the ready availability of music, movies, magazines and books in English.

One type of ICT *tool* that appears to have both advantages and disadvantages for language learning is social media. Müller's (2017) *subject* left behind a girlfriend in Canada when he went to Germany and spent much of his time communicating with her via the internet rather than making personal contacts. Stewart (2010) notes research showing that the use of social media means that language learners in SA programs are less exclusively immersed in TL environments than they were before social media became commonplace, and that this may reduce the amount that they use the TL. Alred and Byram (2002) and Thompson and Vásquez (2015), whose *subjects* had completed their SA programs before the ubiquity of social media, noted that their *subjects* had described their disconnectedness from friends and family at home isolating, but also a factor that motivated them to integrate more into the TL community.

In short, the language learning *tools* described in the previous research include digital games, LiveMocha, Skype online courses, online grammar and translation applications, and TL language music, movies, magazines, and books. The case of social media offers an excellent illustration of how the availability of *tools* can affect the other AT features—*rules*, *community*, and *division of labor*—described in sub-sections 3.4–3.6.

3.4 Rules

The *rules* of a PLE as defined by Buchem et al. (2011) are the “norms, conventions, [and] values” that affect the *activity system*. As mentioned in sub-section 3.3, social media as a *tool* seems to have affected the norms of interaction of pupils and students in SA programs. Where learners were once immersed in the TL environment and had limited contact with friends and family back home (Alred and Byram 2002; Vasquez 2015), social media makes it possible for some learners studying abroad to meet their social needs online rather than taking the opportunity to make new social connections in the TL environment (Stewart 2010; Müller 2017).

Other norms, conventions, and values mentioned in the previous research were primarily connected with institutional structures and expectations. In Busse and Walter's (2013) article, many *subjects* expressed disappointment in the way that their university programs were structured compared with their secondary schools. They stated that there was a lack of

opportunity to speak the TL in their classes, that the assigned tasks (*operations*) were demotivating, and that there was little feedback from their instructors. They noted that the courses focused on language proficiency seemed to have a lower status in their university programs than literature courses and spent less time on learning *operations* for proficiency courses. Busse (2013) noted similar issues, but additionally also found that the *subjects* struggled with the difficulty of the university courses at first, finding them more challenging than expected. The large class size at university was also a demotivating factor.

Thompson and Vásquez's (2015) *subjects*, the three teachers of German, Italian, and Chinese, described how language requirements and the range of languages offered by educational institutions played important but different roles. In one case, the interviewee needed to fulfil a university foreign language requirement and chose Chinese because it seemed interesting and challenging. In another, the interviewee began learning German in school because it was the only option available. In the third case, the interviewee had learned Spanish as the default option in high school and college and enjoyed it, but when she had the opportunity to participate in SA in Spain, she changed her mind at the last minute and went to Italy to learn Italian, her family's heritage language. All three had had SA experiences, albeit of varying lengths. Isolation from other speakers of their NL (English) and the connections made with locals/native speakers were noted as important factors. Karaman and Tochon's (2010) *subject*, the American doing teacher training in Ecuador, cited the fact that she taught in a private school and was involved in extracurricular activities as a factor that increased her use of the TL.

The Turkish learner in Róg's (2017) article cited the inability of many Turkish people outside the university to speak English as a factor that led to her *object* of learning Turkish. In contrast, in Gearing and Roger's (2018) article, factors that influenced the *subject's* learning of Korean included the ubiquity of English and the fact that there was little use for Korean outside of Korea as demotivating factors, as well as the fact that the demands of her work left little time for her own language learning.

Harrison & Thomas (2009) found that the architecture of the LiveMocha platform for language learning, although ostensibly set up for structured coursework, lent itself more readily to the formation of relationships between peer users, rather than between the platform's teachers and learners, despite the fact that the site's lax security features also led to users providing false information in their profiles, discussed further in sub-

section 3.5. The *subjects* asserted that LiveMocha’s structured coursework offered forms of learning that were readily available elsewhere, while its social networking features had unique value—a positive side to social media, in contrast to the research that described how social media detracted from making connections to TL speakers described at the beginning of this section.

To sum up, the *rules* affecting language learning in the previous research had to do with the degree of access the learners had to speakers of their native language (NL) or another language they spoke well, compared to the TL. Institutional structures—such as the range of languages available and the type of courses taught—affected learners’ *objects*. Many of the *rules* described—in particular, the relationships learners develop during study abroad programs and the demands of formal courses and programs—can also be considered factors of the final two features of the *activity system: community* and *division of labor*.

3.5 Community

Buchem, et al. (2011) define the *community* feature of the PLE/*activity system* as a “larger group in which the subject participates.” As mentioned in sub-sections 3.3, 3.4 and 3.6, the *subjects* in Harrison & Thomas’s (2009) article emphasized the importance of peer relationships even as users of the LiveMocha platform found it necessary not to reveal too much personal information about themselves due to a perception of lax security. Nevertheless, “hanging out” (p. 119) with other speakers of the TLs in LiveMocha seemed to be the primary *operation* that the *subjects* and other users of the platform chose to engage in.

Of the other previous research in which *subjects* were learning languages in their home countries, Korhonen (2014) noted the importance of a positive classroom environment, good relationships with teachers and fellow learners, and the ready availability of interlocutors with whom to practice speaking, while Busse and Walter (2013) found that a campus German club helped to mitigate the *subjects’* disappointment with the way their university program was structured (see sub-section 3.4).

Karaman and Tochon (2010) were particularly interested in the significance of *community* in the SA experience, citing factors such the *subject’s* host family, with whom she did not have as close a relationship as some of her peers, a pre-service cultural training, the fact that she taught in a private school and was involved in extracurricular activities, others wanting to speak English with her and not expecting her to speak Spanish. Similar-

ly, the *subject* of Róg's (2017) article reported on the significance of her living situation, a shared apartment with some Turkish students, as well as getting to know other Turkish speakers and a desire to understand Turkish culture better. Conroy (2018), García-Amaya (2017), and Alred and Byram (2002) *subjects* also found their relationships to SA roommates and other TL speakers as important.

In Pomerantz's (2010) article of American learners of Spanish AH, relationships to other speakers of Spanish also emerged as the most significant contextual factor for the interviewees, though the relationships took a number of different forms: a roommate who was a native Spanish speaker and her family; co-workers at summer jobs; and, in one case, a domestic worker employed by a *subject's* parents. *Subjects* also noted that having friends who were also learning Spanish related to their use of the language, but not always in positive ways: one who used Spanish too enthusiastically outside the classroom was discouraged from being a "dork" (p. 10). Derwing and Munro (2013) found in their comparison of two immigrant groups learning English that the comprehensibility, fluency, and accent of the speakers of Slavic language improved much more noticeably than that of the Mandarin speakers. They postulated that the Slavic speakers more readily sought out opportunities to engage with the TL society (though the reasons for this were unexplored).

Features of *community* named in Stewart's (2010) article that affected the language learning environments of the *subjects* include roommates, church groups, and TL speakers' eagerness to correct mistakes. Negative factors included a roommate who had a different schedule (making noise when the *subject* wanted to sleep), experiences of sexual harassment, and contact with social networks at home.

In short, the kinds of relationships and experiences that learners had with speakers of the TL affected their learning *objects*, but it is important to note that this was not always in a way that increased the *subjects'* desire to learn or use the TL. Relationships were affected by ICT *tools* and the structure of learners' institutional learning programs, described in sub-sections 3.3 and 3.4 and also explored in sub-section 3.6.

3.6 Division of Labor

In Buchem, et al. (2011), the *division of labor* feature in the *activity system* as PLE is the role of learners, teachers, peers, and institutions in the system. In a language learning *activity system*, what is it the *subject* can do on their own, and what is it that they need others to scaffold for them?

The substantial role of peers, mentioned in all the previous research, is described in sub-section 3.5.

As previously described, Harrison & Thomas (2009) explained how the structure of the LiveMocha online language learning platform led the *subjects* to choose social networking and “hanging out” (p. 119) with other language learners on the platform rather than availing themselves of tutors and the structured coursework available. In contrast, Nair-Prakash and Stapa (2013) emphasize the role played by the monitoring and support of tutors, and conclude that their research “illustrates the importance of the tutor as a language instructor in the blended learning setting” (Nair-Prakash & Stapa, 2013, p. 105). Additionally, Nair-Prakash and Stapa specify the roles that peers and tutors can play for *subjects*: as sources of information, creating pressure to succeed, and generating face-to-face encouragement. They affirm that “In the act of collaborating with others, learners can provide and receive feedback not only from the tutor but also from peers, which enriches their knowledge base” (Nair-Prakash & Stapa, 2013, p. 105). The significance of teachers could also have a negative effect, as described by Busse and Walter (2013), whose *subjects*’ dissatisfaction with their university courses was in part due to the limited amount of feedback they received from their instructors.

Overall, the previous research affirms a sociocultural view of learning in which the role played by teachers and peers is significant in the ways that *subjects* define and redefine the *objects* of their language learning *activities*, a topic which is investigated in greater detail in sub-section 3.7.

3.7 Change over Time

As explained in section 2, a major feature of AT is that *activity* should be explained through a developmental, or longitudinal, perspective (Wertsch 1981, pp. 26–27), and part of the purpose of this report is to contribute to an understanding of the different ways that the process of language learning changes *over time*. In this section, I summarize the *changes over time* described in the previous research. Some of the changes described by researchers were not directly relevant to the research question of this report, such as the acquisition of particular lexical units in German as a result of computer gaming (Scholz, 2017) or how *subjects*’ beliefs about the efficacy of different types of language learning *actions and operations* changed over the course of three semesters (Ritzau 2018); here I focus on changes in the factors examined in in sub-sections 3.2–3.6.

As mentioned, much of the previous research examined the effects of SA on particular skills, often in comparison to similar groups of *subjects* who learned AH (Conroy, 2018; Klapper and Rees, 2003; Stewart, 2010; Håkansson and Norrby, 2010; Serrano, Llanes, and Tragant, 2016; Llanes, 2012; Lafford, 2004; and Kiely, 2009). While the skills examined were not relevant to the research question of this report, the overall conclusion that can be drawn from this body of research is that increases in language learners' skills in the TL were generally associated with greater amounts of interaction with TL speakers, pointing to the importance of the AT category of *community* in creating *change over time*.

Another type of *change over time* which was examined in the previous research was changes in identity connected with *subjects*' language learning. Some *subjects* described themselves as having become more "sophisticated" (Coffey and Street, 2008; Coffey 2010; and Korhonen, 2014) or establishing "cultural capital" (Alred & Byram, 2002) as a result of their language studies. Similarly, others described personal growth (Müller 2017; Karaman & Tochon, 2010) as being more significant than any changes in the ways they were able to use the TL. In Thompson and Vásquez's (2015) analysis, the *subject's* identity made the transition from language learner to language teacher. In general, then, the previous research indicates that language learning among the *subjects* of the previous research was often associated with changes in identity that the *subjects* considered positive.

The *changes over time* described in previous research which most clearly relate to the AT framework is *motivation*, which can be seen as a feature of the *object* of an *activity system*. The reasons why the *subjects* were learning tended to change from being extrinsic and instrumental to being intrinsic. Yu, et al. (2018) were particularly interested in how their *subjects*' motivation *changed over time*. Nine of the twenty *subjects* said that their motivation had remained positive throughout the period under investigation, but the remaining 11 said that their motivation had changed. Of those, three went from positive to negative motivation, while the rest (8 *subjects*) said their motivations had become more positive *over time*. Campbell (2016) described the effect of SA in Japan on the life trajectories of eight Japanese learners from Australia. All retained some kind of connection to Japan and all but one retained a commitment to learning Japanese. According to Campbell, "while the majority of *subjects* incorporated Japan and Japanese speakers into their lives post-SA, the degree to which

they did was often associated with their SA experiences and degree of dissatisfaction” (Campbell, 2016, p. 6).

Busse and Walter’s (2013) *subjects* expressed feelings of decreased motivation in particular in the middle of the academic year, and that over the course of the year the source of their motivation changed from one of enjoyment of the learning process to a desire to master the language. They developed greater intrinsic motivation, relying less on motivation from their teachers. Gearing and Roger’s (2018) *subject’s* commitment to learning Korean waxed and waned; at the end of the research project she had made progress in her Korean skills, but less than expected.

García-Amaya’s (2017) *subjects’* use of Spanish relative to English declined during their stay. García-Amaya suggests that this is because *subjects* became less enthusiastic about speaking with their host families *over time*, while they got to know their classmates from the US better and began speaking with them more. He suggests that if the goal is for learners to speak the TL more frequently, opportunities need to be created for learners to meet native speakers with similar interests, by, for example, carefully matching learners with host families.

Pomerantz’s (2010) *subjects* noted that success brings success—the more they spoke the language, the more they were encouraged to speak—as well as increased expectations from other Spanish speakers, which could at times be a source of stress. For one *subject*, her increased use of Spanish made her consider why she had not previously put more effort into her heritage language, Hindi, so she decided to begin learning it (Pomerantz 2010). Róg’s (2017) *subject* went from having no interest in learning Turkish before going to Turkey to a high level of motivation and satisfaction with what she had learned, in the end calling herself a Turkophile. As her knowledge of Turkish progressed, she was further motivated by Turkish speakers’ encouragement and the possibility that learning a language not often learned by Polish speakers would offer unique job opportunities.

In brief, many of the *subjects* of the previous research experienced changes in the *object* of their language studies in the form of increases and decreases in their motivation to engage in the daily *operations* associated with learning a language, and the things that determined these increases and decreases had to do with their relationships to other speakers of the languages—their *community*, in AT terms—and the institutional structures in which they were learning (*rules/division of labor*).

3.8 Summary of Previous Research

In this section I examined 28 articles published between 2002 and 2018 that examined foreign language learning using longitudinal and/or narrative methodologies and which were relevant to this report's purpose of contributing to an understanding of the technological, institutional, and social conditions that affect language learning and the different ways that adults can undertake the activity of language learning over time within these conditions. I analyzed the research articles for contextual factors contributing to the language learning process, which were sorted into the AT categories *subjects*, *objects*, *tools*, *rules*, *community*, *division of labor* and *change over time*.

The *subjects* came from Europe, North America, Asia, and Oceania and covered an age range from teenagers to the elderly but were primarily comprised of undergraduates in their late teens and early 20s. All the *subjects* were engaged in formal institutional learning of some kind, but in addition made use of *tools* such as digital games, LiveMocha, Skype online courses, online grammar and translation applications, and TL language music, movies, magazines, and books. Social media seems to contribute to greater engagement with TL *communities* when *subjects* are learning in a non-TL environment and decreased engagement when studying abroad. In general, the degree of access the learners had to speakers of their NL (or another language they spoke well compared to the TL) affected the degree to which they engaged with TL *communities*. Institutional structures affected learners' *objects* by defining the kinds of language courses they had available to them and the degree to which they made language learning *operations* interesting to *subjects*.

The kinds of relationships that *subjects* had with their teachers and peers also affected the ways that *subjects* defined and redefined the *objects* of their language learning *activities*. These relationships were directly connected to increases and decreases in their motivation to engage in the daily *operations* associated with learning a language. Overall, however, in the previous research examined, *subjects'* *objects* had more to do with academic or professional achievement and personal fulfillment than the desire to acquire the ability to use a language for another purpose. Summing up in terms of the technological, institutional, and social conditions for language learning, it is clear that the previous longitudinal and narrative research on foreign language learning has focused primarily on the social conditions which affect learning (relationships between peers, with teachers, and with host families) and on the technological conditions (ICT *tools*

and social media) and perhaps less on the institutional conditions, which are examined only by Busse (2013) and Busse and Walter (2013), in describing how *subjects* lost motivation for studies in part because of the ways that their university programs were differently structured from their secondary school language studies.

In section 6, I conduct an analysis of empirical material using the same framework as I have used in this section, and in section 7, I bring together the previous research analyzed here in section 3 with the results of the empirical portion of this report. In section 4, I describe how the data collection and analysis was carried out.

4. Methodology

The purpose of this report is to contribute to an understanding of the technological, institutional, and social conditions that affect language learning and the different ways that adults can undertake the *activity* of language learning *over time* (two to four years) within these conditions. As described in section 2, I have used the concept of the PLE in an AT framework as articulated by Buchem, et al. (2011) as an analytical tool for this purpose. In section 4.1 I describe how the data for this project was collected, and in section 4.2 I describe how it was analyzed. First, however, I describe the background to the chosen approach.

As described in section 2, an important feature of AT is describing the origins and development of human mental processes (Wertsch 1991, pp. 26–27). For this reason, I chose a longitudinal approach to data collection (see section 4.1) and the construction of narratives as one of the ways of analyzing the data (see section 4.1.1). According to Lantolf (2000), the unit of analysis in AT is “tool-mediated goal-directed action” (pp. 7–8). One traditional way of collecting data on *operations* is direct observation. However, Lantolf (2000) argues that classroom observation is insufficient for understanding the significance of different types of language learning *activities*, because it is partly the *object* that the *subject* brings to the task that defines whether it is an *activity*, an *action*, or an *operation*:

A student might not care if she learned the language, as long as she passed tests and received an acceptable grade for the course, which, in turn, could enhance her chances of obtaining a good job or gaining admission to a choice graduate school, while other students engaging in the same task might well be oriented to the goal of learning the language because, for example, they find it intrinsically interesting. [...] Even if students in the same

class engage with the same task they may not be engaged in the same activity. Students with different motives often have different goals as the object of their actions, despite the intentions of the teacher. [...] Students, then, play a major role in shaping the goal and ultimate outcomes of tasks set for them by their teachers. Thus, from the perspective of activity theory [...] what ultimately matters is how individual learners decided to engage with the task as an activity (Lantolf, 2000, pp. 11–13).

Donato (2000) states that a key concept for understanding language learning processes is situatedness, which “means that learning unfolds in different ways under different circumstances. The circumstances include the specific concrete individuals each with their different histories, the signs they use, and the assistance they provide and are provided” (p. 47).

Furthermore, a background assumption of this report is that the language learner in the 2010s conducts language learning *operations* using *tools* like computers and smartphones. In these conditions, direct observation alone does not yield rich data. A number of researchers, including Dirksen et al. (2010) and Mackay (2005) argue for an approach to research involving ICT that balances data collected both online and off. The challenge is capturing, analyzing, and explaining these phenomena in a way that makes sense and is methodologically rigorous. Several researchers make the case for self-description and self-reporting through instruments like diaries, interviews, and questionnaires (e.g. Tanaka, 2010; Cotos, 2012). Pavlenko and Lantolf (2000), make the case for this approach, arguing that “in the human sciences first-person accounts in the form of personal narratives provide a much richer source of data than do third-person distal observations” (Pavlenko & Lantolf, 2000, pp. 156–157). In this project, I collected such “first-person tellings” over a period of two, three, or four years, depending on when the *subject* enrolled at RSU. The methods used for collecting this data are described in detail in section 4.1.

As Coffey & Street (2008) note, narrative explorations of language learning became increasingly utilized in the first decade of the 2000s (pp. 453–454), and the previous research I describe in section 3 affirms that this trend continued in the 2010s. Coffey (2010) explains that narrative approaches “understand individual experience to be inherently social, constructed around social processes and institutions” (p. 121). My approach to data collection was influenced by Coffey’s, in which he asked participants to write a language-learning autobiography, which he then followed up with an hour-long interview. From his data he elicited particular episodes which were relevant to the themes in which he was interested

(p. 124). Although I think there is a great deal of merit to the autobiographical approach, I thought that it might discourage some of the students from participating, so I modified Coffey's idea and elicited participants' stories more slowly, through the longitudinal e-mail interviews described in section 4.1.2.

Data collection was also partly modeled after Alred and Byram (2002), who used a two-step interview process in which they first invited participants to "tell the story of their lives around the focus" of their studies abroad, and then entered a "thematic phase" in which they asked questions related to particular aspects of the SA experience which they were interested in elucidating in their article. After an initial questionnaire, I also used a two-step interview process. I first encouraged students to tell their stories of language learning, as well as asking specific questions related to the technological, institutional, and social conditions of their learning via e-mail conversations between spring 2014 and spring 2016. This was followed by an in-depth synchronous online interview in spring 2016.

It is important to note, as Campbell (2016) does, that the purpose of this type of research is not to make "direct comparisons and generalizations", but rather "to exploit the richness of the data, drawing out commonalities and idiosyncrasies from shared and differing experiences" (p. 5). Sub-section 4.2 describes this drawing-out process. Finally, research ethics are addressed in section 4.3.

4.1 Data Collection

Data for this report was collected with three different instruments: questionnaires, e-mail interviews, and synchronous online interviews. The questionnaires were sent out to students who had enrolled in a beginner-level course in modern languages in the 2011–2012 academic year in spring 2012, in the 2012–2013 academic year in spring 2013, and in the 2013–2014 academic year in spring 2014. In spring 2014 I began conducting e-mail interviews with willing participants from all three academic years. In spring 2016 I conducted the synchronous online interviews. The process is described in detail in the sections to follow; here I discuss some of the theoretical issues associated with these types of data collection.

Questionnaires are often associated with quantitative research methods and attempts to make generalizations about populations. However, in this project, questionnaires formed the basis for qualitative inquiry. All the questionnaires made extensive use of open-ended questions and were viewed as a recruiting tool for participants in the longitudinal research

project and an “entry interview” of sorts. The guidelines from the Encyclopedia of Survey Research Methods (Holyk, 2008) were taken into account, in particular the importance of making the questionnaire understandable to respondents through carefully selected wording and formatting (pp. 657–659).

Two types of interviews were used to collect data from language learners for the case studies. Both would be considered computer-mediated interviewing (Hine, 2005), which Joinson (2005) argues tends to make interviewees more willing to disclose information. The first type of interview is the asynchronous text-based, or e-mail, interview (Kivits, 2005; Orgad, 2005, 2008). This type of interview offers advantages and disadvantages over synchronous face-to-face interviews, according to Joinson (2005):

Asynchronous CMC has substantial impression management advantages over synchronous CMC—people have the time to edit and check their messages before sending. Moreover, the time afforded by asynchronous CMC should also reduce the cognitive load associated with the need to combine answering a question with impression management. While these are desirable qualities for the building of an online relationship and building affiliation, they do not sit easily with a researcher’s desire to elicit candid responses. It would be expected then that synchronous CMC methods should reduce impression management, and, at least in theory should provide better quality data, particularly when dealing with sensitive topics (Joinson, 2005, pp. 32–33).

