The Role of the Learning Environment in Study Circles for Adult Women Learners

Studying French Vocabulary Learning Strategies

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A thesis

submitted to the Faculty of Education

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts in Education

October, 2007

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Abstract

This qualitative study examined how the learning environment and diverse language learning strategies affect a small group of adult women learners in their ability to learn to speak French as a Second Language. The learning environment consisted of a process of reflection through journal writing and dialogue in study circles. The learning strategies involved, but were not limited to, flashcards, mnemonics, total physical response, and word association. The study took into consideration the learners' past experiences with French language learning, participants' social and recreational goals and the learners' awareness of various learning styles.

Dedication

This work is dedicated to my two wonderful sons, Alan and Tom, who are the light of my life, to my mother, who never ceased to believe in me as long as she lived, and to my father, who continues to believe in me.

Acknowledgements

I would like to extend a sincere thank you to my thesis advisor, Dr. Susan Brigham, for her constant support, endless patience and prompt replies to my questions. This mammoth task would have been much more difficult without her ongoing words of encouragement and thought-provoking suggestions.

I wish to thank my thesis committee member, Dr. Hong Wang, for her valuable insights, helpful advice and attention to detail.

A huge thank you goes to the wonderful group of ladies who volunteered for my study. Without you, ladies, this study could not have taken place.

I am also very grateful to my friends who listened patiently to all my trials and tribulations while I was going through the thesis writing process and to two, in particular, who helped me proofread my text and overcome formatting challenges.

Above all, I want to thank my family for their continual love and support. I am indebted to my husband who picked up the slack at home and freed me up to work on my thesis and to our sons who often waited patiently until I finished "my work" and could spend more time with them.

Chapter 1: Introduction

My study investigates the ways in which the learning environment, exposure to diverse language learning strategies, awareness of learner styles and fulfillment of social or recreational goals could impact on a small group of women who learned French vocabulary. In the chapters that follow, I position this research in a body of literature, demonstrate the suitability of the qualitative research methods of journal writing and study circles and discuss which research paradigms apply to this study. I then outline how I proceeded with the study and thereby take various ethical issues such as confidentiality, bias and power relations, voice, and validity into consideration. Finally, I analyze diverse themes arising from the data, consider the implications and importance of my study and offer ideas for future research.

In this chapter I summarize my own experience in the fields of Second Language Learning (SLL) and Adult Education (AE), and my research interests in the role of the learning environment and the significance of language learning strategies. I then outline my hypotheses on the expectations and challenges of the study.

My Experience in Adult Education

I have learned five languages and taught three at different times in my life. I have also taken courses in psychology, marketing, and book-keeping among others. I have completed an undergraduate degree in French and German Language and Literature and have nearly completed a Masters degree in Adult Education. I am indeed a lifelong learner. This passion for learning stems from a deep belief that we humans should strive

to be the best that we can be and broaden our knowledge in any way we can. This passion for learning and interest in languages has led me to a desire to understand the structure and interconnections of languages, and also how people learn languages.

When I finished my undergraduate degree at university in 1985, I taught English as a second language (ESL) to adults for the British Council in Sweden for one year. The British Council offered evening classes for adults and I discovered that, for many people, the English class was the highlight of their week. One memorable experience was when I was teaching a group of beginners and one student was particularly frustrated with the activities I was trying to get the class to do. He was even a little aggressive about the fact that I was explaining in English, as the prevailing pedagogical theory of the day about immersion advised. At the end of the class one evening, I dared to say something in my rudimentary Swedish. The gentleman came up to me with an incredulous look on his face and said, "You speak Swedish!" This was a defining moment. He left the class singing and was the friendliest student I had after that. I realized later that he understood that I cared. I wanted him to succeed and was willing to learn his language in order to help him learn. To me, teaching or facilitating is about caring and constantly seeking ways to best assist our students to reach their potential.

That teaching experience in Sweden was my first exposure to adult education. The adult students were coming for social reasons, such as to meet people, to find solace from the long winter, to flee loneliness after bereavement, and so on. They were coming because they felt comfortable and accepted there. Whether they had finished high school

or had other formal qualifications or not didn't matter. An interest in the English language was the common bond between the students and this English class often became a lifeline to the students. Later in Germany I taught English evening classes to adults at the "Volkshochschule" (the equivalent of the community college) and discovered that many people were coming there for similar reasons as the adult students in Sweden. It wasn't until I learned about the Danish Folk School in my studies of adult education at Mount Saint Vincent University that I really began to understand the significance of the English classes for my students in Sweden. They were truly "lifelong learners."

After moving to Canada and taking several years out of the workforce to raise our two sons, I taught English and French at a private language school and I now teach ESL to French speakers of the Canadian Military. Although I have learned a total of five foreign languages at different times, before I started studying Adult Education (or Lifelong Learning as it is now called), I had never really reflected on why or how I learned languages successfully. I was used to hearing, "Oh, you must have a natural aptitude." Interestingly enough, nobody ever asked me what strategies I used to help me learn these new languages. However, as a teacher and adult educator, I have been forced to consider both how I did it, and how I can assist my students for whom language learning does not come so easily, or for whom negative experiences in the past still spoil their enjoyment of learning the language. Those reflections have also led me to consider how I learned best during my courses in my degree in Adult Education.

Undoubtedly the most thought-provoking article for me on my learning journey in

Adult Education is a book chapter by Plumb and Welton[1] (2001). I was intrigued by the way the authors led me along the path of critical reflection by posing questions which allowed me to analyse what brought me to the field of adult education and to help me frame a mission statement. As someone who had never written a journal, I approached this article with considerable apprehension, hoping to be able to get at least one page of my journal full. Imagine my surprise and excitement when two hours later and with only about four pages of the text read, I discovered that I had written eleven pages in my journal. I was obviously tapping a source that I had not even begun to appreciate. This was the beginning of an appreciation of the value of critical reflection and of journal writing as a tool to reach this goal.

Another thing I enjoyed most about my Adult Education classes was the cooperative and collaborative aspect. In my classes, students listened to each other and did not ridicule one another's point of view. Each student's contribution was valued and I found that through our discussions of the articles, I was able to understand much more than I had by myself. There was a predominant atmosphere of sharing. Barriers to learning such as fear or aspects of gender or race were discussed openly in a safe, respectful environment. Likewise in the collaborative project groups, each of us was able to contribute what we felt comfortable doing and felt accepted.[2]

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[1] The book chapter is aptly titled, "Theory building in adult education: Questioning our grasp of the obvious."

[2] My undergraduate degree had consisted mostly of lectures. Even the tutorials were often in lecture format. In classes where there were supposed to be discussions I believe most students were afraid to contribute for fear that they might appear ignorant or that they had misunderstood the text.

As I was a part-time student and still teaching full-time, I was fortunate to be able to compare my daily teaching practice with the theories I was studying at school. I was encouraged to notice that some of my ESL/FSL (French as a Second Language) teaching practice relates very closely to Adult Education theories. The field of ESL has been one of the forerunners in communicative learning and we are constantly putting emphasis on dialogic activities and the sharing of ideas. A high percentage of our class time is spent doing work in groups or in pairs. We try to involve the students in presentations of material as much as possible and, to a certain degree, in the design of the course. We try to take into account different styles of learning and to provide something for everyone.

As I continued to reflect, I realized that I viewed adult education as a chance for people to improve their situation in life, whether on a personal, career-related or social level. I felt that my calling was to share the knowledge to which I was lucky enough to have gained access and, thereby, to help others to have the same positive experience with learning that I have always had and to reach their potential. Ideally this would be a reciprocal process, as I would also be learning.

Recently I was talking to a friend of mine whose children attend the French school. She was explaining about how she couldn't speak French or rather couldn't get over her inhibitions about speaking French. She confessed that plenty of words were "swarming around inside her head," but that she couldn't get them out and felt that she was lacking in self-confidence. Those comments led me to consider why this woman felt like this. Did she need new strategies to organize and store the words? Did she need to learn more

about her learning style? Did she need to be in a safe, respectful environment where she could risk making mistakes and feel comfortable experimenting with all these words in her head? I realized that researching these questions would be the optimum way to combine my longstanding experience in language learning with my deep interest in Adult Education theory.

Research Interest

My experience in adult education and language learning led me to want to investigate the connection between the theory of the two fields. Adult learning theory is about acknowledging past experience and validating all types of learning. Since Dewey's (1933) seminal work in the field, adult educators have been encouraging us to reflect on how we think and how we learn and to ponder alternatives to our way of thinking and our assumptions. The literature shows that adults learn for many different reasons and that they often know what they want to learn. It highlights the importance of a caring, respectful learning environment that is cooperative and collaborative. The idea of reflection is also central to second language learning (hereafter referred to as SLL) theory, namely in the metacognitive strategies (Chamot and O'Malley, 1994) where learners plan and evaluate their own learning. These strategies will be explained in more detail later.

In SLL theory there has been a great deal written about language learning strategies (i.e. techniques for retaining the language); for example, Chamot and O'Malley (1994), Ellis (1985), Oxford (1990), Rivers (1988), Rubin (1987), Schmeck (1988) and Wenden

(1987) to name but a few. Much has been written about learning styles (i.e. preferred method of input of new language); for example, Dunn, Dunn and Price (1978), Reid (1987), Richards and Lockhart (1996), and Oxford (1990). However, there are several gaps in the literature.

Firstly, the majority of the literature is concerned with formal learning, mostly at the high school level and sometimes at the university level. There is a clear "need for a more holistic understanding of women's learning" with attention given to workplace, home, family, and community learning (Hayes, 2000, p. 236). I was unable to find any studies referring to SLL and adults in an informal learning environment, so I decided to examine how an informal or nonformal learning environment could benefit adult women learners and how important this environment is to them. I have included both nonformal and informal here since the actual language learning was nonformal learning as it was more structured, but I believed a lot of informal learning would also take place as participants shared their thoughts and experiences. Reid (1987) mentions that the learning environment is important, but only briefly discusses it with reference to different academic environments.

I became interested in women's learning since both the SLL and AE theory show that affective factors are particularly important to women. Even if this does constitute a broad generalization, it was still sufficient to awaken my interest. I am committed to the concept of holistic learning and therefore believe that it is not enough to attend to a learner's rational capability. We also have to consider relational, spiritual, and emotional

aspects of women's learning (Griffin, 1988; Hayes, 2000). According to the Medicine Wheel, an ancient, traditional Native American symbol of wholeness and well-being, human beings need to achieve a balance between the physical, the mental, the emotional and the spiritual (Clason-Hook, 1992). To borrow Griffin's (1988) beautiful analogy: "We wouldn't consider playing a one-stringed guitar" (p. 107). Why then do we often focus only on the rational mind of students and ignore the other capabilities? Consequently, I was excited by Oxford's (1990) inclusion of affective, metacognitive, and social strategies in her discussion of vocabulary learning strategies and decided to examine this area further to see if the learning environment could also play a role.

Secondly, very few authors attempt to indicate clearly whether knowledge of these styles and strategies benefits the student or merely the teacher/adult educator or indeed both. Not only that, but the terminology is somewhat confusing in those areas as there is some overlap between the terms learning styles, cognitive styles, and learner types. Therefore I examine these terms in detail in the literature review. Further, the literature does not specifically address whether both exposure to and reflection on vocabulary learning strategies as well as awareness of learners' styles are beneficial to the adult woman learner. These issues are what interests me. Consequently, I chose participants who were women, mostly mothers, all working outside the home and with similar cultural backgrounds.

I wanted to investigate the research participants' perceptions and attitudes about French language learning in a study circle. Further, I was interested in whether the

participants felt that this particular study circle learning approach contributed to their

ability and willingness to speak French as a second language, and if the participants felt

that the study circle was beneficial to them in any other ways.

My rationale for choosing this area was the belief that the adult learners could

develop their learning potential both in second language learning and in life in general, as

they reflected on their own learning and shared their thoughts, ideas, experiences and

feelings with others. I hoped that by addressing these topics I would raise my awareness

of the needs and desires of adult women learners and would become a more sensitive and

effective adult educator.

Hypotheses

Second language learning offers a unique opportunity for a learner to discover more

about him or herself. I believed that the research would manifest this in many ways. In

this study the goal was not to analyse the cognitive styles of learners, but to open a door

to the learners to reflect on themselves and their own learning. My expectations were that

the adult women learners would attend the study circle for many reasons. I believed that

they all had a basic interest in rekindling their knowledge of the French language, but that

they would also use this as an opportunity to get together and have fun with a group of

like-minded individuals. I believed it would be a challenge for me, the adult educator, to

persuade the learners to speak French in the group, since I believed many adult women

feel very self-conscious about speaking French and lack confidence in their abilities.

Their possible lack of confidence might be due to lack of practice, negative experiences

in the past or other barriers, which I hoped would be discussed as the comfort level of the participants increased. As the adult educator, I tried to make the environment as non-threatening and comfortable as possible. I explained to the participants the need for them to be encouraging and supportive of one another.

I contended that the participants would have fun learning about styles and strategies and that they would enjoy their studies. I expected that their language learning achievement would not be their main concern, rather whether they had fun and relaxed in a comfortable learning environment, that is, the success of the social aspect would be rated more highly than the success of the educational one. As an educator, my intention was that the learners would leave this study circle feeling they had achieved something in at least one area.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

In this literature review, I focus on adult learning theory, specifically second language learning theory. I discuss the role of critical reflection, reflective practice, and transformative learning and then explore literature on the learning environment and women's learning in adult education. In the section on second language learning theory, which includes cognitive, affective, perceptual, and environmental concerns (Reid, 1987), I discuss language learning strategies and language learning styles.

Adult Learning Theory

    Past experience.

One of the basic precepts of andragogy is that adults learn differently than children. Adults are more "self-directed" and have specific learning goals (Knowles, 1973). We know what we want and need to learn, and we seek an informal, mutually respectful, collaborative learning environment (Knowles, 1984). We, as both adult learners and adult educators, must be aware of the power of our past experience, as it deeply affects how we perceive the present and what we value or attach importance to (Boud, 2001). Clason-Hook's (1992) study with Latino women was about an attempt to help these women slowly build confidence in their learning abilitites by providing a safe, respectful learning environment. These women's identities had been so strongly shaped by discrimination, sexism, colonialism, etc. and their abilities as learners had been totally ignored and even repressed (Clason-Hook. 1992).

The learning that occurs throughout the vast experience that adults gather over the years is termed experiential learning. Kolb (1984) describes experiential learning as a cycle of having an experience, reflecting on that experience, making generalizations about this experience and applying those generalizations to another experience. Experiential learning is a very important consideration in adult learning since adults, by virtue of having lived longer, have a lot more experience than children. However, experiential learning can be positive or negative (Spencer, 1998). It will be positive if the learner has had good experiences and enjoyed learning and feels that he or she would like to continue learning, whereas it will be negative if the learner did not perform well in school, for example, and now relates learning with failure or humiliation. Recognizing the ways in which our past learning experiences affect our present learning experiences is important in this study as these past positive and negative learning experiences may help or hinder the participants' language learning processes. For example, adults may have learned not to take risks in their second language learning due to past feelings of humiliation or inadequacy, and they may therefore lack confidence and feel inhibited about trying to speak another language. MacKeracher (2004) reminds us that "past experience is an essential component in learning, both as a base for new learning and as an unavoidable potential obstacle" (p. 35).

Critical reflection, transformative learning and reflective practice.

Our past experience is important, and adult educators encourage us to reflect critically on this experience. Through critical reflection learners consider why we think in a particular way and consider alternatives to this way of thinking (Brookfield 1987;

Dewey, 1933;). Critical reflection is about reflecting on why we think what we think, namely questioning our assumptions (Mezirow, 1990). This is the crux of transformative learning (Cranton, 1998). The concept of transformative learning suggests that, due to this process of critical reflection, a change occurs in "how we understand ourselves, others, our culture or knowledge itself" (Cranton, 1998, p. 192). Reflection enables the transformation from experience to learning (Boud, 2001).

The adult educator is a vital link in this transformation. The responsibility to promote critical reflection lies with the adult educator (Poonwassie, 2001). Moreover, it is our duty as adult educators to continually reflect on the consequences of our actions and how we can improve them, that is, to be what Schon (1983) calls "reflective practitioners". Likewise, Freire's theory of "praxis" is based on the idea of the connection between the action and the reflection on the action with the goal of continually increasing the level of understanding (Shor, 1993). The participants in this study had the opportunity to engage in critical reflection and experience transformative learning with the goal of losing their inhibitions and changing their beliefs about learning. Any changes in the perceptions of the participants of their ability to learn French would be transformative learning with the inhibited stage being the "disorienting dilemma" described by Mezirow (1990). A change in the way the adult educator perceives her ability to assist the participants would also constitute transformative learning.

The combination of reflection on our actions and interaction with other participants is fundamental in my study both for the adult educator and the participants. Shor (1993)

highlights the significance of this relationship between self-reflection and "dialogic" reflection in Freire's teachings. We learn not only from our own reflections, but also from vocalizing our thoughts and then receiving feedback from others, which exemplifies the value of cooperative learning and interaction. To achieve this interactive, reflective behaviour in my study, I presented a learning strategy and then had the learners engage with it during the study circle. They then reflected on the strategy in their journals and in the sharing session the following week. It was also my intention that through dialogic reflection and interaction in the study circles and journal writing that the participants would be able to challenge any potential fears and inhibitions. To enable the participants to feel comfortable doing this, careful consideration was given to a supportive learning environment.

