The Ups and Downs of Becoming a Graduate Student Researcher

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Graduate students participating in LALS 5201: Second Language Classroom Research with Professor Devon Woods each completed a research project that was written up, compiled and bound in a hard cover volume that has been put on the shelves of the Language Learning Resource Centre in the School of Linguistics and Applied Language Studies of Carleton University. Even though the research undertaken and the papers were done for the most part individually, each week in class we discussed readings, collaborated on a questionnaire, and most importantly shared our experiences. It was after one of these long discussions in class that the idea to do a further "meta-project, involving interviews with all the students, came to me. I realized that no one was having an easy time doing original research (for most of us, it was the first time) and I wondered if there were any commonalities with any of the issues. I also realized that having the support of each other in the class was a huge asset to us all and I cannot imagine the results of this type of project without being able to talk about it with others going through the same thing. I got together with the students in our course and asked some specific questions about "becoming a graduate student researcher". During our experience in this particular course there were both ups and downs but in the end we all felt we gained, both as graduate students and as researchers, more than we had imagined we would back when we started.

When I began writing this paper, I started out picking and choosing among the various comments given by everyone but I soon realized that this was wrong. Who was I to decide whose opinion was more valid, more interesting or more important? This paper was to express everyone's voice and everyone's story. To leave even one bit out would be to lose something. Therefore, I have chosen to include almost all of the interviews. I have edited them somewhat to keep everyone's identity anonymous but I think you will find that each voice is unique and special. I begin each section with my rationale for the question I asked and a brief summary of the kinds of answers I received.

I think answering these questions was therapeutic for many of us. We had just finished our research projects, the papers were all written. We had done it! Reflecting on what we had gone through helped us to see all the

hard work we did and the benefits we received from it. I hope you enjoy reading about our experiences.

Beginning Expectations

I started out asking about incoming expectations. I remember speaking with people last fall and many expressed dislike of research or of having to do research for the program. I thought this was rather odd because I always considered graduate school to be inseparable from research. However, we do have a lot of ESL teachers in our program and not all ESL teachers feel strongly about research and some of the ones I talked to considered it impractical. Since LALS 5201 was an elective course, I think it is safe to say that all the students were keen to do research, although very few had specific expectations regarding research. Most of us felt we were facing an unknown, and that created both anxiety and excitement towards doing this project.

Question: When you arrived at Carleton and started the M.A. program what were your expectations of doing research? Had you done any research before? Were you looking forward to it? Were you scared to death or unsure of yourself? How did you feel about doing research?

> *I didn't expect to be able to do classroom research at Carleton but there you go, I did it. I thought it would be interesting to be able to get to know the educational system in Canada in terms of the structural and instructional aspects. This would give me a broader view of ups and downs in certain practices in comparison to what we have in my home country. I was of course looking forward to doing this research in our course. I wasn't sure of how to get others to participate in my research and I guess I wasn't successful in doing this. However, I managed to put together the different data sources to come up with something that was interesting to me as findings.*

> *My expectations about doing research were mainly to do with quantitative research because of my educational background. I did a big research study in my second year of university in one of my classes. I do remember it being a lot of work, but it was so different from this last one because I didn't have to deal with ethical issues, interview transcriptions. Moreover, it felt like the findings were clear cut where as in this past study it was more difficult to see trends and come up with reasons for those trends.*

Well, I came from an educational system where there is still more focus on analyzing and criticizing others works without conducting any original research (information-based rather than research-based). I did have some questionnaires and interviews in my undergrad, but it was not done properly, I guess. Thus when I came here and took the inquiry course, I begun to notice that research does not just involves books and articles but can also involve original research.

I expected to be able to join a research group of some sort (it did not happen yet, because apparently there are no student research groups at SLALS). I had done a little research before for a term paper during my BA. In the beginning of the MA program I was not scared or unsure because I had no idea of what was awaiting me in terms of research. When I started LALS 5201 I realized how much I did not know about research and that made me feel very anxious about it.

When I first arrived at Carleton for the M.A. program I did not have any firm beliefs about what to expect as far as completing individual research. However, I did think that I would eventually encounter and most likely help conduct exploratory research at some point during the program under the guidance of one or more instructor. This belief was simply my general impression at the commencement of the program. I had (and still have) a more-or-less positive view towards conducting research. More specifically, I was eager to find out if I could conduct research that was somehow novel or largely unexplored by other researchers. In addition, I really wanted to do something that had some practical value for teachers and students alike.

Honestly, I did not have very specific expectations about doing research when I arrived at Carleton. I assumed that I would be required to do some research, but I did not think about it too much. For my undergraduate program, I had to write a thesis for which I conducted some original research. Retrospectively, this research was very different from the research I did for the L2 classroom research course. I definitely learned a lot in the 5502 course. Not that the research I did in [undergrad] was not valuable, but this time I felt a little more confident because I had the feeling that I knew what I was doing.

