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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Learner Agency and Investment in a Basic Language Program

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Abstract

Agency and investment are important components that determine learners' engagement with languages and language learning. Much research on language learner agency and investment to date has focused on students in their positions as classroom-based learners, or in terms of their extracurricular learning. This study seeks to establish a more holistic picture of learner agency and investment by exploring the interplay between participants' classroom learning experiences and their wider engagement with language learning. This research focuses on the experiences of learners in a basic language program (beginning sequence of language courses, sometimes part of educational requirements in US postsecondary education), exploring how learners in this context make decisions about their language learning for the classroom and beyond.

The current study explores language learners' engagement with learning German through survey results, classroom assignment submissions, and semi-structured interviews. Using an ecological understanding of learners' contexts, this research examines learners' expressions of agency and investment by analyzing the choices they make regarding language learning, as well as the capital they draw upon or hope to develop through these choices.

Keywords: *Learner Agency, Learner Investment, Capital, LOTE*

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Introduction

By examining language learners' agency and investment, researchers can uncover the variety of interwoven factors that determine learners' engagement with language learning. Work on agency and investment has tended to focus on learners in their positions either within classroom structures (e.g., Liao, 2019; Lin, 2013) or outside of typical classrooms, such as study abroad (Willis Allen, 2010) or social language learning communities (Gao, 2013). This study seeks to bridge these different contexts by understanding how learners in a basic language program engage in language learning both within and outside of the language classroom. This article also explores the multidirectional impact of classroom work on learner agency (e.g., Kashiwa, 2021) and the overlapping social and institutional contexts that affect individuals' language learning experiences (Douglas Fir Group, 2016).

By asking learners about their language learning decisions in multiple settings, this research seeks to establish a more holistic picture of how agency and investment in language learning manifest within and across their different contexts. Such research can be especially relevant to classroom-based language educators who want additional perspectives on the conditions that can enable learner agency and impact investment. Using survey data, class assignments, and interview data, this research shows how three

learners in a German basic language program portray their choices regarding language learning.

Agency, Investment, and an Ecological Framework

This study draws on the constructs of agency and investment, while acknowledging learners' existence in multiple, interrelated contexts. Agency, "the socioculturally mediated capacity to act" (Ahearn, 2001, p. 112), is key to understanding the choices that language learners make regarding language learning and use. Investment is a combination of a person's identity, ideology, and capital that they bring with them to language learning (Darvin & Norton, 2015). Both agency and investment are mediated by several overlapping and shifting contexts, and thus part of larger ecologies in which languages are used and learned (Douglas Fir Group, 2016). This review of literature first explores conceptualizations of agency and investment, then moves to empirical work that shows them in practice and concludes with previewing how the current study investigates agency and investment in context.

Agency

Rather than placing individual language users as sole decision makers, many applied linguistics scholars emphasize that agency, "the capacity to act in the world" (Thompson, as cited in Larsen-Freeman, 2019, 62) is socially embedded. Kayi-Aydar (2019), for example, asserted that agency is not an inherent characteristic, but is situated and expressed in multiple individual, institutional, and social contexts. Similarly, Larsen-Freeman (2019) contended that agency cannot be studied solely by exploring one person's decisions, instead "individual agency can only be understood in relation to the material and social world and what it affords or denies" (p. 62). Larsen-Freeman's (2019) conception of agency applies complex dynamic systems theory, painting a picture of agency that is not only socially and materially embedded, but also situated in time, impacted by multidirectional relationships, and able to be achieved "by means of an environment" (p. 66). In addition, both Kayi-Aydar (2019) and Larsen-Freeman (2019) noted that discourse plays a role in positioning people as agentive or not. Language learners' agency, their ability to make choices about their language learning, can thus be seen as dynamic across time and space, situated in relation to other people and institutions, and expressed by discursive positioning.

Empirical research on language learner agency has studied how learners exercise agency in different contexts, with some studies paying special attention to the impact of those contexts. For instance, works from Liao (2019) and Lin (2013) explore classroom influence on language learner agency in EFL classes in Taiwan and China, respectively. Both showed how tasks that employ a mix of learners' preferences and group negotiations seemed to prompt more engagement. In these studies, pedagogical interventions encouraged learners to participate in collaborative negotiation on aspects of the classroom such as group selection, group roles, tasks, and topics. Findings point towards increased "freedom / creativity / enthusiasm" (Lin, 2013, p. 642) and a "deeper understanding towards […] content through peer discussions." (Liao, 2019, p. 779). The researchers thus argued that promoting learner agency in the classroom not only increases their autonomy as language users, but also gives them new ways to comprehend course content.

Going beyond the classroom, other studies have explored how learners' decisions are impacted by wider language use environments. Kashiwa (2021) employed narrative inquiry to examine a learner's use of language learning resources. Prompted by reflections in coursework, conversations with peers, and a desire to emulate someone she viewed as a successful English learner, Kashiwa's (2021) focal participant became a regular user of her institution's "self-access learning center" (p. 319), actively engaging in self-

driven, extracurricular language learning. Looking at language learner agency outside of a university campus, Willis Allen (2010) studied participants in an education abroad program in France. Despite comparable learning backgrounds, motivation, and access to resources, two focal participants expressed different abilities to pursue language learning goals while in France, with one lamenting that her reserved host family presented a barrier to language learning by not incorporating her into their daily lives. Interpreting this finding, Willis Allen acknowledged the co-constructed nature of agency, noting how real and perceived obstacles can inhibit active engagement with language. Importantly, the author noted that this participant "continued seeking the norms of classroom learning, expecting her hosts to act as teachers" (Willis Allen, 2010, p. 468), which prevented her from acting more agentively in a different language-use setting. The studies from Kashiwa (2021) and Willis Allen (2010) provide valuable insights into the actions of language learners in environments outside of but related to coursework, showing how classroom contexts can both prompt new interactions with resources, and play a role in setting learners' expectations.

