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Language learning style preferences and the development of L2 oral skills

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Abstract

Although many L2 trainees find it difficult to pass their English language and pronunciation courses in college, some others manage to reverse this frustrating situation and eventually become good language learners (GLLs). GLLs learn how to self-regulate their learning process. Rubin (2001) argues that these learners are distinguished by their ability to use their knowledge, beliefs, and cognitive processing in a flexible manner. This cross-sectional case study aims at observing and describing the language learning styles that two trainees used to become GLLs. Both participants completed a learning style survey and took part in semi-structured interviews. Data obtained by means of these instruments highlighted the importance of learners' taking the responsibility for their own learning. We further claim that learners who organize new information and consciously relate it to previous knowledge learn better than those who simply memorize such information. In view of this, the suggestions provided here may serve as a point of departure for other L2 learners facing similar difficulties in their learning processes. As regards teachers, we believe that they must understand how to promote learning to learn. We expect that these suggestions regarding learning styles will provide valuable information for language instructors.

Keywords: L2 acquisition; good language learner; self-regulation; learning styles

1. Introduction

Many English teacher training programs (ETTP) around the world require that their trainees grow to be proficient second language (L2) users because they should set good examples and be adequate models for their future students and other L2 users. In such programs, English language courses often become the most challenging obstacle trainees have to overcome on their way to getting their degrees. Trainees need to be able to talk effortlessly about different topics, monitor their grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation, rely on various learning styles and resort to a range of language learning strategies to facilitate acquisition (Griffiths & Oxford, 2014; O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 2002; Oxford, Rubin, Chamot, Schramm, Lavine, Gunning, & Nel, 2014).

Although many of these student teachers experience difficulties meeting this end, some others manage to accomplish it effectively. Successful L2 learners are known as *good language learners* (Rubin, 1975). Without external assistance from peers, tutors, or instructors, these learners manage to develop self-regulated efficacy and thus improve their linguistic performance (Oxford et al., 2014; Skehan, 1995). Autonomy is a predictor of L2 acquisition, and, along with the appropriate use of learning styles, these factors have a positive effect on students' outcomes (Griffiths & Oxford, 2014; Ma & Oxford, 2014; Rubin, 2001). In the education field, the term *learning styles* refers to the concept that learners differ with respect to what mode of instruction or study is the most effective for them (Pashler, McDaniel, Rohrer, & Bjork, 2009). One characteristic manifested by GLLs is the ability to self-regulate their learning process. Rubin (2001) argues that these learners are distinguished by their ability to use their knowledge, beliefs, and cognitive processing in a flexible manner.

This descriptive case study (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2000; Gerring, 2008) set out to explore and describe the manner in which two particular individuals perceived and processed information in language learning situations. Both participants completed a learning style survey (see Appendix 1) and took part in semi-structured interviews. We hope that the results of this cross-sectional study will provide useful information to other L2 learners that will eventually help them understand their own learning profiles, to develop flexibility and adaptability in their thinking, and to set realistic goals about minimizing learning weaknesses and maximizing strengths. Instructional approaches that help students reflect on their own learning processes are highly beneficial to their overall learning and tend to stimulate motivation to improve as learners.

2. Theoretical background

Several studies show that not all individuals acquire an L2 in the same way or with the same degree of success. Rubin (1975) was one the first researchers concerned with the characteristics which make some individuals better than others at learning an L2. She describes three variables: aptitude, motivation, and opportunities which GLLs possess or may create. Whether the first variable can be modified is unknown and there is an ongoing debate on this topic. On an optimistic note, some researchers believe that an individual's aptitude to learn an L2 may be improved by reliance on diverse learning styles. As to the second variable, motivation is usually classified as intrinsic when the driving force to learn the language arises from a genuine interest either in the language itself or a desire to achieve personal growth. Motivation is classified as extrinsic when the interest to learn an L2 comes not from within the individual, but from an external source. The third variable comprises the opportunities that learners have to practice the L2. GLLs look for ways to use the language both inside and outside the classroom. Research in the area indicates that GLLs make use of an array of language learning styles, and that these should be re-defined, further classified and explored (Cohen & Weaver, 2006; Dörnyei, 2005; Griffiths, 2008; Oxford, 2003).

O'Malley and Chamot (1990) identified ways of processing information that improve comprehension, learning, and retention of information. Their studies came out of the concern for discovering the characteristics of effective learners. They arrived at three important conclusions regarding the general approaches that students use in acquiring a new language. First, mentally active learners are better learners. Those students who consciously make links between what they already know and new material have better comprehension and recall than those who do not. Secondly, learning styles can be taught and modified. If students are given classroom time and opportunities to practice the L2 using different learning styles, they will learn more effectively than those who do not go through such experiences. Thirdly, academic language learning, in particular, is more effective when the use of language learning strategies is promoted. In their studies, Naiman, Fröhlich, Stern and Todesco (1996) identified three attributes of GLLs. First, they are actively involved in their language learning process. Secondly, they find ways to overcome the obstacles they face, whether these obstacles are linguistic, affective, or environmental. Finally, they monitor their own performance by studying, practicing, and becoming involved in communication. Naiman et al. (1996) claim that there appears to be certain attributes common among GLLs, especially with regard to the strategies and techniques they employ. Gilakjani and Ahmadi (2011) highlight the importance of learning styles for learner's self-regulation. These authors claim that learning

to learn is strongly related to an individual taking responsibility for their own learning process. As the amount of information available to L2 learners is constantly increasing and changing, individuals who are aware of their learning styles are able to obtain knowledge autonomously, without any extra help from others.

Learning styles have been defined in different ways in the last two decades. Brown (2000) describes them as the way in which individuals perceive and process information in learning situations. Oxford (2003) provides a broad definition in terms of attitude and tactics: the general approaches students use in acquiring a new language or in learning any other subject. With respect to adult learners, MacKeracher (2004, p. 71) defines learning styles as the "characteristic cognitive, affective, social, and physiological behaviors that serve as relatively stable indicators of how learners perceive, interact with, and respond to the learning environment". The researcher holds that learning styles are closely related to self-directed learning. Expert learners who engage in self-management are able to monitor their own progress, change their course of action whenever necessary, and coordinate different procedures and knowledge. Rubin (2001) breaks down this process into four steps: monitoring, evaluating, adjusting, and implementing.

