Language learning in transition –

The experiences and attitudes of Year 9 language learners in a New Zealand high school

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Abstract

With a new national curriculum, the New Zealand Ministry of Education has created a new learning area – Learning Languages. From 2010 all schools will have to show they are moving towards providing programmes for language learning for all students from Years 7 to 10. In preparation for this, primary and intermediate schools have been increasingly offering diverse programmes of language learning to their students, and high school language teachers have noticed an increase in knowledge and experience from their Year 9 entrants to language classes. This gives rise to the question of how teachers at high schools are able to manage language classes where students have a very diverse range of experiences of learning another language.

This study is a case study from one high school on the phenomenon of language learning, as experienced and explained by nine Year 9 students. The students are asked to explore their current and previous language learning experiences in group interviews, and especially to discuss the issues which they have found in their classes.

The students are from diverse backgrounds, with different experiences of learning another language. Their discussion is honest and wide-ranging as they talk about their experiences, giving reasons for their language choice, and explaining what they like and don't like about their learning. They offer opinions on co-operative

learning, mixed-level classes and the difficulties and benefits of learning another language and they make suggestions about what helps them learn best. A recurring theme in their discussion is one of relationships – family connections which may make a particular language more attractive, teacher-pupil relationships which foster learning, and, more especially, the peer-relationships which support (or occasionally inhibit) learning, and provide social support and a social network of friends. Overwhelmingly, they say they would rather study with their friends in a mixed-level class, than learn in a class which is streamed to their own level. Analysis of data further reveals that identity negotiations, which may not be recognised by the students themselves, play a part in the learning process.

The study concludes with recommendations for practice and pedagogy, based on the students' conversations. The four recommendations are about diversity – exploring the extent of diversity in the classroom, creating an environment which supports diversity, creating programmes which allow diverse students to learn together and creating opportunities for them to learn from each other.

Chapter 1   Introduction

This study explores the nature of Year 9 students' language learning experiences in languages other than English. It presents and discusses the findings from interviews with nine students from a New Zealand high school, asked to talk about their experiences learning another language and to explore these experiences both in their first year at secondary school and prior to their entrance to the high school.

1.1   Study outlined

1.1.1   The context of learning languages in New Zealand

The New Zealand government has, in the release of the *New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education [MOE], 2007), endorsed the importance of learning a second language by creating a new learning area – Learning Languages, and requiring schools to offer a programme of learning languages to students from Years 7 to 10. Previously, the study of a language other than English or Māori has never been part of the compulsory national curriculum in New Zealand. As long ago as 1992, Jeffrey Waite's discussion document, *Aoteareo*, suggested two initiatives which are only now reaching some form of fruition – a national languages' policy, and a second language as "an essential learning area for all students from F1 to F5" (p. 75). A national languages policy is currently being developed by the Human Rights Commission (2007).

This and Waite's second suggestion is the impetus for my research. Until now, most New Zealand pupils have had to wait until high school to learn another language. Now, as more and more schools in the primary sector introduce their pupils to another language, I wonder what effect might this have on language classes in high schools?

The Curriculum Framework document (MOE, 1993) established seven essential learning areas (ELAs), one of which was Language and Languages, Te Kōrero me Ngā Reo. This area included English, Māori, and (in a small paragraph tucked away at the end), "learning another language" (p. 10). The Curriculum Stocktake (MOE, 2002), recommended the splitting of this area into two, to create a new area, Learning Languages. This area became a reality in 2008 (MOE, 2007) and includes the study of Māori in the mainstream (ie. Māori as a second language), New Zealand sign language, and any language other than English, as a language of instruction.

In preparation for the development of Learning Languages as a new learning area, the government has offered incentives and initiatives for language learning in schools. A contestable fund for second language learning was available from 1995 for schools to use for pupils from Years 7 to 10 to develop and implement programmes in languages (Ellis, Loewen, & Hacker, 2005). Initially, the criteria encouraged schools to use the funds to benefit as many pupils as possible. The MOE's website displays the recent changes to the criteria which now encourage

schools to increase the time they spend teaching another language, so that the government's priority can be seen to be moving from quantity to quality of programmes. There are Ministry initiatives to support teacher inservice training in second language learning methodology, through the new Immersion Scholarships for teachers and students of languages, funded by the Ministry and administered by the American Field Service (www.afs.org 2009). A series of language programmes for Japanese, French, Spanish, German, Chinese, Samoan and Māori have been developed for young beginners, and are available free to schools, through the International Languages series from Learning Media (www.minedu.govt.nz). Ellis, Loewen and Hacker (2006) recognise the government commitment to language learning and challenges in the implementation of the policy,

> First, there is a commitment on the part of the Government through the Ministry of Education to promote the teaching and learning of additional languages in New Zealand schools (although this commitment has not yet been translated fully into ensuring the necessary resources). Second, as a result of this commitment, primary and intermediate schools have begun to introduce language programmes in Years 7 and 8. Third, as has proved the case in the United Kingdom, problems have arisen regarding this "early start". These have to do with the quality of the programmes on offer and the lack of linkage between primary/intermediate schools and secondary schools. Fourth, despite the problems, there is an overwhelmingly favourable response among principals, teachers, students and parents to an early start in second language learning (p.18).

The new national curriculum has established Learning Languages as a new learning area and it is clear that the government wishes to support the teaching of other languages to pupils from Years 7 to 10. All schools from 2010 must show that they are working towards offering a programme of learning languages to their Year 7 to 10 students (MOE, 2007).

Some primary and intermediate schools have already accepted this challenge. When the contestable funding was first available, some secondary schools used it to send their language teachers to their contributing schools to allow the younger pupils an opportunity to begin their language learning. I, myself, visited four of my school's contributing primary schools to deliver a programme of French and Japanese, so that the pupils who arrived in our Year 9 intake had already some knowledge of what learning these languages might mean. Now, I am in contact with only one of these schools, to provide support for the teacher who has initiated her own programme. The other schools have already implemented their own languages programmes and offer a variety of languages to their pupils. The implication is that these pupils are now likely to arrive in secondary schools with some experience of learning languages already, and more intense or extended previous encounters with language learning in school. Since each primary school has different staff, different priorities and different resources, the pupils who arrive in a high school will all have different experiences of learning a language. Some will have experienced "taster programmes", where a variety of languages are offered for a short time each. Some will have experienced a sustained, concentrated course in one language only. Some will have learnt languages not on offer at their new high school. While most Year 9 pupils begin their secondary education at Level 4 or 5 of the curriculum in other learning areas, their first experience of learning another language has traditionally occurred on entering a secondary school, so that secondary teachers have commenced their instruction from the very beginnings

of Level 1 of the curriculum for each specific language. The parameters of this instruction used to be recognised by the examination prescriptions for languages, which recommended 300 hours study in preparation for School Certificate. For example, the *School qualifications handbook regulations prescriptions* (New Zealand Qualifications Authority [NZQA], 1995) states for School Certificate Japanese that "schools whose students received instruction for less than three years may be at a disadvantage" (p.230). Since Level One of the current qualifications framework is perceived to be achievable in 3 years study, this does not presume pupils arrive at secondary school with any recognised prior knowledge. Thus, few students enrolled at secondary school with any knowledge of a second language, and there was little pressure on the primary sector to introduce the study of a second language there. Secondary teachers were able to assume their pupils were beginners, and to commence their instruction from Level 1 of the curriculum.

My own experience and anecdotal evidence suggest that teachers, and schools, are not well equipped to support pupils who arrive at secondary school with some knowledge of the language already. Language classes are normally mixed ability (since streaming is often based on knowledge from "core subjects" only), but mixed-level classes at Year 9 have been rare, since all were beginners to language learning. However, since government initiatives have provided resources and professional development for language teaching and learning from Years 7 to 10, Year 9 language classes at secondary schools now contain

pupils with some experience of learning another language. I wonder what difference this might make in language classrooms? I am aware that some of my colleagues are uneasy about teaching the mixed-level classes this is creating. They see this as an issue which they struggle to resolve. I would really like to know the pupils' thoughts – is it an issue for them that others in their language class might have a greater, or lesser, knowledge than they do? Do their previous opportunities and experiences of second language learning impact on their experiences at Year 9? If so, how?

Some of my secondary colleagues fear that increasing numbers of students with prior language learning experiences may mean change to their Year 9 programme. Will a student who has already spent two years learning Spanish in primary school be content to join a Year 9 class where the teacher is delivering a programme at Level 1 of the curriculum? Does it matter? To whom? My research is exploratory, and seeks to find if, and possibly how, the students' experiences of language learning in primary schools affects their secondary learning experiences. I hear my primary colleagues expressing concern that their students may not be able to continue their learning from the level they have already reached. I hear my secondary colleagues worrying that they may have to adapt their teaching to fit multi-level classes. I wanted to find out from the students themselves whether they think there is an issue here. And if there is, how do they describe its nature? Since schools are required to implement the revised curriculum from 2010, it seems timely to explore these changes that are already happening. It is possible that the

students themselves may have some ideas which will assist teachers to manage the transition to a new learning area.

This exploration takes the form of a case study of the language learning experiences of a group of students in a New Zealand high school. This provides a unique context for the study and each student offers a personal and particular view of language learning. The intention is to identify in these unique experiences factors which may inform my practice as a language teacher. The findings may also be applicable to a broader context or to other particular schooling situations.

1.2 Definition of terms

1.2.1 Language learning terminology

It is appropriate here to clarify what I mean by second language learning in New Zealand. Since English or Māori are the languages of instruction in New Zealand, they are the only two languages which are taught as first language, or mother tongue instruction. In kaupapa Māori schools, the method of instruction is usually referred to as "bilingual instruction" or "immersion", since the Māori language is the medium of instruction for other learning areas also. In other schools, however, where Māori is not used as a medium of instruction, Māori is taught as a second language, like French, Japanese, Chinese, or any other of the second language subjects available in schools throughout New Zealand. This is referred to as "second language learning" or "second language acquisition" (SLA), although it may well be a student's third or fourth language. This term

technically means "learning another language either (a) within the culture of that second language…or (b) within one's own native culture where the second language is an accepted *lingua franca* used for education, government, or business within the country" (Brown, 1987, p.136). However, in New Zealand, few languages other than English and Māori are, in fact, used as a *lingua franca* and learning another language in New Zealand could be more accurately described as "foreign language learning", since the language taught is foreign to the context of the learning. This is the term Johnstone (1994) uses to discuss a "language that is generally not widely used within the particular community" (p.1). Bryam (2008) uses the French language as an example to show the difference between "second" and "foreign" language learning. He writes, "In the Anglophone provinces of Canada, French is taught as a Second Language, being one of the two official languages of the country. Across the border in the USA it is a foreign language with no official status but considerable prestige" (p.6).

Ellis (2005) uses the term "Instructed Second Language Acquisition" for his report on "the acquisition of a second language in a classroom context" (p. 1). The context he describes is that in which I am interested – the teaching and learning of a language other than English in a classroom setting. My study focuses on instructed second language learning, not on learning in a naturalistic setting. When I talk about second language learning, therefore, I mean instructed learning of a language other than English in a classroom setting.

1.2.2 Curriculum terminology

The levels of the languages curricula may need some explanation. The New

Zealand curriculum describes the objectives for students throughout their

learning, through levels 1 to 8 (Ministry of Education, 2007). For students who

study a second language throughout their five years of secondary learning,

Level 8 is normally completed in their final year at secondary school, at Year

13. Since language learning has not been considered a necessary part of primary

learning, secondary schools have been used to beginning their Year 9 classes

with no assumption of prior learning at all, and have commenced their

instruction at Level 1 of the curriculum, hoping to cover two levels of the

curriculum in each of the first three years, so that Year 11 pupils are ready for

their first National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA) exam,

which examines up to Level 6 of the language curriculum. Where primary

schools are already beginning to teach a second language, their pupils may have

covered Level 1, perhaps even Level 2, of the curriculum before they begin

Year 9 at secondary school.

1.2.3 Terminology of experience

This is a problematic word, which needs some clarification, since it forms the basis

of my research question. The Collins Cobuild English Language Dictionary

(Sinclair, 1990) defines experience as "all the events, knowledge and feelings that

make up an individual's life or the character of a society", and "something that

happens to you or something that you do that affects you." It involves and includes

both physical action and mental reflection, what was done, and how that felt. As a process, meaning is created over time, and may include social interaction, or be intensely personal and individual. Abbiss (2005) clarifies the term in these words:

> Experience is a nebulous concept. It is a word often used in educational research literature, but rarely defined. Yet it is a concept central to social science research, which is concerned with humans and their relations with themselves and their environments…To experience something is to go through some sort of process, to undergo some sort of transformation. To be experienced is to know or understand something, to make meaning of what one does and observes. That knowledge may be shared with others or be a uniquely personal understanding…A person cannot get inside other people's minds. The best that can be done is to look for clues about people's experiences in their language and/or actions. (p.12)

All Year 9 students have already had considerable experience of language learning since they began learning their first language, and some have also had experience learning a second language. Some may have learned more than two languages. Although these experiences may influence their classroom learning, my interest is mainly in any instructed second language learning the Year 9 students may have had before they came to secondary school – what they have done, and what they think of what they have done. It includes attitudinal perspectives – what did they think about the learning at the time? What do they think about it now? I am interested in their reactions to and feelings about their experiences also, since these may help illuminate these attitudes.

If the term itself is problematic, so is its investigation. I am only able to determine the students' experiences from what they choose to say. There are both social and personal dimensions to experience. Students participate socially and make sense of experience in social contexts, through talk and interactions. Experience is mediated by social constructs such as ethnicity, gender, class. While a whole class may

experience the same teaching, the constructions they place on that experience will all be individual and different. I depend for my research on the students' own interpretation of their experiences, on their ability to put their experiences into words and to articulate and describe as much of their reactions and feelings as they choose.

In my case study, I need to be able to describe the range of these experiences in their richness and diversity. In much educational research, the term "diversity" has been used to refer to a wide range of "difference", especially relating to special need and abilities, race, gender and language. Grossman (1995) uses it to include the range of "ethnic, socioeconomic, and linguistic background; the geographic area in which they live and study; their gender and sexual orientations; and their living conditions" (preface xii). I focus in my research on factors relating to linguistic background, schooling background and factors relating to ethnicity or gender as they emerge from the data.

1.3   Research question

The question I want to investigate is, "What is the nature of the experience of learning a language for Year 9 pupils?" My research question seeks to discover what issues there may be for students beginning their language studies at secondary school, and what implications these may present for their teachers. How do their previous experiences influence their experiences and attitudes in and towards

language learning in Year 9? The research project explores how Year 9 pupils talk about the continuity of their language learning from primary school and asks such questions as, "What previous experiences have these students already had of learning another language?" and "What do they expect and want from their Year 9 language classes?" It explores the diversity of their previous experiences in language learning and asks if the school is addressing their learning needs in the language classes. Are schools coping well with this diversity? What are the students saying?

1.4   Conclusion

These are big questions, yet central to my own practice, with possible implications for practice and pedagogy within SLA. The context of curriculum change in New Zealand presents a new direction for teaching and learning, including the introduction of a new learning area – Learning Languages. The challenges presented by this new area, and the requirement for schools to work towards offering programmes in learning languages to students from Years 7 to 10, raise questions about how these changes will be managed and how teaching and learning will be affected, especially in the transition between primary and secondary school. Having identified what I want to investigate, I begin my research with a study of literature from the body of SLA and educational research available. I discuss relevant aspects of this literature in the following chapter.

Chapter 2   Literature review

This chapter canvases the general literature on second language acquisition and focuses particularly on recent works on instructed language learning in a classroom setting. I am especially interested in studies which present the student voice, or discuss the affective domain and students' attitudes to learning, and on New Zealand studies around the transition of learners from primary to secondary schools. These studies provide a background and a context for my research, and establish the space for this project.

2.1   Relevant research and theory

2.1.1   SLA research

There is a huge body of research related to second language acquisition (SLA) (Krashen, 1981; Brown, 1987; Cook, 1991; Ellis, 2000; Nunan, 1999). Ellis' (2002) comprehensive work, *The study of second language acquisition,* summarizes key research and theories that have been developed in SLA since it was first established as a field of inquiry around the end of the 1960s (Ellis, 2002, p.1). I have used this work as a reference to provide me with an overview of the main work accomplished in the different areas of SLA research.

Many studies on SLA (Vygotsky, 1978; Krashen,1981) have tended to explore linguistic and cognitive aspects of language acquisition, where pupils' previous

experiences have been seen as incremental steps on a continuum towards language acquisition.

I have found Krashen (1981) and his *Input Hypothesis* most useful here, as he posits that learners progress in their language acquisition by understanding language that is just above their level of competence. He refers to this input as "input plus one." For teachers to provide input which is just above the student's level of competence, they must first have some understanding of each student's knowledge of the target language.

Krashen's hypothesis reflects the ideas of Vygotsky (1978). He uses the expression "zone of proximal development" to describe the difference between what a student can do unaided, and what s/he can do with support. Making use of this zone, therefore, requires teachers to be aware of the student's capabilities, and may also demand knowledge of the student's prior experiences in language learning.

Other research on instructed language in a classroom setting has focused on specific methods and approaches, such as task-based or content-based learning (see for example, Ur, 1981; Richards and Rodgers, 2001; Willis, 1996; Snow and Brinton, 1997). The communicative approach to language teaching is the method most used in New Zealand schools, since it is described (and, in fact, prescribed as an expectation of New Zealand language teachers) in the language

curriculum guidelines. This approach has as its aim the ability for the student to communicate – to convey, and to understand messages in the target language. Priority is given to the transfer of meaning, over linguistic accuracy and avoidance of error. Typically, this will involve students learning in pairs or small groups through a variety of games and activities where communication is both the process and the result of the activity. Ellis' summary, however, finds no credible proof that this favoured approach is better than other methods. Research, he claims, is inconclusive (Ellis, 2002, p.571).

The communicative approach has broadened in the last decade to include a cultural element. Whereas earlier approaches had tended to view the cultural aspect of SLA as fairly static, recent approaches have advocated the incorporation of dynamic cultural constructs as an integral part of acquiring another language. This approach, called intercultural communicative language teaching (iCCLT) has become a focus of SLA. See, for example, the works of Bryam (2008) and Liddicoat, Papademetre, Scarino, and Kohler, (2003).

Recent research has also broadened to include sociocultural elements. According to Zuengler and Miller (2006)

> sociocultural perspectives on language and learning view language use in real-world situations as fundamental, not ancillary, to learning. Recent researchers in SLA focus not on language as input, but as a resource for participating in the kinds of activities our everyday lives comprise. Participation in these activities is both the product and the process of learning (p.37).

This socio-cultural paradigm highlights that language learning within the classroom cannot be divorced from the broader social context, where the

individual and shared experiences that students have outside the classroom

potentially influence the meaning they make of what happens in the classroom.

It also reflects the purpose of language learning as it relates to interactions in a

social context, rather than as the acquisition of language knowledge per se.