Learning environment.

As adult educators, we strive to nourish a love of learning in our students whether in formal (following a set curriculum and ending with credentials), nonformal (no credentials but following a set curriculum designed by a adult educator), or informal (everyday shared stories and experiences) learning contexts. In many cases, formal education from universities or colleges is the only method of learning recognized, and Gouthro and Plumb (2003) point out, "adult educators do not live in a world where all knowledge is held to have equal value" (p. 2). It was very important in my study for participants to have their previous knowledge of French validated. For example, maybe they spent a summer working in Quebec or attended an evening class many years ago. I believed that when they realized that the educator valued all nonformal and informal

learning and they began to appreciate how much they actually knew, their confidence in their language learning ability would increase and the foundation would be laid for further learning to take place. My research falls under the category of both informal learning (sharing in study circles) and nonformal learning (more structured introduction to vocabulary learning strategies).

Adult education is a very social activity (Spencer, 2006). Historically, adult education activities emphasized this aspect, for example, the BC Womens' Institutes, the Canadian Citizens' Forum, the National Farmers' Radio Forum[3] and the informal gatherings instigated by Moses Coady and Jimmy Tomkins. Dennison (1987) states that isolation was one of the major driving forces that drove women to attend the Womens' Institutes. She notes that pioneer women reported that they were often so happy to have the social contact with other women that their throats hurt them the following day. Concerning the Citizen's Forum, Wilson (1950) states that the most of the participants were friends who were happy to get together for the discussion and "coffee and sandwiches" (p. 185). Likewise the National Farmers' Radio Forum provided a "social outlet" for the farmers (McKenzie, 1950, p. 171) and "could again become a time for neighbourliness" (Sim, 1954, p. 214). My research study also had a key social component as participants worked together in a group or pairs in a variety of activities and sharing ideas and experiences.

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[3] Small groups of people used to gather round their radios in homes to listen to a broadcast on a current issue, which was then followed up with discussion.

Women's learning in adult education.

Until fairly recently there has not been much literature available on the area of adult education concerning how women as a broad category learn. However, the recent literature stresses the importance to women of a feeling of interconnectedness (Cafarella & Olson, 1993). The feeling of connection in the group may be even stronger since many women experience a deep sense of human connection through motherhood (Flannery, 2000). The validation that women receive through motherhood is also a vital part of the Latino women's self-esteem in Clason-Hook's (1992) study where she uses study circles to "explore the extent to which small, collaborative learning circles based on the principles of the Swedish study circle model, can be a tool for promoting caring learning environments for the empowerment of Latino women" (p. 11). Flannery (2000) discusses the literature on women's learning through interactions and relationships and states: "The dominant theme across studies is that women both prefer to learn with others and prefer a certain kind of learning relationship with others, one that emphasizes mutual support and caring" (p. 124). She also cites many studies which indicate that women prefer collaborative and cooperative environments. This was vital to my study since the whole study circle philosophy is one of collaboration and cooperation with participants learning from each other. The learners were often involved in groupwork or pairwork where they had to cooperate and collaborate with others in order to practice the strategies. Along with collaborating with each other to practice the vocabulary learning strategies, I believed the women would learn a lot more about themselves and their lives from hearing each other's stories. A quote from Elisabeth Tisdell (2000) seems to aptly illustrate the realms of possibility for this study group:

The stories, critical reflection on them, and the context of the experience are often what promotes learning and change. The stories touch our hearts; they embody and put a human face on the abstract world of ideas. They move our spirits. It is through the interaction of our hearts, minds, and spirits that we eventually move to action. It is this interaction that promotes women's learning, at least the learning that is most significant. (p. 183)

There is even some support for different ways of knowing and learning according to gender (Flannery, 2000), which is discussed further in the section on research paradigms. Oxford and Young (1997) find "recurring patterns" (p. 66) related to gender in the use of strategies for learning a foreign language. In most studies of language learning strategies that considered gender, women used more categories of strategies than men, especially general study strategies, social and affective strategies (Oxford, 1993). However, those studies were concerned with university level students learning a foreign language in their own country, so the studies have some limitations. Firstly, university students might be expected to use more strategies than others, so there may be the same difference between women who have studied at an academic level and those who have simply completed high school. Secondly, studies carried out on the informal language development of American students studying Russian in Russia showed the opposite results, namely that men were more likely to use a greater variety of strategies and more social and affective strategies (Brecht, Davidson, & Ginsberg, 1991). The women could have found it more intimidating to be in a foreign country. However, despite these

limitations, these results support my argument that the learning environment may play a large role in the level of comfort with testing various language learning strategies.

Although it is important to pay attention to gender differences as recommended by Oxford and Young (1997), I want to avoid making generalizations about gender-related learning in order not to mask the diversity among women as learners (Hayes, 2000). Flannery (2000) warns, "statistically, in all previous research, most differences in learning style are greater within each gender than between the genders" (p. 137). Consequently, this research does not intend to put the learning of women in opposition to the learning of men (Hayes, 2000), merely to draw attention to a particular area, namely, how women learn, in which there is a dearth of literature.

As I reflected on those tenets of adult education theory, it seemed to me that these ideas of reflecting on how we learn in general and what assumptions we have could be applied to the specific technique of how we learn languages and our perceptions of our ability to do so.

Second Language Learning

Language learning strategies.

Since the late 19th century, how we learn has been a topic of study by examining mental processes and human consciousness (Wenden, 1987). In the 1930s the study of mental processes went out of favour when behaviourism and Skinner's (1974) theory that behaviour was due to a conditioned response became popular. It wasn't until the 1960s

when Chomsky's claim that there is a basic structure in all human language comprehension and production challenged Skinner's theory that the field of cognitive science became popular. Value started being placed on second language learning strategies, in particular recall strategies, in the mid 50's (Cohen, 1990). Wenden (1987) explains, "research on learner strategies in the domain of second language learning may be viewed as a part of the general area of research on mental processes and structures that constitute the field of cognitive science" (p. 6). A great deal of the literature focuses on looking at what successful learners do and trying to see if these techniques could be transferred to others (Rubin, 1987), but obviously no study has found a recipe to fit all students, as there is no single recipe for all students. Naiman, Froelich, Stern and Tedesco (1975) define successful language learners as able to: identify and seek out preferred learning environments, develop an awareness of language as a system and as a means of communication and interaction, deal efficiently with the affective challenges of the second language, and use inferencing and monitoring techniques. The most efficient learners use the greatest variety of strategies and not only the quantity but also the combination of those strategies may be significant (Wesche, 1975). Wong Filmore (1986) detected a strong connection between social strategies and learning strategies.

O'Malley and Chamot (1990) identify three distinct categories of strategies, namely metacognitive, cognitive, and social/affective. They view Canale and Swain's (1980) grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse and strategic skills as part of what they call "procedural knowledge." Procedural knowledge is at the heart of all cognitive skills and includes problem solving, language input and output and the use of learning strategies

(O'Malley and Chamot, 1990). This means that language learners must not only use correct grammar, register, and tone, but also behave in a socially appropriate way in order to show that they can communicate competently and be a "good" learner. The next question then is whether learners are aware of which learning strategies they may or may not have used before.

Role of awareness.

There is some controversy as to whether language learning is a conscious or unconscious process or a combination of both. Krashen (1982) sees it as a largely unconscious process whereas Rubin (1987) supports the idea of making strategies used for language learning conscious. In one study Chamot and O'Malley (1994) contend that the "effective learners were very much aware of their own mental processes and could describe these processes in some detail" (p. 6). The value students themselves assign to strategies is also important (Rubin, 1987). What characterizes a good learner is the ability to choose the right strategy at the right time (Skehan, 1991). If students have no metacognitive strategies, they are unable to evaluate their learning or see where it is going (O'Malley et al, 1983), and probably unaware of strategies they may or may not use. On the other hand, those who use metacognitive strategies are able to reflect on how they learn and take steps to improve or adapt their learning. This can include reflecting on their learning styles and the best way to accommodate learners with different learning styles is to make them aware of their learning styles (Fleming and Mills,1992).

With specific reference to metacognitive strategies to aid in learning vocabulary, Sanaoui (1995) states, "encouraging learners to reflect on and document their personal practices of vocabulary study may increase learners' awareness of what they do or do not do, providing them a starting point to assess the effectiveness of their practices in relation to their progress in learning vocabulary over time" (p. 25). The argument therefore for the use of metacognitive strategies is essentially the same as that for the use of critical reflection in that both are designed to instigate some kind of change.

Rubin (1981) was the first to differentiate between direct and indirect strategies. Oxford (1990) divides the classification of direct strategies up still further into memory (e.g. grouping, associating, semantic mapping, keywords), cognitive (e.g. repeating, analyzing, summarizing) and compensation strategies (e.g. guessing, using coined words, circumlocution or gesture) and indirect strategies into metacognitive (e.g. planning and organizing the learning, self-evaluation), affective (e.g. lowering anxiety and reading your own emotions), and social strategies (e.g. cooperating and empathizing with others) (pp. 18-21).

Sanaoui (1995) wrote an article about the results of three studies concerning how adults learn vocabulary and their use of mnemonic procedures. The studies documented the type and frequency of methods used to record and retain vocabulary. The students were at university level, but it appears that the learning was non-formal since it was a non-credit vocabulary course. The first study was an explorative one with 50 ESL learners, the second case studies of 4 ESL learners and the third case studies of 8 FSL

learners. In the first study, data was collected in 60 minute long, small group, "sharing sessions" where students described and discussed what they had done throughout the week to learn their vocabulary words. The researcher observed and took copious notes of these sessions and used them to compile profiles of each learner, which were then compared in the data analysis section. In the other two studies the learners took daily notes on the strategies (including nature, purpose, variety and frequency of strategies) they were using and had weekly individual interviews with the researcher who took notes in the second study and tape-recorded the dialogue in the third study. An additional interview was held at the end of the course to provide face validity, where the researcher verified with each learner that the information was correct. All three studies produced similar results, which showed that most learners could be categorized into two groups, namely structured and unstructured learners. The former were very organized and tended to conscientiously record vocabulary, revise and study it regularly and design their own methods of learning the vocabulary, whereas the latter were not very organized and rarely recorded or reviewed the words, relied simply on what they had learned in class.

Sanaoui's (1995) rationale for monitoring and reporting the strategies used by the learners was twofold, namely that the learners may benefit from developing a better awareness of their strategies, and may benefit from learning what others do. This concern with awareness provides a strong connection to my own study, as I am also very interested in the effect of awareness of learning styles and learning strategies on the learner.

The major differences between Sanaoui's study and my own lie in the sampling, the learning environment and the procedure with the strategies. Firstly, my learners are mature learners who are not attending university at present whereas only the third study of Sanaoui consisted of mature adults. Secondly, the university setting is much more formal compared to the nonformal setting of my study where the venue will be my home. Thirdly, I presented my learners with strategies to try out whereas Sanaoui researched which strategies the learners were using of their own accord. The use of sharing sessions is common to both Sanaoui's studies and my own study, but whereas she only audiotaped the individual interviews in one of her studies, I audiotaped the sharing sessions. Writing activity plays a big role in both Sanaoui's studies and my own, since my learners will keep learning journals and Sanaoui's learners were required to take daily notes. Finally, Sanaoui is only concerned with the technicalities of the learning strategies, for example, which ones are used and how often, etc. whereas I am very interested in more than this. For example, I am interested in understanding the effect of the learning environment, the role of learning styles and the role of informal learning taking place during the study circle in addition to the learning on vocabulary strategies.

Learner styles.

Before I move into a discussion of what constitutes "learner styles" I will use Oxford's distinction to clarify the difference between styles and strategies. In my study the term "language learning strategies" is understood to be "specific actions or behaviours accomplished by students to enhance their learning" (Oxford, 1990, p. 11). As mentioned above, examples of those strategies are making educated guesses, evaluating

your own learning, taking notes or building word families. However, the way learners select and use these strategies depends on and must not be confused with more general character traits, cognitive learning styles, motivation and aptitude (Oxford, 1990). The next distinction in the literature is between perceptual learning styles and cognitive learning styles (Lightbown & Spada, 2006).

Richards and Lockhart (1996) contend that "cognitive styles can hence be thought of as predispositions to particular ways of approaching learning and are intimately related to personality types" (p. 59).[4] Perceptual learner styles are defined in this study as the preferred method of input, that is, exposure to new language: visual, auditory, reading and writing or kinesthetic (Lightbown & Spada, 2006). Learning styles are affected by many things including past life experience and cultural background (Magro, 2001).

Although learners may not be aware of their perceptual or cognitive learning styles, most have firm ideas about how they want to receive their instruction based on correct or incorrect assumptions about how they learn best (Lightbown & Spada, 2006). I have often seen this with Asian students in a classroom using modern ESL communicative-based instruction. These learners had to go through a "disorienting dilemma" because the style of learning was diametrically opposite to what they had learned was "the best way to learn". My experience has been that, almost without exception, the students have adapted well to the new method once they had time to see that it worked and "challenged their assumptions" about it. In this case, the key was again about raising learners'

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[4] An in-depth discussion of personality types is unfortunately beyond the scope of this study, which is more concerned with perceptual learning styles.

awareness. The learners became aware of other styles of learning, so that they were in a position to question their belief that the old way was the only way and try a new learning style. Several learners of a particular style may of course select different strategies, with learners of differing abilities able to reach the same level of proficiency through compensatory strategies (Skehan, 1991).

There is some controversy over whether learning styles can be changed through experience. Davidman (1981) notes that there is evidence that adult learning styles are not particularly strong or fixed habits and that they can be adapted. If this is the case, learners should be made aware of the concepts of learning styles (Reid, 1987). On the other hand, Lightbown and Spada (2006) claim that it is not clear whether learning styles can be changed through experience, so the best we can do as educators is to encourage learners to try different ways of learning. In any case, I felt it was important to expose learners to different styles in the hope that they would have fun with the experience and that this process would initiate a process of reflection on how they learn.

Some researchers discuss learner styles under the heading of learner differences, such as personality, motivation, learning style, aptitude and age (Ellis, 1985). Learner styles and strategies can compensate for weaknesses learners have in areas such as aptitude (Skehan, 1991). Aptitude itself is a complex term. It contains both cognitive factors such as problem-solving strategies and affective factors such as emotional responses (Ellis, 1985). This is why I hypothesized that working with styles and strategies in this study and careful consideration of the learning environment would help learners

compensate for any perceived or actual weaknesses in their second language learning

ability.

Chapter 3: Research Methodology

Introduction

In this chapter, I state my research questions, present the goals of the research, discuss why I chose qualitative research as my research method and examine the relevance of my study to various research paradigms. Further, I discuss how I selected the participants, why I chose to use my research instruments and how I collected and analysed my data.

Research Questions

1. What are the research participants' perceptions and attitudes about a specialized 6-week French language learning study circle?

2. Do the participants feel that this particular study circle learning approach contributes to their ability and willingness to speak French as a second language? If so, what aspects in particular contributed to their ability and willingness to speak French as a second language?

3. Do the participants feel the study circle is beneficial to them even if they feel they did not increase their proficiency in French significantly? If so, what aspects in particular contribute to this feeling?

Research Goals

The main goals of this study were as follows: The first one was to make the participants feel at ease, so that they would be more disposed to taking risks with their language learning and able to free themselves from self-administered restrictions on their learning due to beliefs about inhibitions and barriers to their learning. The second one was to encourage the learners to reflect on the language learning techniques they have used in the past and are being exposed to now through keeping learning journals and sharing stories and experiences in the study circle. The third one was for the learners to enjoy the experience and feel a sense of accomplishment, be it educational, social and/or recreational. The method I felt was most appropriate to best meet these goals was qualitative research.

Qualitative Research

I selected qualitative research because of the flexibility of structure it offers and the ability to mould the study as it proceeds (Janesick, 1999). This method was important for my research, as I wanted to design the study around the needs and desires of the participants, which might change as the study proceeded. A second attribute of qualitative research is the role played by personal contact, emotionality and caring (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005). The participants are not just a statistic but their thoughts, opinions and feelings are constantly in the forefront. Thirdly, in qualitative research, participants can learn from each other. Reality is constructed every day by ordinary people and people can both change and affect others (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998), which is why the interactive nature of this study group is very important. Finally, qualitative research also presents

more of an opportunity for me to reflect on my own role as a adult educator (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998) and for the participants to reflect critically on their learning (Morgan, 1997). After selecting my research method, I started to reflect on which research paradigm my study reflected.

Research Paradigms

My research is multidisiplinary and draws from the fields of linguistics, sociology, educational and cognitive psychology, and adult education. For this reason, it was a somewhat challenging task to situate my research in one particular paradigm. Firstly, I felt that it principally fits into the humanist paradigm because it is concerned with helping the individual and facilitating personal development (Darkenwald & Merriam, 1982). Furthermore, I took pains to offer a healthy, safe, learning environment, thereby providing the optimal conditions for learning (Magro, 2001). Moreover, I aspired to start from the level at which my learners were in their knowledge, to accept and to respect them unconditionally, and empathize with their emotions as they proceeded through the learning experience (Rogers, 1961). Finally, as humanist educators advocate, I tried to foster an atmosphere of cooperative learning and took pains to reflect on my own development (Winzer, 1995). Those were all part of my rationale for placing my research in the humanist paradigm.

