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‘Learning This Way Is Like Piecing a Puzzle Together’: Bringing My Autoethnography as a Self-Directed Learner of French to a Conclusion

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Abstract

This is the fourth and final part of an autoethnography about how I tried to enrich my vocabulary and improve my listening skills through French language songs. I made a learning plan and followed the same Study Use Review Evaluate (SURE) learning cycle as my students in a self-directed English course at a university in Japan, over a period of six weeks. Throughout the project and in the course of writing it up, I made comparisons and identified connections between my learning and that of my students. In this installment, I first compare the difficulty levels of the vocabulary in the three songs I studied by finding the lexical frequency profile of each. Next, in revisiting my trouble with understanding spoken French while in France, I discuss how cultural awareness, in addition to linguistic knowledge, is necessary for intercultural communication. After that, I briefly explore empathy as a factor in advising students, and particularly how learning in the same way as them (as in this project) can assist a teacher/advisor in better understanding and helping their students/advisees. Finally, I discuss the writing process as a method of inquiry. I feel that writing this autoethnography has transformed me into a better learner, teacher/advisor, writer, and researcher, and in this way, I hope to help others benefit from this method too.

Keywords: autoethnography, French, lexical frequency profile, intercultural communication, writing as inquiry

It is 9:30pm. I am alone and standing at the kitchen sink. Pink rubber gloves on and a sponge in my right hand, I reach down to pick up a plate with my left hand. As the sponge comes in contact with the dish, soap suds slowly glide across the surface. Applying a little pressure, I scrub in a circular motion, cleaning off the remnants of dinner. I hold the plate diagonally under the running water and watch as the soap runs off. Gently placing it in the metal drying rack to my left, I pick up a glass and continue my nightly routine. Tunes play through the Air Pods in my ears. Tonight’s menu includes the silky-smooth spoken verses of 20syl (pronounced /vɛ̃ sil/) and jazzy interludes from his band, Hocus Pocus, French interspersed with a little English. As the music flows into my head, I hear without listening as calmness washes over me, and I continue my monotonous task.

The sink is full of bowls, spoons, chopsticks, pots, pans, spatulas, you name it, accumulated from cooking dinner, the kids’ meals, and ours. The boys are already asleep, my

wife is in a different room, and I am doing one of my least favorite chores. All by myself with no one to talk to, I turn to my music.

I pick up a pair of chopsticks, wrap the sponge around the diameter of one and run it first to the tip, scrubbing up and down a few times. Then, I move on to the base and do the same. I repeat these steps with the other one, rinse both, and place them in the cup that hangs over the sink. The music helps me endure a never-ending pile of tableware and cookware. The track changes, and I hear a whispered "*un, deux, trois, quatre* [one, two, three, four]", followed by a familiar acoustic guitar melody. A flute joins in, a voice hums along, and after a few bars, there is a single spoken word, "*Normal*." Then, a male vocalist starts half singing, half rapping:

Tu es normal, tu respectes chaque critère
Normal, et pas un cheveu de travers
Tu es normal, ton destin est linéaire
Normal, et ça c'est le monde à l'envers
[You are normal, you meet every standard
Normal, and not a hair out of place
You are normal, your destiny is a straight line
Normal, and it's the world [that's] upside down] (Hocus Pocus, 2007)

It is such a gentle song that I often lose myself as the words wash over me. I do not focus on the lyrics as I continue my kitchen chore, but this time something is different. The singer begins the first verse, which is entirely in French, just like the rest of the song:

Il rêvait d'un fils en blouse blanche
Tu rêvais costume et de monter sur les planches
À table, ton père répétait : écoute, fiston
Pendant que dans ta tête résonnaient les trois coups de bâton
[He was dreaming of a son in a white coat
You were dreaming of wearing a costume and going on stage
At the table, your father was repeating, "Listen, son"
While the inside of your head was resonating with the three blows of a stick] (Hocus Pocus, 2007)

"What is happening?" I think, as I feel slightly dazed, almost lightheaded. When I finished studying this song for two weeks the previous spring, I was able to comprehend

snippets here and there. I could catch most of the words, but I then had to translate them in my head. To my amazement, I realize that I can now understand it in real time. As the song goes through the chorus and on to the next verse, images float through my mind. I empathize with the main character of each verse; they appear to be three different people. I feel their emotions as they question what is normal and contrast their perspectives with those of their father, who has vastly different expectations.

Those three minutes were truly magical for me. They put an exclamation point on the autoethnography I had conducted four or five months earlier and was now in the process of writing up. In casually listening to and picking up words (and meanings) of naturally spoken French, I accomplished something that had eluded me during visits to France and Quebec in high school and university while I was still regularly studying the language. As the flute and guitar play the outro, I feel an enormous weight lift off my heart, a weight I did not know had been there. As a warm feeling of contentment takes its place, I suddenly know that conducting this autoethnography has been a very good idea. It was a worthwhile experience for refreshing and relearning French vocabulary and grammar, as well as for improving my listening skills and gaining a newfound confidence in the language.

A Self-Directed Learning Course

This is the fourth and final part of an autoethnography about my experiences as a self-directed learner of French. As discussed in the first three installments (Werner, 2020a, b, c), I studied vocabulary and tried to improve my French listening skills for six weeks. As I co-taught a new self-directed learning course, I was studying at the same time as my students and using the same methods, which included making a learning plan, using it for six weeks through the Study Use Review Evaluate (SURE) learning cycle, and writing a weekly reflection. However, the six-week study period was only the beginning, as I learned much about myself and my learning styles through writing it up and making connections with my past learning and that of my students (more on this below).

