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‘Trusting the Process’: Part Three of My Autoethnography as a Self-Directed Learner of French

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Abstract

This is the third part of an autoethnography about trying to enrich my vocabulary and improve my listening skills as a self-directed learner through French language songs. I followed the same Study Use Review Evaluate (SURE) learning cycle as my students in a self-directed English class at a university in Japan, and my work occurred at the same time as theirs, over a period of six weeks. Throughout the project and in the course of writing it up, I have been making comparisons and identifying connections between my learning and that of my students. This installment covers the final three weeks of the project. First, in continuing my language learning history, I discuss authentic language and the discrepancies between my classroom language learning and real-life experiences, especially with regard to understanding spoken language while in France. Next, the paper details how I evaluated my learning both during the project and months after it finished. After that, I describe my longtime interest in accents and dialects and how I chose my third song partly to study Nouchi, a French-based dialect spoken in Ivory Coast. The paper concludes with a description of how I felt my goals shifting at different points in the project and reasons I considered changing my focus from listening to reading. I also describe a way I have been able to continue practicing reading French on a daily basis and how students can benefit from this method too.

Keywords: autoethnography, French, authentic language, evaluating learning, Nouchi

“*Excusez-moi. Où est la rue Guérin ?*” I ask.

I hear, “*Continuez tout droit. Tournez à droite*,” but the rest is a jumble. My friends do not even catch that much. We follow my ear, go straight, and turn right.

Not seeing anything familiar, I ask another person, “*Excusez-moi. Où est la rue Guérin ?*” This pattern continues as I only catch tidbits, ask more people, and we inch closer to our destination. Finally, we find the street, *rue Guérin*, and the high school that our hosts attend.

It is a chilly, overcast February afternoon, the first day of an exchange program that had been arranged by two of the French teachers at my high school. We landed in Paris early that morning and rode a bus to the school, where we were greeted warmly by the English teachers and served a breakfast of hot cocoa (in large bowls) and bread with jam. This was

the start of the second half of a program that had begun in New York several months earlier. Each of our families had hosted a French student, and our homestay students' families were now going to host us.

In the afternoon, the American students were given time to explore the town on our own, with instructions to meet back at the school by 3:00pm, when our host parents would arrive to drive us to their homes. With smartphones not having been invented yet, my usually stellar sense of direction was being defeated by a hand-drawn map that only included major streets in a warren of irregularly angled back roads, typical for a European town built over the centuries. However, I felt confident asking for directions, because I had practiced the activity many times in French class, and I knew exactly what to say.

Authentic Language

To my dismay, classroom learning did not translate to real-life success, especially with regard to understanding interlocutors' responses. One possible reason might be due to little exposure to authentic audio/visual materials in my high school French studies. Authentic classroom materials not only reinforce language that has been learned, but also provide a real-life context for the learner (Benitez-Galbraith & Galbraith, 2019). In addition, they are produced by and for native speakers and are made for a non-teaching purpose (Gilmore, 2007; Lee, 1995; Porter & Roberts, 1981). In an article about authentic ELT listening, which seems applicable to my French learning experiences, Porter and Roberts (1981) discussed the enormous mismatch between everyday spoken language and the language students are exposed to in class. This is "a major reason for the classic situation in which students do well in the classroom but are unable to transfer their skills to the world outside" (Porter & Roberts, 1981, p. 39). Porter and Roberts also listed typical features of traditional classroom listening exercises, such as a slow, uniform speaking pace and formal language devoid of slang and colloquial expressions. These descriptions hit the nail on the head in characterizing both my high school learning experiences and the ensuing result when I tried to use French in the real world. I think I was not alone, and there are many learners who have similar experiences when they travel abroad or begin a homestay or study abroad program.

I learned formal, and in some cases old-fashioned language from my French teacher, who was close to retirement and had left Belgium as a child in the 1940s. Still, he was one of my favorite teachers. He looked a little like Albert Einstein with his grayish-white hair going every which way. I enjoyed his quirky dictations and laughed at his humor. Maybe it was just the way languages were taught in those days, but in retrospect I think my first meaningful

experience with authentic language actually occurred while I was in France, even though I had been studying the language for more than five years, and my teacher was a native speaker.

My Japanese students may have had similar learning experiences in junior high, high school, and even in some university classes. Rote learning is simply not as useful as meaningful learning, because while students might be able to memorize vocabulary or a dialogue to score well on a test, they will not be able to use what they have learned to adapt to a new situation (Mayer, 2002). In addition, EFL textbooks have traditionally focused on lexico-grammatical features of language to the exclusion of communicative competence (Gilmore, 2011). This makes it an uphill climb for many language learners when we try to understand authentic texts or communicate in the target language in the world outside the classroom.