Secondly, my research could be said to fit partly into the constructivist paradigm because it is concerned with activating prior knowledge by validating past experience and with issues of motivation and anxiety (Magro, 2001), and partly into the critical theorist

paradigm because it is concerned with critical reflection (Mezirow, 1990), possible

transformative learning (Cranton, 1998), and reflection on our assumptions and

perspectives (Brookfield, 1987). I realize that critical theorists normally include a

discussion of issues of privilege, class, gender, race, or sexual orientation (Kincheloe &

McLaren, 2005), but even though a detailed discussion of these issues is outside the

scope of this paper, I still contend it fits to a certain extent into the critical theorist

paradigm.

Finally, my research fits into the feminist paradigm since it is concerned solely with

a group of women and how these women learn. The combination of reflection and

dialogue was expected to appeal to the women, since a balance between the personal and

the group is extremely important (Hart, 1990a). The feminist perspective entails a

complex interaction of the personal and the social, and is concerned with consciousness

raising and awareness (Hart, 1990a), which I have outlined in detail above as being some

of my primary goals in this research. Hart (1990a) suggests that women have to have

their ideas validated in a group first before being able to progress to the reflective stage. It

is essential for women learners to be able to believe in their own capabilities (Hugo,

2000). Researchers belonging to the feminist paradigm also pay attention to the affective

components of research (Denzin, 1997), just as I aspired to do in my study. Gilligan

(1982) was the first to express the belief that women's identities are defined through their

relationships with others. Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule (1986, 1997)

developed this notion and presented a variety of different "ways of knowing." These

authors differentiate between "separate" and "connected" knowing and contend that,

whereas "separate knowers" are more likely to engage in critical discourse and to doubt everything, "connected knowers" work on a basis of trust. Connected knowers are non-judgmental and believe that everyone is entitled to their own opinion since it is based on personal experience, hence cannot be "wrong" (Belenky et al., 1997) which opens the door to an atmosphere of mutual respect. Although it is important to distinguish between connected knowing and connected learning (Flannery, 2000), I believe there can be parallels between the two. Once I had a clear idea of where to situate my research, the next step was to consider how to select participants for my study.

Sampling

I had planned to advertise for 4-6 native English speakers who were interested in learning French and willing to take part in a six to eight week long study which is the timeframe currently preferred for both study circles (Suda, 2001) and focus groups (Krueger, 1994). However, on telling different friends what I was planning to do, several immediately expressed an interest in joining the group and participating in my study. In fact, it was not my original intention to have only women, but since women were the first to volunteer, and they encouraged me to make it a women's group, I decided to do so. I also felt that since there is very little research on how women adults learn (Hayes & Flannery, 2000), I could make a contribution by narrowing the focus to women learners. Additionally, as women apparently find it less stressful and easier to learn in gender-segregated groups (Weiler, 1988), I felt I would centre on a gender-segregated group to benefit the participants.

The sample group of women was relatively homogeneous in that the women had many common features. For example, they all came from a white middle-class Christian background, all worked outside the home and all had English as their mother tongue. Except for one, they were all mothers between the ages of 30 and 60, who had had at least some French instruction in high school, but had not used the language actively for many years. Several of the group members also had school-aged children already in or going into French immersion and several were teachers themselves.

The rationale for confining my study to the participants of the above criteria was that it would be easier to concentrate on the specific learning differences and experience that the study was concerned with if the group had many external features in common. It is prudent to work with fairly homogeneous groups with regard to major issues such as gender, race, and class (Hart, 1990b) if transformative learning is an objective. People tend to reveal more about themselves to others in discussion groups who resemble them in some ways (Krueger, 1994). Moreover, women often experience similar obstacles and situations when trying to continue their education (Gouthro, 2005), which is an issue that I expected to surface as the participants discussed their past experience. It is no secret that women often place the needs of others before their own (Brooks, 2000). A comment made by several of the group on hearing of the study was that they would be able to help their children with their French. I believe this idea helps the women justify the fact that they will be away from home one evening a week and makes the study more enticing. I do not mean to make a value judgement about this, merely an observation that these considerations are a fact of life for many mothers including myself, and that we, as adult

educators, should be aware of them so that we can work with these considerations and not against them.

Because of the location of the learning site, it was anticipated that some of the participants would know each other well. I was also aware that this could affect the comfort level of the group or individual participants, and that some participants might not be comfortable sharing in this situation (Krueger, 1994). Nevertheless, I hoped positive group dynamics and a favourable learning environment would ease any initial concerns. I did not really expect this to be detrimental to this group since we were not discussing controversial issues and the participants would all be voluntarily participating in the study.

I strongly believe MacKeracher's (2004) suggestion that a good learner-adult educator relationship is vital to the learning process. For this reason, I, the facilitator, strove to be respectful and accepting of everyone's point of view and to promote a favourable learning environment, so that the learners would feel more comfortable taking risks in their learning (MacKeracher, 2004). Even if the participants did feel inhibited, they had the opportunity to express their personal views or feelings in their journals. Concerning journals, I will now explain how and why I chose the research instruments used in my study.

Instruments

After deciding to do qualitative research, I then had to decide on which qualitative research method or methods would be most appropriate for my study. It is advisable to combine research methods in order to make the whole research project stronger (Morgan, 1997), so I chose study circles for their interactive component and journal writing for its reflective component, as I believed they would compliment each other well. I also kept a reflective journal myself in order to help me comprehend precisely what I was doing as a qualitative researcher (Janesick, 1999).

Study circles.

The idea of learning together in a circle is an ancient tradition in many cultures; for example, healing circles in Native American peoples (Graveline, 2000). Although Sweden is the country that first comes to mind on discussing study circles, mainstream use of study circles as a method of adult education actually started in the US in Chautauqua, New York in the 1870's. A Swedish temperance advocate wrote an article about them in Sweden after visiting Chautauqua and the idea caught on in Sweden (Oliver, 1987). By 1947 the government had introduced grants supporting study circles and in the 80's the late prime minister of Sweden, Olaf Palme, referred to his country as "a study circle democracy" (Oliver, 1987, p. xviii). Nowadays, over one third of Sweden's population attend study circles each year and over two thirds of the population have attended one at some stage in their lives (Andrews, 2002).

Study circles have experienced a revival in the US since the 1980's and there are even virtual study circles. Study circles are popular with literacy organizations such as the National Adult Literacy Database (NALD, 2007) and with the Bahá'í International Community (The Bahá'ís, 2007). A movement called "Simplicity Study Circles" started by Cecile Andrews in 1992 has now spread around the US, England, Canada, Australia, India, and Sweden (Andrews, 2002). These simplicity circles are concerned with the effects of human behaviour both on ourselves and the planet. The structure of the circle always fosters an atmosphere of equality, respect, and participation (Kindstrom, 2002). There is a website called "Tell Us Your Story" (Study Circle Resource Centre), which encourages people to share how study circles have contributed to their communities. The topics range from racism, education, criminal justice to immigration and many others. Study circles are not difficult to adapt to various topics and diverse interests of participants (Clason-Hook, 1992) and, indeed, foreign language groups can use the study circle format (Blid, 1990).

The collaborative, inclusive, interactive, and democratic nature of study circles (Suda, 2001) is what attracted me to them most. They appear to be the perfect backdrop for cooperative and collaborative learning. The Swedish government defines a study circle as: "an informal group which meets for the common pursuit of well-planned studies of a subject or problem area which has previously been decided upon" (Oliver, 1987, p. 6). This seems to fit my research perfectly since the study area, French vocabulary learning strategies, has already been decided upon and the atmosphere is very informal. In 1987, Oliver claimed that language learning was the subject area in over 30 per cent of

Swedish study circles at that time and in 2002 Andrews noted that study circles were still being used for language learning. Andrews (2002) stated further that in Sweden even if people are studying art history or learning to speak a language on the surface, they all leave the circle reflecting more about society and the environment.

Women like to share stories (MacKeracher, 2004), and study circles focus on personal stories (Andrews, 2002). As they tell these stories, people are learning about themselves, their values and beliefs (Andrews, 2002). This seemed very appropriate for my goal of encouraging the learners to reflect critically on their learning. Besides, I hoped that the study circles would offer catalytic validity (Lather, 1986) in that there could be a lasting effect of the research on the participants. This notion echoes the idea of transformation of constructivists and critical theorists, namely to bring the participants to a new awareness and facilitate their learning on a new level.

Originally, I had planned to use the term "focus groups" for my study. Study circles and focus groups have many common features, which means that my study still has the advantages of focus groups such as high face validity due to the credibility of the participants' comments (Krueger, 1994), even though I call it a study circle. Andrews (2002) notes that study circles require around six to eight participants for optimal participation and Krueger (1994) recommends six to nine for focus groups. Group dynamics is vital to both study circles (Suda, 2001) and focus groups (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990). The main difference is that study circles are concerned with the values behind participants' opinions (Aicher, 1990; Kindstrom, 2002) as well as the

opinions. In addition, focus groups are used for a specific purpose (Krueger, 1994), often in market research, whereas study circles can be on any topic and are appropriate for language learning and reflection (Andrews, 2002). The latter combination was precisely what I required for my study and there is not much systematic documentation and research on study circles available (Clason-Hook, 1992), so this study seemed to provide the perfect opportunity for some research on study circles.

The attraction of the study circle is that learners can take out of it what they want or need for themselves. Clason-Hook (1992) describes it as a "chameleon" that "takes on the characteristics of the group which is using it because it allows the group freedom to direct its course" (p. 312). If a learner was solely interested in expanding her French vocabulary, I was confident she would have ample opportunity to do so. If another learner needed to lose some inhibitions, I felt sure that this caring, sharing environment would provide the optimal conditions to do so and if a learner wanted to go deeper into herself in every way, there was no limit to what she might discover. Finally, if a learner wanted to learn French as a means of developing a sense of community and connection, this too, might occur in this study circle.

Journal writing.

The reason I chose journal writing was the opportunity it presented as a learning tool through critical reflection (Kerka, 1996), and the positive experience I have garnered personally with the journal writing process that I discussed at the beginning of this paper. English and Gillen (2001) claim that journal writing is "an important part of the teaching and learning process" (p. 89). It can be extremely beneficial to the journal writer (whether

participant or adult educator) and provides useful data to the researcher. We can benefit

not only from the activity of writing, but also from the process of reflecting on what we

have written (Boud, 2001). It is a way of getting in touch with your inner self and can be

creative, cathartic, reflective, and educational (Janesick , 1999). Kerka (1996) states

"journal writing is closest to natural speech, and writing can flow without self-

consciousness or inhibition" (online article). Hiemstra (2001) lists many benefits of

journal writing such as "personal growth and development, intuition and self-expression,

problem solving, stress reduction and health, reflection and critical thinking" (p. 24). The

journal writing process was a very important part of my study since it offered the

participants the opportunity to receive any or all of these potential benefits. I asked the

participants regularly to share their experience with the journal writing process and

included a question in the final evaluation about whether they felt any benefits from this

process or not.

Learner style inventory.

There are a lot of tests or inventories available nowadays on learning styles, the

best known probably being Kolb (1985), but I find the terminology often complicated for

people not in the field, for example, "assimilator", "diverger", "accommodator". My

favorite inventory is Neil Fleming's VARK[5] (visual, auditory, reading/writing, and

kinesthetic) because there is no complicated terminology, the situations used are such that

everyone can relate to them and the inventory states outright that most people belong to

two or more of the categories. This inventory is comprised of two parts, namely the

questionnaire and the scoring chart. The questionnaire consists of 16 questions about how

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[5]   See Appendix E.

you would react in typical life situations. You can select one or more of the four answers given. You then use the scoring chart to calculate your score for each VARK category (see above) and read the explanation offered.

The VARK inventory appealed to me since it diverges from the behaviourist idea of boxing people into one category. Even the title of Fleming and Mill's article (1992) explaining the inventory, "Not Another Inventory, Rather a Catalyst for Reflection" (p. 137), applies to the inventory's role in my study which was designed to inspire the learners to think about how they learn.

As mentioned in the literature review, the best way to accommodate learners with different learning styles is to make them aware of their learning styles (Fleming & Mills, 1992). Thus, my rationale for using a learning style inventory was not to assign people labels for the sake of it, but to expose them to categories of styles of learning in order to:

1)   make them more aware of how they and others learn

2)   offer awareness of alternative learning styles and

3)   encourage them to reflect more deeply on how they learn, in order to maximize the advantages of their preferred learning styles.

I wanted to find out whether the participants would predict their own types correctly, whether knowing their learning style would help them learn the vocabulary or help them select strategies to learn the vocabulary, and how studying their learning style could help them be critically reflective also in other areas of their lives. The learning style

inventory and the participants' reaction to it would enable me to compare their initial opinions on how they prefer to learn with the results of the inventory and see if they correspond at all.

Data Collection Procedure

The participants received at no cost facilitation in techniques for learning French vocabulary and their only commitment was to provide feedback on their experiences, feelings, opinions, concerns, etc. through questionnaires, group discussion, and a learning journal. I introduced a different strategy for learning vocabulary each week and asked them to try it out during the following week.

Participants met for one and a half hours once a week for 6-8 weeks. Before the first meeting the participants were asked to answer some initial questions by email including the following demographic information: highest level of education completed, occupation, previous experience with French, reasons for participating in the study, and their expectations of the study (see appendix B). As this questionnaire was submitted, each participant was asked to complete the VARK language learning inventory (see appendix E). The participants were asked to note the results of the inventory in their journals along with their feelings and opinions about how accurate the results were. The results of this inventory were not used in a behaviouristic way to categorize or make learners fit in any particular "box," but were simply used as a tool to raise awareness of different ways of learning with which some learners may not yet be familiar. I hope it offered the learners an opportunity to reflect on how they have learned in the past and maybe started to open their minds to other techniques for learning. I thought it might also

provide some interesting, possibly amusing, light-hearted material to discuss on the first evening, since in addition to research and educational objectives, this study group also had a social and recreational objective.

At the beginning of each meeting of the study circle, I asked participants to share their reflections of the learning from the previous week and how they experienced the strategies for learning vocabulary during the week. This reflective phase was called a "sharing session" (Sanaoui, 1995, p. 16), lasted about 20 minutes, and was audiotaped as unobtrusively as possible. Only participants who were willing to be audiotaped were able to take part in this study. Participants were of course allowed to comment on their learning at any time in the study circle but only the sharing sessions were audiotaped, in order to have some control over the size of the data collected. I had planned to use a "talking stick" for the "sharing session" part of the study circle. This is a stick (or any object) that is passed around and only the person having the stick is allowed to talk. The rationale for this was that everyone would have a chance to speak and those who would prefer not to may decline to take the stick. I had seen this process work very successfully in a workshop during my adult education studies. However, this idea was not very popular with this group and it was not necessary as the group members were very respectful of each other and took turns speaking.

The reason for both the journal writing and the sharing session at the beginning of each evening was to provide regular retrospective feedback (Chamot & O'Malley, 1994) and keep the line of communication open between the participants and the adult educator.

As researchers we have to care about our research subjects. A unique ethical issue in focus groups is that participants not only share with the adult educator but also with the other participants as well (Morgan, 1997). The situation is the same in study circles, and, as the adult educator, I impressed upon the group the significance of both respecting confidentiality, the notion of "what is said in the group, stays in the group", and respecting each other's comments and opinions. I was convinced that an atmosphere of mutual respect would be key to the success of this study circle, so that all participants would feel comfortable voicing their opinion. Before the start of the study, I made sure that participants signed a letter of consent to participation in the study (Babbie, 1998), explaining what their role would be and stating that they could withdraw at any time.

The purpose of the journal was for the participants to keep a record of their learning journal each week, which included their thoughts and feelings about the study group, the strategies and their learning. I gave them some guiding questions to start with (see Appendix C), but they were encouraged to write freely in addition to responding to the questions. I wanted to involve the participants in several decisions about the use of the journals and had this discussion during the first meeting of the study circle. Firstly, I asked if they would prefer to write the journals at home or at the beginning of class each week. Secondly, they could each decide about whether they would prefer to send the journals regularly by email or to have a little book to write in. Thirdly, they decided if I should collect the journals every week or wait until the end of the study. They had the choice of deciding as a group, or they could choose different options depending on their individual preference. The reason for this process was that the participants had choices

about what they were comfortable with and not feeling forced to do something they hated. On an ethical note, English (2001) suggests that the principles governing the use of the journal writing process should be "respect," "justice," "beneficence," "self-awareness and caring" (p. 32-33) and I endeavoured to follow these principles.

I kept a learning journal myself as the adult educator and researcher during this time, in which I recorded my thoughts and feeling about how each evening progressed. This journal also included any notable external factors such as snowstorms, headaches, or any other factors that I was conscious of which might have affected me and/or the participants. This was to help me to see if I actually do what I think I do or to discover gaps between my philosophy and practice (Farrell, 2006). We often learn much more from reflecting on an experience than from the experience itself (Farrell, 2006). I also felt that I should be willing as the adult educator to do the same as I requested of my students. I wanted the participants to feel that the adult educator/researcher was also one of the group and we were all reflecting on the learning process together. I hoped this would facilitate relationship building with the participants and increase their willingness to keep a journal. I was happy to share parts of my journal with the participants during the sharing session. As the researcher, I also noted my ideas on the suitability of the journal writing process, including the participants' reactions to and comments about it. I assessed whether I would be eager to choose this method again for future research and in what ways I could improve the process in the future.

