Phenomenological Analysis into Students' Self-Perceived Autonomy and Out-Of-Class Learning

Diego Mideros, The University of the West Indies, St. Augustine Campus, Trinidad and Tobago

Corresponding author: Diego.Mideros@sta.uwi.edu

To cite this article

Mideros, D. (2018). Phenomenological analysis into students' self-perceived autonomy and out-of-class learning. *Studies in Self-Access Learning Journal, 9*(3), 324-341.

To link to this article

http://sisaljournal.org/archives/sep18/mideros

Scroll down for article.

Phenomenological Analysis into Students' Self-Perceived Autonomy and Out-Of-Class Learning

Diego Mideros, The University of the West Indies, St. Augustine Campus, Trinidad and Tobago

Abstract

Autonomy researchers have employed qualitative approaches to investigate a variety of issues. Ethnographies, case studies, language learning histories, (auto)biographies, among others, are featured in the literature. Some of these approaches fall under the umbrella of narrative research (Barkhuizen, Benson, & Chik, 2014; Early & Norton, 2012), which is emerging strongly in the L2 learning research (Barkhuizen, 2013; Benson 2014). This paper discusses another approach that has not been widely featured in autonomy or L2 learning research, phenomenology. "Phenomenology is a philosophical approach to the study of experience" (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009, p. 11). Phenomenology seeks "to determine what an experience means for the persons who have had the experience and are able to provide a comprehensive description of it" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 13). Phenomenological research was employed to explore the phenomenon of 'institutionalised L2 learning and possibilities for autonomy in Trinidad & Tobago' with thirty students in the context of a BA in Spanish programme. Students' self-perceived autonomy emerged from the analysis and shed light on the sociocultural phenomena that enabled or hindered students' development and exercise of autonomy. The paper illustrates how phenomenological research can be a valuable qualitative approach to explore sociocultural phenomena in learner autonomy.

Keywords: autonomy, out-of-class learning, phenomenological research, autonomy and (self)assessment, advanced L2 (Spanish) learners

This paper illustrates how I employed phenomenological research to explore autonomy and out-of-class learning from sociocultural perspectives in higher education. For my PhD (Mideros, 2017), I conducted a study with students studying for a BA in Spanish at a university in Trinidad & Tobago in the English-speaking Caribbean. In the research context, my participants' first language (L1) was English, while Spanish was their foreign language (L2). The inquiry sought to explore sociocultural possibilities for students to develop their autonomy and act autonomously as students of Spanish in a specialist degree programme. The phenomenon under investigation was 'institutionalised L2 learning and possibilities for autonomy in Trinidad & Tobago'. Formal L2 assessment practices emerged as a factor that affected all participants in the inquiry. Formal L2 assessment practices particularly affected students' approach to studying (Entwistle, 2000) and practising the L2 outside of the classroom. According to participants'

descriptions, studying Spanish in institutional settings was equivalent to preparing for formal L2 examinations. As a result, many participants of the study appeared more concerned with the results they obtained in formal assessments than with effective language use in different everyday scenarios.

My use of phenomenological research led me to notice that this qualitative approach has not been extensively or explicitly featured in the literature. Autonomy researchers have relied on qualitative approaches to investigate a variety of phenomena (Benson, 2007). Narratives are prominent in the literature (Carroll & Cotterall, 2007) and narrative inquiry is an emerging methodology in L2 research (Barkhuizen, Benson, & Chik, 2014; Barkhuizen, 2013; Benson, 2014; Early & Norton, 2012). A number of studies have employed language learning histories as a vehicle to understand learners' trajectories in terms of autonomy development and identity construction (Benson, Chik, & Lim, 2003; Chik & Breidbach, 2011; Cotterall, 2004; Malcolm, 2004; 2011; Menezes; 2011; Murphey, Jin, & Li-Chi, 2004; Murray, 2017; Murray & Fujishima, 2013; Toohey & Norton, 2003). These narrative studies provide valuable information on individual learners and their learning contexts.

While narrative inquiry has gained prominence, phenomenological research is still to be further explored and employed. Not much information is available about phenomenological research in L2 learning research. For example, a seminal volume on qualitative research in applied linguistics (Heigham & Croker, 2009) illustrates different qualitative approaches: narrative inquiry, case study, ethnography, action research and mixed methods. Phenomenology is only briefly mentioned but no concrete studies are featured to illustrate this approach in applied linguistics. In this volume, Croker (2009) defines phenomenology as follows:

> Whereas a narrative inquiry explores the life of a single individual, a phenomenological study describes the meanings that several individuals make from experiencing a single phenomenon. In our field, that could include the experience of adult learners trying to create or negotiate meaning in a new foreign language, or the experience of long-term immigrants who are beginning to learn the language of their adopted home. (Croker, 2009, p. 15).