The course, including SURE, was modeled after a similar course taught at my co-teacher's and my former institution (Curry et al., 2017; Mynard & Stevenson, 2017). Watkins (2015) and Morrison (2013) provided detailed descriptions of SURE, which was initially adapted from Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle. Watkins also discussed the theory behind its inclusion in this type of self-directed language learning program, especially with regard to the role played by conscious reflection.

The students received weekly written feedback and had one advising session with a teacher before implementing their learning plans. In our sessions, we each used some of Kato and Mynard's (2016) advising strategies, such as employing active listening skills, in order to convey that we cared about the students and their work. We also asked powerful questions to help them think more deeply about their learning. We wanted to elicit ideas about their goals and how they envisioned studying. The purpose of the session was to make sure students understood what they wanted to do and knew how they would get started (Mozzon-McPherson, 2012). With such a short study period, we were hoping they would hit the ground running.

When students submitted their weekly learning journals, we provided written feedback in the form of questions and comments to help them better reflect on their learning (Kato & Mynard, 2016; Mynard, 2017; Mynard & Thornton, 2012; Thornton & Mynard, 2012; Yamaguchi, 2014). In addition, because there was a weekly class meeting, both teachers were available to answer questions, and some students received the benefit of additional short sessions.

Data Collection

As discussed in previous installments (Werner, 2020a, c), data consisted of song lyrics with my vocabulary translations, a daily log of time spent on each task, and other notes or observations. Because I had a 90-minute commute (in each direction) and a busy personal life with two toddlers at home, almost all of my studying occurred on a train. Therefore, I was limited in terms of available physical space, and data was mostly typed into the Notes app on my iPhone. I sat down at a computer once or twice a week to write a reflection (learning journal) on what was occurring, how I felt, or other thoughts I had about the project. In this paper, I refer to a reflection as "Journal" and other data as "Notes".

Concluding the Autoethnography

An ethnography interprets culture through studying people's behavior in natural settings (Watson-Gegeo, 1988). In incorporating the self (*auto*), it "combines cultural analysis and interpretation with narrative details" (Chang, 2008, p. 46) and includes various layers of individual awareness (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). By entering the students' experience as a member of the culture (i.e., self-directed language learning environment), I attained valuable inside information. In this way, I gained access to knowledge that would be missing from a more traditional ethnography (Holman Jones et al., 2013). Revisiting and analyzing

my past learning also gave greater insight into the present. I looked at experiences, went deeper into what I was feeling at the time, and then delved even deeper to grasp hidden meanings that allowed me to paint an overall picture of what it all meant. Whether an autoethnography begins with the writer's life (Denzin, 2013) or the surrounding culture (Bochner & Ellis, 2016; Ellis, 2004; Ellis & Bochner, 2000), the process might be summed up as follows:

> Back and forth autoethnographers gaze, first through an ethnographic wide-angle lens, focusing outward on social and cultural aspects of their personal experience; then, they look inward, exposing a vulnerable self that is moved by and may move through, refract, and resist cultural interpretations. (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 739)

By writing evocatively, I have tried to bring others inside the experience, to think and feel along with me. In doing so, I am *showing*, rather than simply *telling* the story (Bochner & Ellis, 2016; Ellis, 2004). By reading the four parts of my autoethnography, I hope that readers from many different academic backgrounds can make personal connections with their own experiences. I also want to help educators connect with students' development as observed through course assignments, advising sessions, and interactions both in the classroom and beyond.

In concluding this autoethnography, I will examine a few topics held back from previous installments, but that I feel warrant discussion and are necessary to explore. While I looked at isolated vocabulary in the songs, I have yet to compare the words in all three; therefore, I will first analyze the vocabulary through finding lexical frequency profiles, and I will then go on to examine the difficulty levels of the words in each. I will also discuss factors that made each song easier or harder to understand and discuss implications for vocabulary study.

Next, I will examine culture from a different perspective. Throughout this autoethnography, I have focused on the culture of the classroom, the self-access center, and that of self-directed language learning. Now, I will look at intercultural communication and knowledge that is necessary for negotiating meaning in everyday situations in the target language. This will continue both the discussion of authentic language and my language learning history from the previous installment (Werner, 2020c). Before closing with a section on the limitations of the entire study (comprising four installments), I will discuss two topics that have meaning for me both personally and professionally. First, I feel that this process has helped me become a more empathetic learning advisor through experiencing it all from the

student's perspective. At the same time, the writing process itself has been a method of inquiry as I have learned more about myself as an advisor, a learner, a writer, a researcher, and an autoethnographer. I feel that these sections have broad applicability, and I hope that they may help others to grow professionally too.

Vocabulary Analysis

After studying three French language songs during the six weeks of this project, I wanted to compare the difficulty levels of the vocabulary in each. My initial impression was that each song was a little harder than the previous one, but I was looking for a more concrete way to see if this observation held up. To this end, I decided to examine the lexical frequency profile of each song. According to Laufer and Nation (1995), a lexical frequency profile is a calculation that compares terms in a text with a corpus to find the percentages of words from different frequency levels. Thus, it is an analysis that helps to determine the difficulty of the text based on the vocabulary contained therein.