Regarding learning typologies, the most popular systems are based on different channels of perception, being the auditory and visual types the most frequently mentioned. Following these two, there are the kinesthetic or the physical and the cognitive and the verbal or communicative types. Learners are often also classified into different categories according to their learning styles, namely the auditory, the kinesthetic and the intellectual ones. Likewise, learning groups may also be divided into the visual seeing type, the auditory listening type, the kinesthetic feeling type and the communicative type (Woodrow, 2017). However, there is certain vagueness about typologies founded on sensual channels. As a result of mixtures of preferences, there are as many learning types as there are learners. Therefore, the classification of learners is not systematic in the first place. Some individuals may find that they have a dominant style of learning, with far less use of the other styles. Others may find that they use different styles in different circumstances. It should be borne in mind that, just like perception, learning is a complex process that cannot be limited to one sensual channel. On these grounds, we insist on the difference between mere memorizing and actual learning connected with understanding, which is in fact sometimes neglected in reproduction oriented learning environments (Dörnyei & Chan, 2013). It may be a naïve assumption to believe that sensual impressions are transferred into the memory directly. The neurophysiologic as well as the psychological process is much more complex. Learning is more than memorizing; it always demands dealing with the material on an intellectual level as well as active assignment of meaning. Sensual perception is a precondition, but

learning itself is a cognitive process (Sweller, 2003). Learning typologies do have certain validity as far as pure learning by rote is concerned and the content is facts (i.e., declarative knowledge).Applicable procedural knowledge and complex issues impose more cognitive processing that is independent of the primary perception channel (Blidi, 2016; Sweller, 2004). Based on these classifications and assumptions, in this exploratory case study we set out to observe, analyze and describe the language learning styles and the steps followed by two trainees on their way to becoming self-directed learners.

3. Research questions

To explore, analyze, and describe the different paths taken by two L2 learners on their way to becoming successful autonomous language users, the following questions were addressed in this study:

1. Can language learners *learn* to modify or adapt their own learning styles?
2. Which language learning styles do L2 students often implement on their way to becoming GLLs?

4. Method

4.1. Participants

When data were collected, both Silvina and Beth were 28 years old. Silvina was a sharp student who was aware and confident of her learning preferences. In fact, she took advantage of several learning strategies but initially she had relied heavily on rote-learning. She was quite extroverted and was not embarrassed or inhibited to take risks inside and outside the classroom. She was a highly deductive learner. She claimed that learning is easier when she is given specific rules and specific information about a given task or a new teaching point. However, she did not spend time analyzing rules when she was involved in production. She also relied heavily on intuition. Silvina is a native Spanish speaker who became an English language teacher in 2013, before having her first baby. She graduated from a four-year teacher training program taught at a private teacher training program in Mar del Plata, Argentina. Although she often encountered some linguistic obstacles along her course of studies to pass her English classes, she always managed to move forward successfully. Her greatest challenge, though, came in her last year in college when she had to take and pass a course in English pronunciation. After failing that pronunciation exam twice in a row, her teachers suggested that she should improve her command of L2 if she intended to pass that test. She had always studied by rote learning, but upon seeing

that this technique was no longer effective, she felt she needed to make a change in her learning style. Thus, she stopped committing things to memory and began to develop the ability to read and understand texts as the first basic requirement for learning.

The other student, Beth, was a highly analytical learner who seemed to enjoy reflecting on her learning process. Like Silvina, Beth is a Spanish-L1 ELT and graduated from a teacher training program taught at a state-owned university in Mar del Plata, Argentina. Despite her linguistic preparation, like most of her classmates, she had to struggle with her English language courses throughout her undergraduate studies to eventually get her degree. As was mentioned earlier, these courses demand a proficient level of L2 at which learners should be able to talk about different content areas while manipulating linguistic components accurately. Beth faced her greatest challenge during her first year in college. She failed several English courses up to four times. However, after these unsuccessful attempts, Beth decided that she needed to make a radical change in her learning style if she meant to pass those courses. She became more actively involved in her learning process and developed a certain curiosity towards the English language, in particular in terms of how she committed material to memory.

4.2. Instruments

The participants completed the *Learning Style Survey* (Cohen, Oxford, & Chi, 2009) (Appendix 1). The survey comprises 11 different aspects of different learning styles and the answers range on a scale from 0 (never) to 4 (always). Some areas covered by this instrument include receiving and processing new information, committing material to memory, dealing with language rules, multiple inputs, and response time. The survey was followed by a personal, semi-structured interview (Appendix 2) which revolved around the changes Silvina and Beth implemented in their learning styles to become GLLs. For ethical reasons, the participants' real names have been changed to protect their identities. The semi-structured interviews were held individually. The results from the survey were complemented and cross-checked with those coming from the interview. Reliance on triangulation strengthened the validity of findings and allowed further interpretations. Robust information enabled the researchers to shed some light on the participants' learning process and their efforts to attain their goal of becoming GLLs.

4.3. Procedure and data analysis

The learning style survey was completed in English. Both participants took approximately half an hour to fill it out. In the survey, there are 11 major activities

representing 12 different aspects of students' learning styles. The interviews revolved around the changes Silvina and Beth had both implemented to become GLLs. Silvina's interview lasted about 30 minutes, while Beth's interview lasted nearly an hour. They were both eager to answer the questions and talk about their learning process. They were asked to describe their unsuccessful attempts to pass some final exams in college. For example, during a three-year period, Silvina had failed an oral phonetics exam twice. She was encouraged to explain how she had prepared for those two exams and to discuss the steps she had taken to come closer to her goal of becoming a GLL. Beth in turn experienced comparable difficulties in her language courses in college. She had failed her language courses three times. Beth was asked to describe how she had studied to take those exams and what she thought had led her to fail so many times. Then, she was encouraged to explain how her study habits had eventually evolved. The fact that they were both fresh graduates eased the process of recall and reflection upon their college experiences. Initially, Silvina was asked to describe how she had prepared for her pronunciation test before succeeding. She described the manner in which she had studied and tried to improve her L2 and oral skills to pass those exams. Then, she was asked to discuss how she was pushed to modify her course of action and the steps she had taken which brought her closer to her goal of becoming a GLL. Beth was asked to describe her experience as a student of English. She spent several years at the university as an undergraduate student. She was also encouraged to describe the steps she had taken to modify the way she prepared for exams. Both participants analyzed and described how they had studied in the past, how and why they thought they had failed their exams, and how they had managed to change their learning styles to overcome those frustrating experiences and eventually become effective autonomous language learners.

