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Validating Learning Profiles as an Alternative Approach to the Study of the Effects of Learning Experiences

Danya Ramírez Gómez
(danyaramirezg@gmail.com)
Ferris State University, USA

Arturo Escandón
(escandon@nanzan-u.ac.jp)
Nanzan University, Japan

Abstract

Learning experiences are deemed relevant for foreign language (FL) learning. Related research, however, has often circumnavigated the influence of one important characteristic of learning experiences: variability. This work addresses this characteristic by discussing two constructs proposed by Escandón (2012a) within the sociocultural framework: *trajectory,* the traits of an individual's relevant learning events, and *orientation*, the learner's level of recognition of instructional discourse. These constructs influence FL accomplishment in formal educational settings (Escandón, 2012a), and jointly – a combination of denominated *learning profiles* (Ramírez Gómez, 2015, 2016b) – they help determine some potential effects of learning experiences in the classroom. Nonetheless, due to the recency of this proposal, it is still unclear whether or how these theoretical constructs are reflected in the reality of learners. By administering three questionnaires to a group of older Japanese learners (60 years old and over) of Spanish, a cohort rarely addressed in FL education research, this study shows that learning profiles are indeed reflected in some aspects of older adults' FL learning. Also, it proposes a convenient tool for measuring trajectories and confirms that understanding these constructs may considerably enhance the learning process.

1 Introduction

Experiences are at the basis of our interaction with the environment; they influence us inasmuch as we transform them into knowledge, emotions and skills (Jarvis, 1992, 2004). Thus, learning experiences and their potential impact on the learning process have been frequently addressed in the literature on foreign language (FL) learning. However, the operational definition assigned to *learning experience* across these studies has not been uniform; when specified, it has been linked either to data points (e.g. number of years learning a second language (L2), level of L2 accomplishment, educational level, cultures to which the learner has been exposed) or to the idea of having undergone a particular process (e.g. exposure to specific grammar structures or lexical units). A drawback of these definitions is that they are built on the assumption that learners are passive entities, similarly affected by events or processes. Also, they lead to generalizations about the effects that *a particular experience* may have on a group of FL learners. This is problematic because, as argued by Jarvis (1992, 2004), the transformation of experiences into knowledge, emotions and skills is influenced by the learner's psychological development and perception of events/processes. In other words, the

manner in which two learners relate to the same learning experience is different; consequently, the effects of this experience are also unique to each learner.

In this study, we align with the notion that one learning event may result in dissimilar effects on FL learning. Thus, drawing from two sociocultural constructs that are built on the idea that variability among learners is a defining factor in the effects of experiences (Escandón, 2012a, 2012b, 2013), this work has two main objectives: First, to confirm whether these constructs – namely, *trajectory* and *orientation* – do reflect the reality of FL learners; and second, to test a more convenient measuring device to determine trajectories. Ultimately, this work is intended to advance a tool that helps instructors define their students' learning profiles and, consequently, assist the latter in improving their learning process. Finally, the article discusses future directions in the exploration of this topic and its potential interaction with the different elements involved in FL learning in formal educational settings.

2 Literature review

2.1 The notion of learning experience

Many studies have discussed and evinced the relevance of learning experiences to FL learning. In defining this construct, learning experience has often been conceived, for instance, as a temporal feature of the contact between a learner and the FL learning process or environment, such as number of years studying an FL (e.g. Hirano, Akamatsu, & Anezaki, 2001; Pauwels, 2015), time of exposure to an L2, or age of L2 acquisition (e.g. Kaushanskaya, Yoo, & Marian, 2011). Additionally, learning experience has been viewed as the presence of certain events or processes in the learner's past, such as having already learned a second language, having being abroad (e.g. Miller, Rycek, & Fritson, 2011), having been exposed to certain learning methods (e.g. Lai, 2015; Miller, Rycek, & Fritson, 2011; Uztosun, 2014), or having performed particular tasks in the L2 (e.g. Ito, Kawaguchi, & Outa, 2008; Lany, Gómez, & Gerken, 2007), among others. Finally, learning experience has also been defined as the learner's subjective view of the processes and events undergone by him while learning an FL, and specifically, in relation to whether this view is deemed positive or negative (Nakata, 2006).

Among the definitions presented above, the first two sets convey a rather rigid view of learning experience. This view leads to discussing the effects of events or processes in a correlational manner. In other words, if the group of learners under study fails to show a correlation between a particular experiential variable (e.g. number of years studying an FL) and a specific aspect of FL learning, then this variable is considered non-significant. The latter set of definitions, in turn, manifests a perspective about experience that is seemingly flexible and more attentive to individual differences. This, however, is not entirely accurate. Studies such as Nakata's (2006), which explored the relation between motivation and learning experiences, tend to examine one particular learning event – in this example, L2 learning in high school. This event, may it be positive or negative in the eyes of learners and/or researchers, is assumed as equally dominant for all individuals under study.