Studies suggest that 98% text coverage (approximately one unknown word in 50) is necessary for most learners to adequately comprehend written and spoken language, while a few learners can comprehend a text knowing 95% of the vocabulary (Hu & Nation, 2000). For the purposes of this study, I am going to assume that I am not one of the select few, since I have been poor at learning and remembering vocabulary in French and English at least since my teenage years. This might have been due to the way it was presented at school (with lists to memorize) or the rudimentary strategies I chose to employ. Not knowing any other way to study, I simply covered the meaning with my hand, tried to remember it, and checked to see if I was right. From doing that over and over again, I was able to remember the meaning for a test, but I often forgot it soon afterward. Looking back, even though I enjoyed reading, my lack of vocabulary knowledge might have been the primary reason I scored poorly on reading comprehension sections of English language standardized tests (see Werner, 2020b, for a discussion of my past vocabulary study in English). While my learning strategies have improved in recent years (e.g., using apps with mnemonics or the keyword technique), I still do not consider myself proficient at learning vocabulary in any language. Therefore, I would likely need to comprehend 98% of the words in a song in order to understand it.

In determining how much vocabulary knowledge is necessary to understand 98% of different kinds of texts, Nation (2006) found that 8,000-9,000 word-families are needed to read a novel, 7,000 to understand a children's movie, and 6,000-7,000 to comprehend unscripted speech. A word-family comprises "a headword, its inflected forms and its closely

related derived forms" (Nation, 2013, p. 11). Kreyer and Mukherjee (2007) noted that "pop song lyrics constitute a special case of a written to-be-spoken (or, rather, written-to-be-sung) genre and, thus, sit somewhat uneasily on the boundary between writing and speech" (p. 37). However, in an analysis of English language popular song corpora, Tegge (2017) determined that 6,000 word-families, plus proper nouns, are necessary to comprehend 98% of a typical popular song. While these studies are all based on the English language, much of the academic literature on French vocabulary acquisition is written in French and is mostly inaccessible to me (as a lower-level language learner). Nation (2013) suggested that second language vocabulary acquisition theory is uniform across languages, so I will work under this assumption.

Finding the Lexical Frequency Profiles

I used Vocabprofil, a French lexical frequency profile tool that is part of Cobb's (2021) Compleat Lexical Tutor, a free web-based program. One thing I like about this tool (in both French and English) is that it shows the words in context (in different colors for different frequency levels) and also in lists. Vocabprofil utilizes a corpus of the 25,000 most frequent lemmas in the French language, which come from the *Frequency Dictionary of French* (Lonsdale & Le Bras, 2009). A lemma "consists of a headword and its inflected forms and reduced forms (*n't*)" (Nation, 2013, p. 10), and all words contained under one lemma are usually the same part of speech (Francis & Kučera, 1982, as cited in Nation, 2013). This contrasts with a word-family, which might include a noun, adjective, and adverb form. In English, examples of lemmas for a verb include the past tense form and past participle (e.g., go – went – gone). Since French verbs are even more complex and are conjugated differently for each personal pronoun (e.g., *je vais* [I go], *tu vas* [you go], *il/elle va* (he/she goes), etc.), the lemma form for each person remains the same (i.e., *aller* [to go]).

Based on the results of a preliminary analysis, I made several changes to the search parameters. First, I reclassified cognates to the 1,000-lemma level since I already knew the meanings of those words. I also classified proper nouns to the 1,000-lemma level. I knew some of the references before studying the songs and know all of them now, but I took this step for consistency, because regardless of the term, all would appear off-list. I generally did not take any action for slang or Nouchi (pronounced /nu'ʃi/). Nouchi is a West African dialect that uses French grammar, but has loanwords from African languages, as well as invented terms (for a fuller description, see Werner, 2020c). However, in two cases, I changed Nouchi terms (*s'envolement*, *enjaillement*) to their correct grammatical forms in standard French (*s'envoler* [to take off], *[s']enjailler* [to enjoy oneself]), since the "-*ment*" [adverb] form

would appear off-list (*[s']enjailler* appeared off-list anyway, because it is a loanword from Nouchi). Finally, I reclassified *jusque* [until] to the 1,000-lemma level, where it should already have appeared (Lonsdale & Le Bras, 2009), but was listed as off-list, most likely due to a flaw in the software.

To compare the songs, I decided to look at two categories: the number of unique lemmas and the 2,000 most frequently appearing lemmas (1,000 and 2,000 level cumulative tokens). I chose the latter benchmark because it is roughly my current level in French and therefore gives me an idea of how much of a song I would theoretically be able to understand. The total number of unique lemmas could help to gauge the relative difficulty of a song, because a greater quantity of terms might mean that there was more for me to learn. Since Vocabprofil solely calculates for individual words, the analysis does not take idiomatic expressions into account. Table 1 shows the results. Songs are listed in the order in which I studied them.

Table 1

Lexical Frequency Profiles of the Three Songs

Song Title	Total Unique Lemmas	1,000 Level Tokens (%)	2,000 Level Tokens (%)	Cumulative Tokens
Magic in the Air	97	93.5%	0.8%	94.3%
Normal	139	83.5%	7.2%	90.7%
Jusqu'à Fatigué	116	69.8%	4.4%	74.2%*

*Might be inaccurate due to a high number of Nouchi terms.

Results

The percentage of cumulative tokens (2,000 most frequent lemmas) decreases for each song, suggesting that the vocabulary gradually became more difficult. However, the inclusion of Nouchi in *Jusqu'à Fatigué* warrants a closer examination. In the following sections, I will briefly discuss factors that made each song easier or more difficult to understand.