Kivits (2005) and Orgad (2005) offer a number of suggestions for mitigating the disadvantages of asynchronous CMC, chief among them developing rapport with the interview participants through “mutual self-disclosure” (Kivits, 2005, p. 40). In my e-mail correspondence with participants, I shared my own language learning experiences as points of departure for questions about their experiences.

The second type of interview, using videoconferencing software, differs less than the e-mail interview from the face-to-face interview, because it is synchronous. However, depending on the speed of the connection and the quality of the web cameras used, there might be fewer facial expressions and body language cues available to help interpret statements. On the other hand, this form of interviewing mitigates at least one of the problems of the “traditional” interview, which is the question of whether the space in which it is conducted creates or exacerbates a power dynamic between interviewer and interviewee (Punch, 2007; Warren & Vincent,

2001). In the videoconferencing interview, both the interviewer and interviewee can be located in locations of their choice. In this project, the videoconferencing software used for the interviews was one with which participants were familiar from their studies at RSU, Adobe Connect.

For all the different types of interviews conducted in this project, Kvale and Brinkman's quality criteria for interviewing (2015, p. 192)⁶ were used as a guide. Although mutual self-disclosure (Kivits, 2005) was used for developing rapport, the goal was to have "the shortest interviewer's questions and longest subjects' answers possible", with those answers being "spontaneous, rich, specific and relevant" (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015, p. 192). One of the ways I approached this was to tell a brief anecdote from my own experiences of learning Swedish and Russian and allow them to respond to it; this often yielded "a self-reliant story that hardly requires additional explanations" (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015, p. 192). In the following three sub-sections I describe the three stages of the data collection process in greater detail.

4.1.1 Stage 1: Questionnaires

Data collection for the project began in spring 2012. At this time, language courses at RSU were offered at a variety of different paces, and furthermore, the Arabic, Chinese, French, German, Italian, and Japanese departments offered evening seminars, making it possible to take some of them in parallel with other responsibilities. The courses could be taken outside of a degree program or full-time course package, and they were open to all who fulfilled the general entry requirements for undergraduate enrollment in Sweden⁷, in most cases with a dispensation for the Swedish language requirement. Most of the language courses at RSU are flexible

⁶ The extent of spontaneous, rich, specific and relevant answers from the interviewee; the shortest interviewer's questions and longest subjects' answers possible; the degree to which the interviewer follows up and clarifies the meaning of the relevant aspects of the answers; the interviewer attempting to verify his or her interpretations of the subject's answers over the course of the interview; the interview being 'self-reported,' a self-reliant story that hardly requires additional explanations (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015, p. 192).

⁷ Completion of Swedish upper secondary school (which assumes proficiency in the Swedish language) or the equivalent, proficiency in English, and for applicants who completed upper secondary school in 2009 or later, completion of Swedish upper secondary school course Mathematics A or the equivalent (Swedish Council for Higher Education, 2014).

with regard to the language of instruction or support language, which means that in addition to the TL, course instructions and teaching may be in English or Swedish, depending on whether all the students enrolled in a given course speak Swedish and whether the teacher of the course is comfortable teaching in Swedish.⁸ The flexibility offered by the language department allowed for students with a variety of backgrounds and life circumstances to enroll in the courses.

A list of the university e-mail addresses of all students who registered for a beginner-level language course during the 2011–2012 academic year was obtained from the administration of RSU. The languages were Arabic, French, German, Italian, Japanese, Portuguese, Russian, and Swedish.⁹ All of the courses were offered by distance only, except for Swedish, which was also offered on campus for international exchange students. A questionnaire (see Appendix 1) was designed that was intended to elicit data on different features of the subjects' PLEs; in particular, the objects of their language learning and the tools and communities that contributed in some way to their PLEs.

The 2012 questionnaire was drafted in both Swedish and English and was formatted and put online using Google Forms, which is user-friendly, allows the researcher to send out a simple link to potential respondents, collects the results in a spreadsheet format, and automatically generates graphs and charts of the results. The 2012 questionnaire was designed so that no question was obligatory, that is, a respondent could skip a question and still submit the questionnaire without an error message, to see whether there were questions that respondents refused to answer.

An e-mail in both Swedish and English with a link to both the Swedish and English versions of the 2012 questionnaire was sent to 1417 university e-mail addresses and received 67 responses. Since the primary goal was to pilot the questionnaire and locate students who would be willing to be part of a longitudinal research project, the low response rate was not considered problematic. The questionnaire was designed to be answered anonymously, but respondents were invited to write in an e-mail address if

⁸ Many of the foreign language teachers at RSU were native speakers of the TL and relatively new to Sweden; some preferred teaching English to teaching in Swedish. Since English proficiency is a general entry requirement for higher education in Sweden, this is not thought to pose any problem for Swedish students.

⁹ RSU also offers courses in Spanish and English, but not at the beginner level.

they were willing to be contacted for further participation in the project. Forty of the 67 respondents did so.

The 2012 questionnaire consisted of 20 questions. As much as possible, the questionnaire allowed for free text answers rather than offering multiple-choice options, in order to evaluate respondents' understanding of the questions and to try to avoid leading questions. In the few cases where there were multiple choice options, respondents also had the option of writing in their own answer.

The results of the 2012 questionnaire were analyzed, written up, and discussed in collegial seminars, but were not published. The analysis included a compilation of the answers in the form of descriptive statistics, but the answers were also evaluated individually, both to determine whether the questions were interpreted as intended and to generate an understanding of the respondents as individuals. Although the 2012 questionnaire contained primarily open-ended questions, the results indicated that the responses to many of the questions did fall into clear categories.

These results were used to produce a similar, but more fine-tuned questionnaire that was sent out in June 2013 (see Appendix 2). The same process was used as in 2012: e-mail addresses of students who were enrolled in beginner-level language courses were obtained, and a link to the 2013 questionnaire was sent to 1208 students. There were 92 responses, of which 35 respondents gave their e-mail addresses for further contact. The results were analyzed, written up, and discussed, and again the results were used to edit the next iteration of the questionnaire.

This process was repeated a final time in early March 2014 to all students enrolled in beginner-level language courses at RSU. 1633 students were invited to take the 2014 questionnaire (see Appendix 3), which received 176 responses, of which 48 gave their e-mail addresses for further contact.

4.1.2 Stage 2: Longitudinal e-mail interviews

Of the 269 total respondents to the three questionnaires, 123 offered e-mail addresses. These 123 respondents were sent an e-mail (see Figure 3) in April 2014 asking if they were willing to have an e-mail conversation about different features of their language learning activities, actions, and operations. The students received the e-mail in the language in which they had completed the questionnaire (Swedish or English).

Hej [PARTICIPANT]!

Last year you answered a questionnaire called "Language Learning Online and Offline". The questionnaire is part of my PhD dissertation project in education about the role of technology in the ways that adults learn and use foreign languages that are new to them. I really appreciate that you responded to the questionnaire!

The next phase of the study involves following up with those who were studying a language two years ago and learning about how they have continued to study and use the language. I would like to invite you to participate in this phase. It involves answering some questions by e-mail. Would it be OK if I e-mail you some questions?

You can watch a little presentation about the study here:
[WEB LINK TO A PREZI PRESENTATION]

If you're interested, I can also send you a longer description of the structure and background of the study. And I'm happy to answer any questions you might have!

Figure 3: E-mail sent to all questionnaire respondents

Sixty-eight of the 123 students e-mailed responded to the e-mail. I wrote to each of the respondents with an e-mail that was individually tailored to their responses to the questionnaire. An example can be seen in Figure 4.

Great, I'm glad you are willing to be part of the study. I'm just going to ask a few questions per e-mail, and they are personalized to you, based on what you wrote in the questionnaire. Feel free to take time with your responses, as this is a long-term study, and feel free to ask any questions you might have as well.

So last year you were studying Japanese at [RSU]. Are you still actively studying the language or using it in some way now?

You said in the questionnaire that you chose [RSU] because it was a distance course. Did you have any connections to Sweden before taking the course at [RSU]? If not, how did you find out about [RSU] and its distance courses?

You indicated that you had used online learning materials. Can you tell me a little more about the kinds of online resources you found for learning Japanese?

Figure 4: Example of an individual e-mail sent to a participant after they agreed to an e-mail interview

From that point, I initiated contact with the respondents once every four to five months so that the students would be less likely to be conscious of the project all the time and be overly influenced by it. The result

was a selection by attrition effect; some students chose not to respond to subsequent e-mails, after which they were not pursued further, while others responded with large amounts of information.

Each e-mail correspondence was treated as a long, asynchronous interview with open-ended questions. There was not a set list of questions asked of everyone, though my questions were always intended to elicit information about the tools, rules, community, division of labor, operations, actions, and activities described in section 2. Instead, the conversations were allowed to develop individually and organically, and the respondents were invited to ask questions as well, which many did; sometimes personal questions about my own language learning experiences, and sometimes questions related to my experience as a language teacher. As described in section 4.2, this “mutual self-disclosure” (Kivits, 200, p. 40) was intended to develop rapport with the participants and increase the richness and reliability of their own answers.

4.1.3 Stage 3: Synchronous online interviews

By February 2015, 24 students were still actively engaged in the e-mail correspondence. Of these 25, 15 were asked if they were willing to be interviewed live via Adobe Connect,¹⁰ the videoconferencing platform with which the students were already familiar from their studies at RSU. The selection of the 15 potential interviewees was done based on several factors intended to maximize the diversity of the interview group: age, TL, educational background, location during the project, and richness of answers provided in the e-mail conversations. The selection-by-attrition approach could have resulted in the interviewees being among the more enthusiastic language learners, rather than the most typical; however, as is shown in the narratives, several students who were not successful in achieving their own language learning *objects* were still eager to tell their stories. Twelve students responded positively to the requests for interviews, which began in February 2015 and concluded in February 2016. Each of the participants was interviewed live one time, in interviews that

¹⁰ With one exception: one respondent did not feel comfortable being recorded and was located in a place with limited broadband speed at the time of the interview. We therefore conducted an extended e-mail interview and then had a synchronous voice conversation on Skype that was not recorded but served to make the kind of personal contact deemed necessary for the project’s reliability.

ranged from 40 to 90 minutes. Follow-up questions were asked, and clarifications made, via e-mail.

As mentioned, the questionnaires were provided in both English and Swedish. The e-mail correspondence and the interviews were conducted in the language chosen by the participants. The live interviews were recorded, and I transcribed those that were conducted in English, while those that were conducted in Swedish were transcribed by a professional whose NL is Swedish for increased accuracy. I compiled all of the data from each of the 12 participants—their original questionnaire response, their e-mail correspondence, and their transcribed interview—into a single data set for each participant and translated the Swedish data into English. This data set was used to create the narratives in section 5. This analytical process is described in further detail in the following section.

4.2 Data Analysis

As described in section 2, this project uses an AT conceptualization of the PLE to contribute to an understanding of the technological, institutional, and social conditions that affect language learning and the different ways that adults can undertake the *activity* of language learning *over time* within these conditions. To achieve this, the data was subjected to two stages of analysis. The first was to take the *subjects'* utterances about important features of their language learning processes, collected over several years, and place them in chronological order to form a narrative of their language learning process.

This narrative approach is intended both to provide a developmental, or longitudinal, perspective (Wertsch 1981, pp. 26–27) on the *activity* of language learning, as well as to present the interview data in a format that could be analyzed and categorized according to the different features of the *activity system* (as I did with the previous research described in section 3), which is the second stage of analysis. This serves to illustrate the participants' PLEs as an *activity system* (Buchem, et al., 2011) and facilitate a synthesis of the results of this report with previous research, presented in section 7.

Narrative was chosen as a form of analysis for several reasons. One reason was to make the data on the subjects' language learning processes available to other researchers so that the results of the second stage of the analysis could be verified, but in a way that did not compromise the *subjects'* anonymity, as providing the raw data in an appendix would have. Another reason was that different aspects of the *subjects'* learning process-

es emerged at different points in the two- to four-year data collection process and so the raw data needed to be reorganized in a way that allowed for better understanding of the *subjects*' PLEs in an AT framework, particularly the ways that different aspects *changed over time*. Finally, I chose narrative in order to make the *subjects*' learning processes interesting and accessible to those who stand to gain from the findings of this report: language learners, language teachers, and educational policymakers.

Previous research contributed to the approach to data analysis that I employ in section 5. Aragão (2011) asserts that the value of conducting narrative research on language learning activities lies in its ability to contribute to knowledge about “learners’ qualitative perspectives in diverse contexts” and even argues that the process of eliciting narrative data can improve learners’ self-esteem (p. 305). Aragão’s approach to narrative research of language learning was to collect a variety of documents pertaining to each of her participants’ language learning and construct narratives from these for each participant so that systematic comparisons could be made (Aragão, 2011, p. 305). My analysis was conducted in a similar way, collecting participants’ reflections and stories over two to four years and compiling them into a narrative. Karaman and Tochon (2010) also used this compilation approach as a first step of analysis, in which they recorded their participants’ utterances over the course of a year, treated this collection as “a whole” (p. 588) and then explored themes in the collection. I applied this approach and then used the AT framework to reorganize the narrative data into categories that allow features of the *subjects*' PLEs to be compared and contrasted, both with one another and with the findings of the previous longitudinal and narrative research on language learning analyzed in section 3.

To create the narratives, all of the information from the questionnaires, e-mail interviews and synchronous online interviews was compiled into a data set for each *subject*. The utterances were rearranged to create a chronological first-person narrative of each participant’s journey from the time they described becoming interested in the TL through the end of the data collection process. These narratives were then redacted to remove utterances that were not directly relevant to the language learning process. In order to clarify the meanings of some of the utterances, particularly those responding to direct questions, the narratives were partially rewritten in the third person, with verbatim quotes retained whenever feasible. The goal was to keep the narratives descriptive rather than explanatory (see Polkinghorne, 1988, particularly pp. 161–177) as much as possible,

and leave the interpretation to the second stage of analysis, but the process of reorganizing the material and partial rewriting in a different voice is necessarily an interpretive and analytical process. The narratives, then, can be seen as a co-construction between myself and the 12 participants.

The second stage of analysis, employed in section 6, is to highlight the factors relevant to the PLE as conceptualized by Buchem, et al. (2011) and organized according to the AT features described in section 2: *subjects, objects, tools, rules, community, and division of labor* (Engeström 1987, Buchem et al., 2011) as well as evidence of *change over time* (Wertsch 1981).

4.3 Research ethics

This project was evaluated by the research ethics board at RSU, one of the funders of the project, which saw no ethical problems with the project and offered some suggestions for improving the data collection process. It was also submitted to the Regional Ethical Board in Uppsala, Sweden, which determined that the project did not include activities which required a full evaluation under Swedish law (Lag 2003:460 om etikprövning av forskning som avser människor, 2003).

I was employed by RSU during the project, which allowed for the collected data to be kept within RSU's servers, but I did not have any institutional connection to the participants before, during or after the project. I do not teach any of the languages that the participants were learning. The participants are anonymous and given pseudonyms. The interview and questionnaire materials have not been made openly available to others. However, at times others have assisted with the management of the materials, such as the native Swedish speaker who transcribed the interviews that were conducted in Swedish and the IT expert who assisted in saving the recordings of the interview to files that could be stored on an external hard drive and removing them from university servers. Colleagues and supervisors in my research group read the raw data and the narratives that I constructed from the data, and they offered constructive criticism to improve the reliability of the narratives and their relevance to the stated purpose of the research.

As mentioned, Google Forms was used to collect questionnaire data, and data stored in the cloud, even temporarily, cannot be said to be completely secure. The participants were aware of these conditions before they agreed to participate in the project. Participants were informed about how their data was to be stored and that they were allowed to withdraw from

the project at any time without needing to explain themselves through an informant letter (see Appendix 4).

Some of the questions asked in the course of the data collection were of a personal nature. Several participants had non-academic reasons for choosing to learn a particular language, such as being in a relationship with someone whose NL was the participant's TL. Certain details have been changed to something analogous—for example, names of cities where they may live or where their partners come from—to reduce the possibility that their identities could be discovered through internet search engines.

Participation in the project may have caused participants to reflect more on their learning practices than they might otherwise, which, in turn, could affect the reliability of the data, although contact with the participants was deliberately spaced so that their participation in the project would not be foremost in their minds during their studies. It could be argued that by participating in this project and reflecting on and describing their personal learning networks the participants gained a meta-awareness of their learning process which could affect that process, and in turn, the reliability of the project. From the point of view of the participants, however, I believe that this meta-awareness is neutral or even beneficial. This is supported by Aragão's (2011) assertion, mentioned in section 4.1, that the process of eliciting narrative data can improve learners' self-esteem (p. 305).¹¹ This was further affirmed by one of the participants, who reflected, "through e-mailing you, I have documentation of how I have thought and felt at different times, and it has changed a bit sometimes. Sometimes I have expressed ambitions that didn't come to anything, but other paths have developed."

I do not see the potential for any harm to come to participants as a result of participating in this project. Such an approach does have the potential to cause the participants stress if they feel they have to live up to expectations that the researcher has, but I attempted to make it clear to participants that I was not evaluating their performance, only interested in their descriptions of the process, and I believe that the narratives in section 5 illustrate that the participants understood this.

¹¹ "[N]arrative research expands knowledge of students' language learning processes through reflection in languaging and promotes an increase in self-esteem [...] Through reflection, students are able to identify beliefs, emotions, challenges and how to deal with them" (Aragão, 2011, p. 305).

As in all research and particularly in qualitative research conducted by a single individual, a researcher's pre-conceptions and positioning affects the collection and analysis of data. This began with the choice of *subjects* and theoretical framework. As the purpose of this report is to contribute to an understanding of the conditions that affect language learning and the different ways that adults can undertake the activity of language learning, I needed subjects willing and able to reflect on and describe their learning conditions and a way of organizing this data that could encapsulate the huge field of technological, institutional, and social factors that affect these conditions. I specifically chose not to collect data on language learning "success" such as grades, test scores, or other metrics of language skills, but rather chose to focus on the *subjects'* goals, choices, and experiences and deemed that the PLE-as-activity system framework would be a productive way of working with this kind of data. Within a particular group of language learners to which I had access (students at RSU), the twelve included in this report were chosen for the diversity of their ages, interests and goals and their enthusiasm for participation in the data collection process. The narratives presented below are shaped by this as well as a desire to present the *subjects'* stories in a respectful way that provided anonymity. I attempted to mitigate my own biases by getting input from colleagues and supervisors during the analytical process and presenting the narratives in a descriptive, rather than explanatory, style in section 5, and presenting the AT analysis in a second stage in section 6.

5. Analysis I: The Subjects' Narratives

In this section I present the narratives I constructed from questionnaires (conducted in 2012, 2013, and 2014), e-mail interviews (conducted between 2014 and 2016) and synchronous online video interviews (conducted in 2016) with 12 adults who enrolled in a beginner-level distance course in a foreign language at RSU between 2011 and 2013.

As described in section 4.2, each *subject's* narrative was the result of longitudinal data collection that developed as a conversation, and while my questions were intended to elicit information about the *tools, rules, community, division of labor, and change over time* described in section 2, the conversations developed in different directions depending on the *subjects'* answers. The narratives were then redacted to remove utterances that were not directly relevant to the *objects, tools, rules, community, division of labor, change over time, operations, actions, and activities*

related to the *subjects'* PLEs. In this section the purpose is to let the narratives speak for themselves to illustrate how unique each *subject's* PLE is.

5.1 Stefan: “One doesn’t have to travel abroad only for a beach vacation”

Stefan was approximately 20 years old when he started learning Japanese at RSU in the 2012–2013 academic year. He was planning to do a SA program in Japan and wanted to be able to cope with daily life while there. At the beginning of the project, his primary *objects* were in being able to have simple and complex conversations, read texts, and understand films and TV programs. He was not interested in being able to write academic Japanese or attempting to reach a native speaker level.

Stefan’s first became interested in Japan through friends who were fans of anime (Japanese animation) and became interested in deepening his knowledge in Japanese culture when, as a high school pupil, he traveled to southeast Asia to represent Sweden in an academic competition and “had the insight that one doesn’t have to travel abroad only for a beach vacation, but that there is a great value in looking around and meeting people in order to get a better insight into how other countries and cultures work. It was from there I became interested in studying abroad, because then you get the chance to immerse yourself in another culture, particularly with Asia as the goal, because so much is different from what we are used to in Europe. The choice to go to Japan was self-evident for some reason.”

Stefan described his interest in Japan as largely based on Japan’s reputation as being very high-tech. He had been interested in computer science “ever since my father showed me how to program, which was sometime in elementary school.” He was enrolled in Japanese courses part-time at RSU alongside full-time campus studies in computer science at a larger university in another part of Sweden, as well as working 40% as a lab assistant. For that reason, he stopped taking Japanese courses at RSU after three terms, because the workload had become too heavy.