The need to differentiate learning to reach diverse learners is also the focus of

some SLA research. In his literature review for instructed second language

acquisition, Ellis (2005) suggests that "Instruction needs to take account of

individual differences in learners" (p.41). He suggests that "teachers can cater to

variation in the nature of their students' aptitude by adopting a flexible teaching

approach involving a variety of learning activities" (p.41). He suggests also a

metacognitive approach where teachers might work to "make students more

aware of their own approaches to learning and to develop awareness of

alternative approaches" (p.41). As part of these suggestions, Ellis proffers the

idea of task-based language teaching, where students negotiate meaning

together and learn another language by engaging in activities where "meaning is

primary; there is some sort of relationship to the real world; task-completion has

some priority; and the assessment of task performance is in terms of task

outcome" (p.5). In the same work, Ellis sets as his first principle of SLA that

"Instruction needs to ensure that learners develop both a rich repertoire of

formulaic expressions and a rule-based competence" (Ellis, 2005, p.33),

explaining that, "classroom studies…demonstrate that learners often internalize

rote-learned material as chunks, breaking them down for analysis later on."

2.1.2   Motivation

Motivation to learn has been identified as playing an important role in SLA, and the reasons students give for choosing to study another language form part of my research. When talking about their experiences in SLA, learners' experiences will be coloured by their purposes and attitudes. Gardner has written extensively over the last forty-five years on the role of attitudes and motivation in SLA. (See, for example, Gardner, 1979). He differentiates between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation in language learning, presenting the former as largely affective and the latter as external to the student. Thus, a student who was intrinsically motivated to study another language would typically do so for reasons of "enjoyment", "meeting people", "world peace", "interest" while an extrinsically motivated student would typically choose to study another language for travel or job opportunities. These examples are among the reasons given by students in McLauchlan (2007). In a presentation to the Seminario Sobre Plurilinguismo, Gardner (2006) also differentiated between two types of motivational constructs – language learning motivation and classroom learning motivation. This latter

> refers generally to the educational system in which the student is registered, and specifically to the immediate classroom situation. When considering the educational context, we focus on the expectations of the system, the quality of the program, the interest, enthusiasm, and skills of the teacher, the adequacy of the materials, the curriculum, the class atmosphere, etc. All of these can influence the student's level of motivation in any school subject (p.7).

Since both forms of motivation affect each other, it is important to consider the context of the learning in any study about the learning itself.

In New Zealand, McLauchlan's (2006) longitudinal study on students'

motivations to learn another language explored reasons students give for

choosing to study or continuing to study a second language. His study however

is concerned with why students continue, or do not continue, with their

language learning, and not with their experiences of the learning process.

McLauchlan found that the top four reasons Year 11 students gave for studying

languages were, 1) because they felt a language study was important, 2) because

they were interested in the country(countries) where that language was spoken,

3) for job purposes, or 4) to travel.

Pupils' motivation to learn another language is also part of an evaluation of the

Second Language Learning Funding Pool of 1999 to 2003 (Ellis, Loewen &

Hacker, 2005), which may become a larger study by the same authors on the

relationship between a pupil's primary study of another language and his/her

motivation to continue. In a later article, the same authors identified a

"relationship between prior experience and motivation (which) only becomes

apparent in those students who have had two years of learning a language"

(Ellis, Loewen and Hacker, 2006, p.28). This research, linking motivation and

previous experience of language learning in primary school, suggests that

students who have had two years learning another language may be highly

motivated to continue their study.

Some researchers have considered the role of anxiety as a motivational, or demotivational, force in SLA. Ellis' summary (2002) presents a case for anxiety improving performance in some cases, but suggests that, for the post-beginner, "situational anxiety develops if (the) learner develops negative expectations based on bad learning experiences", with the result that the "learner expects to be nervous and performs poorly" (p.483). He writes that "when anxiety does arise relating to the use of L2 [the second language], it seems to be restricted mainly to speaking and listening, reflecting the learners' apprehensions at having to communicate spontaneously in the L2" (p.480).

The concept of motivation may also include the idea of *investment* as defined by Norton (1997). "The construct of investment conceives of the language learner as having a complex history and multiple desires. An investment in the target language is also an investment in a learner's own identity which changes across time and place" (p.411). Her idea of identity as multiple and contradictory is explored by Morgan (2004) in the following terms: "Identity…can be seen as both the *condition* and the *outcome* of what takes place through pedagogy" (p.162). In the same article, he looks to future research; "regarding identity formation, we might also explore more seriously the degree to which classroom instruction in L2 constitutes different ways of being and knowing in the world" (p.174).

This concept of identity in SLA has received some discussion since Firth and Wagner's article (1997, cited in Block, 2007), calling for a reconceptualization

of SLA theory, to place a greater emphasis on social and contextual orientations of SLA and to include an emic perspective. David Block, in his article on the rise of identity in SLA (2007), summarizes some of the writing since Firth and Wagner's article, and discusses the highly complex nature of identity for the second language learner, saying, "Resulting from the negotiation of difference and its consequent fissures, gaps, and contradictions is a key concept in any discussion of identity, and that concept is *ambivalence.* Ambivalence is the uncertainty of feeling a part and feeling apart" (p.864). This concept of identity in the second language learner places an emphasis on the individual and on the context of learning, both of which are central to my study of experiences of language learners.

Some have also considered the role of gender, as it contributes to control. Paechter (1998) draws on a long tradition of feminist writing to put a powerful case for women as the "other" in education, showing "an important and powerful division between male Subject and female Other" (p.17) in education. She discusses the "gaze" as something which

> serves to police adolescent girls' behaviour…Boys are not subject to this sort of disciplinary gaze and, in fact, do most of the gazing…Again, the object of the gaze is forced to police herself, her behaviour and her dress, in order to avoid being the object of derogatory labelling. That this sort of social control is so prevalent in schools reflects the Otherness of females in wider Western society (p.16).

She adds that "boys' domination of classroom space does not go unchallenged. It has to be continually fought for, with stereotypical models of masculinity and femininity invoked in support of this appropriation of resources; these models

are themselves also contested and resisted by both genders" (p.57). In a later article, (Paechter, 2006), she documents cases where "some high-achieving, middle-class girls are unable fully to appreciate and take pleasure in this achievement because it is seen as just what is expected by their families and schools. In this case, high-attainment, but not its celebration or enjoyment, is part of the local dominant construction of femininity" (p.372). She discusses research by Renold about a group of 10-year old girls who "feared and simultaneously struggled to be accepted as clever, where the tensions between knowing and positioning themselves as a "knower", in a social world that equates 'cleverness' and 'real understanding' with boys and masculinity, was ever present" (Renolds, 2001, cited in Praechter, 2006). This research offers a way of understanding possible gender influences in the ways boys and girls experience language learning.

2.1.3   Transition to high school

New Zealand studies on transition to high school, such as *Growing independence: Competent learners @ 14* (Wylie, Hodgen & Ferral, 2006), have focused more on the similarities and differences of children's experiences as they move from primary to secondary schooling, and specific experiences with language learning are not documented. Writing about the transition from primary to secondary school, and the challenge faced by Year 9 students, Wylie et al. write, "It is a time when work often becomes more challenging, and there is more of it, but it can be taken in most students' stride. There can be some repetition of work, but this does not mean

that overall work is less challenging. Those who express boredom and restlessness are not doing so because of repetition" (p.81). Since some of my students will be repeating some content from previous years in their first year at high school, I am interested in exploring their own ideas on repetition and boredom.

However, an Australian paper (Hill & Ward, 2003) outlined an issue in the transition from primary to secondary language programmes in Melbourne. This paper reported on an "investigation into the experiences of graduates of a primary school partial immersion program as they go on to study the same language in a mainstream secondary school program" (p.19). Through surveys and interviews with the students, their parents and teachers, the study "identified a number of problems with the current arrangements for transition, including the secondary schools' practical commitment to the aims of accelerated learning, continuity of teaching, recognition of prior learning and communication with the primary school" (p. 34). It quotes de Jong (1995), saying "Foreign language teachers act as a badly coordinated relay team where the students are the batons which they pass on to each other, often without knowing exactly where to take them" (cited in Hill & Ward, 2003, p.19). For me, the great gap in this study is the student voice. The pupils are represented through their surveys, but little is said or explored in respect of their own experiences of and attitudes to language learning in secondary school, whereas the parents' disappointment is more widely explored. Although students reported they enjoyed their language learning less at secondary school, they are not reported as criticising the

secondary program for not promoting their language learning in the same ways as their parents had. Nor did the study discuss how they felt about participating in a class where their own level of competence may have been unrecognised. Perhaps, for the students, this was not an issue. However, the scope and nature of the study does not appear to allow this to be explored in depth.

2.1.4   Recent New Zealand research

There are three key pieces of research from within New Zealand that have guided my own thinking about teaching and learning in general. They are Alton-Lee's (2003) best evidence synthesis which presents a summary of best teaching practice for New Zealand schools, Hattie's (1999) meta-analysis of influences on student learning and the *Te Kōtahitanga* report (Bishop, Berryman, Tiakiwai, & Richardson, 2003), which presents the experiences of Year 9 and 10 Māori students in mainstream classrooms. All three of these provide examples and suggestions for teaching and learning within New Zealand. I have referred to them continually in my research, since they discuss key concepts which are potentially useful in my research, and connect with, and are potential components in, students' language learning experiences.

Learning communities

Since my research is based on SLA classes in an instructed setting, all of my participants have belonged to a learning community which is their class. Their

experiences within this community are central to my theme. Alton-Lee (2003) describes "learning community" in these terms:

> "The term 'learning community': (a) describes the kind of classroom where the peer culture has been developed by the teacher to support the learning of each member of the community, and (b) identifies a key change strategy that can help develop such a classroom culture. The notion of building a learning community emphasises not only the role the teacher takes in directly interacting with students, but also the key role the teacher's pedagogical approaches have in shaping peer culture within classrooms" (p.22).

In this context, the Māori word "ako" may be significant. The recent curriculum guidelines for teaching and learning Te Reo Māori in English-medium schools includes this comment:

> Embracing the principle of ako enables teachers to build caring and inclusive learning communities where each person feels that their contribution is valued and that they can participate to their full potential. This is not about people simply getting along socially; it is about building productive relationships, between teacher and students and among students, where everyone is empowered to learn with and from each other (Ministry of Education, 2009, p.28).

It is interesting that Alton-Lee (2003) includes in her concept of a learning community the possibility of discord. She writes,

> While name-calling and abusive behaviour have shown negative relationships to student outcomes, intellectual disagreements and conflict are vital to the learning process. In her review of research, Stein (2001) warns that if social norms and a 'culture of niceness' displace rather than support mathematical norms, such as standards of reason, rules of practice, and valuing of mathematical knowledge, the kind of disagreement necessary to resolve cognitive conflict may be perceived as unfriendly. The research indicates that, when conceptual disagreements cannot be addressed, learning can be at risk (p.25).

Her summary states that learning communities must provide environments that facilitate achievement, where "students are enabled to express and process dissenting views. Disagreements around curriculum are valued and cognitive conflict is seen as a resource central to the learning process" (p.31).

Acknowledgment of prior experience

My research question concerns the experiences of language learners, and thus their experience prior to beginning high school is significant. Alton-Lee (2003) also recognises the acknowledgement of a student's prior experience as an important issue. It is one of the "effective links" she describes as "quality teaching recognises and builds on students' prior experiences and knowledge" (p.32). She writes, "Associative link-making to students' prior experiences and knowledge is fundamental to the learning process and one of the recurrent and strongest findings in research on teaching (p.38).

Scarino and Liddicoat (2009) discuss prior knowledge in these terms, referring to Vygotsky (1978) and the zone of proximal development: "Through the concept of the zone of proximal development, [the sociocultural perspective] highlights that language learning is developmental. The characteristic of 'prior knowledge' is very important. It recognises that new learning is built on prior learning – that is, the ideas and concepts that students bring to learning. Teachers work with these preconceptions in order to facilitate learning" (p.31).

On the same subject, Bishop, Berryman, Powell and Teddy, discussing their data in *Te Kōtahitanga*, *Phase 2*, differentiate between positions of teaching in a continuum from one to four (Bishop et al., 2007). Position one is of "traditional interactions where the teacher is transmitting knowledge", two "is where the teacher becomes a facilitator of learning", and three begins where "further

qualitative change in the learning relationship between teacher and student emerges and feed-forward becomes dominant. The teacher begins to use a range of formative assessment strategies to ascertain students' prior knowledge and to offer directions where the student may extend their learning. Prior learning is referred to explicitly." By position four, "students' prior learning becomes the foundation for new learning in a more systematic way" (p.128). The authors see the recognition of prior learning not only as crucial in developing an ongoing programme for students, but also in facilitating a good relationship between teacher and students. Later, they write of students that "to know that teachers cared enough to make an effort to get to know them and to make their learning more interesting or fun, inspired students to extend themselves… all students agreed when teachers do make an effort to know and understand them, learning becomes easier and they tend to enjoy and be more comfortable in classes with those teachers" (p.116).

Students learning from each other

When learning another language, students are often encouraged to interact with their peers, to give practice in communicating in the new language. This aspect of learning has been documented in *Te Kōtahitanga*, Phase 2, (Bishop, Berryman, Powell & Teddy, 2007), where the writers discuss group work sessions, placing emphasis on the beneficial nature of these experiences. They record, "it was more memorable to learn off their peers, workload was shared amongst the group and asking for explanations of skills and concepts not understood was easier in a small

group. Students also felt that group work sessions gave them more control and input with regard to their learning" (p.4).

This expands on the earlier *Te Kōtahitanga* study (Bishop, Berryman, Tiakiwai & Richardson, 2003), where evidence of the value of co-operative learning strategies is explored. The writers say, "students valued each other's contributions, depended on each other for help and showed a willingness to try harder, even when the going got tough" (p.20). The authors refer to "what Vygotsky (1978) terms the "zone of proximal development. That area being the area of development between what the student can do alone and what they can achieve with assistance" (p.18). Learning in small groups, students are able to deconstruct the new language together, and share their knowledge and experiences to make meaning.

When students work together to learn, both the student who provides the support and the receiver of the support improve their own learning opportunities. This is shown by Alton-Lee (2003) in her study; "helping other students (giving an explanation of an idea, method or solution) was positively related to achievement for the giver of help, although the student receiving the help only benefited when the help included an elaborated explanation rather than an answer" (p.28). She continues, "it shows the potential benefit to high achievers as well as low achievers, when students are effectively trained to participate in co-operative interaction" (p.28). Referring to a wider body of research, she writes that the authors "emphasised the evidence of higher-level cognitive processes, enhanced learning

outcomes and increased interest when peer collaboration is effectively facilitated"
(p.29

2.2   Gaps in the literature

Alton-Lee (2003), Wylie et al. (2006) and Bishop et al. (2003) all have
suggestions to make on the recognition of prior learning. I suspect there may be
a problem in not recognising a language student's prior learning. It seems likely
that a pupil who, having learnt another language for two years at Years 7 and 8,
may become bored in the classroom and abandon further language study if
expected to learn alongside beginners at their slower pace. This may not,
however, be the reality of language learning experiences for students. In the
twenty-first century, students may appreciate the opportunity to show off their
knowledge, to be at the front of the class, to instruct their peers. They may, or
may not want, at Year 9, to be singled out from amongst their peers for
accelerated, or advanced, learning. There may be other issues and responses I
have not yet considered or appreciated, and which have not been explored in the
literature. In all that I have read about second language learning, the gap seems
to be the lack of a student voice. Students are consulted or surveyed (see, for
example McLauchlan, 2007 and Ellis et al. 2005), but their words are often
reduced to numerical data. Their reasons and ideas are often grouped under
"other" in the data, and we do not hear their voice, or have an opportunity to
explore their ideas. I would like to hear what the students themselves have to
say.

A paper presented to a recent Post Primary Teachers' Association (PPTA) conference said that "listening to what students have to say about teaching and learning is part of a growing movement in the UK" (Fielding, 2006, p.6). He goes on to say that "some of the key issues for emancipatory leadership and student voice are about co-construction of new understandings of what it is to be a student and a teacher, which can be a blurring of boundaries and students as teachers – radical collegiality, not just collaboration" and that the things teachers can learn from students go "beyond the reciprocity of technique and topic to learning with and from each other in holistic ways" (p.6). This suggests new ways of thinking about and organising teaching and learning.

2.3   Conclusion

International literature relating to SLA and more general New Zealand literature relating to students' learning and classroom experiences suggests that a range of factors, both cognitive and socio-cultural, interact to affect students learning another language.

In preparation for my study, most of my research and reading was around second language learning. I found a wealth of information about how students learn another language, with suggestions for continuity of learning and the level and amount of input, which seem relevant to my question. I found data about New Zealand students in their transition to high school, which also talked about continuity. I found a case-study of Australian students whose language learning had been problematic in their

transition from primary to high school. However, I did not find any studies which gave students' perspectives on their learning of another language in their first year of high school. Research which included students surveys (Ellis, Loewen, & Hacker, 2005; McLauchlan, 2007 and Wylie, Hodgen & Ferral, 2006) suggest that a learner's experience of learning another language involves a complex interplay of diverse factors, which include, but are not limited to, motivation, student relationships, student and teacher relationships, prior experience and the learning environment. However, in the absence of specific research, I did not know how these factors might inter-relate. And, once I had collected my data, I found in analysing it that, in order to understand what the students were telling me, I needed to consult a wider body of research. I needed a deeper knowledge of New Zealand pedagogy, so that I could determine where my own data confirmed or contradicted current thought. Here the works of Alton-Lee (2003), Bishop et al. (2003) and Hattie (1999) were especially useful in helping me make these comparisons. I draw heavily on these three works in Chapter 6.

To frame my study, I also needed to consult a body of literature relating to my methodological framework, and this literature is presented in the following chapter.

Chapter 3   Methodological framework

This chapter presents the theoretical perspectives that have influenced the research design and outlines the methodology used in my intention to explore the thoughts and opinions of the Year 9 students in my school and to discover what I could about their attitudes to their current language classes. I wanted to begin by finding out what experiences the Year 9 cohort had of learning another language, and to select a small group to interview more closely.

3.1   Theoretical perspective

3.1.1   Social constructivism

Underpinning the exploration of students' experiences is a social constructivist philosophy. There are many kinds of constructivist positions regarding learning, which, "hold certain beliefs in common. These include: (a) Construction of knowledge occurs in the mind, (b) building of human knowledge in general is influenced by the social context, and (c) properties of a thinker are focused on humans as inventors or creators versus the environment as the instructor" (Aulls and Shore, 2008, p.87).

Hendry (1996) presents constructivism in these terms:

> Constructivist philosophy has its main conceptual origins in Kant's monumental work (Kant, 1787/1982) and Piaget's theory of genetic epistemology (e.g. Piaget, 1970)…Lerman (1989) described constructivism as consisting of just two hypotheses: (a)

> knowledge is actively constructed by an individual; and (b) coming to know is an adaptive process which organises an individual's "experiential world" (p.19).