In sum, it is possible to suggest that most research that focuses on the effects of learning experiences on FL learning defines the former based on one particular variable, event or process. If the learners – as a group – show a clear trend in their interaction with this variable, then it is considered significant. In contrast, if only some learners' interaction with the variable is noteworthy, then it is often concluded that mediating or latent variables need to be explored. This conclusion is misguided, because it overlooks the notion that the potential effects of a certain learning experience are unique to each learner, and it disregards the fact that some experiential variables may be dominant indeed, but only for a subgroup of learners.

2.2 An alternative approach to studying learning experiences: Trajectories and orientations

A different take on the effects of learning experiences on FL learning was developed by Arturo Escandón. In his work, the author indicated that learning experiences may convey cycles of *tension*

– or a developmental crisis – and *release* – or a catharsis or "magical moment" (Robbins, 2003) – that result in the internalization of L2 concepts (i.e. L2 learning), transform the individual and yield a *new learner* (Escandón, 2012a, 2012b, 2013). Learning experiences are thus the foundation of the learner's psychological development; they are key activities upon which a realignment of the individual's psychological functions and identity takes place (Chaiklin, 2003; Griffin & Cole, 1987; Robbins, 2003). Moreover, the learner's interaction with learning experiences governs his development of psychological functions and his achievable FL level in formal settings. This interaction, as well as which learning experiences may indeed convey cycles of tension and catharsis, depends on the characteristics of each learner. Consequently, many experiences – be they positive or negative – may have no relevant effects on some individuals. In this view, and as Escandón suggested, the effects of one learning experience on a particular individual should be defined based on the learners' *perception* of such experience, and not merely on whether the learner underwent that learning event. Thus, it is the learner who must decide which learning experiences are indeed relevant to him and may have influenced his learning process, not the researcher.

In his work, Escandón defined the learners' relevant experiences from *their own* perspective. Specifically, the author assessed what in sociocultural studies are called *leading activities*. This notion refers to the learning events/activities that convey the aforementioned *tension-catharsis cycles*, which contribute to the learner's internalization of concepts and structures and to the reorganization of prior developmental stages, upon which mastery depends. The characteristics of what the learner believes are his prior leading activities produces the learner's *trajectory*, which in turn is connected to the individual's psychological reliance on certain learning contexts.

Escandón (2012a, 2012b, 2013), who studied Japanese college students of Spanish, defined three trajectories: 1) Trajectory 1 indicates that the learner's leading activity has occurred within the formal educational system in the L1 community (e.g. studying an FL in high-school or a language school); 2) Trajectory 2 signals that the learner's leading activity involved participating in a non-verbal L2 activity (e.g. giving directions to a foreigner on the train) or a communication activity while in the L1 community; and 3) Trajectory 3 points out that the learner's leading activity constituted a communication and non-verbal activity abroad, in a non-regulated environment.

According to the authors' research, trajectories are predictors of FL accomplishment in the formal setting[1]: Learners of Trajectory 1 are more likely to reach high FL accomplishment. However, although closely related, trajectory and accomplishment are associated only indirectly (Escandón, 2012a, 2012b; see also, Bernstein, 2000). Their connection is mediated by what Escandón has called the learners' *orientation*. This concept refers to the learner's current ability to recognize instructional discourse, and it results from the learner's previous experiences learning FLs.

Escandón indicated that the FL classroom integrates several kinds of instructional discourse aimed at fulfilling various objectives. These types of discourse include: 1) *weakly-framed communication discourse*, which involves explicit instruction of grammar and cultural elements, and the apparent transference of control over the learner; 2) *communication discourse*, which relates to elaborated discursive structures such as explanations of pragmatic functions; and 3) *grammar discourse*, which includes explanations about syntax, phonology and lexical units. Based on the learners' ability to recognize – that is, understand – each type of speech, Escandón determined the existence of eight orientations: 1) confounded orientation; 2) bipolar orientation; 3) elaborated communicative orientation; 4) communicative orientation; 5) grammar orientation; 6) restricted communicative orientation; 7) elaborated orientation; and 8) comprehensive orientation. Figure 1 displays which type of instructional discourse each orientation is able/unable to recognize:

Escandón's work showed that the degree of recognition of instructional discourse is significant because it predicts realization, that is, the learner's ability to produce what is required from him. Learners who do recognize discourse follow instructions carefully and focus on the relevant aspects of each learning task. Accordingly, learners of Trajectory 1 are more likely to recognize and realize grammar discourse and communication discourse (comprehensive orientation), and they tend to reach higher accomplishment levels in the formal setting. This means that the interaction of trajectory and orientation influences the learners' academic success in the FL classroom.