5. Results and discussion

Regarding the survey, Silvina required some assistance in answering questions, especially those formulated in the negative form. She then explained she was certain about her answers. Sometimes, she even selected her response before she read the entire sentence. Beth, on the other hand, was more rational, and took longer to answer each question. She even reread some questions aloud and rephrased them to make sure her answers were coherent. She followed a more reflexive process in this aspect. Figure 1 illustrates, by means of a bar chart with values ranging from 1 to 9, how the participants dealt with response time and impulsiveness. On the left, the tallest bar indicates the highest value for impulsive in Silvina's results. On the right, the results indicate the highest value

for reflective in Beth's answers. Both Silvina and Beth were conscious of their learning styles. When completing the questionnaire, Silvina answered each question both quickly and confidently. Beth also displayed confidence in her final answer once she had carefully evaluated all the choices given. This shows how important it is for each trainee to "understand the potential advantages and disadvantages of the varied components of his or her learning style profile, as well as the combined effects of these components" (Ma & Oxford, 2014, p. 111) while remaining open and flexible to adjust to a given task.

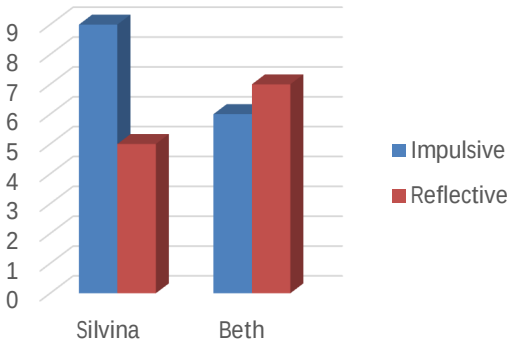

Figure 1 Response time and effectiveness

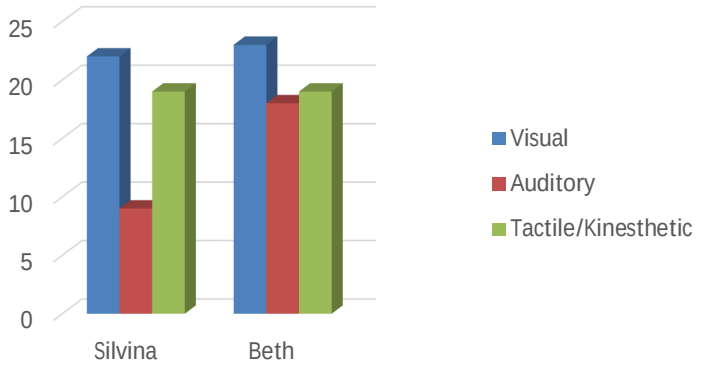

Figure 2 Participants' use of physical senses

It appears that both participants used their senses and received information in multiple, varied ways. They are both mainly visual learners who benefit from graphs, videos, colorful charts, and books. When preparing for her final exam (for the third time), Silvina's first step involved taking down notes from the bibliography and then writing up a final summary. In the final stages of her course of studies, Beth reread the compulsory bibliography, highlighting key expressions

and writing notes on the margins of the original texts. Ma and Oxford (2014, p. 111) explain that "note-taking is (...) preferred by visual learners, who learn better when they see the words written down". Yet Silvina and Belen are also tactile-kinesthetic learners who enjoy doing projects and working on a task without having thoroughly read the instructions first. Silvina also relies on her auditory style for remembering jokes and group discussions. Figure 2 shows the measured values for both participants' use of senses (visual, auditory, and tactile).

As regards receiving information, Silvina is able to learn by both getting the gist of a piece of discourse and remembering specific details about it. Overall, she is a flexible learner. When answering certain questions in the survey, she hesitated. She does not have a single way of going about tasks. Flexibility is another characteristic present in GLLs. They can "adapt their learning style to fit a learning task or purpose, while poor language learners rigidly refuse to change their learning styles, no matter what the task or purpose is" (Ma & Oxford, 2014, p. 111). Oxford (2003) states that L2 learners need to make the most of their style preferences and that, occasionally, they must also extend themselves beyond their style preferences. It is evident that there is a connection between the manipulation of cognitive processes and the use of diverse language learning styles. During the semi-structured interviews, the participants discussed the variety of learning styles they used throughout the period of implementation of change. Silvina physically manipulated the material, first, by writing summaries, and, then, by listening to them. She listened to her own recordings of the material she had to study whenever she had a chance, for instance on her way to work. She first recognized pronunciation mistakes and then she corrected them. She worked first with individual cases and then she contextualized them. Her practice combined insights of both naturalistic and more formal approaches to language learning. Regarding this last comment, she states: "The last times I recorded them, I already knew them by heart, so I was talking". Beth also manipulated the material mentally and physically, especially along her last years in college, engaging in what she called *mental reviews.* She self-assessed her knowledge by asking herself questions and then corroborated her answers against the original version of texts. She also wrote down relevant notes on the margins of pages as she read along. She highlighted keywords and expressions. When she was pressed for time, she summarized information. Beth believed that if she wrote down some information, she would be able to recall it easily. However, memorizing only played a small role in her learning process.

Beth has a more global style preference. She focuses on main ideas without paying close attention to details. In the interview, which will be discussed at length below, she added that she often reads until she fully grasps a certain concept and then continues with the next one. She also mentioned that, in some

cases, she pays close attention to specific vocabulary. In this sense, she is more particular in her preferences, recalling detailed information. Figure 3 shows how Silvina moves on from the global to the particular when receiving information, whereas Beth has a more marked global preference in her learning style. It is important to highlight here that learning styles are not dichotomous. They "generally operate on a continuum or on multiple, intersecting continua" (Oxford, 2003, p. 3).