The current study adds to previous findings by examining the role of classroom, institutional, and broader external contexts on learner agency, as well as the connections that learners perceive between these different contexts. Despite different learner populations and settings, the current study joins previous scholars to explore the impact of factors such as classroom practices (Kashiwa, 2021; Liao, 2019; Lin, 2013) and student roles (Kashiwa, 2021; Willis Allen, 2010) on language learner agency.

Investment and Capital

The degree to which a learner invests in language learning depends on a combination of their identity, ideology, and capital (Darvin & Norton, 2015). In this model, identity refers to a person's ever-shifting self- and other-positioning. In their 2015 text, Darvin and Norton described ideology as a "normative set of ideas." (p. 43). Capital denotes the economic, cultural, and social resources that language users have at their disposal. Drawing on Bourdieu's "theories of capital, language, and symbolic power" (Norton, 2015, p. 377), the concept of investment recognizes the dynamic and social contexts in which language learning takes place and considers the effect of power relationships on language learning. Proponents have asserted that this social orientation and attentiveness to power distinguishes scholarship on language learner investment from research on language learner motivation (Darvin & Norton, 2023).

By focusing on how capital impacts overall language learner investment, research can explore the means that learners possess or hope to gain through language study, as well as how power and access play into language learning. Existing resources play a crucial role in a person's ability and willingness to invest in language learning. For example, English native speaker status is considered social and economic capital in a variety of settings. Given that English is a lingua franca in many settings worldwide, English native speaker status may discourage learners from actively investing in other languages, for example, French in anglophone-majority Canada (Marshall & Bokhorst-Heng, 2020) or Korean in South Korea (Gearing & Roger, 2018). Learners in these studies already possessed the social, cultural, and economic capital associated with English, and some participants did not predict significant benefits from investing in an additional language. Studying the investment of learners of languages other than English (LOTE) at a Chinese university, Lu, He, and Shen (2020) found that academic standing was sometimes considered a necessary resource for serious language study. Some participants explained a disinvestment in language learning by claiming that "good things are only available to the top students" (p. 60). Whether material, social, or institutional, the resources that learners already possess shape their desire and ability to invest in language learning.

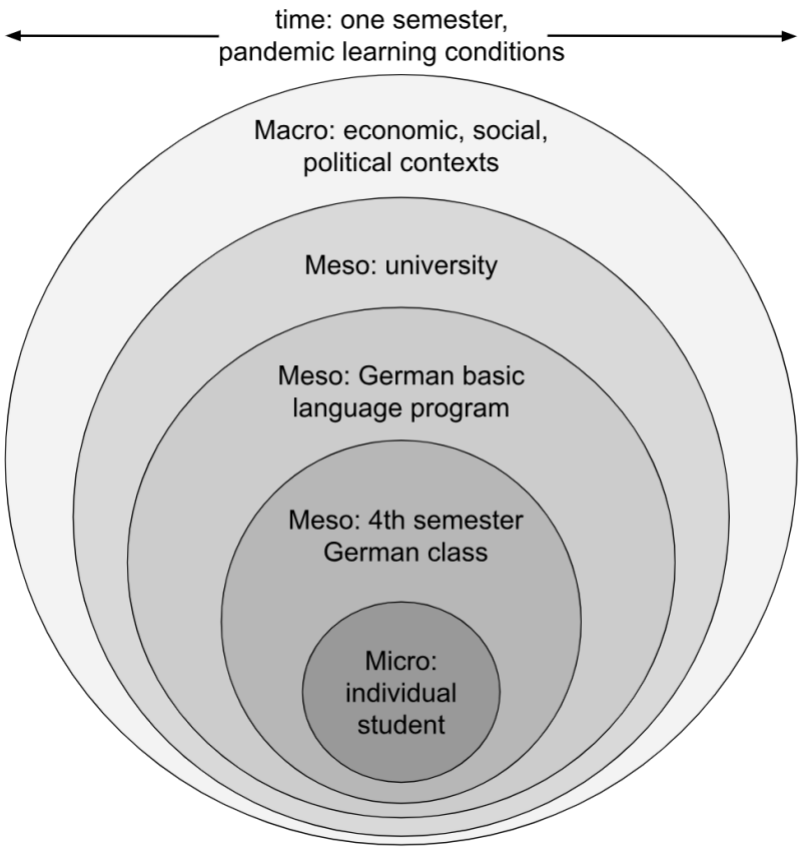
Learners also often envision future capital that they hope to gain via language study. Marshall and Bokhorst-Heng (2020) observed that learners in their study focused heavily on the importance of French for future employment opportunities. While some participants acknowledged the potential for social and cultural capital through language study, the authors reported a disproportionate focus on economic capital and called for educators to embrace "a more balanced conception of the sorts of capital available to [students] as learners of a minority language" (p. 614). In contrast, Lu, He and Shen (2020) found that many of the LOTE learners in their study made connections between the different forms of capital to be gained from language learning. For one learner of Hindi, her language abilities provided not only valuable professional exposure, but they also enabled her to enjoy more social niceties among Indian colleagues. Other participants in their study, seeing limitations in one form of capital, shifted their focus to alternatives. One participant, for example, expressed excitement that her Persian language skills had earned her a short-term interpreter position, while also doubting her chances on a job market that favored men. This participant "identified the cultural value that Persian could bring to her" (p. 60) but was realistic about the lack of opportunities for transforming her Persian language abilities into economic capital. In both Marshall and Bokhorst-Heng (2020) and Lu, He, and Shen (2020), larger social discourses and institutional contexts played a role in how learners construed what is to be gained by language learning.