Interestingly, Croker begins comparing phenomenology with narrative inquiry, but signals the main characteristic of phenomenological studies which is the examination of a particular phenomenon and how it is experienced by a number individuals. This paper illustrates phenomenological research and how it was instrumental in shedding light on students' self-perceived autonomy and their out-of-class learning.

This paper will begin with a theoretical framework that presents a discussion of phenomenological research from philosophical and psychological standpoints, and some of the literature on learner autonomy employed for the phenomenological analysis. The following section will be the methodology, which describes the research design used and its stages together with the discussion of a few challenges. A brief description of the findings will be presented, followed by some concluding remarks on how the challenges experienced were overcome, and the strengths of phenomenology as a qualitative approach applied to autonomy in language learning.

Theoretical Framework

Phenomenology

Phenomenology finds its roots in philosophy and researchers employing phenomenological research should demonstrate awareness of this in their writing (Creswell, 2007; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009; van Manen, 1990). Phenomenology studies human experience and was founded by Edmund Husserl who "argued that we should 'go back to the things themselves'" (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009, p. 12). Phenomenology seeks to describe things (phenomena) as people experience them. To do so, it is necessary to study the subjective side of the human experience and examine human consciousness. Through consciousness and mental processes individuals perceive others, objects and situations. Therefore, when going back to the 'thing' itself, a phenomenologist explores a person's consciousness *of* the phenomenon to retrieve an in-depth description as experienced by the person. Such thick description enables the researcher to arrive at the essence of the phenomenon.

Phenomenology, as proposed by Husserl, was descriptive. However, as phenomenology evolved, different schools of thought emerged to incorporate interpretation and not only description. An understanding of this difference carries methodological implications for research design and analysis. Husserl's descriptive phenomenology implies that both the descriptions and

analysis should be free of interpretations. The person describing the lived experience of a particular phenomenon is encouraged to go back to the 'thing' itself and describe it as experienced rather than provide an interpretation of it. In turn, the phenomenologist should try as much as possible to bracket or suspend his/her assumptions, beliefs and interpretations in order to analyse the descriptions and extract the meaning of the experience. Heidegger (1962), Husserl's student, did not believe that one could bracket or suspend one's beliefs and assumptions. He proposed a phenomenology that beyond descriptive could also be interpretative. Heidegger assigned importance to interpretation for both the person who provides information about a phenomenon and the phenomenologist. Heidegger claimed that "[t]he meaning of phenomenological description as a method lies in interpretation" (Heidegger, 1962, p. 37). Awareness of descriptive and interpretative phenomenologies is pivotal and researchers should explicitly express their choice in their reports given the methodological implications they carry for data analysis.

Phenomenological research

Although phenomenology originated in philosophy, psychologists have employed phenomenological research in recent decades. The literature on phenomenological research methods in psychology has enabled me to adapt this approach to my research on L2 learning and autonomy. Giorgi (1985) maintains that the purpose of phenomenological research in psychology is to "do justice to the lived aspects of human phenomena, and to do so, one first has to know someone who actually experienced what has been lived" (p. 1). Polkinghorne (1989) claims that "[t]he aim of phenomenologically informed research is to produce clear and accurate descriptions of a particular aspect of human experience" (p. 44). In terms of the scope of phenomenological research, Moustakas (1994) suggests that phenomenological analyses can go "[f]rom the individual descriptions to general or universal meanings" (p. 13). These definitions come from a school of thought that privileges Husserl's descriptive phenomenology.

Yet, interpretative phenomenology has also gained terrain. Max van Manen (1984; 1990) has used interpretative phenomenology in psychology and education. In his view "[t]he task of phenomenological research and writing [is] *to construct a possible interpretation of the nature of a certain human experience*" (van Manen, 1984, p. 44) [emphasis in original]. Similarly, Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) describe the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), which

as its name suggests is interpretative. "IPA is a qualitative research approach committed to the examination of how people make sense of their major life experiences" (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009, p. 1). The study reported in this paper follows an interpretative tradition given participants' active roles in making sense and interpreting their lived experiences and also the active role of the researcher in interpreting the data and contrasting it to the literature in the field.

Phenomenological studies stem from a phenomenon of deep interest to the researcher. The nature of the phenomenon can be either personal or social and part of the human experience. Phenomenological studies have been employed in the social and health sciences, particularly in sociology, psychology, nursing and education (Creswell, 2007). Almost any phenomenon can be researched through phenomenological lenses as long as individuals can recall the experiences associated with the phenomenon.