Magic in the Air

Magic in the Air has the fewest unique lemmas, there are many words that repeat, and it has the easiest vocabulary of the three songs. The 8,000-lemma level accounts for 98% coverage of the words in the song. However, if one word were omitted from the analysis, the 5,000-lemma level would provide 98% coverage. It also contains English, cognates, and a lot

of proper nouns that were already familiar to me (French national [soccer] team nickname and players' names). These factors made the song easier to understand.

Magic in the Air also contains one Nouchi term, *t'enjailler*, which is now used as slang in France and has even entered the dictionary (France 24, 2019). It comes from the English word "enjoy" and means "let's have fun" or in the infinitive *s'enjailler*, "to enjoy oneself" (M. Massard-Combe, personal communication, August 11, 2020).

Normal

Normal has the most unique lemmas, and the three stanzas tell a story. The only repetition is a four-line chorus. The grammar is more complex than the other songs because the song is predominantly written in the *imparfait* tense (past progressive) as opposed to the present. In fact, I had to do a quick online review to refresh my memory of that tense before I began to study the song (Week 4 Journal). The 7,000-lemma level accounts for 98% coverage of the words in the song. While I had to learn (or relearn) a lot of terms, they were mostly at the 2,000, 3,000, and 4,000-lemma levels. Therefore, *Normal* turned out to be the best song of the three for improving my vocabulary because I would be likely to come across most of the words (approximately 96%) in other contexts.

In this song, I had the most difficulty with two proper nouns, Racine and Molière. The entire song is a contrast between the main character and their father's perspectives. The following lines appear to continue this theme:

> *Il te voyait déjà faire médecine*
> *Et tu te voyais réciter Racine*
> *Tu soignes tes malades imaginaires*
> *En regrettant Molière*
> [He was already seeing you in medical school
> While you were seeing yourself reciting Racine
> You take care of your hypochondriacs
> While missing Molière] (Hocus Pocus, 2007)

While I had heard the names, I did not know that the two were playwrights, nor was I familiar with the content of their plays. I learned that Racine wrote tragedies, while Molière wrote comedies (including one titled "*Le Malade Imaginaire*" [The Hypochondriac]), so the character is envisioning the impending doom that would result from succumbing to their father's wishes (Week 6 Notes).

Jusqu'à Fatigué

Jusqu'à Fatigué is highly repetitive and only has two verses. However, it also contains a lot of Nouchi, and finding the meanings felt like learning a third language. Without a starting point, this initially made the song extremely difficult. Since so many Nouchi terms appear off-list, I would have to learn the entire song to reach 98% coverage. The 9,000-lemma level accounts for 94% coverage, but by subtracting two words, the same level would account for 95%. While the presence of Nouchi in the song made it incredibly difficult to understand during week six of this project, it was also one of the reasons I chose to study *Jusqu'à Fatigué* in the first place (Werner, 2020c).

Elusive Meanings

There were some meanings in *Jusqu'à Fatigué* that I completely missed during my study, but I have learned since. Some were provided by Kaysha, the artist, who graciously agreed to help me make sense of his lyrics (see Werner, 2020c). I eventually learned the African meaning of another expression (which differs from that in France) on my own. The song goes:

> *Casino pour ceux qui veulent impressionner deuxième bureau*
> [Casino for those who want to impress *deuxième bureau*] (Kaysha, 2005)

Deuxième bureau literally translates to 'second office'. In his first James Bond book, *Casino Royale,* Ian Fleming uses the term to refer to a French military intelligence unit that existed between 1871-1940 ("Deuxième Bureau," 2021). English and French Wikipedia entries indicate a similar meaning ("Deuxième Bureau," 2020; Deuxième Bureau (France)," 2020). However, 'military intelligence' did not seem like something one would try to 'impress', so I was confused. When the project finished, this was one of the expressions that I gave up on learning.

My memory was triggered about a year later when I was listening to a song called *Deuxième Bureau* by a different artist. Part of the chorus in that song goes:

> *Ce n'est que ma secrétaire*
> *Il n'y a rien entre elle et moi*
> [It's only my secretary
> There's nothing between her and me] (Bisso Na Bisso, 1999)

These lyrics suggest a completely different meaning. Even though I was long finished with the project, this expression had continued to puzzle me. I conducted another search and

learned that in several parts of Africa *deuxième bureau* refers to a 'mistress' ("Avoir un Deuxième Bureau," 2020; BBC, 2019). This definition better fits the context of the song, and I was amazed to solve the mystery through a tune from a Congolese French group that had not even been on my radar during the six-week study period.

Now that I know the meanings of all the Nouchi words and slang, it is much easier to understand *Jusqu'à Fatigué*. As with learning any new language, once I became familiar with the terms, they were not particularly difficult to remember. Even though the singing is very fast, the simple lines and repetitiveness make this song easier to comprehend than *Normal*. Therefore, the lexical frequency profiles did not tell the whole story.

Proper Nouns

In conducting this analysis, I not only revisited the vocabulary in each song, but I also compared the overall lexical sophistication of the three. In doing so, I paid closer attention to which words were ranked at the different lemma levels, as well as those that appeared off-list (or would have appeared off-list had I not changed the parameters). An unexpected result of this exercise was that I noticed the importance of understanding proper nouns in grasping the overall meaning of each song. For example, if I did not know the soccer players or French team nickname in *Magic in the Air*, the playwrights in *Normal*, or the coupé-décalé (musical genre that originated in Ivory Coast) references to people and dance moves in *Jusqu'à Fatigué*, I would (and in two cases did) have trouble comprehending parts of the song. This lends credence to Tegge's (2017) assertion that word-families *plus* proper nouns are necessary to comprehend a popular song.