The university where Stefan was studying computer science offered Japanese courses and a preparatory year for students planning to do an exchange program, but the courses were full-time, and the schedule conflicted with his computer science program. He said that if he hadn’t found the courses at RSU, which were held in the evenings and which were part time, he might have tried taking the courses at his home university anyway, but more likely he would have tried “a program like Rosetta Stone.” However, he didn’t think such a program would have worked well, be-

cause “when you have a course, it is much more motivation to say ‘yeah, I need to do this by next week’ or whatever. If you work by yourself you can say ‘no, I don’t have the energy for this today because there are other things I have to do’.” He also thought it was important to have a teacher to point out the finer details, regardless of subject: “For example programming, which is mostly what I’m into and even teach, if you don’t get the basics in a good way, you have a hard time finding your own way, because you don’t know what to look for. But as soon as you have the basics and understand a little how it works, then you can sit and read and find the details fairly easily. I think it seems the same when you are learning languages, though it feels sketchier to find good resources for languages online and do self-study, if you don’t know what you’re doing, than in programming.” To supplement his coursework at RSU, Stefan found several *tools*: Anki, a digital flashcard app, KanjiDraw, for assistance with looking up kanji in digital dictionaries, simplified literature, and manga with furigana.¹²

In September 2014, Stefan went to Japan for SA. He hadn’t been planning to take Japanese courses in an institutional environment while there, but he felt that his courses in computer science didn’t take as much time as anticipated, so he was able to enroll in a language course. He was taking a course which repeated some of the material he had already learned at RSU but felt that it was “good to repeat it properly. And if nothing else I get a whole lot of insight in the language and culture from the Japanese teacher!” Additionally, he had established a self-study routine of reading manga, particularly manga that did “have furigana over the kanji,” which he called “cheating.” He would look up unfamiliar words and kanji, write them in Anki, and review them: “when there is no furigana it’s a pain to look them up, which makes me more motivated to remember them. Furthermore, I feel quite smart when I manage to figure out new words based on the kanji I already know.” This, combined with being in Japan and being exposed to the language every day, made him feel that he had made a lot of progress. He mentioned also that he had found that he found learning easier and more enjoyable “by seeing words and expressions before I learn them, rather than memorizing them in advance.” He mentioned that he had previously tried Heisig’s book *Remembering the Kanji*, which he described as being “built around first learning to recognize all the kanji and associate them with simple words and expressions that are

¹² Kanji and furigana are two elements of the Japanese writing system.

representative. I got pretty far in that before I realized that I wanted to read manga and learn in that way instead. Most important is that I feel like I benefit from it, anyway. I've noticed that it's much easier to remember the kanji I saw in Heisig's book."

Stefan had a number of reflections on how he was using Japanese in daily life in Japan. He said that it "obviously" would have been good if he had learned more Japanese before going to Japan, but nevertheless he was able to do a lot with the skills that he had: "A good example is when I had just come to Japan and was going to try to get one of my bags taken to my room from the airport (an extremely convenient service!), the person I spoke with at the desk couldn't speak very much English at all, and I managed to get my bag in the end in any case." In his case it was particularly important that he could express that he had a food allergy in restaurants. Nevertheless, most of the friends that he had made in Japan were other international students and not native Japanese students. He had, however, found a Japanese language partner who wanted to practice English.

Stefan spent nearly a year in Japan. After he returned to Sweden, he said he never really did get to know his Japanese lab partners very well, but that it could be primarily a function of the field he is in. He had continued to meet with his Japanese language partner throughout the year, albeit sporadically, as she had a demanding job. By the end of the year, he felt quite confident in his ability to use Japanese in everyday situations: "A good example, or a bad example, depending on how you want to view it, is that a few other exchange students and I rented a car and we managed to [dent it]. So then you have to deal with the insurance issue and other fun things like that, and we managed to misunderstand what we were supposed to do, which was contact the police directly [...] That whole conversation, it was maybe four hours total, talking to various police officers and stuff, I managed to get through in my broken Japanese." A more pleasant example was when his family visited from Sweden: "We went up to northern Japan and somewhere we found a little sushi restaurant in a relatively small town [...] There was no one else in the restaurant so it was the owner and his daughter, and we managed to talk a bit. And they thought it was really great that they found a foreigner who could speak Japanese, it was fantastic. So when we left, the owner's daughter came running out after us and said, 'dad said I should give these to you' so we got some candy or something. That was also really great. It shows that you got somewhere in any case."

His experience of living abroad also changed his awareness of opportunities to practice and use languages at home: “I was pretty unaware that there were exchange students at [my home university] until I became a part of that world myself. So that’s something that happens, and I don’t know how to improve that. Now I’ve found [...] conversation corner, which they organize here, where the idea is that you come here and speak various languages and practice. And a lot of exchange students hang out there.” However, he hadn’t had the opportunity to visit it frequently at that point.

Stefan said that in retrospect the best feature of the course at RSU was that the seminars took place “in the evenings and that they were set up in such a way to manage to have a lot of oral practice with other students. [On campus] it is administratively easier to have group work and check with people. But I think it works really well, even online. Well beyond expectations for an online language course, I have to say.” However, it requires more self-discipline: “When I sit in a classroom, then I know I’m sitting in school and I shouldn’t do other things. But if you’re sitting at home in the dark with your computer [...] you can do whatever you want. That’s something you have to think about as a student, now it’s actually the lesson, you have to be active and so forth.”

Although learning by distance was convenient and he didn’t think he would have been able to fit learning Japanese into his schedule any other way during the period he was enrolled at RSU, Stefan nevertheless felt that the ideal language course would be on campus, to be able to see others’ body language and to meet up with other learners outside of class. Despite these barriers, Stefan did manage to make contact with his classmates, those “that I had a language exchange with, another from Australia whom I talked with sometimes via mail. And then the other exchange students from Japan, they had a little reunion that I went to. There were several from [RSU], there hasn’t been so much after Japan, but among them was one of my classmates who was travelling through Sweden and he came here and stayed over one night, and that was really nice.” He also travelled to Helsinki to take a Japanese test after his return from Japan and met up with a Finnish learner of Japanese whom he had met in Japan.

At the end of the project Stefan was unsure about his future plans for learning or using Japanese. He was finishing his master’s degree in computer science and had a job offer in his field in the city he was living in. He did not envision looking for a job in Japan, partly because his food allergy made life a bit difficult for him there, but he wanted to go back for a visit

in the future. He was not sure whether his Japanese skills would be a plus for him on the job market in computer science.

5.2 Albin: “With a bit of help from Google Translate”

Albin was 20 years old when he took his first Japanese courses at RSU in the 2011–2012 academic year. He enrolled in the course after completing one term at another university, when he had not yet decided what kind of degree program he wanted to enroll in. Although he had not engaged in any institutional or self-study before the course, even during this first year he was using his Japanese skills to read anime, read blogs and to search for information online.

Albin’s favorite games when he was a child all came from Japan. When he got access to the internet, he started looking for bands that he liked, and also discovered anime. He had a childhood friend who shared his interest in games and anime and whom he kept in touch with later via internet, sometimes using Japanese.

In autumn 2012 Albin enrolled in a campus-based program in software development at another Swedish university and discontinued his enrollment at RSU. He had “considered continuing the [Japanese] program in parallel with other studies, but it was too much, unfortunately.” However, in the three years that he participated in the project he continued to learn Japanese on his own, in some periods more than others. In spring 2014 he reported that “I listen a lot to Japanese music and watch a lot of anime, so I try to hear it so much as possible so I don’t forget everything I need in order to study more or in some way use my Japanese skills.” He continued to follow the blogs of several Japanese heavy metal musicians, “with a bit of help from Google Translate.”

In summer 2014 Albin said that he had been thinking of continuing with Japanese, but he felt like he had already forgotten too much to pick up where he had left off. He hoped to follow along with a roommate who was enrolling in a beginner-level Japanese course so that he could review what he had learned previously. During that summer he watched anime and listened to Japanese music but didn’t have much more contact with the language other than reading Haruki Murakami novels, “but I read his books only in English so language-wise that probably doesn’t do anything.” Later, however, he reflected that his reading of Murakami may contribute to his learning of Japanese: “it helps to read and in other ways expose yourself to the culture, if nothing else your interest increases which helps a lot, and the culture itself influences the language, which word

choices go together and the relationship between words, so I think it helps quite a bit.” Despite being very technically oriented, he said that he always reads paper books, not e-books.

In late autumn 2014, Albin reported that he had found that his other coursework was easy and so he was using his extra time for self-study in Japanese. He had found “a really good app for the telephone, Skritter, which has a small monthly fee, but it is quite obviously worth it, in it you get words or characters which you should either translate to English, pronounce, or write the character.” He was using Skritter whenever he had a free moment. He was following “more series now than before in Japanese” and listening to a lot of Japanese music. He did not have any concrete plans to enroll in Japanese courses but was hoping to maintain or improve his knowledge of Japanese through self-study: “I watch 8–10 hours of Japanese anime or film per week and on average one hour of Skritter per day. Hopefully I’ll know enough to hop in and study further later if I want to and if I haven’t forgotten too much.” He was also using Japanese passively on social media: “I follow a certain [person], he posts a lot of text and videos in Japanese which I always watch, and I have a few other Japanese friends.”

During 2015, Albin took a campus course in Mandarin at his local university, “but I feel that I unfortunately forgot almost everything from it. The focus was mostly on pronunciation and my Japanese was not exactly of help. It was possibly even more difficult when you mix them.” When asked to compare the difference between a campus language course and a distance language course at university level, he said that there wasn’t such a big difference, but given an option he would choose campus courses because “it feels a little closer in some way. [...] With mics and sound and things on the web and webcams and stuff, it can be a bit of a hassle.”

By the end of the project in early 2016, Albin was still using Japanese to read blogs in Japanese, listening to Japanese music and watching anime. He claimed he was not actively learning Japanese, but he was still spending a few minutes a day building his writing skills and vocabulary on the Skritter app. He said if he had more free time, he would spend more time on Japanese. It wasn’t clear if he would prioritize continued learning of Japanese in the future. At this point he had a year and a half remaining in his undergraduate degree program and was primarily concerned about finding a job in his field. He wanted to travel to Japan, but “it won’t be directly after school, in any case.”

5.3 Christina: “I need some time for myself”

Christina is originally from Italy but had lived in Sweden for four years and was in her mid-30s when she took two semesters of introductory Russian in the 2012–2013 academic year. In the initial questionnaire, she indicated a high degree of motivation to learn Russian for several different purposes, including academic writing and speaking and writing at a native speaker level, one of the few respondents who did so. She had not learned any Russian, institutionally or through self-study, before enrolling in the course. During the course she worked primarily with the learning materials provided/suggested for the course but did some extra self-study as well.

Christina’s interest in Russian stemmed from an interest that she shared with her spouse (who had not learned Russian) in the Soviet space program. They had been planning a trip to Baikonur, Kazakhstan to see a rocket launch, as well as visiting Moscow and St. Petersburg. She also noted that “I must add that language is my biggest hobby/interest, so it is fun to study Russian regardless!”

She chose to learn Russian when she did because she was on parental leave with her first child. She and her husband had agreed that they would each have an evening to themselves each week, and Christina decided that she would like to use her free evening for a language course. Christina’s interest in languages is perhaps also reflected in the fact that she chose to use Swedish, rather than English, in e-mail conversations and interviews, despite having started learning Swedish only four years earlier. Christina came to Sweden with her spouse, who is also Italian, when they had decided to look for international job opportunities and both found appealing jobs in Sweden. Her field requires that she use Swedish, and she is not able to rely on lingua franca English alone. She started learning Swedish through, Safir, a free online course for immigrants, before coming to Sweden, on which she remarked “As it is now with Russian, I did pretty well with regard to the written language, but I saw the big difference when I came to Sweden and was forced to speak for real!”

Comparing Safir with Russian courses at RSU, Christina said that Safir “didn’t have a teacher. It is just material that someone has put on the internet, it is up to you to choose what level you want to do, what parts you want to do. There is something to read, something to write, something to hear. But there is no requirement to do anything, and you don’t get a grade when you complete the course. If you’re a good student you complete all the parts of the course, but there is no time pressure, no requirements or anything. The course at [RSU] is much more demanding. There is

a teacher, classmates to talk to and then assignments every week and you review what you have done and you repeat. There is a bigger requirement to do things if you want to complete the course, obviously. And it is much more structured, so to speak. You have to do all parts of the course”.

A year after the initial questionnaire in late spring 2014, Christina was no longer enrolled in Russian courses at RSU, citing scheduling conflicts. However, she was still planning a trip to Kazakhstan at some point in the future and continued to learn Russian on her own, using a textbook of Russian published in Italy, which “contains a little of everything (reading comprehension, listening comprehension, written production) and has an accompanying CD. The only thing missing is someone to talk to...”

In late autumn 2014 Christina continued to do self-study: “I continue with my book and I have just ordered three books to read (in simplified Russian) from a website called Ruslania, which has a lot to choose from. Sometimes I look at Pravda.ru and read the news there but it is still difficult to understand. I have plans to continue with a formal course in Russian at [RSU] next autumn (it will be Russian for Beginners III) since I will be on parental leave for a while. There will be more continuity and structure in the studies in that way. Then, I have also just gotten a Russian-speaking colleague at work and maybe there will be a little practice with him before I stop working in May. We were also going to travel to Russia in February, to Murmansk (my husband works with a Russian company there) but unfortunately that isn’t happening this year because I will be very pregnant... but it will come to something eventually.” Christina noted later that when she reads web pages in Russian, she uses a paper dictionary for support, never Google Translate, because “It’s not very good. I don’t like it.”

During her parental leave with her second child in 2015, Christina found that she didn’t have time for the third course at RSU as she planned, nor did she have as much time for self-study as before. She occasionally used some Russian words with Russian friends and clients at work: “it can happen that there is a Russian speaker [...] who speaks Russian and nothing else. That has happened twice so far. I can’t speak technical language since there’s a lot I don’t know, but when they have described something, I have been able to understand something in any case.”

Before applying to RSU, Christina had examined a variety of options for learning Russian and said she probably would have preferred to take a campus-based course, but there was nothing available in her area. However, afterward, she saw the advantages of a distance course: “It is really

comfortable to sit at home and do your things at home. So it was maybe a better choice to study by distance I think, when you consider life here at home. When you have children, it doesn't work to drive somewhere, you have to be at home in case something happens. But I didn't know that at the beginning." In a later reflection, however, she said that in an ideal situation, without other responsibilities, she would choose to study full-time on campus: "You focus on just one thing, I think. At home you have a lot to think about. When you're at home you work or do something else on the side. On campus you just read, you study and study and study, that worked for me when I studied when I was younger. I focused on it. Then you meet classmates, you do something else that is related to studies and such. More efficient. Distance works better when you have other things to do. It can be effective, but you have to be a little more motivated not to drop out in the middle of the term".

At the end of the project in 2016, Christina was still planning to take her dream trip to Baikonur when her children were a bit older. In the meantime, after their younger child begins pre-school, she hoped to return to the arrangement she and her husband had earlier, in which "he plays sports and I do something else. [...] I have the course Russian for Foreigners III, which I have to do, that is priority number one for me now. I need some time for myself. That's what I have in mind, not anything else. And then we will travel, of course, and I want to be able to do that".

5.4 James: "I don't know if there's a better way, but that's the computer guy in me"

James was in his late 60s at the beginning of the project. He was born in Sweden to immigrant parents and grew up bilingual. He had also learned German, French and Spanish. He said that his interest in learning languages came from his interest in travel. James began taking courses in Mandarin at RSU in spring 2014, but it was not his first contact with the language. He said he had been interested in China for 40 years, visited China twice, in the mid-1980s and the mid-2000s, and taken an evening course in Mandarin in the early 1990s.

After retiring, James took courses in Mandarin for two years part-time by distance at another Swedish university. That course finished three years before he enrolled at RSU. He had discontinued that course because he felt it was too focused on grammar and not enough on speaking skills: "So the course at [RSU] was good in that way, because the focus was on precisely that segment that I thought was worst for me at [other university]."

Between the two university courses, James did a lot of self-study, primarily through Chineseclass101, a net-based course: “Around New Year’s I started with a one-year subscription to Chineseclass101 and have gone through the beginner-level’s 155 lessons during the spring. I want to train my tourist dialogue ability. I need a general review as well, possibly by aiming for an HSK3¹³ test for the sake of listening comprehension and vocabulary. My plan at the beginning of the year was to think about doing a paid Skype dialogue course or something similar in the autumn, but then it hit me that [RSU] has Chinese courses. A 25% course focused on oral proficiency fit me perfectly.”

During summer 2014, James had moved on to the intermediate level of Chineseclass101, completing 15 lessons of 150, though he said “it’s hard to find motivation in the summer. I try to alternate between video clips and other material on the internet.” By late autumn 2014 James had completed 25 of the intermediate lessons of Chineseclass 101 and was taking another oral proficiency course at RSU. He wrote “It feels like my studies of Chinese have stagnated a bit, but on average I put about 10 hours a week into it.” He said he was tiring of the Chineseclass 101 format, but his plan for 2015 was to complete the intermediate level and take an HSK3 test. He also was planning a trip to China, but said “it’s a long time till then, so it doesn’t contribute much to my motivation”.

Following his second course at RSU in 2014 James did not enroll in any further courses, but he continued self-studies with books and web resources, as well as regular Skype chats with two Chinese speakers who wanted to learn Swedish, whom he found through a site called My Language Exchange, “where you can fill in what you know and you get a lot of suggestions. I’ve turned it off now, because now I have two Chinese friends, which works really well [...] Actually, first I had a Chinese person who lives in China, but there were some technical problems with Skype and such which meant that we lost contact quite quickly. So what I have now is a woman who lives [in Sweden]. We were going to go visit them recently, but something came up, so I haven’t met her other than on Skype. We use Wi Chat, that is, Chinese chat, which she thinks works better. [...] In the beginning the Chinese part was pretty much that I had long monologues about my family and where I lived and such, but when that was done it became more difficult. I kept trying to find everyday situations [...] which [...] was maybe five or ten minutes. So we’ve filled the

¹³ HSK is a standardized test for proficiency in Mandarin.

rest of the time lately by her sending me [...] Chinese sayings. [...] And then there is the other Chinese speaker, who is a young guy with Taiwanese parents. [...] I've practiced tourist dialogues more with him. For example, one time we had a map of a city and I was supposed to say in Chinese how to get to the shopping center and so forth. And there's so much material about how to order in a restaurant, ride the bus, take a taxi."

James was so focused on being able to speak Mandarin that he wasn't at all interested in learning to write the characters: "You know that I talked a lot about this HSK3, which is 600 words. And I mean that I've studied it for a lot of years and then I did [the test] in London so that I could get out of writing. I wanted to get out of learning to write the characters. I can write the characters by hand, but I didn't want to learn it. So in some places, in Europe only in London, at Goldsmith School in London, there you can do it by computer."

Throughout the project James reported often Googling for new *tools* and resources for learning Mandarin. He found one site for practicing listening to Chinese tones, another with video clips for listening comprehension, and practice HSK3 tests. At the end of the project, in early 2016, he said, "I think that I find new things all the time, even just in the last six months. Or you can think that you're finding most of it. Now I'm learning vocabulary for HSK4 with Memrise. You can use Memrise for anything. I thought it was quite a good way to learn vocabulary, because someone else had prepared the HSK4 vocabulary and it works like you get a word and there is like a time pressure also, right? There's quite a lot there with that spaced repetition. The things you get wrong come back. [...] It's all about Googling."

James reflected on how he had learned Spanish in Latin America in the 1980s, when he went for four weeks, lived with a family, and had private lessons every day, compared with the distance courses in Mandarin he had been enrolled in, both at RSU and the other Swedish university: "The result is amazing. It's a luxury. It's hard to get this sort of situation where you have a private teacher all day. So when you don't have that, I think these net-based courses both at [other university] and RSU, they are excellent. They're great. It's a great combination where you still get to meet a teacher [via Adobe Connect] and ask questions, it's an excellent method. [...] Before I got my language partners, I looked into getting a teacher via Skype. But it costs a lot of money. So that possibility exists, but it isn't so cheap. I don't know what they charge, but surely 100, 200 [Swedish crowns] per hour or something."

At the end of the project, James said that he was beginning to be more interested in learning grammar. He reiterated his dissatisfaction with his previous grammar courses and said that he was always looking for new ways to approach the topic: “I don’t know if there is a better way, but yeah, that is a little bit the computer guy in me. [...] And I think it’s a little strange when I work on grammar for then I read about some rule, a bit cut-and-dried, and that rule should always work, right? And then you encounter a text for which there is no rule. So I can [...] look in five different grammar sources, on the web or in a book, to find it. So I think I’m exaggerating a little... I’m a little too pedantic about finding [such things].”

Following his two courses at RSU in 2014, James had not enrolled in any more formal coursework. However, he was still organized and structured in his learning, talking one hour a week with his language exchange partners. He explained that he had an additional motivation for learning, besides his interest in Chinese history and culture: “On YouTube there are a lot of people who teach Chinese, quite a few. [...] And I saw one who was on a TV show, a teacher who said that her oldest learner was 75 years old, who studied Chinese, and he said that it was good for preventing Alzheimer’s. And I sort of see it that way too sometimes. My spouse does Sudoku all the time. This is my way to keep going. I really don’t have any serious goals with my studies, other than that it would be fun if I could use it when I go there. But now I have the practice without going there, with those two people I talk to. So it’s not really so necessary to go to China now [laughs]. No, but it would be great to go to China, of course it would.”

5.5 Marianne: “Age should not set limits”

Marianne was in her late 60s when she joined the project in 2013. During the course of the project she took courses in both Japanese and Portuguese at RSU. She had studied German and French in upper secondary school, and through multiple extended visits to Germany became fluent in German, but between secondary school and retirement she had not taken any institutional language courses.

At the start of the project, Marianne had moderate goals for Japanese: to be able to have simple conversations, watch films and television shows, and read and understand texts. She also said she was motivated by an interest in the language acquisition process, that “it stimulates the brain to

try something completely new [...] age should not set limits for learning abilities.”

Marianne said that her primary motivation for learning Japanese was that one of her children had married someone from Japan. She wanted to learn some Japanese for her grandchild’s sake, to be able to communicate with her grandchild’s other set of grandparents, and to follow her grandchild’s language development, but her contact with Japan and the Japanese language went back even further—another of her children had attended a university in Japan for several years: “that’s how my interest in Japanese was awakened. Before that it was nonexistent. The first time we visited Japan it was like arriving on another planet. It was a remarkable experience not to understand anything at all. So it aroused my motivation to learn hiragana and katakana¹⁴ to start with.”

She had done some self-study in Japanese before enrolling in Japanese at RSU: “Before I applied to [RSU] to study Japanese, I learned on my own for a few years. When I retired, I became a student for real. My [daughter-in-law] tipped me off to a site, www.iknow.jp, a few years ago. It was originally for Japanese people who were learning English, I think. I practiced there a lot for a couple of years and finally built up a vocabulary that was very useful when I started university later. It was free while the course was still under construction. Now it costs a little, but I have still chosen to practice there in the meantime. I also bought a lot of Japanese textbooks and read them. I became more and more fascinated by the Japanese language and had a lot of aha moments along the way.”

