'A Puzzle that Needs to be Fitted Together': The Beginning of My Autoethnographic Journey of Learning French Through Music

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General Introduction to the Column

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Welcome to a new SiSAL Journal column entitled "Ethnographies of self-access language learning". I describe the rationale and aims of the column in more detail in my previous paper (Mynard, this issue). In our first contribution to the column, Robert Werner provides an autoethnographic account of his self-directed language learning over a six-week period. In the first part of his journey as a self-access learner of French, he describes how the project came about, what some of his motives for learning French are, and how he established and carried out a self-directed learning plan. What is particularly interesting about this account is that the author carried out the project the same time as his own students were working on a similar plan for their English language learning. This contribution to SiSAL Journal will be published over several issues, and in the first installment, we learn how the author discovered some effective strategies and resources for embarking on his journey, and some interesting metaphors to describe the experience.

'A Puzzle that Needs to be Fitted Together': The Beginning of My Autoethnographic Journey of Learning French Through Music

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Abstract

This is the first of several installments of an autoethnography about my experiences as a self-directed learner studying French over a six-week period. My studies paralleled work that students were completing in an English language course at a Japanese university and occurred simultaneously with theirs. I set a learning goal and focused on vocabulary and listening skills in order to better understand French language songs. In doing so, I not only revisited past knowledge of French, but also examined my learning techniques and developed strategies as I made weekly study plans. In this installment, I will give an overview of the project, and tell how I arrived at it and why I chose to study French. I will also describe my language learning history, especially with regard to French and Japanese. Data consisted of observation notes, weekly reflections, song lyrics with my vocabulary translations, and a log of days/time spent studying. This installment goes through the first week of the project, when I chose a song to study, a strategy to try, resources to use, and then did those things. At the onset, I doubted whether I could be successful, but was also excited and motivated to begin a new endeavor.

Keywords: autoethnography, self-directed learning, French, language learning history

I am a teacher, learning advisor, and self-access center (SAC) coordinator at a university in Japan. For years, I have helped students become better language learners through reflective assignments designed to foster autonomy, metacognition, and strategy use. Time and time again, I have thought, "What would it be like if *I* did the assignment? Which methods would I try? What adjustments would I decide to make from week to week? What kinds of observations would I have about the overall metacognitive process?" In the past, I have often taken initiative to learn more about things I was interested in, but I never formally reflected on my learning. In the spring of 2019, while co-designing and co-teaching a new third-year English course on self-directed learning (Knowles, 1975), I found myself in the perfect situation to do just that.

As my co-teacher and I had previously worked at a university with a large SAC as advisor and instructor respectively, it was logical to model it after a self-directed learning course offered by our former institution (Curry et al., 2017; Mynard & Stevenson, 2017). Since students were learning in a new way, and they needed guidance to help get started (Carson, 2012; Carson & Mynard, 2012; Curry et al., 2017), we spent the first few classes introducing important concepts (e.g., goal setting), and they put it all together to make a learning plan (Watkins, 2015). After that, students met one-on-one with a teacher (one of us) to discuss the plan. We each took on the role of advisor and helped them become more aware of the learning process and better identify goals (Carson & Mynard, 2012; Kato & Mynard, 2016) that might not have been clear to them in their initial plans. In our conferences, we used advising strategies such as 'asking powerful questions' (Kato & Mynard, 2016) to help students think more deeply about their goals. Then, students put their plan into effect for the following six weeks. Each week, they set a learning target, made a Study Use Review Evaluate (SURE) plan (adapted from Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle), and reflected on how it went. (See Morrison (2013) for a detailed description of SURE.)

After designing materials and teaching the first few lessons, I thought, "If I could approach the process of making and implementing a learning plan, how would I do it?" While students were busy preparing for a presentation on their learning goals, I developed my own learning plan. I met with a mentor around that time to discuss both my language learning and this research project. I use the word "mentor" to describe a colleague and former co-worker who has given me new perspectives, taught me new skills, shared wisdom (Chang, 2008), continues to help me grow professionally, and is generally there for me when I need advice or a push in the right direction. After the meeting, I began my six-week project of studying, reflecting, and revising my plan as I revisited previously-learned material, gained

new vocabulary, and tried to improve my listening skills in French. This autoethnography is about my experiences as a self-directed language learner during that time.