In general, even with perfect vocabulary, if one wants to understand a song, it is important to become familiar with the proper nouns. Students might have trouble if they do not take time to learn about these references. In fact, I sometimes find myself looking up people or places mentioned in English language songs because I start thinking about what the artist is saying, and I always want to know more.

Explicit Language

I have known students who studied English vocabulary through American hip-hop songs, and they have occasionally asked me about meanings of explicit words. As with my experience studying Nouchi, they could not find the word in a dictionary. Whenever this occurs, I explain to the student that it is an offensive word, and they should not use it. One danger of learning a language through music is that if students do not know there are explicit words, they might use an expression in an inappropriate situation. This can lead to trouble during a study abroad or homestay program. Of the three songs I studied, only *Jusqu'à*

Fatigué has some questionable language, but I am aware of it. In any case, as much as I would love to travel to Ivory Coast, I do not know if I will ever find myself in a setting where I could use Nouchi in conversation.

Intercultural Communication

Language learning often begins in a classroom or through another structured environment, such as an app, and first involves learning basic greetings, grammar, and vocabulary. While this foundation is vital for building knowledge and starting to communicate, it is not the only aspect of studying a language. In order to take skills acquired into the real world, it is also necessary to learn about culture (Kim, 2020).

In addition to linguistic competence, a language learner needs to possess intercultural communicative competence (Byram, 2009, 2021; Ho, 2009). This way, they will have the skills to successfully communicate with an interlocutor from the culture in which the target language is spoken. My difficulty in asking for directions in France caused me to be down on myself for many years for not being able to understand authentic spoken language in that and other situations (Werner, 2020c). However, I am now beginning to wonder whether this was less of a linguistic deficiency than a lack of cultural knowledge. I simply did not have enough practice to understand how French speakers communicate in certain situations.

Rymes (2014) described very well my situation of taking language classes for a number of years, scoring well on tests, and then having an extremely difficult time communicating in the target language. I remember memorizing dialogues and trying to reproduce them as I asked for directions in France. When the interlocutor did not respond in the way I expected, I was at a loss. Japanese students have told me about similar problems with communicating in English while abroad. Just as my high school French class focused on grammar and vocabulary in isolation, English instruction in Japan at that level often has a similar focus, where the goal is to score well on university entrance exams or other tests. On the other hand, communication should be a collaborative activity (Rymes, 2014), and it is also a social one (Byram, 2021). We work together to construct meaning, and in doing so, gain a deeper understanding of language that can lead to positive daily interactions, as well as increased competency in the language. Unlike with French, I primarily learned Modern Greek (during a study abroad program) through communicating in everyday situations both in the classroom and beyond.

The First Positive Interaction

It took almost a month in Greece (I arrived with almost no knowledge of the language), but I eventually had my first positive experience in a communicative situation. After the first few Modern Greek classes, I began to practice what I was learning in shops around the city. However, at that point, I was only producing language. For example, when paying at a store, I would ask how much it cost. Not being able to understand the reply, I always gave too much money and received a lot of coins in return. I remember the exact moment everything changed.

It is early afternoon on a sunny day. I am standing at the small kiosk on the main road near my school. It is a busy street, with three lanes of traffic in each direction, and vehicles are constantly whizzing past. The noise from the road is loud, but I have learned to tune it out. As I browse the candy selection, I am looking for something to keep me awake during my next class. I pick up a chocolate bar, make eye contact with the vendor, and say, "*Πόσο κάνει;* [How much is it?]"

The shopkeeper answers, "*Εκατόν πενήντα* [150 (drachmas)]." I give him exact change and slowly walk back down the side street toward the school. As I do, I am smiling inside with such a feeling of jubilation. I am incredibly pleased with myself for having understood something as simple as a price in naturally spoken language. At that point, I had already been to Paris and Montreal twice each, but this was the first time I felt that I was 100% successful in a communicative situation outside the classroom.

Becoming an Intercultural Speaker

It is about two months later. The last of two late afternoon classes has just finished, and I exit the school building. The sky is fading to a deep blue, and the vividly colored clouds range from hues of orange to pink. There is enough light to see, but the sun has already dipped behind the hill to the west. Several hours of listening to lectures and taking notes has given me quite an appetite. On my way home, I stop to pick up some *gyros* (pronounced /ˈjiːɹos/) for dinner from the shop down the street from my apartment. Even though it is near the center of a large city, the neighborhood has a friendly, small-town atmosphere where people know each other. I have been to this particular shop several times before. When I walk in the door, the shopkeeper greets me warmly. On a previous visit, he had asked where I was from. Tonight, his teenage son, wearing an apron, stands by his side. Before I can order, the shopkeeper says (in Greek), "Speak in English so my son can practice."