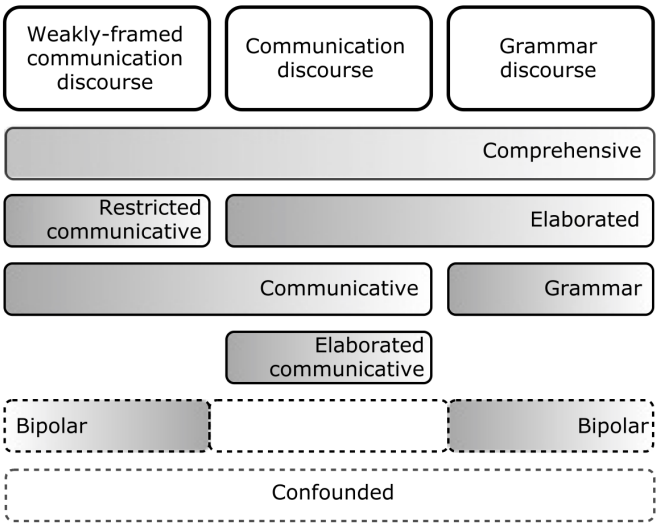

Fig. 1. Escandón's orientations. Source: Based on Escandón (2012a, 2012b, 2013)

2.3 Methodological and theoretical variations to Escandón's proposal

Drawing from Escandón's work, Ramírez Gómez (2015, 2016b) applied the concepts of trajectories and orientations to a group of 45 older Japanese learners of Spanish (60 to 80 years old). This study, however, differed from Escandón's work in several methodological and theoretical aspects: First, Escandón determined trajectories by means of a personal interview with each participant. In contrast, time constraints in Ramírez Gómez's study required that participants answered an open-ended questionnaire at home. Also, due to sample-size constraints, the trajectories under study were simplified and the participants in Ramírez Gómez's work were assigned one of two possible trajectories: 1) a *formal trajectory*, which indicates that the learner's leading activity occurred within formal education (Escandón's Trajectory 1); and 2) an *informal trajectory*, which points out that the learner's leading activity constituted an L2 activity with no instructive regulation (Escandón's Trajectories 2 and 3).

In addition, a new questionnaire about orientations was created for Ramírez Gómez's study (2015). As mentioned above, the participants in Escandón's work were Japanese college students of Spanish, and they were exposed to two FL lessons a week, one for grammar-related activities and one for conversation activities. This allowed the author to explore a more detailed distinction between kinds of communication discourse. However, such a distinction was deemed exceedingly complex for the participants in Ramírez Gómez's study, who were exposed to both grammar and conversation activities in the same lesson. As a result, only grammar and communication instructional discourses were considered. This yielded four orientations (see Fig. 2): 1) confounded orientation, which is assigned to learners who are unable to recognize any instructional discourse; 2) communicative orientation, assigned to learners who are able to recognize only communication discourse; 3) grammar orientation, received by learners who are able to recognize only grammar discourse; and 4) comprehensive orientation, assigned to learners who are able to recognize both communication and grammar discourse.

The results of Ramírez Gómez's study indicated that older learners as a group did not exhibit significant inclinations toward any trajectory or orientation. Nonetheless, combining these two constructs did generate remarkable trends that differed from Escandón's results. Ramírez Gómez's study suggested that, at least regarding older adults, the several possible combinations of orientations and trajectories – that is, *learning profiles*, as termed by the author – are associated with varied performance levels. In the study, the author argued that high accomplishment among older learners

hinges not on having a specific trajectory and/or orientation, but on the learner's ability to understand his profile and capitalize on it.

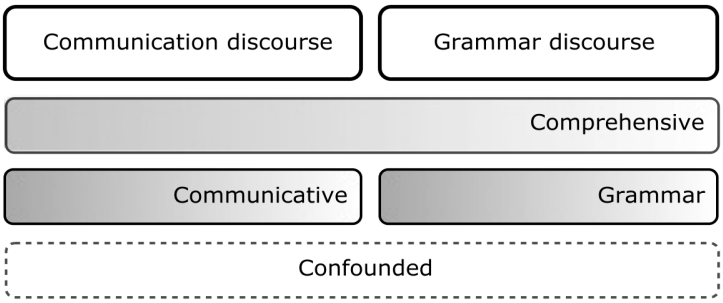

Fig. 2. Ramírez Gómez's classification of orientations. Source: Based on Ramírez Gómez (2015, 2016b)

The construct of learning profile – that is, orientation and trajectory combined – is an appealing alternative to the frameworks used in previous research on the effects of learning experience; while taking into consideration the unique nature of experiences, it can be defined by concrete measuring tools and has specific associated effects. Nonetheless, the validation of learning profiles as a notion that reflects the reality and challenges of learners is a work in progress, and it is unclear whether defining them could actually be useful to improve the students' learning process. Also, the characteristics of the measuring tool for trajectories used by Escandón and Ramírez Gómez may convolute the application of these constructs in the classroom and their exploration in research. A more convenient measuring tool then is also needed. Consequently, in the present study, we examine whether qualitative data – specifically, self-reports – support the proposal of learning profiles, trajectories and orientations, and we test an alternative tool to measure trajectories. The research questions approached in this work then are as follows:

- Are the ideas underlying the constructs of trajectories and orientations borne out by qualitative data?
- Is the tool introduced in the present study a useful alternative for teachers and researchers to measure trajectory?

Finally, we also discuss possible approaches to introduce the notions of learning profiles in the classroom, and we propose future directions for the study of this topic.

3 Method

3.1 Context and participants

This study was conducted in the context of an experimental course of *learner re-training* (Ramírez Gómez, 2016b), in which a group of older adults (60 years old and over) discussed issues related to FL learning, such as learning strategies, personal beliefs about FL learning, memory, challenges, among others. These individuals were simultaneously enrolled in a Spanish course directed specifically at this cohort.