Methodologically, phenomenological research studies how a number individuals experience a phenomenon, therefore, phenomenologists employ purposive sampling (Giorgi, 1985; Moustakas, 1994; Polkinghorne, 1989; Smith & Osborn, 2008; Smith, Flowers, & Larking, 2009). "Phenomenologists focus on describing what all participants have in common as they experience a phenomenon" (Creswell, 2007, p. 58). The number of participants in phenomenological studies may vary, but there is no consensus on a fixed number in the literature.

Phenomenological studies follow similar methodological procedures regardless of their descriptive or interpretative nature. The preferred data collection strategy is the semi-structured interview (Creswell, 2007; Giorgi, 1985; Moustakas, 1994; Polkinghorne, 1989; Smith & Osborn, 2008; Smith, Flowers, & Larking, 2009). The interview seeks to raise participants' awareness of the phenomenon as well as to help them reflect on their experiences. Polkinghorne suggests broad questions such as "What did you experience? Or, What was it like for you?" (1989, p. 46). After the interview, researchers engage actively with the transcribed text to conduct the analysis. Any phenomenological analysis requires researchers to contrast the experiences reported by the participants with the theoretical perspectives that inform the study. This constant process of contrasting theory and experiences adds rigour to the method and enables the researcher to produce a consistent statement of the experience.

Learner autonomy through phenomenological analysis

I became interested in the phenomenon of 'institutionalised L2 learning and possibilities for autonomy' while I taught at a BA in Spanish degree programme at a university in Trinidad and Tobago. I noticed that in some cases students displayed mixed attitudes to studying Spanish. Such attitudes included some resistance to working independently beyond the classroom and resistance to group work. Throughout the academic semester some students appeared uninterested in studying/practising Spanish, yet their interest strategically peaked at examination times. There was resistance when attempts were made to make assessment more continuous and formative. I noticed that students rarely used available resources (language assistants, self-access facility, lecturers' office hours, etc.) to study/practise Spanish outside of the classroom. These observations led me to explore if my students' sociocultural reality influenced their attitudes. From the autonomy literature, I gathered the need to further explore "autonomy as a general human behavioural capacity" and the "socio- cultural factors that give those capacities – autonomy as a human behavioural capacity– their distinctive characteristics from one context to another" (Little, 1999, p. 17-18).

As described in the previous section, it is important to contrast participants' experiences with theoretical perspectives relevant to the study. I sought to assess my participants' past school experiences in light of sociocultural perspectives. My study was informed by identity research (Norton, 2013; Norton & Early, 2011; Norton & McKinney, 2011) and sociocultural theory (Lantolf, 2011; 2013; Lantolf & Poehner, 2008; Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). These theories stress the social dimension of L2 learning. I view L2 learners as social beings immersed in social settings that enable and/or constrain their possibilities for L2 learning and (inter)action in and outside of the classroom.

I also took account of the existing literature on autonomy, particularly some of the definitions available (Benson, 2011; Dickinson, 1987; Holec, 1981; Little, 1991). However, I decided to embed in my analysis ways of conceptualising autonomy that explicitly incorporated a social component (Dam, 1995; Everhard, 2015; Murray, Fujishima, & Uzuka, 2014; Toohey & Norton, 2003; van Lier, 2004). Two useful conceptualisations in my study included Toohey and Norton's (2003, p. 59) effort "to understand 'autonomy' not so much as individualized performance but as socially oriented agency", and Murray, Fujishima and Uzuka (2014, p. 97) who argue that "[t]hrough the exercise of agency, autonomy is an enacted phenomenon encompassing a network of practices". These conceptualisations embed the sociocultural

construct of agency (Lantolf, 2013; Lantolf & Pavlenko, 2001; Toohey, 2007), which enabled me to examine concrete actions (Huang, 2011) that my participants took to make Spanish language learning happen within the boundaries of institutionalised L2 learning and outside of the classroom.

Methodology

IPA in action

IPA (see above) was the methodological approach I employed in my study. IPA stresses the process of interpretation that researchers employ throughout the research process, particularly during the analysis. The following are the stages for an IPA study.

The first IPA stage is to identify the phenomenon. Once the phenomenon is identified a research question should be created and the sampling should be decided upon. I sought to answer a question with an emphasis on the 'lived experience' as the guiding principle: What can students' previous lived experiences tell us about their sociocultural context for L2 learning and for the development and exercise of autonomy?

In terms of the sample, I purposefully approached thirty of my students in the BA in Spanish programme. Since I was their teacher and we had a good rapport, they were happy to take part in the study and granted consent. Students in the BA in Spanish enter the programme after studying Spanish for seven years at secondary school. The Spanish degree begins at the B1 level in accordance with scales of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. Therefore, students are expected to be able to face the demands of a specialist language degree entirely delivered in Spanish. Based on their background, all the students had experienced the phenomenon of 'institutionalised L2 learning'.