While I had been engaging in intercultural communication in authentic situations in my target language for a few months, this time I was able to give the shopkeeper's son an

experience that he would be unlikely to have in his English class at school. The practice of ordering food is a common task in a second language. Speaking another language can also be useful for shopkeepers to communicate with tourists. Recalling this experience, I think back to how I used to order in Greek. While I had learned the grammar and vocabulary in class, I gained the knowledge of how people *actually* order from standing in lines and listening to those in front of me do it. In this way, I not only learned *how* people order a meal, but I also had natural accents to emulate. Through these experiences, I was able to learn the skills and attitudes necessary to set me on the path of becoming an intercultural speaker (Byram, 2021), something I have had more of an opportunity to do in Greece (and Japan) than in France.

Empathy

From conducting this autoethnography, I feel that I have become a better advisor, and this enables me to help my students become better learners. While I have always been confident in giving encouraging feedback on a class presentation or assignment, experiencing this process for myself has given me a new perspective on self-directed learning. After starting out with a high level of motivation, I felt the world crashing down around me as I began to feel doubts, first about my study strategies and then about my learning goals (Werner, 2020b). If *I* felt that way (as an experienced learner and teacher), I can imagine how students might feel, especially when this is the first foray into self-directed learning for many of them.

Kato and Mynard (2016) defined empathy as "understanding a person's internal state and imagining how [they are] thinking and feeling" (p. 22). I feel a greater degree of empathy with students, simply from having inserted myself into their situation (Batson, 2009) as a self-directed learner. This firsthand knowledge is irreplaceable. Even though everyone's learning goals are different, and each learner chooses ways to address their problems based on individual strengths, there are nevertheless similarities between everyone's paths. While some of my experiences matched things I have read about in students' reflections, I now have firsthand knowledge that enables me to be more appreciative of their successes, more understanding of their struggles, and better equipped to be a sounding board and give appropriate advice.

I believe that making a learning plan and studying according to SURE (or a similar learning cycle) should become part of an institution's training or professional development for learning advisors. This way, new (and veteran) advisors will have important personal experiences to draw on, thus helping them better relate to students' learning experiences. Just

as I sometimes tell a story about my life to connect with students' learning in class, if my advisee seems discouraged, I can talk about a challenge I faced while studying French. It might be a powerful reminder to a student that their advisor is a language learner too. I hope that my (and others') personal experiences can inspire students. They might think, "My advisor did it. I can do it too."

Writing as Inquiry

As I write this paper, I review the entire autoethnography. I read through the first installment, the second, the third, and what I have written so far of this one. In reflecting on my work from the past year, I come to a realization. Through the process of writing, I have been learning more about myself as a learner, a teacher, an advisor, and a writer as I compose, revise, reorganize, and rewrite. I revisit my past learning in English (my native language), and also in French. I think about Japanese and Modern Greek, the two languages I have had the most practice using in authentic situations. I review my notes and reflections. I recall memories of students' reflections and of interacting with them concerning their learning. Through all of this, I realize that I am undergoing a professional transformation. The deep reflection that occurred during this autoethnography has helped me take a step in becoming a better writer and possibly a better researcher too.

I admit that I began this process not knowing much about autoethnography. I learned autoethnography through doing it, and according to Ellis (2004), that is the best way. After spending a significant part of the last two years of my life working on this project, I can see that the six-week study period was merely an appetizer. It was a necessary beginning, but the writing process has been so much more. While I was studying, I had the experience of learning and relearning French. As I wrote it up, I began to find the stories in my experience (Bochner & Ellis, 2016; Richardson, 2000b). I continued writing, and I tried to make sense of what I was feeling and what I felt in the past. In looking at different aspects, I recalled events that had occurred many years earlier, such as in French class in high school or while attempting to communicate on two trips to France. Other things bubbled up to the surface too, such as memories of cramming vocabulary in English for standardized tests, experiences I had while living abroad, and scenery I beheld while traveling in different regions of the world. All of these memories helped to enrich the tale. I first wrote nonfictional stories, but as I reflected and revised, the lines between reality and fantasy often became blurred. In the end, I pulled meaning from the story to tell *what* happened, rather than exactly *how* it happened,

which is much more important in bringing overall meaning to an autoethnography (Bochner, 2000; Bochner & Ellis, 2016; Gornick, 2008).

I have tried to write *creatively* in order to make my story more interesting to read, but I simultaneously wanted to *analyze* my experiences and use qualitative methods to scientifically compare my present with my past experiences, and both of these with those of students I have known who were engaging in similar self-directed learning tasks. In these ways, I adopted Richardson's (2000a, b) 'creative analytical practices', which, as the name implies, allow the possibility of combining creativity with analytical analysis when conducting an auto/ethnography. Conversely, Chang (2008, 2013) separated these aspects and also included other characteristics in describing four distinct types of autoethnography: *descriptive-realistic*, *imaginative-creative, analytical-interpretive*, and *confessional-emotive*. Throughout the four installments, I feel that my detailed descriptions of real-life occurrences (descriptive-realistic) and metaphors (imaginative-creative) have brought the story to life, but I have also tried to approach it from an analytical-interpretive perspective to demonstrate what it all means for self-directed language learning. I seem to have fused several styles of autoethnography in finding my voice, and I hope I have succeeded in writing a work that can have a positive effect on others' learning.

Limitations

In looking at all four parts of the autoethnography, there are several limitations relating to two main factors. First, most of my studying occurred in a setting where I could neither use a pen and paper nor type on a keyboard. I was also conducting an auto/ethnography for the first time and therefore noticed some things I might have done differently. As mentioned above, I rushed headlong into this project and literally learned autoethnography by doing it. When acquiring a new skill, whether it is teaching a new type of class, learning a new sport, or cooking a new dish, I believe that there is no better way to learn something than through practice.