The participants of the present study included ten native speakers of Japanese (six females and four males), whose ages ranged between 63 and 79 years old (M = 69). All of them had different Spanish proficiency levels, had studied another FL in high school and/or university, and were partially or totally retired from the work force. Lastly, although no participant suffered from any cognitive pathology, a few of them reported to experience various degrees of hearing/vision impairment and memory decline.

3.2 Instruments and procedure

In order to determine orientations and trajectories, the participants were required to answer: 1) a multiple-choice questionnaire about trajectories; and 2) a close-ended questionnaire about orientations. Additionally, the participants were asked to answer: 3) a final open-ended questionnaire about both constructs. It is important to clarify that the categorization of trajectories and orientations used in this study were those in Ramírez Gómez's analysis (i.e. formal and informal trajectories; confounded, grammar, communication and comprehensive orientations), mainly due to the similarities between both studies.

3.2.1 Multiple-choice questionnaire about trajectories: Description and rationale

In the first study on trajectories, Escandón employed oral interviews. This mechanism allowed the researcher to help the participant focus on one relevant leading activity. However, it required the use of resources to which not all researcher may have access to: It entailed numerous interviews in the participants' L1, transcription of all interviews by a competent L1 speaker, translation of all interviews to the language of the researcher/research, and analysis. Even if all these tasks can be performed by the researcher, they are exceedingly time-consuming. In contrast, Ramírez Gómez used an open-ended written assignment, which required less administration time but failed to considerably reduce the time needed to analyze the data. In addition, this methodology often yielded overproduction (i.e. older learners referred not to one leading activity per question but to several – a total of 5.96 in average instead of 2). Overproduction in Ramírez Gómez's study did not impede the definition of trajectories, but it did make it more complex. Consequently, the present study implemented a questionnaire that included two sections: First, the participants were required to complete a multiple-choice questionnaire in Japanese (see Appendix 1 for an English version). This questionnaire was designed to help participants define one leading activity associated with each of the following questions:

- From your experience before this course, talk about an activity or situation that really helped you learn an FL.
- From your experience before this course, talk about an interesting moment — or a moment that stayed in your memory — that occurred while you were learning an FL.

After answering these questions, the participants were asked to describe in writing each situation/moment selected. The modality of this questionnaire was considered to allow learners to describe an event subjectively but only after defining it, which would facilitate the assessment process. Finally, the administration of the complete questionnaire was conducted during lesson time (30 minutes), and it excluded any explanation regarding the construct being measured.

3.2.2 Close-ended questionnaire about orientations

The participants' orientations were defined through a questionnaire in Japanese (from Ramírez Gómez, 2015; see Appendix 1 for an English version). As mentioned above, similarly to the participants in Ramírez Gómez's (2015) work, the participants in the present study had one Spanish lesson a week that included both conversation and grammar practice. Therefore, only four orientations were considered: comprehensive, grammar, communicative and confounded.

In the questionnaire, the participants were required to position each of 24 instructional discourse samples within a 9-point Likert scale, which assessed how likely each sample was to be encountered either in a conversation activity or in an activity about language foundations (Escandón's grammar activity), which addressed issues about grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation (5 to the left: '100% activity about language foundations'; 5 to the right: '100% conversation activity'; 1 in the center: either 'I don't know' or 'both'). Lastly, a timeframe of 30 minutes was allotted for the administration of the questionnaire, and the learners received no explanation of what was being measured.

3.2.3 Final open-ended questionnaire

The participants completed an open-ended questionnaire about their current involvement in an FL course, specifically, the Spanish lessons which they were attending at the time of the study. The questionnaire included two questions:

1) During your FL lesson, do you sometimes feel that it is hard to understand what the teacher is asking from you? Or do you usually feel confident about having understood what you need to do? Please explain.
2) Where do you feel more comfortable and at ease studying: during the class with the instructor and your classmates, or at home by yourself? Why?

The participants answered the questionnaire as an assignment, and they received no prior explanation regarding neither the concepts of trajectories and orientations nor the questionnaire's objectives. Also, the questions were carefully redacted and native-checked to counteract semantic biases as much as possible.

4 Findings and discussion

4.1 An alternative tool to define trajectories

The first phase of the analysis involved the blind evaluation of the complete multiple-choice questionnaire (i.e. questionnaire about trajectories). This process produced a set of two trajectories per participant: one trajectory for the first section of the questionnaire (i.e. multiple choice) and one for the second (i.e. describe the event). Table 1 shows the results for each student in each part of the questionnaire.

