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# A Day in the Life: Mapping International Students' Language Learning Environments in Multilingual Sydney



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### Abstract

The challenges of gaining access to opportunities to use the target language in contexts of study abroad, international education, and migration are well documented. In this Sydney-based study, these are reconceptualized as challenges of access to English in an English-speaking but increasingly multilingual, city. The notion of “context” in overseas study is also reconceptualized in spatial terms as the environmental circumstances of students’ everyday lives, which are partly fixed in advance of their arrival but also shaped by their agency. A narrative case study of a recently arrived international student’s daily activities and language use draws on online diary and stimulated recall interview data. The case study illustrates both the importance of the spatial dimensions of her everyday life to her use of languages and the how she manages these spatial dimensions to enhance her access to opportunities for English language use and learning.

**Keywords:** international students, language learning environments, multilingualism, narrative, mapping

### Introduction

Like many other English-speaking cities around the world, Sydney is in the process of reinventing itself as an international hub for English language study. In the case of Sydney, this is linked to Australia’s relatively open policies on international education and professional migration, which mean that students are often studying English with longer-term goals of higher education and migration in mind (Robertson, 2013; Tran & Gomes, 2017). The English Language Intensive Courses for Overseas Students (ELICOS) sector includes privately owned colleges, university-attached language centres and vocational colleges, and courses are mainly designed to qualify students for higher education. The

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applied linguistics literature on study abroad tends to focus on short-term and university exchange programs. Research in the field of international education, on the other hand, tends to focus on students who are already enrolled in higher education institutes. There has been much less research on the students in focus in this paper, whose two main characteristics are that they are (i) recently arrived in the city and (ii) taking English courses in order to pursue further study or professional employment in Australia.

ELICOS students are of considerable interest for two reasons. First, they make up a considerable portion of the international students in Australia. The 173,506 students enrolled on ELICOS courses in 2016 made up approximately one quarter of international student enrolments (English Australia, 2017). Following a decline between 2008 and 2012, ELICOS enrolments have increased steadily, and 2017 is likely to see the highest annual figure yet recorded. Students come from a variety of countries around the world, including China (22%), Japan (14%), South Korea (8%), Brazil (8%), Thailand (6%), Colombia (5%), Taiwan (4%), Vietnam (3%), Italy (3%) and India (3%). ELICOS students studied for an average of 13.4 weeks in 2016. Sydney is the major ELICOS centre in Australia, accounting for 36% of enrolments in 2016 (English Australia, 2017).

Second, ELICOS students potentially experience high levels of both opportunity and risk, because they lack the shelter of formal support structures for overseas study that are available to study abroad program participants or students enrolled in higher education courses (Sawir *et al.*, 2012). In Sydney, ELICOS students typically enrol on courses independently or through an agent in their home country, arrange their own accommodation, and engage in part-time work as well as self-organized recreational activities. This heightened exposure to the everyday life of the city means that ELICOS students can help cast new light on the vexed issue of context in language learning. A study of ELICOS students' experiences of using and learning English can contribute to a better understanding of the sense in which a city such as Sydney is a context for English language learning and, indeed, of the relationship between context and language learning itself.

### **Sydney: an English-speaking or multilingual city?**

The title of this paper includes the term “multilingual Sydney” in order to highlight the question of whether ELICOS students in Sydney are, in fact, studying in an English-speaking city. Claims made on ELICOS providers' websites suggest that they are:

“Australians are very friendly and welcoming.... They're always happy to talk so it's a great place to improve your English.”

“If you're going to be living here for a few months (or years) get to know—and speak with—the natives!”