Triangulation.

Data triangulation, whereby different methods of data collection are used in order to improve the probability that the findings and interpretations are credible (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), was achieved through the combination of participant journal writing, adult educator journal writing, sharing sessions, and questionnaires. Triangulation is important for the "trustworthiness" of the data (Lather, 1986), and can also reveal weaknesses with individual methods of data collection, for example the data from the journals counteracts the "tendency toward conformity" (Morgan, 1997, p. 15), which can occur in group discussions. Janesick (1999) recommends "data triangulation in terms of journal writing of the researcher, participants and interaction between both" (p. 505), which is exactly what was done in my study, and she regards journal writing as a way to clarify the precise role of the researcher.

Bias and power relations.

I realize that as a language teacher I have a positive bias towards certain learning strategies or teaching styles and that as the adult educator I would be in a position of power, so I endeavoured not to influence the participants too strongly in any particular direction. As already mentioned above, I especially did not want them to feel any pressure to relate to one particular learning style, or to have to give positive comments about various strategies. I emphasized that the strategies were not "my" strategies, but that we were testing the ideas of other researchers. As I saw it, I had to try to be open with the participants and discuss with them my interest in this research and its

shortcomings (Babbie, 1998). However, I was a researcher and facilitator of this study circle, not a teacher in a formal setting. No marks were awarded for any part of this study, so there was no pressure on the participants to "pass" anything. Emphasis was purely on learning vocabulary and using it to communicate a message and the participants' perceptions and attitudes about this experience. The only evaluating was done by participants themselves, about their own learning. I believe this should have reduced the teacher/student, or rather adult educator/participant, power imbalance somewhat. There was also no payment to the participants for taking part in this research. They simply received French language instruction for free while providing feedback about their feelings and perceptions about the strategies presented, as well as their experiences with the strategies in the study circle.

Activities.

Since I wanted this study to be as participatory as possible under the given circumstances, I was reluctant to state a fixed list of strategies and activities. Although my plan was to use a combination of study circles and journal writing, I wanted to retain a degree of flexibility with those methods. For example, if a participant revealed to me that she hated writing, I would strive to accommodate her. Similarly, with the choice of strategies, if I had suggested an activity such as baking muffins to learn vocabulary for the kitchen and ingredients and one or more participants had hated this idea, I would have attempted to find an acceptable alternative together with the group. However, I did not anticipate many problems of this nature.

To welcome the participants on the first evening, each one received a different coloured gift bag with a pen, blank flashcards, a brightly coloured notebook for the learning journal and a little vocabulary notebook. Participants were encouraged to bring an item on the first evening, which somehow related to their previous French language learning. I did this because it immediately presented the participants with an opportunity for reflection and sharing and brought their attention into the room and to each other and away from other distracting thoughts. It is also a way for the participants to start to get to know each other without having formal introductions. I had taken part in an activity like this several times myself and found it to be very informative.

Some of the activities the study circle involved were:

- flashcards

Cohen (1990) describes flashcards as a "trusty" means of vocabulary learning. The theme for this activity was "basic greetings and useful expressions in French. I put about 20 basic useful expressions in French on different coloured paper on a flip-chart and asked the learners to brainstorm or recall their meaning with a partner. This provided the opportunity for lots of interaction and took the pressure off the individual so was an affective strategy (Oxford, 1990) to put the participants at ease. After debriefing the pairs on the meanings and practicing or explaining the phrases, learners were asked to choose ten phrases which they felt would be useful to them and to write them on the flashcards provided with the translation on the reverse side of the card. Learners were then asked to study the words using the flashcards during the week and note how they found this experience in their journals.

- brainstorming and word association

After reviewing how to ask questions in French there was a quick warmer exercise where learners had to find out two or three things about their partner in French and then present this information to the group in simple French. This helped the learners get to know each other. Next on a large piece of Bristol board, learners were shown an example of how to take a theme in French like, for example, "vacation", associate other words with it, for example, "sand, hotel, sun, beach" etc. Then they had to link three other words to each of the first set of three words. Dictionaries were available for this exercise. I then asked learners to write down a topic they were interested in on a piece of card and try to find a partner with a similar topic. The idea here is that we are much more motivated to learn if we have a personal interest in the topic (Swaffer, 1988). This worked out well and those whose themes were not the same did one theme together first and then the second. Learners were then asked to try this out at home with other topics during the week.

- learning words in context

Learners were given two short articles from the internet where they had to brainstorm the meaning in pairs. Then they listened to a short news story on TV where again, although they couldn't understand a lot of it, they were asked to try to get the main idea form the headlines or the pictures, etc. Finally, they were exposed to a short news article on the French radio news. Learners were then asked to try to read or listen to French news during the week and use the context to help them understand.

- mnemonics[6]

I presented my own family tree in French on a flip chart and explained the vocabulary. I then reviewed a list of adjectives to describe people's physical and psychological characteristics, which I proceeded to use to describe my own family members. Learners then had to draw their own family trees and explain them in French to their partners and try to describe family members using the list of adjectives. Finally, learners were asked to select 10 of the new words on the list and try to make up little rhymes to help them remember them, for example, one learner said that she had a niece with curly, kind of frizzy hair and this helped her remember the French word for curly "frisé". Learners were asked to try to use rhymes or funny links to remember their chosen words during the week.

- a variation of Total Physical Response[7]

It is thought to benefit kinesthetic learners (Oxford and Crookall, 1990). In a study by Reid (1987) of the preferred learning styles of 1388 university students, the majority cited kinesthetic and tactile learning styles. Whereas in traditional TPR emphasis is put on the learners understanding and following the commands (Lightbown and Spada, 2006), I was more interested in having the learners use the commands and other language while doing the action in order to assist retention of the language. Instead of having only the actions and no words, I had the participants both name and use the ingredients and utensils and name and do the actions.

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[6] Mnemonics is the use of words such as rhymes, anecdotes, funny pictures, etc. to facilitate learning and retention of vocabulary (Raugh & Atkinson; 1975, Cohen & Aphek 1980; Sanaoui 1995).

[7] Total Physical Response means that the person is involved in doing an action to facilitate retention (Lightbown and Spada, 2006).

After a quick warm-up activity to find out three new things about their partner that they didn't already know (in French), learners were asked to brainstorm in pairs as many words on food in French as they could in five minutes. The learners shared this information and were then told that we would be making Banana Bread in my kitchen that evening in three groups. One group had the recipe in French, but the order of the steps was all jumbled up, so they had to work it out. The second group had all the amounts of ingredients, so they had to work out what the ingredients were and what the measurements meant and ask me in French for the utensils. The third group had to actually do the baking and they only had to find out the names of the ingredients and had to refer to questions in French posted around the kitchen as props to help them ask the others for what they needed. They also had to ask me in French for what they needed. To keep the first two groups busy once the baking started, they had to answer questions in French after each step such as "What is she doing now? "What has she just done?" (This was to review the question for we had studied the previous week.) Once I explained about the three groups, learners were asked to volunteer for the various groups so that nobody would be doing something they did not feel comfortable with. One participant who I knew was an excellent baker was asked to participate in that group, since she was able to have fun with the French since she was so comfortable with the baking side of the activity.

- warmers

Short activities at the beginning of the evening to break the ice, help participants get to know others better and review the vocabulary studied the previous week.

The learners opted to have a potluck supper on the final evening. During the meal there was a lot of French spoken and each person was required to report in French on how they had made their potluck contribution. This could be a simple as "I went to Superstore this morning and bought the cheesecake" or as complicated as they wanted to make it. This also reviewed a lot of the vocabulary from the baking activity the week before.

Wherever possible language was introduced with a visual component combined with an aural/oral component, in order to meet the needs of a possible majority of visual learners. Around 94% of learners are reasonably good or better at working with visual input (Goleman, 1986). I did not use an exclusively aural strategy, as most people are not primarily aural, although it depends on the culture (Dunn, Dunn, & Price, 1978). For example, cultures such as Native American or African might have much better developed aural and oral strategies since their cultures are traditionally based on a system of story telling where the information transfer has taken place orally over generations. It is important to pay attention to cultural factors since they are ingrained in our minds and bodies since birth (Scott, 1998) and serve as a set of familiar patterns that allow us to proceed through our daily lives in a particular comfort zone (Welton, 1995).

Voice.

At all stages of my research, I was careful to listen to and really hear the voices of the participants and not simply what I expected or wanted to hear (Anderson & Jacks, 1991). Where possible I let these participants' voices speak in this study and have a kind of multi-voiced style (Lather, 1986). One of my objectives was to assist the subjects in

arriving at their own definition of their learning style(s) and what that means to them. Researchers have to be aware that they have unconscious intentions and goals (Scheurich, 1995) and that in presenting a study, we are actually presenting ourselves (Denzin, 1997). The danger is then that only the voice of the researcher is heard and not the voices of the participants. Denzin and Lincoln (2005) further contend that "all research is interpretive; it is guided by the researcher's set of beliefs and feelings about the world and how it should be understood and studied." (p. 22) Indeed, the often quoted saying by the author, Anais Nin, that "we don't see things as they are, we see things as we are" is a good reminder to researchers that we see everything through our own lens and we have our own interpretation of everything.

On the final evening I requested that they complete an evaluation including comments on whether their expectations had been met, how they found the learning environment, their opinions on the strategies overall, and whether they found it useful to receive information on their learning styles or not (see appendix D). These data were useful because I was naturally interested in whether the participants felt they had made any progress with their French language learning, and, if so, what they felt contributed to this progress. In addition, I wanted to know if the participants' social and recreational goals of the study had been met. I realize that learners often tend to write what they think the researcher wants to hear in questionnaires (Ellis, 1985), so I impressed upon the participants that I would welcome any comments, positive or negative, as all remarks would serve to inform my research. I asked them to review their own journals and highlight anything they judged to be important, as proposed by Morgan (1997) in order to get a sense of what was important to them. Two or three of the participants did this,

which was very helpful to me when I was reviewing the journals. It helped me to understand how important the pairwork and the social interaction was to the learners. Those who did not do this may simply have overlooked this request or may not have felt comfortable analyzing their data.

Data Analysis

The first step in my data analysis process was to collect the journals from the participants and read through all of them along with the transcriptions of the audiotapes and try to detect and make sense of various themes using a combination of inductive reasoning, where theories emerge from the data, and deductive reasoning, where preexisting theories are confirmed (O'Leary, 2004).

In order to better engage with the text, I highlighted words, concepts and non-verbal cues (O'Leary, 2004) that were related to themes in my literature review such as the learning environment, past experience, confidence, learning styles and learning strategies. I then tabulated these themes and the names of the participants and completed the tables according to which participants had commented on that particular area and in what way. This enabled a quick visual overview of the most important concerns of the group as a whole and of similarities and differences between individuals.

Next, I constructed a similar table with the information recorded in the questionnaires and the final evaluation. I then reviewed all the data repeatedly looking for any new themes or comments that seemed to reveal more about the participants'

perceptions and attitudes about the study circle or seemed to support themes I had already detected. I ended up with the following list and colour coded the data thematically as follows:

- learning environment including caring, collaboration and location

- commonalities and differences in backgrounds

- confidence and barriers

- attitudes to and feelings about learning styles

- opinions and feelings about the success of various strategies and

- overall evaluation of the study circle.

After that I looked for interconnections between various themes, constantly trying to keep my research questions in mind (O'Leary, 2004). I also looked for irregularities in the data, for example, comments that were made by individuals, considered if and how they related to my research questions and examined how I could incorporate them into my final write-up.

Finally, I wrote up my findings, supporting them with direct quotes or paraphrases from participants and the relevant literature and linking them to my research questions. Complete confidentiality in the data analysis of the journals and transcripts, as outlined by Kirby and McKenna (1989), was ensured through the use of pseudonyms that the women chose themselves at the first evening meeting of the study circle and by the fact that I have not included specific details in this text that would allow the reader to easily identify a participant.

To ensure face validity of the data (Lather, 1986), I emailed the transcripts to the learners individually and they confirmed that the transcripts were an accurate representation of their words in an attempt to eliminate or minimize misunderstandings and then disappointment and disillusionment on the part of the participants about not being understood (Borland, 1991). The participants were happy with the transcripts and did not suggest any serious concerns or substantial changes. I then reviewed my own journal and compared those comments with those of the learners in an attempt to track down any disparities or supporting features between the two. One striking example of a supporting feature was that the evenings that I commented on in my journal where I felt that the evening had gone particularly well, for example, the pairwork around the family tree, was supported by several comments from participants about how much they had enjoyed that evening because there was a personal connection to the material and because they enjoyed working with a partner. It was reassuring as the facilitator to have my feelings about how the activities had gone confirmed by the comments in the participants' journals.

Similarly, I noted how much I felt the participants enjoyed the TPR activity and almost every participant wrote enthusiastic comments about that activity in her journal. For example, Ann wrote, "Had lots of fun tonight using a kinesthetic approach – cooking. What a great way to introduce vocabulary!" I was not convinced that the "learning in context" activity had gone well, as I felt that I had been too ambitious and expected too much of the participants. This feeling was confirmed in that it was the least favourite

activity of many of the participants. There were no notable disparities between the two, which was reassuring, as I would expect, as the facilitator, to have a fairly accurate sense of participants' level of enjoyment of a particular activity.

Chapter 4: Results and Discussion

Introduction

In this chapter I examine the themes arising from the data analysis, support them with direct quotations from the participants and discuss them with reference to the relevant literature. I show why I believe that the far reaching effects of the learning environment make it a suitable addition to Oxford's (1990) list of direct and indirect language learning strategies, and I present findings on collaboration, caring and connection, the learning environment, the confidence of the participants, commonalities and differences in backgrounds, learning styles, and time constraints.

Before I discuss these findings individually, I would like to introduce the participants of the study circle and provide a little background information on each one. There were eight participants[8]: Ann, Tracey, Sarah, Lucy, Meredith, Mary, Effie and Mona plus me, the facilitator. Ann, Tracey and Sarah are all teachers and stated that they enjoyed relating the learning strategies we used to their own classrooms. Lucy and Meredith knew nobody in the group before they started, but appeared to be comfortable members of the group. Many of the learning strategies were totally new to Lucy, but she stated that she thoroughly enjoyed trying them out. Meredith came with a high level of French but was very keen to continue to improve. Mona and Mary were unable to attend the first evening meeting of the study circle, but since both had quite a bit of previous knowledge of French, they managed to catch up very quickly. Mary stated that after an initial feeling of uneasiness, she started to feel very comfortable with the group. Although

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[8]   Not their real names.

Effie is comfortable reading French she states that she has trouble both hearing and reproducing the French sounds.

Collaboration, Caring and Connection

The context of the learning was very important including the location, the physical environment, the emotional environment and the social environment. The strongest and most frequent comments about what led to the success of this study circle approach were about the enjoyment of working with one or two partners, which Habermas (1984) would call collaborative learning. All the women rated the interaction with a partner as most important, no matter what strategy they were trying out. For example, although Mary explained that she found the "learning in context" activity very challenging, she wrote "but it was still fun because of my partners" and Effie wrote "working as a team doing the mix and match exercise was fun." Comments about the particular vocabulary learning strategies during the study circle meetings were not as prevalent as comments about interaction, collaboration and the relaxed atmosphere that suggests that the social component of each activity was vital. Meredith summarized this beautifully at the end of her journal where she said that "the social, comfortable and supportive environment is probably one of the biggest factors in making this group successful."

Adult learners seek an informal, mutually respectful, collaborative learning environment Knowles (1984) and women prefer collaborative and cooperative environments which favour an atmosphere of "mutual support and caring" (Flannery (2000, p. 124). Tracey wrote "we were able to share our knowledge with our [pairwork] partners. On my own, I don't think it would be as successful."

The participants of my study circle all commented on how much they enjoyed the pair work or small group work within the circle which they felt raised both their comfort level and their confidence and therefore increased both their ability and their willingness to speak French. Participants felt much less threatened trying to speak French with their partners than in front of the whole group. Sarah felt that talking in pairs increased "security," by which I think she means the comfort level, and "it makes you more willing to actually say something in French." As the comfort level increased, so did the amount of French spoken. Sarah wrote in her journal, "Every week we became more and more comfortable with each other and willing to try our rusty French." Especially Ann stated that she had felt very nervous about coming, but that she felt better and better as the weeks passed and the members of the group got to know each other which supports the claim that a feeling of interconnectedness is important to women (Cafarella & Olson, 1993). Tracey added "it was nice working in partners, too, as opposed to on your own". This positive atmosphere is directly related to the empathetic, respectful aspect of Belenky et al.'s (1997) notion of "connected knowing".

Sarah suggested that the group was "evolving each week" and that it was important not to miss any evenings. She also felt that "as we became more comfortable with each other, we were less divided as to who knows more than someone else." This is interesting as it illustrates that Sarah's perception was that participants were losing their inhibitions, as they stopped rating their level of French knowledge against that of the other participants. Hence, as their comfort level with the other participants increased,

participants stopped feeling the need to compare their level of French to that of the others which left them able to concentrate on improving their own level.

