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Social and Institutional Factors Affecting Language Learning Activities

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This article aims to contribute to an understanding of how social and institutional factors affect the language learning environments of university students studying less-commonly taught languages (Turner, 1958), at beginner level by distance online. The empirical material is drawn from longitudinal case studies of students who enrolled in beginner-level distance courses in LCTLs at a regional Swedish university in the early 2010s. The study supports previous research illustrating the importance of sociocultural factors in learning activities. Furthermore, the study adds to research showing that for LCTLs an online learning context provides affordances that simply may not exist in campus settings and makes the study of LCTLs accessible to people for whom it would otherwise not be, an important contribution to linguistic diversity. The novel finding of this study is the direct and clearly articulated effect of different policies and frameworks on individuals' choices of how, when and where to study, which suggests a need to examine further the ways that government and supranational entities shape the decisions made by adult learners.

Keywords: LCTLs, adult learners, activity theory, personal learning environments, CALL, distance learning, qualitative

1 Introduction

This article aims to contribute to an understanding of how social and institutional factors affect the language learning environments of university students studying less-commonly taught languages (LCTLs), that is, languages other than the more-commonly taught languages (MCTLs) English, Spanish, French, and German (Turner, 1958), at beginner level by distance online. The study of LCTLs and how and why people choose to learn them is relevant for those concerned with linguistic diversity and the vitality of communities in which LCTLs are spoken. The article also engages with questions of accessibility to education and how this interacts with social policies and frameworks to influence learners' educational options and choices.

The empirical material in this article is drawn from longitudinal case studies of students who enrolled in beginner-level distance courses in Mandarin, Japanese, Portuguese, Russian and/or Swedish at a regional Swedish university (hereafter referred to as RSU) between 2011 and 2014, following their reflections on their learning activities through early 2016. As is shown in the empirical

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material, while the online classroom is a relevant context for the study's subjects, it is only one aspect of a personal learning environment (PLE) that can be viewed as the sum of contextual factors contributing to the language learning process. In an article described in greater detail in Section 3 below, Kyppö (2014) discusses the importance of PLEs for learners of LCTLs:

> Thinking about the future of less commonly taught languages, I see informal learning and Personal Learning Environments (PLE), that is learning in different contexts and situations, as an option to current e-learning approaches. Rapidly growing mobile technologies and the use of social media will offer new learning platforms for the development of all areas of communicative competence (Kyppö, 2014, p. 145).

This article is in part a response to Kyppö's call for explorations of the use of PLEs for understanding the learning of LCTLs in digital contexts.

2 Conceptualizing the Personal Learning Environment

Olivier and Liber (2001) first defined the PLE as a "consistent user inter-face" that meets "lifelong learners' needs […] for a learning profile of their own necessary for (co-) managing their learning career" and "to be able to carry on learning while temporarily disconnected from a remote learning server" (p. 1). Over time, PLEs have been defined in different ways by different stakeholders. The definition used in this article is Attwell's (2007), which describes PLEs as "comprised of all the different tools we use in our everyday life for learning" (p. 4). Attwell collaborated with Buchem and Torres (Buchem et al., 2011) to use Engeström's (1987) activity theory (AT) triangle as a heuristic for conceptualizing PLEs, shown in Figure 1.

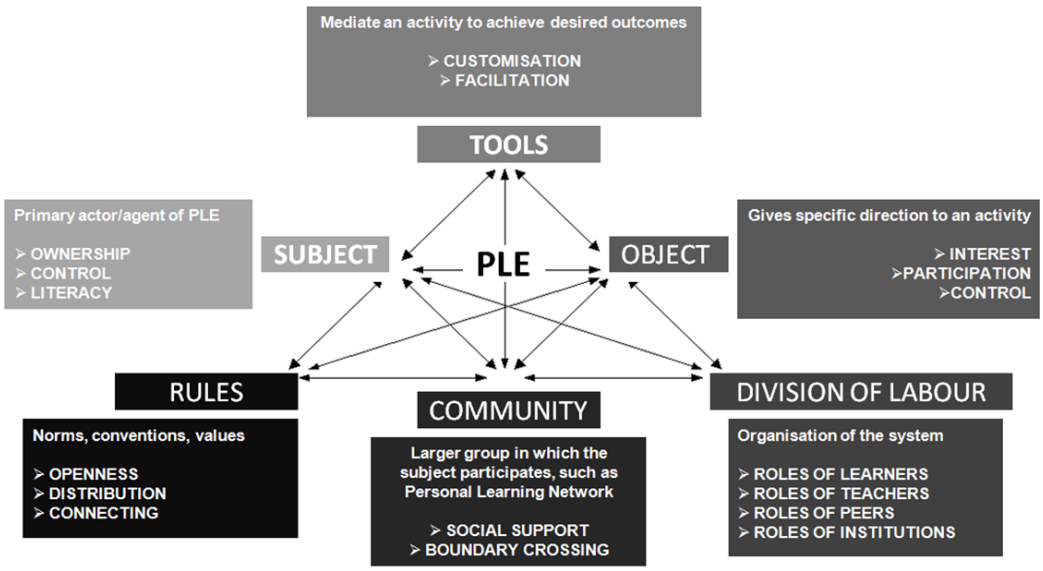

Figure 1. The PLE as an activity system (Buchem et al., 2011)

