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How do adult beginner distance language learners respond to assignment feedback? A qualitative study

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Abstract

This qualitative study examines perceptions and use of assessment feedback among adult beginner modern foreign language learners on higher education distance learning courses. A survey of responses to feedback on assignments by 43 Open University (UK) students on beginner language courses in Spanish, French and German indicated that respondents can be classified into three groups: those who use feedback strategically by integrating it into the learning process and comparing it with, for example, informal feedback from interaction with native speakers, those who take note of feedback, but seem not to use it strategically, and those who appear to take little account of either marks or feedback. The first group proved to be the most confident and most likely to maintain their motivation in the longer term. The conclusion discusses some of the pedagogical and policy implications of the findings.

Key words

modern foreign language adult beginners; distance learning; assignment feedback; student response; affective response; motivation maintenance

Introduction

The ability to interpret and use feedback by tutors on student assignments to inform the learning process (Cohen, 1987, p. 57-68) is of evident importance, and nowhere more so than in distance language learning (Hurd, 2000; 2006, p. 319; White, 2003, p. 187). It is also evident that feedback can sustain student motivation, and that it could play a significant role in initiatives to improve student support and student retention in distance learning (DL), such as those discussed by Dzakiria (2008), Simpson (2006) and Stevenson, MacKeogh and Sander (2006). Interest in the potential role of feedback in supporting students and the learning process has been reflected in studies of language learners in DL (Hurd, 2001). This paper examines learners' perceptions of and responses to feedback provided on assignments in DL courses for beginners in modern foreign languages (MFL), together with the impact of these perceptions on how students exploit that feedback, assess their progress and maintain their motivation.

Background

Feedback involves the perception by learners firstly that there is a gap between their present and their desired level of knowledge, understanding or skill, and secondly the action they take to close this gap (Black & Wiliam, 1998, p. 20; Ramaprasad, 1983). This has been echoed by Hunt (2001, p. 173), who – referring to face-to-face MFL provision – defines feedback as advice on how to close ‘the gap between the actual and the desired levels of performance’. In this context, Walker (2009, p. 68) makes an important distinction between *retrospective* and *future* gap-altering feedback: the former is used to alter a gap demonstrated in a recently submitted assignment, whereas the latter looks forward by concentrating on helping learners to reduce or close gaps that would otherwise have recurred in their work.

Student responses to feedback

Researchers have also considered the question of students' *responses* to feedback, especially in second language writing, dealing with topics such as mismatches between students' and tutors' expectations of feedback (Cohen & Cavalcanti, 1990), and students' use of feedback (Hyland, 1998). Most recently, researchers' attention has shifted to the associated conceptual and pedagogical issues (see, for example, Hyland and Hyland, 2006), but students' *perceptions* of how assignment feedback might be used to identify and bridge gaps, remain under-researched. Nevertheless, there are signs of a growing interest in this area. Weaver (2006, p. 390) studied students' reactions to assignment feedback and found that a sizeable minority of those surveyed claimed to have received little or no guidance on how to interpret and use feedback, and therefore had no clear understanding of what was required to improve their cognitive skills. Maclellan's study of undergraduate perceptions of assessment practices (2001, p. 317) concluded that students did not exploit assessment to improve their learning, and had an underdeveloped conception of what assessment is. Burke (2009, p. 49) has confirmed Weaver's findings and pointed to a mismatch between staff expectations and student awareness. Finally, McDowell (2007) has stressed the need for tutors to bear students' approaches to using feedback in mind.

In their different ways, all the studies cited so far have enhanced our understanding of what constitutes effective feedback and how feedback might affect student behaviour, as well as underlining the dangers of overestimating students' skills in using it. Nevertheless, none of the four studies of student perceptions of feedback deals with language learners, and the work done on feedback in second language writing has been concerned with advanced or intermediate students rather than beginners. Some of the issues specifically affecting beginner MFL distance learners will be discussed in the following section.

Feedback and distance language learners

Since the mid 1970s researchers have been interested in the strategies of successful language learners (see Naiman, Fröhlich, Stern & Todesco, 1978; O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Wenden & Rubin, 1987, *inter alia*). Implicit in this research are two assumptions: firstly, that the learner is an active and involved participant in the language learning process (Oxford & Crookall, 1989, p. 413) and secondly, that students will improve their language learning proficiency by adopting such strategies and developing their own thinking and strategic processes (Chamot, 2004, p. 21).

Beginner MFL students' strategies have been studied by White (1999, p. 451-3), who describes how they are often disconcerted by uncertainty – for example, doubts about the meaning of a word, or a point of grammar. Unable to solve the problem themselves, they wait for some external resolution. Two factors come into play here. The first is especially relevant to language learners: *tolerance of ambiguity*, or the learner's response to feelings of uncertainty and confusion, whereby the uncertainty is accommodated so that it does not obstruct progress. The second is *locus of control*, or the learner's orientation towards what determines success or failure for him or her. It follows that successful distance language learners are likely to possess two characteristics: a high degree of tolerance of ambiguity (in other words, an understanding that the need to clarify uncertainties surrounding certain issues is subordinate to the need to maintain the momentum of the learning process) and a belief that it is within their power to influence the learning process by seeing the locus

of control not as fixed, and forever external to them, but dynamic, and capable of being internalised (cf. Black & Wiliam, 1998, p. 24; White, 1999, p. 456). Arguably, formative feedback emphasising the learning *process* rather than the *product* (for example, by encouraging learners to develop strategies for guessing the meaning of words from the context in which they are used) may increase students' tolerance of ambiguity, and tutor interventions that invite them to develop effective self-correction strategies may give them a degree of control over the learning process, promoting self-regulation (Hurd, Beaven & Ortega, 2001; Kubota, 2001; Ros i Solé & Truman, 2005, p. 79-83; Truman, 2008).