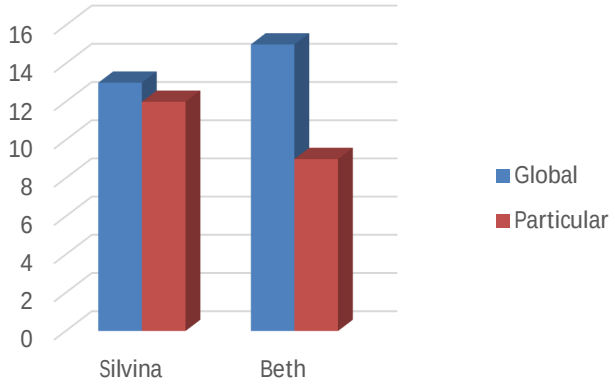

Figure 3 Participants' ways of receiving information

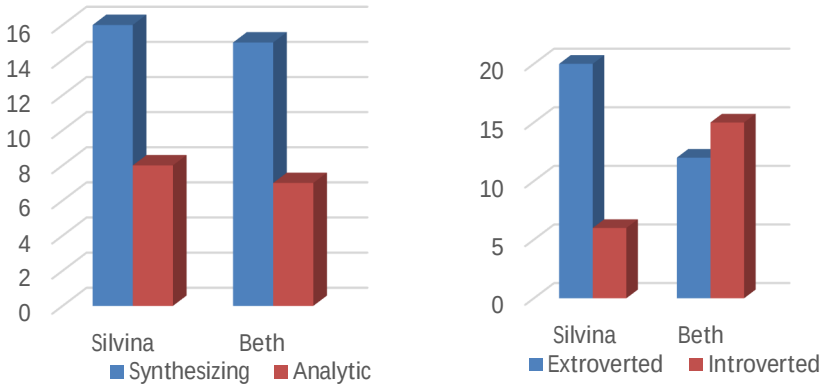

Figure 4 Participants' exposure to learning situations and processing information

In some areas, Silvina and Beth manifest clear tendencies and preferences in their learning style. These areas include exposure to learning situations, processing information, dealing with language rules, and managing multiple inputs. Silvina is undoubtedly an extroverted learner. She enjoys participating in the classroom and is in constant search for learning situations. Although Beth is not entirely introverted, she is not as extroverted as Silvina. Beth is more likely to do independent work. These results are in line with data coming from the interview, in which she

describes her group study sessions as ineffective. The results of this survey describe both Silvina and Beth as synthesizing learners, that is such who can both summarize material very well and paraphrase it without difficulties. These findings are displayed in Figure 4. The bar graph to the left shows the participants' preferences for learning, while the one to the right indicates how they process information.

The results of the survey indicate that Silvina is a synthesizing learner, which means that summarizing was an easy task for her and that she was rather effective at it, although it might not have produced the expected results. Beth claims her change came along with growing up and becoming more academically mature. She asserts that this epiphany would never have occurred to her in her first year in college. Silvina enjoys pulling ideas together and finding similarities. These results correlate with data coming from the interview where she pointed out that she frequently tended to commit data to memory mostly by grouping concepts together and focusing on their similarities, without making the distinctions clear. Figure 5 shows that she is a leveler learner because she is often willing to merge similar memories or experiences, disregarding minor differences. Beth, however, shows more balance in how she commits material to memory. As a sharpener, she tends to focus on differences when storing new information.

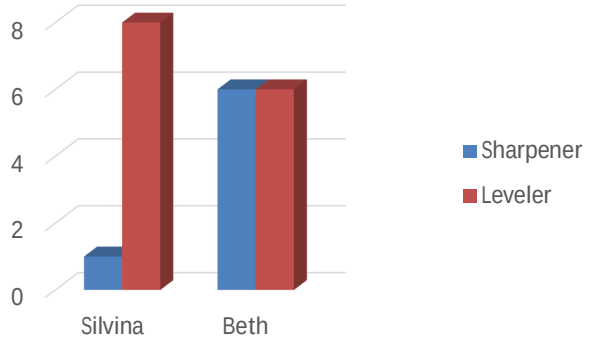

Figure 5 Committing material to memory

These findings indicate that Beth can easily retrieve different items because she stores them separately. This aspect can also be traced in her interview in which she commented that she seldom keeps any records of her learning. She then used a very insightful analogy to describe how she commits information to memory. She compared her way of learning to having a database with multiple folders. After being confronted with new material, she stores it in a *folder* or *compartment* (emphasis on original) and then moves on to study another topic, confident that that material has been successfully stored. She claimed that after storing the material, "[I]t is simply a matter of accessing the database and opening

the folder. If I've understood it, it's all there. That is my mental strategy". As levelers, Silvina and Beth share the ability of clumping material together by doing away with its differences.

The first research question in this study was to determine whether Silvina and Beth would be able to *learn* to modify their learning style. Oxford (2003) argues not only that learners need to make the most of their learning styles preferences but that they also need to extend beyond their stylistic comfort zones. The results of this study seem to indicate that the two participants *did* learn to change their learning styles. Originally, Silvina relied exclusively on summarizing texts and memorizing those summaries to learn. As a synthesizing learner, she was able to both summarize material very well and paraphrase it without difficulties. However, when she realized that that technique was no longer useful for her, she set out to modify her learning style. Data triangulation allowed us to observe that she was able to change and adapt her rote learning style to meet her final goal. She decided to stop memorizing isolated vocabulary items. Instead, she felt the need to learn to establish meaningful connections and associations among them. At the interview, she said: "I think that the biggest mistake was that I was just trying to memorize vocabulary. And I didn't know how I could relate that vocabulary to English itself". Crosschecking this information with that coming from the survey, we can conclude that she was initially a sharpener because she liked to distinguish small differences and to separate memories of prior experiences from memories of current ones. She could easily retrieve different items because she stored them separately. Later on, on seeing that being a sharpener did not help her achieve her goal, she decided to implement a change in her learning style and became a leveler. If one is concerned with expediency, being a leveler may be the key to communication.