The current study focuses specifically on learners' descriptions of the capital that they associate with language learning. Despite taking place in a US-based context, the current study joins studies such as Lu, He, and Shen (2020) and Marshall and Bokhorst-Heng (2020) by using qualitative data to explore which resources learners employ in language learning, what benefits they associate with studying German, and how the contexts in which they are embedded impact their investment in language learning.

An Ecological Model

Situating learners within larger contexts contributes to an understanding of capital and agency that goes beyond the notion of a learner as a sole actor. In this model (Figure 1, adapted from Douglas Fir Group, 2016 and Gao, 2013), I position participants as fourth-semester German students on the micro level; the German class, German basic language program and university as nested contexts in the meso level; and economic, social, and political contexts on the macro level.

Figure 1. *Nested settings for this study's participants. Adapted from Douglas Fir Group (2016) and Gao (2013)*



While this model cannot capture all contexts in which participants exist, it can begin to acknowledge the way in which these contexts interact and influence students' capital, perceived affordances, and ability to act agentively as language learners. It is with this understanding of learner embeddedness that I pose the research questions:

> RQ1: How do learners express making decisions about language learning?
>
> RQ2: How do learners engage with language learning beyond the classroom or class assignments?

The ways in which learners engage with language reflect not only their positions as potential agents in their language learning, but also their capacity and willingness to invest in language learning.

Context

This study took place in a German basic language program at a large, public university in the US Midwest. The German program at this institution enjoys relatively stable enrollments across the undergraduate curriculum, evidenced in part by consistent offerings of multi-section beginner and intermediate courses, and approximately five upper-level courses per semester. While some students discontinue study after the fourth semester (often required for their degree), many continue past this level to complete a minor. Others place into the program at a higher level due to previous language exposure. This university's German program offers a major, a minor, and graduate studies.

In the German basic language program at this institution, classes tend to take an approach informed by communicative language teaching, with emphasis placed on understandable communication about relevant topics. Class sessions are held mostly in German, and almost all assignments are in German. In the semester in which data collection occurred, students in all basic language program courses began completing one "choose your own" task each week, meaning that they were given options of different areas to learn more about and then asked to report back on their chosen task. Other out-of-class work in this program is a mix of structured language practice through an online platform associated with the course textbook, and projects in which learners are encouraged to incorporate more of their interests and identities.

Data for this study was in part collected during a three-week module on language, language learning, and identity. This module, which I co-designed with instructors in the program, took place in the middle of the semester in all fourth-semester German classes. Fourth-semester classes were chosen because assignments related to research topics could be integrated into regular coursework with relative ease. Examples of tasks in the module include conducting interviews with fellow language learners about their experiences, reflecting on connections between language and social prestige, and formulating language learning goals that reflected learners' interests. While the specific topics of the module were new for some learners, the types of tasks were not a significant departure from their normal coursework.

Ethics and the Role of the Researcher

In addition to being a researcher in four sections of fourth-semester German, I also co-taught the three-week module during which classroom artifacts were collected. The decision to co-teach was based on multiple factors: a) I wanted potential research participants to see me, learn about the research project from me, and have a chance to ask questions about participation; b) I wanted students to understand that, if they agreed to participate in research, a person other than their main instructor would see their work; and c) I wanted to provide some form of compensation to the teachers who agreed to let me visit their classrooms (co-teaching included providing materials and facilitation of synchronous sessions).

My role in the classroom, while grounded in practical and ethical concerns, has implications for the data I collected. While I was not the main instructor, I adopted a teacher-like role and thus a position of power in the classroom context. Despite efforts in both written texts and classroom introductions to separate research participation and course grades, students may have perceived a link between consenting to data collection and their standing in fourth-semester German. However, given the relatively low numbers of follow-up survey completion (not a data source for this study), sporadic homework completion, and small proportion of interview volunteers, there is little evidence that students felt compelled to participate in research, much less coerced.

Data Collection, Participants, and Data Analysis

Data Collection Procedures

Data collection occurred largely within one semester in the 2020-2021 academic year (see Table 1). At the time, all courses were being conducted online due to the COVID-19 pandemic. At the beginning of the module, I distributed a survey on language learning goals and strategies to students in all four sections of fourth-semester German, totaling approximately 50 students. Students were given three weeks to complete the survey. Of the 41 who completed the survey, 38 consented to have their data used in

research. From the 38 students who consented to have data used in research, I collected assignments that they completed as part of the module on language, language learning, and identity (see description in the Context section above). Next, I emailed the 26 students who consented to be contacted for an interview, four of whom responded and completed an interview. I conducted semi-structured interviews after the end of the semester. One interview has been omitted from the data because the participant's responses were short, lacked elaboration, and insufficiently addressed the questions in the interview protocol, resulting in data that did not answer the research questions. To focus on richer data and narrow scope, this study focuses on findings from three participants: Kasey, Caleb, and Blake.[1]

Table 1. *Data sources and collection timeframes*

Collection timeframe	**Date Source**
Weeks 8-11 of the semester	Survey 1: Learner Goals and Strategies
Weeks 8-13 of the semester	Artifacts – 2 Course Assignments A) Personalized SMART-Goals + Reflections B) Project Portfolios
Weeks 15 of the semester to 1 week after the semester	1 Semi-structured interview per participant (ranging in length from about 28 minutes to about 60 minutes)

Participants

At the time of data collection, focal participants Kasey, Caleb, and Blake were all undergraduate students in a fourth-semester German class. Since proficiency tests were not a part of data collection, this study cannot report on participants' individual language proficiency levels. However, the German basic language program that these students are in sets ACTFL's intermediate-level language skills (ACTFL, 2024) as a goal for learners exiting the second year, and since these learners were successfully completing second year coursework, they were likely somewhere in the intermediate range. Table 2 gives an overview of important participant demographics. Details about the information previewed in the table are located in Findings.