The relationship between feedback and self-regulation is further explored by Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick (2006, p. 205), who conclude that effective feedback is 'anything that might strengthen the students' capacity to self-regulate their own performance', but to understand self-regulation it may be helpful to consider first some of the processes that underlie it. Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick (2006, p. 202-204) distinguish between *external feedback*, such as the comments provided by tutors on students' assignments, and *internal feedback*, which is generated when students interpret, construct and internalise external feedback. Accordingly, as effective learners work on an assessment task, they also monitor their interaction with it: they evaluate how successfully they deal with the various requirements or steps necessary to complete it. In doing so, they make use of *internal feedback*, which is generated at a variety of levels (cognitive, motivational and behavioural), and might lead to a reinterpretation of the task, an adjustment of internal goals, tactics and strategies or a revision of their domain knowledge or motivational beliefs. These processes might, in turn, influence subsequent self-regulation (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006) and, perhaps, encourage students to assume greater responsibility for managing their own learning (Nicol & Milligan, 2006, p. 64). External and internal feedback are therefore interrelated; moreover, it can be argued that external feedback is unlikely to influence learning unless it is successful in stimulating internal feedback.

Self-regulation is a complex concept that has been succinctly described by Dörnyei (2005, p. 191) as 'the degree to which individuals are active participants in their own learning' and by Zimmermann (2001, p. 1, in Dörnyei, 2005) as 'the self-directive *process* through which learners transform their mental abilities into task-related academic skills.' In this sense we could argue that both internalisation of feedback and determining the locus of control are aspects of self-regulated learning, as well as the ability to reflect on personal experience in order to judge one's own progress. However, self-regulation strategies encompass not only language learning but also motivation maintenance (Dörnyei, 2001, p. 98), an issue of especial importance for DL.

Context of this study

The subjects of this study were students on three beginners' courses in languages launched by the Open University (UK)¹ over a two-year period: *Rundblick* (German) and *Portales* (Spanish), in 2003, and *Bon départ* (French), in 2004. For the OU feedback on assignments is a cornerstone of its approach to teaching and learning, with a long tradition (Cole, Coats & Lentell, 1986; Jarvis, 1978). As part of its quality assurance procedures, the OU disseminates good practice in providing feedback

¹ Henceforth referred to as 'OU'.

through induction, staff development and monitoring, and through a *Monitoring Handbook*, which contains further advice and examples for tutors. OU students, too, are encouraged to use marked assignments as opportunities for further learning, by following recommendations in publications such as *Success with Languages* (Furnborough, Duensing & Truman, 2005), so most assessment feedback comments are expected to emphasise the process rather than the product. It is, however, also apparent that helping students to maintain their motivation is another major function of feedback; for this reason assignment feedback is intended to elicit an affective response from students, as well as encouraging them to attend to the more obvious learning-related issues. This is consistent with the widely recognised importance of feedback in maintaining student motivation (Walker & Symons, 1997; Williams & Burden, 1997, p. 134; Dörnyei, 2001, p. 134-5).

Starting to study an MFL from scratch through DL can be a daunting prospect, and students with previous language learning experience are not necessarily at an advantage either, since – as Sussex (1991, p. 180) acknowledges – interpersonal and communicative aspects of language acquisition are difficult to manage in a DL environment. Despite the opportunities provided by ICT for improving communication at a distance (Hampel & Hauck, 2006; Lamy & Goodfellow, 1999), this remains a problematic area. Even if they have achieved a high degree of self-reliance, good distance MFL learners may feel isolated, having few opportunities for social and linguistic interaction. Some may find opportunities at social events, at work or on holiday. Tutorials may offer further opportunities, but not in every case. In the OU, for instance, attendance at tutorials is not compulsory; for a significant minority of students it is not practicable either, for instance because of work or family commitments. In these circumstances, feedback may be the sole channel for student-tutor interaction (Ros i Solé and Truman, 2005, p. 88), so the learner-teacher dialogue that it can promote becomes more relevant than ever (Aljaafreh & Lantolf, 1994; Nassaji & Swain, 2000; White, 1995).

The OU provides learners with feedback in various forms. The tutor annotates students' written Tutor-Marked Assignments (TMAs) as well as providing a detailed commentary and a breakdown of the marks awarded. In the Department of Languages, tutors also record audio feedback on assignments with an oral output. A survey of students on OU beginners' language courses in Scotland in 2005 suggested that students regarded feedback as 'very important' in encouraging them to stay on the course, work harder and review specific areas of their course (Nicolson & Gallastegi, 2006). However the assumption that feedback is a tool for learning has never been tested through student-focused research, despite anecdotal evidence from tutors casting some doubts on whether students use feedback in this way. The present study explores in more detail differences in students' perceptions of feedback and the possible impact of such differences on how they determine their progress, their confidence and their ability to maintain their motivation.

The study

Research questions

(1) How do students perceive assignment feedback?

(2) Do their perceptions of the role of feedback affect the way in which they judge their progress and level of achievement?

(3) Is there a relationship between different perceptions of the role of feedback and confidence or motivation maintenance?