Statistics from the 2016 Australian census show that 87.7% of Sydney residents speak “English only” at home or speak English “very well” or “well” in addition to another language (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2017). Only 6.5% reported that they speak English “not well” or “not at all.” In the sense that there is no shortage of people who speak English, then, Sydney certainly is an English-speaking city. On the other hand, 35.8% of Sydney's population report that they speak a language other than English at home. This is much higher than the figure for Australia as a whole (20.8%), matched only by Melbourne (32.3%) among Australia's state capitals, and it has been increasing steadily since the early 1980s. From this perspective, Sydney could well be called a “multilingual city” (Chik, Benson, & Moloney, *in press*; King & Carson, 2016; Lamb, 2015).

From an ELICOS student's perspective, Sydney may be even more of a “multilingual city” than these

statistics suggest. When language data from the 2016 Census are broken down by district, the figures for users of languages other than English are above 75% in some parts of the city, while in others it is below 25% (Benson & Hatoss, in press). The areas with the highest levels of multilingualism tend to be concentrated in a band around the south, south-west and west of the inner city, while the more “monolingual English” areas tend to be found in the outer suburbs (Chik, Forrest, & Siciliano, in press). The districts in which multilingualism is most prevalent are, moreover, the areas in which ELICOS students tend to live, study and work. Together with short-term visitors (more than 2 million arrivals from non-English-speaking countries in the year ended June 2017 [Destination NSW, 2017]), ELICOS students make their own contribution to multilingualism in the city, which is not recorded in census statistics. While much of the statistical data on the spatial distribution of multilingualism relates to place of residence, we also know that multilingual communication is frequent in workplaces, on public transport and in public spaces (Pennycook & Otsuji, 2015), and that commercial signage, restaurant menus and product labels are often bilingual in these districts (Wise, 2010; Izadi & Paravesh, 2016). In the areas of the city that they inhabit, ELICOS students are as likely to encounter languages other than English (including their own) as they are English.

### Context and access to English

Coleman (2015) notes “the frequently observed difficulty for study abroad students of accessing locals” (p. 42). In the light of increasing language diversity in the major cities of the English-speaking world, this might be called the problem of access to English in English-speaking cities. Applied linguistics researchers have viewed exposure to language in use as an essential condition for second language acquisition both in and beyond the classroom (Lightbown & Spada, 2007; Ellis, 2008). Language use beyond the classroom has also been seen as a condition for achieving higher levels of proficiency (Benson, 2011; Richards, 2015). Context has, thus, been seen as a crucial factor in second language acquisition, because of its influence on the learner’s exposure to the target language. For students who have studied a second language “at home”, in regions where the target language is not widely used outside the classroom, overseas study potentially offers two contextual advantages: the opportunity to study the language in multilingual classrooms with native speaker teachers, and abundant opportunities to use the target language outside the classroom (Collentine, 2009). However, it has been repeatedly shown that students make far less use of the target language outside the classroom than might be expected, whether in study abroad programs (DeKeyser, 2007; Coleman, 2015), international education (Rocheouste & Oliver, 2014; Gomes, 2015; Tran & Pham, 2016), or migration (Yates, 2010, 2011). Gaining access to opportunities to use English beyond the classroom is the major challenge that many newly arrived ELICOS students in Sydney confront (Kashiwa & Benson, 2017).

The problem of access to English in English-speaking cities can be attributed to learner factors such as attitudes towards or willingness to communicate with local English-language speakers; it can also be attributed to contextual factors, including the ways in which learners are positioned by local English-language speakers (Norton, 2001). However, we see two problems in existing approaches to these questions, both of which involve the conceptualization of context. On the one hand, there is a tendency to equate the context with *social* context. This is evident, for example, in studies of intercultural contact, social networks, and communities of practice in study abroad, which tend to narrow down students’ interaction with context to their interaction with other people (e.g., Jackson, 2010; Arkoudis & Baik, 2014; Zappa-Hollman & Duff, 2015; Umino & Benson, 2016; Dewey, 2017). There is also a tendency to separate contextual factors from learner factors, such that the role of the learner’s agency in the construction of contexts of language use and learning is underestimated.