With the benefit of hindsight, Beth stated that during her first years in college she was not aware of her learning styles and therefore she relied mostly on reading to improve her learning skills. As regards her language courses, she failed them several times. At first, Beth believed that language skills could not be *studied*. She thought that simply by reading texts superficially she would be able to learn what she had read and then pass her exams without much difficulty. Her learning process basically involved reading and listening to model texts. However, she took and failed the same language course three consecutive times and then she felt frustrated. As a first step to reverse that situation, she began to pay attention to her classmates. She noticed they had written multiple outlines and drafts of one written assignment, for example. So, she decided to take a more active role in her learning process. She modified the way in which she approached texts. Before completing an assignment, she started to analyze the macrostructure of model texts. She read them to get familiarized with their

schematic format, "the skeleton of each text type", in her own words. In addition to this change, Beth thoroughly studied particular phrases and grammatical structures useful for each text type. In this way, she developed a more holistic learning style. Regarding oral skills development, she added that she used a similar global technique. She first thought about the type of genre she would have to develop (e.g., narrative, argument, opinion, for example). Subsequently, she organized her ideas in her mind and planned her speech. She identified a few key phrases and expressions she knew would be suitable for her context and then she began speaking.

Analyzing and reasoning played a major role in Silvina and Beth's learning processes. Silvina pointed out: "I try to make a comparison between all the authors and what each author talks about, the years when they wrote their works. That also helped". She mentally manipulated the material by comparing different authors' points of views. This information is in line with data coming from the survey, in which she turned out to be a leveler, that is, someone who is "likely to clump material together in order to remember it by eliminating or reducing differences, and by focusing almost exclusively on similarities" (Cohen et al., 2009, p. 160). Beth had a more balanced preference for sharpener and leveler learning styles, which was evident both in the results of the survey and the interview. As a sharpener, she noticed and sought distinctions among items. When she studied, she devoted time exclusively to one author at a time. She distinguished main ideas and wrote side notes to remember them. She claimed that this allowed her to mentally store information in a *folder*. After doing the same with several other authors, she claimed to have easy access to multiple *folders* in her mind, each belonging to a different author, containing useful information. This claim is supported by the results of the survey in which she reported: "I can easily retrieve the different items because I store them separately". When Beth found a particular topic difficult to understand, she "read a thousand different points of view, until" she "had understood everything". She said that she "*trusted* that knowledge would remain" in her memory. That approach, however, was not exclusive. As a leveler, Beth was also willing to clump similar material together. When she was pressed for time and had to cover a vast amount of material, she "couldn't afford the *luxury* of spending three hours, stuck, on a single page". In those cases, Beth read all the material at once without focusing on details. Once she believed she understood what she had read, she moved on to the next topic. She tried to understand a concept without going deeply into it.

Our second research question set out to investigate the language learning styles that L2 learners often use on their path to become GLLs. We know that they often go through three vital phases. The first step they take is becoming aware of their difficulties. Naiman et al. (1996) claim that GLLs manage to find

different ways to overcome linguistic obstacles. For Silvina, after failing her final exam twice, that meant reflecting over her study methods because they had not worked out the way she had expected. She claimed that when she studied for her pronunciation tests, she mostly relied on the reading and memorization of her written summaries. This information is consistent with data coming from the survey, in which she reported that she often counted on rote learning as her favorite studying technique. In retrospect, Silvina made an interesting remark with regard to committing material to memory: "I think I never understood what I was reading". She referred specifically to her approach to vocabulary learning as her biggest obstacle. She memorized specific lexical items without linking them to her previous knowledge or to the English language system as a whole, without making clear distinctions. This is an example of an overlap of information with the data emerging from the interview. As she said, "I didn't know how I could relate that vocabulary to the English [language] itself".

Beth said she had faced similar difficulties before making a major change in her studying habits. In one of her language courses, the most challenging part of the exam consisted in writing an essay on a random topic. When preparing for that exam, she did not actually prepare or study much. She simply reread sample essays, expecting that reading would help her write her own texts more easily. She added: "I just hoped I would be able to produce a similar text". She believed that she could not really prepare or study for that kind of test. She used to think that essays were "a spur of the moment thing". However, when she took the same language course for the third time, something inside her changed. She became aware that she was not taking any steps to improve. Out of disappointment, she observed what other students were doing to improve their writing skills. Beth decided to imitate them and take a more active role as a learner. She read text to analyze their macrostructure, she highlighted "chunks", phrases that could be easily fitted into a text type to express certain ideas, and she started writing new texts of her own. She acknowledged that she had spent her first years in college "effortlessly". After failing some courses several times, she realized that her limited effort and dedication were not sufficient to improve her language skills to pass her exams, so she decided to implement a drastic change in her approach to learning. It is interesting to see that after failing their exams for the first time, neither Silvina nor Beth modified their studying techniques and habits. Silvina continued reading and memorizing the same summaries she had prepared while taking the course, while Beth kept on reading and listening to sample texts superficially. When asked why Silvina had failed her final exam twice in a row, she answered: "Because I didn't sit down and try to go beyond. I just memorized. Well, you asked me, I don't know, something that was a little bit outside the theory and I couldn't answer. Because I wasn't thinking".

Silvina realized she had to modify her rote learning style to succeed if she intended to become a better language learner. She focused on relating new material to her prior knowledge. In the interview, she referred to it as "going beyond". Whenever she learned about a new topic, she made connections with whatever information she already had in mind. She resorted to her *filing* system for storing information to access different *folders*. She also mentioned looking at a topic from multiple angles to truly know about it. O'Malley and Chamot (1990) claim that learners who organize new information and consciously relate it to previous knowledge learn better than those who simply memorize by rote learning.

Silvina and Beth are also able to merge new experiences with previous ones and to store new material by relating it to previous knowledge. The way in which these subjects deal with language rules is very specific as they are deductive learners. Figure 6 illustrates how they go from the general to the specific, applying generalizations to individual instances. Silvina claims that starting from the rules is the easiest way for her. She begins with the general rule and then moves on to particular cases or examples.