Data collection and analysis

The data were gathered as part of a wider study of beginner language learners at the OU. This wider study was multi-dimensional in its scope, reflecting the under-researched nature of this target group, and consisted of pre- and post-course questionnaires as well as extended mid-course telephone interviews. Nearly 2600 students returned the pre-course questionnaires, 56 of whom were subsequently interviewed by the first author of this article. Data on students' responses to assessment feedback in the interviews form the basis of this paper. The interviews, which were recorded and transcribed, were semi-structured in nature, with open-ended questions designed to explore different aspects of studying a new language through DL. Relevant questions from the interviews are reproduced in Appendix 1. The interviews took place after students had completed and received feedback on half of their assignments, a point at which they were fully engaged with the course and had experience of tutor support through assessment feedback.

QSR N6 was used for analysing their responses. The three themes central to this paper are support in language learning (and most important source of support), confidence increase, and reasons for perceived progress (Tree nodes 5 to 7); these were the aspects in which the roles of tutor feedback were perceived, and reflected in the three research questions. The original coding categories were tested using a sample of six interviews which were tagged independently by two coders and checked for consistency; as a result the coding framework was modified to reflect issues not previously considered. Subsequently all the data was tagged, and checked by an independent coder. Please note that tree nodes and their sub-nodes referred to in this paper are listed in Appendix 2.

Our focus was specifically on beginners and their response to assessment, so 13 of the original 56 interviews were eliminated as invalid for this study: these respondents had considerably greater prior knowledge of the TL than previously indicated through self-assessment in the pre-course questionnaire, or had not submitted any assignments. These questionnaires also provided data on interviewees' previous educational and language learning experience; information on their subsequent participation in higher-level OU courses in the TL was obtained from the University's databases. The University's strict ethical guidelines were followed in capturing and analysing the data and responses.

Key features of the participants

As indicated above, the participants (N=43) had very limited or no knowledge of the TL prior to the start of their course, had submitted assignments regularly and had received feedback. They comprised 28 (65%) females and 15 (35%) males. Their overall educational level ranged from basic school leaver certificate to postgraduate, but the majority (58%) had university or equivalent qualifications. A relatively large proportion (46%) had previous experience of DL, almost exclusively with the OU, although mostly on courses other than languages. These figures broadly reflect the characteristics of the overall population of the beginners' courses.

Reasons given for studying their chosen language included holidays and cultural interest, closely followed by intellectual stimulation and studying for a degree or work; other reasons included spending extended time abroad and filling a perceived gap in their education (Tree node 3). Consequently over 77% of respondents regarded the development of speaking and listening skills and having sufficient opportunities for speaking practice as important, a point which will be considered later in relation to students' judgments of their progress. In the following section we discuss students' perceptions of feedback as revealed in the interviews.

Results

Introduction

One of the most striking features of students' responses was their enthusiasm for assignment feedback:

The important thing is I get the feedback from the TMA [Authors' note: Tutor-Marked Assignment], it's a real – like, ah no, it's like Christmas, you just can't wait for the post to arrive again, you know!

Students generally praised their tutors' efforts to give them useful feedback:

Feedback has been excellent, it's absolutely spot on, the feedback's really, really well balanced and it does give you the boost, she gives you the positive stuff and where you've done well and not so well and your development stuff as well; and she puts, *funnily enough* [authors' italics], she puts a lot of explanation into her feedback, so the feedback's been really good, that again increases your confidence, well, it's increased *my* [speaker's emphasis] confidence.

It should be borne in mind that many of these students were probably accustomed to more perfunctory remarks made on their school homework (e.g. "Good!" or "Be more careful with verb endings."), so the detailed, thoughtful commentaries that OU tutors routinely provide on assignments must have come as something of a revelation to them. As the above comment demonstrates, some students were aware of the affective dimension of feedback, acknowledging a cause and effect relationship between their tutor's positive comments and their own confidence.

How do students perceive assignment feedback?

The interviews revealed that students perceived feedback as fulfilling different purposes; 18 interpreted feedback as a tool for learning, whereas 14 regarded it primarily as a judgement on their level of achievement or the extent of their progress. The remaining 11 appeared to pay scant attention to it, for reasons to be discussed later in this section. For reference purposes we will designate these groups A, B and C respectively.

Group A saw feedback as a learning tool. Students' formative use of feedback varied from a straightforward review of tutor comments to a more reflective analysis:

I've collated the three feedbacks that I've had so far and I've got a piece of paper where I've written stupid errors that I make and I have just written a list of them and from now on whenever I submit anything, I'm going to check it for those, you know?

This student, who clearly intended to make conscious use of tutor comments in subsequent assignments, was aware of the potential benefits stemming from the synergy of external and internal feedback.

For many Group A students, feedback provided considerable added value by empowering them; more specifically, the ways in which the tutor explained difficult points could encourage them to participate actively in the correction and learning processes, and thereby gradually shift the locus of control towards themselves:

Having feedback on where I'm going wrong, that helps me, because then I can sort it out, or have a look at that.... And you know, on the taped assignments she puts extra tips for learning the language after my speaking part.

This concept of added value was recognised by one of the more experienced language learners who clearly appreciated the teaching function of feedback, and its potential for enabling her to close the gap between her actual and desired performance.

I think I did quite well in the speaking task, but I was really pleased that my teacher was able to help me to be better, I'm glad that she didn't just say: yes, that was fine, if you know what I mean, because there's always more.

Students who viewed feedback as an indicator of their progress or level of achievement (Group B) were often also positive, although in a very different way:

Most enjoyable for me, erm, the sense of achievement, you know, when you get a TMA back and you know, you must have done something or you come across something that you thought you didn't know, and you realise that you do know it and it's the sense of achievement you get.