The focus of the analysis in the current article is on the affordances and constraints presented by the *community* and *division of labor* aspects of the activity system on the *subjects* and their *objects* (other aspects of the activity system are treated elsewhere; see Case 2015, 2021). The components of the

aspects identified by Buchem et al. (2011)—social support and boundary crossing for *community*; the roles of learners, teachers, peers, and institutions for *division of labor*—provided analytical categories for the results described in Section 5. Another aspect of AT employed in this article are the three levels of activity that Wertsch (1981) identified: *operations*, *actions*, and *activities*, to which I draw a parallel to Holec's (1979, pp. 10–11) three levels of language learning goals: *operations* are the tasks a learner undertakes, *actions* are engagement in a longer course of study, and *activities* are the way that a target language is put into use. In the analysis below, words are italicized when they are used in reference to this conceptual framework.

In the previous research outlined in the following section, a number of different theoretical approaches to studying language learning are represented, some of which are not compatible with the sociocultural lens taken in this article. However, I consider other approaches which contribute to an understanding of the social and institutional factors which afford and constrain language learning *activities* relevant to the research question in this article.

3 Previous Research

As stated above, the purpose of this article is to contribute to an understanding of how social and institutional factors affect the language learning environments of university students studying LCTLs at beginner level by distance online. As this is a highly specific purpose, the body of directly relevant previous research is not large. A wide net was cast to find relevant research, which brought in studies from fields such as computer-assisted language learning (CALL), study abroad, and second language acquisition. Three themes emerged in the previous research that are relevant to the current study and described in the following subsections: 1) communication with teachers in university and distance-learning settings; 2) relationships to other learners and native speakers of the target language; and 3) the unique affordances for LCTLs provided by online educational settings.

3.1 Communication with Teachers

The first theme found in the previous research, communication with teachers in university and distance-learning settings, illustrates the importance of teacher engagement and feedback. Brown (2014) demonstrated that students who had teacher supervision while performing self-study tasks performed better on post-tests than students doing the same tasks without supervision, concluding that the extrinsic motivation of a teacher has a significant impact on learning outcomes. Busse and Walter (2013) examined the motivation of first-year university students of German, who described how the source of their motivation changed from one of enjoyment of the learning process to a desire to master the language. This was connected with disappointment in the way that their university programs were structured compared with their secondary schools, citing limited feedback from instructors. Jakobson (2015) found that students strongly desired feedback from teachers on form and pronunciation in particular.

Enkin (2017) concluded that online foreign language courses could be effective for learning but suggested that teachers in such courses "should make sure their materials are highly organized", "be attentive to their e-mail" and "follow up more often with students" (p. 81). Enkin (2017) seemed to assume

that "distance" and "asynchronous" were synonyms, which is not always the case. Lai's (2015) study described the teacher's role in encouraging students to use technology outside the classroom in self-directed learning contexts. This finding, illustrating one way in which language learners can learn outside the classroom, provides a bridge to the following section: relationships with other speakers.

3.2 Relationships with Other Speakers

The second theme that emerged in the previous research related to the question of how social and institutional factors affect the language learning environments of university students is the value of relationships with other speakers of the target language, both native speakers and other learners. In some cases, these relationships begin in the classroom. Kozaki and Ross (2011) concluded that "learners nested in classes with a discernable attitude toward the target language, be it confident, diffident, or indifferent, will to some degree be affected by that classroom climate" and noted that classmates "exert an affective influence" on one another (p. 1347). Busse and Walter (2013) found that a campus German club helped to mitigate students' disappointment in the extent to which their university studies lacked opportunities for speaking the target language.

When the focus shifts to social language learning *operations* chosen by learners themselves rather than by a teacher, Noprival et al. (2021) found that among polyglots engaged in self-study, social media was considered an important resource for practicing the target language. Similarly, Dimitrenko's (2017) examination of the language learning strategies of adults learning a third, as opposed to second, language showed that these experienced language learners were more inclined to practice speaking the target language with peers than those who were learning a second language. This is particularly relevant in the context of LCTLs as those who learn them have often studied an MCTL first (all the *subjects* in the current study are multilingual, speaking their native language and English fluently; several had studied additional languages).

There is a body of research on study abroad programs (Alred & Byram, 2002; Conroy, 2018; García-Amaya, 2017; Karaman & Tochon, 2010; Li, 2017; Róg, 2017; Shively, 2016) that illustrates the role of personal relationships in providing motivation for increasing one's communicative competence as well as native speaker feedback. However, it is important to note that study abroad experiences do not always result in positive personal relationships with speakers of the target language. Stewart (2010) described how disagreements with roommates and sexual harassment detracted from some students' study abroad experience. Furthermore, several researchers (Case, 2021; Müller, 2017; Stewart, 2010) have noted that in the age of social media it is possible for participants in study abroad programs to remain focused on their friends and family at home at the expense of making new connections abroad.