While traditional textbook learning still occurs in Japan and other countries, learners are lucky to have access to a range of authentic materials through apps and online tools that can supplement more traditional resources and increase their proficiency in real-life situations. For example, Coumbaa (2019), a native French speaking user of the HiNative app, taught me the meaning of an expression that turned out to be slang (Werner, 2020b), and while studying grammar with Duolingo (2020), I perceived more natural language than I had learned in my high school and university French classes. In addition, dictionaries that constantly search the internet for new example sentences, such as Reverso Context (Hoffenberg, 2020), can keep up with new words that have become part of the lexicon of a language. An app is also more convenient than lugging around a heavy dictionary! In another case, students have told me about positive experiences having language exchanges with native speakers around their age through an app called HelloTalk (2020). Finally, an online writing assistant (e.g., Grammarly, 2020) or sentence search engine (e.g., Ludwig, 2020) can help English learners feel more confident in their grammar or usage while writing.

As we crept closer to the school, my friends and I were desperately trying not to make a bad impression by arriving late on the first day. It never occurred to me to try asking in English, even though almost everyone in the town probably spoke it. I was determined to use my French, and we were *going to* find the school. At the same time, however, I was ashamed of having to ask four different people when our destination turned out to only be a few streets away. I also felt that I had let my friends down after they nominated me to do the talking. After that day, I continued to do most of the speaking at places like cafés and train stations, because I was determined to get better (and I think my friends were determined not to be the

ones who looked bad). While I had success in situations that paralleled dialogues from French class, I was frequently unable to understand what my host family members or the other local students were saying. This was not what I had had in mind when I signed up for the program.

Those experiences and a general feeling of helplessness have haunted me since that two-week program during my senior year of high school, now more than 20 years ago. In every language I have formally studied (including English, my native language), I have always been stronger at reading than listening. While I have no problem memorizing phrases to say or questions to ask, I often have a lot of trouble responding quickly and naturally within a particular situation. Maybe this is just the way I am. It could also date back to my early second language learning experiences. This deficiency in listening skills, particularly in French, influenced my decision to focus on listening for this project.

A Self-Directed English Course

This autoethnography is based on a six-week project where I completed the same work at the same time as my third-year students in a self-directed English course at a Japanese university, which was adapted from a similar course offered at a different institution (Curry et al., 2017; Mynard & Stevenson, 2017; Werner, 2020a). Students made a learning plan, including a learning goal and steps to be taken through the Study Use Review Evaluate (SURE) learning cycle (Morrison, 2013; Watkins, 2015, Werner, 2020a, b). For their learning goal, they chose a target situation (how they want to use the language), a big goal (speaking, listening, reading, or writing), and a small goal (vocabulary, grammar, fluency, or pronunciation). Then, they put the plan into effect for six weeks. Each week, students wrote a learning journal (including a reflection), made any adjustments they felt were necessary, and did it all over again.

Since the class met every week, students had opportunities to share aspects of their learning plans or ways they chose to work towards their goals with each other. In this way, they were able to learn from one another, on their own through studying and reflecting on their progress, and from the teachers as we wrote comments in their journals or spoke informally in class. Students also had an individual advising session with one of us before starting to work on their learning plans.

The students' learning journal was a structured assignment and consisted of a packet with information about the learning cycle, a sample SURE plan, examples of ways they can document their learning, and pages for six weeks of self-study. The self-study materials were

the same for each week and consisted of three parts: a weekly target (what students wanted to accomplish in that week), a blank chart in which to write their weekly SURE plan, and lines for writing a reflection.

Additional pages to continue the learning journal were made available online for students who wanted to continue studying with this method after the course finished, and several expressed an interest in doing so. When I ran into some of them on campus in the following semester, I was disappointed to learn that they had not followed through with their intentions. At the same time, I understood why. They were starting the rigorous job hunting process that is a requirement for anyone who will enter the Japanese workforce, and this consumes students' free time (and likely their minds, as I know all too well from my own recent job search).

Data Collection

When it came to my own language study, I did not feel that I needed as structured an approach as the students, since I have been learning languages for a number of years. In addition, with little free time and a long commute, almost all my studying occurred on the train, which meant that I had little personal space and had to do everything on my smartphone. Data, which was mostly typed in the Notes app, consisted of song lyrics with my vocabulary translations, a log of what I did on each day and for how much time, weekly reflections (typed on a computer), and other notes or observations (for a full description of data collection, see Werner, 2020a). In this paper, a reflection is referred to as "Journal", and other data are "Notes".