Several participants also mentioned that they liked the small groups for sharing and exploring together and felt that they activated each other's memories and prior learning in this way. While sharing her thoughts on a pairwork activity about learning words in context Ann said to her partner, "You would say something and it would just sort of jar me…I bet if I was by myself, I probably wouldn't have thought of it." Her partner for this activity, Effie, stated that the combined knowledge of the pair "increased the success and the enjoyment of the activity. I really liked working in pairs as the others can fill in the words that I was drawing a blank on."

Generally, women prefer to learn with others (Flannery, 2000) and the participants were indeed learning from suggesting ideas to each other. For example, Ann was complaining she couldn't really "watch" a programme in French because she didn't understand anything. Tracey recommended watching the commercials because they were generally already familiar in English. She explained that found the commercials easier to understand because she had visual and auditory cues. Lucy told of watching the movie "The Green Mile" in French after having watched it first in English and how familiarity with the story had helped her understand. This style of learning is also a form of what Marsick (1990) refers to as "action learning" where participants learn from each other's experience and which is designed to "incorporate differences, a practice that helps participants see things from multiple perspectives" (p. 34). By receiving tips and advice

from other learners, the participants are able to develop a better awareness of different strategies they and others use (Sanaoui, 1995). Stories are very important for women's learning (Tisdell, 2000) and they helped make some of the strategies come to life. For example, Meredith explained how she had tried to study words in context. She recounted how she had been on the way to visit a farm and had tried to think of various expressions she would need in that context and searched for them during the drive to the farm. She explained that she was able to ask her francophone husband for assistance. This is a prime example that a good learner is characterized by the ability to choose the right strategy at the right time (Skehan, 1991). The other women appreciated this story and said it was a great idea. Sarah wrote "I love imagining the lives of others and hearing their ideas." Concerning "learning words in context" Tracey noted in her journal "it was interesting for me to find out how much I did learn when it was put into a context."

Relational, spiritual, and emotional aspects of women's learning are just as important as the rational aspects (Griffin, 1988; Hayes, 2000). There was clearly an atmosphere of caring prevalent in this study circle which contributed to a favourable learning environment in which learners felt more comfortable taking risks in their learning (MacKeracher, 2004). Lucy said "I still enjoy the group activities. Someone always seems to know or remember something from a previous session and is able to help me when I am trying to say something." Not only did the participants care about each other and encouraged each other to try to speak French, but they also cared about me as the facilitator/researcher and were eager to hear each week how long I had taken to type up the transcripts or if I had enough information. The participants were quick to

recognize and praise me about the amount of preparation I had put into the different evenings and complimented me on the activities, which made me feel that I was being carried along on a wave of support. Both Ann and Sarah, who are teachers, talked about the benefits they reaped of actually trying to do what they themselves encourage their students to do, such as put words into context and they both feel that they now better understand their own students' struggles. Again this shows an attitude of caring towards their students and a "connected" knowing and learning (Belenky et al., 1997), as they try to relate their own learning to how they can help their students.

It is interesting to note that although Meredith knew nobody at the start, she did not feel inhibited by this. On the contrary, she felt that it was beneficial for the group that some of the group members had known each other previously, as she felt that "this made a lot of the initial conversation more natural." The results of my study challenge Krueger's (1994) view that participants may not be comfortable sharing, if they already know each other. On the contrary, at least one of the participants in my study stated that she would not have attended the study circle had she not previously known some other participants while several others say it was an added benefit. Six of the participants and myself discussed how happy we were to have an opportunity to see more of our friends and were sad that we would no longer see each other each week once the study circle was over. For example, Meredith said, "I'm really going to miss such a wonderful group." She wrote in her journal that she was sorry that one of the participants would miss the final evening which she thought was "a sign of the group cohesion that developed over a very short period of time, even when the majority of people were strangers to begin

with". Several of the women were already friends before the study circle but by the end of the circle, an atmosphere of friendship had developed between all the participants, so just like the women in the Citizen's Forum (Wilson, 1950), the women in the study circle were happy to get together for the discussion, learning activities and social time each week.

An experience of connection is the link to the spiritual and the soul in learning (Kessler, 2000). It is often what motivates us to learn, namely the need to make or foster social connections. Since six of the eight participants checked "social" as one of the choices for reasons for participating, we can say that the desire for connection is one of the major reasons why many of the participants took part in the study circle. Kessler (2000) uses "soul" to represent the "depth dimension of human experience, to students' longings for something more than an ordinary, material and fragmented existence" (p. x). Although Kessler is referring mainly to public schools, I believe this is just as relevant for adult women learning in an informal environment. Even as the facilitator, I found that it was a very special connection for me to feel that I am going through a similar phase of my life as these other women.

Apart from prearranged vacations or absences, we had 96% attendance at the study circle. This is quite a significant figure and speaks to the need of the participants to create this niche in their lives for themselves in amongst their commitments and also to their very high level of personal commitment. The 4% absence was due to unforeseeable circumstances involving the participants' children. There was certainly a sense of

commitment since the participants knew I needed data and had signed the informed consent form where it was stressed to strive for as high an attendance as possible, but I believe a strong personal connection was vital. Indeed Effie noted, "If this had been anyone else or anywhere else, I wouldn't be here." This caring relationship between the learners and the facilitator is supported by MacKeracher's (2004) belief that a good learner adult educator-relationship is vital to the learning process. I believe that this also includes an attitude of impartiality on the part of the facilitator, so since I knew several of the participants quite well before the study circle started, I was encouraged to read Sarah's comment in her journal that "Barbara was equally friendly and considerate with everyone, so I couldn't tell who she knows well and who she doesn't."

Learning Environment

Learning theorists have recently started to pay more attention to the context in which learning occurs (Hayes, 2001). All the participants felt that the relaxed, informal learning environment in a home as opposed to a classroom helped their learning, although Sarah suggested that the high comfort level could have come from the positive group dynamics (which are vital to study circles [Suda, 2001]) rather than the location. Ann noted that having the study circle activities in a home "had a huge impact on putting me at ease throughout this study. It is relaxing and comfortable on the one hand, but also made me feel safe to try new things and not worry so much if I made a mistake. I don't know that I'd feel near as comfortable in a classroom setting." In my own home I, as the facilitator, was able to control aspects such as also room temperature, lighting, availability of materials and equipment and comfortable seating to achieve the optimal

learning environment (Poonwassie, 2001). Several participants mentioned that the home environment took away the "pressure" which embodies MacKeracher's (2004) idea of reducing participants' level of anxiety by creating a safe, comfortable learning environment. Tracey noted that "due to the environment that was created, I was able to take risks and contribute because I felt comfortable and confident. I knew no one would laugh at my attempts."

Both Mary and Mona, who missed the first week found it very intimidating to start the group late, however, they both mentioned that the informal, relaxed environment soon helped them to overcome these feelings. Meredith and Mary both commented on the lack of pressure they felt in an informal home environment. For example, Mary stated, "I enjoyed Barb's class because I was doing it for me and not because I had to do it." This feeling of having some control over their own learning was important to the participants and added to the respectful environment. The study circle was also designed so that learners could have a lot of control over their own learning, since we know what we want and need to learn (Knowles, 1984). The participants appreciated this. For example, Lucy mentioned how pleased she was that she could now choose how to learn and didn't have to rely solely on her old methods. Similarly, Meredith said she really enjoyed being able to choose her own vocabulary words to write on flashcards from the vocabulary covered on a particular evening and not being handed a strict list of words to learn. This meant she could make her list of personal interest. Learners are more likely to remember the words if they choose them and the words are more meaningful (Swaffer, 1988). One of the strategies which was popular was an activity where learners drew up their own family

tree in French and then explained it to their partner. Tracey commented that she liked this activity because it was personal but also enjoyed explaining the tree to her partner, so the combination of the personal and the social interaction was valued here. This provides a simple illustration of the complex interaction of the personal and the social in the feminist perspective (Hart, 1990a). Likewise, Mona felt it was important to discuss things she can "relate to" in a small group.

At the end of the first evening, I offered food and beverages to those who wanted to stay a little longer. All the participants stayed except one who had to drive a long way. Although the conversation was in English then, participants discussed their experience with French and this informal atmosphere also contributed to a sense of relaxation. The participants enjoyed this part so much that two immediately volunteered to bring the snacks for the following week and started a pattern that continued until the end of the study circle meetings.

The learning environment has become such a vital part of my study that I contend that it could be added to Oxford's (1990) list of indirect language learning strategies along with affective, social, and metacognitive strategies. What Oxford (1990) calls "direct learning strategies" such as cognitive strategies including, for example, repetition, compensation strategies including, for example, making educated guesses and memory strategies including, for example, review and mnemonics are important, but they are not enough. My study has shown that what Oxford (1990) calls "the indirect strategies" including affective strategies such as laughing, social strategies such as collaborating

with others and metacognitive strategies such as reflecting are just as important. I contend from the findings of my study that providing a safe, comfortable learning environment is an additional indirect learning strategy. Aspects of the learning environment can include physical location, level of formality, physical comfort, respectful atmosphere, and psychological well-being. Just as Wong Filmore (1986) detected a strong connection between social strategies and learning strategies, my study has found a strong connection between social and affective strategies, such as lowering anxiety and empathizing with others (Oxford, 1990) and memory/learning strategies, with the social and affective strategies playing a key role in any of the learning.

Self-Confidence

Most of the group said that their confidence in speaking was growing every week thanks to the relaxed and encouraging atmosphere. It is vital for women learners to be able to believe in their own capabilities (Hugo, 2000) and it is what women lose over the years of not speaking French "more than anything" (Mona). During the sharing session, Effie told us that she had found it difficult as a "high achiever" to accept that she could not go into the higher more oral French section. She explained that she has always had problems hearing and pronouncing the French words and is beginning to wonder if the belief that she is incapable of hearing them is inhibiting her attempts to learn. Effie wrote "I am so convinced I can't hear – I am probably closing doors on opportunity." It is interesting that she herself was considering how her perception that she has a hearing problem could be affecting her actual hearing.

As the facilitator, I strove to promote a relaxed and encouraging atmosphere, so was gratified when Mary wrote "Barb was always very encouraging, and so I never felt embarrassed when I couldn't pronounce a word properly." As mentioned already, the learning environment can affect women's confidence about their learning abilities (Flannery, 2000). Tracey said, "I think I am gaining confidence that I can do it based on what we have been doing and learning in our sessions." Ann said, "With every week that goes by, I feel a little more comfortable speaking French." Ann, who is an elementary school teacher, noticed that as her students came back from their French class, she was speaking French to them and they were amazed. She got a real kick out of this as she said she would never have had the confidence to do this before. Lucy too added that "the casual, informal learning environment helped everyone feel more comfortable and less hesitant to try to communicate". She described the study circle environment as a "comfortable and encouraging learning atmosphere". Similar frequent comments in the participants' journals confirmed that the learner's anxiety in speaking French was decreasing thanks to the provision of a safe, respectful learning environment as recommended by MacKeracher (2004). Another factor that helps the learners feel "safe" is when the facilitator is careful to set up the activities properly and provide adequate information. Tracey confirmed this belief by saying "I think we are given the background knowledge that we need and are experiencing success with our partners. If I was struggling, I wouldn't be feeling as good about my abilities." Actions often speak louder than words and further evidence that the comfort level of the group was high is that, as discussed in the previous section, almost all the participants stayed on for refreshments each evening after the official part of the circle was over.

While reflecting on my own confidence as a facilitator, I realized that there was one strategy, "mnemonics," which I noted in my journal that I had felt very nervous about presenting because it is not something I am personally very good at, even though they are a highly effective learning tool (Raugh & Atkinson, 1975). However, it turned out to be the most successful evening, since the participants all stated that they enjoyed the interactive activities used to practice the mnemonics. Effie described that particular evening as "the best one so far" and I made a similar note in my own journal. The participants seemed very relaxed and there was a lot of interaction in French. This clearly illustrates how productive it is to push our limits and take risks. If I had given in to my reservations or the circumstances, the participants would never have experienced this very positive evening. Because I was nervous about that strategy, the activities were designed to have lots of interaction and this proved to be effective.

Confidence is related to identity and self-esteem (Flannery, 2000). Flannery (2000) claims that "identity refers to who women are and how they identify themselves and self-esteem refers to the positive or negative evaluations that women give to their identities" (p. 54). Both Mary and Lucy fought against issues with confidence. Lucy wrote, "I still have difficulty speaking. It is a confidence thing. I would really like to be more vocal." I feel that she overcame some of her inhibitions by even volunteering to attend the study circle. Likewise, Mary noted that "it was very intimidating, just knowing the group had already met the week prior and I'd missed it." She said she doesn't like speaking up in front of people, but noted "I also learned that if I wanted to improve my French, I

couldn't just sit and listen to everyone else. So, I really tried to jump into the conversation when I could. Difficult for me, because in the past (school years), I could wait for the teacher to ask me a question." Mary had been used to relying on the teacher for direction. Women's identities are defined through their relationships with others (Gilligan, 1982), so external factors such as history, family, friends, etc. influence our identities (Flannery, 2000) which means that our past experience has a powerful effect on our identities and our self-esteem. In this way, our past experience with teachers (as Mary described), peers, parents, etc. while learning another language has a strong effect on how we perceive our abilities in this area.

The following comment from Sarah illustrates how the general confidence level of the group was rising. "It's interesting but with each session the group seems to be taking control and the facilitator has less control. The French is still happening, but now we are doing it more." Lucy wrote "even this little bit of exposure has given me some confidence that I might be able to get back to a low level of competence in the language." The confidence of the group increased as they realized that they were remembering a lot from before. For example, Tracey noted, "I am amazed at some of the French I am picking up on and remembering. I'm beginning to think it may not be as 'foreign' as initially thought." Mona was both surprised about how many words she remembered and inspired to borrow audiocassettes from the library and listen to them at home.

Commonalities and Diversities in Backgrounds

The discovery of common backgrounds played a major role for several participants which supports Hart's (1990b) advice that it is prudent to work with fairly homogeneous groups with regard to major issues such as gender, race and class if transformative learning is an objective. The more insecure the participants were about speaking French, the more important they rated the common backgrounds. This was evident to me as the researcher since the confident French speakers did not tend to mention common backgrounds in their journals, but the less confident French speakers all mentioned in their journals how comfortable it made them feel to have a common base from which to work.

In general, people are more inclined to share more of their personal thoughts and feelings if they experience commonalities with the rest of the group (Krueger, 1994). Ann especially appreciated the "similar level of French" of most of the participants and "the camaraderie." Two participants mentioned that the advantage of being of a similar age and being women meant participants could relate well to each other's life experiences. In the initial questionnaire only three participants said that they would like the group to be all women, but at some point in their journals, all participants noted that the women only environment had helped reduce the inhibitions about speaking French and promote the feeling of connection very quickly. For example, Mary noted that it was "a real bonus to have all women and about the same age" and Sarah wrote "what was new was that I did enjoy the group of women only. I feel that it would have taken much longer for the group to gel if men had been there." This comment illustrates the point that a feeling of

interconnectedness is very important to women (Cafarella & Olson, 1993) and the sense of community that had developed within the group was evident from the final comments about regret that the study circle was ending, missing the people, the laughs and the regular evening meetings.

Although Weiler (1988) found that women find it less stressful and easier to learn in gender-segregated groups, the participants in my study did not mention that it made it easier to learn, but said that it was easier to try to speak French in front of other women as they felt less self-conscious about making mistakes. Martinez Aleman (1998) describes this situation among women as "a safe haven" (p. 4). However, it is worth noting here that my participants explained the women-only situation as being a kind of "bonus" rather than a necessity and these findings are only intended to show what happened in this case do not suggest in any way that a sense of community or interconnectedness would not happen in a group of men and women. I believe we must be wary of putting the learning of women in opposition to the learning of men (Hayes, 2000), and should rather seek simply to draw attention to how women learn and to appreciate "gender as a crucial aspect of our lives and learning" (Hayes, 2001, p. 36).

Although the learners loved trying out the various strategies with a partner, there was much less enthusiasm in general for trying out the strategies at home which could be due both to the time constraints that the women were under and the lack of the social aspect of collaborative learning with a partner since those who did study at home often had their relatives quiz them or discussed the words with their relatives. For example,

Lucy wrote, "My rate of success for learning vocabulary this week was very low. I am not making time to study."

Although my study showed that the participants were unanimous in their enjoyment of collaborative learning, I am aware that this would not necessarily be the case for all women and that care should be taken not to ignore "the more nuanced insights that give attention to diversity among women" (Flannery & Hayes, 2000, p. 3). For example, Meredith enjoyed trying out her strategy "just as much at home." I also do not intend to suggest that men do not enjoy learning collaboratively, only that women do.

My findings about the popularity of collaborative learning contrast sharply with the findings of a study by Reid (1987) on the learning styles preferences of 1,388 university students. In Reid's (1987) study, all language backgrounds considered group learning a negative experience and preferred to work alone. One-third of this group was women and 90% were under 30. The discrepancy between the two studies could be due to the more formal atmosphere and focused goals of university students to study for and pass exams unlike the more diverse informal goals of the adult learners in my study. It could also be due to either the minority of women or the age difference of participants in the two studies.