Ward (2015) has asserted that while the reasons people learn MCTLs are "easy to understand" because of their ubiquity and their incorporation into compulsory school curricula, learners of LCTLs "may wish to read literature in the original language, learn a language for heritage reasons, for a holiday visit or for military intelligence reasons" (p. 550). One illustration of this is Wilsey's (2013) study in which she surveyed 44 users of an online platform for self-study of Macedonian, exploring why learners had chosen to study online. Thirty-five percent of respondents cited family ties as the reason for studying Macedonian,

another 5% had other kinds of personal connections to Macedonian speakers, and 24% were frequent travelers to or residents of Macedonia.

3.3 Affordances of Online Education for LCTLs

The third theme in the previous research is that online and/or distance education offers particular affordances for LCTLs. Robin (2013) argues that "the maturation of digital technology and the internet has changed the nature of foreign language instruction, but few areas have reaped greater cumulative benefits than those involved in the teaching and learning of LCTLs in nearly all facets" (p. 1). Distance learning in particular is one of the facets described. However, the availability of distance education alone is not sufficient for courses in LCTLs to attract enough students to remain economically viable. Dunne and Palvyshin (2013) describe the Australian case in which asynchronous CALL courses were developed at public universities in the 2010s for a number of LCTLs, but declining student numbers led to these courses being canceled, with the exception of Korean, which was popular enough that the CALL resources were used only as a complement to classroom teaching.

Sato et al. (2017) compared the online and face-to-face versions of a beginner-level online university course in Japanese, finding that enrollment in the distance course was more than double that of similar campus courses, with students citing "the geographic and temporal flexibility of the fully online mode and the lack of an F2F alternative available in summer on campus" (p. 759). Students' assessments of the online course were generally positive, with some disagreement about whether "they could learn Japanese culture and use the target language to interact with the community members outside the class better in the online mode" (Sato et al., p. 756). Furthermore, and connecting to the other two themes found in the previous research described above, the distance students reported less psychological distance between teachers and classmates than they had expected in an online course and were extremely positive about the flexibility and convenience of studying online.

Blake and Shiri's (2012) study inspected university students' evaluations of an internet-based Arabic course, identifying a number of aspects of the learning management system that learners felt contributed to their success. It also had the unexpected finding that computer-mediated communication allowed subjects in the study to receive more individualized communication with teachers than a campus course, and that this form of distance learning "was a credible alternative for students who otherwise would not have had access to Arabic instruction at their home institution or for those who had sought a more flexible learning environment due to their own schedules and life circumstances" (Blake & Shiri, 2012, p. 1). Forty-four percent of respondents in Wilsey's (2013) study stated that they were using the online platform because it was the only available tuition-free way for them to learn the language, while 20% stated that the online platform was convenient and 10% said that the platform was a supplement to other forms of study. Kyppö (2014) concluded that "a less commonly taught language (in this case Slovak) may be learned in a new language learning environment as any other language. However, not all language skills may be acquired at an equal level without contact classes" (p. 145).

In sum, the previous research described above illustrates support for three ideas that I return to in the discussion in Section 6 below. The first is that communication with and feedback from a teacher plays a significant role in adult language learners' extrinsic motivation, regardless of whether a course is

taught by distance or on campus. The second is that the role of relationships with peers, that is, both other learners and native speakers of the target language, is important for providing opportunities to speak the language that contribute to communicative competence and motivation. The third is that for LCTLs an online learning context provides affordances that simply may not exist in campus settings, even if face-to-face learning is still seen as the gold standard by teachers and learners. In the following section, I describe how I collected and analyzed data on these issues with learners studying several different LCTLs at beginner level by distance.

4 Method

Eleven case studies of language learners who enrolled in beginner-level courses in Japanese, Mandarin, Portuguese, Russian and Swedish at RSU between autumn term 2011 and spring term 2014 form the empirical material in this study. Using the model of PLEs described in Section 2, I use these learners' own utterances to illustrate how social support and boundary crossing, and the roles played by peers, teachers and institutions, can affect language learning operations, actions and activities. The case study approach was chosen because it "allows an intensive holistic description and analysis of the contextual factors that influence [a] phenomenon" (Ellinger, 2005, p. 396). The aim of this approach is not generalization; instead, "each case has its own unique qualities manifested in concrete experiences, but within the case there are features and events that readers can find in similar settings" (Faltis, 1997, p. 149). With increasing numbers of universities going online, particularly during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, many are offering similar institutional environments to RSU's.

Data collection for this project was conducted in three stages: questionnaires, e-mail interviews, and synchronous online interviews. The questionnaires were sent out to students who had enrolled in a beginner-level course in modern languages in the 2011–2012 academic year in spring 2012, in the 2012–2013 academic year in spring 2013, and in the 2013–2014 academic year in spring 2014. The questionnaire focused on the *subjects*' motivations and goals for learning the language that they were studying. I was not the teacher for any of these courses. Google Forms was used for the questionnaires, but the data was removed from the cloud and stored on university servers as soon as it was collected. All further data collection was done through university-based tools and stored on secure servers.