He posits seven principles of constructivism:

1. Knowledge exists in the minds of people only.

2. The meanings or interpretations people give to things depend on their knowledge.

3. Knowledge is constructed from within in interrelation with the world.

4. Knowledge can never be certain.

5. Common knowledge derives from a common brain and body which are part of the same universe.

6. Knowledge is constructed through perception and action.

7. Construction of knowledge requires energy and time.

Hendry emphasises the importance of the social context in constructing knowledge, and acknowledges the role of interaction with others. This view is also reflected in Patton (2001):

> [Social constructivists] view the social world (as opposed to the physical world) as socially, politically, and psychologically constructed, as are human understandings and explanations of the physical world…Constructivists embrace subjectivity as a pathway deeper into understanding the human dimensions of the world in general as well as whatever specific phenomena they are examining…Social constructivists' case studies, findings, and reports are explicitly informed by attention to praxis and reflexivity, that is, understanding how one's own experiences and background affect what one understands and how one acts in the world, including acts of inquiry (p.546).

My research is theoretically positioned in a social constructivist approach, in that it has its foundation in a belief that the social context of the students' experiences is important, that their interpretation of these experiences, and the meanings they have individually or collectively made of them, are significant, and that our

interactions together in the focus-group interviews will generate a new understanding of language learning for me to interpret. Talking about their language learning, the students reconstruct their experiences, and, in interpreting them to me, they create and transform their explanations for me to interpret further. Smith, Taylor and Gollop (2000) write,

> Children are not the passive recipients of an adult's teaching. Skills and information from outside the child are not simply transferred to inside the child, because children take an active inventive role and reconstruct tasks through their own understanding. In the process of acquiring skills and information, children transform them and are therefore creative (p.3).

This dynamic process is also reflected in the interview process, where researcher and students together create a shared understanding to explore the phenomenon of their language learning experiences. In presenting this study, my own interpretations of the students' words make the report necessarily subjective – this subjectivity was also unavoidable in all parts of the design process. As Janesick (2003) writes, "The qualitative researcher…prefers to capture the lived experience of participants in order to understand their meaning perspectives, case by case…Qualitative research design is an act of interpretation from beginning to end" (p.73). Rather than deny or mask the subjectivity in the research process, qualitative research reorganizes and acknowledges subjectivity in the interpretive process.

My study falls within the phenomenological tradition in exploring the experiences, ideas and attitudes of Year 9 second language students. This tradition is, as Abbiss (2005) explains, "epistemologically a reality-constituting

interpretive practice. As an ideology, phenomenology gives priority to lived experience over theoretical knowledge…it is the study of people's experiences of social phenomena and involves the production of in-depth descriptions of those experiences" (p.69). Phenomenological ideology also underpins the sociocultural perspective I wish to give my research, where the focus is on the lived experiences of young language learners.

3.2   Qualitative case study

Because my study is focused on these lived experiences, I see a qualitative framework as being most suitable. Janesick, (2003) writes "The qualitative researcher studies a social setting to understand the meaning of participants' lives in the participants' own terms" (p.51).

Denzin and Lincoln (2003) present qualitative research as a methodology which "might prove evocative, moral, critical, and rooted in local understandings" (p.4). They explain that "qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them" (p. 5). This is where I wish to situate my own research. I am interested in the meanings and interpretations students make of their learning experiences in second language classes. How do they explain these experiences? Given that my question is exploratory, and the focus of inquiry the student voice, I see a qualitative case study as an appropriate framework to investigate my pupils' attitudes and ideas about their language learning.

My research is structured as a case study – the experiences of Year 9 students, in one learning area, from one school. The case study has multiple informants. It is intrinsic, with an instrumental flavour: intrinsic, in that I, as a language teacher, have a personal interest in the subject of the study, and am interested in this case in and of itself; instrumental, in that the study may provide insight into the phenomenon of language learning more generally. Stake (2003) writes of distinguishing between intrinsic and instrumental study in this way:

> I call it *instrumental case study* if a particular case is examined mainly to provide insight into an issue or to redraw a generalization. The case is of secondary interest, it plays a supportive role, and it facilitates our understanding of something else. …Because the researcher simultaneously has several interests, particular and general, there is no line distinguishing intrinsic case study from instrumental; rather a zone of combined purpose separates them (p.137).

This study is within the context of teacher research, relating to and informing my own practice and contributing to my professional development. Within the teacher research paradigm, case studies provide a means of exploring issues or concerns that are of value and interest to teachers and potentially impact on their practice.(See Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993).

3.3   Research Methods

Janesick (2003) writes:

> A good choreographer refuses to be limited to just one approach or one technique from dance history. Likewise, the qualitative researcher refuses to be limited…the qualitative researcher uses various techniques and rigorous and tested procedures in working to capture the nuance and complexity of the social situation under study (p.49).

In my intention to explore students' understandings of their learning experiences, and within the qualitative paradigm, I have chosen multiple methods of data

collection, including a questionnaire, focus-group interviews and researcher journal entries. The data from these three sources form the basis of my analysis, and complement each other. It is my hope that multiple methods will assist trustworthiness and help provide credibility for an interpretive approach into the phenomenology of language learning.

3.3.1 Questionnaire

In order to identify suitable students for participation, I decided initially to survey all Year 9 language students at the school where I teach. This would also establish background and contextual information for the study, and provide an opportunity to highlight factors that could be followed up in the interviews. The questionnaire for this was quite short, and asked students what languages they had already learned, and the context of that learning (see Appendix A). It also gave them an opportunity to volunteer to participate further in the research by being part of the focus groups. This data gave me some idea of the diversity of language learning knowledge amongst the students, and helped identify a range of students whose prior knowledge and experiences would enrich the later focus group discussion. This data provided a feel for the year group, but it was in the focus group interviews that ideas and participating students' experiences were explored in more depth.

The decision to use a questionnaire as a tool in a largely qualitative study may require some explanation. Bogdan & Biklen (1998) argue that questionnaires and

open-ended interviews may complement each other, and add that "Qualitative

data can be used to supplement, validate, explain, illuminate, or reinterpret

quantitative data gathered from the same subjects or site" (p.37). While my main

source of data was the focus group interviews, the questionnaire also served the

triple purpose of describing the language learning experiences of the Year 9

cohort, helping select participants for the interviews, and of guiding the

interviews themselves.

From the responses to the questionnaire, I looked for six students with differing

experiences of language learning. Some had extensive knowledge of more than

one language; others had little time learning another language. One had never

studied a language other than English before high school, and wrote he "wasn't

good" at language learning. I chose two students from each language, and

anticipated that each would select an accompanying friend who studied the same

language. This proved to be the case. When my six choices identified their friend,

I looked for the friends' questionnaires, so that I would better understand their

language learning background also. Since the questionnaires were voluntary, not

every student had identified themselves by name, so I was able to identify only

three friends from the questionnaires. However, two of my six choices had

chosen each other, and another had chosen not to bring a friend, so that there

were only four others anyway. I used the ten questionnaires to direct some of my

questions, asking for clarification on some of their comments. This provided

some continuity for the students, who saw my investigation arising out of the

questionnaire, and were keen to explain their earlier answers.

The responses to the questionnaires also allowed me to refine the questions I

would use during the interviews (see Appendix B). Although I had already

identified the areas I wanted to investigate, the questionnaires were valuable in

helping me phrase the questions for the interviews, since, from the

questionnaires, I knew a little about the previous language learning experiences

of most of my participants. I was able to tailor the questions in each interview to

accommodate these experiences.

3.3.2   Field notes

Bogdan & Biklen (1998) write that, "Qualitative researchers guard against their

own biases by recording field notes that include reflections on their subjectivity"

(p.34). This was my intention when I elected to include field notes in my data. To

this end, I kept a journal to record details, impressions and ideas which the audio

recording was unable to reflect (see Appendix C). Taylor & Bogdan's (1998)

advice on field notes is that

> field notes should include descriptions of people, events, and conversations as
> well as the observer's actions, feelings, and hunches or working hypotheses.
> The sequence and duration of events and conversations are noted as precisely as
> possible. The fabric of the setting is described in detail. In short, the field notes
> represent an attempt to record on paper everything that can possibly be recalled
> about the observation. A good rule to remember is that if it is not written down,
> it never happened (p.67).

I had thought of using a video to record body language especially, but feared that

the video might be intrusive and spontaneous dialogue might be affected. In the

event, I was glad that I had chosen not to use the video. Not only would it have been intrusive in the small classroom I chose, but the time taken in setting up, the need for another person to operate the appliance, and the novelty of being in the spotlight might have been a distraction. I hoped to use the journal to enrich the data provided by the recordings and their transcripts. The journal was not only another source of data, but provided an opportunity for analysis. It recorded my own impressions of interactions, gestures, facial and body language, as well as being a reflexive tool where I recorded my own tentative interpretations and analysis as I reflected on the ideas raised by the students, interactions between students, and issues relating to researcher – participant interaction.

My field notes were brief comments and reflections on the interviews made just before, and as soon after, the interviews as was possible. I had a class immediately following two of the interviews, so that in these cases the notes were not written up until the end of the school day. I had thought that the field notes would be redundant, since I would be able to recall the interviews clearly afterwards, but I am pleased I kept them, since the observations they record provided a clearer context for the interviews, and helped me remember aspects which the sound files and transcripts do not show.

3.3.3   Focus-group interviews

In order to further explore students' experiences and ideas about, and attitudes towards, language learning, I used focus groups as the main source of data (see

Appendix B). In her introduction to her chapter on interviewing children, Gollop

cites this quotation:

> The most obvious advantage of interviewing a child is that the child is the expert
> (the only expert) on his feelings, perceptions, and thoughts. Thus, if knowing the
> child's point of view is important, the interview is unsurpassed as a technique for
> obtaining information. If an adult wants to know what or how the child is
> thinking or feeling, the adult must ask the child. (Hughes, 1988:91, cited in
> Gollop, 2000, p.18)

For students to share their ideas with a teacher is not easy, and I hoped that by

interviewing them in small groups, they would feel secure and safe enough to

speak more freely. Focus group interviews have several other practical

advantages. Wilkinson and Birmingham (2003) advise that:

> If the purpose of your research is to gain an insight to a particular theme or issue,
> focus-group interviews provide a relatively natural, relaxed and secure setting in
> which participants are encouraged to share both positive and negative comments.
> The group setting allows both your own questions and your respondents' answers to
> be clarified and modified over the course of the interview, which in turn can
> enhance the group discussion and assist the chain reaction of participant dialogue.
> From a practical stand-point, focus-group interviews are relatively inexpensive,
> data-rich and versatile (p. 109).

Hess (1968, p.194) summarizes the benefits from the participant interaction

which focus-group interviews encourage as the five 'S's – synergism,

snowballing, stimulation, security and spontaneity. As Rubin and Rubin (1995)

write, "In focus groups, the goal is to let people spark off one another, suggesting

dimensions and nuances of the original problem that any one individual might not

have thought of. Sometimes a totally different understanding of a problem

emerges from the group discussion" (p. 140).

However, there are disadvantages and challenges to this method. It is possible

that one student may dominate the discussion, or that the others may be

intimidated or unwilling to express a contrary opinion. They may be embarrassed to express themselves in a group situation. It may not be easy to keep the conversation focussed and on topic. On balance, however, I considered the advantages of focus group interviews to outweigh the disadvantages as a data source for this research project. Making journal reflections in my field notes was one way to address some of these challenges and to try and make visible circumstances and situations where students were impeded or potentially constrained in the focus-group environment.

The interviews themselves were semi-structured in that I had identified the topics of interest, and prepared some questions to explore these topics, but I intended to follow the participants' lead and discuss the aspects of their language learning which they were prepared to share. I suspected they would wait for my questions, answer them, then wait politely for the next. I did hope, however, that, despite the power imbalance between a teacher and students, some free discussion would be generated. It can be argued that an "unstructured interview" is a misnomer. Collins (1998) introduces his paper on unstructured interviewing with this caveat:

> I will show how even the apparently most `unstructured` interview is structured in a number of sometimes subtle ways. The interviewer, in the very act of initiating the interview necessarily determines the nature of the event: we are to engage in what is called `an interview`- it is an event which most people will understand to consist of particular roles and rules: shaped, that is, by a particular structure. As the interview progresses an internal dynamic develops, a storyline emerges which becomes increasingly complex especially in those cases where further interviews are undertaken. Although `unstructured` interviews are characterised as allowing a greater freedom of expression on the part of the interviewer and interviewee, it will become clear …that even the most `unstructured` interview is actually structured at a number of levels (p.1).

Wanting to leave some freedom to explore the participants' own ideas and experiences, I found that structure was generated by my role in relation to the students, the formality of the interview situation, the school environment, even the time conspired to create structure. We had the fifty minutes of the lunch break, and a clock on the wall above our heads. We all, interviewer and interviewees, had classes to go to thereafter, and we kept checking the time to note the end of the lunch period.

3.4   Participants

My potential participants were all Year 9 students at my school, since all must choose a language to study for the year. There are about one hundred and eighty new entrants each year and they may choose Japanese, French or Māori. There are four teachers who take these classes; I am one of them. I chose, initially, to survey each student, from each class, about their prior experiences in, and attitudes towards, language learning. From this questionnaire, I was able to identify a range of students to interview. At the end of the questionnaire was a space for them to write their name if they wished to participate in further research involving focus-group interviews. One third of the cohort, fifty-three pupils, offered their names, sometimes with comments (for example, "If there is a food reward"). Of the nine who said they had had no language learning experience, only one identified himself. I was very keen to invite him to the interviews, because I though his perspective of learning beside more experienced language learners would be valuable.

Davidson and Tolich (2003) write,

> How we select people to take part in our research also distinguishes qualitative from quantitative research. Qualitative methods do not stress representiveness in selecting a sample…In contrast to the quantitative paradigm…samples on qualitative research are based on theoretical sampling…(where) samples are drawn not according to probability theory (random selection), but from 'essential and typical' units. Random procedures are replaced by the deliberate selection of theoretically important units. The researcher decides on analytical grounds what information to collect next and where to find it. Generalisations from the research, then, are based on typical cases (p.35).

Ideally, I intended to interview a cross-section of students from each language class and from different teachers – about ten to twelve in all. I wanted the students to be able to represent views and opinions from those who have already had some language learning experience, as well as from those for whom language learning is a new experience. I thought it would be better not to use students from my own classes as participants, since there would potentially be some discomfort to them in being interviewed by their classroom teacher. I wished to avoid the complication of interviewing one of my own students about her attitudes and ideas in my class (see section 3.6.4, Power).

If possible, I wanted to identify about six participants with a range of experiences from the questionnaires, and to ask each of them to bring a friend. This would introduce an element of randomness to the selection of participants. In that way I hoped to have a mixed group, not all teacher-selected, studying different languages, some of whom would already have some experience of instructed language learning, and some of whom would not. There was also a social support rationale - by asking half of the group to choose a friend, I hoped that the interviews would seem non-threatening and perhaps even fun for my students, in that each would have the support of a peer.

Before the questionnaire was administered, I explained that participation in the questionnaire was voluntary and anonymous, and further participation depended on their completing the form, so that I could identify further participants and gain informed consent from students and their parents. From the fifty-three survey returns where students had expressed a willingness to participate in further interviews, I chose a girl and a boy from each language, although there were four times as many students studying French than Māori, and twice as many French students as Japanese. In exploring the students' attitudes and experiences of language learning, I wanted representation from each group. From the six selected, I had students who had studied their selected language before (one for two years), and others who had not. I had students with a home language other than English, and a student who had spent some years in Switzerland speaking German. I had a boy who had not enjoyed his previous language learning, and another, the only student who identified himself from the nine who had not learned any other language, who was "bad at languages." None of the students were in my Year 9 class. The student mix provided a gender and language balance, and potentially an exciting variety of experiences.

I reasoned I would have twelve participants in total; however it did not quite work out that way. In choosing a friend, two identified students chose each other. One chose one of my students. I hesitated over this, but hoped that my own student would be confident enough not to be intimidated in an interview by his teacher. From what I had seen of Bill, I felt he would be able to talk freely in an interview. He was also an articulate student, and I was interested in his view-point. One of the boys said he

didn't want a friend, he was comfortable by himself. It seemed to me I needed to respect my students' choices by accepting their decisions. I had, then, ten participants, six chosen by me for the variety of their experiences with learning languages and four friends. Unfortunately, the boy I had selected because he had no experience of learning another language did not turn up to his interview, although his friend did. I asked him if he could come another time. He agreed, but again did not appear. It seemed he had chosen not to come, and I regretted his absence, because I had hoped especially to hear why he had described himself as being "bad at languages." Again, I respected his right to choose to attend, or not to attend, which was consistent with the principle of voluntary participation outlined in the information given to students (see Appendix D).

3.4.1   Environment

I hoped to have no more than four pupils in each focus group, so chose three lunch-times to offer to the participants. They obligingly chose the time which suited them best, and I planned the three interviews accordingly for four girls, two girls and two boys, and three boys. Each interview would take about forty minutes. The lunch-time is fifty-five minutes, and it would take a few minutes for the pupils to arrive from their last class. I had chosen lunchtime (from 12 noon to 1pm) to hold the interviews, because it seemed the best time for the students. Taking them out of class would have been possible, but unusual, and I did not want my participants taken too much out of their comfort zone, or to encounter criticism from their teachers for missing their classes. It seemed unlikely that they would be available before school, and so

many sports, clubs and activities occur after school that this time seemed equally inaccessible. In the event, they all seemed happy to come at lunchtime. I allowed them to choose which interview they would prefer to attend, and they made their choice based on who else was coming then. Two students, who seemed happy to come when I invited them, did not turn up. Offered another opportunity, they agreed to come another time, but did not. I asked their friends to let them know the interviews were finished and they were "safe", and when I saw them next around the school, I smiled and told them we had missed them at the interviews. I especially regretted missing the perspective of the boy who was "bad at languages." It was not possible to replace him with another student who had no prior knowledge of learning another language, because he was the only pupil who had volunteered his name on the questionnaire.

I used the small senior language classroom for the interviews, because it is small enough to be a little more intimate, and they all knew where the language block is. I didn't want the occasion to seem just a teacher chatting – I wanted them to think about their experiences and try seriously to articulate their ideas. I put chips and popcorn out for the first interview, but they were untouched till the end, so choose to give out chocolate bars instead to the other two groups.

I used a simple microphone attached to a laptop computer to record the interviews, and explained the process of recording to each group. They all gave permission, agreed they would say if they wanted the recording stopped, and

nodded when I suggested we start. Mary wanted to try the sound first, and enjoyed playing with a brief recording of her voice ("Oooh, that sounds stink!") before we started. The interviews took about forty minutes each, allowing the students still some part of their lunchtime. That seemed fair.

3.4.2   Permission sheets

Permission for the interviews was readily granted by the principal and my colleagues - the other language teachers. For them, I personally presented the letters (see Appendix E), explained them and waited while they read and signed them. The students, however, required a different approach. I visited each during class, asked permission to take them out of class for ten minutes, and verbally explained my interest and research before I gave them the letter to take home. I explained if they were to agree to be part of the research, I would need the permission slip to be signed before the interviews. Most brought back the slips before the interview times; some brought them back at the interview itself.