The diversity among the women in their preference of memory strategies was very apparent when they tried to use the strategies alone at home. Ann, Tracey, and Meredith really enjoyed the flashcards, whereas Lucy and Sarah were not keen on them at all. They

both preferred having a list or page of vocabulary to learn. Sarah wrote, "I think what I find limiting about vocabulary flash cards is that there's only one word or phrase at a time. I prefer going through sets of words, or words in context, to remember." Tracey enjoyed visual input as she noted, "The first thing that caught my eye was the French phrases on the chart stand. The bright colours and arrangement invited me to read them over before our session began." Mary and Ann really enjoyed the more kinesthetic TPR activity.

As one would expect, different learners prefer different learning strategies, yet as already mentioned, the opportunity for collaboration was more important to the learners than particular strategies and they were willing to try out any strategy as long as they could do it with a partner. Meredith enjoyed learning words in context with the TV and radio listening and, in particular, the word association activity. She explained how she had used this to prepare for an outing and practiced with her francophone husband. Effie and Ann, however, had trouble with the listening and found they tended to get very specific with the word association where the French vocabulary became very specialized. In one of the sharing sessions, the participants were amused to discover that Ann and Effie had similar methods of reading the instructions carefully while putting IKEA furniture together, while their husbands did the opposite. Sarah, however, said she had the same method as the other husbands and her husband was more like Ann and Effie, again showing that preferences for various memory strategies are not gender-specific. Those examples were all very informative in that they support the need to pay attention to the difference of learning styles within the genders as well as between them (Flannery, 2000).

There were also diverse preferences for journal writing. Effie, Tracey, and Sarah liked to do the journal writing the day after (as I myself did) when things were fresh on their minds. Meredith was the opposite and did it just before Friday because it had to be done. She liked having a little time to reflect on things before writing. The various preferences here illustrate the diversity among the women that is also evident in their attitude to journal writing. Sarah, Meredith, Lucy, and Effie enjoyed writing in the learning journal because they said it made them think about how they learn and helped them organize their thoughts. The journal writing process functioned as a learning tool through critical reflection (Hiemstra, 2001; Kerka, 1996) for them, as at least three of them noted how they were going to proceed with their learning in the future and which strategies they planned to use. Ann and Tracey both said they did not particularly enjoy it, but they found it very beneficial to help clarify their thinking. We can benefit not only from the activity of writing, but also from the process of reflecting on what we have written (Boud, 2001). The rest of the participants did not enjoy writing in the journals, which again illustrates the diversity within the group and the importance for the facilitator of being aware that what works for one learner may not work for another. Although Kerka (1996) states that "writing can flow without self-consciousness or inhibition" (online article), this was not the case for all of my learners.

These findings challenge Oxford and Young's (1997) notion of "recurring patterns" (p. 66) related to gender in the use of strategies for learning a foreign language, at least for the memory strategies and, to a lesser extent for the reflective metacognitive

strategies. The women were certainly unanimous about the value of affective strategies. Indeed, it is the combination of cognitive, metacognitive, and affective strategies which may be significant (Wesche, 1975).

The feeling of connection discussed earlier in the group may have been particularly strong since many women experience a deep sense of human connection through motherhood (Flannery, 2000). During the first evening of the study circle, three of the women discussed how their children were in or about to enter French immersion and the topic of children came up frequently. For example, one participant's sons had experienced difficulties with language learning and another participant compared what her son did in French class to what the study group was doing. The interest in each other's children provided with women with an immediate common bond.

All participants said they would be fine with other participants who were of different races or cultures, but one or two noted that the common cultural background sometimes simplified things. For example, Mary commented in the sharing session about how all of us have probably made Banana Bread, which we baked during the TPR evening, at some time and were therefore familiar with it, so this was an example of the bond of shared experience. As a facilitator though, while I understand that it is "easier" to be in a group with a common culture, I see the common culture also as a potential disadvantage. One loses a great learning opportunity to share experiences from different cultures, since different cultures are characterized by different ways of thinking (Reid, 1987).

Learning Styles

"I am definitely a combination of a visual, aural, and kinesthetic learner – it hit home during this activity." (Ann's journal)

As discussed in the literature review, this study is concerned with perceptual learner styles rather than personality learner styles. Perceptual learner styles refer to the learners' preferred method(s) of input when being exposed to new language, namely visual, auditory, reading and writing or kinesthetic (Lightbown & Spada, 2006). All participants in my study described themselves as having more than one preferred method of input of new language in the initial questionnaire. These self-descriptions were supported by the VARK learning style inventory results which indicated that all the participants were multimodal learners. This finding was expected and not significant but what was significant was the fact that some of the participants realized that they learned in ways they had not previously been aware of and started to reflect on this as indicated by Ann's comment above. This can help the educator in future preparation of material as the learners are more likely to voice their preferences if they are well informed about them.

Davidman (1981) notes that there is evidence that adult learning styles can change, whereas Lightbown and Spada (2006) claim that it is not clear whether learning styles can be changed through experience. Lucy wrote that although she still preferred reading and writing French, she had enjoyed trying out the other styles of learning. For example,

she enjoyed the more kinesthetic baking activity and she had tried listening to a movie in French that she had already seen in English.

Our goal as educators should not be to "change" someone's learning style or to stereotype them (Reid, 1987) but to encourage learners to try different styles of learning by introducing them to different strategies for learning French vocabulary in order to add to their current abilities and I believe this objective was met in the study circle as at least three of the participants wrote about how they had enjoyed learning in new ways and would like to continue to do so.

Learners are often not learning the way they think they are (Lightbown & Spada, 2006), but it is important to keep our options open and not to block out opportunities for learning because we feel we do not learn well in a particular way. Ann was very surprised that she scored so highly on aural learning in the VARK inventory, as she did not think she learned well by listening to people. She felt she was more inclined to "zone out" and preferred to read the information for herself. After reflecting on this in her journal, she said that she became more open to listening and that she started trying to listen to more French on TV. This is a good example of how she started to question her assumptions about her learning (Mezirow, 1990), that is, to ask herself on what basis she believed that she was not a good aural learner. Reflecting on why we think what we think is the crux of transformative learning (Cranton, 1998). Similarly, as Sarah was reflecting on how she used to believe she either knew words or she didn't, she realized that she did have vague

memories of some words and stated "maybe my recall isn't as black and white as I thought". Sarah was starting to question a belief that she had held for a long time.

Learners do not always interpret their learning style in the same way as the facilitator or teacher (Lightbown & Spada, 2006), nor do they necessarily define learning in the same way. For example, Effie feels she's "very visual," yet she calls "the written word" her "only comfort zone" and one of her favourite ways of relaxing is to listen to novels on CDs in her car, which she described as relaxing and not learning. After reflecting that this listening in her car could also be learning, Effie went to the library and borrowed some cassettes about learning French, so she underwent what Cranton (1998) would call a transformative learning experience since she had questioned her assumptions about her own learning. An apparent contradiction of Effie's learning style here may not be a contradiction at all but a manifestation of her multimodality, that is her various preferred learning styles making themselves evident at different times.

It is useful for educators to note that things are not always as they seem, and that learners may have a totally different perception of what constitutes learning. By exposing them to new ideas, educators can open the door to transformative learning. An educator may perceive that a learner has a visual learning style if she wants to see all the words written down, whereas the learner may believe she prefers reading and writing for the same reason. The key is not the label here but to ensure that learners are aware of various learning styles (Cohen, 1990; Fleming & Mills, 1992; Reid, 1987), and then to leave it up

to the learner to decide which one(s) apply to him or herself. However, it is not easy to change our perceptions. For example, Sarah said,

> The evening was a lovely social experience. If I wanted to learn French seriously, however, I think I would find this way too frustrating. It might prove to be too easily sidetracked with too may goals other than the idea of learning French. It's French for fun: that works. I do think the comfortable atmosphere will make me less self-conscious about trying to speak in French, however. That would be wonderful.

The goals she mentions were having fun, socializing and getting to know other people. Both Effie's and Sarah's above comments indicate a belief that if you're having fun, you can't be learning. Although Sarah is extremely happy that she is "feeling less self-conscious," she does not rate this "informal style of learning" as highly as the traditional academic methods of reading and writing. I believe it is the job of the educator to show learners that it is possible to learn and have fun at the same time. In my study, any change in the perceptions on the part of either the learner or the educator may constitute transformative learning, especially when the learners feel that they have new insight into what works or doesn't work for them. I realize that we cannot force transformative learning to occur, but we can expose learners to opportunities and they then can make the decision to go through the stages themselves (Cranton, 2006). Cranton (2006) warns that many learners are not "ready, willing or able to make deep shifts in their habits of mind" (p. 156).

Time Constraints

Time constraints were always a problem. Almost all the participants noted that it was very difficult to find the time and energy to study due to family and work commitments which was an issue that I expected to surface and supports Gouthro's (2005) claim that women often experience similar obstacles and situations when trying to continue their education. Sarah succinctly says, "In a nutshell, there's no time."

Women have a tendency to give priority to the needs of others rather than their own (Brooks, 2000). Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger and Tarule (1986) say, "Women are drawn to the role of caretaker and nurturer, often putting their own needs at the bottom of the list, preceded by other people, husband, and children" (p. 77). This can be very detrimental to women's own growth and identities in the long run (Hayes, 2000). Ann, Tracey, and Lucy all expressed feeling guilty that they did not manage to find more time to study French words. We set very high standards for ourselves and are quick to berate ourselves if we do not uphold them (Cranton, 2006). However, a critical theorist might suggest that women's condition of having no time for themselves is the result of the structure of our society and no fault of the women themselves (Brookfield, 2005).

I believe that these considerations are a fact of life for many mothers including myself, and that we, as adult educators, should be aware of these considerations so that we can work with them and not against them. Maybe we have to ask ourselves if we really need to bow to this pressure from our patriarchal society where this is expected of

us or how we can carve out some more of our time for ourselves by giving higher priority to our own needs. As Gilligan (1995) puts it, "Women living in patriarchal families, societies, and culture are bound internally and externally by obligations to care without complaint, on pain of becoming a bad woman: unfeminine, ungenerous, uncaring" (p. 122). Stalker (1998) states "Attributes of sensitivity and caring are equally as inhibiting. They have built into them a tremendous expectation for women's energy and time to be focused on others and others' concerns. This in itself may create a barrier to women's participation in adult education" (p. 243). As long as women go on being the primary caregivers of the family and home, they have a higher chance of dropping out of education for non-academic reasons than their male counterparts (Hart, 2002). On the other hand, all the women in the study did make time to attend the study circle, so they were making their own learning a priority to a certain extent.

I had a similar issue with lack of time when trying to keep my facilitator's learning journal. I found I was so busy trying to keep up with the transcribing of audiotapes and the preparation for the next session on top of my work and family commitments that I did not have the time or the peace of mind to write a lot in my learning journal. It wasn't until after the study circle was finished that I was able to stand back and reflect on what had actually transpired.

Summary of Findings

Thank you so much for this wonderful experience. (Lucy's journal)

All in all, it was a fun and rewarding experience where we were active participants

in our learning. (Tracey's journal)

I met my goal which was to feel less shy speaking French in front of strangers and

friends. (Sarah's journal)

The main finding of this study in the field of Adult Education is that it is crucial for adult educators to attend to the learning environment. The participants had a lot of fun and there was lots of laughter, which helped them relax. The participants left the study circle with an increased sense of confidence in their ability to speak French. Although the learners' knowledge of French vocabulary only improved as much as time allowed, since one evening a week for six weeks was not very much time for language learning, the fact that they now have various language learning strategies which they can apply will assist them in their future learning. Participating in the study circle also reawakened their interest in the language and many participants were pleasantly surprised at the number of words they could remember. The participants attached just as much importance to their social and recreational goals as to their vocabulary learning goals in the end.

As exemplified by the above citations, all participants said that they had enjoyed the study circle, were happy that they had learned some new French vocabulary and reactivated a lot of old knowledge and met their objectives by the end of the study circle. As I expected, the findings of my study support Spencer's (2006) claim that adult

education is a very social activity with the participants rating the importance of having fun discussing, sharing, relaxing, and laughing together just as highly as the importance of learning French. Their inhibitions decreased, their confidence increased and they noted that the comments from the pairwork partners helped to "jog" their memory of French words and expressions. A significant finding is that all the women enjoyed learning or working in pairs or threes, which speaks to their need to feel a connection with one another and their increased comfort level speaking in front of only one or two others and illustrates one of Oxford's (1990) social strategies.

Learners chose to participate in the study circle for diverse reasons: some of them wanted to support me personally and be a part of this research, others found the location very convenient, some had children in French immersion and many had a combination of social, educational and recreational goals, but all of them favoured the idea of a relaxed style of learning in a home with no pressure or "benchmarks."

According to the data from the research participants, adult educators must listen to the learners and appreciate their perspectives. We have to be versatile as educators and introduce different memory strategies for learning vocabulary, so that all styles of learners will find something that works for them. Without attaching learner style labels to learners, we can inform learners of diverse learning styles, so that learners can start to reflect on their learning, thereby encouraging what Oxford (1990) calls a "metacognitive strategy." The value of reflection is that participants can benefit from thinking about their own strategies and those of others (Sanaoui, 1995). Evidence of this is that at least six of

the eight participants expressed clear intentions in their journals about which strategies

they liked and will try to use in the future. For example, Meredith loved the

brainstorming and word association and commented on her plans to continue using that

strategy. It was very gratifying as the facilitator to feel that a spark like this had been

ignited since my goal as an adult educator is to help people in their learning journey.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

As a researcher, it was not my goal to put the learning of women in opposition to the learning of men (Hayes, 2000), but merely to draw attention to a particular group of learners, namely women, and how they learn a language, in this case French, within a specific context. In particular, I set out to discover the perceptions and attitudes of a group of adult women learners about a specialized 6-week French language learning study circle and to examine how an informal or nonformal learning environment would affect this particular group of adult women learners. As the facilitator of the study circle, my main objectives were to put the participants at ease, offer them opportunities to reflect on their learning, and help them to enjoy their learning experience. These goals were all met.

According to the data from this research, adult educators must treat the learners in a holistic way (Griffin 1988; Hayes 2000), listen to and appreciate their perspectives while striving to be versatile in our use of teaching styles in order to accommodate all learning styles. Through exposure to different learning styles and strategies, learners can start to reflect on their own learning (Fleming & Mills, 1992). The learning environment in which learners are using these strategies may have a stronger effect on the learning experience than the strategies themselves by either promoting or hindering learning. As discussed in the literature review, it is the combination of metacognitive, affective and social strategies that is so effective (Wesche, 1975; Wong Filmore, 1986), since this combination gives them the opportunity to reflect, to involve their emotions and to

interact with others. In short, it is the role of educators to offer a positive learning environment where learners feel sufficiently comfortable to release their inhibitions and start speaking French.

Reflection on my Methods

A qualitative approach to this topic through a combination of journal writing and study circles provided useful insight into how this particular group of women learn, how important the learning environment is to them, which language learning strategies work best for them, and in what way an increased awareness of their own and others' personal learning styles helps them to be successful in their learning objectives. I am confident that this is a revealing and informative study about the value of informal learning through shared experience and of listening to the voices of the learners. Since losing inhibitions about speaking French and raising the learners' comfort level with French were paramount in this study, it was a resounding success. The participants spoke more and more French every week. Participants indicated they had fun, enjoyed meeting old and new friends and left highly motivated to continue their studies and with great ideas about how to apply various language learning strategies in the future.

As the facilitator, I was content with my choice of activities. I felt they were sufficiently varied to accommodate all learner styles. I realize that by choosing a baking activity, I made certain assumptions that this activity would appeal to my group of women, which is reinforcing the stereotype of the women being in the kitchen. However, I chose this because it is a reality that most women spend at least some time in the

kitchen, it was a practical "hands-on" activity that required use of language and it was easy to organize since the study circle was in my own home. It also provided a wealth of common vocabulary (food). Since there were three groups taking part in the activity and only one group actually baking, there was ample opportunity for those who did not want to bake to volunteer for another group.

The data triangulation method of journal writing and audiotaping sharing sessions enabled me to hear the voices of the participants who didn't feel comfortable speaking out in the sharing session but voiced their reflections through the journal. However, in future research I would add a personal interview at the end of the study circle in order to accommodate the few participants who may be uncomfortable both writing a journal and being audiotaped.

> Hearing how others have learned French and thinking about how I've learned it
>
> helps me realize the strengths and weaknesses of the experience. (Sarah's journal)

Reflecting on their own learning can help learners to become more aware of what they do and evaluate their techniques (Sanaoui, 1995). Tracey, Meredith and Effie all emphasized the fact that they recognized the value of reflecting on how they learn. For example, Tracey said, "Reflecting how I learn made me better understand what worked well." Meredith and Sarah (see above quote) mentioned realizing their strengths and weaknesses. Ann felt that the questions for weekly feedback (see Appendix C) had helped her focus her thoughts for the journal. She said she would have felt more

uncomfortable writing without this structure to help her. On the whole, the more vocal participants repeated in the sharing sessions what they had written in their journals, but the less vocal ones found it easier to express themselves in their journals. One or two seemed a little uneasy with both and I believe they would have benefited from a personal interview.