Coleman (2015) observes that cheaper travel and the emergence of new technologies have considerably affected the degree of “immersion” in the target language that can be expected of study

abroad. The “abroad” of today is not the “abroad” of even five or ten years ago, he argues. The cities in which overseas students study are not only becoming more linguistically diverse, they are also becoming increasingly familiar as their exoticism is diminished by the ubiquity of global chain stores, advertising, products, and media. The availability of digital devices and social media also means that students are never entirely away from home while studying overseas. Overseas study can be more or less of an adventure, depending on the degree of cultural difference between home and abroad, the students’ backgrounds and attitudes, their connections with peers and with home, and so on. What Coleman’s argument points to, however, is the importance of students’ experience of the city itself – its streets, buildings, classrooms, homes, cafés, restaurants, and tourist attractions; texts viewed in public spaces and on digital screens; speech overheard and people seen from afar; 4G networks and wi-fi hotspots that afford opportunities to expand the space of the city through the medium of digital devices. To consider only the social contexts of face-to-face spoken interaction is not only to neglect the physical and geographical contexts of the city in which the potential for interaction are embedded but also to ignore important domains of language use and learning in their own right. In an effort to capture this dimension of context, we use the term “language learning environments” to refer to the spatially grounded contexts of language use and language learning that are mapped out in the trajectories of international students’ daily lives in multilingual cities.

Applied linguists have tended to adopt a one-directional view of the relationship between context and the language learner. The focus has fallen on the influence of contextual factors on learners and learning. Less attention has been paid to the influence of learners and their language use on context. A recent focus on agency, however, has been accompanied by a revised view of context as something that both shapes and is shaped by learners and their actions (Mercer & Williams, 2014; Peters, Gao, Miller, & Vitanova, 2015; King, 2016; Benson, 2017). However, we also need to avoid the trap of positing a bi-directional relationship, or back-and-forth interaction, between two distinct entities, the “learner” and the “context.” As Ushioda (2015) argues, it is not simply that there is a “dynamic evolving relationship between learner and context, as each responds and adopts to each other”; in the process of co-adaptation “the learner necessarily becomes an integral part of the unfolding context of the interaction” (p. 47). This view of the “learner-in-context” also informs our view of language learning environments, which are both constructed by and incorporate the learner’s language activity.

For example, a student may start a conversation with her neighbour during a train journey from home to her college. In order for this to happen, there must first be a regular journey from home to college, a train with an empty seat and somebody in the adjacent seat to talk to. These can be thought of as the environmental conditions in which the student finds herself. But the student must also speak to her neighbour, or perhaps respond to something that her neighbour has said. Up to this point, we might say that the environment of the train carriage is not really a *language learning* environment. At the point at which the student speaks or attends to the speech of her neighbour, however, she begins to construct the carriage as an environment for language learning that incorporates both her and her neighbour’s language use. Even if the student only eavesdrops on a conversation that is taking place across the aisle (rather than puts on a pair of earphones to listen to music on her mobile phone), her actions play a large part in determining the nature of the environment.

The question that arises, however, is the degree to which learner agency constructs and is incorporated into *spatial*, as well as *social* contexts of learning. In this paper, we argue that this is indeed the case. The broad spatial environment of the city, in particular the geographical locations of the spaces that are important to an ELICOS student’s life (e.g., home, college, place of work, and the distances that separate them), is often mapped out before the student arrives or within a few days of arrival. Typically, we find that ELICOS students are keen to use English beyond the classroom, but their access to opportunities to use English is constrained by the spatial contexts of their everyday lives in multilingual

cities. The remainder of this paper will consist of a case study of one ELICOS student's daily life in Sydney, through which we explore how students can navigate courses through the spaces of multilingual cities in order to maximize their opportunities to use and learn English.