The following Group B student exemplifies the particular difficulties experienced by those with limited language learning experience, especially if they have few opportunities to use the language naturalistically or spontaneously by interacting with other, more competent, TL speakers. Essentially, she appears to recognise the desirability of internalising the locus of control, but has not yet developed strategies for achieving this, whilst regarding it as a realistic aspiration for the future:

I think in terms of whether I'm doing OK or not, it's got to be probably the feedback from the tutor.... I think it's difficult to realise how much you're learning until you try to use it, so you're not quite sure what you've learned, and I think in time you start to use it a bit more, and you're confident in using it and then you realise quite what you have picked up.

It should be noted that even those who use feedback as a learning tool (Group A students) can also have difficulty in assessing their own progress. This would seem to be a particular issue for beginners, who may therefore still need to rely on their tutor for external validation and derive support in their motivation from this:

[The most important type of support] would be the feedback that you get from the assignments, because I can see where I'm actually going wrong, and work on that, you know. Up until your assignment, you actually have no idea whether you're doing okay or not, or certainly I had no idea, until I got my assignment back... whether there were things I need to improve on, and where I need to improve.

The third group – Group C – appeared to take little or no account of assessment feedback, even though several were complimentary about the efforts of their tutor; their responses focused instead on other difficulties. These students experienced either doubt or anxiety (or a combination of the two). *Doubters* were students who had been receiving good marks and positive tutor feedback, but who expressed doubts about whether these were a true reflection of their language skills:

Yes, my TMA marks have been very good, yes... so I'm pleased with that, but that's purely because I've taken good time with my TMAs and try and get them right, you know.... I don't think the TMAs reflect my total ability at the moment, because I have put extra effort into them.... Yes, I think you've got to be brutally honest with yourself really, as in all walks of life, you know.

Those classified as *anxious* were demonstrably struggling, either with the learning process (for example, coping with the study schedule or language retention) or with specific aspects of the course, such as negative experiences in tutorials. This made it difficult for them to focus on the potential benefits of feedback:

I don't know whether I expected to be – my hand held all the way and you know sort of like mollycoddled, and I thought: well, perhaps I'm just supposed to get on with this myself ... When you're isolated, you think: Well, am I actually doing all right? You know, the tutor says: yes, that's fine, yes, your pronunciation is good; and you think: she's only heard four sentences, which I practised for two and a half hours! [Laughs].

Many of the subjects of our study were affected to some extent by *language anxiety* (Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope, 1986, p. 128), a phenomenon that has been widely reported and studied (see Hauck & Hurd, 2005 for references). However, it should be noted that although many respondents in Groups A or B experienced some degree of anxiety from time to time, they had managed to develop strategies (drawing on support either from their tutor or to a lesser extent from other members of their tutorial group) for overcoming this. By contrast, Group C students generally lacked strategies for overcoming anxiety (cf. Hurd, 2007, p. 499), showed a low tolerance of ambiguity and felt the need for constant reassurance, as in the following example:

You know I was trying really hard, and I was picking the odd thing up, but I didn't honestly think I was ever going to be able to speak Spanish, you know I just felt – I felt disheartened really - I mean, I could say the odd thing, but again there were lots of times when I thought: “Well, I don't understand that!” and I e-mailed my tutor, but what I needed was someone, like when you were in school, and you could say: “Excuse me, but can you explain that?” I wanted someone to be with the book, I needed a little pop-up tutor [laughs].

Under these circumstances even coping with the assignments (and presumably receiving positive feedback) seemed irrelevant to the problems that they were facing: consider, for example, the remarks of the same student, who had already abandoned the course before the interview took place:

No, I was achieving – the assignments I was doing fine, and my tutor said: “Oh, it's such a shame that you're giving up, because you're doing really well!”, but I mean – I could do the assignments no problem at all, but I just felt I wasn't moving on in speaking the language, which was what I'd wanted.

These comments point to probably unrealistic expectations within the time span of her participation on the course, and the lack of an appropriate yardstick against which to measure her progress. Whilst anxiety is obviously not confined to beginners, it may be reasonable to assume that for them it is, perhaps, heightened by two factors: their lack of experience of studying a language, together with the challenge of doing so through DL.

A characteristic common to all the doubters was negative experiences of studying languages in the past, amounting to a learning block attributable to, for example, a sense of shame at being the only monolingual in a bilingual family, or an unsupportive teacher, as illustrated below:

I've always had a block about learning languages... and I want to find out whether that was something ingrained at school by a sarcastic teacher, who then told me I was useless, or whether it was a real block to actually learning language.

As might be anticipated in the light of the OU's emphasis on assessment as a vehicle for teaching and learning, 42% of the interviewees did regard feedback as a learning tool, but the majority did not. Findings from the interviews revealed a clear division into three groups which we might define as follows:

- Group A: strategic users of feedback;
- Group B: non-strategic users of feedback;
- Group C: non-users of feedback.

Subsequently we examined the data relating to the other two research questions in terms of these three groups, in order to identify how these very different approaches to feedback received might affect learners' responses.

Do students' perceptions of the role of feedback affect the way in which they judge their progress and level of achievement?

This section starts with Group B, since it was defined as regarding tutor feedback (and associated marks) as primarily a judgement on their progress. Marks are an obvious indicator of progress and can also act as an effective motivator and boost to self-confidence, as many respondents observed:

Ah, well, I'm getting reasonably good marks... I am getting 70s and 80s, so that's the incentive, you're obviously – You know, when you're doing well at something you get motivated to keep going, that you can do it, and that the effort that you put in results in learning.