In spring 2014 I began conducting e-mail interviews with willing participants from all three academic years. I carried out regular e-mail correspondence with each of the *subjects* between April 2014 and January 2016. I initiated contact with the *subjects* once every four to five months so that they would be less likely to be conscious of the project all the time and be overly influenced by it. The e-mail correspondence was treated as a long, asynchronous interview with open-ended questions. There was no set list of questions. Instead, the conversations, while focused on the *subjects*' PLEs, were allowed to develop individually and organically, and the respondents were invited to ask questions as well, which many did; sometimes personal questions about my own language learning experiences, and sometimes questions related to my experience as a language teacher. This "mutual self-disclosure" (Kivits, 2005, p. 40) was intended to develop rapport with the participants and increase the richness and reliability of their own answers. I never sent more than one e-mail to a *subject* before

receiving a response. If a *subject* did not answer, I assumed that they were no longer willing or able to participate in the study.

The *subjects* for this article were selected from the group of e-mail correspondents. As the purpose of the study was to elicit a wide variety of possibilities, diversity among the cases was sought in terms of gender, age, language studied, native language[1], place of residence during the study, and the length of time they were enrolled in language courses at RSU throughout the course of the study. An overview of these characteristics is shown in the table below.

Table 1. Study Subjects

Pseudonym	Approximate age at start of study	Language studied at RSU	Native language	Physical location during study	Amount of time enrolled in language courses at RSU as of end of study
Mats	Late 40s	Mandarin	Finnish	China	Less than one term
Tessa	Early 30s	Japanese	Dutch	Netherlands	Four terms, ongoing at end of study
James	Late 60s	Mandarin	Swedish/ Estonian	Sweden	Four terms
Roland	Late 30s	Japanese	Swedish	Japan	Three terms
Martin	Early 30s	Portuguese	Swedish	Brazil	One term
Christina	Mid 30s	Russian	Italian	Sweden	Two terms
Stefan	Early 20s	Japanese	Swedish	Sweden, Japan	Two terms
Elizabeth	Mid 20s	Portuguese	Swedish	Brazil	Two and a half terms
Paul	Late 20s	Swedish	Italian	Sweden	Two terms
Helena	Mid 40s	Swedish	French	Sweden	Two terms
Marianne	Late 60s	Japanese, Portuguese	Swedish	Sweden	Three terms of Japanese, two terms of Portuguese ongoing

The interview *subjects* completed a consent form and were reminded that their participation was voluntary and that they could end it at any time. Because of this, it could be argued that the *subjects* may have had more motivation and/or a greater interest in the language learning process than the average student. However, there is a wide variation in the number of terms that they were enrolled in the language courses at RSU, which indicates that their learning *objects* differed.

Data collection ended with a synchronous online interview with each subject, approximately one hour long. Interviews took place between February 2015 and March 2016, using the videoconferencing platform Adobe Connect[2], with which the students were familiar from their synchronous seminars in the courses they had taken at RSU. The interviews were recorded, and the data analysis process began with the transcription of the interviews. I opted for what Brinkmann and Kvale (2015, p. 213) call a literary style, focusing on the content of the utterances and excluding hesitation, backtracking and metalanguage.

The second step of the analysis was compiling the data from the questionnaires, e-mails, and interviews into a single data set for each of the eleven *subjects*. I then edited each data set and redacted all utterances not relating to the categories outlined in Section 2 above: the *social support and*

boundary crossing of *community* and the *roles of learners*, *teachers*, *peers*, and *institutions* in the *division of labor*. I then organized these remaining utterances according to these categories and present them in the following section.

5 Results

In this section, the results of the case studies are presented in terms of selected categories of contextual factors taken from the conceptualization of the PLE as an activity system put forth by Buchem, et al. (2011) described in Section 3 above: social support and boundary crossing, roles of peers, roles of teachers, and roles of institutions.

5.1 Social Support and Boundary Crossing

The *subjects* often mentioned relationships with other speakers and learners of the target language as a factor in their language learning: family members and other speakers and learners that they had sought out, through online language exchanges and in-person language cafés. Five of the *subjects* were married to or partnered with native speakers of the target language and living in their partner's home country, and only one of them had considered studying the target language before meeting their partner. Martin's relationships in the target language had grown beyond his spouse, about which he was enthusiastic:

> Now with my buddy here in Brazil […] we talk about film, we talk about computer games, about politics. We talk about Sweden, we talk about relationships. I talk with him the same way I would talk with someone at home in Sweden, and maybe not equally well, but we talk about the same things (Interview with Martin).

Mats, who was studying in China with an international group of students, said that those who had Chinese friends or significant others were learning Mandarin more quickly than others. Marianne's interest in Japanese started when one of her children studied in Japan, but she became serious about learning Japanese when another of her children married a person from Japan. She subsequently started studying Portuguese, also at RSU, when another of her children started a relationship with a Portuguese speaker.

Other kinds of family relationships were a constraint on language studies, or, in some cases, studies were a constraint on relationships. Christina had intended to continue her Russian studies while she was on parental leave with her second child but found that she had less time and energy than after the birth of her first child. Tessa, who was not living in a target language environment or partnered with a speaker of the target language, found herself so focused on her studies at one point that it affected her personal relationships:

> OK, I didn't have a social life, and maybe some stress at home […] and at some point […] it was Friday evening, 1:30 at night, and my boyfriend was actually going out with my friends and I was doing an online Japanese test, and then I knew, this is wrong (Interview with Tessa).