As the facilitator, I was a little disappointed that the participants did not write more in the journal about the VARK learning inventory and their learning styles. Several of the participants did not note the results of their VARK scores or their feelings about them. As I reflected on this, I realized that the learning inventory was completed at home before the first meeting of the study circle, so some of the participants were not yet familiar with the whole technique of keeping a learning journal and my request to note the results and their comments on these results in their journals may not have been explicit enough. The short 6-week timespan made it difficult to check that participants were comfortable with the journal writing. If I had been able to collect all the journals at least once in the middle of the research period, I would have been able to see how the journals were progressing and maybe offer some guidance.

In the case of the sharing sessions, there was a certain amount of discomfort with the audiotaping at the outset. It is not unusual to be reluctant to try new things and Effie confessed how first of all she was not at all keen on the sharing session but then proceeded to find it very interesting to hear what other people had to say about their experiences. Some participants commented that it was interesting to get the feedback

from the other participants about how they had fared with the various vocabulary learning strategies. There was often a lot of agreement about different points, such as the degree of difficulty of the TV and radio news clips we listened to, which encourages learners. As Brookfield (2005) says, "When someone else's words illuminate or confirm a privately realized insight, we feel affirmed and recognized" (p. 5). On the last evening, the "sharing session" was towards the end of the evening which Mary much preferred, as she felt that everyone was much more relaxed, so this might be something to consider for future studies. One challenge that the sharing sessions presented for me as the researcher was that it was real natural conversation that was recorded. This means that people do not always talk in full sentences, but get distracted and interrupt themselves with new ideas or comments. This sometimes made it difficult to make sense of the transcriptions and use quotations from the sharing sessions for my research. Since a lot of what people said in the sharing sessions was repetition of what they wrote in their journals where their comments were very clear, this did not present a major problem.

Silence as a disorienting dilemma.

Mezirow (1990) explains that before experiencing transformative learning, there is often a confusing stage which he terms a "disorienting dilemma" (p. 13). This is where the learner has started to question the basis of their beliefs, but has not yet constructed what he calls a "meaning scheme" (p. 2) to replace the previous one. One issue that arose in my study was whether silence could constitute a "disorienting dilemma".

A discomfort with silence may have been the reason why the sharing sessions were not as long as I had expected. I had predicted that they would last about 15 minutes, but they sometimes lasted even less than 10 minutes. On reflecting why this was the case, I realized that it may have been due to my own discomfort with silence and my reluctance to make the participants feel awkward with a long period of silence. If I had waited a few more minutes before ending the session, would the quieter ones have spoken up more? I believe that this silence could have constituted a "disorienting dilemma" for them. According to this theory, it is necessary to initiate a certain level of discomfort in order to move forward. Kessler (2000) states that an educator does not have to "rescue" learners from silence as an initial awkwardness with silence can be "overcome that is easily overcome with clear guidance from the teacher" (p. 45). Maybe if we had talked about this openly, it would have helped both the students and myself deal with the silence. I was so conscious of the relaxed environment that I was afraid to make the participants feel "pressured" to talk, but my fear may have been counterproductive and may have closed the door on the voices of the quieter students. Kessler (2000) sees cognitive, psychological, physiological and spiritual benefits with periods of silence, and I am also aware that a high value is placed on silence in many cultures (Schweickart, 1996).

I believe the combination of journal writing and sharing sessions was successful in that it enabled me to hear the voices of all the participants. Although I did not get some data that I expected to get (e.g. with regard to the VARK as discussed above), I got a large amount of very valuable data where the participants shared their thoughts, perceptions, and experiences very openly. As Sarah wrote, there was a certain amount of

repetition between the journals and the sharing session, which could also account for the

sharing sessions being shorter than foreseen.

The next step was to reflect on the study circle as a method and since the concepts

of sharing, caring and creating community are missing from much of the developmental

theory (Gilligan, 1979), I wanted to consider these concepts. As discussed earlier in

Chapter 4, caring and connection were of paramount importance for the women in my

study circle, but I wanted to examine if the study circle method had helped develop a

sense of community.

The structure of the circle always fosters an atmosphere of equality, respect and

participation (Kindstrom, 2002) and study circles are collaborative, inclusive, interactive

and democratic (Suda, 2001). Although I, personally, enjoyed working in the circle, I

challenge the idea of the circle "always" fostering equality and participation since some

participants found it intimidating to speak up in the larger group. Initially at least, it was

the interactiveness of the small groups of two or three people that participants commented

on and not the interactiveness of the atmosphere in the circle itself. However, after the

connections had been made in the small groups, the sense of community that developed

in the big group was quite significant, which was evident from participants' comments

about how they would miss the group and each other.

It is significant for educators that the learners who did not speak often during the

sharing session were just as effusive about how much they liked the study circle as were

the more vocal ones. I had also hoped that the study circles would offer catalytic validity in that there could be a lasting effect of the research on the participants (Lather, 1986). In this respect, it was encouraging to read in the learning journals that many of the participants discussed how they intended to use some of the new strategies they had learned or rediscovered in the future. For example, Meredith, when discussing the word association strategy said "I think I will be using this strategy a lot in the future." She also plans to teach this strategy to her young daughter to help prepare her for situations. Even on the day of the last meeting of the study circle, Effie reported that she was really excited about the fact that she had emailed another group member and asked all her questions in French.

Interviews.

For future research, I would probably try to include individual interviews in the research process. There was a certain amount of aversion to the audio-taping and a couple of participants said that they did not enjoy the journal writing process, so a personal interview might have been more productive in this case. Although it surprised me that some participants did not really write much about their experience at all, this also supports the idea of the need to use an additional or alternative data collection method for future research. For this reason, I would have liked to have interviewed the participants personally about the contents of their journals and the sharing sessions in order to get a better understanding of what they wrote, but this was not possible due to what I included in my ethics application.

Had I been able to interview the learners about their journal comments, it is possible that I could have developed the students reflection more by adding premise and/or process questions (Cranton, 2005) such as "What are the consequences of your having no time?" or "How did the views in your family shape this opinion?" In retrospect, I believe I was hesitant about asking those deeper questions during the sharing sessions for fear of destroying the comfort level of the participants with the result that I did not give them the opportunity to dig deeper into themselves for answers. Had the discomfort been sufficient, it may have undone all the careful work I had done to put the participants at ease in the circle though, so I felt it was a double-edged sword.

Implications of the Study

The theory on learning strategies and styles is still in its infancy and must be treated as such (Gass & Selinker, 2001; Oxford, 1990) and should not be considered without attending to the learning environment. According to Skehan (1991), there has also been very little research on the differences between language learners. Specifically related to vocabulary learning, Cohen (1990) has a parallel comment that "experts do not have many definitive theories for the learning of target language vocabulary" (p. 21), and Wenden (1987) refers to the research area of vocabulary acquisition as "neglected." Since there is not much research available on my research topic, I believe it is the first step on the way to filling a significant gap. I was unable to find any studies using the combination of data collection techniques that I have selected and connecting the research in the two large fields of Second Language Learning and Adult Education. I was unable to find any studies relating to the use of study circles as a method of Second Language Learning.

Finally, I contend that my research is noteworthy because of the scrutiny given to the learning environment and the interaction and connection between the learners.

Limitations of the Study

One of the limitations of this study was the time available. It was difficult to find a stretch of time where all the participants could attend all the meetings of the study circle. I decided on a 6-week timespan because it was the greatest number of weeks that at least 80% of the participants could attend all the meeting of the study circle. It would also have been difficult to fit more weeks into my own schedule because of work and family commitments. A second limitation is the small sample size which might not be representative of all women. Furthermore the findings of this study represent the experiences this particular group of women had with French vocabulary learning strategies and may not be similar with another subject.

Future Research

I chose Second Language Learning since it is a topic that interested me greatly, but the research methods used in this study could be applied to any subject area of Adult Education. This particular study was concerned with the effects of the learning environment on SLL, but more research needs to be done on the value of study circles as a source of non-formal and informal education in any and every subject area. In particular, along with other research techniques, which validate the learners' prior experience, the respectful, democratic environment of study circles must be examined as

a way for learners to discover where their interests and strengths lie, or as a forum to validate interests that they may not even have admitted to themselves.

My study discusses language learning in general and vocabulary learning skills, but further studies using study circles are required in order to examine their suitability for researching the other learning skills (speaking, writing, reading, and listening) separately in detail. As this qualitative study could be said to give a case study view of a small sample group of white middle-aged, middle-class women, I recommend that further research should be done on other sample groups such as men only, mixed gender, mixed race, etc. learning in study circles to see if the learning environment plays a similar role in other sample groups too.

It would also be interesting to investigate how the study circle dynamics would be altered with a sample group of people who do not know any of the other participants. Oxford and Young (1997) contend that "research on gender differences and specific strategy frequency and strategy type frequency could offer insights into the similarities and differences between male and female cognitive processes in language acquisition" (p. 67). In connection with this, another fascinating area would be to look at the connection between personality type, profession or job and preference of language learning strategy. More studies of language learning in non-formal settings of any type are definitely required. In SLL, as stated in the literature review section of this study, the research on language learning strategies is in its infancy and, just as I have tried to find a way to bring

SLL to a non-formal and informal learning environment with many positive

repercussions, other research is needed in this direction.

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Appendices

Appendix A

General Objectives

- To use different strategies to help learners remember and recall French vocabulary words
- To use affective and social strategies to put learners at ease and promote a productive learning environment

Week 1:
Objectives:

1) To get feedback on pre-survey questions and feelings/opinions about VARK learner style inventory.
2) To get to know each other and share past experiences of learning French vocabulary.
3) To explain to participants how study circle is designed and purpose of journal writing and sharing sessions, etc. To encourage any other exposure to French during this time, e.g. radio, TV, etc.
4) To introduce strategy # 1.

Activities:

1) Pass out official letters and have them sign letter of consent. Ask them each to choose a pseudonym. Pass out gift bags with pens, blank flashcards and coloured notebooks for journals.
2) Share stories of object you connect to learning in some way with other group members.
3) Sharing session on learning style inventory (to be recorded)
4) Review of basic greetings and useful expressions in French. Practice with partner.
5) Illustrate and discuss use of flash cards (Strategy # 1) to remember new vocabulary. Each chooses 10 words to learn with flash cards during the week.

Week 2:
Objectives:

1) To get feedback on the flash card strategy.
2) To share any feelings, emotions, frustrations about language learning.
3) To introduce strategy # 2.

Activities:

1) Sharing session on flash cards (to be recorded).
2) Have students write down something they are interested in. Show students an example of word association using a theme, e.g. Vacation and working outwards from it, e.g. beach, hot swimsuit, hotel, etc.
3) Ask students to find someone with a similar interest and on Bristol board design a word association chart (Strategy # 2). Make dictionaries available or ask me for unknown words. Copy word associations onto paper, so they can be studied at home. Encourage learners to try others at home.

Week 3:
Objectives:

1) To get feedback on the word association.
2) To share feelings about journal writing process so far.
3) To introduce strategy # 3.

Activities:

1) Sharing session on word association (to be recorded).
2) Read 2 short news articles from the internet. Brainstorm meaning of unknown words from context with partner.
3) Listen to clip of prerecorded French news on TV. Take notes and try to decipher main idea with partner. Same for short radio clip. (Strategy # 3 – Learning words in context) Teach vocabulary as required.
4) Discuss how to use this technique during the week.

Week 4:
Objectives:

1) To get feedback on learning words in context.
2) To share any concerns, problems, successes, etc.
3) To introduce strategy # 4.

Activities:

1) Sharing session on learning words in context (to be recorded).
2) Present vocabulary for family in family tree on flip chart and review adjectives for describing physical and personality characteristics of people.
3) Make little rhymes or links with family names and adjectives to aid in memory recall. (Strategy # 4 - Mnemonics).

Week 5:

Objectives:

1) To get feedback on mnemonics.
2) To share wishes for any particular vocabulary areas for following week.
3) To introduce strategy # 5.

Activities:

1) Sharing session on mnemonics (to be recorded).
2) Have participants brainstorm any vocabulary on food, kitchen or cooking in groups. Make this competitive with a time limit.
3) Explain that we will bake Banana Bread in French. Explain process - 3 groups, one to work out ingredients, second to work out order of steps and third to carry out instructions. Place useful question in French around kitchen. NB, learners volunteer for different groups.
4) Follow the recipe instructions and make the dish together with each group interacting with the other groups in French to receive the required information. (Strategy # 5 – Total Physical Response - TPR).

Week 6:

Objectives:

1) To get feedback on TPR strategy.
2) To share general feelings and ideas on learning progress and summarize learning achievements.
3) To have fun and socialize in French.
4) To complete study circle evaluation.

Activities:

1) Sharing session on TPR.
2) Discussion of general satisfaction with learning during the study circle.
3) Potluck supper to wind up study circle. Goal is to speak French during the social and to explain what you brought and how you made it in French.
4) Fun vocabulary activity and memory game* in French.
5) Fill out study circle evaluation

*Memory game: In groups, how many objects can they gather together that they know the names for in French. Hide the objects and in groups under time limit, try to remember as many objects (in French) as possible.

Appendix B

Questions for initial survey – Part 1

Please answer in the shaded areas (which will expand as you write) and click on the box(es) of your choice as required. If you wish to change your selection, simply click on the same box again. (The empty shaded areas do NOT appear on a printout.)

1) For how many months or years have you studied French and in which context?

months/years   Please give details.

☐ elementary school?

☐ high school?

☐ university?

☐ evening classes?

☐ immersion?

☐ other?

2) Have you spent any time in a French speaking country?

☐ No   ☐ Yes

If yes, please give details.

3) How did you learn French vocabulary in the past?

4) If I asked you to memorize 10 new French words, how would you go about doing it? Please explain your method.

5) What kind of learner would you say you are? (You may check more than one.)

☐ visual (prefer to watch first, look at diagrams, read instructions, etc)

☐ auditory (prefer to listen to people)

☐ kinaesthetic (prefer to learn by doing)

☐ analytical (prefer to think things over carefully)

6) Which do you find easier to do in French? (You may select more than one.)

☐ reading

☐ writing

☐ listening

☐ speaking

Please explain why.

7) What are your reasons for participating in this course? (Please check one or more.)

☐ educational ?

☐ social?

☐ recreational?

☐ other?

8) Is it important that you know people in the group before you start this class?

9) Would it have made any difference to you had the group included men as well as women learners? Please explain.

10) Do you generally prefer to learn in groups containing only women?

☐ Yes

☐ No

Please explain.

11) What interested you in joining this French study circle and what are your expectations?

12) What are some of your learning goals?

13) Would it have made any difference to you had the group been more racially diverse? Please explain.

14) Would it have made any difference to you had the group been more culturally diverse? Please explain.

15) Would it have made any difference to you had the group contained various age groups, e.g. children and teenagers? Please explain.

16) Would it have made any difference to you had the teacher been a man? Please explain.

17) Does it matter to you that I, the adult educator, was not born and raised in a French speaking country?

Questions for initial survey – Part 2 (to be completed after finishing the VARK language learning inventory)

1) What is your response to the results of the inventory?

e.g.   How do you feel about the results?
          Was there anything that surprised you about the results?
          Is there anything you disagree with?

2) Have you heard of these learning styles or completed an inventory like this before? Please explain.

3) How do you feel about these kinds of inventories in general?

4) Have you ever thought about HOW you learn before? Please explain.

Appendix C

Questions for weekly feedback which will be the guideline for the journal writing.

1) How would you rate your success with learning the vocabulary this week? Please rate

on a scale of one to five with 1 being very successful and 5 being very unsuccessful.

☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5

2)   My vocabulary learning this week was mostly successful because (check relevant points):

☐ I made time to practice;

☐ I had fewer family responsibilities;

☐ I didn't work overtime;

☐ Other

   My vocabulary learning this week wasn't so successful because (check relevant points):

☐ I was too tired;

☐ I had too many other commitments;

☐ The time got away from me;

☐ Other

3) Did you use any new techniques for reviewing your words this week? Please explain.

4) How did you feel about the class last week? Please check box(es) or explain.

☐ I laughed a lot.

☐ I felt relaxed when I left.

☐ I learned something new.

☐ I felt more comfortable when trying to speak French.

☐ I felt a little awkward.

☐ I felt frustrated.

☐ Other: Please explain.

5) Did you learn anything new about yourself this week? Please explain.

Appendix D

Questions for study circle final evaluation

1) In this study circle, which activity worked best for you and why?

2) Did you find it helpful to reflect on HOW you learn best? If yes, in what way?

3) Has your preferred learning style(s) changed at all?

4) Did you learn anything new about yourself?

5) What did you like best about the study circle in general?

6) What did you like least about the study circle in general?

7) How did you feel about the learning environment?

8) Would you recommend a study circle like this to others? If yes, why?

9) Did you enjoy the process of writing a learning journal? Why or Why not?

10) Did this course fulfill your expectations or do you have any suggestions for improvement?

Appendix E

VARK

visual aural read/write kinesthetic

The VARK Questionnnaire (Version 7.0)

How Do I Learn Best?

Choose the answer which best explains your preference and circle the letter(s) next to it.
Please circle more than one if a single answer does not match your perception.
Leave blank any question that does not apply.

1. You are helping someone who wants to go to your airport, town centre or railway station. You would:
    a. go with her.
    b. tell her the directions.
    c. write down the directions (without a map).
    d. draw, or give her a map.