[1] All names are pseudonyms, chosen by the researcher.

Table 2. *Participant overview*

	Blake	**Caleb**	**Kasey**
Previous German courses before university	Yes	No	No
Language requirement for degree	No	Yes	Yes
Declared minor in German	Yes	No	Yes
Intention to study abroad	Yes	No	Yes
General area of study	Engineering	Humanities	Social Sciences

I am treating Caleb, Kasey, and Blake as case studies. Rather than having generalizability as a goal, a case study approach calls for contextualization (Duff, 2006). In the findings and discussion sections, I aim to contextualize the data from the three participants with the information available to me through triangulating their data and knowledge about the contexts in which they are situated. In addition to describing participants' institutional backdrop (German courses, basic language program, and university) above in Context, participants' shared contexts play an important role, as evidenced throughout Findings.

Instruments

Survey 1 (see Appendix A) asked students in English about their goals and strategies for language learning. Although the survey had a wider scope, this study only examines participants' own formulations of their goals and strategies, as well as their stated relationship to the language requirement. Participants' formulations of their learning goals and strategies are understood to reflect their investment in language learning.

As mentioned above, course assignments for this module mirrored other types of assignments that students completed across this beginning sequence of German courses. Because these course assignments were less likely to be associated with more explicit forms of data collection (such as the survey and interview), they are a valuable source for triangulating the data from other sources. I drew data from two assignments, completed in German,[2] that took place in the three-week module described above. Across fourth-semester German classes, student submissions indicate that learners' language proficiency enabled them to complete the assigned tasks successfully in the target language. The first assignment (see Appendix B) asked learners to set a specific goal for learning German and reflect on why that goal is appropriate for them. This prompted learners to consider how a language learning goal could relate to their identities and interests. The second assignment analyzed is an end-of-module portfolio in which students were prompted to write five short texts reflecting on the different assignments and themes of the module: language, language learning, identity (see Appendix C).

Interviews provided a chance to ask participants follow-up questions in English about their survey responses, class assignments, and language learning backgrounds. Interviews followed a semi-structured format, using the information from survey responses and class assignments to adapt questions for

[2] For this study, I have translated relevant quotes into English to capture what I believe to be the participants' intended meaning (i.e., I did not incorporate spelling or grammatical structures that deviate from the standardized language into the translation).

interviewees (see Appendix D).

Data Analysis Procedures

The first step in the data analysis was to separate out focal participant data from the larger collection of data. Because I wanted to focus on learners' own formulations of their experiences (as opposed to pre-written answers they selected), I only pulled participants' short answers to two open-ended survey questions, as well as their responses to one question regarding the language requirement. I assembled this survey data, each participant's SMART goal and reflection, and the text from their end-of-module portfolios into one document per participant. I then listened to interview recordings, correcting the errors in the automatically generated interview transcripts, and added the corrected text to each participant's document. As I compiled their data, I noted initial themes that pointed to participants' decisions and views regarding language learning.

The first iteration of coding applied predetermined codes to note where participants' data directly addressed the research questions (How do learners express making decisions about language learning? How do students engage with language learning beyond the classroom or class assignments?). However, to mark where the predetermined codes did not capture important distinctions or noteworthy data, this first coding also employed open coding (Baralt, 2012). In a second round of coding, I revised themes (see Table 3), creating new codes or consolidating where necessary. For example, in the second coding, I distinguished two types of engagement with language learning outside of the classroom to differentiate between current/past (real) versus future/planned (imagined) language use. I also added new codes for themes that stood out as relevant in initial readings of the data. Table 3 provides an explanation and examples for each code, as well as some key differences between the first and second rounds of coding. In the final steps of data analysis, I returned to participant data with the revised codes, re-coding as appropriate. I then compared learners' statements across the different sources to identify consistent themes and contradictions.

Table 3. *Initial codes and refined codes*

Initial codes	**Refined codes**	***Description*** **and Examples (Participant, Data Source, Context)**
Decision to spend time (13)	Decision to spend time (18)	*decision or decision-making process around language learning or engagement with language* „I'm already here [at university] and I don't really want to graduate early." (Blake, Interview, on why he decided to adopt the German minor)
Resources and engagement (21)	Access to resources (21)	*resources of any kind that participants express in connection to language learning – they may or may not have access to these resources* „I guess I don't know where I would get vocabulary from, maybe…I'll find some site that has more of…like a consistent, like, word of the week, or something." (Blake,

		Interview, on how he planned to supplement his summer German course)
	Engagement beyond classroom (planned/desired) (12)	*ways in which participants say they intend or hope to continue learning German or engaging with German-speaking people or places outside of the classroom setting*
		„It is still relevant, and I want to learn more German in the future because I plan to go to Germany." (Caleb, Project Portfolio, reflecting on whether his SMART-Goal was still relevant)
	Engagement beyond classroom (current/past) (7)	*ways in which participants say they actually learn German or engage with German-speaking people or places outside of the classroom setting, whether currently or in the past*
		„I actually like having the English book open and the German book open to kind of follow them like the side-by-side short stories…because sometimes you can see those choices being made and you're like, Oh, I can understand why you said that." (Kasey, Interview, on their preferred out-of-class resources for German)
How language (German) works (20)	How language works (21)	*statements on the nature of language/nature of German, specifically*
		„After like 101 and 102, when I got into the groove and had a good foundation being built, I started putting less and less time into it, because I had that foundation and that understanding of basic German, and I was able to just build off of that as if it was any other course or I guess any other language." (Caleb, Interview, on development of language abilities)
How/why to learn languages (20)	How to learn language (24)	*statements on how language learning functions, including but not limited to one's own language learning experience*
		„Because it's a language, like all of these are partially goals. Because, like if you know how to read it, but not how to speak it you're losing out on part of it, [and] if you know how to speak it but not how to read it, you're also losing out..." (Kasey, Interview, on learning a language for specific purposes)