Related to the question of *social support* are the specific milieus in which the target language is spoken. This, however, affected the *subjects* in different ways. Elizabeth's circumstances in Brazil were something she felt contributed very positively to her language learning:

> Now I have my life here and I think that that is what makes the difference, when you think you like the place, you have friends and you have found something to do […] it becomes more fun to speak Portuguese. […] I think the best way [to learn a new language] is to be put in a situation where you have to learn and you don't have a choice […] because it's so easy when you come to a new country, or even in school, you always go to the language that is easiest to communicate in (Interview with Elizabeth).

Further, Elizabeth said that her husband contributed to her learning by being patient, speaking slowly, and not switching to English if she had asked him to speak Portuguese. Helena's sentiments about having access to a patient native speaker were similar to Elizabeth's, but in Helena's case it was not her spouse:

> I think so far I've only found one person who really made the effort, a person I don't know, she asked a number of questions, really simple and slow, finally I ended up being able to say much more than usual because she took the time (Interview with Helena).

In sum, personal relationships with native speakers of the target language were an affordance for the *subjects'* language learning, whereas the demands of personal relationships unconnected to the target language were a constraint.

5.2 Role of Peers

Subjects expressed their appreciation for the classmates they met through their RSU courses. Stefan, for example, contacted his RSU classmates outside of class for language exchange, participated in a reunion of students with whom he studied abroad in Japan, and both hosted and visited former classmates in real life. Marianne enrolled in RSU in part with the intention of expanding her Japanese-speaking community, because it was difficult to talk to family members in Japan due to the time difference. Roland remained in contact with one of his RSU classmates a few times a month after discontinuing studies at RSU:

> She lives in Sweden and […] doesn't have the daily opportunity to speak Japanese. So she gets the benefit of that, and I get the benefit of being able to interact with someone who doesn't speak Japanese fluently, because it seems a little simpler when you have someone who is on the same level (Interview with Roland).

James also discontinued his studies at RSU partway through the study, but he continued to actively study Mandarin on his own and sought out language partners on the internet. However, not all the *subjects* found communicating with classmates useful. Helena said,

> I really didn't like the breakout sessions [during seminars in Adobe Connect]. I didn't feel I was getting that much from them. Trying to talk with other beginners doesn't go very far, especially without the presence of a teacher to help and correct the mistakes (Interview with Helena).

Tessa was also reluctant to practice conversing with classmates, for different reasons:

> I still don't do it a lot because it is not always very productive and making appointments can be a hassle […] Currently I have so little time for anything but work and study, that all social activities are cut to a minimum. […] Being an introvert, I like that distance classes are more structured and that there is not really a group dynamic present (Interview with Tessa).

In sum, interaction with peers, whether it was classmates or other speakers of the target languages, was a language learning affordance for most of the *subjects*, and many of them actively sought it out. Two of the *subjects* did not enjoy speaking practice but did not describe it as a constraint. *The role of peers* is directly related to the category described in the following section, *the role of teachers*, which focuses on the context of learning at RSU, in which direct contact with classmates was often encouraged and even required by the teachers or the course structure.

5.3 Role of Teachers

All of the *subjects* described engaging in a wide variety of self-study *operations* but valued the *action* of institutional study with a teacher. Those who were living in a country where the target language was spoken found great value in having explicit instruction in Swedish or English and a place to make errors without feeling embarrassed. Elizabeth found that the course at RSU helped mitigate a feeling of alienation resulting from attempting to speak Portuguese with native speakers:

> You're not yourself, you sit quietly and listen and come across as shy and introverted. When you do talk or have conversations you get tired quickly and you feel both stupid and irritating when you don't understand – I don't have to feel that way during the lessons (Interview with Elizabeth).

Similarly, Martin said that he took the course at RSU in parallel with a local course in Brazil and was glad to have both a course taught entirely in Portuguese and one in which things could be explained in Swedish or English.

Stefan described the drawbacks of self-study and the *role of teachers* as follows:

> Compared with when a teacher tells you what to do, you miss a lot of details, or maybe the opposite, that it's pretty easy to find detailed information online, but the overarching picture is difficult […] If you don't get the basics in a good way, you have a hard time finding your own way, because you don't know what to look for. But as soon as you have the basics and understand a little how it works, then you can sit and read and find the details fairly easily (Interview with Stefan).

Elizabeth described the importance of learning grammar in a formal way:

> As an adult […] learning a language requires a lot more, at least for me, logic, I need a map, I need a system, I need boxes to stuff things in. […] And that's why I want to continue with the grammar course because I realized that grammar, which I always thought was kind of boring, is a very good tool for learning to understand a language (Interview with Elizabeth).