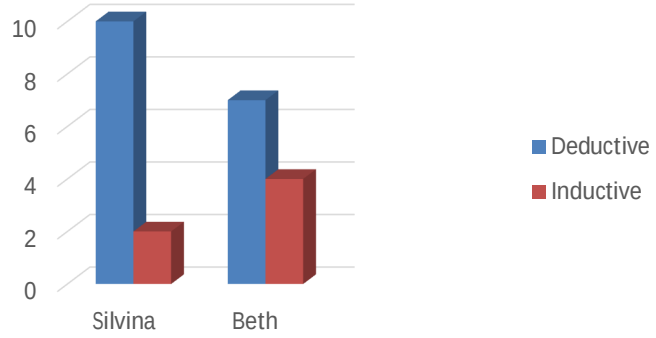

Figure 6 Participants' way of dealing with language rules

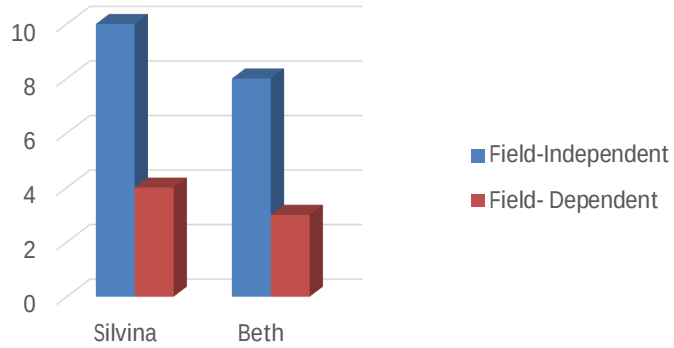

Figure 7 Participants as field-independent learners

Figure 7 shows that Silvina and Beth are field-independent learners, which indicates that they are able to abstract material from a given context despite distractions or hindrances. In other words, they have the ability to separate details from the surrounding context. Each aspect of an individual's learning style can have positive and negative effects in the learning process. Ma and Oxford (2014, p. 111) suggest that learners manage these effects, confirming "the importance of metacognitive thinking and planning on the part of the learner".

As mentioned earlier, learning styles are closely related to self-regulation in L2 learners. Self-regulated learners: (i) become actively involved in their learning process, (ii) find ways to overcome their obstacles, and (iii) monitor their own performance (Neiman et al., 1996). These three steps are presented in an alternative taxonomy by Rubin (2001), who suggests four phases in the growth of self-regulated learners: monitoring, evaluating, adjusting, and implementing. Beth and Silvina experienced these steps in their paths to becoming GLLs. The negative experiences that led these two learners to become aware of their drawbacks have already been discussed. After noticing their difficulties, Silvina and Beth's next step consisted in becoming actively involved in their own learning processes. Silvina decided to record herself reading her summaries aloud. Then, she listened to her recordings instead of merely reading them again. Beth began to write texts of her own but, before doing that, she tried to understand the schematic structure of different text types. She analyzed them using both a global and a particular focus to recognize their macrostructure as well as the vocabulary and grammar associated with the text type. In this way, these two learners began to take charge of their own learning processes.

As advanced learners, Silvina and Beth determined their own objectives and the way in which they would accomplish them. They took charge of their learning process and organized their learning approach. They decided how much time they would have to devote to completing different kinds of tasks. Only after these two initial phases were these learners ready for the third step, namely monitoring their own performance. While listening to her recordings, Silvina was able to spot mistakes in her production. In reference to this, she said: "You should find out where you sound the way you don't want to sound". She constantly evaluated her performance. In fact, she used her mistakes in L2 to identify her weak areas and to understand why she was making those mistakes. Beth also monitored her comprehension by mentally assessing her knowledge of a given topic and she engaged in evaluating her performance in different circumstances. Then, she went on to explain that in 2010 she had made a four-month trip to an English speaking country, and right after she came back from that trip, she began to focus critically on the quality of her oral production. She realized that she needed to improve her tempo and the pronunciation of certain

words, for instance. However, she also noticed that, as a result of being immersed in an English speaking environment for some time, she had made some interesting linguistic gains, especially regarding her overall fluency, a fact that seemed to have boosted up her self-confidence when using the L2.

Silvina was able to identify some mistakes in the use of pitch contours, for example. She realized that she was using rising tones when adding new information where she should have used falling tones to signal finality. Such prosodic problems brought about some communication difficulties with her interlocutors. Another suprasegmental feature that she felt affected her speech was related to pause location and its correlate in the form of fluency. She acknowledged that pause misplacement interfered with the temporal structure of her speech and also caused some misunderstandings in her discourse. She also mentioned the importance of stress placement at both word and sentence levels for the attainment of intelligibility. At the segmental level, she noticed some problems in the realization of some sounds, such as the production and distinction of the alveolar fricative [s] and its counterpart [z], [b]/[v] distinctions, and the production of some consonant clusters, especially those in word-initial position. She describes this as follows:

> I think in some way it is some kind of punishment. I mean I heard it, I heard it, over and over again. So I didn't stop until I was happy with my recording (...) because the first times that you hear yourself isn't nice. I mean it doesn't sound nice. I can't believe, I couldn't believe I was talking like that. So I recorded myself again and again and again and again. I'm not talking about recording two or three minutes, I mean they took like twenty minutes each.

It should be borne in mind that all these phonological aspects had already been formally taught to Silvina in her pronunciation classes. However, only after she reflected upon her learning style, and that was long after she had taken that course and failed twice its final exam, was she able to start making some important changes in her speech, and began working autonomously, without the assistance from teachers, tutors, or peers.

Beth was also able to improve substantially without extra assistance from her teachers or classmates. After having become aware of her challenge and taken an active role in her learning process, she began to monitor her performance with a focus on her organization of ideas. Beth claimed that even though she often lacked organization, she was very schematic. She studied the contents thoroughly. Once she was confident about the content she had to study, she focused on *how* she would put that into words. She thought about a particular topic or concept and reviewed the literature about it. Then she wrote down the main ideas on paper, using *chunks*, or formulas and patterns she had taken from similar text types and arranged them following an organization pattern. She then

proofread her work. During the interview, she commented on a particular episode in which she monitored herself in excess. On that occasion, she was told "Beth, you monitor yourself so much that we can't follow what you say!" Since then, she has tried to relax more and lower her anxiety levels. Those words allowed her to keep in balance the extent to which she should monitor her production.