3.5   Analysis

3.5.1   Questionnaire

I used an Excel programme to store and sort data from the questionnaires. It was easy from this to sum the quantitative data for each question –how many pupils had studied Japanese? For how long? How many had never studied another language? Cross-tabulation gave me details on the number of Japanese learners who were now learning French, and other such combinations. It generated simple

descriptive statistics that could be presented as totals and proportions. The two final questions, asking students to explain and give reasons for their choices, were, of course, the hardest to collate, because of the extended nature of responses. Most responses, however, were short (for example, in answer to "Why did you choose Māori?", "Because mum said I had to."), and were simply copied into the Excel file. My intention for the questionnaire was mainly to identify students for the focus-group interviews, but I was intrigued by some of the responses and began to formulate questions for the focus group which would explore some answers students had given. Some students showed by their use of exclamation marks (for example, "I hated Moari and Jap (sic)! & was forced to do it!") or language (again, "Because I don't like French people & because I don't like their food") that they had strong reasons for their choices, and while it was beyond the scope of the research to follow up questionnaire respondents outside the selected group, the responses signalled ideas that could be explored through the focus group interviews. The comments relating to decision making about language selection were grouped into broad categories such as "travel", "friends", "liked teacher" for reporting purposes.

3.5.2   Transcripts

Having recorded the interviews digitally, I transcribed the data myself. This helped me review the interviews, and gave me time to reflect on emerging themes. As I wrote the transcripts, questions I had not asked and issues I had not considered emerged, reflecting the dynamic nature of interviews. Collins (1998)

writes, "It is naïve to think that interviews consist entirely (or even largely) of

collecting data rather in the manner of shelling peas. Lives do not consist of data:

they consist of stories and stories are negotiated during social interaction. And the

stories (along with the selves they constitute) continue long after the writing is

finished" (p.11).

A range of tools are available for thematic analysis. The research questions

themselves provided a thematic foundation, and I anticipated that students' answers

would present sub-themes or categories and varied interpretations. These needed to

be sifted out and coded. Bogdan & Biklen's (1982) advice on coding is to

> search through your data for regularities and patterns as well as for topics your data
> cover, and then you write down words and phrases to represent these topics and
> patterns. These words and phrases are coding categories. They are a means of sorting
> the descriptive data you have collected …so that the material bearing on a given topic
> can be physically separated from other data. Some coding categories will come to you
> while you are collecting data. These should be jotted down for future use. Developing a
> list of coding categories after the data have been collected and you are ready to
> mechanically sort them is…a crucial step in data analysis (p.173).

Coffey & Atkinson (1996) also offer suggestions for coding, and on moving from

codes to concepts, since they say that to attach codes is already to identify themes

and concepts for reporting. They describe the steps from coding to interrogating the

data to interpretation. I used a coding system within the transcripts to identify

themes and sub-themes or categories as they occurred. I started with differently

coloured highlighters to code emerging themes on print-outs of the transcripts, but

many themes crossed into each other, so that I had to print multiple copies of the

transcripts to allow for each theme. As this became increasingly messy, I set the

themes up on separate computer pages, and copied and pasted from the transcripts.

This required a different system to identify each participant and transcript page, but was more efficient and addressed the multiple entries from the colour-coding. It also made it easier to organise themes and concepts from the individual pages. Some of the themes were suggested by my questions and I listed them under the headings Background, Choice, Enjoyment, Benefits, Suggestions, others evolved from points the students raised and became Collaboration, Separate classes, Familiarity, Being better/ worse, Frustrations, Co-operation. Later, the codes and headings changed to more refined concepts and discrete bits of data joined others as my ideas emerged.

Identifying themes is, of course, a subjective matter, and, in an attempt at objectivity to recognise themes which were hidden from me, I also tried various ways of word-analysis. A search for common words throughout the interviews revealed little I could use. I was forced to realise that a student's vocabulary is not my own. The search showed the word "like" to be consistently common in all interviews. However, looking more closely, the transcripts showed the use of "like" as a temporiser, (as show in this example: "we did, like, our teacher always did, like, she'd ask things in class – like she'd ask them in French but, like, when we remembered it, like she'd say "Allumez les lumières, s'il vous plait, for lights off and…") not as a verb.

All of the dynamic dialogue we constructed together was tamed, controlled, and sorted into small thematic packages. What remains unsorted are the questions I did

not know to ask, the clarifications I did not ask for, the attitudes I did not question

and could not explore with the students later because the moment had gone and the

opportunity had passed. These unasked and unanswered questions provide

limitations to the analysis and the conclusions that can be drawn from the data.

However, the qualitative methodology and the use of focus group interviews

provided opportunities for exploration of issues that were of significance to the

students and the explanation of students' experience, which would not have been

possible if the study were based on a questionnaire alone. The analysis provides a

detailed, albeit partial representation of students' experiences and attitudes towards

language learning.

3.5.3 Data interpretation

Transcribing the interviews myself was important for me also, in that it helped me

interact with the data in a different way. In an interpretive paradigm, I was looking

at the data as a researcher, interrogating for meaning, positing possible and

alternative interpretations, looking for the meaning that the students intended, while

being critically aware of my own assumptions, interests and biases. Deciding on

conventions to show pauses, interruptions, hesitation, agreement or disagreement

meant that I had to listen not only for the information, but for tone and intonation.

My field notes were useful in filling in some details, but the transcriptions gave me

the opportunity to revisit the interviews, and begin to make judgements on what

they revealed of my participants' experiences and opinions. I was able to begin to

identify themes initially from the questions I asked.

As the themes emerged, copying from the transcripts gave me the impression that the participants were being heard, and their words given weight. I had been able to identify most of their dialogue as belonging to one, and sometimes more, of the themes, and copied it tidily into the themed pages. However, I was increasingly aware of questions which were also emerging at the same time – ideas I had not anticipated, so that I had no questions prepared for my participants to explore. There were concepts the pupils took for granted that were clearly influencing their descriptions and preferences, but which I struggled to identify, and, once identified, to understand.

When I read through the transcripts of the interviews, I am aware how the first has influenced the other two. I did use the same questions in each, but the first interview provoked some ideas which I explored in the other two, so that, in effect, the interviews became a generative dynamic, feeding off previous ones.

3.6   Potential issues

Qualitative research presents a number of issues for researchers.

3.6.1   Bias

Janesick (2003) writes that

> Qualitative researchers accept the fact that research is ideologically driven. There is no value-free or bias-free design. Early on, the qualitative researcher identifies his or her own biases and articulates the ideology or conceptual frame for the study. By identifying one's biases, one can see easily where the questions that guide the study are crafted. The researcher owns up to his or her perspective on the study (p.56).

I am aware that, despite my best efforts at objectivity, this is a subject in which I have a decided interest, and objectivity is not possible. In my analysis, in the interview questions, my journal entries, even in my selection of participants, some bias will inevitably be reflected. My choices of methodology have already been influenced by my own interests. The journal gave me a first opportunity to notice bias, and to support the integrity of my research by highlighting and reflecting on issues relating to subjectivity as they might arise. This bias is inevitable in a qualitative study, and only by remaining aware and honest about my position can my research be made transparent and defensible.

3.6.2   Credibility and validity

The use in qualitative research of words such as "credibility", "validity", "rigor" "reliability" and "generalizability" has received much discussion already (Stake, 2003; Janesick 2003; Patton, 2001; Davidson and Tolich, 2003). I believe, with Janesick (2003) that "validity in qualitative research has to do with description and explanation and whether or not the explanation fits the description. In other words, is the explanation credible? In addition, qualitative researchers do not claim there is only one way of interpreting an event. There is no one "correct" interpretation" (p.69). In qualitative research, the credibility of the research depends very much on the credibility of the researcher. In my introduction to this study, I have stated my own position and outlined my background. I am aware of my own bias in a study which concerns my own practice. I am aware it plays a major part in my interest in the research, in my choice of methodology, of

methods and my research design. It influences the way I have conducted the

interviews, and how I have interpreted my participants' words and actions. It is

constantly present in my writing. Throughout the study, I use the first person in

my writing. I hope the honesty of this awareness serves to create credibility.

Where possible, I use the students' own words extensively, hoping that their

voice, and not mine, will predominate.

Davidson and Tolich (2003) say that

> Qualitative research does not seek to generalise to the whole population but to
> provide a precise (or valid) description of what people said or did in a particular
> research location. Its validity is strengthened by triangulation (Denzin, 1978) of
> findings. In social science, *triangulation* refers to different research methods to
> hone in on an event from two or three different angles. …Essentially, if different
> sources of information are saying the same things, then the social researcher can
> have a greater confidence that the findings are valid (p.34).

In my study, the questionnaires, transcripts of interviews and field notes together

provide data which can be analysed and cross-checked against each other. Patton

(2001) discusses ways of checking for consistency in these terms:

> [one] type of triangulation involves triangulating data sources. This means
> comparing and cross-checking the consistency of information derived at
> different times and by different means within qualitative methods. It means
> - Comparing observations with interviews;
> - Comparing what people say in public with what they say in private;
> - Checking for the consistency of what people say about the same thing over
>   time;
> - Comparing the perspectives of people from different points of view, for
>   example, in an evaluation, triangulating staff views, client views, funder
>   views, and views expressed by people outside the program; and
> - Checking interviews against program documents and other written evidence
>   that can corroborate what interview respondents report (p.559).

I have been able not just to cross-check comments from the participants against

the field notes and questionnaires but against each other. These checks for

consistency contribute to the trustworthiness or credibility of the research and the findings. In qualitative research, similarities as well as differences can be significant and contribute to illuminate various aspects of a phenomenon. Patton writes that "Either consistency in overall patterns of data from different sources or reasonable explanations for differences in data from divergent sources can contribute significantly to the overall credibility of findings" (2001, p.560).

How far this study reflects a national climate is also an issue for generalization. The case study is small involving a Year 9 cohort of language learners from one New Zealand high school, with in-depth interviews of nine students only, and the capacity to generalize beyond the case study is limited.

3.6.3   Insider/outsider status

Conducting research in the context of one's own workplace (school) presents particular challenges relating to the insider/outsider status of the teacher-researcher. As a teacher, I am an insider in the school community. During the interviews themselves, there were moments when I wasn't sure whether to react as a teacher, or as a researcher. I am sure the students never forgot for a moment that I was a teacher. The advantage of being a familiar face at school, had to be weighed against the disadvantage of needing to break through the hierarchical role to allow the students to share their thoughts more fully. So, for example, when Mary, bored with the way the interview was going, began to use a classroom pointer to slap against the desk and poke a fellow interviewee, I took

a moment to work out my reactions. As a teacher, I would have reproached her and removed the pointer. As a researcher, I smiled and continued with my interview. Eventually, Mary gave the pointer up, but by then Justin was properly outraged, and needed careful handling before he was willing to move back to the discussion again.

As an insider, I was also privileged with certain information which would assist me. I knew, for example, how the system of class nomenclature worked, and what it meant that Bill was in the "contextual class", and Mary in the "supported learning class". When the students talked about teachers, I could work out who they meant. For that reason, I avoided pursuing details about their current teachers, asking rather about the students' responses to classroom practice, than for personal responses to their teacher. Although the three other language teachers were aware of my research and had given their permission for me to interview their students, I did not want our comfortable collegial relationship disturbed. In the transcripts, I see little reference to current teachers. It is also possible that the students themselves would have been reluctant to discuss their teachers with another teacher.

Although I refer to myself as an insider, there was some tension in that position. Yes, I was part of the school whanau. The students knew me as a teacher and assumed I would understand their language and their references to school life. However, I was aware my role as researcher took me beyond my insider

position. On at least two counts, I was not an insider: I was not a student, and I

was acting in a researcher's role, not as the teacher they perceived me to be.

Merriam et al. (2001) describe an interesting perspective on "positionalities" for

researchers which includes the following:

> The *indigenous- insider* is one 'who endorses the unique values, perspectives,
> behaviours, beliefs and knowledge of his or her indigenous community' and 'who
> can speak with authority about it'…The *indigenous-outsider*, a second position,
> 'has experienced high levels of cultural assimilation into an outsider or
> oppositional culture' but remains connected with his or her indigenous
> community (p.412).

Although Merriam et al. use the term 'indigenous' to refer to a separate cultural

or ethnic group, I found it useful to help me clarify my own position. The

'indigenous' group became my students. Using these terms, my position was

that of the indigenous-outsider. As indigenous, I was therefore familiar to the

students, and began with that advantage. As an outsider, I would perhaps find it

easier to be objective in my interpretation of the information they gave me. This

dichotomy is explored further in the same article by Merriam et al. (2001):

> It has commonly been assumed that being an insider means easy access, the
> ability to ask more meaningful questions, and read non-verbal cues, and most
> importantly, be able to project a more truthful, authentic understanding of the
> culture under study. On the other hand, insiders have been accused of being
> inherently biased, and too close to the culture to be curious enough to raise
> provocative questions (p.411)

In their conclusion, they argue that, "drawing from contemporary perspectives

on insider/outsider status, that in the course of the study, not only will the

researcher experience moments of being both insider and outsider, but that these

positions are relative to the cultural values and norms of both the researcher and

the participants" (p.416). There were moments in the interviews when I felt

close to my participants, united as we were in our exploration of their experiences of language learning, and moments when I felt utterly estranged, an adult struggling to comprehend a child's reality.

Comfortable with my insider/teacher role, I had to step outside that to become a researcher, and, by that process, an outsider. I needed to get permission for my research from my principal, my colleagues, the Year 9 cohort, my selected participants and their parents. This necessitated being seen in a different role by these people, and I felt uncomfortable about this. For the students themselves it seemed less of an issue. Although I taught only one of them, they were prepared to see me principally as a teacher, and were surprised at the level of permission required. My colleagues did not seem very interested in my research, and allowed me to conduct the surveys without comment. They received the collated results of their students' prior experience with some interest, but asked no questions about the interviews or my findings. I was grateful for their forbearance, not wanting to risk our ongoing collegial relationship for a temporary academic researcher role.

The students seemed to accept me as an insider. They assumed I knew their current teachers, and explained their earlier teachers to me. They seemed to accept my authority as the one who asked the questions in the interviews, decided when to move on, thanked them for their participation, although it is possible they would have responded in the same way to any adult researcher. I did have the impression that they were willing to explore and explain their language learning experiences

because they accepted me as partisan. I was part of the school whanau, and they accepted this.

However, as a researcher I was obliged to step outside my teaching role. Where, as a teacher, I would have led and orchestrated discussion, directed questions, required answers, controlled timing and turn-taking and reprimanded exuberance or disagreement, as a researcher I suggested, waited, rephrased, cajoled and accepted. It was a move from active to passive, from control to collaboration, from presenter to receiver. When I read the transcripts, I see how that transition was made – I play a more active and commanding role in the first interview than in the third, where I have learnt to let the students speak, to wait and allow them to explore a question together, and to decide themselves whose turn it is, who wants to respond, and who has something to say.

3.6.4   Power

Power is an issue. The power and influence a teacher wields may be intimidating to some parents or students. Even for the students who do not know me, it was not possible to conduct the interviews except as a teacher. I hoped that interviewing in small groups would help the pupils feel more comfortable, but it was impossible to avoid the power imbalance that goes with the hierarchical structure. The interviews were necessarily held at school, and the only possible venue was a formal classroom. This too must have reminded the pupils of their position. Taking the students out of class for the interviews was

not practicable, so I had to interview them either after school or in the lunchtime. Both of these required considerable goodwill on their part. I hoped to manage this by using a language classroom which is familiar to the students, and providing snacks to compensate for their lost lunch-time. With a small group, I managed the recording by using a small digital microphone on the central table, but I made it clear that the recording could stop at any time, either at the request of the pupils, or if I noticed any discomfort or concern from individuals. There did not seem to be any discomfort. All of the students were volunteers, and, although each interview begins slowly with signs of shyness from most participants, it seemed in each case that, by the end, the participants were relaxed, and confident enough to share their ideas honestly, to agree or disagree with me or with each other, and to take an active part in the discussion. Never-the-less, they clearly deferred to my teaching role, allowing me to choose the topics for discussion and waiting in silence for me to move on, and chose language which was suitable for talking with a teacher.

3.6.5   Anonymity and confidentiality

This proposal is subject to approval by the ethics committee of the University Of Canterbury, College Of Education. Consent was required from my principal, and my participants. My colleagues at school, also involved in second language teaching, were also informed and their co-operation requested, since members of their classes would be my participants (see Appendix E). They were given an assurance that their own names and practice would not be identified. (However,

they were aware that the study must inevitably carry my name, and that, in the

small community that is the reality for language teachers, they would be

identifiable as my colleagues, as my school would be identifiable by those who

know where I teach.)

The questionnaires were all voluntary. They were completed anonymously by

most pupils, and those who were prepared to identify themselves to be part of the

focus group interviews were given an assurance of confidentiality, before the

questionnaire was administered. I explained to each class that by consenting to

participate, and to complete the questionnaire, they gave me permission to use the

information the questionnaires might provide. Participation in the focus groups

required informed consent from both the students and their parents. Obviously, I

was looking for willing volunteers, and either the student or his/her guardians had

the opportunity to decline to participate in my study, or could withdraw at any

time during the study. Since these interviews were to be recorded, the students

were given the assurance that they would not subsequently be individually

identified in my reporting, and that they had the right to withdraw at any time.

The students would be anonymous within the study, their identity protected with

pseudonyms, but they were known to each other, since they had an opportunity to

see the list of names when they chose their interview time, and identified who

would be there. Each focus group was briefed on issues of respect, confidentiality

and safety, and requested to respect the privacy of others in the group by not

talking about the interview outside of the group.

Anonymity is not completely possible, given the nature of my position and the small population of New Zealand. However, it is maintained as far as possible by ensuring that the school is not identified by name in my study, and students' and my colleagues' names on the transcripts have been changed. Confidentiality is maintained through goodwill within the focus groups and, outside the focus groups, through the secure treatment and storage of data.

3.6.6 Concluding the process

Negotiating access can be difficult for an insider. Although I already had access, I am comfortable in my teaching role, and there was an element of distress in stepping out of it to become a researcher. So getting in" was not an issue. I was already "in". But "getting out" after the interviews was more difficult. There is no "out" for the insider. The interview process would irrevocably change the teacher/pupil relationship I had previously with the students. Since most of the participants of the focus groups were not from my own classes, I hoped the change in dynamics would be minimal and constructive, and the selection and ethical procedures put in place were designed to achieve this. For the one student whom I did teach, there seemed to be little post-interview effect. I did not notice any difference to his attitude in the classroom. From the others, they now greet me around the school, smile, seem comfortable to have helped me in my research. I recently greeted one by the name I had used for her in my transcript, and she corrected me with some sharpness. Justifiably so. I appreciate their insights and would not seem ungrateful. As for my colleagues,

they were interested in the results of the questionnaires because their own students were all represented there, but less so in the findings from the interviews.

3.7   Conclusion

My research is structured as a case-study, within a qualitative framework. Social constructivist theory underpins the phenomenological and interpretive approach, where interviews with my participants about their experiences learning another language form the bulk of my data. Although the description of the process is reported as a series of steps, it was not a linear process. As the questionnaires influenced the questions I asked in the interviews, so each interview moderated the process for the following interviews. Between each step, I went back to the literature as issues or questions arose. In the same way, the analysis process threw up issues and questions which required further reading and research, so that the whole process became a series of zig-zags around a central, ever-growing spiral. The next chapter introduces the findings from my first data collection – the questionnaire.