Similarly, Helena said,

> The only thing that helps me is to take a more linguistic standpoint, it's much more neutral and engages only the mind and that makes me feel more comfortable but then it's not that useful to speak! I like the fact that our teacher at [RSU] was having a linguistic approach during the course. […] So one thing that is really really important is having a very competent teacher who is clear and can explain things in different ways until people get it (Interview with Helena).

Mats also thought that it was important to have a teacher who could explain things in multiple ways, saying,

> A good bag of study and learning alternatives with different methods, and frequent follow-ups on what is working individually would be good. Classroom teaching is great, and if you are lucky you will get a teacher that motivates and inspires. […] [A] variety of methods can all be used for learning but none of them is THE BEST (e-mail Interview with Mats, emphasis in original).

Paul said that self-led digital courses could assist in learning a language, but that they were no substitute for coursework or living in a target-language environment.

James reflected on his previous study of Spanish in Latin America, when he spent four weeks living with a family and had private lessons every day, compared with the distance studies he had done in Mandarin, both at RSU and another Swedish university:

> The result is amazing. It's a luxury. It's hard to get this sort of situation where you have a private teacher all day. So when you don't have that, I think these net-based courses […] [are] a great combination where you still get to meet a teacher and ask questions (Interview with James).

In sum, all the *subjects* emphasized the importance of the *role of teachers* in their PLE and identified a number of different roles: providing a context in which they felt comfortable speaking, providing external motivation to engage in language learning *operations*, and providing structured explanations and answers to questions that prepare a solid ground for future self-study, particularly for grammar concepts. They also pointed at the issue of distance versus campus studies, further discussed below under the *role of institutions.*

5.4 Role of Institutions

A need for external motivation and a lack of self-discipline were reasons cited by *subjects* not only for the importance of the *role of the teacher*, but also for choosing to take the *action* of enrolling in institutional learning. As Stefan said,

> When you have a course, it is much more motivation to say 'yeah, I need to do this by next week' or whatever. If you work by yourself you can say 'no, I don't have the energy for this today because there are other things I have to do' (Interview with Stefan).

Tessa also emphasized the importance of having class regularly with deadlines to help prioritize language studies.

Several *subjects* described the fact that the courses were taught by distance, with no required campus meetings, as a necessary condition for studying at RSU. However, all the *subjects* said that they would have preferred to take a campus course if their personal circumstances allowed it. Before applying to RSU, Christina had researched a variety of options for Russian study and chose RSU only after she found that there were no campus-based courses in her area. Once she actually started studying by distance, she felt that being able to participate from home was a great advantage with a small child. Nevertheless, she considered studying full-time on campus to be the ideal way to learn, because when studying at home there were more distractions.

Marianne had a local, face-to-face option for studying Japanese at Folkuniversitet[3], but decided that distance study would suit her better, since she

wouldn't have to drive in the evenings. Stefan said that if he had not found the courses at RSU he might have enrolled in Japanese at his home university, although the program was full-time and would have caused scheduling conflicts with his full-time studies in computer science. More likely, he said, he would have tried a self-study program. He also said that the best aspects of the course at RSU were the fact that the seminars took place in the evening and in such a way that there were opportunities for oral practice.

The course content and course assignments affected *subjects*' choices to study at RSU and how they continued their engagement with the target language after enrolling. Tessa had sought a course that was more focused on proficiency in Japanese than the more theoretical study of the language and culture offered at a nearby university.

James and Roland both indicated that the course requirements at RSU were a constraint on their language learning. Midway through the study, Roland said,

> Unfortunately I have fallen behind because we have had oral presentations and an essay, which required formal writing, something that I'm terrible at. So all my energy went to doing this, which meant that the things I really want to study have to be put to the side. A bit unfortunate but those are the course requirements so one just has to accept it (Interview with Roland).

Eventually Roland stopped taking Japanese courses at RSU because of the demands of his job and a schedule that made it impossible to attend the online seminars. James, who was primarily interested in oral communication in Mandarin, had discontinued previous studies at another university because of its heavy focus on grammar, and he wasn't planning further studies at RSU, because he anticipated that there would be a focus on writing, in which he was not interested.

The *subjects* identified several Swedish social policies and other national and supranational frameworks that affected their language-learning *actions*. University studies in Sweden are tuition-free for citizens and permanent residents of the EU and EEC, and financial considerations played a role for Tessa, who said that when she was searching for degree programs in Japanese,

> One [degree program in Japanese] looked great, but that required me to move to Edinburgh, which would be nice but I do not have the money for that, and also tuition fees in the UK, especially the last few years, are really high, so that wasn't really a viable option (Interview with Tessa).

Christina used her paid parental leave time, guaranteed by the Swedish state, as an opportunity to pursue Russian studies, an interest that she had had for some time, after the birth of her first child, but discontinued her Russian studies when she returned to work. She had planned to resume them after the birth of her second child, but she found that the demands of caring for two children left no time for studies.

Paul and James discussed their language studies in terms of frameworks created by governing bodies. Paul had studied a number of languages in addition to Swedish and repeatedly referred to the A1–C2 scale used in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages to describe his abilities in different languages. James described his goals for Chinese studies in terms of the HSK[4] system:

> The words they taught us at [other university] were more and different than HSK3, I ran an analysis program that shows that only half of those words are in HSK 1–6! […] one

> problem is now that I have identified a lot of words beyond HSK-3, particularly in Chineseclass101[5] but also in the [RSU] course. Do I want to/can I learn 500 words beyond HSK3? (Interview with James).