She enrolled in courses because she “wanted to communicate with someone else and talk to someone else because my daughter-in-law was in Japan. They have completely different time zones, so when I was awake, she was asleep and vice versa. Yes, and I came to a point where my son was, naturally, going to a language course at Folkuniversitet.¹⁵ But I thought that because I live in the countryside it would be tiresome to drive in the evening when one is tired after the whole day and so forth. So when he found out that [RSU] had distance courses he said, why not try it?”

¹⁴ Hiragana and katakana are two elements of the Japanese writing system.

¹⁵ One of several “studieförbund”, or study associations, with evening courses for adults in a variety of subjects, some of which are academic, but most of which are not. These courses charge a fee to participants and are generally taught face-to-face, though this has been changing in recent years.

Marianne was impressed by the way that the different ICT *tools* were used in the RSU courses. Although a pensioner, she was not intimidated by learning to use new ICT *tools*: “Before I started the Japanese courses I had never before learned or communicated in that way via computer. It was a challenge in the beginning. When we also had to make recordings, I had to learn to use new tools like ‘Audacity’. There was a moment of worry in the beginning, but it worked out after a number of attempts on my part. Audacity helped me be aware of my own pronunciation when I tried to speak Japanese in our dialogue assignments. It also helped me get a better ‘speech flow’ afterward.”

“And they were very pedagogical teachers also [...] I thought it was fascinating. So I had a motivation, it was never boring in any way. And I could sit and do my exercises at the same time as I put on music, I put on jazz to open up other channels. [...] And then we also had group work, so we communicate with other classmates where we applied [our knowledge] and we simply got to talk to each other [...] So that was a fun experience. I thought, I also see that this learning thing works! It’s a process. It’s clear that it can happen more slowly than when one is young, but it works.”

When learning Japanese, “You have to write with your hands, I think that’s really important. It doesn’t work to just recognize them with your eyes, all the senses need to be activated. [...] I can’t just look at a symbol and then close the book and go and write it.” Throughout the project, Marianne often drew parallels between writing and playing the piano: “it is a kind of muscle memory that gets activated.” She did not find it easy but was determined to succeed: “Learning is a process that takes time. I have experienced a lot of frustration when I thought ‘now I can write this without any model.’ If I write a couple of other characters in between my memory can be erased and I have to practice more. There is a ‘glass barrier’ all the time that has to be pushed and grabbed over and over before the character slips in and stays. At the same time I have learned to see the similarities and the groupings in the kanji that I am trying to learn.”

Marianne had a lot of reflections about the learning process: “I strengthened my sprawled-out knowledge of Japanese decisively when I gathered the courage to take the distance course at [RSU] [...] I got to think in completely different ways. It took a lot of time and energy to do the assignments, particularly the listening part and not least when one had to speak oneself. [...] Then it got easier and easier. Repetition, repetition, repetition all the time. I’m still not good at speaking freely but in any case, I can understand what I hear much more easily. I’m happy when I under-

stand dialogue in Japanese films, for example. And I can write and read quite a bit of Japanese.” She compared language learning to learning jazz improvisation, that first one has to practice certain sequences over and over and over, and then “suddenly it was like a little window opened a crack, and suddenly you notice that you just go in, and there’s some kind of flow, you discover new sides of yourself.”

Marianne articulated clear goals not only at the level of *activities* and *actions*, but also *operations*: “My goal [this term] has been to hand in [assignments] on time and not collect late assignments which can be overwhelming at the end of term”.

By the end of 2013, Marianne had achieved one of her primary goals, to be able to communicate with her in-laws: “Now they can answer in Japanese when we communicate by e-mail sometimes. I wrote a new year’s letter to them by hand to them in Japanese. It took a lot of time to put it together, but it worked. It was a challenging but stimulating exercise. I think it’s important to communicate as well as possible for my grandchild’s sake.”

By summer 2014, Marianne had completed 75 university credits in Japanese, the equivalent of two and a half terms of full-time coursework. In the final term she was enrolled in a full-time course load in Japanese, which became stressful, and so she decided to take a break from courses at RSU. She wrote: “I have gained the tools so that I can continue on my own now with regards to Japanese. I’ll continue to practice kanji. And read through my Japanese ‘textbook library,’ which has become comprehensive. So that was the last course in Japanese for now, in any case.”

It was at this point Marianne decided to take up Portuguese, “because my daughter’s significant other is Brazilian, and his family doesn’t speak any English. I don’t have any preexisting knowledge at all, so I don’t know how it’s going to go. But I want to try [...] It was a sense of fairness that I had tried with Japanese and then the Brazilian person came into the picture, so I thought I have to be equal. It was actually a joke at first, that I said, ‘now I have to learn Portuguese too’ [...] but then I thought, maybe I have to do it now.” She began in autumn term 2014.

In mid-November 2014 she wrote: “It is really fun to learn a whole new language. I didn’t study Spanish, but rather French in secondary school. I can’t speak French at all. We didn’t get that kind of practice then. There is a big difference between how it was to study Japanese and manage to do all the assignments and Portuguese. [...] It is also significantly easier to comprehend a text in Portuguese than in Japanese. My sister tipped me off

to a Brazilian TV-series with 100 episodes that started a few weeks ago on [public television]. It's on every weekday. I try to follow the dialog and see what I understand when the language is spoken in a normal way."

In late January 2015, she wrote: "Portuguese went well in the first term. I passed everything. I haven't been especially active during the break but I'm going to take it up again now. It is fantastic to discover that it's possible to follow along a bit in a new language. It is easier to understand texts than to understand spoken language so far. But it's just a matter of grabbing on to a few words that you understand and trying to understand the whole. It's like a puzzle where there are individual pieces in place and it's possible to imagine what it's getting at, in any case. Now I'll continue to fight on with term two."

At the end of the project, Marianne was hoping to make use of both Japanese and Portuguese: "I would really like to go to Japan to be able to see how I can handle Japanese there, and the same thing with Brazil. [...] I think it is significantly easier to be in a country and be able to feel a little safer because when one isn't dependent on other people to explain things to one, but that one can understand things oneself. And that one can manage in daily life when it comes to buying tickets, going to restaurants, etc. And then I don't know if there's one more term of Portuguese, but in that case, I would do that too [...] Yeah, we'll see how it goes."

5.6 Helena: "It's like they're asking me not to be myself anymore at all"

Helena, a native French speaker, was in her mid-40s at the start of the project. She was enrolled in Swedish courses via distance at RSU in autumn 2013. She had met her Swedish spouse in another country where they were both working and moved with him to Sweden three years earlier. Their mutual language was English, which Helena found taxing to speak. Before moving to Sweden, she had heard that people spoke English well and she thought she could continue her career in Sweden, but that turned out to be more difficult than anticipated.

Helena's goals for learning Swedish were to be able to manage daily life in Sweden. However, she found herself unmotivated to learn the language. Answering the initial questionnaire, she wrote: "I'm sorry, I don't think my answers are that interesting for you as I have a problem with the language I'm learning. I should be more advanced by now after 3 years living in the country, but I block completely with the sound of it, it sounds silly but there is something very emotional with languages. I guess I'm not that

much a "Germanic languages" person as I had the same problem to learn Dutch (never entered my mind!). Probably the fact of feeling homesick doesn't help either. The only thing that helps me is to take a more linguistic standpoint, it's much more neutral and engages only the mind and that makes me feel more comfortable but then it's not that useful to speak! I like the fact that our teacher at [RSU] was having a linguistic approach during the course."

Before enrolling in the course at RSU, Helena had engaged with Swedish language learning in several ways. First, she tried self-study with different types of software: Babbel, which she said was "not too bad," Rosetta Stone, which was "really bad", and finally Safir (a free online course for immigrants), on which the recorded voices sounded "terribly irritating." Following her self-study experiences she attended Swedish for Immigrants courses for three months, which she found "inadequate": "It's the structure and the program that makes it lame, not having learned anything about food after 3 months is quite unbelievable for a program targeting immigrants." She had thought a lot about the pros and cons of the different software: "I disagree with the idea of teaching an adult to learn a language as kids are supposed to do it, the mind doesn't work the same way anymore, at least for me. [...] I found the fact of having images (pictures actually) to illustrate the vocabulary very helpful compared to just a list of words or sentences, it makes things more alive. [...] Babbel has also a speech recognition software that is supposed to help people practice their pronunciation, but it doesn't work that well as it validates only the exact Swedish sound that is sometimes impossible to reproduce, a bit more tolerance would make it much more useful I think."

Helena had a lot of previous experience with language learning and a number of reflections on what works and does not work for her. She preferred a very academic approach to language learning, with detailed explanations about grammar and "the context in which expressions can be used, the subtleties of the language and the culture behind, it makes it richer." She emphasized repeatedly the importance of a teacher who could explain things in just the way she wanted them explained, but also acknowledged that such preferences were very individual.

She felt uncomfortable doing oral exercises before having built up a substantial vocabulary through reading and writing: "I like to write texts; they give me the time to think about what I want to express, and I can check a dictionary to find the right word." She felt her reticence to speak was largely due to being an "introvert". These issues extended to the RSU

course, where students were placed in breakout rooms on Adobe Connect to practice speaking in smaller groups: “Trying to talk with other beginners doesn't go very far especially without the presence of a teacher to help and correct the mistakes (the teacher comes in the ‘room’ from time to time but it's not the same as a real meeting). [...] Something that makes it difficult on [Adobe Connect] is not seeing people, there is no facial expression, no body language, it's very impersonal and it's not comfortable, like being deprived of one of our senses.” She felt that learning to speak Swedish would be best accomplished by talking to native speakers who were patient and slow, but by the end of the project, after having been in Sweden nearly six years, she had “only found one person who really made the effort, a person I don't know, she asked a number of questions, really simple and slow, finally I ended up being able to say much more than usual because she took the time.”

Helena felt that many of her difficulties with Swedish were more emotional than linguistic. She cited her age, her dissatisfaction with the Swedish health care system, and a general disorientation as a result of migrating as contributing factors to her lack of motivation to learn Swedish: It's pretty hard to uproot oneself, then you have to put your roots in another culture when you don't speak the language, and it's kind of overwhelming [...] I found it helpful to share with a friend who has been working a lot herself with immigrants and refugees, and the symptoms I was describing to her, feeling lost, not finding my way [...] memory problems, focus problems, [...] and she was saying, well that is what I am hearing always from people migrating, especially when they are older, there is a quite long time to adapt.”

At the end of the project Helena had not continued with any kind of Swedish-learning *actions* or *operations* after the RSU course. She worked from home assisting her spouse with his business. She had tried volunteering at a shelter for homeless cats in order to engage more with Swedish society, but had to stop due to allergies. As she described it: “I left behind family, friends, a job, and well, everything, you know, life as I knew it [...] They are asking me to also let go of my language, or a language I'm comfortable in, and that's too much. I know that's not the way they view it, they just, it's kind of, well, integrating. But for me it's like they're asking me not to be myself anymore at all. And I don't really... well it's an identity thing really. [...] I know I'm not staying here. I know that I don't want to spend the rest of my life in Sweden.”

5.7 Roland: “I try not to see the problems but rather try to float by as well as I can”

Roland was in his late 30s when he enrolled in an introductory Japanese course at RSU in spring 2014. Roland moved to Japan in 2012 with his spouse, who is Japanese. He had lived in Austria for five years, where he learned a limited amount of German, just enough to get by in daily life. They moved to Japan soon after they got married because it was difficult for his spouse to find work in her field outside of Japan, while Roland “didn’t have a great interest in staying in Austria, so we said we’d test Japan instead. Because I don’t have any problems, that is beyond language problems, so to say, so I don’t have any problem moving to a new country.”

In addition to English, German and Japanese, Roland had been a SA student in the United States and had taken courses in French in secondary school and adult education (Komvux) for a total of six years as well. So he had had a number of different experiences learning languages other than his native Swedish in a variety of different situations.

Roland had been mildly interested in Japanese since childhood, when he did martial arts, had had a number of friends from Japan, and met his spouse in 2007. Before moving to Japan, Roland “had started learning Japanese 3–4 times but hadn’t had the time and/or motivation to continue,” though he later clarified: “The motivation was there, but it wasn’t teacher-led and I’m the sort that learns best in seminars. Self-study is difficult for me to force myself to do, so I gladly take teacher-led lessons, and since I hadn’t had that earlier, it became just when the mood struck me, when I had time and the desire to study. I had [...] lots of children’s books, books for first through third grade, for example. The problem was that those are only in Japanese and since I didn’t know the writing systems, hiragana and katakana, it was not super easy to go through these on my own. If I had had a teacher from the beginning, perhaps I would have come a bit further, but I can’t shift the blame here, because I could very well have sat down and done it, it’s just that my personality is a little too lazy by nature, so I don’t do much when I don’t have a teacher who instructs.”

Before enrolling in the RSU course, Roland had been learning Japanese for one year through self-study, speaking with family members, and taking a free evening course offered to immigrants in Japan. At the start of the project his learning *object* was to be able to speak fluently with his

spouse's parents and brother. Being able to carry out basic everyday life tasks in Japan was very important to him, while being able to read and understand texts and write academic Japanese were less important. He did not have a native speaker standard as his goal.

Roland had everyday exposure to the Japanese language while enrolled in the course at RSU, and he did extra self-study with “various books and some forums on the internet”, which included the textbook used his local evening course which he was taking concurrently with his coursework at RSU at the time, and a forum called transparentlanguage.com, “where I am also on a mailing list so at least once a week I get an e-mail with a few new words and other information”.

By summer 2014 he had stopped attending the local evening course, although he said later that he thought that the introduction to the Japanese writing systems he had received there had served him well when he began his courses at RSU. He had found a job and had less time for coursework, but planned to continue with self-study, as he had “plenty of material and my wife is good at stimulating me to study.”

Roland hoped to find work in Japan in his original profession, but in November 2014 he said that he had put this pursuit “to the side” because he did not have enough time for his work, his spouse, and his Japanese courses at RSU otherwise. At this point he said he was doing some Japanese grammar exercises every morning before work, practicing writing and reading kanji during his lunch break, and working on his course assignments in the evening. He said that “just now I feel that I am behind in my kanji learning so now I am focusing on that. Unfortunately I have fallen behind because we have had oral presentations and an essay, which required formal writing, something that I’m terrible at. So all my energy went to doing this, which meant that the things I really want to study have to be put to the side. A bit unfortunate, but those are the course requirements, so one just has to accept it.”

By this point in late 2014 Roland was speaking a lot of Japanese in his everyday life. Although he had one colleague at work who spoke English, and “those times when we work together, I can finally relax a little. Otherwise it’s only Japanese”. With his wife he was speaking an “unholy blend” of languages: “It is still mostly English, but we are phasing that out more and more and often speak Japanese”. He was speaking Japanese with his wife’s parents. He stated that “the toughest is speaking Japanese on the phone because you can’t see the other person. Body language is golden”.

By the end of the project, in February 2016, Roland had stopped taking courses at RSU because of the demands of his job and a schedule that made it impossible to attend the online seminars taking place in Sweden's time zone. He said that his time for self-study was also limited, but then he said that "I still have contact with one of my classmates from [RSU]. She has also taken a break in her Japanese studies, but we meet on Skype. I won't say once a week, but a couple times a month in any case [...] because it seems a little simpler when you have someone who is on the same level."

By early 2016 Roland was becoming more comfortable using Japanese in everyday life, but he found the different registers of politeness in the Japanese language difficult to navigate, particularly because he was working in a retail environment: "I work in the back office of the shop, but sometimes I have to be in the shop and then a Japanese person can come and ask me something and then I have to answer in a polite way, and that isn't too easy." Roland said that many Japanese people he encountered had an understanding of how difficult Japanese was to learn, but that it depended on the person's own experiences: "When you meet people who don't have any experience of having traveled to other countries, seen other cultures, they don't have friends from other cultures, they only have friends from [...] where they grew up. [...] I wouldn't say that that is necessarily something negative, but in my experience such people have less understanding of other cultures, that they have a harder time understanding me and they won't make the extra effort to understand me either, so there's a bit of language confusion. [...] I try not to see the problems but rather try to float by as well as I can, but it isn't always super easy, naturally."

Roland had a number of reflections about distance Japanese courses at RSU and what functioned best for him pedagogically and technologically. He seemed to most appreciate the second of three courses that he took, one which was focused on speaking skills and required him to give oral presentations regularly. The third course he took, which was focused on grammar, was at too fast a pace for him to keep up with comfortably alongside his work schedule.

Roland felt that the perfect institutional language-learning situation would be preferably on campus, but he appreciated the flexibility of distance courses and thought that they would work better in his current situation. He would prefer to be enrolled in coursework half-time alongside his work responsibilities and thought two seminars a week would be ap-

appropriate. He added that it was preferable to have a native speaker as a teacher, but that “the teacher we had in the course that the municipality arranged, they couldn’t speak English and when you come as a complete beginner, you have not even 1% knowledge of the language, then it isn’t helpful to have a teacher who doesn’t know any language besides the TL. So it was quite good at [RSU], because there the teachers used either English or Swedish beyond the course material, so to say. Then it becomes more and more, naturally, that you use Japanese and that is completely OK. But when you start a new language, then it’s more important for me that they lead the course in a common language that everyone knows, both the teacher and the students.”

At the end of the project, Roland was planning to continue his Skype meetings with his former classmate. He also expressed a strong desire to return to formal coursework if his work schedule would allow it. While he says sees himself as more or less settled in Japan, he is also willing to move to another country. He noted that he had received a very attractive job offer in an English-speaking country and that he and his spouse were contemplating moving there.

5.8 Martin: “It is actually a completely fantastic thing”

Martin, who was in his early thirties at the beginning of the project, took an introductory Portuguese course at RSU in autumn 2012. Martin met his Brazilian spouse in Sweden, and they moved together to Brazil in summer 2012 because of his spouse’s job. Before meeting his spouse, Martin was working at a job in his hometown that he did not see as a career path. They had known each other less than a year when “she asked me if I wanted to come along on an adventure and I said of course, why not. So I quit my job and sold my apartment and just went on adventure, quite simply.”

Martin’s main goals at the beginning of the project were to be able to have simple conversations in shops and to be able to communicate with his spouse’s family. Martin had not learned any Portuguese before going to Brazil and knew “maybe ten words” before moving. Shortly after arrival he enrolled in local Portuguese course for immigrants, which he called his “gringo” course, and the beginner-level Portuguese course at RSU simultaneously. He thought these parallel forms of learning were very useful: “The advantage of the [RSU] course was that I knew that my teacher [...] was from Brazil but he knew Swedish and English, so I could ask for an explanation or I could ask in Swedish or English. The whole methodology

with the course here in Brazil was that it was only Portuguese and it [...] was both a disadvantage and an advantage [...] that I couldn't get an explanation in English if I needed it, but at the same time [...] you were bombarded with Portuguese so that in the end you learned something.”

Other than his formal coursework and his use of the language in everyday life, Martin did not do anything he would consider self-study or use any kind of websites or apps designed for learning: “sometimes I snuck into Google and checked a verb or something and then also managed to tease out how I should decline that verb. But other digital resources, no.”

In autumn 2014, Martin was using Portuguese for basic everyday conversations with people in his building and in shops and restaurants and talking to his spouse's family and commenting on their Facebook posts. Most of the rest of his *operations*, such as speaking to his spouse, reading, watching films and TV series, were done in English. It was around this time that he “finally made a real Brazilian friend, because we had hung out with my wife's colleagues and they speak English, so I spoke English with them, naturally. I was never forced to speak Portuguese. But when I made this friend in September 2014 or something, he spoke very, very little English, so I was forced to speak Portuguese and my Portuguese improved somewhat unbelievably in the course of two months because of him. He helped me and I was forced to talk so I was forced to learn more verbs and stuff.”

Martin said that he generally prefers campus classes to distance classes, if the campus is conveniently located, in part because “if the technology gets messed up you can miss a lesson or miss information.” However, although he was enrolled in Portuguese courses at RSU for just one semester, it led him to discover other distance courses at RSU, so he enrolled in a distance program in an unrelated subject and completed a bachelor's degree during the project. He continued to study Portuguese at the intermediate level at the local university where he took his “gringo” course. He returned to Sweden from December 2014 to July 2015 to focus on completing his degree program. Upon his return to Brazil, Martin started working as a private teacher of English in Brazil in July 2015. He did not have a teaching degree, but neither was language teaching a choice borne solely out of necessity as it often is for people living abroad: “I've always had an interest in pedagogy and I started, actually, in 2005, a teacher training program [at hometown university]. I studied for one semester and then I got the opportunity to work full-time [in an unrelated field] so I chose that instead. So I've always been a little oriented toward the teach-

ing profession, and so, that's what one does here as an immigrant or a foreigner in [city], one, like, becomes an English teacher, that's just the way it is. I tried it and I liked it and it has been quite fun, actually”.

By the end of the project in February 2016, Martin's ability to use Portuguese had exceeded his own expectations: “It is actually a completely fantastic thing to learn a language and be able to make yourself understood and understand and be able to have friends and talk about ordinary things in another language, it's really awesome. When I started to be able to talk, it was like I said that I was Swedish, that this is what Sweden is like. The meat is good in Brazil, it's like, you say the same things every time you meet a new Brazilian. But now with my buddy here in Brazil, we talk about everything! We talk about film, we talk about computer games, about politics. We talk about Sweden; we talk about relationships. I talk with him the same way I would talk with someone at home in Sweden and maybe not equally well, but we talk about the same things and that is really freaking awesome”.

In autumn 2014 had Martin mentioned that he and his spouse planned to move back to Sweden at some point in the future. After nearly four years in Brazil, during the final interview in February 2016, Martin said that he was soon moving back to Sweden without his spouse. I asked him what he planned to do with his Portuguese in Sweden now that he had gotten to the point where he could converse comfortably: “Exactly, I've thought about that a bit and I don't want to lose it, so I'll keep in touch with my students that I had here, because they are basically my friends now. So I'll keep writing to them and maybe Skype with them and stuff. And then I thought I'd check whether there was some kind of Brazilian club or something in [my hometown] when I go back so that I can find someone to talk to there, because I want to maintain Portuguese, absolutely.” Martin was also interested in learning other languages. He had learned French in secondary school and was interested in taking it up again “because now I know that it is the same structure as Portuguese, so it would be really exciting to try it.”