The second IPA stage is the data collection phase, which entails the design of semi-structured interview(s). I designed two semi-structured interviews, one to explore students' approaches to studying Spanish, and the other to explore their past lived experiences as students of Spanish. The interviews contained twenty-four and twenty questions respectively. Both interviews had self-assessment questions for students to assess their level of satisfaction with their own language level, and to reflect on the role that they had played in achieving their perceived level. Table 1 illustrates some of the questions included in each interview:

Table 1. Sample Questions from Interviews

First interview	Second interview
• What kind of extra work do you take upon yourself for the things you find exciting in your classes? Can you give me specific examples? Do you do extra reading in Spanish? What do you read? • Do you think that the level of effort you put into studying Spanish equates your results and your language level? Are you satisfied with your language level? Why?	• What was your best experience in studying Spanish in secondary school? Why? • How was your experience studying Spanish at secondary school? • What kind of Spanish student have you been? What have you done/not done? What could you do to improve as a student of Spanish?

The third IPA stage is interviewing, and the fourth is transcribing the interviews. I collected a total of sixty interviews, which lasted between thirty and forty-five minutes each. I digitally recorded and transcribed each interview using a professional audio player software. I carefully proofread every transcribed interview prior to the analysis.

The fifth IPA stage is the analysis. The analysis "involves the investigator engaging in an interpretative relationship with the transcript" (Smith & Osborn, 2008. p. 66), this kind of engagement supposes a constant reading and rereading of the interview transcripts. The more that a transcript is read, the higher the level of abstraction enabling the researcher to relate the data with terminology from the literature. The IPA analysis includes four steps: i) look for themes in the first case, ii) connect themes, iii) continue the analysis with other cases, and iv) write up.

Challenges

I experienced a few challenges while conducting the study. The first challenge was my difficulty in articulating the phenomenon clearly. I overcame this difficulty as I became more and more familiar with the data of the study and reflected on it in light of the literature. I refined the phenomenon throughout the different stages of the study. Another challenge of this research approach is that it relies entirely on participants' retrospective accounts. Therefore, as the literature indicates, it is critical that the participants of the study have all experienced the phenomenon so that commonalities can be identified. In my case, the challenge was the large number of participants and the difficulty to make sense of their experiences, especially given the broad nature of the phenomenon I examined. In the next section I will discuss some of the

emerging findings of the study and how I addressed this challenge.

Findings

Exam-driven culture: A universal experience

Although all participants had experienced the phenomenon of institutionalised L2 learning, the repertoire of experiences reported varied greatly. Yet, I identified one thing in common among all: students associated studying Spanish with studying *for* formal examinations. In the descriptions of their experiences formal assessment emerged among all participants (Note that the initials and students' names are pseudonyms. [D]iego is the researcher's name):

A (Student):	...because my goal is to do well, I tend to focus on the exams, what is going to get me the high grades.... And so if I think that a lecturer is stressing on something that is definitely going to come for an exam, I'm going to put my attention on that.
Diego:	What is important for you in terms of learning Spanish? What do you do about the things you consider important?
A:	If there's a particular topic that the lecturer says or seems to be indicating is important, we as Spanish speakers need to know, I tend to focus on that because I think that's what's coming for exams. But I pay attention to the other things but not as much.

Even though I began the study with the assumption that formal assessment would be a factor influencing students' attitudes and approaches to L2 studying, it surprised me the extent to which students made reference to assessment in their descriptions. Their learning of Spanish at secondary school was marked by a constant washback (Bailey, 1996) in preparation for formal national and regional assessments, and not only summative internal assessments conducted at their schools. Students in the context of Trinidad & Tobago sit different national and regional examinations throughout their primary and secondary school experience. Such constant formal assessment highlights an aspect of the big sociocultural structure (Block, 2015) that is beyond students' control, but which they must conform to if they wish to advance in their education. Students' descriptions stated that in many cases teachers were also pressured to produce good results among their students and this led to washback.

Self-perceived autonomy: Phenomenologies of L2 learning

Students' self-perceived autonomy and self-assessment enabled me to further assess their lived experiences learning Spanish in institutionalised settings. Three groups emerged from students' self-assessment. The first group featured students with a sense of satisfaction with their

language level in Spanish. The second group featured students who wished their level could be better. The third group featured students who were dissatisfied with their language level. It is worth stressing that all participants were students enrolled in the same course and they all entered the BA in Spanish with similar qualifications.