What about Paradigms?
In our required fall term course, LALS 5502: Inquiry Strategies for Applied Language Studies, we talked a lot about paradigms. While the research we were undertaking for LALS 5201 was certainly going to be qualitative research, I still felt the need to ask my fellow students how they felt about paradigms and if it was at all a part of their thinking in any aspect of our projects. Because the course was set up to do qualitative research, some students felt they had no choice but to follow a socio-constructivist view, regardless of how we as individuals might have felt. However, because we were, and are still, so new to the field of research no one considered this to be negative. Given the chance to do research from this perspective brought new insight into our own beliefs about the nature of knowledge whether or not we agreed with the socio-constructivist view or not. I guess you could say we were all socio-constructivists for this project although some of us did not consciously think about it.

Question: In LALS 5502 (Inquiry Strategies) we talked a lot about *paradigms*. Did you think about this at all when you began your project? Do you feel you could declare your "intellectual leanings" on the meaning of knowledge? Do you think it is necessary? Why?

I didn't think about paradigms before I started the research project. It was only until after I transcribed my interviews that I realized I identified with a socio-constructivist view, but it didn't direct my research.

It's a good thing we had LALS 5502 or I wouldn't have known about paradigms. I have thought a lot about the idea in general but I guess I didn't really think about it for this project per se. As far as being able to declare my beliefs on knowledge I think I have changed so much in the past two years that I am hesitant to make declarations. However, after doing this research I think that I have a much better idea of why it is important to know what your beliefs are because of the impact it can have on your research.

Honestly, I did not think of it. I think restricting yourself into a particular paradigm will harm your analysis. Well, it may help you to be focused but still to me it is of little value.

Yes, I guess I did, but not too much, because the paradigm we were going to follow was somewhat established early in the course by the professor. We were not given too much of a choice in terms of paradigms for our project. I think I've

learned a lot about my own beliefs about the nature of knowledge, but I'm not so sure I could declare those beliefs with confidence. I believe declaring your beliefs about the meaning of knowledge is necessary because they underline all the assumptions, claims and arguments you make as a researcher.

I did think about the paradigms a lot. I knew this research should be more qualitative in nature because we were looking more for what others thought of their progress in learning the language, which urged our use of interviews as a solid data source because of the interactional nature of interviews.

I actively considered the different paradigms (that is, the basic identified distinctions between qualitative and quantitative research) when I started this project. Due to the nature of the course and research topics, I wanted to design a learning project that would be more qualitatively oriented than quantitatively oriented. Once I had this approach in mind, I then decided to use mostly interview and questionnaire data. These methods of data collection were recommended during our class. I think it is very useful to have at least an introductory level of understanding of the various paradigms since it allows one to become more aware of the 'hidden' biases and shortcomings of adopting any particular paradigm. I'm not sure if it is necessary to have such knowledge, but I do believe it would facilitate with designing and attempting to interpret the data collected. I think it's interesting that depending on one's paradigm, the same results from a study could be interpreted in different ways.

The Difficulties with Getting Started
For many of us the most difficult part of the project was starting. We looked up and saw a huge hill looming before us. For some, it was the research topic itself that was the biggest problem in the beginning. For others it was finding the right class or convincing the teacher to let a researcher in that proved to be the biggest obstacles. I think it is always hard to start something that you haven't really attempted before. We constantly second-guess ourselves. Fortunately we all did ok, and it is interesting to read about how these issues were dealt with, the very creative ways they were handled, and how we all got over that "hump" of getting started.

Question: Tell me about what you did in the very beginning after we decided what our research topic (for Devon's class) was and which classroom we were going to be observing. How did you feel? How did you proceed? What was the most difficult part about getting started?

I contacted [a teacher] via email to get started with classroom observations and wrote her a bit about what I was planning to do. Her reply was very surprising to me. She wrote that she does not think that I would be able to find anything I am looking for. This was a little discouraging because I thought I might not be able to stick to my topic/research idea. However, I did not give up at that point and emailed [the teacher] that I would like to conduct my project in [a specific classroom]. That class was taught by another instructor with whom I got in touch, and I started my observations fairly early. Those observations were very encouraging because just in the first class the teacher and students talked about [the topic I was studying]. I felt that I was "on the right track". So I would say that finding the right class to conduct my study in was maybe the most difficult part about getting started.