5.9 Elizabeth: “You have to change your whole system every second of your life”

Elizabeth was in her mid-20s when she joined the project after taking a beginner-level Portuguese course in spring 2014. At that point she had just moved to Brazil with her Brazilian spouse and was highly motivated to master the language. She aimed to be as close to native-speaker level as

possible and even to write academic Portuguese. She wanted to integrate herself into Brazilian life completely, or as she put it, “to live here and feel like I am participating without language being a barrier.”

Elizabeth met her spouse while traveling in Asia. At the time she was completing her undergraduate degree in the social sciences at a Swedish university other than RSU. She had visited Brazil in autumn 2013 to do fieldwork for her bachelor’s thesis, and then moved to Brazil in January 2014. Before moving she “worked on my own with a textbook I had received from my then-boyfriend (now husband!) as well as three or four lessons from a Brazilian woman in my hometown [...] Her lessons weren’t great, but they gave me the possibility to keep alive the little that my husband had taught me when we met. I had also downloaded apps, looked a bit at YouTube, tried to orient myself in the grammar and read a lot before the start of the course. I was also quite interested and had a lot of difficult language questions that I wanted answers to, which my husband couldn’t answer.” Elizabeth later said that the apps that she had found at the beginning were much more useful and enjoyable than the private lessons she had taken in her hometown. She found the apps simply by going to the AppStore and searching for “Portuguese” and found “verb trainers and I don’t know how many apps I had that I didn’t like. The one I liked that I used the most was called Babbel.”

Because of this, Elizabeth felt that she had a “head start” before the RSU course, which she found easy and boring at first, but after half a term she realized that this review of previous knowledge was useful: “a lot of pieces fell into place thanks to the simple introduction, which I understood after a while. And that was nice, that I could feel secure in the language (or more secure than many others in any case) made it so that I dared to speak up during the lessons, dared to ask questions and talk, and in that way I developed more.” The second half of term became more challenging, and she really appreciated the opportunity to practice her Portuguese online even though she was living where it was spoken: “It’s difficult and tough sometimes, or quite often, to be honest, in a new country where everyone speaks a language that you don’t know. You’re not yourself, you sit quietly and listen and come across as shy and introverted. When you do talk or have conversations you get tired quickly and you feel both stupid and irritating when you don’t understand—I don’t have to feel that way during the lessons.”

Highly motivated to learn Portuguese, Elizabeth had a lot of self-study strategies from the beginning: “I listen to Brazilian music a lot and try to

translate it. In my daily life I ask my husband (who probably has sores in his ears) all the time about words, rules, phenomena, etc. More and more often, he's not able to answer. I try to speak Portuguese even with English-speaking friends. During intense discussions or longer stories I switch over to English, but I am mixing more and more. I try to always write in Portuguese (when you write you're allowed to take your time and it is completely different from speaking and I like that!) and chat via Facebook only in Portuguese with all my friends [here]. I try to read the newspaper, which feels a bit difficult, but I've bought some children's books and comic books that I read a bit now and then. Sometimes I try to read more difficult articles, such as from music magazines, but then I need help from my husband. Google Translate can't translate expressions, crazy metaphors and such. I watch very little television in Brazil, but when I watch a film in English I put on the Portuguese subtitles. Also on Facebook you learn so much from friends' links, comments, etc. at the same time as it is a completely normal free-time activity."

Elizabeth did a second full-time term of Portuguese courses at RSU in autumn 2014. She said that she enjoyed it a lot more than the first term because it was more demanding, and the teacher was able to answer her many questions about grammar. After that, she found a job and stopped taking courses at RSU, primarily because of a lack of time. She took one course in autumn 2015 but did not complete it.

By winter 2016, Elizabeth had settled in in Brazil. She had found a paid internship and had become much more comfortable speaking Portuguese, about which she had a lot of reflections: "People still hear that I make mistakes, and sometimes I feel sad when people say so in front of me, but at some point, I don't know when that happened, I simply had to accept that 'yes, OK, I make mistakes. I don't speak completely fluently. But I speak really well, and I can speak about everything with everyone. And it's freaking obvious that it's going to sound wrong sometimes. So I think I just have to accept the situation.'" She also noted that she felt that she could speak Portuguese much more freely with certain people than others but that she did not understand why.

After returning to Brazil after a longer trip home to Sweden that she felt a great leap in fluency: "When I came back, the first few days I was a little stiff, but then everything came back much more fluently so I clearly needed a break. [...] That has happened every time I have come back, I think that there has been some kind of breakthrough, but I think that one was the biggest. [...] Now I have my life here and I think that that is what

makes the difference, when you think you like the place, you have friends and you have found something to do, a life, hobby, it becomes more fun to speak Portuguese. It is no longer a fight, just a part of life, I think.”

After her two terms at RSU she had not continued institutional courses in Portuguese, but she didn't rule out more coursework in the future. She was considering doing a master's degree in Portuguese to get a formal credential since she was learning the language anyway, but also because she had maintained her motivation to try to learn Portuguese as well as she possibly could. For this, she felt that formal institutional coursework was necessary: “as an adult, I think it's this way for a lot of people, to learn a language requires a lot more, at least for me, logic, more, I need a map, I need a system, I need boxes to stuff things in. It doesn't come automatically, I have to sort the language [...] for that reason I want to continue [...] I would like to think that [formal coursework] isn't necessary [...] but the person I am in Swedish is a person who loves to read books, who is good at expressing herself in writing, who can write formally and speak formally if she really wants to. [...] And I can't be that person here until I have learned Portuguese [...] I come from a family of teachers and it has been very, very important to be able to write. So yes, I need formal study. But just because I have a high level of ambition which is sometimes unhealthy.”

If she had had the option, Elizabeth would have preferred to take classes on campus. She felt that the distance coursework was not as demanding as campus coursework and she wished she had the opportunity to meet socially with other learners. Living in Brazil, however, she was able to use her free time speaking with other people, and she also counted herself lucky that her spouse was willing to speak Portuguese patiently with her. She was, however, disappointed that her spouse hadn't learned much Swedish yet: “He probably thinks that it is easy to learn a new language because it went pretty quickly for me to learn basic Portuguese. He probably doesn't understand how much time it takes, how much thinking, and how you have to change your whole system every second of your life, or that's how I function in any case, to really learn a language quickly.”

According to Elizabeth, the most difficult aspect of learning a language is speaking: “I don't even think anymore if I write and chat in Portuguese, but when I speak Portuguese, I start thinking about what I'm saying. Not all the time, but it happens. Primarily when I am telling a story. Or when someone else tells a story, a long one, I can still lose focus if there's something I don't understand [...] It comes up a lot when you talk, when you

sit in a group and talk there are so many jokes and expressions and people take up a lot of space and speak quickly and speak a lot. That is the ultimate difficult situation, I think.”

Even though Elizabeth had reached a point where she was quite comfortable with her Portuguese, there was still a lot of English in her daily life. English was still the neutral relationship language with her spouse unless they were making a particular point of speaking Portuguese, and her boss at work had lived in several English-speaking countries and enjoyed speaking English with her. But with most of the rest of her friends, except for one “who thinks it’s irritating” to slow down for foreigners and who makes her nervous, she had switched to speaking Portuguese about six months before the end of the project, or about two years after having enrolled in Portuguese courses at RSU.

Elizabeth didn’t envision staying in Brazil forever. She was considering an opportunity to work in the Netherlands with her job (and dabbling in learning Dutch with Duolingo), which would bring her and her spouse closer to Sweden. She also said that if they were to have children it would be much easier to live in Sweden than Brazil. She really wanted her spouse to experience life in Sweden and learn Swedish. But she was very happy to be playing in the kind of band she’d dreamed of all her life, and she loved her job, so she was not eager to leave, either.

5.10 Paul: “Then of course there’s also the matter of self-discipline”

Paul was in his late 20s when the project began. Originally from southern Europe, he was living in Sweden and enrolled in Swedish courses at RSU in autumn 2013. Paul indicated that he was highly committed to living in Sweden in the long-term and integrating into Swedish society and hoped to be able to write academic Swedish and be close to native speaker level.

As an undergraduate, Paul had done an Erasmus exchange year in another Scandinavian country. He ended up in Scandinavia because he wanted something different from southern Europe, noting that many students from his home country choose to do SA in a neighboring country. He had already considered continuing his master’s studies in Scandinavia when he met his Swedish partner elsewhere in Europe, so they moved to Sweden together.

Paul had taken several different kinds of Swedish: Safir (a free online course for immigrants), Folkuniversitet (a private study organization), and Swedish for Immigrants (a publicly funded language in-person course for

refugees and immigrants with non-student residence permits), which he dropped out of, but then rejoined “because I signed up again in a semi-distance course. And the platform they used was It’s Learning, and the resources that they had there, they were fantastic. [...] Then of course there’s also the matter of self-discipline... I’m not really good in self-discipline and online resources in general. But eventually I finished it rather fast because after three months the teacher said, OK, you are going to do the exam this week, so I said, OK.”

At the beginning of the project, Paul was using English more than Swedish. At the university where he was enrolled in a graduate program, he was using Swedish for administrative purposes, “general understanding and documentation” since Swedish was “the working language”, but tended to switch to English whenever possible, saying “I am not very motivated to use Swedish, simply because [...] everyone speaks English, and I can express myself much better using it.” He spoke English with his Swedish partner as well, because “it is hard to switch to another language when you spoke together in English for 2 years”.

In the second year of the project, Paul was employed by the Swedish university where he had completed his master’s degree. He was also enrolled in an intensive Swedish program at the university intended to bring learners from the beginner level to the level at which they would be allowed to take university courses in Swedish in one academic year. This course was highly intensive, and mid-year Paul reported that his schedule was very stressful: “We have a 3-hour lecture every day, around 3-4 hours of homework, one individual essay and one group essay to write every week, we also have to report a news article every day. A lot of work and I do maybe 1–2 hours at home, I do not manage to do everything. After teaching all last semester [...] at 40% employment, I started to work as a project assistant for a [...] grant and that sucks all my afternoon, I start to work at 12 and I usually finish at 18 or 19.00.”

Paul found that full-time coursework plus full-time paid work was too much, and he quit the intensive Swedish course about halfway through the second term: “really I could not manage, because we had four hours of lectures every day, every single day, plus group exercises twice a week in the afternoon, and a huge amount of readings and things to prepare for each day. It was really at least 8 hours a day of work.” This, however, allowed for the growth of his career, and by the end of the project he was working full-time at the university.

Later, Paul said that the intensive course at the university where he worked was the best of all the different ways he had learned Swedish: “And still I would say that’s the best course I’ve ever done. Even though I could not put much effort, even if I had to skip many home assignments, still, I was rather fluent when I finished the level five. I could write properly, I read Hundrårången,¹⁶ the book, completely in Swedish with no big issues, I could watch movies in Swedish. My Swedish got much worse afterwards when I dropped and I stopped using it. But at that point I was using it every day. And I also had fantastic books. [...] We did work a lot with text. Basically the first four levels you do all grammar, and you build up your vocabulary up to two thousand five hundred words, and then after that we almost do not touch any grammar, it’s only working with texts.”

Midway through the project, Paul described the mix of languages in his daily life: “If I look at a typical day, I would say that I spend 6–7 hours a day of Swedish, the same amount of English and a very tiny part of Italian, 45%+45%+10%. However, the use of language is different. Aside from studying, I use Swedish for simple things such as shops, some emails, public administration, while English covers my work environment, I find rather hard to start using Swedish at work, I just feel incapable to fully express myself. [...] I use Facebook mainly in English, very rarely I write in other languages [...] I am also lazy at home, my girlfriend is Swedish, but we met some years ago when we had only English as a common language, it is rather hard to change habits. It is also part of the problem of Sweden, the country has a high proficiency level of English and I simply find no advantages in switching to Swedish, I end up keeping Swedish as a ‘university language course’ instead of a ‘daily use language’.”

At the end of the project, Paul was not actively doing any self-study or institutional coursework in Swedish: “I mean I don’t have physical energy or time. I mean I just came back from work, and from last year I started to actually come back home at a normal time. So I do not do anything. I really wish to go back to Swedish, but I find it a bit useless for me to go back to studying formally Swedish when maybe I have to skip every second class. So I kept postponing that. I have to say that grammar rules are clear, I think I’m rather good with grammar, my only issue is vocabulary and practice. Those things improve with just talking with people.”

¹⁶ The novel *The Hundred-Year-Old Man Who Climbed Out the Window and Disappeared* by Jonas Jonasson.

At the end of the project, Paul wasn't sure what the future held for his learning of Swedish. He thought that he would like to take the TISUS¹⁷ test, but that he would need to do some more work before doing that. However, his career was more of a priority for him, and he and his partner were also expecting a baby, but "if I find that in one semester I have a bit more time, then I will probably start again to study Swedish, even privately at Folkuniversitetet. That's no problem."

Reflecting on his language learning experiences, Paul described the ideal language course as being intensive, 2–3 classroom hours per day, campus-based with access to lots internet-based resources "to do exercises online, where you can check the answers, check the explanation of why the answer is so, some listening exercises with questions, dictations, this kind of different things that you could do at the same time in the classroom but maybe you wouldn't have time. Computers make it just so easy. I mean, you write something, you click a check button, it tells you if it's right or wrong."

Paul thought computer apps were a good compliment to teacher-led courses but would never replace them: "I tried both Babbel and Duolingo on my phone. I think they're good to keep your exercise going, but [...] in my opinion you cannot really learn the language through an application like this. It's just a good assistant to your learning. I actually tried another thing called Quizlet [...] I think people also have different ways of learning, it's not that everyone is learning the same way. I would say that a teacher should somehow address you towards the best way you have to learn a language. [...] I do perceive the modern, or more modern at least, way of teaching, you do not just focus on grammar and just talk about grammar and structure, but actually to start from the very beginning in using the language with basic elements. So that I definitely see it as extremely efficient. And I mean, online tools are just an extension of that."

"In my experience, it is very hard to say what is right and wrong because languages are different. For me it was very different to study French, where I mostly wanted to learn structure and grammar, than learning Swedish, where my main issue is actually vocabulary, it's not really grammar. So it is very individual. And that also a problem in a society where

¹⁷ TISUS is the Test in Swedish for University Studies, which fulfils the university enrollment requirement for Swedish language proficiency for those who do not have the necessary credits in the Swedish language from a Swedish upper-secondary school.

the budget of education keeps being cut, you have bigger and bigger classes, which makes the experience of a student of languages especially harder. The more students in a class, the less time the teacher has for you. And I think individual support is still extremely important in education. That's maybe something to consider."

5.11 Mats: "It's about the memorization grind and working your behind"

Mats was in his late 40s when he began learning Mandarin in 2014. Originally from Finland, he had lived in Sweden and the United States and considered his skills in Swedish and English to be equal to his native Finnish. Mats was very highly motivated to learn Mandarin at the beginning of the project. Although he didn't have an interest in writing academic texts or aiming for a native speaker standard, he was determined to be able to use Mandarin in all aspects of personal and professional life.

Mats was enrolled at RSU for a very short time. He was originally motivated to take courses at RSU even though he was living in China because "getting an additional degree was tempting. I also thought that I might get some additional knowledge around linguistics that would be both interesting and useful." Although he described the courses as "quite good and professional, the teachers were very nice and knowledgeable" he had serious problems accessing the ICT *tools* necessary to do coursework by distance from within China—the broadband speed was too slow for the Adobe Connect sessions and he needed to use a VPN in order to access YouTube, on which there were videos that he was to watch as part of the course assignments—so he left the courses mid-term and focused on his coursework at the local university where he was living in China. He wrote, "I still think that training over internet is very useful, but classroom still beats the virtual one. Also, just like in classrooms, smaller the group the better. I initially thought that it wouldn't matter where the distance education came from, but I was wrong—the closer the better, due to technical and political reasons."

He was in China because he had "decided to quit my job, sell or get rid of everything and pack two suitcases and do something else with my life." He had weighed over many different options when deciding where to go. Europe and the United States were not new enough to him to be interesting. He had read that China and Thailand tended to top lists of quality of life and value for money for ex-pats and decided that living in China would be the bigger challenge. Furthermore, he already personally knew

several people who had lived in China, and China's large population and increasing international clout made it a particularly interesting place to be.

At the beginning of the project Mats said that his plans were flexible, but he could imagine staying in China long-term: "I love the experience and for some reason I connect well to people here. Despite of all the expat blogs ranting about the daily horrors of being in China I find very little, really nothing at all, to complain about. I am not glorifying the experience either, but one needs to accept that things are quite different. [...] Anyway, I will probably move to [another city] next term to study more."

Although he had praise for Pleco, a dictionary app, Mats felt very strongly that the best *tools* for learning Mandarin were pen and paper: "I was actually completely thrown off in the beginning. I actually thought that I could get by not learning to write by hand. The computer and smartphone would do the job. I thought that if I knew the pinyin and was able to recognize/differentiate the characters I would be fine. I was going to use word lists, apps and smartphone flashcards for recognition, but I had really hard time getting to recognize the characters, and they would not stay in my memory. I spent a lot of time creating tools for learning while the best one for me personally would be on my desk already, a pen and plain paper. I learned some calligraphy and hanzi, the basic strokes with their beautiful and strange forms, hooks and crooks, and started writing down all the words that I didn't recognize. At first once, correctly, with the right strokes and then I would write them a few more times until I would remember them. I go through the papers again later on since I still forget some of the strokes. Now I actually remember the words, they somehow come alive when you do them the old-fashioned way."

The importance of pen and paper for learning the Chinese characters was a theme he returned to again and again in subsequent interviews, but later in his project, he said that "I notice that as the learning progresses, word lists and smartphone apps are starting to work now as well. It seems like different things work in different phases and learning styles are individual."

In summer 2014, Mats was planning a move to a larger city in China. He was also reconsidering resuming his coursework at RSU, despite his earlier technical problems. Although he was now able to access YouTube, which was one of the problems that prevented him from completing assignments for his RSU course, he had reservations about public sector institutions relying on "very commercial actors, like Microsoft, Google, Facebook and YouTube. They can be used a lot, but one shouldn't have to

depend on them. I liked Memrise too until I realized that their system is not so suitable for Chinese, Japanese or Korean. Their system does not accommodate all the aspects of these languages.”

At the end of the project, in early 2016, Mats seemed well-settled in the city he had moved to in 2014, which he referred to as his “new hometown.” He had chosen it “based on the campus location and language department, rather than just choosing a famous university with a satellite campus way out from the city life. It is important to me and my study to be downtown in a thriving, vibrant city.” At that point he had been actively learning Mandarin for a total of 20 months, not including university breaks, and was happy with his progress: “I can speak quite a bit, read quite lot, and communicate things that are not complicated. I intend to keep on studying. China has a standard learning program for long term Chinese.” Nevertheless, he had not yet reached the goal he had set for himself at the beginning of his learning process: “I’m not ready to start competing in Chinese with native speakers. Instead, I would like to learn more about how people do business in China, hands on. I will keep on studying [here] and start looking for part time projects involving Sweden, Finland and China. I love [this city] ... it is an affordable, vibrant, thriving metropolis that has a lot to offer.” In hindsight, he wished that he had chosen his “new hometown” from the beginning of his learning process and felt that he would have progressed more quickly if he had lived in a shared apartment with Mandarin speakers.

Mats continued to use the Pleco dictionary app and had added Quizlet.com to his digital repertoire, which he described as “very good for memorizing Chinese characters and words.” He had done a great deal of reflection on the language learning process, and he was skeptical of methodologies and technologies that claim to revolutionize learning: “Like the Chinese often say, reading more, listening more, writing more and speaking more are keys to improvement.” He felt that “classroom teaching is great, and if you are lucky you will get a teacher that motivates and inspires” but that “just about everyone can do it, it’s about the memorization grind and working your behind. At first, focus, sit and study, then get out and use the language.” He also emphasized that the learning process is different for each individual and that there is no one-size-fits-all solution to make learning easier or more efficient: “I also think that individualized study method counselling would have encouraged and benefitted most students.”

5.12 Tessa: “It just never let me go”

Tessa, a woman in her early 30s, was living in her home country in continental Europe, and had never visited Sweden as of spring 2016, but didn't think it at all unusual to enroll in distance courses at a Swedish university: “I did not worry for one second whether the quality of education would be good. From my point of view the Scandinavian countries have organized things as education, childcare etc. on a higher standard.” Tessa began taking Japanese courses at RSU during the 2013–2014 academic year. She was very ambitious at the start of the project, aiming for a native speaker standard. She was also the only one of the 12 *subjects* in the project who was planning to get a degree in the TL.

Tessa's interest in Japan began in 2006 when she was doing a bachelor's program in history: “I did a minor about Japan. During one class, media such as film and manga were discussed. After that class I got home and looked for manga online. I selected an image to use as a wallpaper on my PC. My brother came by and recognized the image from anime. He gave me a hard drive with the first 90 episodes. After 5 episodes I was hooked. In the following years I watched a lot of anime and started reading manga. I got more and more interested in the culture and the language.”

She said that she thought that people who chose to learn Japanese often had more specific interests in mind than learners of many other languages: “I think everybody who is studying Japanese, [...] they have some sort of interest either in gaming or anime or manga. And there are a few [whose] interest is from a more linguistic point of view. I'm not sure if we're all like nerds or something, but everybody has some kind of passion for something Japan-related.”

Her interest in Japanese culture led her to travel to Japan, before which she took an eight-week private course in Japanese. She visited in 2009 and again in 2010, and “after that it just never let me go. Just hearing Japanese expats talk made me eager to learn the language. I just needed peace of mind take up a new study again.” The only Japanese language program near her was focused on history and culture as much as language skills, and having “already acquired a bachelor in history, and even though I felt that was a very interesting study I really didn't like doing all the research. And I knew I just wanted to have a really practical education. [...] That was when I found [RSU].”

She had found RSU by searching online. First, she found university programs in Japanese in the UK, which she ruled out because of the cost and

the requirement that she relocate, “and then at some point there was, I think I added like “distance course” and then Sweden came up and I remember there was one website that showed all the distance programs in Sweden and I think somehow I found my way to [RSU].”

Tessa gave very detailed descriptions of the different sorts of resources she was using: “Flashcards: <http://orangeorapple.com/Flashcards/>, Flash card apps (Flashcards Deluxe); Studybooks: all the books from Taeko Kamiya are useful. Oxford Japanese Grammar & Verbs; Japanese Verbs and Essential Grammar (Lampkin); Kenkyusha's Furigana English–Japanese Dictionary; Kodansha's Basic English Dictionary; Essential Japanese Verbs (Coscom) and accompanying app.” Additionally, she read manga and watched anime and Japanese drama.