Continuing the Autoethnography

This is the third part of an autoethnography about my experiences trying to improve my French vocabulary and listening skills through music. Autoethnography is "an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural" (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 739). The culture in this case is the language classroom, the self-access center, and/or self-directed language learning in general. Autoethnography "begins with the biography of the writer and moves outward to culture, discourse, history, and ideology" (Denzin, 2013, p. 124). Thus, it starts with my language learning history (Werner, 2020a). Like an onion that is peeled, previously hidden aspects of my past learning are revealed and become intertwined with the present study, as I

continuously seek to interpret the data and bring clarity to the personal transformation I have been experiencing (Bochner, 2000; Bochner & Ellis, 2016; Everhard, 2018).

Throughout this project, I acted as a learner, an instructor / advisor, and an autoethnographer all at the same time. While studying French according to my own learning plan, I paid attention to what my students were doing as I commented on their journals and interacted with them in class. As this was occurring, the students became part of my experience, and their work, opinions, or actions are related through my memories (Denzin, 2014). During the six weeks of self-study and while writing it up, I have been making meaningful connections between my learning and that of the students in my class or others I have known who were engaging in similar activities.

I am trying to write evocatively in order to *show*, rather than simply *tell* the story (Ellis, 2004). I want the reader to be part of the experience, to *feel* it and make deep connections with personal learning experiences, whether through language learning, advisor training, or professional development. I am also aiming to help teachers and learning advisors connect with students' development as observed through course assignments, advising sessions, and interactions both in and beyond the classroom.

I ended the first installment with a metaphor of being caught in a storm while kayaking on open seas (Werner, 2020a). At the end of Week 3, I was caught in that figurative storm, as I doubted both my ability to successfully complete the project and the value of studying French at all while living in Japan. I was also confused about the learning goal I had chosen and wondered if I should change my focus to grammar (Werner, 2020b). While my work through Duolingo took me away from the original plan of learning vocabulary through songs, I also started to feel that the app might lead to more meaningful learning. It was sequential in the new grammar forms and vocabulary that appeared, rather than haphazard (learning whatever appeared in a song). After a conversation with a colleague helped me realize that there can be a lot of flexibility in following SURE (see part two, Werner, 2020b), my resolve strengthened, and I felt empowered to continue on the path I had begun. In the absence of a learning advisor, I think telling someone else about what I was doing and how I felt helped me to better put things in perspective and realize that I was only experiencing a bump in the road.

"Evaluate", the Final Step of SURE

Coincidentally, the conversation, which I consider to be a turning point, occurred at the exact midway point of the project (the last day of week three). The following morning, as

week four began, I spent my entire 90-minute commute studying, and this was only the beginning of my most productive week thus far.

After rechecking and correcting a few terms in *Magic in the Air*, I conducted my first evaluation. While there are four steps to SURE, "Evaluate" is not done every week because it takes time to learn something new, and it is vital to see how well you are retaining what you have already learned. It is more important to achieve a balance between the four steps, but this balance is determined by the individual (Morrison, 2013). On one hand, week four of a six-week project might have been a little late to complete my first evaluation, because only the first three steps of SURE had been done up to that point. On the other hand, I had to overcome obstacles in learning how to best carry out my learning plan. First, in week two, I was bogged down with how to "Use" new words, because I felt that hearing them in a song was insufficient (Werner, 2020b).

Next, without the benefit of a learning advisor, I had to figure everything out by myself. Having sophisticated knowledge of how to learn languages, I could 'self-advise' (Kato & Mynard, 2016), but I feel that this likely drew out the process. Since I was learning at my own pace, the evaluation would occur when I was ready.

Finally, even though I was studying for pleasure, I was bothered by not having an easy way to quantify my learning progress. If I had been studying for an exam, I could have taken a practice test before starting to study. Then, as I evaluated myself every few weeks, I would be able to compare my score to the initial pre-test to gauge improvement. Likewise, I think students are often mistrustful of the process when they first start learning in this way. They feel that their learning is not meaningful if they do not raise their score on a test (C. Taylor, personal communication, December 12, 2020).

Without a concrete measure, I found it difficult to decide how to evaluate my learning. At the same time, I realized that I would have to take a holistic approach. I think this is common for students who are intrinsically motivated and are learning for the sake of learning. While advising students, as in learning for myself, measuring the acquisition of listening skills has always presented the greatest challenge. Does this go back to my early language learning experiences, where listening was the first step in learning how to produce language, rather than a goal in and of itself (Porter & Roberts, 1981)?

Measuring My Learning

Kato and Mynard's (2016) listening diagnostic test provided a starting point in evaluating my learning. If I were to use that cognitive tool, I would first listen to a song and write what percentage I could understand. Then, I would check boxes (good, fair, or poor) to

evaluate my ability in five areas, such as keeping up with a natural speed and understanding vocabulary. With my study time occurring on a train, I did not have any physical space to write on paper, and I could not see a way to easily use that resource. For better or worse, I chose a more informal method of evaluation to start.