I started observing the class but mostly it was not for the topic of investigation itself but for my overall understanding of the overall context because I believe the whole can guide you to notice more of the parts and bits and pieces of incidents that tell you a lot about learning as an intellectual and social exchange that builds the blocks of knowledge. I introduced myself to the students but I didn't mingle with them at all. I was all the time an outsider whom the students greeted and smiled to almost every week. As the students were doing a case study assignment, I worked with one student who was so cooperative and expressed himself freely in the interviews, in which half the time was devoted to his questions for his study. It was difficult to get students to come for the interviews on time, so I wasted some time waiting for the students to show up for the interviews

I spent a lot of time trying to decide what methodology to use. We had read a lot of very interesting articles on classroom observation and ethnography but I was frustrated that I still didn't know how to go about doing this myself. I felt I was not knowledgeable enough. However, I decided to get into the classroom and at least start observing and taking field notes. I

also spent a lot of time in the beginning narrowing down my topic. Since I wasn't sure, I often felt like I didn't know what I was looking for when I was observing. I just wrote down everything.

The most difficult part of getting started was finding a way to articulate what I wanted research. This was important because I had to first articulate to the instructors to gain access to their classrooms, and then how to explain it to the students without scaring them away but still remaining ethical.

I felt a little unsure of what I was supposed to do. This was the first time I conducted such research. I kept asking my classmates what we were supposed to do. Apparently, the majority of the students were not sure of the right way to observe a classroom. I had some difficulty in writing down some notes during the observation. The first two weeks I kept writing nearly everything but then realized that this is going to be a tiring task and I would no be able to control my writing. I decided then to take the most relevant notes only. I think I learned this way as time passed.

First, I think we did not decide the topic (the professor did). Not that I'm complaining about it, I was happy to be working on a common research topic and to be collaborating with classmates. The first thing I did was to get in touch with the teachers of the classes I was going to observe. I was a little apprehensive because if I was not granted access to those classes I would have to change my research topic, and I already had some good ideas about it. Knowing exactly what to look for was the most difficult thing about getting started.

Initially, I tried to brainstorm various research ideas connected to the underlying class topic of 'sense of progress' in language learning. I first started the research process by thinking of different ways to approach this topic. Certain scheduling constraints meant that only a few ESL classes were available to adequately observe and use for data collection. Thus, one … class was chosen that could be attended by me after my regular classes. I felt quite comfortable starting with this ESL class and beginning the initial observations. My primary concern or difficulty at this time, though, was trying to find a class that would be compatible with my school

timetable since I had a total of four courses during the time and tutoring throughout the week. So, I would say that scheduling was a significant initial concern, while managing my time was another important issue.

Devon had talked to two instructors of classes that I wanted to work with. I then emailed both of them with my proposal. The first instructor responded immediately. However, I never heard from the second instructor even though I emailed her multiple times and Devon talked to her again. I don't know what happened, but it was very frustrating. I finally emailed a different instructor to do the research, but since it was about three weeks after I started observing classes from the first instructor and interviewing students from that class, I was unable to do the same number of interviews with participants from the second class.

The first day I met the class teacher, [the teacher] kept asking me [about] my research interests and what I [was going to do] in the class. I do not know why I felt [unwelcome] [because I received] permission and emailed [the teacher] before attending the class. I think [the teacher] was afraid that I may criticize his/her teaching methods.

At first [the] teacher was reluctant to accept me in the class and I got upset about that because I thought [the teacher] was being uncooperative. I also thought [the teacher] did not understand "how good my intentions were". After that I had to explain very carefully the scope of the research and point out that it would consist of a small learning project for a course end-of-term paper. Rounds' article was very helpful because I identified some of my own problems in her discussion of the obstacles she had to face in her classroom research project. The reading and my own reflections began to make me think about several questions: What kind of benefit would my research bring to the teacher and students? How did [the teacher] know he/she could trust me? I wanted to get something from [the teacher], but what was I offering in return? Did [the teacher] think I was being intrusive? I was making an effort to "understand my project and my related needs from the teacher's point of view …" In addition; I was trying to figure out something I could offer besides the findings of my research. I came up with the idea of offering to

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do a presentation in his class. It was only after this offer that the teacher agreed to grant me access to the class. On the first day I visited I did the presentation and it ended up being a very good way of establishing a positive rapport with the teacher and the students since they interacted with me by asking lots of questions. They got to know me and I got to know them, and I had done something interesting and useful to them... My hard feelings about the situation were gone after I reflected about it and found a way to offer the teacher and the class something relevant to them in exchange for their cooperation.

Designing the Research Project

When I asked questions about methodology choices I was hoping some variety would be revealed. All of us however, did pretty much the same thing. It is not that we weren't exposed to the wide variety of research methods; it was more of a lack of confidence on our part. Time was another problem and constrained us from attempting more ethnographic methods. In the end everyone did interviews, and questionnaires and some did classroom observation.

Question: What research design/methods did you decide to use and why? Did you try out anything new? How did you know what to use? In LALS 5502 (Inquiry Strategies) we were exposed to a wide variety of research methods, did you feel you could use any of them?