Table 1. Results from the multiple-choice questionnaire per student

Participant	Age	Gender	Trajectory – 1st part	Trajectory – 2nd part	Result
H.S.	68	F	Informal	Informal	Consistent
K.K.	67	F	Informal	Informal	Consistent
K.M.	63	F	Informal	Informal	Consistent
M.A.	66	F	Formal	Formal	Consistent
N.O.	73	M	Formal	Formal	Consistent
R.O.	68	F	Formal	Formal	Consistent
T.D.	68	F	Formal	Formal	Consistent
T.O.	68	M	Formal	Formal	Consistent
T.T.	79	M	Formal	Formal	Consistent
Y.S.	70	M	Informal	Informal	Consistent

As shown in Table 1, every participant's result in the first section of the questionnaire was consistent with his result in the second section. Additionally, although the answers to the second part had to be translated and analyzed, limiting the number of events to which the participants could refer rendered these tasks less time-consuming for the researchers. Moreover, if it is considered that many teachers speak the L1 of their students and may not need to translate the learners' answers, then using this questionnaire considerably facilitates the task of defining trajectories.

4.2 Trajectories and orientations as reflections of the learners' in-class experience

The following step in the analysis involved defining the participants' orientations following Escandón's assessment procedure. Briefly, this procedure assigns each answer a value that depends on its accuracy (i.e. how close/far it is from the correct answer), and it groups all these values according to types of discourse (for more details on the evaluation process, see Escandón, 2012a).

Table 2 shows the participants' orientations and trajectories, which were obtained through the multiple-choice questionnaire described above.

Table 2. Trajectories and orientations for each participant

Participant	Age	Gender	Trajectory	Orientation
H.S.	68	F	Informal	communicative
K.K.	67	F	Informal	communicative
K.M.	63	F	Informal	communicative
M.A.	66	F	Formal	confounded
N.O.	73	M	Formal	comprehensive
R.O.	68	F	Formal	confounded
T.D.	68	F	Formal	grammar
T.O.	68	M	Formal	comprehensive
T.T.	79	M	Formal	grammar
Y.S.	70	M	Informal	grammar

Subsequently, orientations and trajectories were contrasted with the responses to the final open-ended questionnaire. The main objective was to determine whether these responses reflected the results related to the constructs under discussion. Tables 3 and 4 provide a summary of representative portions of the participants' answers to the open-ended questionnaire, classified according to trajectories – formal (Table 3) and informal (Table 4) – and orientations.

Drawing from Escandón's and Ramírez Gómez's works, the premise of this analysis was that formal-trajectory learners (as named in Ramírez Gómez's studies) rely on a more structured approach to learning that involves clear roles, hierarchy and processes. This context helps formal learners structure their learning process, take calculated risks and benefit from the opportunities offered in the classroom. This in turn may improve the learner's probability of grasping theoretical discourse, and may help him realign psychological functions as well as perform better.

Table 3. Formal-trajectory participants' answers to the open-ended questionnaire (our translation and highlighting)

Orientation	Question 1	Question 2
confounded	I understand all instructions, but I can't understand most of what my classmates say. However, since the teacher explains the most important points, I don't ask questions. Then I regret it, though, **because may be some other things were also important.**	I like the pace of the teacher. I feel I can learn. I feel relaxed during the lesson and enjoy it. **When I am at home reviewing what we studied, I get confused**.
confounded	**I don't understand when I can't remember the words.**	I feel more relaxed at home because **I don't know what expressions and words may come up in class**.
comprehensive	It is **hard for me to understand complex instructions**. Also, the instructor erases the board **when I am still trying to read his/her small letters**.	**The instructor goes too fast**, so I understand things only after reviewing at home. **I get tired in class**, so I feel more relaxed at home.
comprehensive	I think I understand. The instructions from **the materials that we use help me a lot**.	I get nervous in class whenever I have to answer a question. Also, **there is never enough time to write down what is on the board**, so I can't relax.
grammar	I understand all instructions.	**The explanations about grammar are useful.** I also **enjoy studying after class with some classmates and some teaching assistants**.
grammar	In today's class, **I had to *see* my classmates doing an activity to understand what I had to do** (asking questions to my classmates and writing down their answers in a chart.)	(THE PARTICIPANT'S ANSWER FAILED TO ADDRESS THE QUESTION)

The comparison of the answers to the closed-ended and the open-ended questionnaires revealed two interesting issues: First, participants who had been assigned a formal trajectory indeed reported feeling more comfortable in learning contexts where tasks were clearly structured and some level of hierarchy was perceivable, such as the lesson or while interacting with more proficient classmates in a "study situation" (e.g. a study group). This is revealed in responses such as the following[2]:

> I like the pace of the teacher. I feel I can learn. I feel relaxed during the lesson and enjoy it. When I am at home reviewing what we studied, I get confused. *(M.A., confounded-formal)*
>
> The explanations about grammar are useful. I also enjoy studying after class with some classmates and some teaching assistants. (*T.D., grammar-formal*)

On the other hand, informal-trajectory learners (Escandón's Trajectories 2 and 3, and Ramírez Gómez's Informal Trajectory) tend to – albeit not overtly – disregard the hierarchy and authority embedded in the formal environment. These learners reckon that they may be able to decipher and understand the linguistic system on their own, and value the formal setting mostly as a context of practice and interaction. The traits of this trajectory are reflected in the comments in Table 4.