Reason for further language study (7)	Reason for further language study (7)	*reasons for wanting to continue learning German, whether in the classroom or outside of it* „…[T]hat's kind of like going towards the goal of being able to have casual interactions in German with native German speakers, or I guess anyone speaking German.“ (Blake, Interview, on how plans for education abroad drive his study of German)
Reason for studying German (10)	Reason for studying German (10)	*rationale participants give for learning German* „My goals are to gain proficiency in a language other than English so that I can work more effectively abroad and in diverse communities.” (Kasey, Survey 1, responding to an open-ended question about goals for learning German)
[not in first coding round]	Exhaustion levels (6)	*comment on lack of energy, burn-out* “Basically, when I wasn’t working, I was doing nothing…because that was all I could do.” (Kasey, Interview, on why they had not pursued their SMART-Goal)
[not in first coding round]	Classroom influence (14)	*how the classroom learning environment impacted the way that students viewed language, language learning* “We had this small unit on…prejudices with language learners…people with certain accents, with certain levels of language skills and how that plays out in and affects peoples’ lives.” (Caleb, Interview, on additional perspectives gained in German classes)
[not in first coding round]	Perceived benefit (5)	*what participants understand the benefit of additional languages to be* “I find it really interesting what it would look like to live in Germany, or like everyday life and interacting more, and just…casual settings…” (Blake, Interview, on how plans to participate in study abroad motivated his study of German *how the expectations of others (individuals or institutions) impact decisions around language learning*
[not in first coding round]	External expectation/requirement (4)	“…they require doing a cognate, so…kind of like a concentration, like you have to take a certain number of credits in another field.” (Blake, Interview, on the requirements of his major)

Findings

Findings are presented below by individual participant, followed by a discussion that compares participants' experiences. For each participant, findings first contextualize the learner's decision to enroll in German courses before describing their engagement with language, their language learning pursuits, and the roles that they see German playing in their future.

Blake

Blake's degree did not require that he take a language, but he chose German to fulfill his major's requirement of a concentration of related courses. In explaining his choice to continue learning German, he referred to positive learning experiences in middle and high school. Upon finding he had room in his schedule, Blake resumed German courses after a multi-year hiatus. After resuming German study, he went on to declare a minor in German, explaining that he had "missed German, so [the minor was] …just kind of a decision based on what I was feeling." He continued to emphasize his personal interest in the language, distancing himself from a professionally motivated decision, "I don't really have a career plan for it - it was more just like a passion thing." Noting that he had no desire to graduate early, Blake took advantage of his time at university to return to a language that he had enjoyed learning in the past.

Blake seemed to enjoy his German coursework, while also experiencing limitations on how much he could invest in language learning. Although he described being consistently engaged in his German classes, he also acknowledged how beginning-of-semester optimism can become tempered by time and energy constraints, "The first week or two, I was really, really motivated. And then slowly as time goes on, you kind of settle in and you're like, 'Oh, this is the amount of work that I can do each week, and that's enough,' you know?" Reflecting on his goal to expand his vocabulary, Blake explained that the courses for his major required high commitment, meaning that he felt unable to pursue that learning goal. Yet, despite this difficulty, he stated that he would not revise the goal, and that setting a concrete goal helped him remember why he was learning German. Blake valued the process of articulating a goal because it reminded him of his larger interests in the language, but it did not remove the obstacles that Blake perceived to pursuing the goal.

Blake also had hopes for his future use of German. In the short-term, Blake expressed an intention to use free time in the summer to learn German, bridging the gap between the semesters. However, he also displayed uncertainty about where to find the resources to do so, "I guess I don't know where I would get vocabulary from, maybe I'll just find some site that has more of a consistent word of the week or something." As a long-term goal, Blake imagined a future in which he would be "able to have casual interactions in German. With native German speakers, or I guess anyone speaking German." He connected language learning with a curiosity about life in other environments, something he intended to experience through study abroad. "I find it really interesting, like, what it would look like to live in Germany? Or like, everyday life and interacting more, and just, like, casual settings…" For Blake, much of his language use beyond the classroom lay in an imagined future.

Caleb

Caleb's major was in a college that required four semesters of the same language, and he made clear across multiple data sources that he saw German courses as a way to fulfill this requirement. Due to his family background, Caleb had hoped to study Polish but realized that course offerings would not allow him to fulfill his degree's requirements. He originally enrolled in Spanish classes and felt that he was

placed at too high a level, deciding to come back to his language requirement later in his studies, landing on German, a choice which he attributed to "German history" in his family.

In his course assignments, Caleb mentioned feeling "burnt out" and how this contributed to his "short-sighted goal" of passing fourth-semester German. In pursuing this goal, Caleb leaned on his experiences from previous German courses, as well as a variety of online resources. After his first two semesters in German, Caleb put less energy into later courses, "... took it from 'I need to do this, I need to put as much effort into it as I can' to 'Okay, I got this, I'll be doing it anyway, so let's just take it at our own pace.'" In addition to efficiency, Caleb described using a variety of online resources to help him understand and complete course tasks. Caleb accessed alternative explanations of tricky concepts through online resources, saying that a "new format and different way of it being said…just helps break through some of the blocks in learning."