## Method

The following case study is taken from a project in which 11 Sydney-based ELICOS students recorded their activities in an online diary for a week and participated in a stimulated recall interview. In the interview, the participants were prompted to recount their activities and reflect on their use of languages over a seven-day period. The methodology of the study drew on recent research on study abroad that has used logs and online tools to measure learners' language use outside the classroom (Ranta & Meckelborg, 2013; Dewey, 2017; García-Amaya, 2017). However, our goal was not so much to quantify students' use of English as to map out the ways in which their language use interacted with the environmental conditions of their daily lives.

The participants were of nine different nationalities. Six were studying at the Macquarie University English Language Centre, in Sydney's northwestern suburbs, and five were studying at a private sector college in the Sydney CBD. The participants were all adults (six male and five female) aged 20-40 and all intending to remain in Sydney after completing their courses, either to enter higher or vocational education or to obtain professional work. The participants were selected from those who volunteered to participate in the project in response to an advertisement circulated by their class teachers. They first attended a briefing session, in which the project research assistant explained the procedures. Having downloaded a free online diary application, *Diario*, to their mobile phones, the students were asked to keep an hourly record of their activities for the next seven days. Each entry was to include a brief note of the activity they were engaged in, who they were with and what language(s) they were using. The application automatically recorded the date and time of the entry and also used the phone's GPS system to record the location. The participants were also asked to attach photographs to their diary entries as they saw fit. All of the participants completed this task. Although there were some gaps in their record keeping, the data were sufficiently detailed for the participants to recall and talk about their activities in depth.

The diary data were not collected by the research team but were used by the participants during stimulated recall interviews (Gass & Mackey, 2000) that took place two to three days after they had completed the diary task. The interviews were conducted in English by the project research assistant (a female Japanese graduate student) and lasted approximately one hour. Using the diary data on their mobile phones, the participants were first prompted to describe their activities briefly in chronological order from the first day to the last. The interviewer noted the locations that the interviewees mentioned and then prompted them to talk more about their language use at each location.

The interview data were read and re-read by the research team members who wrote up a narrative for each participant, describing their weekday and weekend activities, with a focus on their language use. These narratives were essentially shortened and edited versions of the participants' contributions to the interviews, which retained their wording as far as possible. As exploratory research, the study did not have specific research questions but was guided by the broad aim of identifying the elements that would be relevant to a description of international students' language learning environments in Sydney.

As the detail in the participants' accounts was often of significance, we examine a single case, Carita, in this paper, rather than the data set as a whole. Her daily routine and weekend activities are first described in her words (with some editing for brevity and clarity). This is followed by a discussion of two aspects of her narrative: first, the importance of the spatial dimensions of her daily life for her

access to English and, second, her use of agency to manage the spatial dimensions of her language learning environment.

### **Carita's week**

Carita (a pseudonym) is a female Colombian in her mid-thirties who is taking an ELICOS course at the Macquarie University English Language Centre. She is studying English as a pre-requisite for enrolling on a Master's programme. This is Carita's second period of study abroad in Australia. Three years ago, she came to study English with "no English and determined to improve" but found herself in a Latin American community in which she mostly spoke Spanish. Supporting herself by part-time work, her priorities began to change from learning English to working in order to finance second and third visas. Dissatisfied with this earlier experience, Carita had decided to come to Australia with the more definite aim of studying for a Master's degree.

At the time of the research project, Carita lived in a shared house in Eastwood, a suburb adjacent to the university, a 15-minute bicycle ride from the university. She worked in a Mexican restaurant on four weekday evenings in a nearby shopping centre, a 20-minute ride from the university and a similar distance from her home. Here, we reproduce two sections of the narrative of Carita's week, the first covering a typical weekday and the second covering Friday evening and Saturday.

#### *A typical weekday*

Most of the students like me need to come every day to class, so sometimes it's a little bit difficult to find free time for different activities. Our schedule is from 1.00 pm to 5:15 pm so we don't have too much time in the morning and we don't have too much time at night. So, it is a little bit difficult but I try. So okay, what I did, I wake up and I come to class.