Table 4. Informal-trajectory participants' answers to the open-ended questionnaire (our translation and highlighting)

Orientation	Question 1	Question 2
communicative	I think I understand everything.	Sometimes the teacher or my classmates say or do things in ways that do not fit me. **I like it when at home I write about what I want to write and how I want to write about it**.
communicative	I think that I generally understand instructions.	**I feel more comfortable after class, when I can review what we studied**.
communicative	I understand the instructions, but I don't understand what my other classmates say.	**I have a great time in class, but sometimes it gets hard to follow.**
grammar	I understand the instructions, but then **following them** (like including certain vocabulary in sentences) **is very difficult**.	**I feel comfortable after class while doing my homework. That is very helpful for me.**

As shown in Table 4, learners who had been assigned an informal trajectory reported feeling more at ease when studying by themselves. See the following examples:

> Sometimes the teacher or my classmates say or do things in ways that do not fit me. I like it when at home I write about what I want to write and how I want to write about it. (*H.S., communicative-informal*)

> I feel more comfortable after class, when I can review what we studied. (*K.K., communicative-informal*)

> I feel comfortable after class while doing my homework. That is very helpful for me. *(Y.S., grammar-informal)*

On the other hand, the learners' responses reflected the interaction of orientations and trajectories, that is, *learning profiles*, but less clearly than in the case of trajectories. For example, a participant who had a comprehensive orientation (i.e. recognizes all kinds of instructional discourse) and a formal trajectory reported the following:

> The instructor goes too fast, so I understand things only after reviewing at home. I get tired in class, so I feel more relaxed at home. *(N.O., comprehensive-formal)*

Theoretically, a learner with this profile relies heavily on the formal setting and is able to recognize all kinds of instructional discourse. Nonetheless, his answers conveyed instead a strong feeling of discomfort. Another comprehensive-formal learner reported a similar experience:

> I get nervous in class whenever I have to answer a question. Also, there is never enough time to write down what is on the board, so I can't relax. *(T.O., comprehensive-formal)*

These learners seem unable to benefit from what we have devised as their learning profile, and their responses suggest that this is because they are unable to access the information presented to them. Indeed, it could be hypothesized that the lack of research on – or methodologies for – FL geragogy (FL learning by older adults) may be a cause of the learners' discomfort. The limited FL research on this cohort leads either to a lack of methodological adjustments to meet these learners' most common age-related transformations (e.g. changes in processing speed, hearing impairment, memory problems; for an overview of these transformations, see Ramírez Gómez, 2016b), or to adjustments that are not evidence-based and may be inappropriate. This is possibly at the heart of these participants' challenges: They rely on an environment that is physically inaccessible to them, and such frustration is reflected in their answers.

In contrast, a participant with a confounded orientation (i.e. low recognition of any kind of instructional discourse) and a formal trajectory, for instance, reported the following:

> I feel more relaxed at home because I don't know what expressions and words may come up in class. *(R.O., confounded-formal)*

This learner also seems to feel uncomfortable during the lesson. However, this learner's response posits that she is unable to predict what will be asked from her and that this causes her discomfort. Conversely, the following learner – also with a confounded-formal profile – stated the following:

> I understand all instructions, but I can't understand most of what my classmates say. However, since the teacher explains the most important points, I don't ask questions. Then I regret it, though, because maybe some other things were also important. *(M.A., confounded-formal)*

This answer seemingly contradicts what we have argued about orientations. However, a closer evaluation of the participant's complete answer revealed that her low understanding of instructional discourse was reflected not in the *content* of her responses, but rather in the *manner* she answered. This learner tended to meander and had difficulties providing a clear response, which suggests that she experienced challenges understanding precisely what was being asked.

The discussion presented here supports the claims by Escandón (2012a, 2012b, 2013) and Ramírez Gómez (2015, 2016b) that formal learners tend to rely more on the formal environment than informal learners. The former seem indeed to feel more comfortable within structured learning contexts, and the latter seem to enjoy more dealing with the language provided in class in an independent manner. Learners who have one trajectory or another interact with the contents of the FL class also depending on their orientation: For example, comprehensive-formal learners have a facilitated access to the benefits of being in the classroom. However, this access may be obstructed by the absence of methodological adjustment that address some common age-related transformations, which may affect these learners negatively. Simultaneously, and as stated by Ramírez Gómez (2016b), a comprehensive-informal learner may not be affected to the same extent by the lack of methodological adjustments, because he tends to prioritize his own interaction with the material.

4.3 The complexity of discussing orientations in the classroom

Addressing the topic of orientations in the classroom is a delicate task. Good teaching practices, for instance, involve confirming that the learners comprehended the instructions provided to them (Cf. Scrivener, 2005). However, even if the learners have grasped the general tasks involved in a certain classroom activity, this does not necessarily imply that they understand which aspects of the activity need to be *prioritized* (e.g. accuracy, fluency), and furthermore, that they are aware of their level of understanding.