When asked how he saw learning German in relation to his life more broadly, Caleb made connections between his experiences as a learner of German and working with multilingual clients in writing centers. In his interview, he discussed how his approach with international students has "changed because I, as somebody who's starting to learn a new language, I'm like 'God, this is difficult!' How much more difficult must it be to not only start to learn a new language, but apply it in an academic setting in another country?" Referring to a classroom-based activity on language-based discrimination, Caleb stated, "Even though it might seem like Oh, this is a drag I have to read about this, it can generate good conversation, or at least good thought processes in people." In his portfolio, he indicated that this heightened awareness of linguistic discrimination made him want to "stop people when they make fun of others [because of their language use]." Caleb's engagement with German beyond the classroom thus revolved less around using the language and focused instead around applying the topical knowledge and perspectives from class in other situations. Regarding his future with languages, Caleb said that he would "probably learn more German…, because I want to go to Germany one day."

Kasey

One of Kasey's two majors required four semesters of the same language. They had taken two other languages in high school but began studying German during their postsecondary education because they found it applicable to their majors' study abroad programs and potential graduate studies. Kasey had also declared a minor in German, a decision they contextualized with "... well I'm here [at university], as long as I'm in the flat credit rate, you know?"[3] In addition, when asked about their goals for learning German, they stated, "I … enjoy learning languages, so learning German is fun for me in and of itself." An overall curiosity about languages, specific plans, and an institutional economic incentive drove Kasey's decision to study and minor in German.

Kasey took a broad view of learning German, linking their coursework to personal and academic pursuits. Kasey asserted that personal interest enhances language learning, explaining, "somebody said … 'Listen to more German music', and I'm like 'Well, if I don't want to listen to German music, then that's going to be boring'… the interest needs to be there, otherwise, in my opinion, you're not getting as much as you could out of it." Acting in accordance with this awareness, Kasey described completing course assignments in a way that incorporated their hobbies, "for one of the asynchronous [assignments] where

[3] The term "flat credit rate," sometimes called "block tuition" or "flat-rate tuition," refers to a practice at some US universities that sets the cost of tuition, above or between a certain number of credit hours, at one rate, rather than increasing with every credit hour.

you could do vocab, I play tabletop RPGs[4], so I actually got a PDF copy of a rulebook in German and in English and I looked at some of the key vocab." Beyond coursework, they also invested time in tracking down and consuming German-language media that suited their love of reading and certain streaming series. For example, Kasey ordered a German translation of a favorite book and read portions of the German version side by side with the English version. Despite their enthusiasm, Kasey admitted to struggling with the reading goal they had set for the module assignment, "Let's just say the goal didn't happen … it was partly the learning at home, partly heavy coursework, partly research. Basically, when I wasn't working, I was doing nothing because that was all I could do." Even though they had been overwhelmed during the semester, Kasey looked forward to more advanced German coursework the following year and planned to read German over the summer to maintain their language skills.

In the long term, Kasey envisioned a future in which their ability to use German enabled them to pursue education abroad in Germany and graduate studies in Europe. In response to a survey question on why they were learning German, Kasey explained that they wanted to "gain proficiency in a language other than English so that I can work more effectively abroad and in diverse communities." They also referred to "toolboxes" of knowledge from different parts of the world that would help them understand how global communities addressed issues in their chosen discipline. Kasey appeared to be a self-driven learner who, while sometimes struggling with their workload, engaged actively with the language outside of class for academic growth and personal amusement.

Discussion

Agency: Learning German for and beyond the Requirement

Across participants, the meso-level context of the university is portrayed as an institution that demands certain actions, but one which also allows certain choices for those who have access to it. For Caleb, his degree's language requirement represented an imposition, although not always a negative one, "I really do appreciate and enjoy that I was forced to take a language course." This phrasing indicates a certain lack of agency within institutional demands, whereas Kasey and Blake describe actively taking advantage of the university's offerings to continue learning German past degree requirements. Both participants make use of institutional structures to enable their language study, whether for future academic ambitions or current enjoyment. However, Blake and Kasey also portray burnout and other coursework as impediments to their ability to pursue language learning goals. Positioning themselves as postsecondary students, the participants are thus subject to certain "rights and duties" (Kayi-Aydar, 2019, p. 13) associated with this role.

In addition to the level of the institution, structures at the program and classroom levels also influenced learners' decisions. A "choose-your-own" assignment encouraged learners to find German-language resources and tasks that suited their needs and interests. Some learners used this as an opportunity to seek out unique language-learning materials, as with Kasey, who found German-language gaming guides. Caleb also expressed independently finding resources that suited his learning needs, although he did not expressly connect these to the "choose-your-own" assignment. These findings partially echo Lin (2013), who found that classroom activities and structures can engender learner agency and increase learners' ability to engage with greater personal interest. The current study's findings indicate that Lin's (2013) conclusion extends beyond the classroom to also include out-of-class work. Yet, the flexibility

[4] The term "RPGs" refers to role playing games.

encouraged in course assignments did not necessarily enable all learners to seek out such resources, even those with an enthusiasm for language learning. Blake, who voluntarily sought out German coursework for enjoyment, was less aware of how to develop language skills outside the classroom context. Blake's inability to identify resources appropriate to him is reminiscent of Willis Allen's (2010) focal participant who, despite a clear interest in language learning, struggled to function as an agentive learner in a non-classroom setting. Even though Willis Allen's (2010) study profiled education abroad participants, findings from both studies feature students who express difficulty in driving a learning process outside of the classroom.