Given these three emerging groups, I had to further explore the transcripts to find information that could account for students' self-assessments. I decided to treat each group as a separate phenomenology, which made the task more manageable. Eleven students comprised group 1, eight students comprised group 2, and eleven students comprised group 3. Based on significant statements retrieved from the interviews, I captured each group with the following summarising statements: Phenomenology 1 – 'My level is good, I can carry on a conversation in Spanish', Phenomenology 2 – 'My level should be better', and Phenomenology 3 – 'I'm not where I want to be'. Table 2 illustrates some of students' self-assessments retrieved from interviews (all names are pseudonyms):

Table 2. Samples Students' Self-Assessment

Self-assessment What do you think of your current level in Spanish?		
Phenomenology 1 "I think that it's a good level. I think I'm able to carry on conversations pretty well." (Carolina)	Phenomenology 2 "I think it needs to be improved because I've been studying a while and it should be a little more advanced." (Adriana)	Phenomenology 3 "It's terrible! I automatically said that because I'm not where I want to be. I want to say that I could speak fluently…" (Claudia)

To add some objectivity to students' self-assessment, I checked their results for the Spanish course at the end of the semester to compare their performance with their self-assessments. In most cases the grades they obtained equated their self-assessment. In fact, some descriptions corroborated this as the following extract from a student in the second group:

Diego: Are you satisfied with your language level?
N (Student): Last semester, yeah, I was. At mid-term I got a B+, it was good. And then for final I got a B. So I was disappointed then, but it can be better, I know I can do better than this.

The data in this study suggest that formal assessment played a role in the self-constructed identity of the L2 student-learners in the inquiry. If a student constantly performs well and receives good results, s/he will develop the self-perception of a good and successful language

learner, the opposite may also be true based on what students described in this study. Therefore, students' L2 ego (Cotterall, 2017) may be negatively affected if they perform well in a context, such as secondary school, and then perform poorly in a different context as a result of a change in performance demands. This was the case of many students whose L2 ego was strong in secondary school, but diminished by university demands:

> I would say I've not been as active as I should be, but I try, that's all I can say, the key word, 'try'. …I would say I started off really enthusiastic and loving it and having a passion for it [Spanish] and then within time and all the work it just started to dwindle away and I don't know if to say I've lost interest… (Claudia)

Another factor that the data suggested played a role in students' self-assessment was adaption (White, 1999; 2003) to the teaching and learning community and its practices (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). The quote above from a student in the third group illustrates a loss in motivation and a struggle to adapt to the demands of the Spanish programme. On the other hand, students whose self-assessment was favourable, those in the first group, demonstrated having been able to adapt to the context:

> I think there's no way that you can't be autonomous while learning Spanish. There's a lot of self-work that you have to do and I think the way that the course is structured, yes, you learn something in class, but in the end it's up to you to put it in practice, do the homework, research things you might not be sure about. (Edna)

Students' lived experiences and their self-perceived autonomy

The next phenomenological task was to explore if the description of events in their sociocultural lived experiences could explain their self-assessments. I did not attempt to draw generalisations or profile the participants in each phenomenological group as homogeneous. Instead, I attempted to explore common sociocultural events that could account for the common self-assessment in each group.

The effects of washback (Bailey, 1996) arose again as a factor in the kinds of teaching and learning practices that students were exposed to in their secondary school experience. Although all students were trained to be effective language test-takers, the main difference lay in the fact that students in the first group were also encouraged to use Spanish for communicative purposes beyond test preparation. Students in the first group were addressed and taught in Spanish. Their teachers ensured that students were both capable of performing well under examination conditions and also able to use the language in other scenarios and outside of the

classroom. The same was not the case for students in the second and third groups. Students in the second group reported cases where their teachers attempted to teach in Spanish but focused mainly on getting them ready to perform well in their national and/or regional examinations. Students in the third group were not only trained to do well in examinations, but the Spanish classes were taught in students' L1, English. The following are illustrative quotations from the interviews:

> My Form 6[1] teacher prepared us from early on. From Form 5 to Form 6 it was a very big jump and suddenly Spanish classes were no longer being taught in English with some Spanish. The entire class was in Spanish and we had to adjust to that. (Sofía, group 1)

> We had set topics to learn and our teachers were in the habit of predicting what was going to come for the exam, so we did past papers but they tried to focus on what was going to come... (Julia, group 2)

> We spoke in English. There wasn't much conversation in Spanish unless we knew that it's before exams and the thing about that too is that they actually gave you what you would have to talk about for the exam. So it's basically you write what you want to say, you just learn it off in Spanish and then go and speak it in the exam room. (Anita, group 3)

The role of teachers as experienced others in their classrooms as communities of practice becomes critical. The data in this study suggested that the instructional practices that teachers bring to the classroom influence how students go about L2 studying and their practices outside of the classroom. Students in the first group were fortunate to have had teachers who exposed them to the language and made them aware that language learning was about language use. In turn, as university students they approached studying Spanish similarly and sought opportunities to use the language beyond the classroom. However, in cases where students' lived experiences in secondary school focused on effective test-taking, students would approach language learning attempting to obtain good results or to avoid failure. In this last case, students did not report active out-of-class engagement with the language.