Autoethnography

Ethnography can be defined as "writing about or describing people and culture, using firsthand observation and participation in a setting or situation" (Ellis, 2004, p. 26). Since *auto* means 'self', a researcher conducting an autoethnography connects themselves and their personal experiences to the culture being examined (Adams et al., 2014; Ellis, 2004; Ellis & Bochner, 2000). Autoethnography is part autobiography (self), part ethnography (culture), and part something else; it is both a process and the result of a process (Adams et al., 2017; Ellis, 2004).

According to Chang (2008), one benefit of autoethnographies is that they are both researcher-friendly and reader-friendly. The primary data source is accessible to the researcher because it comes from their own experiences. Therefore, the analysis and interpretation tend to have a higher degree of accuracy because the insider's voice (self) is more truthful than the outsider's (Reed-Danahay, 1997). From the reader's standpoint, the familiar, personal writing style is accessible to a wider audience than conventional academic writing (Chang, 2008). Another benefit is that an autoethnography can help others who are in the same situation realize that they are not alone (Adams et al., 2014; Ellis, 2004; Ellis & Bochner, 2000). Autoethnographies have been written in a wide range of fields, including anthropology, sociology, communication, psychology (Adams et al., 2014), applied linguistics (Cummings, 2010; Davies, 2019), ELT teacher training (Canagarajah, 2012), and self-access (Osborne, 2013; Shibata, 2012).

Within the social sciences, autoethnography has been criticized as unscientific (Ellis et al., 2011), not analytic (Anderson, 2006), self-indulgent (Holt, 2003; Mykhalovskiy, 1996; Sparkes, 2000), or simply a sociologist's autobiography (Gans, 1999). Part of the problem might be due to confusion about what constitutes an 'autoethnography' (Chang, 2008). Ellis and Bochner (2000) provided an extensive list of almost 40 types of works that fall under the broad category of autoethnography in various fields, thus making it difficult to arrive at a universal definition of the term. Another criticism is that the authenticity of autoethnographic data has been questioned when it comes solely from the researcher's personal experiences or memories (Holt, 2003; Wall, 2008). Chang (2008) noted that if data were from multiple sources, it could more easily be triangulated to produce a study with a higher validity. While Carolyn Ellis (2004) has inspired me to write about my experiences evocatively, I am aiming

to find a balance between vivid storytelling and the analytical methods grounded in empirical data (Anderson, 2006; Canagarajah, 2012; Chang, 2008) that are so often found in qualitative research in the social sciences, including education and self-access.

My autoethnography will be told in several installments. Throughout the series, I will compare my experiences with and connect them to those of students engaging in similar activities. Because I was studying at the same time and completing the same work as my students, the project not only became more meaningful to me, but I was also able to "compare notes" with some of them who had similar goals. For example, when one student who had identical goals to mine seemed stuck, which I could tell from reading and commenting on her SURE plan and reflections, I offered to tell her about a strategy I had been using. I was not quite a peer to students due to the status difference between us (Cummings, 2010), but I was closer than usual from engaging in a similar task. In my dual role, I could put on my teacher hat when giving weekly written feedback on students' work (Mynard, 2012) and then take it off as we all worked toward our goals.

Even though the students and I were completing the same task, this autoethnography only considers my perspective. On the other hand, the story is not only about me; it has further-reaching implications (Canagarajah, 2012; Ellis, 2004). I took on the role of a student in order to travel on my own self-directed language learning journey and simultaneously understand what students might be going through as they travel on theirs. By sharing it, I hope my autoethnography will be meaningful for other teachers and learning advisors and help to advance the field of self-access.

My Language Learning History

In writing a language learning history (LLH), one looks at their own past learning in an introspective way (Oxford, 1995). It gives insight into a learner's thinking and how they interpret their experiences (Mercer, 2013). By reading about their collective experiences, students can see what peers have done and find ways to identify with others' learning (Deacon et al., 2006). In telling my LLH, I want to not only connect my past with my present language learning, but I also hope readers can find similarities to their own motivation, interests, and/or previous learning experiences.

I am from suburban New York, and while I grew up in a monolingual English-speaking household, I have always been exposed to and interested in other languages. Almost all my foreign language learning to date, ranging from basic to intermediate skills in Hebrew, French, Spanish, Modern Greek, Arabic, and Japanese (languages listed in chronological

order from elementary school to adulthood) has occurred in traditional classroom settings in the US and other countries (e.g. memorizing vocabulary, doing grammar drills, practicing scripted dialogues, writing paragraphs). While I think I can learn well in those situations because I am good at memorizing, I do not profess to enjoy it. After the initial excitement of learning a new language wears off, I gradually lose interest and motivation.