In the beginning of week one, I first listened to *Magic in the Air* without looking at the lyrics. I thought to myself, "Can I understand individual words only? Phrases? Whole lines? The entire stanza?" This was my listening diagnostic (or pre-test), and the result was that I was able to "understand occasional words" (Week 1 Notes). I did this for all three songs, and the result was the same each time. For each song, I evaluated myself once at the beginning and once before moving on to the next song (or at the end of the project). In this way, I achieved a balance, even though the interval between evaluations was not uniform for all three songs.

The evaluation in week four (post-test) consisted of the same exercise. After studying, I found that I was able to understand individual words, and also phrases and an occasional line (Week 4 Notes). In addition, I could recognize all the words in the song, even if I did not always remember the meanings (Week 4 Journal). Thanks to this, it would only be a matter of time before I would remember all the vocabulary and understand everything.

An Unconventional Evaluation

It is a beautiful, clear Tuesday morning, a rarity in the middle of the springtime rainy season. As the train crosses the Tone River, my eye is caught by the distant Mount Fuji rising over the far riverbank, a view that never gets old. Several minutes later, I exit the station and make my way to the garage where my bicycle is waiting. Helmet and sunglasses on, I ride through the streets of the small town, and after a few minutes, the houses fall away behind me. I am now on a wide bike path in the middle of the rice fields. On my right, a short, grassy slope rises to a two-lane country road. Aside from the road and bike path, the paddies extend for about a kilometer on either side, bordered by a low hill rising to the left and a few houses, several copses of trees, and a single railroad track to the right. The thin, green stalks rise out of the shallow water of the paddy and occasionally wave in the almost non-existent breeze. Traffic on the road is sparse today, and there are no other cyclists or pedestrians. The temperature is perfect, with blue skies stretching as far as the eye can see. A heron alights from someplace to my left and gracefully glides across my field of vision. Multi-hued butterflies flutter as I glide through the serene landscape. At this moment in time, all alone on the path, feeling the warm sun on my face, there is no place I would rather be. As this feeling

of complete and utter peace settles into my body, I spontaneously begin to sing *Magic in the Air*.

Not only was I able to sing the whole song, but I also understood all the expressions (Week 5 Journal)! It was an unconventional and unplanned way of evaluating my learning, but being relaxed and surrounded by nature, which I love, I sang the words without thinking. I was in flow, caught up in the moment, with all my attention and concentration focused on the song (Csiksentmihalyi, 1997).

I had not reviewed *Magic in the Air* since the previous evaluation, which had been 12 days earlier. In the intervening time, while I probably listened to the song but did not consciously focus on the lyrics, I went from understanding individual words, phrases, and an occasional line, to understanding and *producing* the entire song. How did that happen? While it was unintentional, I think I produced the optimal conditions for spaced repetition (Mondria & Mondria-De Vries, 1994; Pimsleur, 1967; Seibert Hanson & Brown, 2020), and this helped me to more effectively remember the vocabulary words in the song. In weeks one and two, I was "Studying", "Using" the vocabulary (by listening to the song), and "Reviewing" meanings, the first three steps of SURE. In week three, I only listened to the song, and then did my first "Evaluation" in the beginning of week four. As the time increased between instances of focusing on or checking meanings of the vocabulary, so too did my memory retention. Every time I have listened to *Magic in the Air* since that morning, I have been able to comprehend everything.

After the turmoil I had felt just two weeks earlier, this was the "aha moment" that gave way to an amazing sense of accomplishment at having mastered a song. While the setting was completely different, the relaxed nature of my experience might be similar to a student enjoying learning English through karaoke. In several studies, learners showed increased motivation from singing karaoke in the classroom (Butto et al., 2014; Rengifo, 2009) or through an app (Murad et al., 2018).

Post-Project Evaluations and Memory Retention

About three weeks after the end of the project and once every few months since then, I have wanted to see if I could still understand the vocabulary in the songs, as well as the overall meanings. This time, I used part of Kato and Mynard's (2016) listening diagnostic test. My evaluation consisted of listening to each song once without looking at the lyrics and estimating how much I could comprehend (e.g., about 80%). Every time I have done this evaluation, the result has been about the same for *Magic in the Air* and *Normal*. I can understand all of *Magic in the Air* (100%) and about 85-90% of *Normal*. In a few parts of the

latter song, I cannot catch the rapidly spoken linked words, even though I have practically memorized the lines.

For *Jusqu'à Fatigué*, three weeks after the project I was able to understand about 90%, but I can now catch about 98-99% of the singing parts. I occasionally miss a word, and I have trouble with the short speaking parts, which include a mix of French and Lingala, a language spoken in Congo (E. Mokolo Jr., personal communication, November 23, 2020). The higher comprehension is likely due to increased confidence from knowing that I now have the correct lyrics and from having learned additional meanings in the year and a half since the project finished (more on this below).