Clearly for this student the marks themselves, rather than the feedback, were an indicator of progress in learning. In many cases, however, they are viewed alongside, rather than instead of, the tutor's feedback. As one student commented:

Well, I feel very happy – it did my ego the world of good to get 100% in the last TMA! Yes, it makes you feel good about yourself, when you feel you're doing well.... My confidence is increasing. My tutor tells me that I have a good accent, and I speak Spanish well, and my previous tutor told me that as well.

For the majority, however, marks and their tutor's judgement, weighed against each other in varying proportions, were seen as complementary indicators providing an overall, balanced view of their achievements and performance.

However, especially for Group A learners, marks and feedback were not necessarily regarded as the sole indicators of progress. We have already suggested that beginners' responses to feedback are complex, requiring careful interpretation. The interviews revealed that the main aspiration for many students was to be able to interact effectively with other TL speakers. For them, alternative progress indicators – such as their capacity to understand the TL spoken at natural speed – seemed to be at least as relevant as assessment feedback, as in the following example:

Well I think I'm doing all right, I'm getting eighties in the assignments ... but because I'm able to actually go to France and measure those changes each time in my comfort and self-confidence in dealing with people, then yes, certainly in normal transactions, I would say I'm a hundred percent better, but in conversation I've still got a way to go because obviously, there's a lot more vocabulary involved there and a conversation starts in one direction and then it goes in many directions before the end.

Answers from Group A students often revealed an approach which involved setting evidence from marks and assessment feedback against that from aspects of their own performance (see Zimmerman, 2000, p. 21), in the above case experience of day-to-day transactions and conversations in the TL.

Figure 1 shows the different measures of achievement used by the three groups, and whether these measures were viewed positively, negatively or ambivalently. (Tree node 7.1)

<Insert Figure 1 here.>

It should also be noted that the notion of performance as a progress indicator was also adopted by other Group A learners who had few, if any, opportunities for interaction with native speakers: these students tended to focus on other evidence (e.g. improved listening skills and vocabulary retention), especially if they were less confident about their oral communication skills. This use of performance in combination with other measures of progress depends solely or largely on the student, and can therefore be regarded as an expression of self-regulation.

However, students with less language learning experience often felt the need for more reassurance or instant feedback from their tutor to give them the confidence to continue, given that their tolerance of ambiguity seemed limited, as this Group B student explains:

I record myself on the tape, but the thing is you haven't got anybody there to say to you: no, that's not right, say it this way, and yes, I do ... the assignments on the tape, but it's not the same as somebody there correcting you as you're doing it to yourself on that tape in between.

The difficulties described above reflect those encountered by many DL students. They arise partly from a lack of confidence in their ability to find solutions to learning or language problems, and perhaps also from a reluctance to see linguistic faults and the processes involved in their correction as an integral and necessary part of the learning process.

The responses of Group C students suggest that their negative perceptions of their performance, which fall short of their possibly unrealistic goals, cause them to doubt the value of feedback. On the other hand, they might regard feedback as a generally unreliable progress indicator, since it does not take into account their own overwhelming anxieties or doubts.

Is there a relationship between different perceptions of the role of feedback and confidence or motivation maintenance?

Tutor feedback and confidence

The findings in this section are based on analysis of data on students' confidence, firstly as language learners in general, and secondly on any perceived increase as the course progressed (Tree nodes 6.1 and 6.2); they do not include any direct quotation, because the differences in response between the three groups were more significant than the exact words used.

Figure 2 shows marked differences between the three groups in terms of confidence and increase in confidence.

<Insert Figure 2 here.>

As can be seen from Figure 2, Group A students were predominantly confident at the outset. The interviews revealed that this was derived from positive previous language learning experience, or (more frequently) confidence gained as learners in other subject areas, which they were able to draw on. They also reported that their confidence was increasing, fuelled by good assignment marks and feedback which encouraged them to take a positive view of their performance, as discussed in the previous section.

The results for Group B were very different. As the table shows, few of its members regarded themselves as confident learners per se. At the outset some derived confidence from their previous language learning experience (albeit not through DL). Those who did not feel confident and were able to offer reasons for this generally cited a fear of speaking. Where confidence within this group did increase as the course progressed, this was largely attributed, as in Group A, to their performance. However, half the group remained unconfident or ambivalent; for example, although their reading skills had developed well, they did not consider that the same applied to their oral skills.

All but one of Group C lacked confidence as language learners, based on previous negative experiences and, in some cases, fears surrounding aspects of language learning; in view of their doubts, anxieties and negative feelings about their learning on the course, it is no surprise that their confidence did not increase. In view of the findings in the previous sections we might speculate that a certain level of confidence may be a pre-condition for trusting feedback received.

Tutor feedback and motivation maintenance

As indicated earlier, OU tutors are encouraged to bear in mind the potential of feedback to support learners' motivation (which can also affect student retention). This obviously raises issues about the precise nature of the feedback that students

receive, and the extent to which it inspires ‘motivational thinking’ (Ushioda, 1996; 2001); whilst this is beyond the scope of the current paper, it may well constitute an area for follow-up research.

The relationship between motivation maintenance and retention cannot always be interpreted in terms of simple cause and effect: for instance, even the most highly motivated students may be forced to abandon DL courses because of increasing work, personal or family pressures. However, the extent to which students are prepared to persist in their learning does constitute an obvious motivation maintenance indicator. The measure of persistence used in this paper (successful completion of the next course, i.e. 2 years of continuous study) far exceeds what the University would define as successful retention, i.e. completion of students’ current course. We would, however, justify our measure of persistence as realistic – even if challenging – in view of the students’ own recognition that more than one year’s study would generally be required in order to achieve their goals (Node 3.4).