However, because I was studying on the train, the lack of physical space impacted *how* I studied. First, since I was typing on my phone, a lot of the observation notes are brief and lacking in detail. In addition, due to time constraints, I only sat down at a computer to type a reflection once a week (twice in week 6). It would have been better to have done so every day that I studied, because this would have provided more insight into my thinking.

I used the Notes app on my iPhone for vocabulary translations, and when something was wrong, I corrected my mistake. This meant that earlier meanings of a word were deleted.

As a result, when I reviewed the data, I could see the final result, but not the path I took to get there. Since I only had my memories, I wished I had used an app that saves the edit history, such as OneNote (Microsoft, 2021).

In a perfect world, another possibility would have been to write on paper. When I taught students about a strategy of learning vocabulary through music (see Werner, 2020a), they received a printout of song lyrics. They could then underline or highlight new words and write the meanings. If I had done something similar, I would have been able to revisit my earlier work and might have seen my thinking more clearly at each stage of vocabulary development. This in turn might have led to better analyses.

While I am generally satisfied with my process of evaluating learning gains[1], I often wonder whether I could have done a more effective pre-test before beginning to study a new song. For example, I wish I had tried Kato and Mynard's (2016) listening diagnostic test (see Appendix). If I had used this tool, it would have provided a better estimate of how much I understood. It would also have given me a clearer understanding of my strengths and weaknesses. This, in turn, might have saved time later, for example, when I grappled with whether or not to continue learning grammar with Duolingo (Werner, 2020b).

Finally, I wish I had more concrete data from students' points-of-view. Even though I was comparing my learning to theirs, students' perspectives only appear through my memories. While this is a perfectly acceptable way to conduct an autoethnography (Denzin, 2014; Ellis, 2004), I would have had richer data had I conducted interviews with a sample population of students. Then, I could have learned their opinions of individual learning gains or of the process in general in order to glean additional information that did not come out in the advising session, in-class discussions, or their reflections.

Writing an auto/ethnography is clearly a learning process, and I think I will be much better equipped the next time I undertake such a project. While I feel that I have room for improvement from a technical standpoint, both the overall process of writing it up and having the opportunity to write multiple articles has helped me explore various topics in depth and learn more about myself and my learning.

[1] I completed all evaluations in my head and then recorded the results. An evaluation consisted of listening to a song without looking at the lyrics and measuring whether I could understand individual words, phrases, lines, or an entire stanza (for a complete description, see Werner, 2020c). About three weeks after the end of the six-week study period and every few months since then, I have done the same thing for each song, with the added element of estimating what percentage of the song I could understand.

Conclusion

In the overall autoethnography (four installments), I examined a number of aspects of learning: self-directed language learning, learning cycles, language learning histories, vocabulary, grammar, language learning apps, motivation, advising in language learning, evaluating language gains, dialects, authentic language, intercultural communication, lexical frequency profiles, empathy in advising, and writing as inquiry. All the while, I interspersed analyses with narratives, metaphors, and creative writing to give added meaning to the autoethnographic experience.

I began the autoethnography with my language learning history. I explained why I decided to study French, and I introduced the class that led to this self-directed language learning project (Werner, 2020a). As I taught students about goal setting, the SURE learning cycle, and making a learning plan, I began to think about doing it for myself.

The second part dealt mainly with vocabulary, grammar, and motivation, but also touched briefly on advising in language learning (Werner, 2020b). I described the process I used to find a meaning when the dictionary definition did not make sense in the context. I also discussed how I used the Duolingo app to supplement my learning, as well as to relearn prior knowledge, thus helping me to better understand the songs. Then, I talked about intrinsic and extrinsic motivation and how I felt like I was being tugged in two different directions; I considered whether I should learn French for pleasure or Japanese to help me get a future job. Finally, I discussed some roles played by an advisor in the self-directed learning process.

In the third part (Werner, 2020c), I talked about evaluating my learning. I also discussed my longtime interest in accents and dialects and how this project afforded me an opportunity to study Nouchi, an African dialect of French. Through learning about Nouchi and coupé-décalé culture, I realized that I had always been interested in second language reading. To this end, I devised a way to continue practicing reading French in my daily life. Finally, I thought back to my lack of comprehension of spoken French and wondered if I had not been exposed to enough authentic language in my high school classes. This began a discussion that continues into this final installment.

In this paper, I briefly revisited my difficulty in understanding spoken French, but this time I examined it from a cultural perspective. I wondered if my problem actually stemmed from not having the cultural knowledge to know how people collaboratively negotiate meaning in particular situations. In doing so, I recalled my first successes in communicating in another language, which occurred while studying abroad in Greece.

In addition, I compared the difficulty levels of the vocabulary in the three songs through finding the lexical frequency profiles. I found my initial impression that each song was harder than the previous one to be partly, but not entirely true, complicated by the inclusion of Nouchi in the last song. An unforeseen benefit of the vocabulary analysis was the realization that familiarity with the proper nouns in a song is paramount to grasping the overall meaning. Throughout the project, I applied and adapted some learning strategies that I had previously suggested in advising sessions or modeled in class, as well as others that I had heard about from colleagues or students. Creatively adopting these strategies helped me to learn more effectively (Everhard, 2012; Tseng et al., 2006).