Chapter 4 Findings from the questionnaire

Although the initial questionnaire would provide some quantitative data, my main

interest was in the qualitative data which emerged from the focus group interviews. I

intended that the questionnaire and interviews would support each other and that the

former would provide appropriate participants for the latter, and also throw up some

topics or issues that could be discussed in the interviews. I considered the

questionnaire a tool to help me select participants for the focus-interviews, and to

help me define my questions to explore the participants' experiences of and attitudes

towards language learning. It served these purposes well, in providing a useful

profile of the Year 9 cohort's language learning opportunities, and identifying

students who were prepared to participate in the focus-interviews. It provided

valuable background information on languages studied previously, and where and

how they had been studied, and gave me an understanding of the context of the

students' learning.

4.1 The Year 9 cohort and their language choices

There were 175 Year 9 students at the school in 2007. Almost all of them study

either French, Māori or Japanese. For 10 students for whom English is not their

native language, their language time is spent on intensive English language study,

and they do not have an opportunity to learn a second language. From the other 165

students, there were 152 returns from the survey, providing a good summary of the students' experiences of language learning before they reached high school. This high return reflects the circumstances in which the questionnaire was administered. On the day on which it was used in the language classes, only thirteen students were absent or out of class.

For the last three years, French has been the most popular choice of language, and this year, even more so. Figure 1 shows how languages were chosen by the year 9 students in 2007.

Figure 1
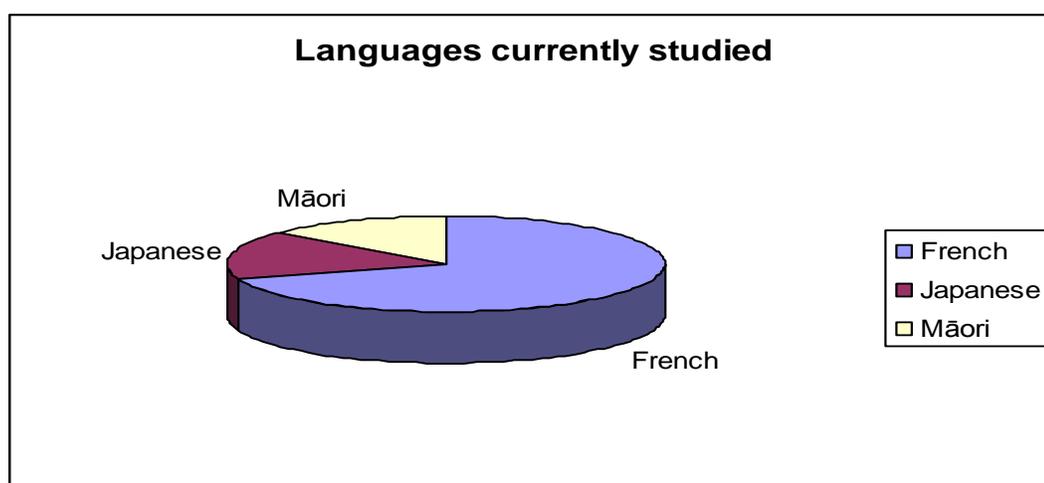
4.2   Survey questions

There were six questions – five about their experiences of and attitudes to language learning, and a sixth asking if they would participate further in the study. The sheets were coloured, so that the language the student was currently studying was identifiable.

4.2.1   Previous languages

The first three questions asked what languages they had learned, where, and for how long. Again, French was the most commonly recorded, followed by Japanese, Māori, Spanish, German and Chinese, in that order. Figure 2 shows the languages students had studied before they came to high school. Since many students learned more than one language, there are multiple entries.

Figure 2
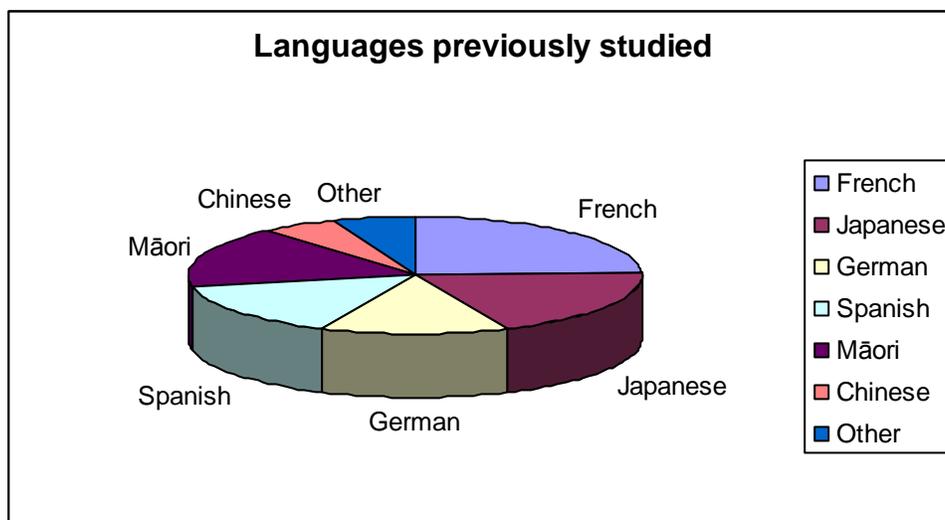
Amongst the "other" languages, Samoan, Italian, Arabic, Finnish, Dutch, Malay, Fijian and Korean were mentioned. These languages, with Chinese and Māori, were sometimes mentioned as home languages, rather than languages studied at school. I was surprised that of the 152 returns, only 9 said they had not learned a language other than English. I had not realised the extent to which languages other than English are taught in our contributing schools. I also found it surprising that only 56 claimed to have learned Māori. However, since one student who said she had studied only Spanish, also made a comment that "Māori was easy", it is clear that

the survey itself had limitations. Students' interpretations of the first question,

"What languages have you learned already?" were diverse. Most students

interpreted the question to exclude English, and some may have done so to exclude

Māori also, since both are the languages of New Zealand. The students'

interpretations of both "languages" and "learned" influenced the responses here,

and the opportunity for clarification was not available.

Question 2 asked where the languages had been learned, and the responses here

showed that almost all of the students' language learning had occurred at primary

school, although some (13 of the 152) had learned a language at home, in a

language school, or from friends.

It was clear from comments in question 3 that the school programmes differed

greatly in length and time allocation. A typical response to the question "For how

long?" was "Spanish for one year, Māori intermittently through a few years and

French for one year." These responses were more informative than those from

students who listed several languages in question one, and gave a general response

of "for a couple of months". Some students mentioned English "for all of my life",

and others included a comment on speaking a language at home or with relatives.

One intriguing response included Dutch, which the student seemed to be learning

for four years. I wondered how that was possible. It seemed unlikely that a school

programme would include Dutch – especially for four years. And if it were a home

language, I would have expected "all my life" or a similar response. This is just one

example where the answers or comments created a curiosity which remained unsatisfied – the reality of such surveys. Most of the primary school programmes were short – one, or two, terms. However there were some students who had studied a language for two years at primary school, and some who had been attending a language school for Chinese classes for more than a year.

These three questions showed a great diversity of language learning experiences in the Year 9 cohort. Fewer than 6% said they had not studied a language. Most had learned their languages at primary school, although about 9% indicated they had learned at home or from friends. Some (3) had learned five different languages in primary school programmes, and ten had learned four, although the average was two languages. A typical student (i.e. the "mode", or the most common result, from the data on Excel) would have studied French for six months, and Japanese for a term at primary school.

This profile is likely to be different in areas where the contributing primary and intermediate schools have less access to language teaching, or access to different languages. My school, as stated, is a decile 7 co-educational school in Christchurch. A similar study from another part of New Zealand would not necessarily reflect the same make-up. At my school, a typical language class (again, from the mode) would include, of the twenty-eight Year 9 pupils, one student who had never learned a language other than his native English, eleven who had learned a language other than the target language, twelve who had already studied the target

language for at least one term, but less than a year, and four who had been studying

the target language for a year or more. Of these last two categories, eight would

have also studied another language other than English. This figure reflects the

profile of a typical language class – a French class, for example, since French was

the modal, or most common, class this year. The profile would have been similar

for Japanese and Māori classes also.

Figure 3

Typical Year 9 French Class - Prior Language Experience
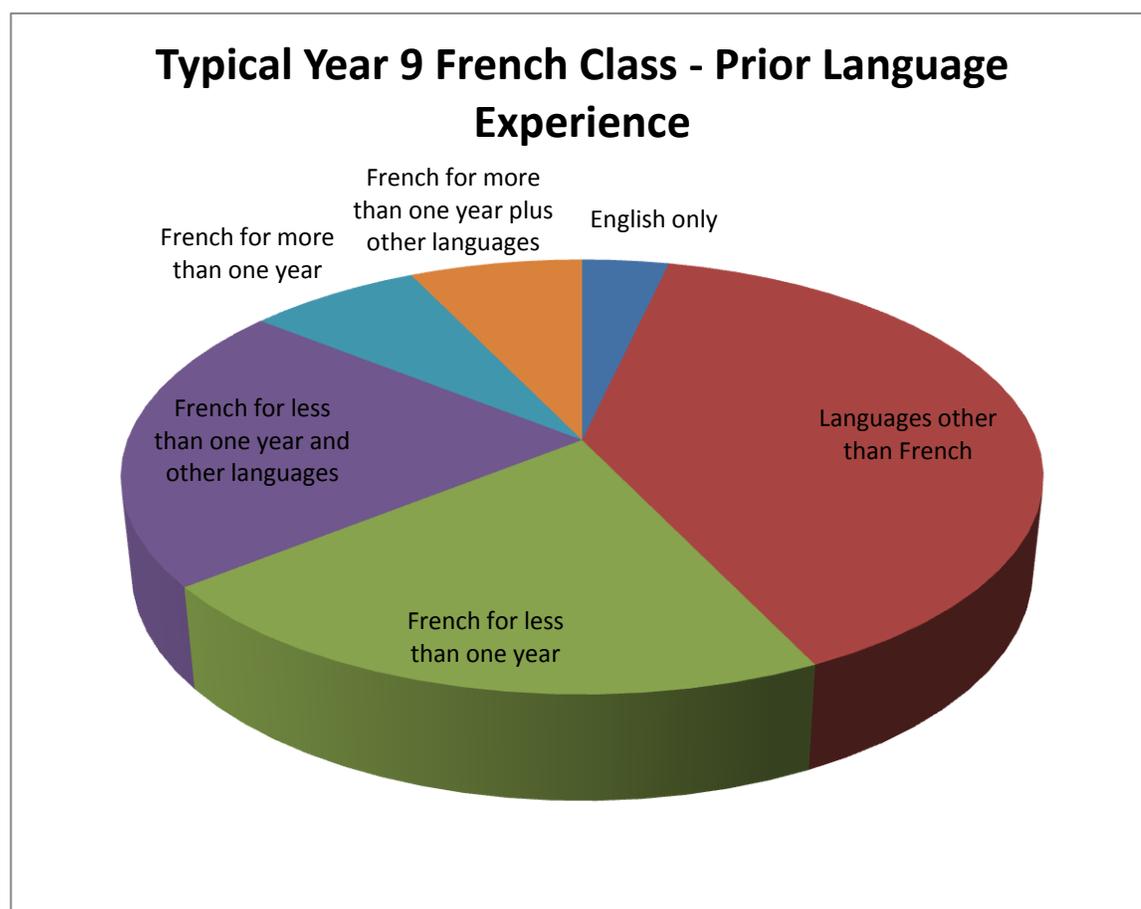
This shows that just under half of the class have had no experience of the French

language, while just under 15% have studied French for at least one year. It also

illustrates the small percentage (one student only) who have no experience of learning another language apart from English, whereas the rest of the class have already had some opportunity to develop language learning skills.

4.2.2   Enjoyment

Question 4 asked students which languages they enjoyed learning and why. This question was harder for the students, and many left it blank. Responses focused on the nature of a language ("I enjoyed learning French as it is valuable to the English language and Japanese with traditional cultural activity. I didn't really enjoy German with the style of pronunciation and the so-called "spitting" techniques."), the activities ("I enjoyed French last year because we got to watch videos and do fun activities like a French day when we made crêpes."), and the teacher ("I didn't enjoy French mostly because I didn't like the teacher."). Of them all, the teacher-influence predominated, one comment making it very clear, "I enjoyed French because the teacher was cool. I didn't enjoy German because the teacher was not cool." And again, "Everyone in the (Japanese) class hated the teacher with a passion." Other comments talked about their enjoyment of language learning in terms of "fun", "enjoyable", "passionate teacher", and teachers who "made learning fun".

Most of the comments were positive, exploring students' enjoyment of their learning, but a few negative comments were quite telling. One student had not enjoyed "either of them. Because we didn't get to choose what language and I

would have preferred something else." Another disliked "French. It was really boring and forced to do it." The element of choice is clearly an important part of engagement to some pupils, and a point which is also made during the interviews, and discussed later.

4.2.3   Selection criteria

The final question asked students why they had chosen the language they were currently studying at high school. This, too, was often left blank. Responses were varied. Some were tantalising ("because I thought it was different") and made me wish the student had provided more information. Some, again, expressed disappointment that they had not been able to learn the language they had chosen. ("I didn't get to choose. I wanted to learn Japanese but I can't learn it because I'm in the wrong form class"). For some, parental influence had been important, ("My mum said I had to.", and, charmingly, "I was told by my dad to, and I did not want to eat snails in French"). Common reasons for choosing their language were

1. to continue with a subject they had enjoyed previously.

2. to try something new or different.

3. because they wanted to travel.

4. to be in a class with their friends.

5. for family or career reasons.

Although the first two reasons may seem to contradict each other, they were not expressed by the same students, so they really highlight the diversity of the

reasons, rather than some internal inconsistency. The last two reasons were about

relationships, although relationships were also often included in their reasons for

enjoying, or not enjoying, their study.

The main purposes of the questionnaire were to explore the context of the

previous language learning experiences of the cohort, and to identify a range of

students for the interviews. I felt it did both well. It gave me a clear, if broad,

picture of what language learning the Year 9 cohort had experienced already, and

what their attitudes to those experiences were. It also allowed me to define the

questions I wanted to follow up in the interviews.

4.3   Limitations of the questionnaire

Although I feel this tool served its triple purpose well, there were some things I

could have made clearer. I had not clearly defined the context of the word

"languages" for the students. From the responses, it was clear that they did not

know whether they should mention English or Māori as a language they had

learned. Some included English in the list of languages they had learned. Most did

not. Where it was included, it would have been interesting to know if they had

learned English as their first or second language. In the same way, some students

omitted to mention Māori in their first answer as a language they had studied, but

wrote about it later when they included it in the time allocation for languages. It is

possible that, assuming both languages to be part of the compulsory curriculum at

primary school, students left them out of their response. I could have made this clearer in the questionnaire.

It might also have been clearer to have provided a table for the students to complete instead of the first three questions. A table like this would have obliged the students to give details on each language, rather than the more generic response I received overall:

What languages have you learned?	Where?	For how long?	What did you enjoy?

However, I had wanted the questionnaire to be simple, easy and quick to complete. While the table might have been easier for me to collate, students would probably have found it off-putting. I think, on balance, the less structured question form encouraged the students to complete the questionnaire, and I was pleased with the information I received.

4.4   Conclusion

The questionnaire itself, designed as a tool to identify students for the focus-group interviews, provided a rich description of the language learning experiences of the Year 9 cohort. I was surprised by the diversity of languages, the length of time some had studied them, the number of students who had already learned another language. I was intrigued by their explanations, what they choose to mention. I wondered about apparent inconsistencies – students who had disliked French at

primary school, but choose to continue at high school. Students, whose comments

identified them as Māori choosing a different language. Students who wrote that

they had already learned German, but didn't mention where or for how long. I

wondered what they meant when they wrote, "it was fun" or "cool" or "boring".

What was fun? The class? Why? The activities? The teacher? The language itself?

The questions had been designed to provide a description of the experiences of the

cohort, and to identify participants for the interviews. Although these tasks were

accomplished, and I felt I had a good understanding of the diversity of language

learning experiences of my students, I was eager to learn more, and looked forward

to the interviews.

Chapter 5   The focus-group interviews -

participants and findings

The first section presents the nine participants of the focus-group interviews,

introduces their background in learning languages, and prefigures the discussion of

the themes which emerged from the interviews. Following this introduction, the

second section presents a thematic analysis of the interviews themselves.

5.1 Interviews

In this section, I introduce the participants in the focus-group interviews and briefly

present each interview.

5.1.1   Interview one

I had chosen two girls, one from French, one from Japanese. One chose to bring

along another of my selected students, and the other brought a friend from her own

language class. The four girls politely took their turn to speak, and the tone became

more of a formal interview than a free discussion.

Kate

Kate had learned Spanish for two years at primary school, and regretted not being

able to continue, although she says she is enjoying French this year at high school.

She had also done a little Japanese and French earlier. She didn't enjoy the Japanese because she found learning to write with Japanese characters hard. Kate seemed shy, was quiet, and, during the interview, deferred mostly to her friend, Gemma. When she spoke, which she did only when it was her turn, her voice was quiet, and her comments quite short. During the interview, she began to speak more confidently, but without interjecting or interrupting other speakers.

Gemma

Gemma was born in New Zealand, but lived with her family in Switzerland during her early childhood, and says she enjoyed learning several dialects. Her older sister was born in France, and the family still speak a little French at home. She learned Spanish and Chinese for a year each in primary school. Gemma was very confident during the interview – she spoke volubly when it was her turn, and occasionally interjected. She seemed comfortable with the other girls, and expressed opinions that were occasionally different to theirs. She enjoyed talking about her skills in languages, and how she had been the best in the class with chopsticks.

Jane

Jane had learned Japanese, French, German and Māori during the last two years at her primary school, and she says she enjoyed learning them all. It transpired during the interview that I had taught her some Japanese and French two years ago, when I visited her primary school once a week. I had forgotten, but she took it for granted that I would remember her, and I pretended I had! Jane also was very confident

during the interview, and seemed pleased to be asked her opinion. Her brother married a Japanese woman, and her little cousins speak Japanese, so she is very interested in that language. She happily gave her own opinion, contradicted others politely and interjected when she had a comment to make.

Margaret

Margaret was Jane's friend, and, like Kate, quiet and shy. She spoke when it was her turn, and made full comments, but didn't venture her own opinion until the others had explored theirs. She claimed to have had little experience of language learning before she came to high school – a bit of Japanese, she wrote, and some Māori. Where the other three girls had been quite expansive about their language learning, Margaret had only this to say:

Margaret: Umm, I learnt my Māori and Japanese at my last school.
Interviewer: Mmm.
Margaret: Yeah, that's pretty much all.

5.1.2   Interview two

What should have been two boys and two girls become two girls and one boy when a selected student didn't turn up, although his friend did. This interview became a more interactive discussion, and the students occasionally interrupted each other, and shared contrasting opinions. They all seemed to enjoy the discussion, and to be proud to be consulted by a teacher.

