Chapter 2

Context

Data for the study were collected in the self access center at the Universidad de las Americas-Puebla (UDLA-P). The university is a prestigious private university in Mexico. The student population is made up of upper to middle class Mexicans. However, forty percent are on scholarship, and foreign exchange students make up 4% of the university population. The university also offers opportunities for Mexican students to study abroad in English speaking countries.

The university introduced the SAC in 1995 to respond to an interest in autonomous learning by some language teachers at the university and a general trend towards self access language learning in Mexico. Initially the SAC had limited space and resources but in the summer of 2000 a proposal was made and accepted by the university to renovate the space and purchase more equipment and resources. During the present study the general philosophy of the SAC was to foster autonomy, have a place for authentic language interaction, and provide counseling in language and autonomy. The SAC offers a variety of resources for students to choose from:

* A small library containing grammar texts, reading texts, composition texts, and
   dictionaries.
* A computer lab where students can access information and language exercises on line.
* A library of listening comprehension cassettes, videos, and CD-roms.
* A variety of magazines and newspapers.
* Video and audio equipment.
* A small conference room.
* Teachers from the university as tutors.
* Front desk staff.

Resources are catalogued by number and organized on lists that students can access manually. Texts in the library, newspapers and magazines, and the computer lab can be directly accessed by the student. Video, audio, and CD rom materials must be signed out at the front desk by a staff member. Upon leaving the SAC students register

the date, their name, course number, and instructor on a computer to provide a database of student attendance. Many instructors also incorporate materials related to their course into the SAC by providing students with a menu that they are either obligated or encouraged to use.

Occasionally controversy has emerged amongst teachers and coordinators over the use and operation of the SAC. A lack of understanding and training in autonomous learning has resulted in some resistance from teachers. The teacher-centered nature of education in Mexico has also contributed to a certain degree of resistance from teachers and students.

Subjects that participated in this study were enrolled in an advanced English course meeting two days a week for 1 hour and 15 minutes. The overall objective of the course is to develop integrated language skills. Students were expected to leave the course with a score of 500 on the TOEFL exam. Each chapter in the course text focuses on a particular topic of interest. Students are required to read, write, synthesize, and analyze information about the topic. Vocabulary is presented in context and grammar is explicitly explained and practiced with exercises in the course text. Subjects were required to spend a minimum of one hour per week in the SAC. The course instructor assigned both obligatory and "free" SAC activities. One week students were required to complete a specific activity assigned by the instructor and hand it in the following week. Students were then free to do an activity of their choice the next week. Students were obligated to answer journal questions about these activities which required them to think about the goal, process, and result of the SAC activity. The course grade was calculated on the basis of a midterm exam (15%), a final exam (25%), and homework/class activities/presentations/quizzes/SAC activities (60%).

The instructor for the course was a bilingual English/Spanish speaker and had a Master's degree in Comparative American Studies with no formal training as a second language teacher. At the time of the study, in total she had been teaching ESL for 8 years

and the course for 1 year. During a pre-experiment interview she revealed that she preferred to concentrate on having students write about and discuss issues and events that could be found in the class text or in resources such as newspapers and magazine articles. It was also apparent from her comments in the interview that she was somewhat resistant to the obligatory nature of the SAC for students in the course.

Subjects

The initial pool of subjects for the study were 52 Mexican native Spanish speaking advanced students of English ranging between the ages of 18 and 22 coming from three intact groups taught by the same instructor. This group was chosen partly because motivation is an important factor in an autonomous context like that of an SAC. Attendance records of students at this level from the previous semester indicated that these groups were most consistent in their SAC participation. Eight students were placed in the course according to their score on the university's English placement exam. Eighteen students were in the course because they had passed the previous level with a score of 9.0 or higher out a possible 10. These students had been placed previously in a lower level because their placement scores were not high enough to enter directly into the advanced level.

Complete data were obtained from 26 of 52 students in the initial pool. Therefore, the data from the remaining 26 subjects were used in the study. To obtain further information on subjects' L2 experience, background, and attitudes towards language learning the subjects filled out a language history questionnaire (Appendix A) prior to their participation in the study. The results for the group as a whole are summarized in the results section to provide a more detailed account of their characteristics.