I used survey research: questionnaire and interview data. I used these methods of data collection since my research approach was essentially qualitative in nature and I thought it would be an effective and efficient way to elicit a 'thick' or rich description from participants under the circumstances (i.e., time constraints). As you know, our class worked together to devise a questionnaire to address our fundamental research question. Thus, a preliminary version of questionnaire questions and interview questions were developed by our classmates and Devon (our instructor). After our class devised a tentative questionnaire, I collaborated with a classmate to customize the questions on the questionnaire for my specific research purposes. In addition, I thought that interviewing would also yield a 'thick' description that could be analyzed in detail.

For this research, I used questionnaires and interviews to collect data triangulated by classroom observations. In the design of this research, an important step was to find the right questions to get the participants to talk about their beliefs about their learning. So, I rewrote my questionnaire forms in order to suit my goals that aimed mainly at eliciting information from the students. I could not of course use some of research methods I learned in LALS 5502 because the research methods that suited our approach was more of an interactional nature I guess.

I must admit that when I designed the project I didn't think of any of the methods that were introduced in that class (5502). When I first went into the classroom, I thought about observing for doing research, but I soon realized that it was too difficult. I thought that I would rely on the questionnaire more than I did.

Even though we were exposed to a wide variety of research methods in LALS 5502 I certainly didn't feel qualified to actually use any of them, especially the quantitative designs. I guess I was being a little stubborn with wanting to make my research observation based. Most everyone seemed to be focusing on interviews and questionnaires and I felt those were easy and unchallenging so I wanted to try something else. The problem was I had no training to do anything else really. We read about using observation techniques like COLT but honestly the short article in no way prepared me to actually try to use it. Of course if I had much more time (like a year) I might have been able to do it. In the end I used interviews, questionnaires and my field notes. I was frustrated because I feel that anyone can do an interview and make a questionnaire and that questionnaires are extremely problematic. However, I felt I had no other choice but to use these methods. I was being stubborn wanting to use other methods because I felt classroom research should be all about observation, and that case studies were too easy and not really classroom oriented.

I decided to have interviews as my main source of data. I tried using some charts that participants were supposed to complete during the interviews. I figured these charts would be a good way to answer my research question, but I was not so sure I

was doing the right thing. I think I could use all of the research methods we were introduced to in LALS 5502, except for the quantitative methods (I don't think I'm able to handle all the stats).

I used qualitative methodologies like observation, questionnaire, and interviews. I do not feel comfortable conducting any quantitative research because of two reasons. 1. I do not know how to use and interpret quantitative measurements. It needs some experience which I lack at the moment. 2. Quantitative research will produce just numbers and figure. While these numbers and figures looks interesting, thye seem to me meaningless. I cannot draw any conclusions from these numbers

My study was a qualitative study. For the purpose of it, I conducted classroom observations and interviews and administered questionnaires. I had done qualitative research before, but the research I conducted earlier consisted only of observations and an interview, which was less structured than the interviews I conducted this time. In another project I had used questionnaires, but back then we took a quantitative approach. This time I used the questionnaires to add to the interviews, not to determine general tendencies. This was definitely a new thing for me. My goals [of] a qualitative study [were] more useful. Qualitative research might be more honest in the respect that it does not claim to present the ultimate truth. LALS 5502 definitely helped me with the project. I learned in this course to be more critical when I read articles and to be careful about making generalisations and about drawing conclusions. All the methods that I used were also discussed in 5502, and I am convinced that it helped me to get a better grasp of what I was doing during this project.

What Do I Do With All These Data?
After we had finished collecting our data we were faced with the next stage of our projects; analyzing it! I was interested to find out just how much data everyone ending up collecting and how they dealt with it. I think we all ended up with much more than we had expected and at first it seemed an impossible task to sift through it all to find any patterns or relevant material. However, as soon as that first glimmer of a pattern was revealed to us, or the first relevant incident was discovered, our confidence soared and we really

began to enjoy the analysis process. The only down side was perhaps the fact that some of these discoveries led to more questions or revealed serious gaps and it was too late to go back and do more data collecting.

Question: How much data did you end up with? How did you approach analyzing it? What helped you the most in dealing with your data?