Mary

Mary was an interesting mix of assertiveness and shyness, inquisitive and active in

her exploration of the room, but more subdued in discussion. During the interview,

it became clear she was from the supported learning class, whose students are

identified by a lack of academic success in primary school. Mary is from a Pākeha

family, and chose to study Māori in Year 9 to be with her friends. She was

confident to talk about her learning, interrupting when she had something to say or

disagreed with the others, and was assertive in her opinions, but showed little

confidence or belief in her ability to learn in the classroom, describing her

experiences in Māori as "scary". She had studied Māori in primary school already,

and, she said, "learnt a bit of German". When we explored this, she said, "One day

I was, like, bored, and I just went, like, to the library and got a book out, and I

started, like, reading the dictionary and, like, stuff…" She had also studied some

Indonesian in Australia three years ago. Her perspective on her language learning

was quite different to that of her friend from the same class, but they disagreed

quite cheerfully with each other.

Pene

Mary's friend, Pene, seemed much more confident discussing her language classes.

Her parents are Samoan, and often use that language to talk to her. She is also in the

supported learning class, in the Pasifika performance group and the Māori class,

having learned Māori at primary school. Pene was quite confident about her own

ability in Māori, and talked about how she corrects her teacher (a native speaker)

occasionally. She contributed the most to the interview, interrupting occasionally, but exploring and expanding her own ideas also.

Justin

Justin was an enthusiastic interviewee, cheerful and confident. His friend had forgotten to come, but he appeared quite comfortable with the two girls and myself, and seemed to enjoy the discussion. He had learned Spanish for "about four years", for maybe three times a week. He claimed, however, to have learned little, because he had not enjoyed those classes. Initially upset at not being able to study Japanese, he has adjusted to his French class now, and was enjoying learning with his new teacher. He waited his turn to speak, but confidently elaborated on his opinions, and seemed to enjoy the discussion, and the opportunity to have his opinion and advice asked.

5.1.3   Interview three

This interview was to be four boys, and I wondered if the discussion would differ greatly from the first interview with the four girls. One of the students was a boy who said he had never before studied another language and was "no good at languages". I was particularly looking forward to his view-point, and especially his reasons behind this self-assessment, but he did not appear. Nor did another boy, the Māori student who was invited for the previous interview, but forgot. The two boys who did appear were Bill and Jason, studying French and Japanese respectively.

Bill

Bill said he had studied Māori for six months at primary school, including time with a tutor who taught the class poi and haka skills. His French study was spread over two years, and seemed quite extensive. Bill said that, although his teacher, the same over the two years, may only have spent one hour a week on formal instruction in French, she used the language actively in the classroom, to give instructions, ask for opinions, and manage the class in its daily routine. Bill had particularly enjoyed learning songs, and the highlight, for him, was a fashion show in French which the class presented in assembly.

Jason

The other student, Jason, was the lad who decided he did not want a friend to accompany him. Although the two boys had not met before, and neither had a friend with him, they both spoke freely, interrupting each other occasionally, agreeing or disagreeing comfortably as their opinions differed.

Jason is from a Chinese family, and came to New Zealand when he was four, at which time his first and only language was Cantonese. He spoke this with a four-year old's confidence, and was beginning to learn to read. His mother only speaks a little English, and his father "can talk and understand" English, so Jason is sometimes the interpreter for his family. Now, he says, he is comfortable in English, only uses Chinese at home, and is unable to recognise and read the Chinese characters any longer.

To my delight, at the end, Jason thanked me charmingly for this opportunity to discuss his opinion of learning languages, and asked me if there was someone he could talk to about the physical education classes, because he had some ideas for them also!

This table more graphically presents the participants in tabular form:

Table 1: Interviews and participants

	Name	Prior learning	Now studying	Comments
Interview 1	Kate	Spanish, French, Japanese	French	Had 2 years of French at Primary
	Gemma	German, French, Chinese	French	Lived in Switzerland for 3 years
	Jane	French, Japanese, Māori	Japanese	Sister-in-law is Japanese
	Margaret	Māori, Japanese	Japanese	Enjoys singing
Interview 2	Pene	Māori, Samoan parents	Māori	In supported learning class*
	Mary	Māori, Indonesian (German?)	Māori	In supported learning class*
	Justin	Spanish	French	Wanted to learn Japanese
Interview 3	Bill	Māori, 2 years French at Primary	French	In contextual class[a], taught by me.
	Jason	Cantonese at home, Japanese.	Japanese	Born in China.

The bracketed names reflect friends who chose to come together.

*the supported learning class is a home room class for fifteen Year 9 pupils with learning difficulties.
[a]the contextual class is a Year 9 class of twenty-nine pupils who have been accepted into a programme where, for two weeks each term, they study off-site to present their solution to a particular challenge.

5.2   Findings

The following are themes discerned from the interview data. They are presented under headings that reflect the interview questions and the themes and ideas that emerged in discussion.

5.2.1   Subject choice

Diversity of reasons

The students all had various reasons for their choice of language at high school. For most, it was a conscious selection. For some, however, it was a "default" option, a choice made in the absence of other options. For example, Justin had wanted to study Japanese, but he was put in a class where the students had mostly chosen French, so he was obliged to pick up this language which was new to him. He said, "There's only certain classes who can learn Japanese. Ms Thomas…I even talked to Ms Thomas about it, because I really wasn't happy." Even though he says he is now happy with French, he resented not being able to study his chosen language. Kate, also, would have chosen a different language if possible. She chose French "because I couldn't do Spanish."

Although some had written in their initial survey that they had enjoyed their previous language learning, only one gave this as a reason for their choice of language. They talked about their feelings about the language (Gemma –"I think it's a lovely language, French") and about their own success (Bill – "well, the teacher said I was quite good"), and about their desire to travel (Bill – "I want to go

to France and stuff"). They expanded on activities they had enjoyed, teachers who they liked, but during the interviews, they didn't give simple enjoyment as a reason for choosing their language. Only Jason said he wanted to continue with Japanese because "I found it more fun…I think Japanese was the most fun and enjoyable."

Familiarity

Familiarity with the language was given as another reason for choosing it. Kate's second reason for choosing French was that "I only learned a little bit." While she is looking forward to increasing her knowledge of a language she has just started, Margaret wanted the security of more developed study, and chose Japanese "because I didn't know much French, and I felt that Japanese was easier than doing a totally different language that I don't even know." Having previous experience, even a limited amount, of learning another language provided familiarity and was a factor in the choice.

Familiarity was also Bill's reason for choosing French. He had studied the language for two years already and "I didn't think I had got to the point of thinking of throwing away all that I did." Familiarity in these cases is associated with continuity of learning and it is this continuity that was important to Bill and Margaret in their subject choice.

Familiarity also played a part in Pene's choice to study Māori. She said, "It's easy for me 'cos most of the words are similar to… to Samoan words." For Pene,

familiarity was associated with family and cultural connections. This is also

reflected in reasons from other students who talked about a family connection with

their chosen language. Talking about her choice of French, Gemma said, "It's kind

of fun to…to follow in my sister's footsteps, really." Jane also talked about her

brother and his Japanese wife, and how she wanted to be able to talk to her little

cousins. She said she would like to continue with Japanese, "just because I have the

relatives and stuff that speak Japanese, and if I had trouble, well, they could help

me with it, as they do occasionally, and, umm, s yeah…it's, it just makes it easier.

It just…ummm, err, what's the word I'm looking for? It starts with "c"…connect

with family."

Connections and belonging

The idea of social connections and belonging is evident also in both Pene's and

Mary's language choices. Pene said, "I only took that class because, because that's

where my friends are in there." Mary also talked about her choice – "I only did

Māori 'cos heaps of my friends would be there as well, and then…so I wouldn't be

a loner." Both Bill and Justin also gave as reasons against offering an advanced

class the probability of such a class not containing their friends. Although all four

students also had other reasons for choosing, or staying with, their language, the

importance of having friends in their class was clearly significant.

5.2.2 Benefits and utility

When discussing their reasons for choosing their language study, the students also talked about the benefits they saw from learning a language. These benefits tended to be linked with utility or usefulness – the perceived advantages of having a language for future life.

Some students wanted to travel to countries where their language was spoken. Justin, now a committed Francophile, said, "yeah, so, like, you can go to the country and actually speak it…I'd like to do that." Bill and Gemma also agreed that the prospect of travel was another reason that had attracted them to the language they had chosen.

Jason wanted his learning to have some practical use. Talking of Japanese, he said, "I found it, like, more useful than other languages like Māori, and that you can barely use it…you can barely use Māori, and then French – I don't think I'll go to France one day." One of the reasons Jason gave for not learning French was that he thought he would never go to France.

Jason could see no practical value in Māori, which is notable, given that Māori is one of the three official languages in New Zealand. This may reflect the fact that only 4% of our school population identify themselves as Māori, and the Te Reo classes are small. It is possible that the low profile of Māori at our school has given him the impression it is not useful. It is also possible that Jason's background as an

Asian student at school means he does not consider himself as having any connection with one of the official languages of New Zealand.

Perceived benefits or utility were also a source of tension for students. The two girls studying Māori felt disadvantaged because, "what about the Māori guys? We can't go to the country." Neither Mary nor Pene said that they expected Māori to be "useful" to them, but did concede that "it's just a good opportunity for us to meet other people." It is likely that this is because the Year 9 students remain together in their form classes except in their language study. It is only, therefore, in their language classes that they mix with students from other classes. The girls' non-identification of Te Reo as useful intrigued me. Both are New Zealanders, and Pene's family is from Samoa, so they cannot have the same reason as Jason to distance themselves from a national language.

Some of the students said that they felt that learning a language would make it easier for them to learn another, different, language. Jason said that, "if you know more than one language it's, like, easy to do…decipher things, like, crack codes." Gemma also agreed that, "learning from childhood two different languages it's easier for me to pick them up now."

In general, the benefits they saw from learning a language were mostly tied up in the reasons they gave for choosing their language, and were individual and specific, such as Gemma's reason for choosing Japanese to "connect with family."

5.2.3 Enjoyment

When they talked about what they enjoyed in learning a language, their comments were as varied as their reasons for choosing it. The greatest consensus was over the use of songs. Jane and Gemma both agreed that the singing ability of the teacher was immaterial – and that "it's funnier" if the teacher can't sing, "'cos it makes you laugh, and then you remember it. Like, I remember the days of the week song, which we only did, like, Friday, and I remember it completely." Bill had reservations about songs, because "we didn't really like it because we didn't really like the songs, but it does really get stuck in…and it gets stuck in your head for, like, the rest of the day." Six of the students mentioned songs as being an enjoyable part of their learning.

An element of choice was also offered as a factor in enjoying learning. Jason remembered choices his Japanese teacher offered the class at his previous school, and was keen to recommend it to me.

> **Jason**: Yeah, well, what our Japanese teacher did last year, well, she knew what each of us were like, like some of us knew, were a lot faster than others…
> **Interviewer**: Yeah.
> **Jason**: and some of us were like, a lot slower, so she got, like, for homework like, we got to choose, like there were 3 different levels, like, 3 piles of sheets and some them were, like, hard, medium and easy, for you to like, choose one.
> **Interviewer**: Oh, I see…
> **Bill:** That's good.
> **Jason:** Like, choice, so what you wanted to learn.

Jason offered this suggestion as a way to manage learners at different levels. No other student talked about the possibility of choosing their own preferred activity.

Communicative, practical activities which related to their own lives were mentioned favourably, such as Kate's homework in Spanish, when she had the plan of her own house to draw and label in Spanish. The classroom surveys of favourite colours, popular sports etc. which some students mentioned would also fit in here. Some enjoyed cultural activities in English. Gemma spoke of enjoying a lesson on using chopsticks in Chinese class, and talked also about her French class where "we also did research on France and the capital and the culture and that sort of stuff, so we could learn more about it and understand, like, where the language comes from and that sort of stuff." Justin enjoyed the challenge of remembering the characters of a new script in Japanese, and Gemma was fascinated by "learning the different dialects and things for all the different languages." Jane is enjoying having her Japanese-speaking little cousins help her with her homework.

The language-learning experiences and activities which the students enjoyed were varied, and idiosyncratic, depending very much on each student's own goals and attitudes towards the language. Justin's comment, however, seems important in this context. He said, "You learn stuff easier, easier, when you're, like, enjoying it more."

5.2.4   The importance of the teacher

Only a few students claimed teachers as an influence on their learning. On the few occasions, however, when teachers were mentioned, it seemed that they did, none-the-less, play some part in determining whether a student enjoyed his language

learning or not. Justin, asked why he had not enjoyed his Spanish classes, replied, "umm…probably because we had a boring teacher." He seemed happy to ascribe this "boring" element to "teachers from Spain", and no other student talked about disliking their teacher. Kate had enjoyed her own Spanish classes, and felt the teacher had been a contributing factor there. She said, "I enjoyed Spanish the most. We had a very good teacher. She knew how to do interesting things, not just reading out of a book and remembering." Justin, who had been disappointed with his Spanish teachers, has now found a happier solution in French. He said, "I'm still really liking French, and it's really fun. Yeah, we've got a great teacher."

It seemed from the students' comments that the relationship with a teacher could influence their enjoyment of their language learning, but was less important than the relationship they have with their peers in the class, since all of them referred to friendships in their reasons for choosing, or continuing with, a language. I had expected the students' relationship with their language teacher would be a key influence in their learning, but, in fact, the teacher was hardly mentioned in the interviews. There were other reasons for the lack of exploration of the teaching role also. This could, of course, have been affected by my presence – if you are being interviewed by a teacher, it may be wise not to talk about other teachers. And I was uncomfortable with this topic, given that my Head of Faculty role puts me in charge of my participants' teachers, and I did not want to investigate their practice in my interviews. My questions were, therefore, fairly generic and did not give the students an opportunity to discuss their current language teachers in any detail.

All of the participants had already listed the languages they had studied already in the questionnaire. During the interviews, they were happy to expand on their earlier responses, and seemed to enjoy being asked. They were often vague about the length of time a particular study had taken, but happy to talk about any experiences, activities and moments they remembered. Asked, however, if they would tell their teacher how much they had already learned, they were divided. Some said they would be comfortable to talk to their teacher about their prior experiences, others were afraid of seeming to show off. Most seemed to be more comfortable talking to their teacher about the extent of their learning than to their peers.

5.2.5   Class composition

Consensus for mixed classes

In the interviews, students explored together the differing levels of language knowledge they had, and discussed their own multi-level classes. After that, they were asked if they supported the idea of the two different classes, one for beginners and the other for more advanced learners. Of the nine, seven indicated that they preferred to learn in a mixed-level class. The consensus is best expressed by Jane – "The class, I think, should stay together so, like, the people who don't really understand get help from the people who do understand." Kate, Margaret, Jason and Gemma all used similar comments to support this. They, too, enjoyed the interaction of their mixed-level group, some because they had more knowledge and enjoyed helping, the others because they had less knowledge, and appreciated the help. Kate said, "You can learn quicker, you know, if you had, like, other people to

learn off." Jason wanted to keep the more relaxed prospect – "If I was in a higher class I'd, like, work, but it wouldn't be as much fun. It wouldn't be so relaxing. I could, like, chat to my friends, like, I could…O, yeah, I could be happy with that."

Alternative positions

Only two students said they would perhaps prefer to study in a class more suited to their level of competence. One was Bill, who had already studied French for two years at his primary school, before coming to secondary school where his French class now holds students who have not only had no previous French instruction, but some who have had no second language instruction at all. He said, "I suppose it's hard to, to decide, because you wouldn't have any friends probably…I think I'd probably choose (to be in an accelerated class) because, because, I do want to learn more. Like, it's good to, to learn the stuff again, but I do want to learn more things."

Where Bill saw the possibility of two class levels as an opportunity to learn more, Mary would have preferred to choose the beginner's class. She is not, she said, comfortable in her present class, which she says is "quite, like, scary." When her friend, Pene, said she herself would prefer the "confident" class, Mary immediately accepted the term, seeming happier with the classes as "confident" and "less confident", rather than "beginners" and "advanced". Mary is in the supported learning class, for pupils who have learning needs which make close support necessary. Her Māori class is the only subject she has outside this form class and

she may prefer a "less confident" class for reasons of comfort and security. It is interesting, though, that her friend, Pene, also from the supported learning class, is enjoying her Māori study, and would choose, she said, the "confident" class if it were offered.

Tensions and contradictions

The participants' language classes at their high school are all mixed-level and mixed-ability, since the streaming which affects their form class does not influence their language class. The survey showed that beginners are learning alongside students with two years or more of language study, and students from the supported learning class learn with students from our top stream. The students interviewed had interesting comments to make on this diversity.

Only Bill felt that he would learn more in an advanced class. The other students who had more language knowledge said that, although they were sometimes frustrated at the speed of some of the beginners, they still felt they were making progress in their learning. Pene seemed surprised at the question. "But then," she said, "I am learning." Even Bill acknowledged, "I don't think I was held back, 'cos I, like, enjoy it so much that it didn't even bother me…'cos I like learning, and there were, there were lots that I didn't know, or had forgotten, or something, like the verbs."

There were tensions and contradictions in students' thinking in the discourse that affirmed mixed grouping as a positive environment for SLA, but felt somehow that it restricted a personal desire to get ahead. Despite the general consensus that the mixed environment was a good thing, there were suggestions of tension within personal senses of inferiority and superiority, disadvantage and advantage, leading to discomfort.

Talking about another student with more language knowledge, Jane said, "There's this one girl who kind of gets on a lot of people's nerves, because she knows everything, like, absolutely everything. Hana, she wins, like, every game and all the things that we do." Kate agreed that, in her class also, they had a similar experience – "We also have one of those kids in our class, umm, yeah, my friend. She's lived, she lived in France when she was five for a year, and her family just speaks French." These tensions suggested a contradiction between the students' stated preference for the mixed-level grouping, and the frustrations that occasionally occurred. However, despite an element of jealousy towards the students who were seen as more knowledgeable, most seemed comfortable with their own perceived position. Kate said, "It's kind of nice, like the feeling that you don't know everything, 'cos then you've got more to learn."

Some of the students who had begun their class with less knowledge than the others, however, were not comfortable. Justin, put into a French class when he really wanted to learn Japanese, found himself with no knowledge of the French

language in a class where several had already spent many hours learning it. He was, he said, "quite nervous, 'cos, like, a few of the people in Mr Gray's class had already learnt it." Asked if he felt at a disadvantage, he replied,

Justin	Yeah, yeah, mainly, yeah.
Interviewer	Do you still?
Justin	Not so much now, but I know I'm not one of the better ones in the class.

Mary also felt at a disadvantage in her Māori class. From the small supported learning class, she felt uncomfortable in the larger, mixed class. She said, "There's just heaps of people in the class, and you have to say a sentence in the class, and, like, you don't want to, 'cos there's just heaps of people, like, watching you…and it's quite, like, scary…especially if it's a boy. Like, if you say something wrong, he's just, like, going to laugh."