Policies and frameworks, like distance study and course requirements, then, both afford and constrain whether and where a learner chooses to study, as well as their personal goals for the particular aspects of a language on which they want to focus their learning.

5.5 Summary of Results

The social support and boundary crossing, roles of peers, roles of teachers, and roles of institutions identified in the analysis above consist of both affordances for and constraints on learning operations and actions, not only factors that the subjects view as supporting their language learning objects and activities. Furthermore, a factor that represents an affordance for one subject may be a constraint for another, such as personal relationships, or even simultaneously an affordance and a constraint for the same individual, such as distance study.

The *subjects* described how family members and friends, classmates, teachers, language partners and the surrounding society afforded and constrained their language studies in different ways. Seemingly small differences in the behavior of the people who were part of the *subjects*' language learning communities affected the kinds of *actions* and *operations* the *subjects* undertook. Family and friends could provide encouragement, supportive environments for speaking the target language, and a reason for choosing to learn a language in the first place. They could also discourage a *subject* from studying or speaking the target language through distraction or impatience. The target language society could seem welcoming and supportive, or obstructive, to the learner.

Several other factors emerged as both affordances and constraints for the *subjects*: the *role of peers* in the learning process and the *role of institutions*, particularly the requirements of a formal course of study reflects that an efficient, one-size-fits-all approach to language learning, is unlikely to be successful and suggests that learners may benefit from exposure to many different types of settings, materials and courses (which one of the *subjects*, Mats, stated outright).

Although it may not be particularly surprising that having a personal relationship with a person with a different native language, or living in a target language environment, affords language learning, the finding that personal relationships and target language environments also present some constraints was somewhat unexpected. That having a second child became a constraint in Christina's Russian studies is perhaps obvious but becomes more interesting in light of the fact that having a first child and going on parental leave was precisely what allowed her to begin her Russian studies in the first place.

The RSU courses provided what could be called a safe space for language practice, in which several *subjects* mentioned that they found it easier to speak the target language than with their family members or the target language society. Elizabeth and Martin both expressed appreciation for being able to take a course that had English and/or Swedish as the support language, and while they did not express this as a constraint of the target language environment, it indicates that the total immersion experience, often thought to be the ideal situation for language learning, as James's comments exemplified, may not be enough for some learners. The degree to which some of the informants valued

their classmates, remaining in contact across time and space after their courses were over, was also a surprising and exciting discovery.

Teachers can be seen as both members of the *subjects'* learning community and as part of the institutional structure of formal study. All the *subjects* viewed teachers as important and saw the *role of teachers* primarily as one of providing explanation in a support language and providing external deadlines and structure. While most of the *subjects* expressed a preference for face-to-face, campus courses, they were studying by distance because they were not able to take a campus course due to their life circumstances or because the kind of course they were seeking was not available where they were living. Several of the *subjects* were pleasantly surprised by the opportunities for interaction and feedback they received in the distance courses.

The RSU course syllabi often articulated learning objects that were not shared by the *subjects* themselves, something they viewed as a constraint to be tolerated because the university structure provided tuition-free distance education, which was an important affordance for all of the *subjects*. This tuition-free education interacted with other aspects of the Swedish welfare system to enable pensioners and parents on leave to study. Other governmental and super-governmental structures offered language learning benchmarks that were important to some of the *subjects* that differed from the course syllabi.

6 Discussion and Conclusion

As mentioned in Section 3, there were three themes that emerged in the previous research that were further supported by the empirical data in the current study: that the *role of teachers* is important in adult language learners' extrinsic motivation, that the *role of peers*, that is, relationships other learners and native speakers of the target language, is important for providing opportunities to speak the language that contribute to communicative competence and motivation, and that for LCTLs an online learning context provides affordances that simply may not exist in campus settings, an important *role of institutions*.

The near-unanimous agreement among the *subjects* on the *role of teachers* in providing supervision, structure, and external motivation was a strong confirmation of Brown's (2014) findings on the importance of supervision and external motivation. Although the *subjects* did not specify, as Jakobson (2015) did, that they wanted feedback from teachers on form and pronunciation in particular, they did emphasize the importance of feedback in general. While some *subjects* described differences in the structure of RSU courses from their previous studies, none seemed to indicate that this was a constraint on their motivation to study, as Busse and Walter (2013) had shown previously; rather, several *subjects* preferred RSUs flexibility and the opportunities for developing oral skills. Lai's (2015) finding that it is important for teachers to promote the use of ICT beyond the classroom was not something that was identified by the *subjects* in this study, as most actively chose to engage in extracurricular *operations* online, even long after they were no longer studying at RSU.