Instruments

The study utilized several instruments to gather both quantitative and qualitative data to identify and understand students' choices in the SAC. These instruments were: 1) a language history questionnaire; 2) SAC activities; 3) SAC student journals 4) teacher journal; 5) post-experiment interviews with students. All instruments were in English and adapted by the researcher from instruments used by other researchers, or based on the course curriculum. Only during the application of the language history questionnaire were students told their responses would be used in a research. Students were told all other instruments were part of the course curriculum. The following section offers a description of each instrument and how it was developed and administered.

Language History Questionnaire

The language history questionnaire (Appendix A) was administered for three reasons. Firstly, it was necessary to have an idea of the subjects' language history in order to provide a more detailed description of the subjects in the study. Secondly, factors such as how, when, and why a person has learned a second language in the past could possibly have an affect on how they prefer to learn it in the present. Students' attitudes may also be a factor in determining language learning preferences. For this reason the questionnaire also included items that sought to discover subjects' attitudes towards language learning and the SAC environment.

One way to find out what students' preferences are for learning a second language is to ask them. Questionnaires are useful tools to gain insight into what students prefer to do in order to learn the L2. The questionnaire was adapted from Hall (1997) and Fortune (1992). The researcher designed the questionnaire to capture both qualitative and quantitative data. The questionnaire can be divided into two main parts. The first part (questions 1 to 15) seeks to obtain information on the subjects' language learning history. The second part (questions 16 to 22) was designed to gather data on subjects' attitudes

and preferences for language learning. The last question (22) was included to gain some insight into the students' attitude towards learning in the SAC.

In order to obtain a more reliable instrument the questionnaire was piloted with students enrolled at the same level as subjects in the study. The researcher had several instructors who teach the course make changes and suggestions in the language and content of the questions. The final question was a direct result of a suggestion by the course instructor that negative past SAC experiences may have an effect on what students do in the SAC. Once changes in language and content were made the questionnaire was given in class to a small group of eight students enrolled in the same course as the subjects that participated in the study. On the pilot version of the questionnaire students were asked a final question in which they were asked to note anything they found confusing or difficult about the questionnaire. On the basis of responses to the pilot questionnaire and comments made by the course instructors, revisions were made in language, structure, and content.

 SAC Activities

The study utilized a battery of eight activities (Appendices B, C, D, and E) that were integrated into the SAC over a four week period. Each week students were required to choose between two activities that had been placed in the SAC by the researcher. The primary difference between the two activities each week was that one was designed to focus students' attention on the form of the language, while the other was designed to try and get students to focus on the meaning of the language. Recording students' choices between these activities provided quantitative data on their preferences in the SAC. This method was adopted because it may be possible that what students say they prefer to do to learn the L2 may not be what they actually do to learn the L2. Methods such as interviews and questionnaires which ask students what they prefer to do to learn the L2 are limited by this discrepancy between what is said and what is actually done. Thus,

recording students' actual choices in the SAC was adopted in an attempt to address this limitation of the interview and questionnaire methods.

The activities were on adjective clauses. This construct was part of the course curriculum and the exercises were adapted by the researcher from the course textbook. The exercises that focused on the meaning of the language asked students to recognize between identifying and non-identifying adjective clauses. For example, an identifying adjective clause like "Sensors are people *who are practical and notice what is going on around them*" is essential information for the sentence to make sense. However, a non-identifying adjective clause like "Jack and Barbara, *who have been married for years*, are good examples of these types" can be left out and the sentence can still make sense. The exercises that focused on the form of the language asked students to recognize which adjective clauses were correct and incorrect. For example, the sentence "The trees *where are in the park* give the people shade" should have an adjective clause that uses "that" or "which" not "where". To control for potential intervening variables several steps were taken in developing the exercises. They were designed to reduce the possibility that students would make a choice based on a factor other than a focus on form or meaning. Factors that were taken into consideration were time, ease, appearance, topic, content and length**.** These intervening variables were controlled by manipulating the design of the exercises and piloting them on a similar population before using them in the study.