There are two possible reasons that I have retained my listening skills and vocabulary knowledge. First, as the time between evaluations increases, my memory retention increases. Next, as I listen to more and more French language songs, my word recognition also improves. Studies have shown that exposure to foreign languages or accents helps listeners to better adapt to and recognize those sounds (Baese-Berk et al., 2013; Wyner, 2014), thus achieving better comprehension of spoken (or sung) language.

Exposure to and Interest in Accents and Dialects

I have long been interested in the different ways people speak. Growing up in suburban New York, I cannot remember when I first heard an accent or language being spoken that was different from my own. Many of my classmates' parents were Italian immigrants, workers in local shops and restaurants came from Greece, China, Korea, or Spanish-speaking countries, and it was not uncommon to hear Yiddish-accented English from elderly people. I think acceptance of diversity and differences among people is a part of who I am due to my experiences in my formative years.

A woman from St. Kitts, an island in the Caribbean, used to come to our house. I cannot recall when she started coming, but I remember standing on my tiptoes on the green carpet in the upstairs playroom, little fingers on the white windowsill, looking out through the glass. She is climbing into the van, sinking orange sun to my left, shadows lengthening on the ground. I wave, "Good-bye. See you next week."

She was warm and friendly, like everyone I have ever met from that part of the world, and she spoke to me while she cleaned. I could swear that she was speaking another language, except that my monolingual mother always understood her perfectly and told me what she said. I think she was amused that I did not understand, but I was ashamed that I needed my mother to 'translate'.

When I met people from other places or had a chance to travel, I always thought other accents sounded "cool", such as speakers from England, Ireland, Australia, or South Africa, as well as those of nonnative English speakers from around the globe that I might have heard in stores or restaurants, at sleepaway camp, or at the airport. I also thought Southern [US] accents were nice, but I had a lot of trouble understanding them when I first started university down South.

Years later, while living in Shimane, a rural area of Japan, I had the opportunity to learn some phrases in *Izumo-ben*, an obscure regional dialect spoken by most of the elderly people in the small, mountainous town where I resided. Some of the vocabulary is so different from standard Japanese that it is unintelligible to the vast majority of native speakers. While teaching *Izumo-ben* to Japanese people from Tokyo or Osaka has been a fun ice breaker at parties, I am genuinely interested in non-standard dialects of a language when I come across them. This interest manifested itself during week six of the project.

Nouchi

Towards the end of week six, I started my third song, *Jusqu'à Fatigué* (pronounced /ʒus'kɑ fɑti'ge/), by Kaysha. "*Jusqu'à fatigué*" literally means "until you are tired", and with a chorus about constantly dancing and moving one's body, it is saying "we will party until we get tired" (Mr. L. T. NIMBA, 2006). While I was just about finished with the project (keeping to the same number of weeks as the students), I had been very interested in this song from the beginning, partly because I liked the melody.

When I began to look up meanings, I found that many of the words were not in the dictionary. This was not entirely unexpected, however, because I knew that the musical genre was coupé-décalé (cf. pkramses333, 2008), dance music that originated in Ivory Coast. Coupé-décalé songs often include a mix of French and Nouchi (pronounced /nu'ʃi/), a dialect spoken in Ivory Coast. Choosing to study this song gave me the perfect excuse to learn some Nouchi.

Nouchi began as a secret language spoken by youths (Kube-Barth, 2009) and has been referred to as Abidjan street slang (Le Guen, 2012). Abidjan is the largest city in Ivory Coast. It is a center for West African music and culture, and it is where coupé-décalé originated. Nouchi mixes French, words from local languages, and slang from Guinean youths who had immigrated to Ivory Coast and were living in Abidjan (E. Mokolo Jr., personal communication, November 23, 2020). While it uses some French grammar, it could

be argued that it is a distinct language (Sande, 2015), because it not only contains loanwords from local languages and English, but also has many invented terms (Kube-Barth, 2009).

Understanding "*Jusqu'à Fatigué*"

Since Nouchi is an ever-evolving dialect (Konan, 2016), and *Jusqu'à Fatigué* was written about 15 years ago, finding meanings of unknown words turned out to be quite a challenge. Other roadblocks included not knowing if the lyrics I had found were accurate (they turned out not to be in a few places) and having to conduct my search almost entirely in French. A search for one term would lead to a string of websites, and I ended up doing quite a bit of research to find the meaning of each word. I read or skimmed online news, academic articles, French Wikipedia, dictionary lists, etc. At the same time, I enjoyed learning about a culture that was new to me.