Every morning I meet with my flatmates, they are from they are Croatian, Chinese, Muslim and another man who is from China. My last flatmate was a Chinese family, but they moved and now I am still in that house. Every morning when I make my breakfast I talk with them. They ask me a lot of things and I ask about their families, or sometimes they ask me what I do for my breakfast, so we start to have a little bit of conversation in our morning.

I take a bike because that helps me to save money. I think it's not just to save money. I find that really beneficial for my health because I like to do exercise and I can go to different places. And, actually, I use my bike to go to my job in the shopping centre so it's really convenient for me. So, I come to class and before the class I try to do homework or do some search about the next topic, I try to be ready for class. I use the equipment in the Independent Learning Centre [a self-access learning centre in the ELC] because they give us a computer. So I do my homework in the morning and then I study and I am a little bit more ready for class.

Then I went to class, blah, blah, blah, that's okay. I met with a Colombian girl who has started to become one of our friends. We were just talking about what happened with our last weekend or last night or something like that. Normally we talk in Spanish just for 15 minutes. But Camilla is my class mate, she's from Mexico but sometimes we speak just in English because I don't know, we know we speak Spanish but we started by speaking English so it's like, you know, you still talk how you did when you met the first time so we're doing that. It's sometimes funny because sometimes we mix so it's strange.

When I finish my class, I take my bike and go directly to my job. I ride my bike through the

park so the view is really, really nice and there's no danger because there is a cycle path, so it's really good. And I arrive at my job in a Mexican restaurant.

I am a waiter and cashier. Most of the staff are not from Latin America. We are a mixed group. Our manager is Australian and the cooks are from some part of India. I don't know where exactly but they look like Indians, sorry for the stereotype. Others who do the dishes are from Australia, because they are like teenagers, and another one is from Latin America. So, we all the time speak in English. This is the rule in their restaurant because it's rude for the others who can't understand Spanish or another language. I love that job, actually, because I can not just improve my English, I can make new friends. Yes, and I like to talk with the customers. They ask you where you're from and sometimes they are just want to know about my country, about the drugs and Pablo Escobar, but with time I learn not to take that personally. In the beginning that made me feel angry, but it depends on how the person says it, so I try to understand. Okay, I can follow the conversation and that's it, so yes. Okay.

That's what happens in my day. I finish at 10:30 pm. I close the restaurant with the other staff and then I arrive home, take a shower and I talk online with my kind of boyfriend. He's German guy. He lives in Luxemburg and we speak in English. He knows Spanish really well, but I told him not to speak Spanish because I don't know English and I need to improve. If he says something in Spanish I just ignore him because I really want to learn English. So, this part of the year when I arrive in Sydney I am really determined to improve my English so that's why I make him speak to me in English. When I arrive, it is almost 11.00 pm. Then I take a shower and then I talk with him for almost one, two hours. So sometimes I just go to sleep, sometimes no. Usually I go to bed at 1.00 am.

During a busy day like this, sometimes I don't watch TV or use the Internet, because I don't have enough time. When I wake up I check my phone, Facebook, Instagram like that, social media, but that's it because I don't have enough time.

This describes the first day on which Carita kept the diary, a Wednesday. She described a similar routine on other weekdays but added details of several interesting events that punctuated the days. On one morning before class, she found a hairdressing salon in the shopping centre (a recommendation from a cleaner at the restaurant). She had a late-night encounter with a cockroach in the basket of her bicycle after work, which led to a conversation with a group of Chinese passers-by, one of whom took charge of disposing of the insect. She had also begun going to the gym with her friend Camilla in the mornings before class.

The following describes Carita's Friday evening and Saturday.

On Friday, okay Friday, I come to school as usual, but I have an app where I can meet new people. Obviously most of them are guys, men. When I finished class, I talked with a guy, and decided to go for some drinks. Most of them are guys, because girls don't want to talk with another girl, I don't know why. I like to meet new people because sometimes we have similar characteristics. So sometimes I can meet that person and learn new vocabulary, that is my goal.