I studied French in junior high, high school and for three semesters in university, but I have not had any contact with the language for a number of years. Because I had a strong grammar foundation (thanks to my eccentric high school French teacher, Dr. Ethé's, constant drills), I had the forms ingrained in my head and could always apply that knowledge to speaking. In fact, when I was in France for a homestay program during high school, my friends, who were mostly from the same class, always appointed me to order food or ask for directions. I never had any problem coming up with the right things to say, but I also understood very few of the responses. This came to be a problem, as I once had to ask four different people for directions in order to find our destination that was practically around the block.

I have been studying Japanese on and off for 17 years out of necessity from living in Japan and needing to communicate in my daily life. I have only taken a formal class once, however, and that was in New York City for about six months before returning to Japan in 2012. Otherwise, my learning has consisted of one-on-one lessons from a tutor, language exchanges, or self-study. I consider myself to have high beginner to low intermediate skills in Japanese. In other words, I am not very good for the amount of time I have spent in Japan.

It has been difficult for me to stay motivated to study Japanese, so I have been constantly searching for ways to make it more enjoyable. Unfortunately, my motivation comes more from a necessity to get through life than a deeper interest in the language or community. I do not have the same interests as many highly motivated Japanese learners (e.g. manga, J-Pop, history), and I think my extrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000) makes it difficult to successfully learn the language. I love sports, and I love music, but I have never been able to use these avenues to get into Japanese culture in a way that would motivate me to study more. These interests, however, brought me to my current French study project, albeit in a roundabout way.

Interest in Francophone Africa

Way back in the second grade of elementary school, my teacher, Ms. Forma, introduced me to geography and the world. Around that time my parents bought me a globe

(see Figure 1), and I regularly studied it, memorizing names and locations of various countries. As I progressed through school, I became fascinated with anywhere that was different from what I saw every day, especially Africa, and I learned from my French secondary school textbooks that there were Francophone African countries.

Figure 1

The Globe I Received in Second Grade

During the 2018 World Cup, I read an article by Tom Williams (2018) about how people in various African countries considered France to be Africa's sixth team because many players have African roots, including some of the stars. As a result, many Africans easily rallied behind Team France. Williams discussed music, and he linked the team with two songs by African artists:

1) *Seka Seka*, the song in a viral video (Boy Holy, 2018) originally posted by Presnel Kimpembe, one of the players, on his Instagram story. It shows teammates dancing on an airplane after one of their victories.

2) *Magic in the Air*, the official Team France fan song for the last two World Cups. From following Team France's climb to the top, learning about the African heritage of so many players, and hearing the songs associated with the team through social media, I felt like I was part of the experience, even though I am neither French nor African, and I live on the other side of the world. Reading Williams' article was the "aha moment" that brought sports and music together for me. Thanks to music streaming services, these two songs also served as my gateway to entire genres of French language music (i.e. coupé-décalé and zouglou) that originated in Africa, with lyrics that I subsequently desired to understand. Having begun to

get back into French through music after so many years, I was fortuitous to be in the right situation to study the language in an enjoyable way, thus giving me a goal and the motivation to follow through (Kato & Mynard, 2016).

Why French?

I chose to study French for this project for three reasons. First, I had a high level of motivation from the music I had been discovering and listening to. Next, I wanted to replicate my students' experiences as best I could. While it might have seemed logical for me to choose Japanese because I need it for everyday life, I can find it everywhere around me. I can hear it spoken in stores and read signs on the train. On the other hand, I have no connection to French in my daily life. I do not hear it spoken or see it unless I make a conscious effort. Similarly, my students have little exposure to English outside of classes or our tiny SAC. They have to make an effort to find it. The final reason is that I can still read some French when I come across it. I feel like I lost a skill I once had, and I have long desired to regain it.

My Learning Goal

Replicating the students' work, I chose a target situation (what do I want to be able to do?), a big goal (reading, writing, speaking, or listening), and a small goal (pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, or fluency). Together, these comprise my language goal, which is to improve my vocabulary and listening to better understand French language songs. I chose listening because that was always my weakest of the four skills in French. In social situations, such as at restaurants, train stations, or asking directions on the street, I have always had trouble understanding spoken language. Since I felt that my grammar was still pretty good, but I have forgotten many words, I decided to focus on vocabulary to better understand the meanings of the songs.