> *Tons!!! I had 6 interview transcripts, over 20 completed questionnaires and field notes from 8 classes I observed. I devised 3 huge tables with summaries of the data (1 for the interviews, 1 for the questionnaires, and 1 for the field notes). In order to try to make sense of my summaries, I put them up all over my living room walls and every time I walked into the room I would look at them and try to identify any interesting patterns*

> *I ended up with a lot of data (hard to quantify). I approached the questionnaires first because I found them easier to look at. It actually gave me some direction as to what to look for in the interviews. It is hard to say what helped me the most, maybe my color tabs.*

> *I ended up with a lot of data. I had a notebook with my field notes, my competed questionnaires and my transcripts of interviews. I used a database program to organize my questionnaire data. I decided on 5 themes to look for and used color coding to mark sections of my notes and interview transcripts for the themes. Without this, it all seemed a big jumble.*

> *I had stacks of interviews transcripts and observations, but I ignored some sources in order to concentrate on the part that was significant for the study in identifying patterns among the data. The literature review was useful in identifying some new patterns as well as build on some concepts like learner autonomy and progress.*

> *I ended up with four completed questionnaires (each questionnaire had a total of 18 questions), and one individual interview that lasted about 20 minutes and one group interview of similar duration. I tried to find any patterns in the questionnaire responses. In this way, I decided to write out the questionnaire responses of every participant within one chart.*

I believe that this charting technique really helped me to gain an overall perspective of the data and readily compare and contrast any differences or similarities between responses. Ultimately, I was able to see a few significant patterns in participants' responses. Correspondingly, I transcribed the interview data and then tried to sift through the responses to identify the most relevant responses in relation to my research questions.

In the end, I had about 24 pages of interview transcriptions from three interviews. For both the interview data and the questionnaire answers I made tables to juxtapose the data. That way I could see differences and similarities between the students' answers. Furthermore, I read through the interview transcriptions several time to find statements that were of particular relevance to my research question. I highlighted them and noted on the margins that I wanted to put them in my results section. Later, I organised those statements by common topics in my paper. Thus, I did not talk about the different participants separately, but I put their answers regarding the same issue together.

I think keeping my research question always in mind helped me most with the organization of my data. I read it over and over to not lose track of what I am really doing. I also think that having only three participants also helped because I could keep a lot of information in my mind. If I had to deal with more data, I would probably use more steps between the data and the results section, e.g. filing cards.

Well, at the beginning of my research, I was not sure that I would have any data for my study. However, as time passes, I began to have some interesting quotes and ideas hat seem relevant to my topic. In fact, I end up with a lot of data and had some difficulty choosing the ones that seem most relevant and get rid o the least relevant for my study.

If I could go back in time, I would take my time during the interviews and ask all the questions I had planned to ask. Many times, during the interviews, I would skip some important questions and spend too much time on irrelevant chatting. When I transcribed the interviews I realized how many important things I did not ask.

I wish I had more time. So many things came out of the interviews and classroom observations that I didn't really see until my final analysis and looking at the sources all together. Or course it was too late by then to go back and confirm or followup. I think maybe I should have analyzed more as I went along rather than wait until the very end to look at everything I collected. That way I could have gone back with better questions for followup interviews.

More Difficulties
Research, like most things in life, is an individual experience and each of us had a slightly different experience. I asked about what everyone thought was the most difficult part because I was looking for advice to give to other novice researchers. Interestingly, the answers varied quite a bit, although I think the fact that we were looking back at the completed project might have colored our answers a little bit. Certainly back in the beginning when we were pouring over the questionnaire, revising it, and revising it, again and again, that was difficult! Knowing what to look for in the classroom; that was difficult! Time management was also an issue for some. I think the value of the answers to this question is to help with the realization that difficulties are part of the process and you never know what it is that is going to cause you trouble until it happens. I don't think any of us could have predicted our problems, although perhaps this comes with experience.

Question: What was the most difficult aspect of doing this research project?

The most difficult part was being courageous enough to link relevant data to come up with patterns. Reporting the findings is so difficult as one has to be succinct on one hand and make sense on the other.

The most difficult thing about doing this research project was lack of time. I felt that we had enough time to collect some data. When I started analyzing it, I found that I had more questions. Unfortunately, I ran out of time to ask them. Logically I should have done the analyzing as I was doing the collecting, so I could have asked those unanswered questions. However, it was unrealistic to do that while studying for other courses. Moreover, when it came to writing the paper I found that I wanted more time, in a sense, to simply "sit on the data". I felt that I didn't get enough time to simply process what it all meant and probably missed some things.

Getting started! I had some difficulty to begin my research as everything seemed so strange and I merely collected any valuable information for my study at the first two weeks. However, as the topic became refined and I became comfortable with class, I began seeing some connections and themes began to surface in the data.

Having so little time was the hardest part of this project. I feel we could have taken 1/2 term to prepare, ½ term to do the data collecting and another ½ term to write the paper.

There were moments of panic when I began analyzing all the data I had collected. However, the most difficult aspect of this research project was the extremely short time we were given to complete it: We had to find relevant literature, read it, design the research, collect the data, analyze the data and write the research paper in less than 4 months. Not to mention the four reflections and the class discussion we had to organize! Honestly, I think we all made a miracle

I think that the most difficult aspect of this research project for me was trying to budget my tasks since it required substantial effort and time to effectively complete the study. For instance, I realized that transcribing interviews can be a painstaking process. Once transcription was completed, the interview data had to be carefully analyzed and later on interpreted from a particular perspective.