The students who began their classes with more knowledge than most of their classmates, said they had moments of frustration, when the pace of the learning seemed too slow for them. Jane, talking of her Japanese class, said, "'Cos sometimes, 'cos, like, if the teacher says something, you've repeated…we've tried just sitting there and going, yep, and he doesn't let us do anything until everyone understands it, so you have to sit there, like, ten times and nobody gets it…so you kinda got a…in that situation, you kinda want to scream out what he says, and sometimes you do." It was, however, Jane who made this remark:

| **Interviewer** | You don't feel frustrated that you might be held back? |
| **Jane** | I don't. I don't really think so, 'cos there are not that many people that are, like, really, really slow and don't get it…and it's just taking a little bit longer, and you get the result for everyone knowing it, instead of just half the people. |

This altruism was repeated in all three interviews. The students with more knowledge seemed to enjoy their position of "experts" in their classes. Bill said, "It was a bit embarrassing, but it was good that they thought that." They felt that the other students appreciated their help in class, Bill saying, "I think they liked it because they had someone they could ask."

Since Bill felt a "bit embarrassed" about knowing more French than his classmates, I wondered if other students also were reluctant to show their teacher and class how much they knew. Gemma was comfortable to let the teacher know when she wanted to move on, saying, "If I'm a bit ahead, I do let the teacher know so I can get onto more advanced work rather than just sit back and relax for a while." Kate, however, said, "I don't so much mind letting the teacher know, because then you know what else you need to know, but I don't so much like showing off as such, 'cos then people just – they get jealous or they just get sick of you showing off and…sometimes you can get away with it, if you know when to stop showing of, but…a lot of people don't know when to stop." Gemma agreed, saying, "I guess there are…there's a certain extent to which you can show what you know." Pene had no inhibitions about letting her teacher and her class know how much Māori she knew. She seemed confident that her Māori was strong, and was prepared to challenge her teacher, "'cos I always help her out when she tries to say Māori words." From the same supported learning class as Mary, the difference in their confidence levels in their language class was marked.

The students all seemed to cope with, and to enjoy, the mixed-level classes. Even Mary's lack of confidence seemed to come more from being in a different, larger class, than from knowing less than others. The students with more knowledge enjoyed being the experts, and helping the others in their group. They explained this as a way of moving the whole class on in their learning, but enjoyed being able to position themselves as expert or superior. The small moments of frustration seemed to amuse, rather than irritate, them, and, apart from Bill, they did not want to be in a more advanced class.

The students with less knowledge appreciated the help of their peers, and, despite their initial nervousness and anxiety, seem now to be comfortable in their language classes, although Justin still feels he is not one "of the better ones in the class."

All suggested that the classes stay together as they are. This conversation summarises much of the discussion:

> **Gemma**   …in the mixed class, if you haven't done it before you can pick things up from people that have.
>
> **Kate**   You can kind of learn things faster and catch up slowly 'cos you've picked things up as they're said. Like, if you were in separate classes, you'd all be learning at the same speed, but occasionally you can learn quicker, you know, if you had, like, other people to learn off.

The students made two suggestions they thought could help cater for the mixed levels within the class. One suggestion was, although it was mostly good for groups to be mixed so that students with less knowledge could learn from those with more knowledge, sometimes it would be beneficial to have same-level groups so that the more advanced students could do different work, while the other groups could work

more intensely at their own level. They didn't, however, feel strongly about this, and some, (notably Jason, who wanted to stay with his friends at all times,) disagreed. Another suggestion came from Jason, and related to an experience he had in his primary school. He said, "Well, what our Japanese teacher did last year, well, she knew what each of us were like, like, some of knew – were a lot faster than others…and some of us were, like, a lot slower, so she got, like, for homework, like, we got to choose – like there were three different levels, like, three piles of sheets, and some of them were, like, hard, medium and easy, for you to, like, choose one…Like, choice, so what you wanted to learn."

The students emphasised the advantages of collaboration and peer-teaching to help the class learn. Students who had little prior knowledge of their language appreciated the support of their peers who had already some knowledge, while those with prior knowledge seemed to enjoy helping their peers learn. Margaret and Jane, finishing each others sentences in perfect accord, agreed:

Jane: I think it's a better idea to, like, just leave it as it is with the mixed thing, so…because then the people that know things can,,,
Margaret: can help the people that don't…
Jane: yeah
Margaret: …can help the people that don't, yeah, that don't know as much and don't understand.

Those who were more advanced, said that they enjoyed helping their classmates progress. Jason spoke about helping his group with the hiragana characters, Bill of teaching Kate words she wanted to know, Jane of helping explain the teacher's instructions to her group. Bill summed up their comments with, "It's good because you can help other people, like, in your group, you know, when they ask you, like,

"what does this mean?" Gemma said, " It's just…it's good…helping people is kinda cool, 'cos you know that…you're not just helping yourself, like, not like…you know what I mean?...Like, doing something else so that other people can have a good chance and that…that makes it better."

The students who had not studied their language before, instead of feeling patronised, seemed to appreciate this help from their peers, saying, "In the mixed class, if you haven't done it before, you can pick up things from people that have."

5.2.6   Relationships

Reading the transcripts of the interviews, I am aware of the huge importance the students placed on other people – on their friends, their teachers, their family, their classmates. They used these relationships to explain why they were studying a particular language, why they enjoyed, or did not enjoy that language, why they would, or would not, continue with that study, why they would choose to be, or not to be, in a different class. It seemed that, whenever they had a choice to make, they reached and justified their decision by the relationships it affected. Mary had chosen to continue with Māori so that she wouldn't be a "nif" (no friends). Jason did not want to be in a more advanced class, because he wanted to stay with his friends. Even Bill, who thought he might prefer to be in an advanced class, had reservations because he would not then be with his friends. Some students had made their language choice for family reasons, others because of a connection with a teacher.

Where the students positioned themselves within relationships was also interesting. They talked about other students who were "better" than them, and others again who were "not as good". When Gemma said, "If I'm a bit ahead I do let the teacher know so I can go onto more advanced work, rather than just sit back and relax for a while", the context shows she was referring to work completion as her measure of success, but when Justin said, "I know I'm not one of the better ones in the class," I wondered what made him think that. Margaret and Jane both positioned themselves in the top ranks of the class, by talking about their strategies to cope with the "slower students", but acknowledged another student, "who makes me look really dumb." They seemed to have a clear concept of an academic hierarchy within their class. This was a surprise to me, since our year 9 language classes have very few tests during the year, and none at all where students are ranked. I wondered how they arrived at this concept and how they identified their own position within the class. It did seem possible that the students with prior knowledge of their target language had developed a confidence which supported their learning this year also.

5.3   Conclusion

My sources of data were the questionnaire completed by the Year 9 cohort, and the three focus group interviews. The questionnaire showed a diversity of language learning experiences bewildering in its range. Students had enjoyed their learning; they had hated it; they had loved their teacher; they had hated their teacher; they had enjoyed a great variety of activities; they could not remember any activities

they had done; they chose their current language because they wanted to continue their learning; they chose a different language because they wanted to try something new. Only eight students said they had never studied another language, while others had spent two years exploring the language they had chosen already. One of the strongest features of the questionnaire was the idiosyncratic, individual nature of my students' experiences.

From the interviews, there were other features. In the questions about their previous language learning (see Appendix B), the students talked about what they had, and had not enjoyed. They discussed the importance of the teacher, the benefits of learning another language and their reasons behind their language choices. Answering questions about their current classes, they talked about the mixed level of abilities and knowledge, and how they reacted to this. Their suggestions for future classes included what languages should be offered, how mixed-ability and mixed-level groups could be taught, and what activities were most conducive to learning. They did not agree on all details, but their reasons were illuminating.

Most significant was the way in which students talked about their experience in the mixed-level classes which form the structure of learning for all the Year 9 students. Only one student was uncomfortable in her class, and would have liked to be able to choose a less "confident" class in the same subject. Where I had thought the students with greater experience in language learning would resent being in a class with beginners, I was surprised to learn that, instead, they enjoyed being the

"expert" and helping their group learn. They did not want to show off – some were reluctant to let the teacher know the extent of their prior learning. Their interest in helping was presented as entirely altruistic. Only one student would have liked the choice of a beginners or an advanced class, and even he was not sure what his choice would have been. He would, he thought, rather be with his friends. The importance of the peer group seems so significant to these Year 9 students. It influenced their language choice, their attitudes to learning, their participation in class, their enjoyment of school. They spoke more of their peers than of their teachers.

From the students' comments, it seems that students are most comfortable with their language learning when they have some choice in their studies, and even choice in the activities. They like it when their teacher knows the extent of their previous experience with languages – whether this be based on formal classes in primary or intermediate school, or on their family situation – but prefer not to offer this information spontaneously. They enjoy learning in groups, especially when mixed grouping allows students to learn from each other. These students saw learning languages very much as a social process, and considered any suggestions for change in the light of how that would affect their peer group.

In the next chapter, I consider the ideas this research has generated, and revisit my research question. I discuss what I have learned throughout the research process,

and make suggestions for practice and pedagogical development based on these

findings.

Chapter 6   Discussion

In this concluding chapter I reflect on the findings from the questionnaire and the interviews. I revisit my research questions, make some suggestions based on the data explored in the previous chapter, and discuss tensions and challenges within the data itself.

6.1   Research question revisited

My research question, "What is the nature of the experience of learning a language for Year 9 pupils?", began with a questionnaire about the pupils' previous experiences and explored the diversity of their previous experiences in language learning. The responses showed aspects of the nature of that diversity, and produced volunteers for the focus interviews, where the central issue of experience in language learning could be more fully explored.

I wanted to explore the nature of my Year 9 students' experiences in language learning to see what issues there were for them in their first year at high school. I was especially interested in their attitudes towards mixed level classes, given the diversity of language learning experience shown in the questionnaires. The focus-group interviews were particularly useful in exploring their experiences and attitudes – the students spoke honestly and articulately of what they done and how

they felt. The results, for me, have been significant. From the questionnaires, I have

learnt to appreciate the great diversity of language learning experience that each

new student brings into the classroom. From the interviews, I have learnt to value

their experience as learning which can be built on, as well as a teaching tool which

can be shared with other students. I have been impressed by the importance

students assign to relationships with others, and how these affect their learning.

And I have learnt to appreciate the power of peers learning and constructing their

own meaning from interaction with each other. What has surprised me the most was

the willingness of students to share their knowledge, and the obvious enjoyment

that they get from sharing.

In answer to my research question, I have learnt that students' experiences of

learning another language are incredibly diverse, and defined by factors relating to

personal and individual differences within broader social constructs. Students

talked about their experiences initially as activities – things they did in their

learning. In their discussion, the meaning they constructed from these activities was

explored and socially mediated, so that it was clear students who had shared an

activity did not necessarily assign the same meaning to it. It seemed also that in the

context of the discussion, some things may have been more acceptable to say than

others.

In exploring my students' language learning experiences, I had an answer to my

concerns about mixed-level classes. However, the exploration included concepts

beyond this issue and produced comments and ideas which I present here as some of the implications of the data.

6.2   Implications

Because this is a case study of language learning situated in one school, these findings cannot be extrapolated nationally, nor, in a social constructivist paradigm, is that important. It is enough to say that, in this case study, this is how students talk about their language learning experiences. Patton (2001) writes of social constructivist researchers that "they're more interested in deeply understanding specific cases within a particular context than in hypothesizing about generalizations applied to complex human interactions and cultural systems. They offer perspective and encourage dialogue among perspectives rather than aiming at singular truth and linear prediction" (p.546). In this paradigm, the tensions and disagreements between students do not need to be resolved, but simply acknowledged in the same way as most of the students wanted their teacher simply to acknowledge their differing levels of language learning experience.

There are, however, some ideas which recurred throughout the interviews, were supported by all the students, and reflected also in other literature and research. They present implications for practice and pedagogy in the school of the case study, and perhaps beyond. I put these ideas forward here as recommendations for teaching and learning in the specific context of the case study, and with potential

interest and applicability beyond this one school in the broad issues and questions that are raised.

6.2.1 Recommendations for practice and pedagogy

These recommendations, derived from the students' conversations, are all concerned with diversity – exploring the extent of the diversity of language learning experience in the classroom by acknowledging prior learning experiences, creating an environment which supports this diversity, providing learning experiences where the diverse learners can progress, and providing opportunities for the students to learn from each other.

Class organisation

One of my concerns was that the school might need to provide separate classes for beginners, such as Justin, and experienced learners, such as Bill. From the survey, however, only about eighteen of the Year 9 cohort would have been in Bill's position, having studied the same language for at least a year. (The uncertainty about whether Māori was included in the survey makes this number difficult to ascertain.) My school would be unable to offer advanced classes for only eighteen students across three different languages. We currently have four French classes at Year 9, two Japanese classes and one Māori class. These numbers and the discussion from the other students about mixed and same level grouping do not support our splitting them into two levels.

Both beginners and experienced learners agreed that they preferred to learn together in a class which provided opportunities for them to learn from each other. This suggests that we, as teachers, need to maximise opportunities for students with more experience to develop their language skills within a mixed-ability class, while supporting those who, like Mary, feel insecure because of their own lack of prior knowledge. The other students were strong in their conviction that mixed-level classes offered opportunities to both advanced learners and beginners, in that advanced learners develop their skills through peer-teaching, and beginners have the advantage of learning from more experienced peers whose explanations are often clearer than the teacher's, being couched more clearly in the learner's own language.

I was relieved that my students felt that it was unnecessary to split the classes into experienced and less-experienced learners. It would be impractical in a school of our size. It was therefore good to hear students recommend that the class stay together, and that opportunities be provided for students to learn from each other. I would have expected this from the weaker students, but was surprised that the more experienced students also preferred this. It is also possible that students did not wish to seem to challenge the accepted norms of the school they are in, and bought into the agreement through shyness or an unwillingness to express their disagreement to a teacher. It did seem to me that student were not intimidated by my presence, but the strongest consensus for supporting the mixed classes came

from the first interview, where two strong, confident girls lead the discussion, and may have prevented the other two girls from expressing disagreement.

Recognition of prior learning

Students reported that they liked their teachers to recognise their previous experiences in language learning, and, if the teacher is to be able to help the students progress, it is important to know where each student is already at in their learning. However, while the students in this case study were keen to have their teacher know the extent of, or lack of, their previous language learning experience, some were reluctant to initiate that discussion with their teachers. This reluctance is reflected in Bishop et al. (2007) comment about student-teacher relationships in these terms, " While the students considered it important to get along with their teachers, it was felt there still had to be a professional boundary in that they did not want teachers to know everything about them" (p.116). It is, of course, also possible that shyness, embarrassment or unease with the student-teacher relationship may also create this same reluctance and a desire to maintain a comfortable distance.

A survey is one possible tool for the teacher to be able to ascertain the extent of the class' knowledge and experiences of second language learning without crossing that professional boundary. It could be a good way, not only of gathering information on the class' previous experiences, but also of building the relationship that Alton-Lee (2003) and Bishop et al. (2003) recommend. It could form the basis

of discussions between teacher and student that would help a developing relationship, without the teacher being seen to pry into details which might be uncomfortable for students.

Supportive environment

Students talked about being shy, embarrassed, not wanting to show off, and some girls discussed being nervous about what the "boys" might say. It is important that teachers construct with their pupils a supportive learning community where students feel comfortable to take the risks that learning another language involve. In such an environment, Mary might be more comfortable to express herself, and the girls might be less fearful of being seen to "show off".

Creating a learning community where such diverse students as Pene, Mary and the 'boys' are able to learn together is a challenge for the teacher. Alton-Lee (2003) writes of the ideal environment as one where "diversity is valued, addressed and integral to instructional strategies. Caring and support is integrated into pedagogy and evident in the practices of teachers and students" (p.31).

It is interesting that Mary is able to be 'loud' in her home room classes, but is 'shy' in her language class. Her home room class is small, consisting of fifteen pupils only, and made up of students who struggle to learn in mainstream classrooms. The Māori class has twenty-one students from a variety of classes. It is likely that some

of Mary's discomfort with this class comes from its social and cultural context. Thus, although Mary has prior experience of learning Māori which should make her more comfortable in the class, complex issues of self-esteem, relationships and social interaction also influence her ability to learn, and her teacher cannot begin to manage these complex issues without some understanding of Mary's background.

Co-operative learning

I was particularly struck by the students' descriptions of the power of learning in groups, where more experienced learners help deconstruct the new language for the others, reflecting Vygotsky's work (1978) on the zone of proximal development. The more experienced said that it helped them consolidate their own learning, and those with less experience felt supported by their friends. It was encouraging and enlightening to see how the students all strongly supported the research by Hattie, (2003), Bishop et al., (2003) and Alton-Lee, (2003) when they discussed their enjoyment of learning together, where those with more experience are encouraged to help their group. It is what Kate referred to when she said, "you can learn quicker, you know, if you had, like, other people to learn off." It is also perhaps implicit where Pene insisted that she is learning when she shares her knowledge with others. This also reflects the concept of "ako", where teaching and learning become indivisible as each learns from the other. At face value, students' responses support the use of cooperative learning strategies in language classes, although there are some tensions here that also need to be considered (see 6.2.2).

It is also possible that these expressions of support are influenced by students'

positioning themselves as 'knower' and 'expert', constructing learner identities in

relating to others and not as altruistic as they sound. The implication here is that,

while supporting cooperative learning in language classes, teachers need also to pay

attention to the learner identities being created and the power/knowledge

differentials that groups may reinforce rather than challenge.

Reaching all students

Wylie et al. (2006) refer to the inevitable repetition of some content students face in

their transition from Year 8 to Year 9, but do not link this with boredom or

restlessness. Thus, although some students reported that they had covered the same

content previously in their primary school, they still insisted, "But I am learning."

The ability to manage a class of diverse learners, where some repetition is

inevitable given the range of prior experiences of language learning, and make sure

they are all learning is a challenge to language teachers now. From Ellis' (2005)

description, it does seem that a task-based approach would help both engage

diverse students, and allow them the opportunity to work in collaboration with

others.

My diverse group of students discussed in the interviews which activities they

enjoyed and learned from. High on the list were songs as a popular method of

learning. Even where the pupils hated the tune, or when their teachers sang badly,

they said the songs were a great learning tool. Learning songs is a good method of

ensuring this repertoire, since the songs do, as Bill said, "get stuck in your head",

and whole chunks of material can become internalized without analysis. Songs are

clearly a useful method of presenting students with a repertoire of formulaic

expressions required to fulfil Ellis' first principle (2005).

Bishop, Berryman, Tiakiwai and Richardson (2003) also note the importance for

engagement of activities which have relevance to students' lives. The students

supported this when they talked about enjoying activities to which they could

personally relate – such as the map Kate drew of her bedroom with the

measurements and labeling in Spanish, Bill's fashion parade in French or the class

survey on favorite colours in Spanish. Tasks which are authentic and relevant,

which connect to 'real' situations and contexts are clearly of interest to students.

Choice is also one of the factors identified by Bishop et al. (2003) in helping to

engage students, and in this context Jason's suggestion is relevant. He suggests a

variety of activities from which the student can choose. Jason added, "You learn

stuff easier, easier, when you're, like, enjoying it more." This, too, is something

which resonates in the work by Bishop et al. (2003).

6.2.2   Tensions within the data

However, although my participants did provide answers to many of my questions,

they did not always agree. And they have left me with more questions. The data

were not always coherent or consistent. Students contradicted each other, and

occasionally themselves. Some students said they were comfortable with the mixed-level classes but expressed a degree of frustration with others who were slower to understand, or with others again who were quicker than them. One was uncomfortable because he felt he knew less than the rest of the class. Some claimed to enjoy being able to share their knowledge with others, but were also aware of a line of disapproval between "helping" and "showing off".