In Enkin's (2017) study, the *subjects* had offered the feedback that teachers of distance courses "should make sure their materials are highly organized", "be attentive to their e-mail" and "follow up more often with students" (p. 81). Though this may be good advice for any teacher, the *subjects* in the current study did not raise these issues. This may be because the distance course that Enkin (2017) evaluated was taught asynchronously and so the students had little contact with the teacher, while the distance courses at RSU differed from

campus courses only in that the synchronous seminars were held online in a video conferencing platform. Similarly, Kyppö's (2014) conclusion that "not all language skills may be acquired at an equal level without contact classes" (p. 145) does not apply to the RSU context, which has as many contact classes as an equivalent campus course.

The empirical data showed that the *role of peers*, that is, both other learners and native speakers of the target language, is important for providing opportunities to speak the language that contribute to communicative competence and motivation, echoing findings by Shively (2016) and Wilsey (2013). Classmates could be a source of frustration, or they could be a resource for speaking practice even long after the course was over, supporting the previous findings of Kozaki and Ross (2011). The empirical data showed that attitudes and habits of the native speakers in the target language milieu in particular can play an important role in a learner's PLE. As with the findings of Dmitrenko (2017) and Noprival et al. (2021), these experienced multilingual learners sought out opportunities to practice the target languages with peers and/or native speakers.

A number of the *subjects* were living in places where the target language was spoken, and so their situations could be compared to those of study abroad participants. The *subjects* confirmed the previous findings (e.g., Alred & Byram, 2002; Conroy, 2018; García-Amaya, 2017; Karaman & Tochon, 2010; Li, 2017; Róg, 2017; Shively, 2016) showing how personal relationships to native speakers in the target language environment are valued both for their motivation and for providing opportunities to speak and receive feedback. Although most of these *subjects* had only positive things to say about living where the target language was spoken, one was deeply homesick and unhappy, confirming previous findings (Müller, 2017; Stewart, 2010) that learning languages in the target language environment is not, as commonly thought, the magic solution to the challenges of language learning.

Distance study was viewed by *subjects* as a constraint to the kind of interaction often expected in campus studies, particularly for language learning, in which synchronous oral communication with others is often a primary goal. However, it is also a learning affordance for people whose life circumstances are not conducive to campus study, which was also shown by Blake and Shiri (2012), Sato, et al. (2017), and Wilsey (2013). As many have discovered during the coronavirus pandemic, distance studies do not have to be asynchronous, lacking real-time contact between teachers and students. As in Wilsey's (2013) study, the *subjects* chose distance study at RSU because it was one of the few tuition-free options they had available for learning the target language.

Although some of the previous research concluded that online environments may not be as effective for adults studying LCTLs as they are for more ubiquitous languages that offer more opportunities to engage online or for campus courses, the results of the current study indicate that without the availability of distance courses, some people would simply not study LCTLs *at all*. If one's interest lies in promoting the learning of LCTLs, this is an important finding. However, the way in which distance courses are provided makes a difference. As Dunne and Palvyshin (2013) showed, asynchronous CALL is not enough. Learners appear to need direct communication with teachers and peers to maintain their motivation to study.

Analysis of the *subjects'* utterances elicited some environmental factors that appear not to have been extensively addressed in previous research, particularly the direct and clearly articulated *role of institutions*, that is, the effect of different

policies and frameworks on individuals' choices of how, when and where to study. The findings suggest a need to examine further the ways that government and supranational policies and frameworks shape the decisions made by adult learners. It is not surprising that tuition-free courses of study are more appealing to learners than costly ones, but if those tuition-free courses have curricular objects that do not match learner objects, then learners' engagement with those courses may be superficial and/or short-lived, which may not be in the best interests of either the learner or the educational system providing the courses.

In sum, this article's contribution to the understanding of how social and institutional factors affect the language learning environments of university students studying LCTLs at beginner level by distance online 1) affirms the importance of sociocultural factors such as relationships to teachers, other learners, and native speakers in the language learning *operations*, *actions*, *activities*, and *objects* that learners have, and 2) reveals the influence that social welfare structures, curricula, and international frameworks have over the choices learners make about which kinds of institutional learning to include in their own personal learning environments.

Endnotes

[1] The correspondence and interviews with native speakers of Swedish were carried out in Swedish, as was one of the interviews with a non-native Swedish speaker; the remainder were in English. Since proficiency in English is a requirement for entry to university in Sweden, all of the Swedish speakers are also fluent in English. Many of the foreign language courses at RSU have English as their medium of instruction.

[2] One *subject* did not feel comfortable being recorded and was located in a place with limited broadband speed at the time of the interview. We therefore conducted an extended e-mail interview and then had a synchronous voice conversation on Skype that served to make the kind of personal contact deemed necessary for the study's reliability.

[3] *Folkuniversitetet* is one of several nationwide study organizations in Sweden that provide courses in subjects such as language proficiency, music, art, and craft. The courses generally take place in the evenings and participants pay a modest fee. No school or university credit is granted for these courses. Today, many of these study organizations offer distance courses, but at the time of data collection, this was rare.

[4] HSK is the abbreviation for the transliteration of the Chinese Proficiency Test, a set of standards for learners of Mandarin as a foreign language created by the Chinese Ministry of Education.

[5] Chineseclass101 is an online Chinese course, primarily self-study but with support available. Users pay a small fee.

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