The three focal participants in this study illustrate learner agency as dynamic and socially constructed. Navigating institutions through their positions as students, all three participants find themselves in fourth-semester German classes, either by obligation or by choice. Interestingly, whether the participants chose to enroll in German classes did not always correspond neatly with their choices regarding coursework or out-of-class engagement with language. Whereas Blake made a voluntary and enthusiastic return to learning German, he struggled to make connections with the language beyond what was provided to him in the form of coursework. Caleb, on the other hand, readily sought out additional resources to facilitate his coursework, despite being externally compelled to be in German courses. Time also impacted learners' choices in multiple ways, highlighting the dynamic nature of agency, as well as its potential relationship with investment. Blake and Caleb described tempering their efforts in coursework after realizing what degree of work was feasible for them. While the ebb and flow of competing priorities took certain possibilities away from them, they also described reassessing their energy levels and making choices based on this understanding. Furthermore, feelings of burnout and time constraints, mentioned by all participants, impacted the choices that they felt they could make.

Capital and Investment: The Impact of Access, Time, and Energy

Caleb, Blake, and Kasey each employed combinations of material and immaterial resources to learn German. Kasey and Blake used their existing capital in the form of access to higher education, which supported their choices to learn German. Kasey and Caleb also availed themselves to internet access and technological competence, further forms of capital, to seek resources that supported their coursework and beyond. However, despite probably having similar access, Blake indicated he was not sure how to find such resources. This discrepancy invites curiosity about other contextual factors that may have prevented Blake from using these resources. One possible answer lies in two themes that all participants mentioned: finite time and lack of energy. Blake, Caleb, and Kasey limited efforts and adjusted work pace to fit what they felt was reasonable to expect of themselves. Although no participant explicitly mentioned the COVID-19 pandemic, data were gathered under pandemic learning conditions, likely contributing to burnout and exhaustion (see, e.g., Melnyk et al, 2021). Time, energy, and wellbeing, resources that might have been used to pursue language learning under other circumstances, were not available to the same extent. Thus, fluctuating levels of certain kinds of capital reduced some learners' overall investment in language learning. Looking at participants' engagement with language learning, it becomes clear that studying their investment paints a different picture than exploring their motivation. Blake and Kasey, for example, are ostensibly motivated learners of German who both struggle to invest in aspects of their language learning due to contextual factors that restrict their access to certain forms of capital, albeit to different degrees.

Forms of cultural capital, both real and imagined, also affected participants' investment in learning German. Although Caleb's language learning efforts fall almost exclusively within the fulfillment of

course expectations, his work with multilingual writers shaped how he perceived the value of learning German. Through his language learning experience, Caleb approached his writing center work and his larger interactions with a multilingual world differently. He frames his experiences, at least rhetorically, as cultural capital, "knowledge, educational credentials," (Darvin & Norton, 2015, p. 44), something which one might not expect from a learner who describes himself as burnt out and simply meeting an educational requirement. Kasey and Blake envisioned gaining cultural capital through future travels in Germany and Europe more broadly. Both intended to participate in education abroad during their undergraduate degrees, and Kasey described wanting to pursue graduate education in Europe. Blake focused on how time in Germany would allow him to learn more about everyday life in Germany from other speakers of the language. Kasey imagined a European graduate education as allowing them to develop as a well-rounded expert in their field of study. Interestingly, no participant mentioned learning German explicitly for career-related ambitions, with Blake even explicitly saying that he did not "have … a career plan for it." This finding is in contrast with Marshall and Bokhorst-Heng (2020), whose participants strongly emphasized the importance of French for their economic futures. An awareness of the local importance of French may have heightened the languages' salience for participants in Marshall and Bokhorst-Heng's (2020) study, whereas the current study's participants likely did not grow up with a local German-speaking minority. While this study's participants may have perceived some benefits for the job market, they did not frame it as a primary driver for their investment. This shift away from economic capital to recognize other forms of capital is also evident among some participants in Lu, He, and Shen (2020), although the current study's participants are approaching language learning from a different position, namely with status as speakers of standardized US-American English. This widely recognized form of economic, cultural, and social capital may have allowed learners to recognize the non-economic benefits that learning a language can bring, as opposed to beginning study of German with high hopes for economic returns.

Implications for Language Pedagogy and Curricula

The findings presented above may, in some ways, run counter to intuition about certain learner groups' investment and agentive capacity. For example, despite emphasizing German as a requirement to fulfill, Caleb displayed an ability to find external resources that suited his needs in language learning. He also made connections between his work in writing centers and his own language learning experiences, illustrating the interconnectedness of his contexts and their role in him becoming a more empathetic and critically aware writing consultant. Furthermore, he shows that students who are taking language courses for a requirement are not necessarily disengaged, even if their investment may appear low. Caleb's story reinforces to language educators that we can give learners more chances to bring their experiences and capital into the classroom, sharing these perspectives with fellow language learners. Blake, despite his German minor, his plan to participate in education abroad, and his desire to become part of broader German-speaking communities, showed little awareness of resources outside of class. Cases like Blake's highlight the need to give students practice in locating and using appropriate resources, as well as making the language relevant and meaningful beyond the classroom. Kasey's pragmatic approach, which matched their language study to their majors, and their language engagement to their interests, may at first seem obvious from a practitioner perspective. Nonetheless, Kasey's experiences show that curricula and activities should give learners opportunities to see their interests reflected in the language use community.