I did not feel that the earlier parts (classroom observations, questionnaires, interviews) of the project were difficult. I would say that the actual writing of the paper was the most difficult part. However, it was not as difficult as writing other papers for which I had not done any original research. For me, writing is in most cases not easy, so finding it difficult to write a paper is more a general problem I have. Maybe it was also a little hard because it was my third paper within a short period of time and I was a little exhausted.

Are Questionnaires "The Devil"?
I was very interested in hearing everyone's feelings about designing, implementing and analyzing a questionnaire. As a class we spent a lot of time creating a general questionnaire, focusing on every small detail. I think

it was a good experience and it showed us that throwing out any old questions would not be appropriate for a second language classroom. The end value of the questionnaire was somewhat split between somewhat useless to useful as a supplement to the interviews.

Question: I think most of us, if not all of us, did some sort of questionnaire as part of our project. Tell me about your experience using a questionnaire. Would you use one again?

> *I did do a lot of work developing a questionnaire, most of which was with the class. Even though I used it and distributed it to many students, I didn't use those findings a lot in my final paper. I found the questionnaires really helpful for adding structure to the second round of interviews. I found that having the students explain their answers to the questionnaires in the interviews was useful because they seem to come up with many examples as a result. I don't know if this is because they thought back to when they were filling out the questionnaires and then were able to explain their answers better or felt less threatened. As a result, I would use questionnaires again, but only in combination with interviews, so not in the way that they are normally used. I found that the anonymous ones were useless for the most part.*

> *I think the open-ended questionnaires are more effective than multiple choice ones. In open-ended questionnaires, participants have the space to answer in details bout what they actually think rather than saying agree or do not darer as the case with multiple-choice questions.*

> *I really love/hate questionnaires. They are so easy to use it is very tempting to rely on them. But I am skeptical about their value. Unfortunately we as a class spent an extraordinary amount of time designing a questionnaire that in the end almost everyone said was very useful. I think we would have been better off spending all our time doing something else.*

> *The data I collected from the questionnaires did not help much, and I hardly used it in my research paper. It was very tricky to use questionnaire data because it is a quantitative research tool and my research design was qualitative-oriented. Yes, I would use a questionnaire again, but only*

after I learn how to deal with all the stats you need to know to handle questionnaire data.

I think that I would use a questionnaire again, but only to obtain some baseline data. I thought it was an effective and efficient means to obtain basic information. At the same time, though, I thought there were several limitations with using questionnaires: the options were finite (e.g., participants may not have found a choice that fully captured their stance), the formulation of the questions seemed to involve endless revision, and sometimes more than one option might apply for a participant.

I think that it helped me a lot to use a questionnaire for my project. I would definitely use it again. Since I took a more qualitative approach for the questionnaires as well and let the students fill it in right before the interviews, I was able to relate questionnaire answers to interview questions and answers and ask the participants for in-depth information on their questionnaire answers. Therefore, the questionnaire did not provide me with general numbers and I would say it did not really show any main tendencies due to the small number of students who filled it in, but it was another means to gain more personal information from my participants.

Feeling Good: The "Ups"

I believe that in any process involving human beings there are ups and there are downs. Once again there didn't seem to be any obvious pattern among all of us (we didn't all feel up at the same time) but we all experienced highs and lows while we were doing this project. As I mentioned with the discussion on difficulties I think what is important here again is to recognize that there is no such thing as a completely "smooth sailing" research project. Reading the answers below it is easy to sense the true zeal that each student felt when they were having one of their good moments in their study that is almost becomes contagious.

Question: At what phase of the project did you have the most enthusiasm? Could you explain why?

When I began interviewing participants and especially when I was able to establish a positive rapport with them during the interviews. I thought to myself: "Wow, I can do this!"

After about the second week when I was sitting observing in the classroom I started to notice things. I got very excited. It is hard to explain. The classroom is a dynamic place and there are a LOT of things going on there if you really pay attention. I got to the point where I was concentrating so hard I began to see these things that were not obvious before.. I looked at timing, who was involved, the conditions, all sorts of things. It was stimulating to think that way and was the best part of the project!

I don't know if I can pin point an exact moment when I felt enthusiastic. Overall, I would have to say doing the interviews were quite rewarding.