At the time that I chose to study *Jusqu'à Fatigué*, I thought it would be easy because "it has much fewer words and a much simpler grammar structure" (Week 5 Journal) than *Normal*. However, according to my Week 6 Journal:

> I probably spent three to four hours [in addition to the 70 minutes spent on *Normal*], and I still have not found everything. It did not help that I went off on tangents to try to understand the backgrounds of some of the pop culture references in the song.

As I learned, things are not always as they seem, but at the same time, I have no regrets about my choice. While the work was time-consuming, it was also fascinating. I think students often find a task to be more difficult than it initially seems. That is how things are sometimes, and I have been happy to see many of them take on the challenge and succeed.

Jusqu'à Fatigué is an ode to the culture and key figures of the early coupé-décalé musical scene, which was in full swing when the song was written, and the lyrics contain several shout-outs (Kaysha, 2005). In fact, many DJs and other artists appear in the music video (Mokolo, 2020). In terms of language, the song contains French, Nouchi, and slang. Finding French meanings was the easy part; I went back to the Reverso Context app. I was able to decipher some of the Nouchi by sifting through lists of terms or searching on Nouchi.com (2013), while others eluded me. At times, I combined a Nouchi expression with my knowledge of French grammar and made an educated guess. Eventually, I felt that I was able to get the overall gist of the song, even if I might not have gotten everything right, but I had to give up on several expressions because the project was ending.

While writing this paper, I thought, "How can I learn the meanings of all the slang and Nouchi in the song? How can I verify my work?" As I thought about it, I came to a

conclusion: what better way to understand what a song is saying than to ask the person who wrote it?

I sent an email to Kaysha, the artist, who is multilingual and records vlogs in English. He graciously offered to help and replied with corrections, comments, and answers to a few questions. He also added some notes about Nouchi and/or the coupé-décalé scene. I am grateful for his assistance, because these notes contain valuable information from an active member of the Abidjan music scene at that time. They also give insight where otherwise I would have none. Information from Kaysha (Edward Mokolo Jr.) appears throughout this paper.

Grammar

Jusqu'à Fatigué contains at least one example that illustrates how grammar in Nouchi sometimes differs from that of standard French. The chorus goes:

> *On va danser, jusqu'à fatigué*
> *On va bouger, jusqu'à fatigué*
> *On va décaler, jusqu'à fatigué*
> *On va s'envolement*
> [We're going to dance, until we get tired
> We're going to move, until we get tired
> We're going to *décaler**, until we get tired
> We're going to fly] (Kaysha, 2005)
> **Décaler* refers to dancing to coupé-décalé music.

The first three lines include the infinitive forms of the verbs, which end in "-er". However, in the fourth line, the verb ends in "-ment". This confused me because the "-ment" suffix usually changes an adjective to an adverb. According to Kaysha, *on va s'envolement* is a Nouchi corruption of French that should have been *on va s'envoler*. In addition, the last line refers to a move where the dancer raises both arms and one leg to pretend to be a bird. It also signifies being at a higher level, or better than everyone else (E. Mokolo Jr., personal communication, November 23, 2020).

From Listening to Reading

At different points during this project, I felt that my goals were shifting. In part two, I detailed how and why I considered changing my small goal from vocabulary to grammar (Werner, 2020b). Towards the end of the project, I began to feel that my big goal was changing from listening to reading. As I learned about the coupé-décalé scene and searched for meanings of Nouchi words, I was able to practice reading and hone my vocabulary and

grammar skills through decoding and attempting to comprehend authentic French texts. It was difficult, and I had to pause to look up many words, but I also felt some of my prior knowledge returning as I thought, "I know this word. I recognize it from my past studies."

I have always been confident in my French reading, and this is one skill I felt I retained to some degree over the years, although I could not remember enough grammar to pass a placement test on Duolingo (Werner, 2020b). Weltens (1988) found French language learners to retain proficiency for two years of non-use, but after that, their grammar skills decreased. It is no wonder that my first Duolingo experience was such an exercise in futility.

In Week 6, I wrote about how Nouchi was in the back of my mind all along, with Magic System, Kaysha, and other artists emphasizing it in their music (Week 6 Notes). In discussing the activity of reading about coupé-décalé and Nouchi, I wrote:

> This is what I am really interested in. I realize now that it is the crux of what I have wanted to do. I want to learn about linguistic elements of Ivorian musical culture. Nouchi has been termed 'a living language', and while it is constantly changing, it exists in the songs as an expression of life in Abidjan, a city with a rich musical tradition. What are the songs about? What events led to this music? Almost all the texts on this topic are written in French, so I need to be able to understand them. (Week 6 Journal)

If I had continued the project beyond Week 6, what would have occurred? Would I have read texts instead, or would I have returned to listening to songs after finding the information I sought? In hindsight, I think I was just caught up in the moment. It is only conjecture at this point, but I think I would have gone back to listening to music, because that is what I am interested in, where I find the most enjoyment, and where I am motivated to learn for the sake of learning (Mynard & McLoughlin, 2020; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Sansone & Thoman, 2005).