Interpreting these data, it can be observed that both learners implemented a number of comprehensive changes in their learning processes and styles. Silvina adopted and followed a very systematic procedure to eradicate pronunciation problems and internalize the correct forms: (a) she noticed her mistakes, (b) she wrote them down, (c) she tried to fix them, (d) she practiced them by reading them aloud in a very controlled manner, and (e) she read and recorded her summaries again, always focusing on those phonological areas that needed modification. Beth, on her part, divided her learning process into two aspects: (i) content and (ii) development. She studied the concepts included in the exam from different angles, reading different authors' works and taking down notes. Beth also focused on relevant vocabulary to describe the concepts. She *filed* these concepts, confident that the information had been carefully stored. Then, she worked on the development of ideas. She analyzed different text types until she had a mental representation of the macrostructure she would have to produce, and she focused on learning *chunks* to elaborate ideas or establish meaningful connections. These chunks served as formalized routines to achieve performance beyond her competence level. She practiced how to express ideas either mentally or in written form, following a given schematic structure, or fitting them to her mental representation of the text's skeleton.

6. Conclusion

In this descriptive study we set out to observe and analyze the learning processes which led two unsuccessful learners to become GLLs. We initially presented two research questions which were promptly addressed in the earlier sections of this paper. We also reviewed some of the most frequent language learning styles that most GLLs use and compared them to the ones deployed by Silvina and Beth in their particular contexts along with their implementation of change. One of the central aspects of this descriptive study was to observe and describe the manner in which these trainees monitored and self-regulated their learning process in a completely autonomous way, thus managing to revert their initial state to become GLLs. We concur with Griffiths and Oxford's (2014, p. 8) prediction that "(...) there will be an increasing groundswell of interest in definitions that emphasize learners' strategic self-regulation". We are also confident that this step towards self-regulated learning is highly beneficial for L2 acquisition.

The insights provided by this study may be taken into account by other language teachers and teacher-researchers in order to better understand how they might help their students become better language learners. Gilakjani and Ahmadi (2011) highlight the importance of providing multiple opportunities for learners to achieve a *learning style shift*. Oxford et al. (2014) claim that language teachers, coaches, or counselors must understand how to promote *learning to learn*. Language instructors must provide assistance for learners to become aware of their learning styles and their effectiveness in performing certain tasks. This may be accomplished by designing tasks which encourage learners to cater to different language learning styles. Tasks which push learners to notice gaps in their interlanguage by comparing and contrasting input or output and the distance to be covered to reach the desired level of L2 proficiency (Luchini, 2005, 2012, 2013) could well fall into this category. Teachers may also discuss with their students how to organize their learning and how to set realistic goals. As regards learning styles, a practical suggestion for teachers might be to "pair one student with another student who has a different learning style, so that learners can emulate the other person's [styles...] and incorporate them into their own styles" (Ma & Oxford, 2014, p. 112). All in all, we want students to understand what sorts of learning styles there manifest and how to interpret their own behavior in learning. This leads to greater self-awareness, a crucial factor for L2 acquisition to take place. Insights derived from this study may also be useful for other students facing similar challenges to the ones depicted by Silvina and Beth who wanted to achieve individual self-development. We hope that this work will contribute to cooperation of English language teachers, strategy researchers and theorists with respect to the central aspects of language learning styles. This joint work should have a positive impact on L2 learners' language development, which will allow them to achieve their desired linguistic goals and eventually become better language learners (Griffith & Oxford, 2014).

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Appendix 1

Learning Style Survey: Assessing Your Own Learning Styles (taken from Cohen et al., 2009)

For each item, circle your response:
0 = Never, 1 = Rarely, 2 = Sometimes, 3 = Often, 4 = Always

Part 1: HOW I USE MY PHYSICAL SENSES

1. I remember something better if I write it down.
3. I take detailed notes during lectures.
4. When I listen, I visualize pictures, numbers, or words in my head.
5. I prefer to learn with TV or video rather than other media.
6. I use color-coding to help me as I learn or work.
7. I need written directions for tasks.
8. I have to look at people to understand what they say.
9. I understand lectures better when professors write on the board.
10. Charts, diagrams, and maps help me understand what someone says.
11. I remember peoples' faces but not their names. 11. I remember things better if I discuss them with someone.
12. I prefer to learn by listening to a lecture rather than reading.
13. I need oral directions for a task.
14. Background sound helps me think.
15. I like to listen to music when I study or work.
16. I can understand what people say even when I cannot see them.
17. I remember peoples' names but not their faces.
18. I easily remember jokes that I hear.
19. I can identify people by their voices (e.g., on the phone).
20. When I turn on the TV, I listen to the sound more than I watch the screen.
21. I prefer to start doing things rather than checking the directions first.
22. I need frequent breaks when I work or study.
23. I need to eat something when I read or study.
24. If I have a choice between sitting and standing, I'd rather stand.
25. I get nervous when I sit still too long.
26. I think better when I move around (e.g., pacing or tapping my feet).
27. I play with or bite on my pens during lectures.
28. Manipulating objects helps me to remember what someone says.
29. I move my hands when I speak.
30. I draw lots of pictures (doodles) in my notebook during lectures.

Part 2: HOW I EXPOSE MYSELF TO LEARNING SITUATIONS

1. I learn better when I work or study with others than by myself.
2. I meet new people easily by jumping into the conversation.
3. I learn better in the classroom than with a private tutor.
4. It is easy for me to approach strangers.
5. Interacting with lots of people gives me energy.
6. I experience things first and then try to understand them.

7. I am energized by the inner world (what I'm thinking inside).
8. I prefer individual or one-on-one games and activities.
9. I have a few interests, and I concentrate deeply on them.
10. After working in a large group, I am exhausted.
11. When I am in a large group, I tend to keep silent and listen.
12. I want to understand something well before I try it.

Part 3: HOW I HANDLE POSSIBILITIES

1. I have a creative imagination.
2. I try to find many options and possibilities for why something happens.
3. I plan carefully for future events.
4. I like to discover things myself rather than have everything explained to me.
5. I add many original ideas during class discussions.
6. I am open-minded to new suggestions from my peers.
7. I focus on a situation as it is rather than thinking about how it could be.
8. I read instruction manuals (e.g., for computers or VCRs) before using the device.
9. I trust concrete facts instead of new, untested ideas.
10. I prefer things presented in a step-by-step way.
11. I dislike it if my classmate changes the plan for our project.
13. I follow directions carefully.