Undoubtedly, when exploring autonomy among advanced L2 student-learners, communicative competence becomes crucial. Since students in the first group had built a strong communicative competence from secondary school, they were in a better position to take responsibility and action when it came to overcoming difficulties or seeking opportunities to

---

[1] Secondary school in Trinidad & Tobago runs from Form 1 to 6.

practise the L2 in and outside of the classroom. Students in the second group seemed aware that they had to take more action to improve, and that if they took a more active role, they could achieve their desired level. Although students in the third group were also aware of their challenges, their constructed identity as L2 learners who had not achieved their desired level, and their status as struggling students may have constrained their possibilities for action. Claudia's quotation above: "I want to say that I could speak fluently…" implies a level of frustration at a university level where she is expected to speak Spanish with a level of fluency. Students in the third group shared such frustration and seemed unaware of where to begin to find ways to overcome their difficulties. Therefore, as participants in the community of practice of the Spanish degree students in the third group resorted to approach studying strategically in order to avoid failing.

Concluding Remarks

Phenomenological research enabled me to produce a descriptive and interpretative piece where I explored 'institutionalised L2 learning and possibilities for autonomy in Trinidad & Tobago' from sociocultural perspectives. The lived experiences of my participants suggested that, on the one hand, students whose communicative competence was fostered early on during their secondary school experience were in a better position to take an active role in their L2 learning, to adapt to the demands of a specialist L2 degree programme, and to use opportunities to practise the L2 outside of the classroom. On the other hand, students who were not encouraged to learn and use the language for communicative purposes, but instead were exposed to washback appeared to approach L2 learning strategically to obtain good results or to avoid failing. Formal assessment as a sociocultural practice appeared to have influenced how students' saw themselves as L2 learners. Those accustomed to performing well would have constructed a positive identity, as opposed to those who had not yet achieved their imagined L2 level.

The two main challenges I experienced during the course of the research were i) how broad the phenomenon initially was, and ii) the large number of participants in my study. However, the IPA protocols for analysing the data helped overcome these difficulties. By closely (re)reading the transcripts and contrasting students' experiences with the literature, I was able to get a deeper insight into my students' lived experiences. Once I identified students' self-assessment and the three groups emerged, it became easier to manage the data. Even though this

approach relies entirely on participants' retrospective accounts, I found that my students recollected mainly meaningful experiences and reported on them. As such, the experience and its significance lessened this challenge. It was also significant to be able to triangulate the information by comparing commonalities among the experiences reported by the participants in the study. Such commonalities represent the essence of the experience, in the case of this study the influence that L2 assessment had on all the participants of the study.

In this paper I illustrated how I employed phenomenological research to explore autonomy from sociocultural perspectives. My illustration seeks to advocate for phenomenological research to be considered as a valuable research methodology that deserves theoretical and methodological attention in the learner autonomy and applied linguistics literature. Given that experience is at the core of this approach, phenomenological research is ideal to explore different phenomena experienced by L2 learners and teachers alongside with other qualitative approaches.

Notes on the contributor

Diego Mideros is a lecturer in Spanish at The University of the West Indies, St. Augustine Campus in Trinidad and Tobago. He holds a PhD in Linguistics awarded by the same university. His research interests include autonomy and agency in language learning, phenomenological research and qualitative approaches in language learning, identity and sociocultural research. He is one of the conveners of the AILA Research Network on Learner Autonomy for the period 2018-2020.

References

Bailey, K. (1996). Working for washback: A review of the washback concept in language testing. *Language Testing, 13*(3), 257-279. doi:10.1177/026553229601300303

Barkhuizen, G. (Ed.). (2013). *Narrative research in applied linguistics.* Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Barkhuizen, G., Benson, P., & Chik, A. (2014). *Narrative inquiry in language teaching and learning research*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Benson, P. (2007). Autonomy in language teaching and learning. *Language Teaching, 40*(1), 21-40. doi:10.1017/s0261444806003958

Benson, P. (2011). *Teaching and researching autonomy* (2nd Ed.). Harlow, UK: Longman Pearson.