Tessa’s described how she located these different resources by spotting things on discussion forums for learners of Japanese, and “so you start searching and searching and that’s how I always find everything. [...] I think I developed [my awareness of my language learning needs] partly because of previous studies. But too be honest, simply getting older and being able to reflect better upon what works for you and what doesn’t has helped me to approach my study in a different way. I feel that if I had the same awareness when I went to uni when I was 18, I would have been able to study so much more effectively.”

She described a very intensive learning regime: “Because I use the app on my iPhone, I study flashcards whenever I get the chance. Before sleeping, when waking up, when commuting or travelling, even on the beach. When studying grammar, or writing, I do that mostly in the evening after work. When studying grammar, I need to be alone in a room, so this requires some planning. Writing practice is easier because I don’t mind my partner watching tv or listening to music. When practicing conversation (mostly on Skype, sometimes Connect) I want to be alone as well.”

This level of discipline required a lot of planning and scheduling, and her social life was affected as a result: “This also means I currently don’t see my friends and family a lot. But everybody understands. It took some time getting used to for my partner and his family though. [...] Currently I have so little time for anything but work and study that all social activities are cut to a minimum. Whereas it would be good to make Japanese friends and acquaintances and speak Japanese on a regular basis.”

This pace eventually became unsustainable, and a year later Tessa had switched to part-time coursework. Furthermore, the company she had been working for went bankrupt, so she was no longer employed. “At that

time I was dealing with some health issues and we were moving [...] I guess everything happens at the same time. Since a few weeks [ago] I have started to feel better. I have more energy and my concentration is back as well. Furthermore, I somehow have a better idea how to approach this course. I divide and prioritize the work differently and now I don't feel so overwhelmed anymore.”

Tessa also described how she had found a degree of autonomy in her learning even though she was committed to following a formal program: “Recently I found myself being able to learn how to use a grammar dictionary. [...] I do it before class because the current teacher, she’s so fast and she explains also abstract things in Japanese, like grammar, so I do feel it helps me a lot more when I do everything beforehand. Whereas in the first year I think I would just wait and see what happens in class and after that I would just go to the textbook [...] now I do a lot more in advance. And I rely more on trying to find alternative explanations of grammar points. That helps me a lot to get a better understanding.”

Outside of coursework, at the end of the project she was using Japanese in the following ways: “Besides my studies I’m more like a passive user of Japanese, so I watch anime, and I notice that I start recognizing grammar patterns, sentence patterns and sometimes thinking like, oh wait, this translation is just off. Which is so amazing! And I watch Japanese drama, and I try, especially art-house movies, they often have Japanese movies, so I go there a lot, and last month we had the International Film Festival so that’s me then also scanning for all Japanese movies.”

She had also discovered that she was able to use Amazon.jp, even though it was in Japanese: “It’s quite easy to use, actually. So I want to order second-hand manga and read it in Japanese. [...] Sometimes I do have to hover over things like “what’s this?” but basically all the, it’s also because Amazon has like a set formula so you know what to expect, so you can actually really navigate quite easy through it.”

Another initiative Tessa was taking in her self-studies involved doing more speaking in Japanese. She planned to go to conversation practice organized by a club for Japanese women in a nearby city, but she was nervous about it: “the fact that I like taking distance classes might also be the reason why I am behind on conversational practice. Being an introvert, I like that distance classes are more structured and that there is not really a group dynamic present. But it is sometimes also an easy way not to having to communicate outside class.”

Tessa had clear plans for how she would use her abilities in Japanese after finishing her degree: “I would hope to be working in a company, preferably in a Japanese company, and that I would have to communicate in Japanese and maybe English every day and hopefully to travel a lot.” However, her motivation wasn’t purely professional: “Even if I would never use it in the workplace, for example I would never get a job in a Japanese company, for me it’s something I just want to accomplish for myself. Somehow studying this language has been very fulfilling up till now, and even, it doesn’t really need justification, it’s just something that I want to do, and it would be amazing if I can work in a Japanese company. But if for now it would already be known that I could never work there, I would still be studying Japanese.”

This section was intended to illustrate how unique a person’s PLE can be in order to contribute to an understanding of the technological, institutional, and social conditions that affect language learning and the different ways that adults can undertake the *activity* of language learning within these conditions, with a particular focus on the *change over time* feature of AT. Because each *subject’s* PLE is unique, I refrain from attempting to provide any kind of summary here. However, in the sections to follow, I discuss the narratives first in terms of the AT framework and then in relation to the previous research explored in section 2.

6. Analysis II: Personal Learning Environments in an Activity Theory Framework

The purpose of this report is to contribute to an understanding of the technological, institutional, and social conditions that affect language learning and the different ways that adults can undertake the *activity* of language learning *over time* within these conditions. In the preceding section, the material from interviews with 12 *subjects* was used to construct narratives of their language learning processes to illustrate the development of *subjects’* learning *activities, actions, and operations over time*, a key feature of an AT analysis (Wertsch 1981, pp. 26–27). In this section, the narratives in section 5 are analyzed and organized explicitly in terms of the AT view of PLEs proposed by Buchem et al. (2011) described in section 2 (*subjects, objects, tools, rules, community, and division of labor*). Further, the developmental perspective illustrated through the narratives in section 5 is condensed by summarizing the changes that took place over two to four years.

6.1 Subjects

In the AT view of the PLE described by Buchem et al. (2011), the *subject* of the *activity system* is the primary actor or agent. In this report, all the *subjects* were enrolled in university language courses taught by distance at one particular university, but only four of the 12 were full-time university students, only one of those four was enrolled in a degree program in the TL, and that one *subject* had already earned a bachelor's degree in another field. The remainder of the *subjects* included pensioners, working people who were learning in their spare time, and/or people who had moved to another country because of personal relationships. In other words, most of the *subjects* in the empirical part of this report are not what might be considered traditional university students, and they bring a diverse set of life experiences to their language-learning processes, which is reflected in the other features of their *activity systems*, described in sub-sections 6.2–6.6.

6.2 Objects

As described in section 2, Buchem, et al. (2011) define the *object* of an *activity system*/PLE as that which gives “direction to an activity” (p. 3). In the simplest terms, the original *object* of the PLEs of all the *subjects* described in section 5 was to learn, or improve existing knowledge of, a foreign language. The narratives reveal that what this really means can be quite different for different learners. For Helena, Martin, and Roland, the *object* when they enrolled at their course at RSU was to be able to carry out basic life functions in the country in which they were living. Elizabeth, Paul, and Mats were also living where the TL was spoken, but were more ambitious, striving to be engaged in local life to the same degree as a native speaker of the language. Mats can also be said to have a similar goal to James, Christina, and Stefan when they enrolled at RSU: they all had plans to travel to a country where the TL was spoken and wanted to get the most out of their trip.

James and Marianne, both pensioners, described their language learning as an alternative to Sudoku for keeping their brains nimble. Self-enrichment probably applies to all the *subjects*, but most especially to Christina, who used her “alone time,” which she and her spouse allotted themselves as new parents, for learning Russian, and to Albin and Tessa, who were driven by their interest in Japanese culture. Interestingly, Albin and Tessa can be seen as being at opposite ends of the spectrum when it comes to their formal coursework *objects*; while Albin was enrolled in

institutional Japanese courses for just one term, Tessa was working toward a bachelor's degree in the language. Finally, Martin, Roland, Elizabeth, and Marianne had achieved the goal of being able to talk to their in-laws after they or someone in their family married someone who had the TL as their NL.

6.3 Tools

In Buchem et al. (2011), the *tools* of an *activity system*/PLE are what “mediate an activity to achieve a desired outcome” and contribute to the facilitation and customization of the *activity*. Since all the *subjects* were enrolled in beginner-level language courses at RSU before joining the project, they had one set of *tools* in common: the university's learning management system, Fronter; video conferencing software, Adobe Connect, and e-mail application, WebMail. The courses also required the *subjects* to acquire textbooks, and, in some cases, use freely available commercial websites and applications, such as Audacity, Skype, and YouTube. The latter actually contributed to Mats's decision to discontinue his coursework at RSU, since he had difficulty in accessing YouTube from behind China's firewalls. He also experienced significant delays when trying to participate in synchronous seminars on Adobe Connect, a problem cited by several other *subjects* as a drawback to courses at RSU. Helena also expressed a common critique of online seminars, that the limited view of facial expressions and body language made the communication impersonal. All of the *subjects* said that they thought campus courses were preferable to distance courses, but most also noted that distance courses were the best option available to them in their current life circumstances. Marianne and Tessa even expressed that they enjoyed the online environment at RSU.

With the exception of Martin, who said he did not seek out additional *tools* beyond the assignments in his institutional courses except for the occasional Googling of a word, all the *subjects* had sought out a wide variety of online resources and smartphone apps both to support their institutional coursework and for self-study purposes. The *subjects* learning Japanese and Mandarin, in particular, described a number of different apps for learning how to write, but were divided on the utility of such apps. Mats and Marianne felt strongly that the only way to remember the characters was by writing them by hand, over and over, while Tessa and Albin were particularly fond of an app called Skritter. James had deprioritized writing Chinese characters completely, as he was primarily

interested in being able to speak; when he decided to take an HSK proficiency test, he chose a testing center in another country that where the writing portion of the test could be done on a computer, rather than by hand.

Though Mats and Marianne were the most insistent on pen and paper as the best technology for language learning because of the demands of learning an entirely new writing system, all of the *subjects* used a mixture of digital and analog *tools* for learning. When Albin, the youngest of the *subjects* and a computer science student, mentioned that he liked reading the novels of Haruki Murakami, I asked him if he read paper books or e-books, to which he (almost indignantly) replied that he read novels on paper only.

Many of the *subjects* saw internet search engines (that is, Google) as an integral part of their language learning. Tessa, who had no other connections to Sweden, used Google to find RSU in the first place, as well as to find other resources she saw other learners mention on online forums. James also described doing a large amount of searching online to find all possible free or nearly-free resources for learning Mandarin.

Google Translate was also mentioned by several informants, but mostly as a rarely used *tool*. Albin used Google Translate to support himself in reading the blogs of Japanese heavy-metal musicians, which was one of the ways he continued to engage with the Japanese language when he was no longer enrolled in formal coursework.

6.4 Rules

The *rules* of a PLE as defined by Buchem et al. (2011) are the “norms, conventions, [and] values” that affect the *activity system*. Several of the *subjects* expressed that some of the tasks (*operations*) they were expected to do in their RSU courses were done only for the sake of the courses, as they seemed far removed from their personal learning *objects*, as mentioned in section 6.2. Others, like Tessa and James, noted that they chose to enroll in courses at RSU in part because the courses were better matched to their own goals. For Tessa, it was avoiding a program focused on Japanese history and culture when what she really wanted to do was focus on language proficiency. For James, it was doing as much speaking and as little grammar and writing as possible.

Most of the *subjects* in the current project were interested primarily in language proficiency and not in the TL as an academic subject with accompanying coursework in linguistics or literature. Most were combining

coursework with other responsibilities and were not full-time students at RSU. These are the kinds of learners for whom evening courses at a study organization are designed. Why, then, did the *subjects* choose to enroll at RSU? Many of those who were living in a country where the TL was spoken were also taking a local proficiency course for immigrants. However, those who were in Sweden also cited the convenience of distance courses, the opportunity to earn university credits, even if they didn't necessarily plan to use those credits toward a degree, and, perhaps most importantly, the fact that university courses in Sweden are free for European citizens, while study organizations charge fees (albeit modest). The structure of the Swedish welfare state was a factor in other ways as well: for Christina being on paid parental leave was a key factor in her decision to enroll in a language course at RSU.

At the same time, the timing of the courses at RSU was a constraint for several of the *subjects*. Mats, Roland, Martin, and Elizabeth, who were all living a number of time zones away from Sweden, cited the awkward timing of the obligatory synchronous seminars as one of the reasons why they had eventually discontinued their coursework at RSU.

The fact that many of the *subjects* were employed while learning was also a constraint. For Tessa, her employer's bankruptcy halfway through the project meant that she lost her job, but she was able to collect unemployment benefits for at least some time, which meant that she was free to devote herself to her coursework full-time. It is important to note that if she had been a resident of Sweden, she would not have been allowed to enroll in university courses while receiving unemployment benefits; she would have had to finance her living expenses through the Swedish stipend-and-loan system, which may not have been possible if she had already used up her limit of stipends and loans when she obtained her first degree.

6.5 Community

Buchem, et al. (2011) define the *community* feature of the PLE/*activity system* as a "larger group in which the subject participates." As mentioned, several *subjects* cited talking to their in-laws as one of the goals of their language learning. Five of the 12 *subjects*—Helena, Paul, Martin, Elizabeth, and Roland—had a spouse or partner who was a native speaker of the TL. Additionally, Marianne chose to learn Japanese and then Portuguese because they were her children's partners' NLs. That is to say, half of the *subjects* had direct personal connections to speakers of the TL. The

degree to which this was an affordance or a constraint, however, varied. Elizabeth was unique in emphasizing how patient her spouse had been in helping her to learn Portuguese, speaking very slowly and deliberately. The others tended to continue speaking the common language that they had had when they first met their partners, which, in all cases, was English.

Those who were living in a TL environment—Helena, Paul, Elizabeth, Martin, Roland, and Mats, as well as Stefan, for part of the project—engaged with the surrounding *community* in very different ways. Helena, who described herself as extremely introverted, said she worked from home and had as little to do with Swedish society as possible. In contrast, Paul, who was also in Sweden, was eager to learn Swedish, but he worked in an international environment in which English was the primary language. Martin worked as an English teacher, but by the end of the project was using Portuguese to explain concepts to his own students and had made local friends with whom he spoke only Portuguese. Roland used Japanese at work, but found it a bit of a struggle, and the demands of his job did not allow for a lot of other socializing. Mats and Elizabeth prioritized engaging with local people and making friends, though Elizabeth lamented the amount of English that was used in her workplace. Stefan, while on his SA program, did a lot of socializing with other international students in English, but also made use of his Japanese as much as he could and was very proud of his ability to connect with people at the end of his exchange year.

Some of those who were not living where the TL was spoken, or who did not have family members who spoke the TL, sought other ways of connecting to the TL *community*. James, in particular, had actively searched for and found several Chinese language partners online, and he spoke with them on Skype on a weekly basis. Stefan had maintained contact with some of his classmates from RSU, and after returning from his exchange year had both virtual and face-to-face meetings with them as well as some of the other international students he had met in Japan. He, Tessa, and Albin were avid consumers of Japanese cultural products. Stefan read manga, Tessa watched anime, and Albin listened to Japanese heavy metal bands and followed their blogs. Tessa, another self-described introvert, said that she knew she needed to get more speaking practice, and at the time of her final interview was planning to attend a meeting of a Japanese women's club in a nearby city.

6.6 Division of Labor

In Buchem, et al. (2011), the *division of labor* feature in the *activity system* as PLE is the role of learners, teachers, peers, and institutions in the system. In a language learning *activity system*, what can *subjects* do on their own, and what do they need others to scaffold for them? As described in section 6.3, the *subjects* in this project had unfettered internet access and several of them were in the habit of avidly Googling for new learning resources. As described section 6.5, there are also opportunities to interact with the TL *community* no matter where one is in the world. Furthermore, several of the *subjects* noted that their own language learning *objects* did not match the curricular objectives of the courses they were taking, and few of them were seeking a university degree. I asked them why, given the available affordances, they chose to enroll in language courses at RSU. All cited the importance of the role of the teacher.

A good teacher meant different things to different *subjects*. Helena, who had learned Swedish not only at RSU, but in several different institutional environments, and had been generally dissatisfied with all of them, was positive about only one aspect of her formal coursework: what she called her RSU teacher's "linguistic approach" to teaching. She also said that she did not appreciate naturalistic attempts to teach languages to adults as if they were children. Elizabeth shared Helena's view about the importance of presenting language learning material in a structured way with a linguistic perspective. Mats and Paul both said that in the ideal language learning situation the teacher has the time and the ability to understand the individual needs of each learner and provide them with appropriate materials.

Roland, Elizabeth, and Martin, who were all enrolled in local language courses for immigrants at the same time as they were enrolled at RSU, emphasized the value of having concepts explained to them in Swedish or English when they were beginners. Part of the reason they discontinued coursework at RSU was that they felt that their knowledge of the TL had reached the point where they could understand such explanations easily enough in the TL.

Nearly all *subjects* said that organized institutional coursework was important for keeping them engaged with their learning. The carrots of university credits and the sticks of assignments and deadlines helped push them forward in their language learning, and without these it is easy to put off the *operations* of language learning to another day. While *subjects* said that, in theory, they could have learned the TL with self-study alone,

they did not think they would have without a course that involved some kind of commitment to completing certain learning *operations* in a certain time period.

6.7 Change over Time

As described in section 2, a major feature of AT is that *activity* should be explained through a developmental, or longitudinal, perspective (Wertsch 1981, pp. 26–27). This was part of the purpose of presenting the *subjects'* PLEs as narratives in section 5, but here I offer a brief summary of the changes illustrated in the different narratives.

The *subjects* differed in the degree and type of changes their PLEs underwent during the course of the project and whether their experiences led to new *activities*, *actions*, or *operations*. Roland's goals when he moved to Japan were to get by in everyday life and to communicate with his spouse's family. He achieved his goals during the project and also found a job in which he sometimes had to use Japanese to talk to clients, which he found challenging. He was content with life in Japan, but not committed to living there, and at the end of the project he was considering a move to another country where he had a job offer.

Stefan enrolled in Japanese at RSU in preparation for an SA year. He felt that the courses gave him a good grounding in the language, and he was able to develop his Japanese further during his exchange year. Upon returning to Sweden, he maintained contact with classmates from RSU and planned to attend Japanese conversation practice at his local university. He would be interested in going back to Japan for a shorter period but not to live long term.

Albin was enrolled in Japanese courses at RSU for just one term and plans that he expressed throughout the project to re-enroll in institutional courses did not materialize. He did complete a term of Mandarin at another university during the project, and he continued to learn Japanese on his own and to interact with Japanese culture.

Helena was enrolled in Swedish courses at RSU for two terms. She had moved to Sweden because her spouse was Swedish but didn't like living in Sweden or the Swedish language. In some ways, she actively resisted change, because she said that she felt like integrating into Swedish culture meant giving up her own identity. On the other hand, the language learning process had prompted a lot of self-reflection for Helena, and she had a number of insights about the language learning process to offer.

Christina was enrolled in Russian courses at RSU for two terms. She had intended to continue with institutional courses after the birth of her second child but found herself with less free time than she had expected. She still had her original goal of travelling to Russia and Kazakhstan, and in the meantime, she occasionally has the opportunity to engage in self-study or speak Russian with acquaintances.

Paul was enrolled for two terms at RSU, which was one of many different institutions in which he had studied Swedish. Paul did not reach his initial *object* for learning Swedish, which was to be as close to a native speaker as possible, during the course of the project; a demanding job prevented him from finishing many of the courses he started, and the primary language of his work and personal life was English. If anything, it would seem that his PLE was in a sort of stasis, with the *tools* he was using for learning evolving slowly. At the end of the project his partner was expecting a child, so perhaps raising a child in Sweden will cause a shift in his *community*.

Tessa was in her third term of formal coursework of Japanese at RSU at the end of the project and planned to complete all the requirements for a bachelor's degree. She found the beginning of her university coursework very stressful but reducing her course load to half-time and becoming unemployed improved the situation. Her goals did not change significantly under the course of the project, but she was constantly searching for and finding new apps and other resources for learning.

Mats had just moved to China at the beginning of the project. He was enrolled in a course at a local university at the same time as he enrolled at RSU, but quickly left the RSU course because of internet connection issues that made it difficult to participate in the seminars and access course materials. He continued in formal courses at a local university. He quickly discovered that the key to success was focus and repetition and didn't see a lot of value in language learning apps. Later, however, when he had learned a certain amount, he found that vocabulary smartphone apps became useful. After one term of coursework he relocated to a new city and an urban campus which he preferred. By the end of the project he was satisfied with his progress in the language and was able to use it in daily life but had not yet reached his initial goal of being able to use Mandarin to conduct business. He still maintained this goal, but he was also simply enjoying life in what he called his "new hometown."

James was enrolled in Mandarin courses at RSU for four terms. When he felt he had taken all of the courses that offered him what he specifically

wanted—speaking skills—he discontinued his coursework and sought other ways of learning. For him, reaching higher levels in the HSK system was a motivating factor. He found language partners online and progressed in an internet-based self-study course. At the beginning of the project he was planning a trip to China, which kept getting postponed and did not take place during the project.

Marianne was enrolled in Japanese courses at RSU for three terms. She had originally chosen to learn Japanese in part because one of her children was married to a person from Japan. When another of her children got engaged to a person from Brazil, she decided to learn Portuguese. She was in her second term of Portuguese at the end of the project. It could be said that finding out about the Japanese courses at RSU also informed her of the possibility of learning other languages by distance. The fact that she was already familiar with RSU's *tools* made the decision to enroll in Portuguese courses easy.

Elizabeth had moved to Brazil with her spouse and was committed to integrating herself into local life as much as possible. By the end of the project she had reached a point where she felt she could use Portuguese in all domains of life, but she had also come to the realization that she would never feel like a native speaker and would likely always make a few mistakes. She had found work in her field in Brazil and was playing music in a band but was unsure how long she would stay there. She was starting to learn Dutch at the end of the project and also considering completing a master's degree in Portuguese, something she hadn't planned at the beginning of the project.

Martin had moved to Brazil with his spouse for an adventure, and his goals at the beginning of the project were to be able to get by in daily life and talk with his in-laws. He exceeded his own *object* and by the end of the project was able to talk quite fluently. Through the language course, he also discovered other distance courses at RSU and completed a bachelor's degree program in another academic subject during the project. At the end of the project he and his spouse were planning to separate, and he was moving back to Sweden, but having learned Portuguese he was now eager to learn more French (which he had begun learning in secondary school). He also started teaching English while in Brazil and was considering continuing to work in the field of education.