I felt most enthusiastic when I began writing my paper. It was interesting to see many patterns and themes that go together. I felt relieved as I had a lot of data but was not sure how I will be able to incorporate it in my study

Personally, I was most enthused when I was able to detect patterns in the questionnaire and interview data that seemed to confirm one theoretical model within my specific research topic. It appeared that the results somehow 'magically' fit the model being investigated when I looked closely at the cumulative chart of questionnaire results. It was quite a pleasant experience to see how actual data can support and validate a theoretical model. Thus, I think seeing a clear link between data collection and theory was the most enjoyable

I think the most positive experience was conducting the interviews. At that point, particularly during the interview with [a student], I realised that I would indeed be able to use the information for my project. [The student] was the perfect example of [what I was looking for], and his answers gave me a real "kick" during the interviews and still later on when I wrote the paper because [the student's] statements were – as I think – really strong and interesting

I had the most enthusiasm while doing the interviews because the students in particular were enthusiastic to tell what they thought and interacting with them was a good experience and sort of discovery to me.

Feeling Discouraged: The "Downs"

We all had points during the project where we felt discouraged. I asked for people to share with me about those times. You will notice that even though everyone had a low point, every single answer included an upbeat positive note tacked on to the end.

Question: At what phase of the project did you feel the most discouraged? Could you explain why? Did your enthusiasm return sometime after this phase of discouragement, and if so, when?

> *I got discouraged when I felt the data I had been collecting was meaningless and useless feeling that I needed to collect more data or analyze the available data differently. Due to this, I interviewed students whose classroom context I was not familiar with. However, the students seemed to offer a lot of experiences in their report of their language learning progress and the role of technology in this progress. This encouraged me to discover more of their personal and academic uses of technology rather than the usual guided and graded classroom use.*

> *I did get discouraged after repeatedly trying to get a hold of the one instructor, and not succeeding. In addition, I got a bit discouraged in the beginning when going over my research proposal with the first instructor because he/she was hesitant about working with a student researcher. However, we came to develop a good rapport between each other and as a result the research process was quite successful.*

> *I got discouraged after I saw the questionnaire results. There didn't seem to be any patterns at all. However after I began to transcribe my interviews my enthusiasm returned!*

> *The most discouraging time in the study was when I began transcribing the interviews. It was a very time consuming task. I was not sure if I will add all these data in my study. However, I felt comfortable when I began to see the pattern emerging from my data.*

> *When I struggled to make sense of all the data as the deadline was approaching. It was a terrible feeling, I did not believe I would be able to finish everything before the deadline. I spent sleepless nights in front of the computer drinking coffee. My*

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enthusiasm only returned when I had the final version in my hands, ready to be handed in!

I believe that I felt most discouraged when I first asked for volunteers to participate in the study. I wrote my e-mail on the board in the classroom and requested that any interested student send me a message. Unfortunately, I did not receive any response whatsoever. I felt surprised and somewhat disillusioned. It was quite troubling and worrisome since time was literally running out: the ESL course was fast approaching its examination period. I used a slightly different approach during the next class. I circulated a sheet of paper to students in the class and asked any interested student to write his/her e-mail address for further information about the prospective research study. This time I received a strong response: nine students indicated that they were interested to participate. In the end, four students ultimately participated in the study, which was in stark contrast to the initial lack of response. This experience also reinforced the importance of developing a sound rapport with students, which seemed to be a challenging endeavor under the time constraints of the study.

My most frustrating experience during the research project has to do with the questionnaire. After some of us (including me) had spent a whole weekend taking about the questionnaire and modifying it on WebCT, during the following class a totally different plan (as it seemed to me) was suggested. It was decided that we make a web questionnaire, and I couldn't see why. Also a lot of changes were made to the questionnaire to make it fit the format of the web questionnaire. I was extremely frustrated and felt that the questionnaire was not ours any more. I think this incidence also lead to the consequence that different people used different questionnaires.

Doing a Literature Review

One of the most important parts of any research paper is the literature review. Since our general topic was rather abstract and somewhat unusual there was a problem finding directly related articles. I wanted to see how everyone handled this issue, especially since many of us would be faced with writing literature reviews in the future.

Question: Tell me about writing a literature review for your paper. Was it difficult to do? How important do you think it is?

The lit review was difficult to write because the topic that we choose was obscure, and not really present in the current literature, so it was hard to set the lit review up in a meaningful way. In addition, I had never really did a lit review before, so it was quite difficult from that aspect as well.

Yes, it was difficult because there is not much literature on our research topic for this class. I think it is very important provided that you maintain consistency between the literature review and your research. It is pointless to present a literature review that has nothing to do with your actual research.

The literature review was useful for me to determine the research trends in the area of investigation and the research gap and how it relates to my topic, which I tried to address as well as indicate as possible future research needs. It was difficult to do.