So I met that person. It was a terrible night because on Friday it was just raining, do you remember? I went home, I took a shower, I changed my clothes, and the guy said we can meet in Olympic Park. I don't know Sydney, so okay there's a train station, Olympic Park. But I took the train from Eastwood so I spent 15 minutes walking from my home to Eastwood and then the train. I usually use Google maps to know which train and what time I need to take another

train. Google said take a train to Strathfield and from Strathfield take a bus, so I got lost a little bit because the bus is not like in front of the station. I need to walk, and okay, I wait. I waited a long time. I needed to meet him at 7.00. It was 7:30 and I was still waiting for the bus and I said, okay, so sorry, you know it's raining and now what has happened with the bus, blah, blah, blah. I waited for the bus. Finally, when there was a bus that guy was really patient. I meet him in a kind of, not club, restaurant and he's a British guy so I started to hear a new accent, so oh okay, but he was a really friendly person. I needed to like training my listening with the words that he said, the new vocabulary. But he has really a lot patience with me, because sometimes I couldn't understand him because my ear is more with Australian now. He sometimes corrected me when I made mistakes in my pronunciation. And that's it, we ate a lot, like crazy. I didn't eat. He ordered a lot of food and I couldn't eat because it was too much and when you see too much food sometimes you don't eat. I spent a long time meeting with him. We enjoyed and then I spent a long time going back home again. It was so hard. Oh my God! But it was nice and sometimes he's still talking with me and that's it. Really good. So, I think it's good to use social media to meet new people and try to break that barrier because sometimes you feel afraid because – actually I don't speak English really well and sometimes you feel afraid to talk with local people because they can't understand you. Yes and that's it.

It's like, Oh my God, okay. Saturday morning I woke up early because I wanted to spend my day in the city. I don't like to stay too long time in my room in the house and obviously I wish to take advantage of my day off. So, I was in the city almost at 9.00 am. I went to Apple Store because my phone had some issues and I saw [Apple] Solutions. It was really nice and I didn't spend too much time there, then I take my breakfast in a restaurant. It was a yummy breakfast – toast with avocado – I think this is perfect. Then I start to walk all the city, I like – don't use Google maps, I like to take a way that I really don't know. So okay, what happens if I take that way? Which kind of the restaurants or places can I see because I like to explore, so I usually take different ways and I start to walk and walk and walk. Then I took my lunch, it was a really, really nice lunch – I don't know if it was Italian, because it was pasta.

Sometimes it's difficult [to talk to people], they are in their own business so it's difficult. Maybe someone starts to talk with me, it's fine, but for me going directly to a person and talk if it's not for information, it's more difficult. But no, no, I didn't [talk to anyone]. I was expecting going to the art gallery because it's one of my favourite things but I say, no, maybe next time I can go in and I want just to walk and explore.

And then I take a train because it was around 3.00 pm. I wanted to go into Eastwood because - that Saturday was Granny Smith Festival. But at that moment the guy who I met last night texted me and asked if I wanted some coffee before his meeting later? He's a financial consultant so I thought he has a meeting but was with a suit and was really formal, so formal. And I say okay and then I leave the train in Meadowbank. I don't know actually where it was. I saw the river, he lives near to some river, near to Olympic Park, so in Olympic Park you find a river and I leave there and I say okay, I need to walk to a ferry to cross to the other side of the river and then walk. My battery in my phone was like four per cent and I said, Oh my God, okay, what I can do? I tried to memorise the way and which ferry I needed to take and how many blocks I need to walk. Then when I was at the ferry pier my battery was just two and I said, Oh my God, I hope I can call that guy because actually I don't know where he lives. Then I knew it was 20 minutes and then I need to wait for take the ferry so I said, okay, that's enough time, try to find some place when you can charge your phone. And I saw a restaurant and I went to there and I talked with a waiter, I said I'm so sorry, I need to recharge my phone, see I don't have power. He was so friendly. I could charge my phone and they offered me hot



chocolate and I stood a little bit there and that was really good for me.