I initially started this project because I was caught up in the moment while teaching a new course. I thought, "What would my goals be? How would my learning plan look? What strategies would I try?" First, I made a learning plan while students were making theirs. Then, I spent part of my commute home designing a presentation visual (digital poster). The next week, I gave a presentation about my learning plan in order to model the activity for the students. After that, I just started studying. Working at the same time as my students and having similar goals to some of them put me in a unique position to not only observe, but also to discuss learning with them from different perspectives. I commented on their learning journals each week as an advisor, but we also shared ideas as fellow learners. A positive effect of the latter was gaining a new level of empathy. I think this will help me greatly in future advising sessions with students. I can empathize not only as an advisor, but also as a learner, and I can draw on my experiences to encourage students as they engage in theirs.

This autoethnography had a positive effect on the way I think of myself as a researcher and a writer. It also helped me become more confident in my language learning and view past experiences in a more positive light. I realize now that when things were not going well, I was doing better than I thought. I am going to keep this knowledge in the back of my head to motivate me as I continue to communicate in everyday life in Japan or wherever I might end up in the future.

While everyone's preferred learning styles and strategies might not be the same, I feel that other individuals can replicate my level of satisfaction by trusting the process. It is important to constantly reflect on what is occurring and stay the course, but also not to be afraid to try a different approach if something is not working (Werner, 2014). At the same time, one should not be hesitant to backtrack if a new strategy also does not work. Learning this way is like piecing a puzzle together; it might take a lot of tweaking for each person to find the method that helps them learn the best. Therefore, it is important to see where the self-

directed learning journey takes you. It might not be the place you expected when you set out, but that is okay. It will take you *somewhere*.

Epilogue

It is 10:30am on a Tuesday. The floor-length curtains are partially open, and light streams into the room from my left. I am on the left side of the bed, with a rosewood-colored lap desk resting on my straightened legs. On top of it is a silver MacBook Pro computer. A pillow is propped up behind me, and a heating pad rests against my lower back. This is my "pandemic office", the only place I can teach classes, have meetings, and write without being interrupted when one or both of the kids are home, which is all but four or five hours of every weekday. This is where I have done the majority of my work since last April, now almost a year ago.

At the far-right corner of the room, the door opens. A little boy enters, quietly closes it behind him, and walks around the bed. It is a school vacation, so he and his brother are home today. He has a red plastic toy pot with penne made out of yellow felt, which he places on the foot of the bed. As he stands and stirs the 'pasta' with his red spatula, I go back to reading this paper. He continues standing near my feet and gazes at me expectantly. I look up and ask, "Are you waiting for me to play with you?"

"Mmm-mmm," he replies, emphatically nodding twice. He does not say many words, but the two of us communicate just fine.

"I have some work to do. I'll play with you when I'm done." He quietly lowers himself to the floor and sits patiently to my left. I continue my methodical work, occasionally changing a word.

After a few minutes, he moves over to the power cords for the computer, printer, humidifier, and heating pad, which are all plugged into a power strip. I continue to put the finishing touches on this autoethnography. I am focused on the screen, but all the same, I watch in my periphery as his little hands move one of the cords first to the left, then to the right, then back to the left. Next, he pulls on the cord for this computer. The magnetic charging cable gently detaches, but it is okay. I have a full battery.

I feel at peace this morning, unlike during the turmoil of the past year between a pandemic that necessitated suddenly having to teach online, rarely leaving the house to avoid getting infected, and a job search at the worst possible time, all the while working on an autoethnography that stubbornly refused to be written, but gradually gave way to the words on the screen. Throughout the writing process, I relived a lot of memories, many of them

painful. Some were related to this story, while others appeared unwittingly, maybe so the first ones did not feel left out. I am getting past that now.

A beep takes me out of my reverie. The boy has moved on to the humidifier. Head directly over the vent, he looks down and smiles as the wind blows his hair back. He looks like a passenger in the back seat of a convertible with the top down. The toy pot and pasta sit on the floor, long forgotten.

I have a bittersweet feeling. This was initially going to be a 'quick action research project'. I planned to study for six weeks and then write up an article to be published soon afterward. Instead, this autoethnography has consumed much of the past two years of my life, and it took four papers to finish the story. I poured my heart and soul into it and felt emotionally drained at times. It is just about finished now, but I want this to be the perfect ending. I have enjoyed it more than any other research project I have ever done. In fact, I never realized it was possible to have this much fun writing a paper.

"Beep. Beep. Beep. Beep." The humidifier fan gets faster, slower, stronger, weaker. The boy steps past it and opens the curtains a little wider. He looks out the window.

There is a new, post-pandemic future out there, and I know we will get to experience it someday. As far as this project goes, something special is coming to a close, and I have a warm feeling in my heart. I did my best, and that is all I can ask of myself. I stand up and replace the computer on top of the dresser. Almost as high as my shoulders, it is the best location I can think of, childproof by sheer height. I hold out my hand and say, "Let's go." I feel the warm, tiny hand in my own, and together we walk out of the room.

Notes on the Contributor

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Appendix

Listening Diagnostic Test

1. Choose a text similar to one you wish to be able to listen to well (e.g., a recorded lecture, the news on TV, a travel podcast)
2. Listen to the text naturally and answer the following:
    a. How much of it did you understand? _____ %
3. Evaluate yourself on the following:

	Good	**Fair**	**Poor**
Following the natural speed			
Understanding the main idea			
Understanding details			
Vocabulary knowledge			
Grammar knowledge			

This diagnostic test was reproduced from Kato and Mynard (2016, p. 31).