Documenting My Learning

Like the students, I aimed to work for 90 minutes per week on my SURE plan. Then, I would sit down at a computer and type a reflection (Journal) about what occurred and how I felt (Watkins, 2015). I also kept a log of exactly what I did on which day and how much time I spent (similar to students). Because I had two toddlers at home, one of whom needed extra attention, I was severely limited in my leisure activities. However, my long commute by train (about 70 minutes with a transfer in the middle) gave me ample opportunities to make the most of my time. While rush hour in the Greater Tokyo Area is notorious for train cars

packed like cans of sardines, I am fortunate to have a reverse commute. Therefore, I could instead sit shoulder-to-shoulder with other commuters and use two of my most prized possessions, my noise-canceling earbuds and my iPhone, to immerse myself in French language songs and lyrics. In that cramped space, I strove to find ways to learn effectively. I found students to also do a lot of work on their phones, and while we did not discuss their reasons, I know that many of them have a similar commute, are members of university sports teams, and work at part-time jobs. Therefore, they might have similar necessities and time issues.

Since I had such a small workspace, all data (except for reflections) was typed in the Notes app on my phone. At the beginning of the project, I made a new folder in the app, titled "French". When I began to study a song, I pasted the French lyrics into a new note. These "song" notes gradually expanded as I made sense of the meanings, often through trial and error. Finally, there is a very long note titled "SDL – French songs / time spent". It takes five swipes to get all the way to the bottom of it. Originally, this was going to be my time log. However, it expanded to also include a list of potential songs to study, thoughts about my motivation, observations about the learning process, and notes about my self-evaluations, one of which involved an impromptu rendition of an entire song while riding through the rice fields one sunny morning.

I wrote observations about my learning whenever I thought of them. As a matter of fact, once I started this project, I was constantly thinking about my learning as if it were a problem to be solved, "How was I doing it? What could I do better?" I might be working on something completely unrelated, such as washing the dishes at home, and I would suddenly get an idea. It might have been a thought about the learning process or something new to try. I had to stop what I was doing, take off my dishwashing gloves, and type a quick note into my phone. For example, during one of these "aha moments", I typed:

> *Observation*: Songs are only for motivation. Learning vocab thru music not really effective because it's isolated. Need solid grammar and *useful* vocab (e.g. 1000 words list, K2 words) for effective lang[uage] learning. However, imp[ortant] to enjoy learning, & music (for me) helps me do just that. (Week 4 Notes)

Many observations in this paper came to me in this way.

During the six weeks of this project, I would say that I spent on average more than two hours per day listening to French language songs. However, I never counted it in my time log unless I was consciously focusing on the lyrics and/or reading along with them because it did not seem honest. I thought I would be "cheating" because if I was not giving

my entire attention to the task, such as while working out, I could not count it as studying. Nevertheless, I feel that listening (even with half an ear) is effective "ear training", and coupled with explicit study, I think it helped to improve my listening comprehension. (This will be discussed further in a future installment.)

Week 1

I began this project with contradicting emotions. On one hand, I treated the first week as a "getting my feet wet" period (Week 1 Journal). I wanted to ease myself into the process. I had never learned a language in this way, and I had some doubts as to whether I could succeed. Since most of my past language learning occurred in classrooms, I would just start a course and do my work. Self-directed learning was new for my students too, and as discussed above, they needed some guidance and training before getting started. In this case, where each week's work was an assignment for them, they simply followed the instructions as they completed each task. Therefore, students might not have felt my level of trepidation.

On the other hand, I was eager to embark on this new adventure, and I began the project on a high, energized and excited to start something new. I was intrinsically motivated, studying for enjoyment, rather than any external rewards, and I was taking an interest in new things (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Ryan & La Guardia, 1999). From my Week 1 Journal:

> I dove right in with a high level of motivation. I prepared and gave a presentation together with my students. I had spent about an hour of my commute home making the Pic Collage visual [(for the presentation)], and I felt very good about it.

While I wanted to give my students an example to follow, I was also doing this for myself, enjoying the beginning of the journey I was embarking on.

Employing a Strategy

Initially, I decided to adapt a strategy I had previously taught (and had been wanting to try) in the vocabulary unit of a first-year university level English communication course. It is designed to learn new words from songs or movies. The way I taught it, one uses the lyrics of a song or a several minute clip from a movie (with the script typed out). The original steps are as follows:

1. Listen to the song (or movie) and read along.
2. Listen again and underline unknown words or phrases.
3. Listen two more times and try to guess the meanings from context.