Table 1 summarises the outcomes in terms of persistence for each group according to approach to feedback.

<Insert Table 1 here.>

Whilst the overall figure of 18.6% may appear low, it needs to be borne in mind that only 42% of the overall sample (Node 3.4) had at the halfway stage in their course felt committed to continuing learning through DL, and that the completion rate for beginner courses in the OU is calculated at approximately 50%. The significant aspect from our perspective is the contrast in terms of persistence between the three groups, which appears to suggest a relationship between regarding feedback as a learning tool and persistence in pursuing language studies as a beginner.

It is interesting to note that although Group B students showed a higher completion rate on their beginner course, and were more likely to continue to the next level, those in Group A were almost twice as likely to complete the next level course successfully. This implies that there may be a link between students who attempt to maximise their benefit from feedback by using it as a learning opportunity, persistence and longer-term motivation maintenance. On the other hand, motivation maintenance seems to be relatively short-term in the case of students who simply see feedback as a judgement on their progress. As might be expected, completion and continuation rates were far lower in Group C.

Summary of findings

Interview responses suggest that learners fall into three groups: those who use feedback strategically as a learning tool (Group A); those for whom it is a progress indicator, but who do not use it strategically (Group B); and those who seem to make little constructive use of it because they are inhibited by doubts or anxieties (Group C).

In determining which learners constituted Group A we were looking for evidence of any learning strategy in their use of feedback, as proposed by Dörnyei (2005, p. 190): ‘the important thing about the proactive strategic learners is not necessarily the exact nature of the strategies... they apply, but rather the fact that they

do apply them. That is, what makes strategic learners special is not so much what they do as the fact that they choose to put creative effort into improving their own learning and that they have the capacity to do so.'

A further characteristic of Group A's approach to feedback is that it is predominantly positive, looking forward to the next task or assignment, as in Walker's concept of 'future gap-altering feedback'. By contrast, Group B's approach, whilst often no less positive, reflects primarily a retrospective gap-altering perspective; their response was frequently characterised by the mantra 'must try harder', rather than by any specific strategy for using feedback received. Group C's approach, on the other hand, was characterised primarily through affective factors – anxieties and/or doubts. Although aware of the feedback they receive, these emotions make it hard for them to give it credence.

The interviews revealed a spectrum of attitudes towards the function of assignment feedback as an indicator of progress. At one end of the spectrum were Group A learners striving to internalise the locus of control by using a range of progress indicators in addition to assignment marks and tutor feedback. By and large, these students were more tolerant of ambiguities, and saw the problems they encountered and linguistic faults as learning opportunities rather than barriers to progress. At the other end, some interviewees (Group C learners) seemed to regard assignment feedback as an unreliable indicator or extraneous to the learning process. The difficulties they encountered became insurmountable obstacles: they found it impossible to internalise the locus of control or increase their tolerance of ambiguity, perhaps because previously acquired attitudes towards learning and the learner's role inhibited their ability to seek solutions.

Our findings confirm the importance of the affective dimension in beginner MFL DL courses and suggest that students with high initial confidence levels tend to become successful long-term learners, as measured by completion rates for the TL course at the next level (see Table 1). We can conclude that confident MFL beginners (predominantly Group A) will probably be proactive in using feedback as a learning tool by analysing it and attempting to integrate it into the learning process. Positive feedback encourages these strategies, as well as boosting learners' confidence and creating a virtuous circle that spurs them on to greater achievements. At the other end of the scale are those in Group C whom we have designated as non-users of feedback, beset by doubts and anxieties which inhibit their learning. Their problems – real or imagined – might be soluble, but they fail to develop any coherent or systematic strategies to overcome them. This, in turn, undermines their confidence, creating a vicious circle in which their anxieties and doubts grow, further inhibiting their capacity to learn.

Perhaps surprisingly, the highest proportion of students completing the beginners' course was in Group B; however, a far higher proportion of Group A students persisted in their studies and successfully completed the next level course. This suggests a positive relationship between their approach to feedback as a learning tool and maintaining their motivation over a longer term. Not surprisingly, a far lower proportion of Group C students even completed the beginners' course, and only one student from this group went on to complete the next level course. Within Group C an

initially low level of confidence as learners, combined with an inability to benefit from feedback, prevented their initial motivation to learn from being sustained.

Their high dropout rate therefore comes as no surprise, but the fact that they comprise a quarter of those interviewed is a matter for concern. Assignment feedback is seen as a means of supporting students and providing individualised tuition, but it can only do so if students understand its purpose and are aware of its potential. This was clearly not the case so far as Group C students were concerned. This suggests that the attitudes and motivational factors affecting students in this group may warrant further investigation.

The characteristics of the three groups in relation to key concepts associated with feedback and used in this paper are summarised in Table 2.

<Insert Table 2 here.>

Conclusion and implications for further research

Let us first consider the practical implications of this study. Students' ability to use feedback effectively appears to be related to their confidence and persistence, their capacity to learn and, in the long term, their potential for achieving self-regulation. Students like those in Group A, who have a clear understanding of the relationship between feedback and learning, tend to be more confident and more likely to continue studying the TL once they have completed their beginners' course. However, students with less language learning experience or confidence as learners – like those in Groups B and C – may need further help.