Benson, P. (2014). Narrative inquiry in applied linguistics research. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics, 34*, 154-170. doi:10.1017/s0267190514000099

Benson, P., Chik, A., & Lim, H-Y. (2003). Becoming autonomous in an Asian context: Autonomy as a sociocultural process. In D. Palfreyman & R. C. Smith (Eds.), *Learner autonomy across cultures: Language education perspectives* (pp. 23-40). London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.

Block, D. (2015). Structure, agency, individualization and the critical realist challenge. In P. Deters, X. Gao, E. Miller & G. Vitanova (Eds.), *Theorizing and analyzing agency in second language learning. Interdisciplinary approaches* (pp. 17-36). Bristol, UK: Multilingual Matters.

Carroll, M., & Cotterall, S. (2007). Commentary on part two: Narrative, struggle, reflection and autonomy. In A. Barfield & S. Brown (Eds.), *Reconstructing autonomy in language education: Inquiry and innovation* (pp. 156-164). New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.

Chik, A., & Breidbach, S. (2011). Identity, motivation and autonomy: A tale of two cities. In P. Deters, X. (Andy) Gao, E. Miller & G. Vitanova (Eds.), *Theorizing and analyzing agency in second language learning. Interdisciplinary approaches* (pp. 145-159). Bristol, UK: Multilingual Matters.

Cotterall, S. (2004). It's just rules… that's all it is at this stage… In P. Benson & D. Nunan (Eds.), *Learners' stories: difference and diversity in language learning* (pp. 101-118). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Cotterall, S. (2017). The pedagogy of learner autonomy: Lessons from the classroom. *Studies in Self-Access Learning Journal, 8*(2), 102-115. Retrieved from https://sisaljournal.org/archives/jun2017/cotterall/

Creswell, J. W. (2007). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (2nd Ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Croker, R. (2009). An introduction to qualitative research. In J. Heigham & R. Croker (Eds.), *Qualitative research in applied linguistics: A practical introduction* (pp. 3-24). New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan

Dam, L. (1995). *Learner autonomy 3: From theory to classroom practice.* Dublin, Ireland: Authentik.

Dickinson, L. (1987). *Self-instruction in language learning.* Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Early, M., & Norton, B. (2012). Language learner stories and imagined identities. *Narrative Inquiry, 22*(1), 94-201. doi:10.1075/ni.22.1.15ear

Entwistle, N. (2000). *Promoting deep learning through teaching and assessment: Conceptual frameworks and educational contexts.* Paper presented at the Teaching & Learning Research Programme (TLRP) Conference, Leicester, UK November 2000.

Everhard, C. (2015). The assessment-autonomy relationship. In C. Everhard & L. Murphy (Eds.), *Assessment and autonomy in language learning* (pp. 8-34). London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.

Giorgi, A. (Ed.) (1985). *Phenomenology and psychological research*. Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania: Duquesne University Press.

Heidegger, M. (1962). *Being and time*. Oxford, UK: Basil Blackwell.

Heigham, J., & Croker, R. (Eds.) (2009) *Qualitative research in applied linguistics: A practical introduction.* New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan

Holec, H. (1981). *Autonomy in foreign language learning.* Oxford, UK: Pergamon.

Huang, J. (2011). A dynamic account of autonomy, agency and identity in (T)EFL learning. In G. Murray, X. Gao & Terry Lamb (Eds.), *Identity, motivation and autonomy in language learning* (pp. 229-246). Bristol, UK: Multilingual Matters.

Lantolf, J. (2011). The sociocultural approach to second language acquisition: sociocultural theory, second language acquisition, and artificial L2 development. In D. Atkinson (Ed.), *Alternative approaches to second language acquisition* (pp. 24-47). New York, NY: Routledge.

Lantolf, J. (2013). Sociocultural theory and the dialects of L2 learner autonomy/agency. In P. Benson & L. Cooker (Eds.), *The applied linguistic individual: sociocultural approaches to identity, agency and autonomy* (pp. 17-31). London, UK: Equinox.

Lantolf, J., & Pavlenko, A. (2001). (S)econd (l)anguange (a)ctivity theory: Understanding second language learners as people. In M. Breen (Ed.), *Learner contributions to language learning: new directions in research* (pp. 141-158). London, UK: Routledge.

Lantolf, J., & Poehner, M. (Eds). (2008). *Sociocultural theory and the teaching of second languages*. London, UK: Equinox.

Lantolf, J., & Thorne, S. (2006). *Sociocultural theory and the genesis of second language development.* Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Lave, J, & Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated learning: legitimate peripheral participation*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Little, D. (1991). *Learner autonomy 1: Definitions, issues and problems.* Dublin, Ireland: Authentik.