I think it was quite difficult to find relevant literature for my paper. This was because first of all, I did not really know what to look for. The topics were all a little vague, but it was necessary to come up with a number of different keywords that were somehow related to my topic when I did my quest for references. It took me much longer to find some article than it took me for papers with a more "concrete" topic, and I would say that I found much less. The actual writing process of the literature review was not that difficult though. I had three main parts in my literature review, and I organised the references according to these three parts. First, I typed the most important information in point form, reorganised it and then wrote the literature review. I don't think that it is the most important part of my paper, but it gave me a more solid basis for my own research, and I was able to draw on some points later on in my paper. Generally, I would say that it was helpful to do the literature review, even though it was quite difficult to find relevant articles.

It was the easiest part of my paper especially that it was not very long. The literature review helped support my data. Some

of the findings mentioned in the study seemed more valid when I supported then with similar findings from the literature.

Waiting to do the literature review after the data collection was difficult but we had such a hard time finding anything on our topic that there didn't seem to be any other way. It was certainly drilled into us that we need to create a research space based on current literature but it was pretty clear this was completely new territory we were covering so I was unsure what to do. In the end I focused on showing what there was out there and how it led me to aspects that were relevant to our topic of sense of progress.

I think the literature review was quite important for this paper since it was meant to provide a theoretical framework upon which we could further explore and develop our particular research questions. I thought that for this particular paper it was challenging to fully develop a literature review due to the apparent scarcity of information on my topic under investigation. I took a lot of time to search on-line journals which were closely related to my topic. After several searches, I was able to find only a few articles that directly corresponded with my topic.

Influence on Goals

Research into motivation tells us that retrospection on our experiences can have an affect on how we approach future related endeavors. I asked my colleagues how they felt about research now, after completing a major project and whether or not it influenced their decisions to do further research in the M.A. program.

Question: Now that you have undertaken an original research project and completed a research paper how do you feel about doing research? Have your goals for the M.A. program or career changed at all as a result of doing this research project (e.g. your decision to do all course work or research essay or thesis)?

My goals for the M.A. program have not significantly changed as a result of undertaking this research project. I think this research project clarified for me the importance of having sufficient time to complete a study. I believe that I have more insight into the laborious and meticulous nature of the

research process, which sometimes may raise more questions than supply answers.

My decision to do the thesis has been supported as I think I am able to do empirical studies and report them academically. I believe the more I write, the more I progress in my learning to do research especially classroom research. I just need to work more on making my writing succinct and up to the point.

Well, this study did change my mind a little bit. At the beginning I was skeptical about conducting an original research but after this study, I think it will be interesting to conduct a research paper with some qualitative methodologies. But my goals will remain the same, i.e. doing a research paper.

My goals haven't really changed. I had always planned on doing original research as part of the program. Unfortunately I don't really feel more confident to do it either after this project. I might be a little more nervous now because I know just how much time and effort you have to put into it. So, it was good to have this experience, it really helps keep unrealistic expectations down (like being able to do a thesis in one term).

I feel proud, I feel I can do good quality research and I would like to have more opportunities to do it in the future. I would like to write research papers for publication, (by the way, I think we should be allowed to submit the papers we wrote for this class for publication, it is not fair that we put so much work into our papers and we cannot publish them because of ethics requirements). I already knew I was going to write a thesis, but this project certainly shed some light into my plans for my thesis.

Unfortunately, it is too late now to change my plans. When I first arrived at Carleton, I thought I would do a thesis or a research essay. However, when I found out that it is possible to complete the program within one calendar year, I decided to do all coursework because I have funding for only one year and can only start working in the fall. So I thought it would make life easier for me. If I could change my decision, I would probably opt for the research essay now, but I would have

needed to get started on a major project much earlier. As I said earlier, I think it is too late now to change plans. This project definitely showed me that it is manageable to conduct a research study. Actually, I thought that it was maybe even easier that writing a library research paper because I was very familiar with the topic and the data. The project was really my own project and I knew where the data came from..

After doing original research and writing a paper, I still like doing research. I think as a result of going through the process I am hopefully a little more realistic about it and the amount of time that it requires. Have my goals for the M.A. program/career changed? I think I am a little more excited about doing research now. It is quite exciting looking at something that no one else has done before. Plus, writing in the first person and talking about something that I did was exhilarating compared to the constant paraphrasing that is needed to write a term paper. Goals: Doing research has made me reconsider whether I should do a thesis because I now know how much time is required to do it properly.

Concluding Remarks

I found that reading all the papers and then reading through the interview questions to be quite complementary. Sometimes when we read a polished work we have no idea all the "blood, sweat and tears" that went into it. This course was not easy but it was extremely rewarding, as you can clearly see in everyone's stories. If I could go back I would have had everyone keep a diary of how things were going right from the first day of class. My favorite day in class was the day everyone went around and basically told about how their research was progressing. It was towards the end of the time we spent with our respective ESL/FL classrooms and the stories that came out of that day were amazing.

I want to say thank you to everyone who participated in the interviews; your honesty was extremely appreciated!