Piloting Of SAC Activities

The exercises were piloted on students enrolled in the same course but from a different group with a different teacher. The course instructor agreed to offer students bonus points in order to motivate them to participate in the piloting. Students were aware that they would be working with the researcher but were not informed of the nature of the research. The researcher scheduled a time to meet in the SAC that was convenient for the students who agreed to participate. Before they completed the exercises they were told

that they would be asked to choose between two activities. To complete the exercises, they were free to choose other resources in the SAC. Once students had examined the two exercises together and made their choice for meaning or form, they returned the exercise that they did not choose. The researcher then recorded the time they began on their chosen exercise. When they had finished the exercise the researcher recorded their finishing time. The student was then asked to complete the exercise that they had not chosen and their start and finish time was once again recorded. This helped the researcher to determine if one type of exercise took longer to do or was more difficult. The researcher was able to gain more useful feedback from students by sitting down individually with each of them to ask a set of questions aimed at determining the motive for their choice. This feedback was useful to establish if any intervening variables had motivated their choice and if they were confused by certain aspects of the exercises. The piloting process with students, along with feedback solicited from various instructors teaching the course, helped the researcher to make the activities more valid and reliable instruments.

Student Journals

Journals (Appendix F) were used to obtain data on why students had chosen a particular activity. Nevertheless, it can be difficult to get rich data from subjects if journal questions are not carefully constructed. For this reason, journal questions were also piloted previous to the study. The researcher adapted the journal questions from SAC journal questions already in use by the teacher and students. Using journal questions that students were already familiar with helped to ensure that they would not be too difficult or confusing for them. The journal questions were piloted at the same time as the SAC activities and with the same population. On the basis of student responses to the piloted journal questions, changes were made in wording and structure in order to facilitate more in depth responses from subjects participating in the study.

Interview of Subjects

Journal responses can be problematic if subjects do not respond fully or in enough detail to provide usable data. With this methodological limitation in mind a semi-structured type of interview was adopted. This type of interview was chosen because it allows subjects the freedom to discuss what is important to them yet still allows the researcher to cover important topics for the study (Bell, 1999). It was necessary to have subjects free to explain to the researcher the motives for their choices. At the same time it was important that the researcher ask subjects questions about certain topics that were theoretically significant and trends that arose out of the data gathered from the teacher journal, student journals, and SAC activities. Thus, the researcher constructed a set of interview questions (Appendix G) based on the data gathered in an attempt to explain it more fully.

Teacher Journal

The course instructor was asked to keep a journal throughout the data collection process. It was possible that what occurred in the classroom could have had a profound impact on what students did in the SAC environment. For this reason, it was necessary that the researcher gather data on what was going on in the classroom while students were participating in the study. Teacher journals can be used as a way to monitor what goes on in the classroom. Journal responses from the instructor helped the researcher to speculate if student choices were being made based on the nature of the SAC activities or some other factor in the classroom. Providing specific topics or questions for the journal writer to respond to can help the researcher obtain more robust responses. With this is mind, the researcher developed a set of journal questions for the instructor to respond to (Appendix H).

Procedure

This section describes the steps taken to apply the previously mentioned instruments. Procedures included the application of the instruments, experimental controls, and how the data were collected and analyzed. Subjects in the study were identified by their university student number. When the four-week data collection process was completed, it was determined which subjects had provided complete data. Only those who provided complete data on all instruments were included in the data analysis. This group consisted of a total of 26 subjects out of the 52 originally involved. This was a considerable amount of attrition over a short four week period. There may have been a couple of reasons for this. Firstly, perhaps it is a reflection of a lack of motivation on the subjects' part since some assignments simply were not turned in. Secondly, it is possible the present study utilized too many instruments making it very difficult to obtain complete data from all subjects involved.

Interview of the Instructor

The researcher conducted an interview with the course instructor prior to the data collection process. The purpose of this was to: 1) obtain information on the teacher's professional background and philosophy; 2) be aware of the dynamics of the course prior to the data collection period. Step number two was necessary because data were collected one month after the course had begun. Before interviewing the instructor, verbal consent to use her statements was obtained and a consent form (Appendix I) was later signed. The researcher developed a set of questions organized under general topics. The researcher asked the instructor the questions and recorded her responses on audio cassette. The instructor was free to respond to the questions as she wished.