As shown in the results above, all participants reported having the impression of recognizing all instructions provided by the teacher. Conversely, the results of the questionnaire on orientations indicated that only two participants were able to recognize all kinds of instructional discourse. There are two possible reasons for this inconsistency: First, the questionnaire did not address the specific concepts conveyed by the notion of orientation to avoid overthinking and other biases, and the participants' definition of "understanding an instruction" may have been viewed much more broadly than predicted. The other potential reason is that participants are unable to accurately assess whether they recognize various types of instructional discourse without explicit feedback from the instructor. This notion suggests that introducing the concepts of orientation in the classroom may not always be effective, if done explicitly. A confounded learner who is unaware of his low recognition of instructional discourse and who receives this kind of information about himself may also struggle to identify and correct the problem, which may hamper his motivation. Fortunately, orientations are by no means set in stone. If a student – at least older learners – exhibits low recognition of some kind of instructional discourse, this does not mean that he is destined to fail in the FL learning process. Indeed, the instructor may implement measures to deal with less advantageous orientations in the classroom and counteract them (for a discussion on this topic, see Ramírez Gómez, 2016b).

On the other hand, it is also with caution that trajectories should be discussed in the classroom. Although the notion of trajectories may help learners understand some of their own learning behaviors, they could also become a "label" that may restrict the individuals' future learning decisions. If addressed, both trajectories and orientations – that is, learning profiles – should be portrayed as a

general description of some of the learners' current learning traits, which could change in time and through their learning experiences.

4.4 Some remaining questions

The discussion above indicates that learning profiles do reflect observable phenomena that may play a key role in the learner's interaction with the FL learning process in formal settings. Additionally, the results revealed that the more demarcated questionnaire about trajectories presented in this study may facilitate the implementation and evaluation of this construct, without distorting the results.

Several issues remain unsettled. First, although the present study – and previous works such as those by Escandón and Ramírez Gómez – have centered on the effects of trajectories, the origin of this trait is still unclear. The circumstances of a certain learning experience may influence learners differently and lead them to consider it – or not – more relevant than others. Conversely, the relevance that some experiences acquire may result from an *inherent* quality of the individual. Evidently, in topics such as these, it is extremely complex to establish causation. Thus, we believe that trajectories and particularly-relevant experiences may reinforce each other, and that any modification of trajectories – if possible or desired – requires extra attention and effort.

A similar question arises regarding the notion of orientations. Is the ability to recognize instructional discourse only a result of the learners' previous classroom experiences? Or is it possible that an inherent ability to detect certain communicational cues leads the learner to develop a particular orientation? (See Ramírez Gómez, 2015) Regardless of the nature of trajectories and orientations, defining them may contribute to the individual's better learning. However, establishing whether they emerge from inherent traits may to some extent account for other potentially related aspects of the learning process, such as self-regulation capacity and strategy use, among others.

It should also be considered whether the leading activities that mark the trajectory of the learner are positive or negative and the influence that this could have on a learner. For instance, the effect of a seemingly positive leading activity (e.g. receiving a perfect grade in a certain FL project) on a formal-trajectory learner may be entirely different from the effect of a negatively perceived leading activity (e.g. being embarrassed by an instructor in front of the class) on the same learner. In the latter, such an experience may cause the learner's rejection of his most useful resource. Simultaneously, although negative events may hamper the learning process in many cases, some individuals may present their selected leading activity under a negative light and consider that this was the most beneficial to their learning process (e.g. being robbed in the L2 community and having to struggle to communicate with the police). More research is required to clarify these issues.

5 Conclusion and implications

Learning experience is mentioned throughout the literature as an influential factor on FL learning. This concept is often conceived as data points or as the presence of certain events or processes in the learner's past. Such definitions fail to acknowledge that every individual interacts with learning events differently and that the effects of certain learning experiences are unique to each individual because they hinge on his psychological traits.

We have thus based this study on two main premises: First, the characteristics of a learner's relevant learning events reveal his level of reliance on formal learning settings – that is, his trajectory – while his ability to follow instructions in the FL classroom and to benefit from its dynamics is associated with his level of recognition of instructional discourse – that is, his orientation (Escandón, 2012a, 2012b, 2013; Ramírez Gómez, 2015, 2016b). Second, the various combinations of orientations and trajectories – that is, learning profiles – are connected to various effects on the learning process (Ramírez Gómez, 2016b). The results of the small-scale qualitative study presented in this article confirmed the characteristics assigned to learning profiles and suggested that this notion reflects real aspects of the learning process.

Finally, in order to be deemed productive, any educational construct needs to be implementable in the context of FL teaching and learning. This study has presented an alternative tool for measuring trajectories that is more easily applicable and that yields results that are consistent with those yielded by the original tool. Ideally, and for a more holistic view of the learners, various assessment mechanisms should be implemented. However, the mechanism presented here is a useful alternative in teaching contexts in which time or other resources are limited.

This study confirmed that the notions of trajectory and orientation (i.e. learning profiles) reflect an aspect of the reality of FL learners. This supports the idea that active steps should be taken to address these notions – either explicitly or implicitly – in the classroom. Defining learning profiles is conducive to understanding the learners' actual interaction with classroom activities and the instructor's discourse. This in turn may help the latter deliver more effective lessons. Future research should determine the origin of trajectories and orientations and their interaction with other aspects of FL learning.