Then I met with the guy but I spend too much time waiting for the ferry and walking, so we couldn't find time for drink and he was almost ready for his meeting. So, he asked me if I can go with him to Parramatta to take his suit because a guy was fixing that. And then we went to Parramatta, he was like a handsome guy, it was really good. I was walking in the shopping centre with him and I said, Oh my God, I'm so ugly next to you because he was really, really good and I was like this, informal. And I said, okay, you can leave me here. I am so tired and I think you are ready for your meeting, I can take my bus here. And, actually, I took my bus there to the festival in Eastwood – I start to think okay, I leave the bus and I leave the bus, I leave the bus, I go into the festival and I go to the festival and then I said no, I can't do that because I was so tired, my feet were hurting me because I walk too much so I say no, no, maybe next time.

I just went home and decided okay, if I'm not going to the festival I can do some interesting thing. So, I made popcorn and then I started to watch a series – “American Horror [Story]” - because I love horror movies. So was my first time to see “American Horror” and I start to watch like seven chapters, so finish one, next one, next one, next one, was wow, really, really interesting. I have subtitles but in English. I don't use Spanish in my iPhone – just English because sometimes I can stop and look for some word because sometimes I don't know and I need to use the captions to look up a word I heard.

## **Discussion**

Issues of space have been brought to the fore in several recent publications on language learning. This prompted, on the one hand, by increased attention to broad contexts for language learning such as migration, international education and study abroad (Baynham & Simpson, 2010; Gao & Park, 2017; Higgins, 2017) and, on the other hand, a related interest in settings for autonomous language learning beyond the classroom (Reinders & Benson, 2017; Murray & Lamb, 2018). Here, we want to argue that Carita's narrative may offer a way into a more systematic understanding of the importance of space to an understanding of the nature and influence of context in language learning. It shows, first of all, how the contexts of an international student's language use and learning are fixed in place by the circumstances of her everyday life. On weekdays her language learning environment is geographically confined to three points of a relatively small triangle in northwest Sydney, defined by her place of study, her accommodation, and her workplace. One point of this triangle—the university ELC—was fixed before she arrived, while the other two were fixed shortly after her arrival and were determined partly by their proximity to the university. Eastwood, the district in which she lives, is highly multilingual, with 64% of residents using a language other than English at home (predominantly Mandarin Chinese, Cantonese, or Korean) (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2017). In addition, it is a popular place of residence for ELICOS and international students attending Macquarie University, many of whom live in shared houses. The social contexts of Carita's language use are largely conditioned by the multilingual geography of the triangle in which she spends her weekdays. It offers few opportunities beyond the classroom for interaction with local native speakers of English (although she does speak with her manager and customers at work). However, it does offer ample opportunities for interaction with other non-native speakers at home, at work, and outside the classroom at school. As there are few Spanish speakers in the district, her daily life is mostly conducted in English and she uses Spanish only with one of her Spanish-speaking friends at the university. In this respect, her life is very different to that of a Chinese participant in the study, who was studying in Sydney with his wife and spent much of his free time either at home or with Chinese-speaking friends.

Two other related factors emerge from Carita's narrative as being particularly important: financial constraint and time. Like many ELICOS students, Carita has to work part-time in order to finance her studies and, as a result, she leads a busy life, which leaves little time for any weekday activities other than school, work and homework. Public transport is not a setting for language use or learning, because she travels by bicycle – it is both faster and cheaper. Carita's nightly online conversations with her boyfriend are a fourth important setting for language use that adds to the pressure on her time. Interestingly, this pressure translates into a conflict over language, as his use of English rather than Spanish appears to become a condition for continuing these conversations. Important as they are, however, financial and time constraints are chiefly manifested in their effects upon the spatial contexts of Carita's language use. They primarily determine *where* she spends her time, rather than *how* she spends her time when she is in any particular setting. The main effect is to confine her to the triangle of home, school, and work on weekdays, while the proximity of these three settings also relieves the pressure on her time.