At face value, this altruistic "helping" is a valuable classroom tool, in that it facilitates the learning of students with less experience. However, I wondered how it might reflect a hierarchy of power within the classroom. The students seemed to have a clear idea of some kind of hierarchy – they talked of "better" and "slower" students with a confidence which suggested there was a tacit understanding of a ranking amongst them, whether of experience, ability or confidence. They seemed to know their own place in this hierarchy, and were aware of others both above and below them. I was very interested in how they positioned themselves, but unable to explore this concept openly within the interviews. Those who positioned themselves amongst the "helpers" seemed to feel that some credit accrued because of this. However, another girl, Hana, "who wins, like, every game" "gets on a lot of people's nerves." It seems that there is a fine line between "helping" and "showing off".

This awareness of the danger of "showing off" is shown by the girls, especially in the first, girls-only interview. During the third interview, with two boys only, Bill

claimed to be a bit embarrassed that others identified him as advanced, but he felt "good" about it, whereas the girls seemed to be aware of a need to play down their knowledge occasionally. This behaviour is seen by Paechter (2006) as being typical of a construct of marginal femininities, where girls recognise a tension between being feminine, and positioning themselves as knowing in a social world where being a knower is associated with masculinity.

Mary's perception of her Māori class was also interesting and contradictory. In her smaller form class, she was loud and confident. In her language class, she claimed to be shy, but felt her teacher would not believe this because of the way she presents herself in her other classes. Mary finds her Māori class "scary", and is uncomfortable answering, especially in front of the boys. The exercise of power in the gaze has been documented in Paechter (1998), and Mary here displays the anxiety of someone forced into the role of the Other in her class. Ellis (2002) also writes about the anxiety which may arise when a student is expected to use the new language spontaneously. He also documents anxiety which may occur in learning a second language when the student feels that his/her own identity may be threatened by acquiring another language. It was interesting to hear Mary talk about the quite different identities she has constructed for herself in her form class and in her Māori class. Her interview persona had not seemed shy, confidently dominating the discussion and the physical space, occasionally disagreeing and interrupting, and exploring the classroom, playing with various teacher tools lying around. Norton's work (1997) on identity and investment in SLA shows that a student's identity is

multiple and contradictory. Any investment requires some risk, and, for Mary, the investment in learning Māori may be a threat to the identity she is constructing. However, where Mary chose Māori to be with friends, Pene's investment in learning Māori is for family reasons, and this is already a part of her identity. Perhaps, then, unlike Mary, having already made the investment in family, Pene feels no threat to her identity in learning Māori. Perhaps being bilingual already assists the process.

There were other occasions where the strong discourse of friends and relationships created a tension with identity. Students showed that the choices they made and would make for their language learning depended heavily on what their friends were choosing. Each participant considered the implications of choosing their language or moving to a more advanced class in the light of how it would be likely to affect their friendships. In most cases, they were prepared to make their choice based on how they could best accommodate their friends. It is possible that I may have encouraged this idea by asking each of the six selected participants to bring a friend, but it was clear from the discussions that peer relationships play a significant part, not only in students' subject choices, but also in moderating classroom behaviour.

It amazes me that children manage to navigate the maelstrom of peer-relationships in each classroom. That they do is evident. How they do it depends on so many variables that it must take considerable skill to be successful. My participants were

aware of such complex niceties as to how far they can show what they know without showing off; how far they could rely on their friends for support or learning tuition; to what extent they could monopolise the teacher; how much attention they could draw to themselves; how loud they can afford to be. Some clearly navigate these troubled waters with more success, or with more confidence, than others. "Loud" Mary was scared to venture an answer in her Māori class because of the boys, but Pene "just tell(s) them to shush."

6.2.3   Diversity

The issues with student identity reflect the huge diversity of linguistic and schooling background amongst the nine participants. All nine had a unique and complex combination of attitudes towards language learning, reflecting a rich panoply of experiences. They had learned different languages, and had different attitudes towards them. They had different family and cultural backgrounds, different values and different motivations for choosing and learning their language. They each made a different investment in their learning, approached their classes in a different manner, created their own unique identity for each class. Although the interviews show a general consensus on most of the issues we discussed together, they often had different reasons for that consensus.

The 152 responses to the initial questionnaire by the Year 9 students represent an even greater diversity. In any language class, there are about twenty-eight Year 9 students and one teacher, each contributing their own unique identity to build

together the identity of the class. Managing this diversity to create a cohesive learning community is a serious challenge for any teacher, and the best suggestions I have arise from my participants' comments above. It is interesting that, despite this underlying diversity, some commonalties emerge. Maybe it is important for teachers to explore the diversity in their classrooms which feeds into commonalties and consensus. However, given that each class is unique, it remains the challenge of the teacher to find unique solutions to create a positive learning community.

6.3   Conclusion

My study has relied throughout on data collected from the students, and the findings represent my own interpretation of what the students said. My case study is structured to present the student voice.

It is a small case study, and my findings are specific to this school. Some of my conclusions are in tune with the findings from other New Zealand researchers. This is especially the case when the students talk about collaboration and diversity, and my recommendations for practice and pedagogy are very much in line with their research. However, the data contains ideas which challenge current research, especially in the tension that exists between the identity a student is constructing for him or herself, and the position he or she may need to take within the shared identity which the class is constructing of itself. This area of how learner identity is affected by SLA is one which is worthy of deeper exploration.

My case study is exploratory: it poses issues and asks questions rather than producing solutions. The key messages of this thesis concern the great diversity of students' experiences and the importance of the student voice. I suggest the teacher can only really manage the first, with reference to the second.

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Appendix A – questionnaire (format has been changed)

Introduction to questionnaire

(This information will be read to the class by the teacher before the questionnaire is administered.)

I am interested in your experiences of learning a language, and would like to find out more about your learning before you came to Riccarton. To do this, I would like you to complete this questionnaire. It is entirely voluntary, and you can leave the form blank if you wish to, but I would be grateful for your help in my research if you wish to participate. The questions on the form ask you about your experiences learning a language. You don't have to fill it in, and even if you choose to complete it, you don't have to put your name on it. It is voluntary and anonymous.

The last question, however, asks if you would like to be part of further research project. That means that I would like to talk to some of you later, together in a small group, about what you say in the questionnaire. If you would like to be part of these interviews, please write your name in the space provided at the bottom. This means that, for you, the questionnaire will not be anonymous, but it will be confidential. No-one else will know what you have written.
.

Questionnaire for Languages students
2007

1. What languages have you learned already?

2. Where did you learn them?

3. For how long?

4. Which languages did you enjoy or not enjoy learning? Why, or why not? Please explain your answer: you may have 1 or many reasons.

5. Why did you choose to study (Māori, French, Japanese) this year?

6. Would you like to be part of a further research relating to students' experiences of language learning? This would include being part of a focus-group interview with 2 or 3 other students. If so, please write your name and class here:

Name: _____ Class_____

Appendix B – questions for focus-group interviews

Focus group Interviews

The following are guiding questions for interviews, with flexibility allowed to explore ideas presented by students.

Prior knowledge and experience:

1. Tell me about the experiences you have had with languages before you came here, both at school and elsewhere.

2. What did you learn? (What did you do?)

Experience in Year 9

3. Why did you choose to study (Japanese)?

4. Do you think your earlier language learning helped you learn (Japanese) this year? Why/ why not? (Are you glad you learned some (Japanese) before you came here? Why/why not?)

5. In your language class this year, do you think you knew more (less) than some others at the beginning? What makes you think that?

6. How did you feel about knowing more (less) than the others? Were you too shy to show them? Did you feel proud (embarrassed)?

7. Did you tell your teacher how much you know? Why/why not?

8. Tell me what you think about learning a language this year. (Is there anything about learning a language this year that has frustrated you? Been pleasing or helpful?)

For the future

9. What do you think would be a good idea for kids who start school with more language knowledge than others? Why?

10. What other language would you like to learn? Why?

Additional voluntary comments

11. Is there anything more you would like to tell me about your language learning this year or last year?

Appendix C – Sample of field notes

Interview 2

2 boys, 2 girls – 3 from Māori, 1 from French. The chips and snacks I put out last time didn't work – no interest until the end. Too polite? This time, I've got choc bars fort hem for afterward. I've told them to bring their lunch. Looking forward to the boys' perspectives. 3 of them from a lower ability class. I wonder how that will fly? Got a class beforehand, so I'll have to be quick.

The girls were first – Mary inquisitive and active in her exploration of the room, Pene much quieter, but still confident. Justin also interested and unintimidated. Tom didn't come – I wonder if he changed his mind or forgot?

Interesting perspective, and a change from interview 1. I wonder if being from a lower ability class is a symptom or result of their thinking? Or vice-versa? They agreed they would rather have 2 levels of class for beginners or confident speakers. ("confident" was their word. I like it. Mary had previous experience, but wasn't confident. She would have chosen the non-confident class.) Clockwise order: Pene, Mary, Justin. Pene was very poised, and seemed comfortable. Mary kept playing with my pointer – dropped it between the desks. I wasn't sure whether to be a teacher or an interviewer. Went with the interviewer. Justin was chirpy and confident. All 3 expressed themselves comfortably – I had tried to choose pupils I don't teach, but it transpired that I had taught Mary briefly at her Primary school, and Justin had also had some dealings with me over Japanese, when he came to find out if he could transfer, and, failing that, to borrow a Japanese text book. I think they quite enjoyed being consulted. They were full of opinions – Mary especially. Talked much more freely than the girls. Wonder what happened to Tom?

Appendix D – Sample of interview transcript

Sample from Interview 3

Bill: Yeah

Me: Language

Bill: Yep

Me: and you did…what sort of things did you do with, umm, in French. You said songs.

Bill: Yeah. Songs, and…we did a lot of activities, like we did activities – we had homework to do for it. …and…

Me: written homework?

Bill: Ah, yeah, yeah, it was an activity, like sheets of things to sort of reinforce it, ah, what we leart.

Me: Like the sheets from Oui?

Bill: Yep,

Me: uh-umm

Bill: Yep, those things, yes. And umm…we did a lot of, we had to do like …speaking to the class, with a partner each. Oh, we did one time, we did twice, once at the end of the year and once at the middle, we did a fashion show…

Me: um-mum

Bill: with, we'd just learnt how to say what you're wearing and stuff. So we did it to all the classes, and you had to bring clothes, and the girls liked it a lot.

Me: I bet.

Bill: and the boys thought it was funny, 'cos Logan, in my class, we…dressed him up as a girl and stuff like that. And, and, yeah.

Me: Righto, and Jason, could you, you had done some Japanese before

Jason: mmm-hum

Me: You said, but also you had some Chinese.

Jason: mm-hum

Me: So tell me about …you…how much Chinese can you use?

Jason: errr, none, errr, we used Cantonese.

Me: OK. Is that quite different?

Jason: Yes, it is.

Me: And, that's what you speak at home all the time?

Jason: Hum-hum.

Me: So do your parents speak much English, or do you just use Chinese all the time?

Jason: Well, my mother speaks a little, my dad, yeh, he's relevant, he can talk and understand, but, umm, I'm actually Cantonese.

Me: So you're actually about fluent in Cantonese.

Jason: Yep.

Me: OK, so tell me about, tell me about your Japanese.

Jason: Umm, well, it's OK. I learned it last year at school. We were studying it for a language for the whole year.

Me: So about how often did you do it in the week.

Jason: umm, once a week.

Me: and what sort of things did you do?

Jason: we did those ummm 48 hiragana cards and we did, umm

Me: Oh, yeah.

Jason: and we did ages and numbers, and we did, yep, all of that stuff.

Me: So did you remember all of the cards? Did you know the hiragana already?

Appendix E – Consent forms
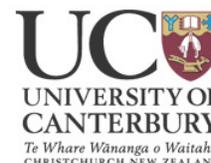
Declaration of Consent

Participant

I consent to participate in the project, Experiences of Year 9 Second Language Learners.

I have read and understood the information provided to me about the research project and what will be asked of me if I participate in this project.

I understand that the information I provide to the researcher will be treated as confidential and that no findings which will identify me or my school will be published.

I understand that my participation in the project is voluntary and that I may withdraw from the project at any time without incurring any penalty.

Signature: _____

Parent/ Guardian

I give permission for _____(child) to participate in the project, Experiences of Second Language Learners.

I have read and understood the information provided to me concerning the research project and what will be required of participants.

I am satisfied that my child understands what will be asked of participants in the project.

I understand that the information participants provide to the researcher will be treated as confidential and that no findings that could identify either them or their school will be published.

I understand that participation is voluntary and that either I or my child may choose to withdraw from the project at any time without incurring any penalty.

Parent/ guardian Name_____   Date_____

Signature_____

23rd May, 2007

Information for parents/guardians of participants

My name is Anne Jacques, Head of Languages at …High School. I am working towards a Master for Teaching and Learning at the University of Canterbury College of Education. As part of my degree, I am required to undertake a research project. I will be working under the supervision of Dr Abbiss and Jae Major, both senior lecturers at the University of Canterbury College of Education.

Topic: the experiences of Year 9 students learning a second language

What is the aim of the research project?
I would like to see whether Year 9 students' learning experiences in second language classes are affected by their earlier experiences in language learning. I am interested in the students' previous language learning experiences, and their experiences and attitudes to language learning now.

What types of participants are being sought?
Students in Year 9 Japanese, French and Māori classes.

What will students be asked to do?
Students will be asked to participate in a group interview with myself and two or three other students. I will ask them to describe and discuss their experiences of language learning together. This interview will be audio-recorded.

How much time will be involved?
The interview will take about forty-five minutes, and be held during lunchtime this term.

How will confidentiality and anonymity be addressed?
No findings that could identify any individual participant will be published. The interview will be recorded and transcribed, using pseudonyms. Data will be securely stored, according to University of Canterbury College of Education policy, for at least five years, but I will be the only person to listen to the recordings, and the transcripts will not identify any individual.

Where will the research be published?
The outcomes of my research will be written as a thesis and a copy kept at the University of Canterbury. A summary of my findings may also be published in the New Zealand Language Teacher, and presented as a paper at the NZALT conference in 2008.
Are all students required to participate?

No, participation is voluntary. All Year 9 language students have had the opportunity to volunteer, and the students who have been selected were chosen to represent the three languages that the school offers. Even if you agree to let your child participate, he/she may choose not to answer some, or all, of the questions during the interview.

If I agree to let my child take part, can I change my mind and withdraw my child from the study?
If you agree to let your child take part, you can withdraw at any time by sending me an email, or contacting me at school. This will mean that, if the interview has already taken place, I will not include your child's responses on the transcript, or in my report.

The University of Canterbury College of Education Ethics Committee has reviewed and approved this study.

Complaints procedure
If, at any time during this research, you or your child have any complaint concerning the manner in which my project is conducted, it may be given to me, or, if an independent person is preferred, to :

The Chair,
Ethical Clearance Committee,
University of Canterbury College of Education,
Private Bag 4800,
Christchurch

Please contact me at school if you have any concerns about this project, or would like to be informed of the aggregate research finding. The easiest way to contact me is by email:
jq@riccarton.school.nz

Thank you,

Anne Jacques

Information for pupils(selected by friend)

Your friend name has asked that you can join him/her at an interview with me and 2 other Year 9 students on the date. This interview will help me understand what students at Year 9 think and feel about their language classes. I hope you are able to come. I would appreciate your help with my research.

Interviews
There are about 12 students who have said they would like to help with my research. They have all had different experiences of studying another language at school, and I have divided you into three groups of 4 each. I hope you can come with your friend to the interview with me and the other 2 students on the ….(date). I will ask you to describe and discuss your experiences of language learning together. This interview will be audio-recorded.

How much time will be involved?
The interview will take about forty-five minutes, and be held during lunchtime this term.

What will happen with the information you provide?
Your answers will help me better understand what students' feel and think about studying another language at high school. The outcomes of my research will be written as a thesis and a copy kept at the University of Canterbury. A summary of my findings may also be published in the New Zealand Language Teacher, and presented as a paper at the NZALT conference in 2008. Nothing which will identify you will be published. The interview will be recorded and transcribed, using false names. You might like to help me choose a name to represent you. Data will be securely stored, according to University of Canterbury College of Education policy, for at least five years, but I will be the only person to listen to the recordings, and the transcripts will not identify you at all.

Do you have to participate?
No, participation is voluntary. All Year 9 language students have had the opportunity to volunteer, and the students who have been selected were chosen to represent the three languages that the school offers. Even if you agree participate, you may choose not to answer some, or all, of the questions during the interview.

If you agree to take part, can you change your mind and withdraw from the study?
Yes, you can withdraw at any time by telling me at school. This will mean that, if the interview has already taken place, I will not include your responses on the transcript, or in my report.

 If you have questions about this interview now, or at any time afterward, you can ask me at school, or ask you classroom language teacher. I hope you enjoy the interview. I am grateful for your willingness to participate.

Consent form – principal

Principal,
Christchurch
March 2007

Dear   ,

I am working towards a Master of Teaching and Learning through the University of Canterbury College of Education, and would like your co-operation for some research I would like to do for my thesis. I am interested in whether and how Year 9 language students' language learning experiences are influenced by their earlier learning of another language, and would like to conduct a questionnaire with all our Year 9 language classes, and interview small groups drawn from Japanese, French and Māori classes.

No findings that could identify the school or any individual participant will be published. My data will be stored securely, and only seen, if necessary, by my supervisors. Interviews will be done outside of class time and will not affect the normal school timetable, nor interrupt students in their classes.

 If you need any further information, please feel free to contact my Supervisor, Jane Abbiss, at the University of Canterbury College of Education, on 345 8465(direct).

Yours sincerely,

Anne Jacques

CONSENT FORM

I have read and understood the description of your investigation. I agree to having students from …High School participate with the understanding that the school's anonymity will be preserved. I understand also that I may withdraw my permission at any time.

Signed _____   Date _____

Consent form – teacher

Christchurch.
March 2007

Dear   ,

I am working towards a Master of Teaching and Learning through the University of Canterbury College of Education, and would like your co-operation for some research I would like to do for my thesis. I am interested in whether and how Year 9 language students' language learning experiences are influenced by their earlier learning of another language, and would like to conduct a questionnaire with all our Year 9 language classes, and interview small groups drawn from Japanese, French and Māori classes, including (number) students from your class. I attach the questionnaire I plan to use, and would welcome your comments before administering it.

No findings that could identify the school or any individual participant will be published. My data will be stored securely, and only seen, if necessary, by my supervisors. Interviews will be done outside of class time and will not affect the normal school timetable, nor interrupt students in their classes.

 If you need any further information, please feel free to contact my Supervisor, Jane Abbiss, at the University of Canterbury College of Education, on 345 8465(direct).

Yours sincerely,

Anne Jacques

CONSENT FORM

I have read and understood the description of your investigation. I agree to having students from my class participate with the understanding that the school's anonymity will be preserved. I understand also that I may withdraw my permission at any time.

Signed _____   Date _____