In sum, some of the *subjects* did not describe great changes in their PLEs during the course of the project; others had had life-transforming experiences. All but one had discontinued their formal coursework at

RSU, at least temporarily. Several continued active self-study in the language; others were living in TL environments but were not actively engaged in learning. While most of the *subjects* had become less ambitious in their learning *objects* during the two to four years they were contributing data, several found themselves using the language more extensively than expected. All maintained at least some contact to the TL through friends, family members, or other hobbies or interests. The narratives illustrate how for learners, language may be not just an object of a learning process but an integral part of their daily lives. They illustrate the role played by *community* in shaping people's language learning goals. Significant others can be both an affordance and a constraint in the language learning process, and the experiences that people have in TL environments can inspire a long-term engagement in a TL *community* or turn people away from that *community* completely.

7. Discussion and Reflection

In section 3 of this report, I analyzed previous longitudinal and narrative research on language learning to draw out the technological, institutional, and social conditions that affect language learning and the different ways that adults can undertake the *activity* of language learning *over time* within these conditions, using an AT framework of the PLE (Buchem et al. 2011, Wertsch 1981). In section 6, I analyzed the language learning processes of 12 university students learning languages by distance at RSU using the same framework. In this section, I bring these two analyses together to create a more robust picture of language learners' PLEs and processes. I end the section with a reflection on how the methodological choices made can have affected the results.

7.1 Discussion of Results in Relation to Previous Research

The *subjects* in the previous research came from all around the world, including Europe,¹⁸ North America,¹⁹ Asia,²⁰ and Australia,²¹ and com-

¹⁸ Alred & Byram 2002, Busse 2013, Busse & Walter 2013, Coffey 2010, Coffey & Street 2008, Kiely 2009, Klapper & Rees 2003, Korhonen 2014, Llanes 2012, Ritzau 2018, Róg 2017, Serrano et al. 2016, Stewart 2010.

¹⁹ Derwing & Munro 2013, García-Amaya 2017, Gearing & Roger 2018, Karaman & Tochon 2010, Lafford 2004, Müller 2017, Pomerantz 2010, Scholz 2017, Stewart 2010, Thompson & Vasquez 2015.

prised an age span from teenagers in secondary school to elderly immigrants, but the bulk of the research was on university students in their late teens and early 20s pursuing degrees in the TL or in a related subject like linguistics or language teaching. In the current report, the twelve *subjects* were all distance students at the same Swedish university, but they were living in different countries (one having never even visited Sweden) and ranged in age from 20 to 70, bringing a diverse set of life experiences to their language-learning processes. Only one of the twelve was on a university degree trajectory in the TL, and she was in her thirties and had previously completed an undergraduate degree in another subject.

Many of the *subjects* of the previous research were studying abroad as a part of their educational program in order to improve their language skills, while for many of the *subjects* of this report, the inverse was true; they were improving their language skills in order to carry out basic life functions in the country they were living in, to travel to a country where the TL was spoken, and/or to be able speak to new family members. *Subjects* of the previous research described the *objects* of their language learning more in terms of academic or professional achievement than to use a language for a particular purpose.

However, both the *subjects* of the current report and in the previous research cited personal enrichment as an *object* of their language learning. Previous research elucidated motivations for personal growth and development and learning for learning's sake, particularly the *subject* of Gearing and Roger's (2018) article, who identified mastery of an L2 as a personal life goal, which was something nearly all the *subjects* of the current project shared. *Subjects* in the previous research described personal transformations in terms like "sophisticated" and "cosmopolitan" (Coffey and Street 2008, Coffey 2010, Korhonen 2014).

The issue of the mismatch between personal learning *objects* and curricular objectives emerged in both the current project and in the previous research, particularly among the first-year students of German in the UK in Busse and Walter's (2013) and Busse's (2013) articles, who found curricular expectations demotivating in contrast to their secondary school language courses. The challenge of working and actively learning simultaneously was also a constraint faced by the *subject* in Gearing and Roger's

²⁰ Campbell 2016, Conroy 2016, Harrison & Thomas 2009, Nair-Prakash & Stapa 2013, Yu et al. 2018.

²¹ Håkansson & Norrby 2010.

(2018) article. Some of the *subjects* in the current project also expressed that certain course tasks (*operations*) seemed far removed from their personal learning *objects*, as described in section 6.2, while others said that they chose to enroll in courses at RSU in part because the courses were better matched to their own goals. Several of the *subjects* in the report asserted that even if their own *objects* were not well matched with the course goals, organized institutional coursework was important for keeping them engaged with their learning.

An important difference between the *subjects* of the current report and those in the previous research is that the *subjects* in the current report had enrolled in a distance university course, whereas all of the *subjects* of the previous research were learning languages in a campus or face-to-face environment. All of the *subjects* in the current report said that they thought campus courses were preferable to distance courses, but most also noted that distance courses were the best option available to them in their current life circumstances. All of the *subjects* who were not living in Europe during their studies at RSU cited the awkward timing of the obligatory synchronous seminars as one of the reasons why they had stopped taking courses at RSU. Additionally, the cost of different types of institutional learning and the ways that financing for institutional learning could be combined with other social benefits were more important for some of the *subjects* than the specifics of course curricula were.

In addition to distance learning platforms, a wide range of *tools* were used by the *subjects* of both the previous research and in the current report: digital games, LiveMocha, Skype, online grammar and translation applications, TL music, movies, magazines and books. *Subjects* in this report who were learning Japanese and Mandarin described a number of different apps for learning how to write. Most of the *subjects* saw internet search engines (that is, Google) as an integral part of their language learning, as a way of seeking out new *tools* and new ways of engaging with the TL community.

In both the previous research and the current report, the kinds of relationships and experiences that learners had with speakers of the TL, their *community* in AT terms affected their learning *objects*, and *community* was also affected by ICT *tools* and the *rules* and *division of labor* of learners' institutional learning programs. As noted in section 3.8, in previous research increases in language learners' skills in the TL were generally associated with greater amounts of interaction with TL speakers.

In the current report, half of the *subjects* had direct personal connections to speakers of the TL, and some of them were living in TL environments in situations that could be compared to the SA environments described in much of the previous research. Indeed, roommates and host families were significant for many of the *subjects* of previous research (Róg 2017, Conroy 2018, García-Amaya 2017, Alred and Byram 2002, Pomerantz 2010). As noted in section 3.7, García-Amaya (2017) suggests that more opportunities need to be created for learners to meet native speakers with similar interests, such as a more careful matching of learners with host families. Language meetups for speakers of the TL in non-TL environments were mentioned by *subjects* both in the previous research (the German club described in Busse & Walter, 2013) and in the empirical data (Stefan and Tessa).

At the same time, having significant others who did not have a direct connection with the TL emerged as a possible constraint on language learning *operations*. There is an interesting parallel between Tessa's description (in section 5) of her partner as a distraction and the *subject* of Müller's (2017) article, who spent much of his SA time communicating via social media with his girlfriend from home. The possibility of social media detracting from language learning mentioned in the previous research did not come up in the current project, likely because the *subjects* were located in the same place as their closest family members, and many had, in fact, moved to the TL environment to be with their spouses and significant others. Rather than an SA situation which removed the *subjects* from people with whom they had close emotional ties; their home community was a sort of SA community.

Both the previous research and the current report indicate that the role played by teachers and classmates is a significant aspect of the PLE. However, a difference between the results of the current report and the previous research is role played by classmates. This may be because the online courses taken by the *subjects* of this report did not lend themselves to socializing outside of class time. However, those who were not living where the TL was spoken or have family members who spoke the TL sought other ways of connecting to the TL *community*: Skype language practice with native speakers, maintaining virtual and face-to-face contact with former classmates, consuming cultural products online and off, and attending language meetups.

All the *subjects* in the current project affirmed the importance of the role of the teacher. This is congruent with the previous research as well

(Nair-Prakash and Stapa 2013, Busse and Walter 2013). However, a good teacher meant different things to different *subjects*. Some emphasized the importance of a “linguistic” approach. Several stated that in the ideal language learning situation the teacher has the time and the ability to understand the individual needs of each learner and provide them with appropriate materials.

There appear to be similarities in the ways that the PLEs of the *subjects* in the current report and the *subjects* in the previous research *changed over time*. Both experienced fluctuations in their motivation to engage in the daily *operations* associated with learning a language, and these fluctuations were often connected to the *community* feature of their *activity systems*: how they interacted with TL speakers and how their significant others who were not TL speakers drew their attention away from their studies. For the *subjects* of the previous research, the institutional structures in which they were learning were important. Certain kinds of *operations* could be demotivating (tasks and assignments not connected to the learners’ own *objects*), while success within an institutional structure (i.e. good grades) were motivating. The latter was not the case for the *subjects* of the current report, of whom all but one had discontinued their formal coursework at RSU, at least temporarily, during the course of the data collection, and none of whom mentioned grades, but who continued active self-study in the language; others were living in TL environments but were not actively engaged in learning. While most of the *subjects* had become less ambitious in their learning *objects over time*, several found themselves using the language more extensively than expected. All maintained at least some contact to the TL through friends, family members, or other hobbies or interests, something which was noted in the previous research as well (Coffey and Street, 2008; Coffey, 2010; Campbell, 2016).

7.2 Methodological Reflections

The *subjects* of this report are a small, self-selected group of students from a particular university in Sweden. Therefore, there are clearly limits to the kinds of conclusions that can be drawn from the data. As described in section 4, the purpose of this report is not to generalize about all language learners, but rather to contribute to an understanding of the technological, institutional, and social conditions that affect language learning and the different ways that adults can undertake the activity of language learning over two to four years within these conditions. The narratives illustrate the complexity of the language learning process and highlight some as-

pects of these which teachers, learners, and policymakers may not have previously taken into consideration.

As discussed in section 7.1, few of the *subjects* in this report were university students in their late teens and early 20s pursuing degrees in the TL, but rather a diverse group in terms of age, life experience, and educational goals. This is both a strength and a weakness. The fact that the *subjects* were self-selected meant that they were willing to provide detailed accounts of their language learning process, contributing to the richness of the data. However, with a different group of *subjects*, different *objects*, *tools*, *rules*, *community*, and *division of labor* in the language learning process might have emerged. I attempted to mitigate this by analyzing previous research, with a variety of different *subjects*, in which I used the same AT theoretical framework, allowing for comparison and contrast with the empirical results of this report.

At the same time, the AT framework itself has limits. As AT shaped both the kinds of questions I asked of *subjects* as well as being an analytical tool, aspects of language learning that are not covered by the categories *objects*, *tools*, *rules*, *community*, and *division of labor* are largely missing from the results. For example, as noted in section 4, Donato (2000) states that a key concept for understanding language learning processes is situatedness (p. 47). One limitation of the AT-as-PLE framework is that it does not explicitly address geography, and the data collected for this project could benefit from a different kind of analysis that takes location into account, particularly as a number of *subjects* mentioned the difficulty of participating in courses at RSU because of being in different time zones and/or behind internet firewalls. Another aspect of language learning that is not explicitly addressed by the theoretical framework is the ways that learners construct the physical aspects of their PLEs: whether they have a dedicated space to engage in learning *operations*, how they arrange the physical artifacts in that space, and so on. Moving away from physical locations and spaces, other possible approaches to analysis of the narratives could have been the “figured worlds” used by Coffey and Street (2008), mentioned in section 1, or Wenger’s (1998) concept of “communities of practice,” to describe the processes by which *subjects* became integrated into spaces inhabited by other TL learners or TL speakers.

An object of inquiry in some of the previous research, but not in the current report, was the question of identity formation. The issue of identity was, in fact, raised by the *subjects* in the current report. Helena’s statement “It’s like they’re asking me not to be myself anymore at all” and

Elizabeth's "I can't be [the person I am in Swedish] here until I have learned Portuguese" point to the significance of identity and the way that the data collected for this report could be analyzed using a different theoretical framework that incorporates identity.

As stated in section 1, the need to examine the question of what kinds of configurations adult foreign language learners' PLEs and trajectories can take is rooted in the assumption that developments in ICT are changing the kinds of *tools* that are available to learners, potentially affecting language learning processes, the role of formal education in language learning, and the role of languages in learners' lives. In section 8, I provide a summary of my findings on what adult foreign language learners' PLEs and trajectories can look like in the material and institutional context of the 2010s.

8. Conclusion

The purpose of this report is to contribute to an understanding of the technological, institutional, and social conditions that affect language learning and the different ways that adults can undertake the activity of language learning over time (two to four years) within these conditions. In this section, I provide a summary of the findings in this report to answer the question of what configurations adult foreign language learners' PLEs and trajectories can take within university distance education in the 2010s and explain how these findings are relevant to policymakers, teachers, and learners themselves.

Both the previous research and the empirical material analyzed in this report illustrate the significant role played by *communities* in shaping language-learning goals. Significant others can be the inspiration for learning a new language, and they can also be a constraint on undertaking the kinds of tasks involved with language learning. The quality of interpersonal experiences in TL environments can inspire a long-term engagement in a TL *community*, and they can also turn people away from that *community* completely. This is something for language learners to be aware of, and they may wish to avail themselves of social media *tools* to seek out speakers of their TLs who can encourage and support them in their learning *activities, actions, or operations*.

Teachers can be seen as part of this TL community, but additionally, they play an important role in defining the kinds of tasks that make language studies interesting and relevant to learners' goals. Tasks which are

not engaging for learners can cause them to change their goals and become more oriented toward being successful in their coursework than in using the TL itself, or cause learners to discontinue their studies at a particular institution and seek a learning environment that better suits their goals.

Learning institutions, in turn, exert pressure on teachers through curricula and program requirements. Other institutional structures, such as a country's social welfare system, determine how education is funded and how students cover their living expenses while learning. This can create paradoxical situations in which learners intentionally choose courses or institutions whose curricula do not match their own learning goals because enrolling in those institutions offers financial advantages over institutions with better-suited curricula. Educational policymakers in Sweden may want to consider, for example, subsidizing distance-based language courses at study organizations so that language learners who are more interested in conversational skills than academic degrees are more likely to choose the kinds of courses designed with those goals in mind, instead of choosing university courses.

Other paradoxes are created by the available information and communications technologies. While learners express a preference for campus studies, in many cases online distance courses are the only learning form that allows for a given learner to engage in institution-based learning. However, distance studies have their limits; the further a learner gets from an institution, the more difficulties they may encounter, with some online *tools* becoming inconvenient, incompatible, or unreliable across borders and time zones. Social media can bring learners in contact with TL communities from afar, but it can also keep some learners from engaging in local TL communities fully. This is something that learners could be made aware of before they enroll in studies abroad, and learning institutions may consider ways of encouraging visiting students to engage with TL communities outside the classroom that can compete with the pull of social media and homesickness.

The value in using narrative research to examine personal learning environments is that it allows details to emerge that learners, teachers, and others might not otherwise consider. To take a nearly absurd example to illustrate the point, in the empirical portion of this report it emerged that one *subject's* food allergies and another's cat allergies prevented them from fully engaging in TL environments in ways that they would have liked. This is not to imply that language teachers need to be aware of all of their pupils' or students' allergies, but rather to raise awareness of the

ways that a personal learning environment is intertwined with many different aspects of learners' lives and that inflexible, one-size-fits-all approaches to language teaching or learning may encounter unexpected hindrances.

The short answer, then, to the question of what configurations adult foreign language learners' PLEs and trajectories can take within university distance education in Sweden in the 2010s is that they can take many different configurations depending on an individual learner's own goals and personal objectives, location, and even health. Regardless of an individual's personal circumstances, however, having social relationships that encourage and facilitate language learning appears to be key to whether learners achieve the goals they set out for themselves. Learners with internet connections have access not only to the technology offered by the institution in which they are enrolled, but also search engines to find *tools* to help them learn vocabulary, to learn to write unfamiliar characters, and to connect with other TL speakers. The learner narratives in this report have also shown that institutional structures, in particular the ways that university distance education in Sweden is funded and structured has a great influence on the choices that learners make. Without the distance education option, and if university education in Sweden were not completely state-funded, most of these learners in this report would not have studied modern languages at a regional Swedish university. The value of these findings is now left to learners, teachers, and educational policymakers to decide.

References

- Alred, G., & Byram, M. (2002). Becoming an intercultural mediator: A longitudinal study of residence abroad. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 23(5), 339–352.
- Aragão, R. (2011). Beliefs and emotions in foreign language learning. *System*, 39(3), 302–313.
- Brinkmann, S., & Kvale, S. (2015). *Interviews: Learning the craft of qualitative research interviewing*. Sage.
- Buchem, I., Attwell, G., & Torres, R. (2011). Understanding personal learning environments: Literature review and synthesis through the activity theory lens. *The PLE Conference 2011, Southampton, UK.*, 1–33.
- Busse, V. (2013). Why do first-year students of German lose motivation during their first year at university? *Studies in Higher Education*, 38(7), 951–971.
- Busse, V., & Walter, C. (2013). Foreign language learning motivation in higher education: A longitudinal study of motivational changes and their causes. *The Modern Language Journal*, 97(2), 435–456.
- Campbell, R. (2016). Maintaining the Japan Connection: The Impact of Study Abroad on Japanese Language Learners' Life Trajectories and Ongoing Interaction with Japanese Speakers. *Comparative and International Education/Éducation Comparée et Internationale*, 45(2), 1–14.
- Coffey, S. (2010). Stories of Frenchness: Becoming a Francophile. *Language and Intercultural Communication*, 10(2), 119–136.
- Coffey, S., & Street, B. (2008). Narrative and identity in the “Language Learning Project.” *The Modern Language Journal*, 92(3), 452–464.
- Conroy, M. A. (2018). Contextual factors in second language learning in a short-term study abroad programme in Australia. *The Language Learning Journal*, 46(3), 311–328.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/09571736.2015.1118643>
- Cotos, E. (2012). Towards effective integration and positive impact of automated writing evaluation in L2 writing. In G. Kessler, A. Oskoz, & I. Elola (Eds.), *Technology across writing contexts and tasks*, CAL-

ICO Monograph Series (Vol. 10, pp. 81–112). Computer Assisted Language Instruction Consortium.

- Derwing, T. M., & Munro, M. J. (2013). The development of L2 oral language skills in two L1 groups: A 7-year study. *Language Learning*, 63(2), 163–185.
- Dirksen, V., Huizing, A., & Smit, B. (2010). ‘Piling on layers of understanding’: The use of connective ethnography for the study of (online) work practices. *New Media & Society*, 12(7), 1045–1063.
- Donato, R. (2000). Sociocultural contributions to understanding the foreign and second language classroom. In J. P. Lantolf (Ed.), *Sociocultural theory and second language learning* (pp. 27–50). Oxford University Press.
- Engeström, Y. (1987). *Learning by expanding*. Orienta Konsultit.
- Engeström, Y. (2006). Development, movement and agency: Breaking away into mycorrhizae activities. *Building Activity Theory in Practice: Toward the next Generation*, 1, 1–43.
- Engeström, Y., & Miettinen, R. (1999). *Perspectives on activity theory*. Cambridge University Press.
- Engeström, Y., & Sannino, A. (2010). Studies of expansive learning: Foundations, findings and future challenges. *Educational Research Review*, 5(1), 1–24.
- European Commission. (2007). *The Key Competences for Lifelong Learning—A European Framework (annex of a Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18 December 2006 on key competences for lifelong learning)*. Brussels, European Communities.
- García-Amaya, L. (2017). Detailing L1 and L2 use in study-abroad research: Data from the daily linguistic questionnaire. *System*, 71, 60–72.
- Gearing, N., & Roger, P. (2018). Ebbs and Flows: A Longitudinal Study of an English Language Instructor’s Motivation to Learn Korean. *Journal of Language, Identity & Education*, 17(5), 292–305. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15348458.2018.1465343>
- Håkansson, G., & Norrby, C. (2010). Environmental influence on language acquisition: Comparing second and foreign language acquisition of Swedish. *Language Learning*, 60(3), 628–650.

- Harrison, R., & Thomas, M. (2009). Identity in online communities: Social networking sites and language learning. *International Journal of Emerging Technologies and Society*, 7(2), 109–124.
- Hine, C. (Ed.). (2005). *Virtual Methods: Issues in Social Research on the Internet*. Oxford.
- Holec, H. (1979). *Autonomy and foreign language learning*. Council of Europe/Pergamon Press.
- Holyk, G. (2008). Questionnaire Design. In P. J. Lavrakas (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of survey research methods* (pp. 657–659). Sage Publications.
- Joinson, A. (2005). Internet Behaviour and the Design of Virtual Methods. In C. Hine (Ed.), *Virtual Methods: Issues in Social Research on the Internet* (pp. 21–34). Oxford.
- Karaman, A. C., & Tochon, F. V. (2010). Worldviews, criticisms, and the peer circle: A study of the experiences of a student teacher in an overseas school. *Foreign Language Annals*, 43(4), 583–604.
- Kiely, R. (2009). Observing, noticing, and understanding: Two case studies in language awareness in the development of academic literacy. *Language Awareness*, 18(3–4), 329–344.
- Kivits, J. (2005). Online Interviewing and the Research Relationship. In C. Hine (Ed.), *Virtual Methods: Issues in Social Research on the Internet* (pp. 35–49). Oxford.
- Klapper, J., & Rees, J. (2003). Reviewing the case for explicit grammar instruction in the university foreign language learning context. *Language Teaching Research*, 7(3), 285–314.
- Korhonen, T. (2014). Language narratives from adult upper secondary education: Interrelating agency, autonomy and identity in foreign language learning. *Apples – Journal of Applied Language Studies*, 8(1), 65–87.
- Lafford, B. A. (2004). The effect of the context of learning on the use of communication strategies by learners of Spanish as a second language. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 26(02), 201–225.
- Lag (2003:460) om etikprövning av forskning som avser människor, Pub. L. No. 2003: 460 (2003). <http://www.riksdagen.se/sv/Dokument->

Lagar/Lagar/Svenskforfattningssamling/Lag-2003460-om-etikprovning_sfs-2003-460/

- Lantolf, J. P. (2000). Introducing sociocultural theory. In *Sociocultural theory and second language learning* (pp. 1–26). Oxford University Press.
- Llanes, À. (2012). The short-and long-term effects of a short study abroad experience: The case of children. *System*, 40(2), 179–190.
- Müller, M. (2017). “As a Person, I Feel I’ve Changed Pretty Immensely”: Sojourners’ Aspirations and Self-Perceived Achievements. *Canadian Modern Language Review*, 73(1), 24–47.
- Nair-Prakash, S., & Stapa, S. H. (2013). ESL distance learners’ participation in an online forum: The interplay of contextual factors. *Advances in Language and Literary Studies*, 4(1), 100–108.
- Olivier, B., & Liber, O. (2001). Lifelong Learning: The need for portable Personal Learning Environments and supporting interoperability standards. *Bristol: The JISC Centre for Educational Technology Interoperability Standards, Bolton Institute*.
<http://ssgrr2002w.atSPACE.com/papers/14.pdf>
- Orgad, S. (2005). From Online to Offline and Back: Moving from Online to Offline Relationships with Research Informants. In C. Hine (Ed.), *Virtual Methods: Issues in Social Research on the Internet* (pp. 51–65). Oxford.
- Orgad, S. (2008). How can researchers make sense of the issues involved in collecting and interpreting online and offline data? In N. Baym & A. Markham (Eds.), *Internet inquiry: Conversations about method* (pp. 33–53). Sage Publications, Incorporated.
- Pavlenko, A., & Lantolf, J. P. (2000). Second language learning as participation and the (re)construction of selves. In J. P. Lantolf (Ed.), *Sociocultural theory and second language learning* (pp. 155–178). Oxford University Press.
- Polkinghorne, D. E. (1988). *Narrative knowing and the human sciences*. SUNY Press.