Carita's account of her activities on Friday evening and Saturday suggests that her weekends are very different from her weekdays. There is, in fact, a good deal of evidence of agency in her weekday routine: for example, in her initiation of conversations with housemates and customers at work and her management of language choices in her interactions with Camilla and with her boyfriend. However, these are examples of the exercise of agency within spatial constraints. In terms of access to English, they are examples of making the best use of the spatial cards that one has been dealt. At the weekend, on the other hand, Carita exercises her agency to break free of the spatial constraints of her weekday routine in order to navigate unpredictable, and at times far less multilingual, paths across the city. In doing so, she begins to create new and transient spatial contexts for access to English – a restaurant in an unknown, and somewhat remote, suburb, a walk at random through the streets of the city centre, a conversation with a waiter as she charges her phone in a restaurant, a somewhat confusing meeting with a friend, a ferry trip to Parramatta and a bus journey home, and a visit to a local festival, which turns into an evening at home alone with a favourite television series.

One point that Carita's narrative illustrates is that the exercise of agency to extend one's language learning environment beyond the settings of everyday routine entails some degree of spatial risk. She uses what we imagine to be a dating application to initiate a social interaction with a stranger, but each time she meets him she has to venture into unknown territory by train, bus, ferry, and on foot. Interestingly, it is not so much the social dimension of this interaction that entails risk – once they succeed in meeting up, things seem to go well enough – but its spatial dimensions. On each occasion she is temporarily lost and disorientated. Equally interesting is the way in which this risk is mediated and mitigated by Carita's mobile phone – she first uses an application to arrange the meeting, then uses text messaging and maps to navigate her way toward it. Indeed, the only point at which the risk becomes serious is the point at which her phone begins to run out of battery. The point of this story, however, lies less in its specific details than in the more general way that it illustrates a potential understanding of context in language learning that involves the interweaving of the activities of a mobile (and technologically-enhanced) learner, with the environments of the multilingual city.

## Conclusion

The conclusions that can be drawn from a single case study must necessarily be tentative. Carita's life in Sydney was unique among the 11 participants in the study, but this could also be said of any of the other ten participants. Carita was certainly the only participant who used a dating application to gain access to English. However, others were creative in constructing language learning environments in other ways, some being more creative than others. The fixing of Carita's weekday routine within a spatial triangle of home, college, and work, however, was typical of the participants as a group. Much

of the variation among the participants' weekday routines, therefore, related to the spatial location of the three points of the triangle, and the distances and journeys between them. The data that we have—and we believe that this is clearly illustrated by Carita's account—point to space as a key, if not the key, dimension of context in language learning. As this was an exploratory study, we should, perhaps, put this more tentatively as a suggestion that it might be profitable to begin investigations of language learning in context with the question of *where* the language learning takes place: its settings, their locations in the wider spaces of the city, their interrelationships, and their relationships to the learners' use of time and interactions with human and material resources.

To conclude with a methodological observation, the difficulties of obtaining good data on language learning beyond the classroom can often seem intractable (Reinders & Benson, 2017). The study that we have discussed in this paper was designed partly out of a sense of frustration with retrospective interviews that provided interesting data on international students out-of-class learning activities but often failed to tell where those activities had taken place. There was also a concern that research largely fails to account for all the settings in which individuals learn languages and how their activities in these settings constitute what we call a “language learning environment” (Kashiwa & Benson, 2017). There are, certainly, limitations to the methodology that we have used, most importantly that it does not provide us with real time data on actual instances of language use and learning. Nevertheless, the use of an online diary application in conjunction with stimulated recall interviews has provided us with a much richer data set than we would have obtained by other means, as we hope Carita's narrative illustrates.

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