Of these two groups, B presents fewer difficulties. These students are generally positive in attitude, but their repertoire of learning strategies is limited. Their lack of awareness of the learning opportunities provided by feedback suggests that they will need support if they are to achieve a degree of self-regulation as learners. Murphy (2005; 2007) describes a project in which MFL DL students were invited to carry out assignment-linked tasks designed to foster reflection on performance, needs, strengths and weaknesses, and encourage informed decision-making about what and how they learned. With careful integration into the course materials and assessment strategy, such tasks might well prove beneficial for Group B students (Murphy, 2008).

Interestingly, Murphy reports that only around a third of students took up the offer, a factor that may well be of relevance as we consider the problems of those in Group C, who are beset by attitudinal and affective problems that inhibit their ability to learn. These problems may not be immediately apparent to tutors, although they may explain, for instance, students' reluctance to attend tutorials, notwithstanding the opportunities that they offer for informal feedback (Nicolson & Adams, 2008). Affective problems (manifesting themselves as course-related doubts and anxiety), their perceptions of an external, immovable locus of control and their intolerance of ambiguity all combine to produce a paralysing effect that prevents them from overcoming obstacles to learning. Carefully considered and appropriately resourced measures to identify such students at an early stage and offer them additional support may well prove beneficial, but the provision of such help raises ethical, pedagogical and institutional issues (Simpson, 2006). What sort of training would tutors require?

How would tutor initiatives be integrated into the existing student support infrastructure? How would students react to being 'targeted' for further support: would they welcome it, or would they regard it as confirmation of their negative self-perceptions, even as an invasion of their privacy? Finally, could the allocation of potentially significant additional resources to enhance the learning experience and improve the retention rate of a relatively small group of MFL beginner distance learners be justified in the present financial climate? The nature and range of these questions are indicative of the complexity and scope of the issues surrounding students' perceptions and use of assessment feedback on beginners' MFL DL courses, and suggest some fruitful areas for future applied research.

Looking at the wider implications, our findings indicate that so far as MFL DL beginners are concerned, the question of how students view and use feedback is more complex and multifaceted than it may appear, encompassing both learning strategy and affective considerations. Macaro (2001, p. 28-29) has considered the dilemma surrounding the relationship between motivation and strategy use, but reaches no firm conclusion on the issue of whether increased motivation propitiates the use of more effective strategies, or whether the opposite is true. Our working hypothesis is that both of these cause and effect relationships were present in the sample we studied. This study represents an attempt to describe a motivational profile of beginner MFL distance learners in relation to assignment feedback. We focused on variables which appeared to us to exert a strong influence, namely their propensity to use feedback strategically and determine their own progress, as well as the affective dimension (as reflected in respondents' answers to the questions on confidence and motivation maintenance). We would not claim that these are the only variables, as there are almost certainly others which may be equally relevant and influential, but the range of issues we were able to explore in our study was limited. There is clearly scope here for further investigation to identify these additional variables and use them to study in more detail this type of learner.

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Appendix 1. Beginners distance language learners' study: mid-course interview questions (extract)

- 1 When you started you said that your main reason for studying on the course was [individualised, from questionnaire response]. Can you tell me more about that, what you had in mind?
- 2 How long do you think it might take you to achieve this?
- 3 (a) Have you attended tutorials?
(b) Have you received any other help from your tutor?
- 4 Do you get support from any other sources?
- 5 Of the types of help or support that you do get, which ones feel most important for you? (Why do you feel that?)
- 6 (a) Do you feel that you are confident as a language learner? (What makes you feel this?)
(b) Is your confidence increasing as the course goes on? (What or who do you think has contributed most to this?)
- 7 In terms of your progress on the course, how well do you think you are doing? (What makes you feel that?)

Appendix 2. Beginners distance language learners' study: tree-nodes and their sub-nodes (extract)

- (3) /Reasons for studying
- (3 4) /Reasons for studying/commitment to goal
- (5) /Support in LL
- (5 2) /Support in LL/other support
- (5 2 2) /Support in LL/other support/tutor feedback
- (5 3) /Support in LL/most important source of support
- (5 3 3) /Support in LL/most important source of support/TMA feedback
- (6) /Confidence
- (6 1) /Confidence/reasons for confidence
- (6 2) /Confidence/confidence increase
- (6 2 1) /Confidence/confidence increase/reasons for confidence increase
- (6 2 1 1) /Confidence/confidence increase/reasons for confidence increase/better performance
- (6 2 1 2) /Confidence/confidence increase/reasons for confidence increase/good marks
- (6 2 1 3) /Confidence/confidence increase/reasons for confidence increase/other
- (6 2 1 4) /Confidence/confidence increase/reasons for confidence increase/tutor feedback/support
- (7) /Progress
- (7 1) /Progress/reasons for perceived progress
- (7 1 1) /Progress/reasons for perceived progress/TMA results
- (7 1 2) /Progress/reasons for perceived progress/tutor feedback on TMAs
- (7 1 3) /Progress/reasons for perceived progress/tutorials
- (7 1 4) /Progress/reasons for perceived progress/communicating in the country
- (7 1 5) /Progress/reasons for perceived progress/other reasons for perceived progress