Notes

[1] Formal learning settings are defined as those learning contexts that are embedded in educational institutions (e.g. universities, schools, community centers), involve a teacher, and have a relatively fixed structure.

[2] The comments included here were originally produced in Japanese.

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Appendix 1

Questionnaire about Trajectories (English version)
Part A: From your experience before this course, do you remember an activity or situation that really helped you learn an FL? Think of one example and answer the following questions.

1. Did this activity or event take place before you graduated from university? (graduate or undergraduate school)
   Yes (go to question number 2)
   No (go to question number 9)
2. Did this activity or event take place in the context of a foreign language lesson?
   Yes (go to question number 3)
   No (go to question number 6)
3. Was this event or activity associated to your language teacher?
   Yes (go to question number 4)
   No (go to question number 4)
4. Was this event or activity associated to your classmates?
   Yes (go to question number 5)
   No (go to question number 5)
5. Was this event or activity associated to any other person?
   Yes (go to question number 16)
   No (go to question number 16)
6. Was this event or activity related to a foreigner that you met in Japan?
   Yes (go to question number 8)
   No (go to question number 7)
7. Did this event occur in a foreign country?
   Yes (go to question number 8)
   No (go to question number 8)
8. Did this activity or event occur when you were studying a foreign language by yourself (for example, at home)?
   Yes (go to question number 16)
   No (go to question number 16)
9. Did this activity or event take place in the context of a foreign language lesson?
   Yes (go to question number 10)
   No (go to question number 13)

10. Was this event or activity associated to your language teacher?
    Yes (go to question number 11)
    No (go to question number 11)
11. Was this event or activity associated to your classmates?
    Yes (go to question number 12)
    No (go to question number 12)
12. Was this event or activity associated to any other person?
    Yes (go to question number 16)
    No (go to question number 16)
13. Was this event or activity related to a foreigner that you met in Japan?
    Yes (go to question number 15)
    No (go to question number 14)
14. Did this event occur in a foreign country?
    Yes (go to question number 15)
    No (go to question number 15)
15. Did this activity or event occur when you were studying a foreign language by yourself (for example, at home)?
    Yes (go to question number 16)
    No (go to question number 16)
16. Please, describe the activity or event.

Part B: From your experience before this course, talk about an interesting moment—or a moment that stayed in your memory— that occurred while you were learning an FL.

1. (Questions 1 through 15 were the same as in Part A)
16. Please, describe the moment that you selected.

Questionnaire about Orientations: Entries (version in English)

1. Now, let's go to page 20. Is everybody on page 20? There are 4 people here, right? Two, three, four. The first person is "Fernando Alonso". What does this person do? His job? Please, look.
2. That's right. That is the best way. It is best if you choose somebody that everybody knows.
3. Well, we can't really see the picture clearly. Both of them could be... *"Fregando"* ("mopping") and *"barriendo"* ("sweeping"). I don't know. *"Fregando"*? Please, raise your hand if you think this is *"fregando"*. Is there anyone who thinks this is *"barriendo"*?
4. Are these people singing? May be they are singing, but we don't really know. What do you think?
5. We have 4 minutes left, so whoever hasn't practiced yet, please ask a question.
6. What are the people in this picture doing?
7. In Spanish, in Spanish. Not "*chotto*" ("a little" in Japanese). Everything in Spanish.
8. The answer needs to be only "yes" or "no". So, the question is "do you live in Tokyo?" "Do you live in Kobe?"
9. Then, read this sentence again and talk in pairs. Think about whether this can be done in Spain or not.
10. Well, you can't do that in Spain. Usually you can't... Why?...Because.
11. We will practice in groups of 3 and 4. Move your chair a little and face the students behind you.
12. In Spain, you can't be barefoot in public spaces. But, in other countries, for example...Where is it OK to be barefoot? Which countries? Or in what kind of places? For instance, where in Japan is it OK to be barefoot?
13. Let's use a verb. Let's use a verb.
14. *"No joven"* ("no young")?... How do we say that?
15. That is all right, but everybody else needs to guess, so if you choose that one...Isn't it going to be too easy?

16. Between sentences 1 and 2? Which one is correct? Who thinks the first one is correct? Who thinks the second one is correct?
17. That is all right, but if you take too long, other people will not have time to ask questions.
18. Isn't it "flamenco"? So, what are they dancing?
19. Find out the meaning of these words. If you have a dictionary, you can use it. If you already know the meaning, you don't need to find out anything. OK. Find out the meaning, then decide whether it is "positive", it is a good thing, or "negative", it is a bad thing, and then check it in here. OK? Let's start.
20. And "kind"? Does anybody know? The meaning?
21. It depends on the context. For example, in *"she is having coffee"*, we are talking in general. But, in *"she is having the coffee that is on the table"*, or *"the coffee that I bought today*", we are talking about some specific coffee.
22. So, let's remember some vocabulary. Don't look at the textbook. Don't look at the textbook. Let's try to remember.
23. It's *"ordenador"* ("computer"). But, there is another word. Does anybody know? *"Computadora"*. The word *"ordenador"* comes from French, and *"computadora"* comes from English. Please use any word you like.
24. And this group? Who is going to start?