4. Discuss meanings with a partner, ask for help from group members or the teacher, and finally, use a dictionary.

In my case, I followed the first two steps explicitly. While doing this, I unconsciously guessed meanings of words from context, as I have always done since learning first language reading strategies in elementary school, and I later used a dictionary app to verify my guesses and revise as necessary. However, I ended up listening to the song many more times than the strategy calls for. I adapted this strategy because it did not work for me as it was. I think students often do (or should do) the same because a strategy should be modified if it does not work (Werner, 2014). Personally, I think the most important consideration to using this strategy is to choose a song you really like because you will have to listen to it many, many times to truly understand it.

I decided to begin with Magic System's *Magic in the Air*, since this song, with lyrics about soccer, was the gateway to all the new music I had been discovering. I have felt that students tend to start out with something familiar to them, too. I thought it would be easy as an initial attempt because I was already familiar with some of lyrics, there is a lot of repetition with few unique words, and I had been able to understand the simple and catchy chorus (with both French and English) the first time I heard it.

My Method

First, I copied and pasted the lyrics into a new note in the Notes app. Next, I went through and bolded all unfamiliar words the first time they appeared. It was then that I realized I needed a good dictionary app to look up English meanings of French words. I was hesitant to use Google Translate because of inaccurate translations between Japanese and English (Week 1 Journal), and also because I often tell my students not to use it. I read reviews and tried four apps that seemed promising (Word Reference, Vida Lingua French, Reverso Context, and one more that turned out not to be so promising). Although I had a "getting my feet wet" mentality, I nevertheless worked for about two hours in Week 1 and made good progress both in getting through my first song and discovering useful strategies and resources. At the end of the week, I noted that Reverso Context "worked well not only with individual words, but also with phrases and example sentences. In this way, I learned some expressions that differed from the meanings of the individual words" (Week 1 Journal). I was looking forward to continuing in Week 2.

Looking Ahead

In this installment, I introduced my autoethnography about studying French as a self-directed learner for six weeks at the same time as my students, who were using the same method to learn English. I discussed the task, which included a weekly SURE plan, study time, and a reflection. I also told my language learning history and described the strategies and resources I used in the first week of studying.

In future installments, I will describe the ensuing five weeks, where I not only began to study grammar, but also discovered a new dialect and a new interest. These factors led to a reconsideration of my learning goals, as well as a deep reflection on whether I should change them. I will also tell about ways I evaluated my learning and what a vocabulary analysis revealed about the new words and my choices of songs. Finally, I will delve into challenges I faced and ways I worked through them or might have done so in retrospect. As I continued to learn and compare my learning to that of my students, I came to the important realization that this experience was helping me to become a more empathetic learning advisor.

Earlier in this installment, I compared my autoethnography to an adventure, a voyage, and a journey. With that in mind, my entire six-week experience might be summed up by the following metaphor:

My journey is a boat ride. It starts when I push off from the dock into gentle waters. My arms move in a rhythmical, cyclical motion as my paddle smoothly dips into and out of the water: right, left, right, left. I glide across the pristine surface and gradually pick up speed. I'm excited to be kayaking out on the open seas for the very first time. It's peaceful and tranquil. I can smell the familiar salty tang in the air. "This is wonderful," I think. Suddenly, the waves become rough. The boat violently pitches up higher and higher so that I am almost lying flat on my back, and then briefly levels out before plunging straight down the crest of a wave like a roller coaster. I hold on for dear life as the motion threatens to make me sick, and I try to keep from capsizing. I somehow ride it out to calmer seas, but it is only a temporary reprieve. The storm returns and with it, a maelstrom threatening to suck me in, but I paddle hard with the shoreline in sight. I find myself gliding gently along the coast, admiring the sandy beaches, emerald forests, and majestic mountains rising beyond. It's paradise, and I'm loving every minute of it. But what's this? I catch the rope from the dockworker, and he's pulling me to the pier. Hold on, I don't want to get off the boat yet. I just figured out how to sail! Wait a minute, how did I end up on a sailboat?

Notes on the Contributor

Robert Werner is a teacher, learning advisor, and self-access center coordinator at Ryutsu Keizai University. He has taught ESL/EFL at elementary schools, junior high schools, and universities in Japan and the US, and he spent a memorable year teaching social studies at a New York City public high school. His research interests include self-directed learning, metacognition, motivation, and autoethnography.

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