Figures and Tables

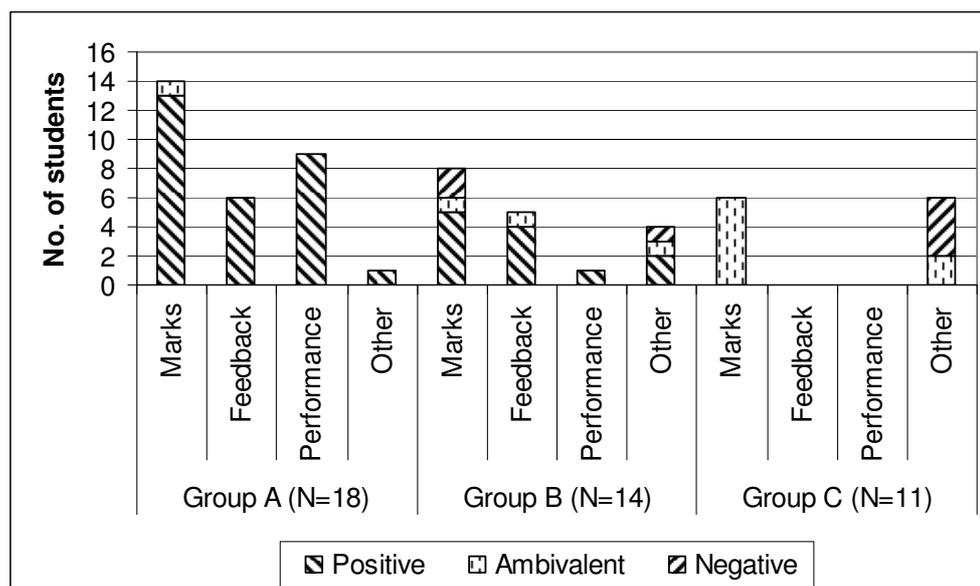


Figure 1. Measures of progress or achievement used by students

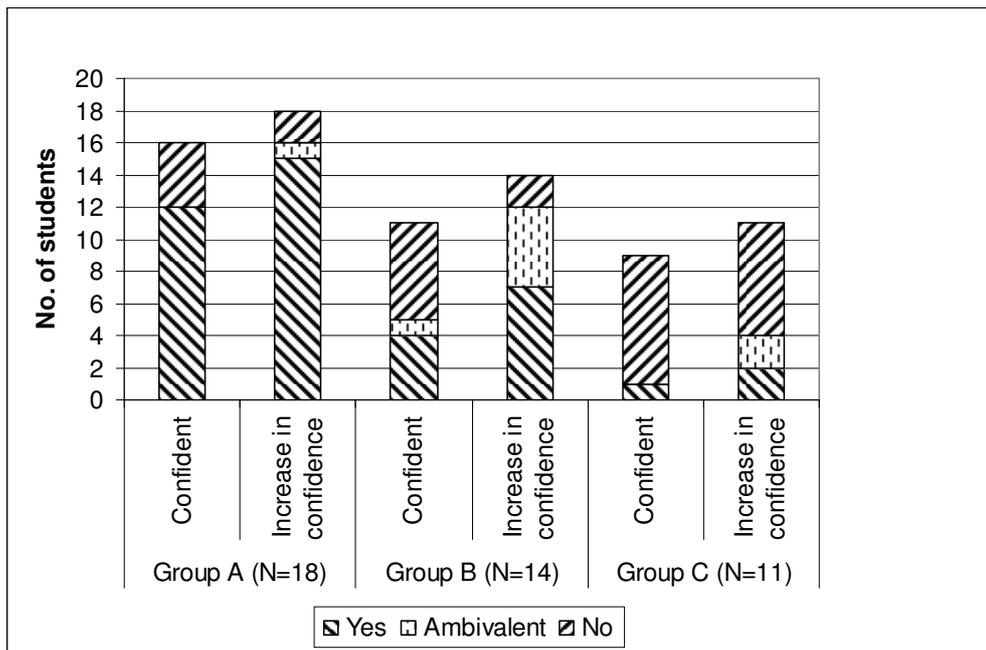


Figure 2. Student confidence as a language learner and increase in confidence during the course

Note:

The seven students who were beginners in any language were not asked to comment on confidence as language learners at the start of the course, but they were asked about any increase in confidence as the course progressed, hence the number of responses for the latter is greater.

Table 1. Motivation maintenance as reflected in completion and continuation rates

GROUP	Completed beginners' course	Continued to next level course	Completed next level course
A (N=18)	61.1%	44.4%	27.8%
B (N=14)	78.6%	57.1%	14.3%
C (N=11)	27.3%	9.09%	9.09%
Total (N=43)	58.1%	39.5%	18.6%

Note:

The data relate solely to language study with the OU at the time of the interview; data on any other languages studied subsequently with the OU are not included.

Table 2. Student perceptions of assignment feedback and the learning process

	Group A	Group B	Group C
Perceptions of feedback	Process-orientated approach with emphasis on future gap-altering: feedback used strategically as a learning tool	Product-orientated approach with emphasis on retrospective gap-altering: tutor's comments noted, but not used strategically.	No apparent notice taken of feedback
Feedback and learning	Proactive approach: feedback analysed and integrated into the learning process	Feedback not seen as integral part of learning process; no systematic analysis of tutor's comments	No apparent awareness of link between feedback and learning
External and internal feedback	External and internal feedback combined synergistically	Points of reference are external; little evidence of ability to generate internal feedback	No evidence of any ability to generate internal feedback
Tolerance of ambiguity	High: problems seldom impede progress	Moderate: problems can sometimes impede progress; little evidence of systematic approaches to solving them	Low: problems regularly halt progress
Perceptions of locus of control	Seen as moveable, and shifting from tutor to student	Seen as moveable, but need for it to shift to student not fully recognised	Seen as immovable; shift from tutor to student inconceivable