All participants in this study mentioned that specific classroom assignments or types of tasks allowed

them to connect learning German to their lives outside of the classroom. As described above, Kasey took advantage of a "choose-your-own" assignment to find personally relevant vocabulary. Blake maintained that setting a goal, even one that he did not meet, helped him remember his larger ambitions for using German. Caleb explained that activities about linguistic bias pushed him to think more about how he interacts with others in a multilingual world. These accounts are reminiscent of Kashiwa's (2021) focal participant, who, prompted by course assignments, articulated her identities and language use contexts, ultimately becoming a more active agent in her language learning. By inviting learners to negotiate some of the tasks and topics of classroom-based language learning (Lin, 2013; Liao, 2019) and reflect on their "various concerns, desires, and visions ... in the light of contextual and structural conditions" (Gao, 2013, p. 235), language educators may facilitate learners' ability to make agentive language learning decisions that are in accordance with their desired types and degree of investment.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

As case studies, Kasey, Caleb and Blake provide a snapshot of how three learners in a basic language program conceive of capital and agency in their language learning pursuits. Given the time frame for data collection of about two months, this data is limited in its ability to tell a larger story or capture the changes in investment and agency over time and across contexts. Future research on agency and investment would benefit from a longitudinal study, which could capture learners across personal, professional, and academic trajectories. Such an approach would better fit the contextually embedded conceptualizations of agency (Ahearn, 2001; Kayi-Aydar, 2019) and investment (Darvin & Norton, 2015). Similarly, this data focused on students in fourth-semester German, the final course in the basic language sequence. One potential for future research is to study learners across the curriculum, to see how agency and investment manifest themselves at different levels. Finally, the learners in this study self-selected to participate in research, and two of the study's participants had already declared German minors and expressed an intent to study abroad. Research that captures perspectives from students with no intention for continued language study would likely allow for a more representative sample of students in beginning language courses.

Despite these limitations, this research contributes insights from a prevalent context (beginning language study, language study for a requirement) to inform practical decisions on curriculum design and classroom practice. By learning more about learners' contexts and the resources at their disposal, language educators can learn more about the many influences on language learners' decisions. Based on this awareness, practitioners can incorporate pedagogical approaches that encourage learners to build connections between language learning into other parts of their academic and personal lives.

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Appendix A. Relevant Excerpts from Survey 1

Note: The full version of Survey 1 included language learning strategies found in *Maximizing Study Abroad: A Language Instructors' Guide to Strategies for Language and Culture Learning and Use* (Cohen, Oxford, & Chi, 2006). However, because the current study focuses on participants' own articulation of their language learning strategies, choices are not listed here.

What are your goals for learning German?

_____

_____

Do you identify with this statement?
None of the goals listed above are relevant for me, I am simply taking German to fulfill a requirement.

- o Yes (1)
- o No (2)

When learning German, what strategies do you use?

_____

_____

Appendix B. Assignment 1, SMART Goal for Language Learning

Note: Directions for the task below was given to students in German. Students submitted the assignment in German.

SMART Goal Set yourself a SMART goal for learning German. * Then explain why you set this goal for yourself and what it has to do with you and your interests. Finally, name a few concrete steps towards your goal - what do you need in order to follow this goal?

*If you don't know what a SMART goal is, you can find an explanation in this text or this video.

Appendix C. Assignment 2, End of Module Portfolio

Note: The information below was presented to students in German. Students completed the assignment in German.

Portfolio Directions

1. Show the representation of your identity. Describe the image and what the image says about your identity. Which aspects did you choose? At the end of this module, would you change any of these aspects (or add anything)? Why (not)? Write at least 5 sentences in German.
2. What did you learn from the language learner profiles? Which commonalities and differences were there, between the learners and between you and the learners? Write at least 5 sentences in German.
3. What was your language learning goal? Is it still relevant? Would you change your goal? Why (not)? Write at least 5 sentences in German.
4. What was a particularly interesting question/answer from your interview? How did this question/answer contribute to your understanding of language, language learning and identity? Write at least 5 sentences in German.
5. Reflect on what you learned in the module about language, language learning and identity. Write at least 5 sentences in German.

Appendix D. Relevant Interview Protocol Excerpts

Note: Highlighted text are variables that changed from student to student. This information was gathered from the surveys and class assignments they completed before the interview.

1) *Beginning / Intro / Warm Up*
   a) Tell me a bit about how your classes are going this semester.
      i) What about your German class?
   b) Why did you decide to take German (as opposed to another foreign language)?

2) *Your Goals*
   I wanted to talk a bit about some general and specific goals you have for German.
   a) Can you tell me a bit about how the goals you mentioned in the survey (A, B, C, D…) connect to your interests, hobbies or future plans?

3) *Experience Setting and/or Pursuing Language Learning Goals*

   a) Could you talk to me about your experience in Kulturaufgabe 1 (that was the project weeks where the topics were language learning, identity and goals)?

      i) *Potential Follow-Up Questions*

         (1) What tools and strategies did you use to pursue the goal you set in Kulturaufgabe 1? Could you talk a bit about how those strategies interacted with other priorities?
         OR

         (2) What barriers did you encounter that led to this goal not being a priority?

      ii) What was it like being asked to set a learning goal for yourself? What was that experience like in general?

         (1) *Potential Follow-Up Questions:*

            (a) Was that a new experience for you? Have other classes asked you to think about what you want to do with a given subject?

4) *Control over (Language) Learning*

   a) In a given semester or week, what factors influence how much you put into learning or using German?

   b) How does your coursework play a role in those choices?

5) *Wrap Up / Thank You / Conclusion*

   a) Are there any other aspects of your language learning experience that you wanted to talk more about?

   b) Are there any questions that you had for me in terms of language learning or this research?

About the Author

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