Language History Questionnaire

Prior to the introduction of the SAC activities, the language history questionnaire was applied. The researcher entered each class and told subjects that the purpose of the questionnaire was to gather information on them so that both researchers and teachers could learn how to help them learn more effectively. Instructions were given in English and clarifications were made in Spanish as necessary. It was also pointed out that their instructor would not have any access to their responses. In this way the language history questionnaire was disassociated from the course and the course instructor. These two factors helped to control subjects from responding to the questionnaire with their grade for the course in mind. The questionnaire provided primarily quantifiable data. These data were analyzed into averages and percentages for the 26 participants.

SAC Activities and Student Journal Questions

Two days following the application of the language history questionnaire the SAC activities and the student journal questions were introduced. The researcher met with the instructor and gave specific written instructions (Appendix J) for the introduction of the exercises and questions in class. The activities were presented in a folder with one form focused and one meaning focused exercise glued inside on opposing sides. Each week students were shown the folder in class and assigned the different set of SAC exercises. Journal questions remained the same throughout the four weeks. In a week's time students were required to turn in to the instructor the exercises they had chosen in the SAC and were assigned the following week's exercises. In the following class the instructor returned the exercises to the student with a check mark for completion, and the answers were briefly discussed as a group. The instructor then collected the exercises and the researcher collected them from the instructor. This procedure was followed because it was necessary that students believed the activities were a part of the curriculum as an extrinsic motivation to participate, and to maintain as natural an environment as possible.

The same folder and exercises that the instructor introduced each week in class were placed in the university's SAC. Instructions were typed on the front of the folder to remind students of the steps necessary to complete the exercise (Appendix K). Subjects answered journal questions on the back of each activity. It was important to ensure that they examined each exercise carefully and chose only one of the exercises. This was controlled by having students request the folder from the SAC staff. Once they had looked at the two exercises in the folder and made their decision, they were required to return the folder and ask SAC staff for one or the other exercise. Since the exercises were very similar in nature this control also avoided them from using one exercise to help them complete the other. To help ensure that subjects completed the exercise in the SAC they were required to turn in their credential before receiving their chosen exercise. The researcher also met with SAC staff informally during the experiment and provided them with specific written instructions (Appendix L) for the management of the activities in the SAC.

After the four-week period of SAC data collection the researcher recorded students' preferences for the form or meaning-focused activities. Their preferences were also recorded weekly. Their overall preference and their preferences from week-to-week were calculated as percentages. Trends in the data made it possible to group subjects into the following categories: 1) chose meaning all four weeks (M4x); 2) chose form three out of the four weeks (F3x); 3) chose meaning three out of the four weeks (M3x); 4) chose form only in the last week (F Last); 5) chose meaning twice and form twice (MIX).

Teacher Journal

The researcher asked the instructor to maintain a journal on each of the three groups. The journal questions were pasted into the journal for her to make reference to when needed. The instructor wrote in the journal immediately after each class and the teacher journal was collected weekly. At the end of the data collection process the researcher analyzed the journal in search of significant trends and factors in the classroom that may have affected students' choices in the SAC.

Interview of Students

The post-interview was performed a week after the SAC data collection process had been completed. Subjects in the M3x category were excluded in the interview because the M4x category demonstrated a clearer tendency. The mixed category was excluded because no preference was apparent. In one of the three classes there was a mixture of M4x, F3x, and F Last subjects. This group of eight students was chosen for the post interview as a sample of the subject population. Two of the eight subjects were M4x, three were F3x, and three were F Last. The researcher pulled these eight students out of the classroom to interview them in a small group. The interview was not recorded so that their responses would not be affected. Rather, notes were taken on their comments. The entire interview was performed in Spanish and subjects were not told it was for the purposes of the present study. They were told that the researcher was assisting the course instructor to learn more about how they use the SAC. They were also assured that their responses would be anonymous. These controls were utilized to help facilitate more complete and honest comments from subjects. Notes from the post interview were immediately summarized by the researcher and analyzed to help shed further light on what motivated subjects' preferences.