Little, D. (1999). Learner autonomy is more than a western cultural construct. In S. Cotterall & D. Crabbe (Eds.), *Learner autonomy in language learning: defining the field and effective change* (pp. 11-18). Frankfurt am Main, Germany: Peter Lang.

Malcolm, D. (2004). An Arabic-speaking English learner's path to autonomy through reading. In P. Benson & D. Nunan (Eds.), *Learners' stories: difference and diversity in language learning* (pp. 69-82). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Malcolm, D. (2011). 'Failing' to achieve autonomy in English for medical purposes. In G. Murray, X. Gao & T. Lamb (Eds.), *Identity, motivation and autonomy in language learning* (pp. 195-211). Bristol, UK: Multilingual Matters.

Menezes, V. (2011). Identity, motivation and autonomy in second language acquisition from the perspective of complex adaptive systems. In G. Murray, X. (Andy) Gao & T. Lamb (Eds.), *Identity, motivation and autonomy in language learning* (pp. 57-72). Bristol, UK: Multilingual Matters.

Mideros, D. (2017). *L2 learner autonomy/agency among undergraduate Spanish students in Trinidad: A phenomenological inquiry* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). The University of the West Indies, St. Augustine Campus. St. Augustine, Trinidad, W.I.

Moustakas, C. (1994). *Phenomenological research methods.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Murphey, T., Jin, C., & Li-Chi, C. (2004). Learners' constructions of identities and imagined communities. In P. Benson & D. Nunan (Eds.), *Learners' stories: difference and diversity in language learning* (pp. 83-100). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Murray, G. (2017). Autonomy in the time of complexity: Lessons from beyond the classroom. *Studies in Self-Access Learning Journal, 8*(2), 116-134. Retrieved from https://sisaljournal.org/archives/jun2017/murray1/

Murray, G., & Fujishima, N. (2013). Social language learning spaces: Affordances in a community of learners. *Chinese Journal of Applied Linguistics, 36*(1), 141- 157. doi:10.1515/cjal-2013-0009

Murray, G., Fujishima, N., & Uzuka, M. (2014). The semiotics of place: Autonomy and space. In G. Murray (Ed.), *Social dimensions of autonomy in language learning* (pp. 81-99). New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.

Norton, B. (2013). *Identity and language learning: Extending the conversation* (2nd ed.). Bristol, UK: Multilingual Matters.

Norton, B, & Early, M. (2011). Researcher identity, narrative inquiry, and language teaching research. *TESOL Quarterly, 45*(3), 415-439. doi:10.5054/tq.2011.261161

Norton, B, & McKinney, C. (2011). An identity approach to second language acquisition. In D. Atkinson (Ed.), *Alternative approaches to second language acquisition* (pp. 73-94). New York, NY: Routledge.

Polkinghorne, D. (1989). Phenomenological research methods. In R. S. Valle, & S. Halling (Eds.), *Existential-phenomenological perspectives in psychology* (pp. 41-60). Boston, MA: Springer.

Smith, J., Flowers, P., & Larkin, M. (2009). *Interpretative phenomenological analysis: Theory, methods and research*. London, UK: Sage Publications.

Smith, J., & Osborn, M. (2008). Interpretative phenomenological analysis. In J. Smith (Ed.), *Qualitative psychology: A practical guide to research* (2nd Ed.) (pp. 53-80). London, UK: Sage Publications.

Toohey, K. (2007). Autonomy/agency through sociocultural lenses. In A. Barfield & S. Brown (Eds.), *Reconstructing autonomy in language education: Inquiry and innovation* (pp. 231-242). New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.

Toohey, K, & Norton, B. (2003). Learner autonomy as agency in sociocultural settings. In D. Palfreyman & R. C. Smith (Eds.), *Learner autonomy across cultures: Language education perspectives* (pp. 58-72). New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.

van Lier, L. (2004). *The ecology and semiotics of language learning: A sociocultural perspective.* New York, NY: Kluwer Academic Publishers.

van Manen, M. (1984). Practicing phenomenological writing. *Phenomenology + Pedagogy, 2*(1), 36-69. Retrieved from https://journals.library.ualberta.ca/pandp/index.php/pandp/article/view/14931/11752

van Manen, M. (1990). *Researching lived experience: Human science for an action sensitive pedagogy.* London, Canada: The University of Western Ontario.

Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of practice: Learning, meaning, and identity*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

White, C. (1999). Expectations and emergent beliefs of self-instructed language learners. *System 27*(4), 443-457. doi:10.1016/s0346-251x(99)00044-5

White, C. (2003). *Language learning in distance education.* Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.