- Pomerantz, A. (2010). Speaking Spanish outside the foreign language classroom: An analysis of learner narratives. *Critical Inquiry in Language Studies*, 7(1), 1–27.
- Punch, S. (2007). ‘I Felt they were Ganging up on me’: Interviewing Siblings at Home. *Children’s Geographies*, 5(3), 219–234.
- Ritzau, U. (2018). From form-focussed to communicative: How university students change their beliefs about learning a foreign language. *The Language Learning Journal*, 46(3), 263–276.
- Róg, T. (2017). Successful L3 learning in a study abroad context: A personal narrative. *Language and Intercultural Communication*, 17(3), 288–305.
- Scholz, K. (2017). Encouraging free play: Extramural digital game-based language learning as a complex adaptive system. *Calico Journal*, 34(1), 39–57.
- Serrano, R., Llanes, À., & Tragant, E. (2016). Examining L2 development in two short-term intensive programs for teenagers: Study abroad vs. “at home.” *System*, 57, 43–54.
- Stewart, J. A. (2010). Using e-journals to assess students’ language awareness and social identity during study abroad. *Foreign Language Annals*, 43(1), 138–159.
- Swedish Council for Higher Education. (2014). *Bachelor’s level requirements*. University Admissions in Sweden.
<https://www.universityadmissions.se/en/All-you-need-to-know/1/Applying-for-studies/Entry-requirements/Bachelors-level-requirements/>
- Tanaka, M. (2010). Supporting individual learning and interactive CALL. In J. Egbert (Ed.), *CALL in limited technology contexts*, CALICO Monograph Series (Vol. 9, pp. 215–225). Computer Assisted Language Instruction Consortium.
- Thompson, A. S., & Vásquez, C. (2015). Exploring motivational profiles through language learning narratives. *The Modern Language Journal*, 99(1), 158–174.
- Vygotsky, L. (1978). *Mind in society*. Harvard University Press.

- Vygotsky, L., Rieber, R. W., & Wollock, J. (1997). The Instrumental Method in Psychology. In *The Collected Works of L. S. Vygotsky. Cognition and Language* (pp. 85–89). Springer.
- Warren, S., & Vincent, C. (2001). “ This won’t take long...”: Interviewing, ethics and diversity. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 14(1), 39–53.
- Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of practice: Learning, meaning, and identity*. Cambridge University Press.
- Wertsch, J. V. (1981). *The concept of activity in Soviet psychology*. M.E. Sharpe, Inc.
- Yu, J., Brown, G. T., & Stephens, J. M. (2018). Retrospective case studies of successful Chinese learners of English: Continuity and change in self-identities over time and across contexts. *System*, 72, 124–138.

Appendices

1. Questionnaire 2012

Language Learning and Personal Learning Environments

Welcome, and thank you for taking part in my questionnaire!

This questionnaire is a pilot study about how students use technology and how they use the languages that they are studying. You may complete the questionnaire anonymously. I would like to contact some students with more questions, so there is an optional place for your e-mail address at the end of the questionnaire.

Best wishes,
Megan Case
[contact and supervisor information redacted]

Which foreign language did you study at [RSU] in the 2011-1012 academic year? (If you studied more than one language, then choose one. You can do the questionnaire again for another language, if you wish.)

- Arabic
- French
- Italian
- Japanese
- Chinese
- Russian
- Swedish
- German
- Portuguese

Why did you decide to study this language?

[FREE TEXT ANSWER]

Why did you decide to take this course at [RSU] instead of another place?

[FREE TEXT ANSWER]

Do you plan to continue studying this language?

- Yes
- Maybe
- No

When you began the course, what were your long-term goals for using this language?

For example, do you want to travel to the country where this language is spoken? Do you want to use this language in your work? Do you want to read literature in this language?

What did you think of Fronter, the learning management system?

- It worked well
- It was OK
- I did not like it
- It was not used in my course
- Other: [FREE TEXT ANSWER]

What did you think of Adobe Connect, the platform used for online seminars ("Samtalsrum")?

- It worked well
- It was OK
- I did not like it
- It was not used in my course
- Other: [FREE TEXT ANSWER]

What did you think of VideoChat, the platform used for online lectures ("Föreläsningssalar")?

- It worked well
- It was OK
- I did not like it
- It was not used in my course
- Other: [FREE TEXT ANSWER]

What did you think of WebMail, [RSU]'s e-mail system?

- It worked well
- It was OK
- I did not like it
- It was not used in my course
- Other: [FREE TEXT ANSWER]

How important were RSU's internet-based tools (Fronter, Connect, VideoChat and WebMail) in your language learning experience? Are there other tools which you think would have been more useful for this kind of course?

[FREE TEXT ANSWER]

Besides Fronter, Connect, VideoChat and WebMail, how did you communicate with your teachers and classmates? You can check more than one box.

- Facebook
- Twitter
- Google Docs
- Skype
- Instant Messaging (e.g. MSN)
- SMS/Text Messaging
- Personal e-mail (i.e. not [RSU]'s Webmail)
- Telephone
- Postal Mail
- None of the above
- Other: [FREE TEXT ANSWER]

Besides your teachers and classmates, do you have friends or family who helped you to study this language?

- Yes
- No

Did you have the chance to use this language outside the course meetings and course assignments?

You can check more than one box.

- Yes, I did extra self-study
- Yes, I visited a country where this language is spoken
- Yes, I lived in a country where this language is spoken
- Yes, I have friends/family/colleagues who speak this language
- Yes, I read books and magazines in this language
- Yes, I used it to communicate with people on the internet
- Yes, I used it to get information on the internet
- No, I did not use this language outside the course meetings and course assignments
- Other: [FREE TEXT ANSWER]

If you did extra self-study beyond your course assignments, what did you do? You can check more than one box.

- I used textbooks/workbooks
- I created my own learning materials, like flash cards
- I used online learning materials
- I used language learning software (e.g. Rosetta Stone)
- Other: [FREE TEXT ANSWER]

Can you think of any other ways that you have used this language this year, online or offline?

[FREE TEXT ANSWER]

Besides studying this language, what did you do during the 2011-2012 academic year?

You can check more than one box.

- Student
- Parent
- Employed
- Other: [FREE TEXT ANSWER]

What is/are your native language(s)?

[FREE TEXT ANSWER]

What other languages can you speak?

[FREE TEXT ANSWER]

What year were you born?

[FREE TEXT ANSWER]

What is your gender?

[FREE TEXT ANSWER]

Thank you very much for completing the questionnaire! If you are willing to be contacted for follow-up questions, please enter your e-mail address below.

[FREE TEXT ANSWER]

2. Questionnaire 2013

Language Learning Online and Offline

Welcome, and thank you for taking part in my study!

This questionnaire is part of my PhD dissertation project in educational science about how language learners use technology in their learning as well as how they use the new language. There are 19 questions, and the questionnaire takes 5-10 minutes to complete.

This questionnaire is anonymous, but if you would like to know more about the project and/or are willing to be contacted to answer some additional questions, there is a place to give your e-mail address at the end of the questionnaire, in which case your answers are no longer anonymous.

Best wishes,

Megan Case

[contact and supervisor information redacted]

*answer required

1. Which foreign language have you been studying at [RSU] in the 2012-2013 academic year? (If you studied more than one language, then choose one. You can do the questionnaire again for another language, if you wish.)* (English is not one of the options because the study is focused on beginner-level courses.)

- Arabic
- French
- Italian
- Japanese
- Chinese
- Russian
- Swedish
- German
- Portuguese

2. Why did you decide to study this particular language?* You can check more than one box.

- I live or plan to live in a country where this language is spoken
- I want to visit a country where this language is spoken
- I need this language for my current job or future career

- I have family members who speak this language
- I have friends who speak this language
- I am interested in the culture associated with this language
- For linguistic reasons - I am interested in the structure or sound of this language
- Other: [FREE TEXT ANSWER]

3. Had you already started learning this language before you started the course at [RSU]? If yes, in which context(s)?* You can check more than one box.

- No
- Yes, in primary or secondary school
- Yes, at university
- Yes, in a private course
- Yes, through self-study
- Yes, with family and/or friends
- Yes, the language is used in a country where I live/have lived
- Other: [FREE TEXT ANSWER]

4. Why did you decide to take this course at [RSU] in particular?*[FREE TEXT ANSWER]

5. People can have different goals and motivations for learning a language. Do you have any of the following goals? If yes, how important are those goals to you?*

Answer on a scale of 1-5, where 1 means “This is not one of my goals” and 5 means “I will not quit learning this language until I have achieved this goal”.

Have simple conversations in shops and restaurants when I visit a country where this language is spoken.

1 2 3 4 5

Read and understand texts written for adults who are native speakers of this language.

1 2 3 4 5

Understand films and television programs in this language without subtitles or major language problems.

1 2 3 4 5

Communicate via social media in this language (for example, write and read status updates on Facebook or comments on YouTube).

1 2 3 4 5

Live in a country where this language is spoken without any major language problems in daily life and in the workplace.

1 2 3 4 5

Have long conversations with native speakers of this language and be able to express myself and understand everything they say without any problems.

1 2 3 4 5

Write academic texts in this language.

1 2 3 4 5

Speak and write like a native speaker.

1 2 3 4 5

6. What other goals do you have for using this language that are not mentioned in question 5?

[FREE TEXT ANSWER]

7. [RSU] uses several different web-based tools: Fronter, Connect, VideoChat and Webmail. Do you have any opinions on how usable these tools are and/or how appropriate they are for language studies?

[FREE TEXT ANSWER]

8. Besides Fronter, Connect, VideoChat and Webmail, have you communicated with your teachers and classmates in other ways?* You can check more than one box.

- Facebook
- Twitter
- Google Docs
- Skype
- Instant Messaging (e.g. MSN)
- SMS/Text Messaging
- Personal e-mail (i.e. not [RSU]'s Webmail)
- Telephone
- Postal Mail
- Face-to-face
- None of the above
- Other: [FREE TEXT ANSWER]

9. Do you have any suggestions for other websites, applications or communication tools which could be useful in language courses or for language learners?

[FREE TEXT ANSWER]

10. Besides your teachers and classmates, do you have friends or family who help you to learn this language?*

- Yes
- No

11. Have you had the chance to use this language outside the course meetings and course assignments? * You can check more than one box.

- Yes, I have done extra self-study
- Yes, I have visited a country where this language is spoken
- Yes, I have lived in a country where this language is spoken
- Yes, I have friends/family/colleagues who speak this language
- Yes, I have read books and newspapers in this language
- Yes, I have used it to communicate with people on the internet
- Yes, I have used it to get information on the internet
- Yes, I have watched films and/or TV programs in this language
- Yes, I have listened to music in this language
- No, I have not used this language outside the course meetings and course assignments
- Other: [FREE TEXT ANSWER]

12. If you have done extra self-study beyond your course assignments, what did you do?

You can check more than one box.

- I used textbooks/workbooks
- I created my own learning materials, like flash cards
- I used online learning materials
- I used language learning software (e.g. Rosetta Stone)
- Other...
- 13. Are there any other ways that you have used this language this year, online or offline?
- 14. Besides studying this language, what did you do during the 2012-2013 academic year?
- Student
- Employed
- Other: [FREE TEXT ANSWER]

15. What is/are your native language(s)? *

[FREE TEXT ANSWER]

16. What other languages have you studied or learned?

[FREE TEXT ANSWER]

17. What year were you born?

[FREE TEXT ANSWER]

18. What is your gender?

- Male
- Female

19. Is there anything you would like to add about your language studies?
Were there any questions above which made you want to explain your answers further?

[FREE TEXT ANSWER]

Thank you very much for completing the questionnaire! If I may contact you with follow-up questions, please enter your e-mail address below.

[FREE TEXT ANSWER]

3. Questionnaire 2014

Language Learning Online and Offline

Welcome, and thank you for taking part in my study!

This questionnaire is part of my PhD dissertation project in educational science about how language learners use technology in their learning as well as how they use the new language. There are 21 questions, and the questionnaire takes 5-10 minutes to complete.

This questionnaire is anonymous, but if you would like to know more about the project and/or are willing to be contacted to answer some additional questions, there is a place to give your e-mail address at the end of the questionnaire, in which case your answers are no longer anonymous.

Best wishes,

Megan Case

[contact and supervisor information redacted]

*answer required

1. Which foreign language have you been studying at [RSU] in the 2013-2014 academic year? (If you are studying more than one language at the beginner level, then choose one. You can take the questionnaire again for another language, if you wish.)* (English is not one of the options because the study is focused on beginner-level courses.)

- Arabic
- French
- Italian
- Japanese
- Chinese
- Russian
- Swedish
- German
- Portuguese

2. Are you studying this language on campus or by distance?*

- Campus
- Distance
- Both campus and distance

3. Why did you decide to study this particular language?* You can choose more than one answer.

- I live or plan to live in a country where this language is spoken
- I want to visit a country where this language is spoken
- I need this language for my current job or future career
- I have family members who speak this language
- I have friends who speak this language
- I am interested in the culture associated with this language
- For linguistic reasons - I am interested in the structure or sound of this language
- Other: [FREE TEXT ANSWER]
-

4. Why did you choose [RSU] as the place to study this language?*

5. Had you already started learning this language before you started the course at [RSU]? If yes, in which context(s)?* You can choose more than one answer.

- No
- Yes, in primary or secondary school
- Yes, at university
- Yes, in a private course
- Yes, through self-study
- Yes, with family and/or friends
- Yes, the language is used in a country where I live/have lived
- Other: [FREE TEXT ANSWER]

6. IF you had already started learning this language before you started the course, when did you start?

- Less than 1 year ago
- 1 or 2 years ago
- 3 or 4 years ago
- 5 or more years ago
- 10 or more years ago

7. People can have different goals and motivations for learning a language. Do you have any of the following goals? If yes, how important are those goals to you?*

Answer on a scale of 1-5, where 1 means “This is not one of my goals” 1 This is not one of my goals, 2 means “Not so important”, 3 means “somewhat important”, 4 means “Very important”, and 5 means “I will not quit learning this language until I have achieved this goal”.

Have simple conversations in shops and restaurants when I visit a country where this language is spoken.

1 2 3 4 5

Read and understand texts written for adults who are native speakers of this language.

1 2 3 4 5

Understand films and television programs in this language without subtitles or major language problems.

1 2 3 4 5

Communicate via social media in this language (for example, write and read status updates on Facebook or comments on YouTube).

1 2 3 4 5

Live in a country where this language is spoken without any major language problems in daily life and in the workplace.

1 2 3 4 5

Have long conversations with native speakers of this language and be able to express myself and understand everything they say without any problems.

1 2 3 4 5

Write academic texts in this language.

1 2 3 4 5

Speak and write like a native speaker.

1 2 3 4 5

8. What other goals do you have for using this language that are not mentioned in question 7?

9. Have you had the chance to use this language outside the course meetings and course assignments?* You can choose more than one answer.

- Yes, I have done extra self-study
- Yes, I have visited a country where this language is spoken
- Yes, I have lived in a country where this language is spoken
- Yes, I have friends/family/colleagues who speak this language
- Yes, I have read books and newspapers in this language
- Yes, I have used it to communicate with people on the internet
- Yes, I have used it to get information on the internet
- Yes, I have watched films and/or TV programs in this language
- Yes, I have listened to music in this language
- No, I have not used this language outside the course meetings and course assignments
- Other: [FREE TEXT ANSWER]

10. If you have done extra self-study beyond your course assignments, what did you do?

For example, if you used language learning software, learning materials you found on the internet or textbooks (that weren't used in the course), or created your own study materials

[FREE TEXT ANSWER]

11. Are there any other ways that you have used this language this year, online or offline?*

[FREE TEXT ANSWER]

12. [RSU] uses several different web-based tools: Fronter, Connect, VideoChat and Webmail. What are your opinions on how usable these tools are and/or how appropriate they are for your language studies?*

[FREE TEXT ANSWER]

13. Besides Fronter, Connect, VideoChat and Webmail, have you communicated with your teachers and classmates from your language course in other ways?* You can choose more than one answer.

- Facebook
- Twitter
- Google Docs
- Skype
- Instant Messaging (e.g. MSN)
- SMS/Text Messaging
- Personal e-mail (i.e. not [RSU]'s Webmail)
- Telephone
- Postal Mail
- Face-to-face
- None of the above
- Other: [FREE TEXT ANSWER]

14. Do you have any suggestions for other websites, applications or communication tools which could be useful for other people who want to learn this language?

[FREE TEXT ANSWER]

15. Besides studying this language, what did you do during the 2012-2013 academic year?* You can choose more than one answer.

- Full-time studies
- Part-time studies
- Work

- Parental leave
- Other leave
- Other: [FREE TEXT ANSWER]

16. What is/are your native language(s)?*
[FREE TEXT ANSWER]

17. What other languages have you studied or learned?
[FREE TEXT ANSWER]

18. Of the languages listed in question 17, which would you say that you can use to communicate today?
[FREE TEXT ANSWER]

19. What year were you born?
[FREE TEXT ANSWER]

20. What is your gender?
[FREE TEXT ANSWER]

21. Is there anything else you would like to say about your language studies? Were there any questions above which made you want to explain your answers further?
[FREE TEXT ANSWER]

Thank you very much for completing the questionnaire! If you are interested in learning more about the project, or if I may contact you with follow-up questions, please enter your e-mail address below.
[FREE TEXT ANSWER]

4. Informant Letter

Information Letter for the project Adult Foreign Language Learning and Personal Learning Environments

Purpose of the study

The purpose of this project is to describe the activities of adult foreign language learners in their self-directed learning processes, with a particular focus on the role played by information and communications technology. The primary research questions for this project are: *How do adult students of foreign languages create their own personal learning environments, what do those environments look like, and what is the role of ICT in those environments?*

Selection of participants

You have been invited to participate in this project because you have studied/are studying a foreign language at the beginner level at [RSU].

Data collection methods

Data will be collected primarily in the form of questionnaires, e-mail interviews, and online interviews on Adobe Connect, which will be recorded. Later in the project, some face-to-face interviews may be conducted. An optional e-portfolio platform will be established for participants who would like to document their language learning practices in different ways, through blogs or video presentations.

You will not need to travel for any reason and you may contribute data to the project from wherever you have an internet connection. You may participate in the project as much or as little as you like, but the maximum time a participant might contribute to the project is an average of one hour per month over the course of two years.

Risks and advantages

The interviews are not intended to address sensitive topics, but since many people choose to learn languages for personal reasons, some of their interview discussions may be personal in nature. The degree to which you reveal personal information is under your control.

The project is not intended to create stress for you. It is the descriptions of language learning practices that are the focus of the study, not student performance or achievement, and you do not need to continue your formal language study in order to remain part of the project. Individual data will not be shared with your language teacher(s) at [RSU].

Participation in the study may cause you to reflect more on your learning practices than you might otherwise. This may affect your learning in a positive way.

Confidentiality

According to the Personal Data Act, your answers and your results will be dealt with in such a way that no unauthorized person will have access to them.

You will be given a pseudonym in the published data. E-mail correspondence between you and the researcher will be saved to an offline file with a pseudonym and deleted from [RSU]'s e-mail server as quickly as possible. Recordings of interviews will be saved with pseudonyms in the file names. Digital data will be stored on a password-protected account on [RSU]'s server and backed up on a hard drive to be stored in a locked cabinet in the researcher's home. However, for technical reasons it may not be possible to erase all traces of the materials from the servers. By agreeing to participate in the project, you indicate that they understand this.

Recordings of interviews will not be published or made public. Transcripts from the interviews, excerpts from e-mail correspondence, and screen shots from the e-portfolio will be used for analysis and publication. Details which would make it possible to determine your identity will be omitted or changed in publication.

Access to the study

You will be invited to review the results of the data analysis before publication, and all publications will be sent to you unless you would prefer not to receive them.

Compensation

At this time monetary compensation to participants is not planned.

Voluntary participation

Participation in this research project is voluntary, and you are entitled to withdraw at any moment without giving any explanation. Upon your request, data that you have submitted that has not already been included in a report submitted for publication will be deleted. If you choose to withdraw from the project or temporarily suspend your participation, you are welcome to re-join the project at a later time.

The persons responsible for the study

The contact person and researcher carrying out the study is Megan Case, doctoral student.

[CONTACT INFORMATION, SUPERVISOR NAMES, AND NAMES OF FUNDING INSTITUTIONS REDACTED]

Consent form

I have been given information about the project **Adult Foreign Language Learning and Personal Learning Environments**. I have been given the opportunity to ask questions, and have received answers to the questions I asked.

I hereby agree to participate in the study and agree to the collection and analysis of data given by me to the persons responsible for the study. I understand that I may end my participation at any time without giving an explanation, and that I may request that any data that I have provided that has not been submitted for publication be destroyed.