2. You are not sure whether a word should be spelled `dependent' or `dependant'. You would:
    a. see the words in your mind and choose by the way they look.
    b. think about how each word sounds and choose one.
    c. find it in a dictionary.
    d. write both words on paper and choose one.

3. You are planning a holiday for a group. You want some feedback from them about the plan. You would:
    a. describe some of the highlights.
    b. use a map or website to show them the places.
    c. give them a copy of the printed itinerary.
    d. phone, text or email them.

4. You are going to cook something as a special treat for your family. You would:
    a. cook something you know without the need for instructions.
    b. ask friends for suggestions.
    c. look through the cookbook for ideas from the pictures.
    d. use a cookbook where you know there is a good recipe.

5. A group of tourists want to learn about the parks or wildlife reserves in your area. You would:
    a. talk about, or arrange a talk for them about parks or wildlife reserves.
    b. show them internet pictures, photographs or picture books.
    c. take them to a park or wildlife reserve and walk with them.
    d. give them a book or pamphlets about the parks or wildlife reserves.

6. You are about to purchase a digital camera or mobile phone. Other than price, what would most influence your decision?
    a. Trying or testing it.
    b. Reading the details about its features.
    c. It is a modern design and looks good.
    d. The salesperson telling me about its features.

7. Remember a time when you learned how to do something new. Try to avoid choosing a physical skill, eg. riding a bike. You learned best by:
    a. watching a demonstration.
    b. listening to somebody explaining it and asking questions.
    c. diagrams and charts - visual clues.
    d. written instructions – e.g. a manual or textbook.

8. You have a problem with your knee. You would prefer that the doctor:
    a. gave you a web address or something to read about it.
    b. used a plastic model of a knee to show what was wrong.
    c. described what was wrong.
    d. showed you a diagram of what was wrong.

9. You want to learn a new program, skill or game on a computer. You would:
    a. read the written instructions that came with the program.
    b. talk with people who know about the program.
    c. use the controls or keyboard.
    d. follow the diagrams in the book that came with it.

10. I like websites that have:
    a. things I can click on, shift or try.
    b. interesting design and visual features.
    c. interesting written descriptions, lists and explanations.
    d. audio channels where I can hear music, radio programs or interviews.

11. Other than price, what would most influence your decision to buy a new non-fiction book?
    a. The way it looks is appealing.
    b. Quickly reading parts of it.
    c. A friend talks about it and recommends it.
    d. It has real-life stories, experiences and examples.

12. You are using a book, CD or website to learn how to take photos with your new digital camera. You would like to have:
    a. a chance to ask questions and talk about the camera and its features.
    b. clear written instructions with lists and bullet points about what to do.
    c. diagrams showing the camera and what each part does.
    d. many examples of good and poor photos and how to improve them.

13. Do you prefer a teacher or a presenter who uses:
    a. demonstrations, models or practical sessions.
    b. question and answer, talk, group discussion, or guest speakers.
    c. handouts, books, or readings.
    d. diagrams, charts or graphs.

14. You have finished a competition or test and would like some feedback. You would like to have feedback:
    a. using examples from what you have done.
    b. using a written description of your results.
    c. from somebody who talks it through with you.
    d. using graphs showing what you had achieved.

15. You are going to choose food at a restaurant or cafe. You would:
    a. choose something that you have had there before.
    b. listen to the waiter or ask friends to recommend choices.
    c. choose from the descriptions in the menu.
    d. look at what others are eating or look at pictures of each dish.

16. You have to make an important speech at a conference or special occasion. You would:
    a. make diagrams or get graphs to help explain things.
    b. write a few key words and practice saying your speech over and over.
    c. write out your speech and learn from reading it over several times.
    d. gather many examples and stories to make the talk real and practical.

VARK
visual aural read/write kinesthetic

The VARK Questionnaire Scoring Chart

Use the following scoring chart to find the VARK category that each of your answers corresponds to. Circle the letters that correspond to your answers

e.g. If you answered b and c for question 3, circle V and R in the question 3 row.

Question	a category	b category	c category	d category
3	K	(V)	(R)	A

Scoring Chart

Question	a category	b category	c category	d category
1	K	A	R	V
2	V	A	R	K
3	K	V	R	A
4	K	A	V	R
5	A	V	K	R
6	K	R	V	A
7	K	A	V	R
8	R	K	A	V
9	R	A	K	V
10	K	V	R	A
11	V	R	A	K
12	A	R	V	K
13	K	A	R	V
14	K	R	A	V
15	K	A	R	V
16	V	A	R	K

Calculating your scores

Count the number of each of the VARK letters you have circled to get your score for each VARK category.

Total number of **V**s circled =

Total number of **A**s circled =

Total number of **R**s circled =

Total number of **K**s circled =

Calculating your preferences

Use the online VARK spreadsheet (available from the www.vark-learn.com web site) to work out your VARK learning preferences.

-----Original Message-----
From: Neil Fleming [mailto: ███████████████]
Sent: Tuesday, 27, February, 2007 21:02 PM
To: ████████████████   █████████████
Subject: VARK and Copyright

Dear Barbara

You have a long memory to go back to Dalhousie. I am impressed you remembered.
Some time ago a French Canadian woman used VARK for some work as
a language teacher. i am not sure whether she is at this same address. She was studying
at McGill. She was "Sophie Bourgeois" at ████████████████████

You are welcome to use the VARK materials from a link online, or in paper format, for
your study circle, providing suitable acknowledgement is made. This is what we prefer:

© Copyright Version 7.0 (2006) held by Neil D. Fleming, Christchurch, New Zealand
and Charles C. Bonwell, Green Mountain Falls, Colorado 80819 U.S.A.

We are pleased to announce that we have completed a five-year review of the VARK
questionnaire and the new VARK 7.0 version is now online.

You may not provide an open-access Internet site with VARK copyright materials on it,
or place the questionnaire on your intranet without contacting us. If you want to use it,
the site must be password protected.

You may be interested in our new VARK Subscription service. We capture the VARK
scores for your students, work team, colleagues, your class or your classes. These VARK
results are available to you and you will have your own password for access. The
Subscription Service is demonstrated on our website in a working example that you or
your IT team can trial. There is also sophisticated and specialised VARK software that
allows you to capture and use the data from your own students on your own intranet.

Personal profiles and team profiles are proving very popular. After completion of the
questionnaire online, you can request a VARK Personal Learning Profile. Within 2-3
days you will receive several pages of personalised advice about the learning strategies
that would be most helpful to you. A follow-up email discussion about your learning is
also available.

You may find the two VARK books helpful for your work. There is also a book that
teachers and trainers are finding very useful for encouraging active learning and for
widening their repertoire of presentation strategies. It is titled - ***55 Strategies for
Teaching*** and has 55 one-page practical ideas.

VARK principles can be applied equally well to coaching athletes and sports players so there is a new book that details how to do this, titled *Sports Coaching and Learning.* All books are available from our secure website at **www.vark-learn.com**.

Bona fide trainers should consider using the VARK Trainers' Resource Kit and purchasing an inexpensive VARK Lifetime Licence to use the copyrighted VARK materials with a once-only fee. We have a VARK PowerPoint presentation available and a Software VARK Scoring sheet for large numbers of respondents.

To purchase any of these resources (above) you can use a personal check/cheque, an institutional Purchase Order or buy from our secure website with a credit card.

Best wishes for your work.

Neil

Neil Fleming

Designer of the VARK Questionnaire

50 Idris Road, Christchurch 8052

New Zealand

phone:

fax:

Appendix F

Original on Mount Saint Vincent University letterhead

Informed Consent Form

I understand that Barbara Schneider, a graduate student of Mount St.Vincent University is conducting research for her Masters of Arts in Education in Adult Education. She has asked me to participate in a 6-week French study circle.

I understand that the research study will examine how we, a group of adult women learners, can develop our learning potential in second language learning in a study circle. The researcher is interested in our reflections on our experiences learning to speak French as a Second Language in this study circle. The research study will further consider how the learning environment and language learning strategies can affect us in our ability and willingness to learn to speak French as a Second Language.

General research question:
What are the research participants' perceptions and attitudes about a specialized 6- week French language learning study circle?

Sub-questions:
Do the participants feel that this particular study circle learning approach contributes to their ability and willingness to speak French as a second language? If so, what aspects in particular contributed to their ability and willingness to speak French as a second language?

Do the participants feel the study circle is beneficial to them even if they feel they did not increase their proficiency in French significantly? If so, what aspects in particular contribute to this feeling?

I understand that the research group will consist of a group of women who will attend a free study circle in French. I understand I will not be paid and that I do not have to speak French fluently. I understand that the study circle offers educational, social and recreational benefits. <u>My only commitment will be to agree to attend five to six free one and a half hour study circle meetings if at all possible and to keep a "learning journal" which will consist of my written reflections on my experiences in this study circle.</u> Each week I will be asked to try out a different strategy to learn French vocabulary and then to note in my learning journal my thoughts, feelings and ideas about the learning strategies.

<u>I understand that at the beginning of each meeting of the study circle, there will be a 'sharing session' where I will be invited to share, if I am comfortable doing so, some of the entries I made in my journal or other thoughts, ideas, experiences and feelings. The sharing session will last about 20 minutes and will be audiotaped</u>. I may comment on my learning at any time during the study circle, but only the sharing session will be audiotaped. I understand that should I become very upset while sharing personal thoughts and past experiences, Barbara will refer me to PONO Consultants at 434 6695 for coaching or counselling.

I understand that the purpose of both the journal writing and the sharing sessions is to provide retrospective feedback about the strategies and to keep the lines of communication open between Barbara (the facilitator/reseacher) and me (the participant) and among participants. I understand that the sharing session and the journal writing will be done in English, otherwise during the study circle I will use as much French as possible.

With my permission my journal entries and comments in the sharing sessions will be used to inform the research, which means that Barbara will collect the journals at the end of the study circle. She will be looking for regularities and patterns in our journal account of our experiences, but may want to paraphrase some sections or use short direct quotations. I realize that she will keep my journal for a period of no longer than 6 months and then return it to me.

I understand that at any time I will be able to view the transcripts of the sharing session, if there is any particular comment I am concerned about. I will be asked to choose a pseudonym for the purposes of assuring confidentiality in reporting the research. I understand that these pseudonyms will be used in the thesis and in any future papers about this research. Any information that would allow others to easily identify me will also be omitted when I am referred to in any reporting of this study.

I understand that Barbara will keep a master list of the names of the participants and the pseudonyms in a safe in her home along with the audiotape recordings, transcripts, journals, questionnaires and notes. I will keep my inventory, as she is more concerned with my feelings about the inventory results than with the results themselves. Should I choose to give her the inventory, it will be kept with the other papers. Everything except the journals will be kept in the safe for a period of five years. After five years Barbara will destroy all the documents and the audiotapes.

<u>I understand that this is a group project and that it is very important to respect the confidentiality of others.</u> <u>I am aware that I must respect the comments and opinions of others even if I do not agree with them. I may discuss any of my own comments or behaviour outside the study circle, but I may not refer to any other participants by name and discuss their comments or behaviour in the group outside the study circle. I understand that any disrespectful behaviour or a breach of confidentiality could be harmful to other participants.</u>

Furthermore, I, as a participant in the study, have the right to decline to participate and/or withdraw my contributions from the project at any time. I am aware that if I decline to participate in the research, I would not be able to continue attending the study circle meetings. If there are any concerns, complaints or questions about this study, I can contact either Barbara, as the principal researcher, at home by phone at ██████ or by email at ████████████████ or Dr. Susan Brigham, thesis supervisor, by phone at MSVU at 457 6733 or by email at susan.brigham@msvu.ca. I understand the thesis will be available at the MSVU library on completion and may even be published in an academic educational journal later.

If I have questions about how this study is being conducted and wish to speak with someone who is not directly involved in the study, I may contact the Chair of the University Research Ethics Board (UREB) c/o MSVU Research and International Office, at 457-6350 or via e-mail at research@msvu.ca.

Under the terms and conditions stated in the letter of information, I
_____, agree to so participate.

Signature: _____ Date: _____

As the principal researcher I, Barbara Schneider, agree to respect the decisions of the participant named above about withdrawal from the project and with regard to the use or non-use of all information disclosed in the sharing session including any information not audio-taped or transcribed. I agree, to the best of my knowledge and ability, not to mis-represent the participants in any way.

Signature _____ Date _____
        Barbara Schneider, graduate student researcher

Once signed, a copy of this consent form will be provided to you.

Appendix G

Original on Mount Saint Vincent University letterhead

March 5, 2007

Dear Participant,

My name is Barbara Schneider and I am a graduate student of Mount St. Vincent University. I am conducting research for my Masters of Arts in Education in Adult Education. My research study will examine how a group of adult women learners can develop their learning potential in second language learning in a study circle. I am interested in the participants' reflections on their experiences learning to speak French as a Second Language in this study circle. My study will consider how the learning environment and language learning strategies affect the learners' ability and willingness to speak French. Here are my specific research questions:

General research question:
What are the research participants' perceptions and attitudes about a specialized 6- week French language learning study circle?

Sub-questions:
Do the participants feel that this particular study circle learning approach contributes to their ability and willingness to speak French as a second language? If so, what aspects in particular contributed to their ability and willingness to speak French as a second language?

Do the participants feel the study circle is beneficial to them even if they feel they did not increase their proficiency in French significantly? If so, what aspects in particular contribute to this feeling?

I herewith invite you to participate in this study which offers educational, social and recreational benefits. You will learn not only some French vocabulary, but also possibly some new things about yourself as you reflect on your previous and present learning experiences with the French language. This is also an opportunity to hear about the experiences of others, share your own reflections and work together in a group to learn new French vocabulary.

You do not have to be a fluent French speaker, but should have had at least some French instruction in high school. Your commitment will be to attend five or six free one and a half hour study circle meetings if at all possible and to keep a "learning journal", which

will consist of your written reflections on your experiences in this study circle. Each week you will be asked to try out a different strategy to learn French vocabulary and then to note in your learning journal your experience with and thoughts, feelings and ideas about the learning strategies.

At the beginning of each meeting of the study circle, there will be a 'sharing session' where you will be invited to share, if you are comfortable doing so, some of the entries you made in your journal or other thoughts, ideas, experiences and feelings. The sharing session will last about 20 minutes and will be audiotaped. You may, of course, comment on your learning at any time during the study circle, but only the sharing session will be audiotaped. Should you become very upset while sharing personal thoughts and past experiences, I will refer you to PONO Consultants at 434 6695 for coaching or counselling.The purpose of both the journal writing and the sharing sessions is to provide retrospective feedback about the strategies and to keep the lines of communication open between you (the participant) and me (the facilitator/reseacher) and among participants. The sharing session and the journal writing will be done in English, otherwise during the study circle we will use as much French as possible.

With your permission your journal entries and comments in the sharing sessions will be used to inform my research, which means that I will collect the journals at the end of the study circle. I will be looking for regularities and patterns in your journal account of your experiences, but may want to paraphrase some sections or use short direct quotations. I will keep them for a period of no longer than 6 months and then return them to you. (This is to allow me time to complete the research and be able to refer back to the journals.) After I have transcribed the audiotapes, I will give you a copy of the transcripts of the sharing session. You will be asked to choose a "pseudonym" (a fake name) for the purposes of assuring confidentiality in reporting the research. I will use these pseudonyms in my thesis and in any future papers about this research. Any information that would allow others to easily identify you will also be omitted when I refer to you in any reporting of this study. I will keep a master list of the names of the participants and the pseudonyms in a safe in my home along with the audiotape recordings, transcripts, journals, questionnaires and notes. You will keep your inventory, as I am more concerned with your feelings about the inventory results than with the results themselves. Should you choose to give me the inventory, it will be kept with the other papers. Everything except the journals will be kept in the safe for a period of five years. After five years I will destroy all the documents and the audiotapes.

Since this is a group project and we will be aspiring towards an atmosphere of mutual respect, it is very important that all participants respect the confidentiality of others. This means that you will be respectful of the comments and opinions of others even if you do not agree with them. Outside the study circle you will not refer to any other participants by name and discuss their comments or behaviours in the group. Any disrespectful behaviour or a breach of confidentiality could be harmful to other participants.

Furthermore, you, as a participant in the study, have the right to decline to participate and/or withdraw your contributions from the project at any time. However, please be aware that if you decline to participate in the research, you would not be able to continue attending the study circle meetings. If there are any concerns, complaints or questions about this study, you can contact either myself, as the principal researcher, at home by phone at ████████ or by email at ██████████████████ or Dr. Susan Brigham, thesis supervisor, by phone at MSVU at 457 6733 or by email at susan.brigham@msvu.ca.

The thesis will be available at the MSVU library on completion and I may even publish my study in an academic educational journal at a later date. I will also send each participant a summary of my research results by email once the thesis has been submitted and defended.

In order to ensure your consent and to indicate that you understand the terms and conditions of the research project, I would ask you to sign the letter of consent. If you have questions about how this study is being conducted and wish to speak with someone who is not directly involved in the study, you may contact the Chair of the University Research Ethics Board (UREB) c/o MSVU Research and International Office, at 457-6350 or via e-mail at research@msvu.ca.

Thank you very much for taking the time to read this letter and for considering granting consent to participate in my research.

Looking forward to learning with you.

I remain sincerely yours,

Barbara Schneider