Part 4: HOW I DEAL WITH AMBIGUITY AND WITH DEADLINES

1. I like to plan language study sessions carefully and do lessons on time or early.
2. My notes, handouts, and other school materials are carefully organized.
3. I like to be certain about what things mean in a target language.
4. I like to know how rules are applied and why.
5. I let deadlines slide if I'm involved in other things.
6. I let things pile up on my desk to be organized eventually.
7. I don't worry about comprehending everything.
8. I don't feel the need to come to rapid conclusions about a topic.

Part 5: HOW I RECEIVE INFORMATION

1. I prefer short and simple answers rather than long explanations.
2. I ignore details that do not seem relevant.
3. It is easy for me to see the overall plan or big picture.
4. I get the main idea, and that's enough for me.
5. When I tell an old story, I tend to forget lots of specific details.
6. I need very specific examples in order to understand fully.
7. I pay attention to specific facts or information.
8. I'm good at catching new phrases or words when I hear them.
9. I enjoy activities where I fill in the blank with missing words I hear.
10. When I try to tell a joke, I remember details but forget the punch line.

Part 6: HOW I FURTHER PROCESS INFORMATION

1. I can summarize information easily.
2. I can quickly paraphrase what other people say.

3. When I create an outline, I consider the key points first.
4. I enjoy activities where I have to pull ideas together.
5. By looking at the whole situation, I can easily understand someone.
6. I have a hard time understanding when I don't know every word.
7. When I tell a story or explain something, it takes a long time.
8. I like to focus on grammar rules.
9. I'm good at solving complicated mysteries and puzzles.
10. I am good at noticing even the smallest details involved in a task.

Part 7: HOW I COMMIT MATERIAL TO MEMORY

1. I try to pay attention to all the features of new material as I learn.
2. When I memorize different bits of language material, I can retrieve these bits easily—as if I had stored them in separate slots in my brain.
3. As I learn new material in the target language, I make fine distinctions among speech sounds, grammatical forms, and words and phrases.
4. When learning new information, I may clump together data by eliminating or reducing differences and focusing on similarities.
5. I ignore distinctions that would make what I say more accurate in the given context.
6. Similar memories become blurred in my mind; I merge new learning experiences with previous ones.

Part 8: HOW I FURTHER PROCESS INFORMATION

1. I can summarize information easily.
2. I can quickly paraphrase what other people say.
3. When I create an outline, I consider the key points first.
4. I enjoy activities where I have to pull ideas together.
5. By looking at the whole situation, I can easily understand someone.
6. I have a hard time understanding when I don't know every word.
7. When I tell a story or explain something, it takes a long time.
8. I like to focus on grammar rules.
9. I'm good at solving complicated mysteries and puzzles.
10. I am good at noticing even the smallest details involved in a task.

Part 9: HOW I COMMIT MATERIAL TO MEMORY

1. I try to pay attention to all the features of new material as I learn.
2. When I memorize different bits of language material, I can retrieve these bits easily—as if I had stored them in separate slots in my brain.
3. As I learn new material in the target language, I make fine distinctions among speech sounds, grammatical forms, and words and phrases.
4. When learning new information, I may clump together data by eliminating or reducing differences and focusing on similarities.
5. I ignore distinctions that would make what I say more accurate in the given context.
6. Similar memories become blurred in my mind; I merge new learning experiences with previous ones.

Part 10: HOW I DEAL WITH LANGUAGE RULES

1. I like to go from general patterns to the specific examples in learning a target language.
2. I like to start with rules and theories rather than specific examples.
3. I like to begin with generalizations and then find experiences that relate to those generalizations.
4. I like to learn rules of language indirectly by being exposed to examples of grammatical structures and other language features.
5. I don't really care if I hear a rule stated since I don't remember rules very well anyway.
6. I figure out rules based on the way I see language forms behaving over time.

Part 11: HOW I DEAL WITH MULTIPLE INPUTS

1. I can separate out the relevant and important information in a given context even when distracting information is present.
2. When I produce an oral or written message in the target language, I make sure that all the grammatical structures are in agreement with each other.
3. I not only attend to grammar but check for appropriate levels of formality and politeness.
4. When speaking or writing, I feel that focusing on grammar is less important than paying attention to the content of the message.
5. It is a challenge for me to both focus on communication in speech or writing while at the same time paying attention to grammatical agreement (e.g., person, number, tense, or gender).
6. When I am using lengthy sentences in a target language, I get distracted and neglect aspects of grammar and style.

Part 12: HOW I DEAL WITH RESPONSE TIME

1. I react quickly in language situations.
2. I go with my instincts in the target language.
3. I jump in, see what happens, and make corrections if needed.
4. I need to think things through before speaking or writing.
5. I like to look before I leap when determining what to say or write in a target language.
6. I attempt to find supporting material in my mind before I set about producing language.

Part 13: HOW LITERALLY I TAKE REALITY

1. I find that building metaphors in my mind helps me deal with language (e.g., viewing the language like a machine with component parts that can be disassembled).
2. I learn things through metaphors and associations with other things. I find that stories and examples help me learn.
3. I take learning language literally and don't deal in metaphors.
4. I take things at face value, so I like language material that says what it means directly.

Appendix 2

Questions used along the interviews:

- How did you prepare to enter university?
- Did you have any difficulties with any course in particular?
- What happened the second time you failed the course/exam?
- Can you tell us what happened to you before you took this test?
- How did you prepare for these exams?
- And, what did you do to pass this test? What did you do if you didn't understand a concept?
- How did you realize your approach to learning was ineffective?
- How do you know that you "never understood how to study"?
- Did you record your summaries while you were reading them aloud?
- How did you manage to modify them?
- How many times did you listen to your recordings?
- How did you acquire the technical jargon, the technical specific language or vocabulary that you need to express your ideas?
- Why did you have to mold your learning process?
- After having graduated, what do you consider was most helpful to improve your language skills?
- How did you realize which actions were useful and which were not?
- What piece of advice would you give to classmates in a similar situation?
- What do you think about your English now?