I often tell my students that a learning plan can be changed if they feel that something is not working. While I encourage them to stick to the goals they started with, I know from experience that it is more important to enjoy what one is doing, and this will lead to higher motivation in the long run (Dörnyei, 2001; Ryan & Deci, 2017; Vallerand, 1997).

In a Week 7 plan that was only partially completed, I wrote that I would begin to study *1er Gaou* (*Premier Gaou*), a song written entirely in Nouchi (Powell, 2018). In fact, when I listened to that song for a pre-test, I found that I could "understand or recognize quite a bit thanks to all my reading about Nouchi" (Week 7 Notes) the previous week. Therefore,

all my studying had not been in vain. I think the knowledge will be put to good use should I formally study West African songs again in the future.

French Reading Practice in Everyday Life

After the project finished, I wanted to retain my language skills. While I have continued to listen to French language songs regularly, I wanted to keep reading too. To do this, I took a very simple step and changed the Google search location to France on my home computer. Now, every time I conduct a search (in English), the first few results are French sites, followed by English ones. When I search for a term that has a cognate in French, I might not see any English results at all (which can be annoying if I am in a rush). While I still have English as the system language, and I use Google.com (rather than Google.fr), this small change has paid dividends, because I am forced to see the language on a daily basis. Once I see French, I skim the results (in addition to the English ones). It is similar to how I casually read signs in Japanese in stores or on the train. I feel that this brief daily practice has helped me improve my reading speed and comprehension, because I read the text and sometimes look up an unknown word.

I would highly recommend this strategy to Japanese learners of English (or anyone who is serious about learning another language). They can set their search engine to Australia, England, the United States, or any other English-speaking country to regularly see results in English. However, since Japanese and English use different writing systems, this would likely only work if a learner were to type in *romaji* (Roman letters).

Looking Back and Ahead

In this installment, I talked about my high school classroom language learning experiences, especially with regard to listening, and how unprepared I felt when I tried to converse with people in France. As a result, I began this project motivated to try to improve my French listening skills. I also detailed the ways I evaluated my learning during the six-week project and how I have continued to do so since. After that, I discussed my lifelong interest in accents and dialects. I crammed *Jusqu'à Fatigué* into the end of Week 6, because I really wanted to learn Nouchi, a dialect spoken in Ivory Coast, which combines French grammar with words from local languages. Finally, I described how I thought about changing my goal from listening to reading and ways that I continue to practice reading French.

The project is just about finished, but I do not feel a sense of closure. I definitely feel contentment here and there, such as from learning more about myself as a learner and what

motivates me, having a better understanding of what students are going through as they study with the SURE learning cycle, and being able to understand authentic spoken French more consistently. In the eight years I studied French, I had never been able to have more than a cursory interaction or sustain a conversation. This might be my biggest takeaway from this project, since it was something that had haunted me for years (and through three trips to Paris and two to Montreal).

I think many Japanese learners have a similar experience in their English studies, where they can score well on tests but cannot hold a natural, unscripted conversation. This is likely due to the nature of their high school English classes, which tend to focus more on rote than meaningful learning. In a sense, this project was wonderful, not only in refreshing my memory of the vocabulary and grammar I learned years ago, but also for gaining confidence in my French listening ability.

In a perfect world, I would have continued studying, just as I have continued listening to French language music. However, I not only wanted to limit my study period to the same amount of time as the students (for the purposes of this study), but I also became busy with other obligations. From the six weeks of the project, about three of which were spent figuring out what to do, I felt like I only whet my appetite. Is that why I feel like something is missing? While autoethnographies do not have perfect, Hollywood-type endings (Bochner & Ellis, 2016), I have a few loose ends to tie up (although it might be the kind of messy knot my four-year-old sons would tie, rather than a neat bow). More observations need to be made, and more analysis and interpretation needs to occur.

The fourth and final part of this autoethnography will tie together the three songs I studied by comparing the difficulty level of the vocabulary and looking at factors that made each song easier or more difficult to understand. After that, I will shift from a discussion of my French language learning to that of my development as a learning advisor and autoethnographer through conducting this study. I will take a thematic approach and delve deeper into topics covered in the first three parts that helped me learn more about myself from, with, and parallel to students. At the same time, it will be reflective as I discuss advising in language learning and how experiencing the process has transformed me into a more empathetic advisor. In addition, throughout this autoethnography I have written again and again about how I was motivated to study because I was interested in the music and the task (and was not as motivated when a task was boring). In this vein, I want to revisit motivation and discuss the roles of interest and self-regulation in advising and language learning.

