

# From self-study to studying the self: a collaborative autoethnography of language educators as informal language learners

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**Abstract.** This article reports on an autoethnography by two authors who analysed the interrelationship of their experiences as foreign language learners, educators, and researchers. Both participant-researchers had taken advantage of the accessibility of online learning resources to learn new languages, had incorporated digital tools into their teaching practices, and had researched how technology could be used as a learning aid for students inside and outside the classroom. In this collaborative autoethnography, they turned the research lens upon themselves and each other to develop understandings of the way their experiences as language learners and researchers impacted upon their teacher cognition and teaching practices.

**Keywords:** collaborative autoethnography, informal language learning, multilingualism, teacher cognition.

## 1. Introduction

This paper examines how the authors' informal online L2 learning experiences impacted upon their teaching practices, as "teachers' cognitions can be powerfully influenced by their own experiences as learners" (Borg, 2009, p. 3). It also extends to their role as researchers by examining the interconnectivity of the teacher, learner, and researcher dimensions. This study is autoethnographic, following studies in teacher education (Yazan, 2019), CALL (Clark & Gruba, 2010) and instructional design and online education (Park, Jung, & Reeves, 2015). Mirhosseini (2018)

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has called for more autoethnographic research in TESOL<sup>3</sup>, which is still relatively rare despite its potential to deepen epistemological understanding in this field. The authors take this challenge and extend it by conducting a collaborative autoethnography in a multilingual context.

## **2. Method**

### **2.1. Participants**

The participant-researchers share several similarities. Both are multilingual and teach their L1 as a foreign language. Louise teaches English in Japan and speaks Japanese, French, and Italian at various levels of proficiency. Antonie teaches German in New Zealand, is proficient in English and French, and is learning Spanish. As Computer/Mobile Assisted Language Learning (CALL/MALL) researchers, they have both been exploring the role digital technology plays in their students', and more recently in their own, L2 development.

### **2.2. Collaborative autoethnography**

The participant-researchers undertook a collaborative autoethnography, a method which involves “researchers pooling their stories to find some commonalities and differences and then wrestling with these stories to discover the meanings of the stories in relation to their sociocultural contexts” (Chang, Ngunjiri, & Hernandez, 2016, p. 17). To gain an understanding of the way their identities and experiences as language learners, teachers, and researchers intertwined, they followed Chang et al.'s (2016) iterative process of collaborative autoethnography. This approach involved four stages – preliminary and subsequent data collection, data analysis, and report writing – shifting at each level between individual and collaborative (see [supplementary materials](#) for a full overview).

## **3. Results and discussion**

This section explores three central, inextricably interconnected dimensions that emerged in the analysis, reflecting the participant-researchers' transitions from language educators who engaged in L2 self-study to researchers who engaged in studying the self.

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3. Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages

### 3.1. The learner dimension

While engaging in the iterative process of collaborative autoethnography, the authors re-examined their language learning histories, identifying successful informal and unsuccessful formal learning episodes. These experiences were partly behind their shift towards autonomous learning. They experimented with a range of learning resources and felt drawn to ‘the digital wilds’, a term defined by [Sauro and Zourou \(2017\)](#) as “informal language learning that takes place in digital spaces, communities, and networks that are independent of formal instructional contexts” (p. 186). The authors explored the digital wilds through multiple tools but focus on their use of Netflix below.

Louise began using Netflix in Italian in December 2018, 16 months after commencing her studies. She had previously used Netflix for entertainment in English and felt it could offer an enjoyable way to improve her L2 skills. When watching in Italian she initially understood little and needed substantial English audio/subtitle support, often accessed during subsequent viewings, but enjoyed the shows and the challenge of watching them in her L2. In early 2019, her reliance on English was still high, but later that year she noticed a dramatic improvement in her vocabulary recognition, listening/reading comprehension, and reading speed. By 2020, she was comfortably watching shows solely in Italian for pleasure.

Antonie started watching Netflix series in Spanish in June 2017, after six months of Spanish practice with language apps ([Alm, 2016](#)). She initially made extensive use of the replay function and used subtitles in Spanish and English. Having developed a daily viewing routine, she noticed, like Louise, steady improvement in her understanding. A further source of satisfaction was the cultural knowledge she gained, and a growing familiarity with sites and actors she encountered over time in different series, nurturing her emerging L2 self.

### 3.2. The teacher dimension

Their personal experiences strongly impacted on their teacher cognition and, in turn, this influenced their teaching practices. Louise’s successful experiences with informal learning pushed her to seek ways to support out-of-class online learning in her English and self-directed learning courses. She guided students through planning-action-reflection cycles ([Ohashi, 2018](#)) to help them reach goals they determined for themselves. Informed by self-determination theory, Antonie’s approach to language teaching equally placed a strong emphasis on learner autonomy, self-reflection, and collaboration ([Alm, 2006](#)).

The researchers' use of particular tools as learners impacted upon the way they guided students and structured their courses. Louise's use of Netflix led her to present it as an L2 resource, encouraging students to use it and share their learning experiences with each other. Similarly, Antonie's positive experiences led her to include a Netflix project in her German course. To foster learner agency, students were guided to self-select German series, and to encourage peer learning, they shared their viewing experiences with classmates through blogs. Learning from students' self-reflections, and reflections on each other's experiences, she adjusted the assignment in subsequent iterations, increasing its length and providing increasing self-control over learning tools (e.g. use of subtitling apps such as Mate<sup>4</sup> or Memrise<sup>5</sup> for vocabulary revision).

Assuming a learner position reinforced their understanding of the dynamic nature of out-of-class L2 engagement. They were confronted with impediments that they had not foreseen but also found ways of becoming creative with their time constraints. They knew how they optimised Netflix in their own contexts and wondered how the viewing practices of their students were shaped by their lives and routines. Their discussions during this collaborative autoethnography led them to two important questions: what can we learn from our students? What can they learn from each other and from us? Asking these questions opens a dialogue between teachers and learners that creates a more egalitarian structure than conventionally found in the classroom.

### **3.3. The researcher dimension**

Through sharing narratives and engaging in discussions, the researchers realised that sharing their informal learning experiences with each other and their students validated and empowered their own learner voices, which brought them closer to their students and their experiences. They also identified within themselves a desire to be L2 role models and teachers who give agency to students within formal learning environments by offering them options, recognising their learning choices, and encouraging them to engage in activities that meet their individual needs.

Antonie has used the term 'intra-formal' language learning (Alm, 2019) to describe the synergy between informal and formal learning, which informs the learning experiences of both students and teachers who engage in informal language practice. Through turning the analytical lens upon themselves and each other in this collaborative autoethnography, the researchers not only solidified their

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4. <https://gikken.co/mate-translate/netflix/>

5. <https://www.memrise.com/>

understanding of the important role they saw for informal learning in their own and their students' L2 development, but also recognised how their experiences had pushed them to actively draw students into intra-formal learning.

## 4. Conclusions

This study has highlighted the interdependent relationship between the authors' teacher cognition and teaching practices, their language learning experiences, and their engagement as researchers. Having observed colleagues learning L2s, they believe their experiences are not unique and are responding to EUROCALL 2020's conference theme of 'widening participation' by calling for others to add their voices. This exploratory article and their EUROCALL 2020 presentation (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l8MBDzUpuuc>) offer an example and endorsement of collaborative autoethnographic research within the CALL context, an area the authors hope colleagues will help expand.

## 5. Supplementary materials

<https://research-publishing.box.com/s/m30e55a71e61sh351e81v16ywk2b5y8w>

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