Finally, I want to reflect deeply on the writing process as a method of inquiry (Richardson, 2000) and on how it helped me use the past to discover new aspects of the present (Denzin, 2013, 2014) as I became an autoethnographer. The closing section provides a starting point for this reflection.

Conclusion

Writing this autoethnography has been incredibly difficult for me, and there were times that I thought, "I simply cannot do this." However, I am not a person who gives up easily. For as long as I can remember, my parents taught me to finish something I started, and I feel that this is a defining feature of my character. My motto is "I *will* persevere". As I have worked on the stories, analysis, and interpretation, over and over again I have become overwhelmed by the enormity of the task and the difficulty not only of reflecting deeply about myself (and reliving painful memories in the process), but also in making smooth connections between my memories, the present-day study, and the literary prose of the different vignettes. At the same time, I thought, "How can I make it academic, but also interesting to read?" I have been greatly influenced by Carolyn Ellis, Art Bochner, and others in this regard (Bochner & Ellis, 2016; Ellis, 1993, 2004; Ellis & Rawicki, 2013; Poulos, 2009, to name a few), and I have been aiming to not only follow in their footsteps, but also to contribute to an emerging field within self-directed language learning and help others who might attempt similar undertakings.

Along with a perception that I have been producing some of my best work to date, I also have a miniscule, but nagging feeling of self-doubt that will not go away and instead seems to grow as I dwell on it. From writing so personally, I might be opening myself up to painful criticism. I am almost afraid to hear colleagues' opinions of my work. As I briefly contemplate this, I have flashbacks to the criticisms of autoethnography that I listed in part one (Werner, 2020a), and which I have consciously tried to avoid throughout this journey. Is my autoethnography self-indulgent? Is it unscientific? Is it just an English teacher's / language learner's autobiography, devoid of any academic value? Is it analytical enough? As I consider these questions, additional doubts begin to emerge. If well-known writers of autoethnography were to read my work, would they accept it, or would they say, "This is not autoethnography."? Compared with other autoethnographies that I have read, are my issues serious enough to write evocatively, or do I instead come across as superficial? Am I being melodramatic, especially in part two (Werner, 2020b)? Is the story coherent, does it have any

academic value, or is it just a collection of "jumbled events that have less than no worth" (Phish, 1996)? The thought of rejection is terrifying.

I am somewhere on the slope of a mountain. When I began, it had seemed so easy, walking gently uphill with a clear goal in sight. As I climb, there are fallen trees, rocks to climb over, muddy streams to navigate. None of this was visible from the base camp, but they are only minor obstacles. The air is getting thinner, but I will just slow my pace a little to conserve energy. I can do this. Another slope, not too steep, rises steadily upwards. I continue my ascent, but just as the path levels off, snow begins to fall. The air is colder now. Just ahead, I can see yet another incline. "Where did that come from?" I think. I catch my breath for a moment and then continue my upward trajectory, as the mountain path winds its way higher. Each time I think I am reaching the summit, I find that there is a little more to go. The easy hike is starting to feel like an insurmountable hurdle, but I have come too far to go back. My feet are completely numb, but I know I can do this. The snow gets heavier. As the powder deepens, it becomes harder to trudge uphill. My toes are turning into ice cubes. "Do I even have toes anymore?" I think. Just a little farther. My gloved hands grab onto a rocky outcrop, and I pull myself over it. I am at the top. I made it! What a feeling of elation! As I look around, the clouds break, and the bright sun shines on the serene landscape of the countryside below. I see green fields, with a narrow river meandering through a small town. "What is on the other side?" I wonder. I turn around and see…oh no. Is that *another* slope? I slowly raise my head as my eyes follow the path. At best, I might be a little over three quarters of the way up. I thought I was finished. I sit down on a snowy boulder, dejected. All of my eagerness is gone in an instant. I rock forward and put my head in my hands. An immense feeling of dismay wells up inside and threatens to burst. I think, "I can't do it."

I type a quick email to Jo [Mynard], the editor of Studies in Self-Access Learning Journal. I write, "I do not think there is any way I can finish this installment by the deadline. It is currently a partially written mess, and I am having trouble getting in the right frame of mind mentally."

As usual, Jo's response comes quickly, "You are doing really well considering all the challenges this year! It sounds like there might be a break for the column in the upcoming issue. Fine with me."

I reply, "I'm going to double down and get the paper done," and I did. I feel like this interaction encapsulates my life. I get so overwhelmed that I feel like there is no way I can complete something, and then I somehow find a way to get it done. I "just keep on keeping

on" (Mayfield, 1971). I *will* persevere. I do not know what I would do if I did not have such an understanding editor.

Notes on the Contributor

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