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# Distance language learners and learner support: beliefs, difficulties and use of strategies

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## Abstract

Evidence is mounting from a number of studies undertaken with groups of learners of all ages and all abilities that there is a particular factor common to successful language learners: strategic competence involving the use of appropriate learning strategies. The growing body of research into this area has not, however, had much to say so far about the special situation of those learning a language at a distance. Based on the findings of surveys and discussions carried out with students enrolled in the final year of the Diploma in French at the Open University, this paper investigates learner beliefs about learning a language at a distance, difficulties encountered, attitudes to learner support and the use of strategies. It concludes that metacognitive strategies may have an enhanced role for the learner of a language at a distance, but that further research is needed to determine more clearly the nature of this role, how metacognitive strategies relate to learner variables and the specific implications for learner autonomy, tutor support and course design.

**Key words:** Autonomy, Distance Learning, Language Learning Strategies, Metacognition.

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## 1. Introduction: distance language learning and its associated problems

The last decade has seen a rapid growth in the provision of distance learning courses covering a wide range of subjects and settings. There are now, for example, over 6,000 learners studying languages with the Open University UK (OU). To date, not much research has been undertaken which examines the nature of those courses or the difficulties experienced by distance language learners. Yet those of us who work with them are becoming increasingly aware of the particular strain that isolation, time pressures and conflicting priorities can cause. Moreover, those learning at a distance do not have the standard university infrastructure to call upon when in difficulty: teachers or language advisers on site, classes to go to, ready access to other students to compare notes or to ask for advice. To support them in their studies, each OU language student is assigned a tutor, and 2-3 hour group tutorials are scheduled roughly once a month. Students may choose to attend tutorials or the occasional dayschool set up in most regions for more intensive practice of the language, but are under no obligation to do so, and, if they live in remote areas, they may not even have the choice. They can always contact their tutor by phone, but there have to be limits placed on this kind of contact, and, moreover it does not suit everyone, particularly those who feel they need a face to talk to.

Distance language learners therefore need to be fairly autonomous at least in their attitude to learning already or, if not, be receptive to what it entails and be prepared to work hard at it early on, in the absence of face-to-face regular contact with a teacher. Those who are used to total dependence on a teacher will find learning by this mode extremely difficult and are likely to drop out if the road to autonomy is too painful. Ultimately, it is up to the learner in the first instance to be open to advice and willing to work with the support available.

Using the findings of two surveys and a focus group discussion carried out in 1998 with students following the Open University's third-stage French course L210: *Mises au point* (loosely translated as *fine-tuning*), this paper investigates learners' perceptions of distance language learning, specific difficulties encountered in learning at a distance and appropriate learning strategies to address them. It goes on to explore the extent of learners' readiness to develop strategic competence and what the implications might be for the teaching and learning process and for course design.

## 2. Learning strategies and the distance language learner

While there is now a significant body of research into learning strategies and the language learning process in standard learning contexts, there is little to be found which relates specifically to the experience of distance language learners. A previous survey, carried out by Schrafagnl and Fage in 1996 into the background, learning experience and strategies of first-stage Open Uni-

versity language students in the London Region noted this scarcity and concluded that "overall, in the field of open and distance language learning, a great deal of research remains to be done in order to identify what learning strategies are successful and for what kind of learner" (1998: 68).

A review of the literature on learning strategies gives an insight into the complexity of this area of research. Wenden (1991: 18) contends that "researchers in second language acquisition have not been able to come to a consensus regarding what a strategy is". While accepting that this is a controversial issue, Cohen maintains that "the element of consciousness is what distinguishes *strategies* from those processes that are not strategic" (1998: 4) and goes on to describe language learner strategies as constituting "the steps or actions consciously selected by learners either to improve the learning of a second language, the use of it, or both" (p. 5). Oxford (1990: 1) supports the involvement of 'self' in defining strategies, considering them as "especially important for language learning, because they are tools for active, self-directed involvement", and adds that if used appropriately, they "result in improved proficiency and greater self-confidence". Conscious selection and self-directed involvement, both features of strategies as described above, are also characteristics of an autonomous approach, and of general relevance, therefore, to the needs of distance language learners.

Learning strategies vary widely, however, and do not automatically divide up into distinct categories; hence the efforts by many researchers (Naiman et al., 1978; Oxford, 1990; O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Wenden, 1991) to differentiate them in order to understand better their role in language learning and how they can best be taught and transferred. O'Malley and Chamot (1990) classify strategies under three main headings: cognitive (applying a specific technique to a particular task, for example repeating, reasoning and analyzing), metacognitive (related to the learning process, for example organizing, planning and monitoring) and socio-affective (involving oneself and others, for example co-operating with peers, seeking clarification). They give a special emphasis to those classed as metacognitive, maintaining that "students without metacognitive approaches are essentially learners without direction or opportunity to plan their learning, monitor their progress, or review their accomplishments and future learning directions" (1990: 8).

The identification and classification of such approaches as metacognitive draws on Flavell (1976) who defines metacognition in terms of both skills and knowledge. Metacognitive *knowledge* is, in his view, "the knowledge concerning one's own cognitive processes and products or anything related to them" (p. 232) and metacognitive *skills* "the active monitoring and consequent regulation and orchestration of these processes" (p. 232). In relation to language learning, Victori and Lockhart (1995: 224) define metacognitive knowledge as "the general assumptions that students hold about themselves as learners, about factors influencing language learning and about the nature of language learning and teaching". Dickinson (1992),

highlights the skills aspect, and talks in terms of 'the executive', because the strategies involved in the application of metacognition are used "to manage or control the learning process" (p. 19). Both aspects would seem to be of particular relevance to distance language learners: (1) metacognitive knowledge because of the power of such knowledge to affect the learning process, a major consideration for those learning on their own; and (2) metacognitive skills because of their emphasis on planning, monitoring and control of learning. For distance learners, left to a large extent to their own devices, it could be that metacognitive knowledge and the development of metacognitive skills are not only an essential part of effective learning but also a pre-requisite to it.

### 3. The study

#### 3.1. *The Open University context*

The Centre for Modern Languages at the Open University was set up in 1991 to respond to an overwhelming demand for distance language courses. The first course L120 *Ouverture* for those at a lower intermediate level was presented in 1995. There are now three staged distance learning courses comprising a fully integrated mixed media package in both French and German, which lead to a Diploma. Work is in progress for a Spanish Diploma, which will be completed in 2001. The Diploma takes students to a level commensurate with the end of the second year of undergraduate study, and can be counted towards an OU BA or BSc degree. The academic year runs from February to October during which time students must submit compulsory assignments (TMAs), both written and oral on a regular basis, to be marked by their designated tutor. There is also a compulsory week-long Summer School which takes place at a French University in August. The result of the continuous assessment component plus an end-of-year examination held in October, together determine the final grade.

#### 3.2. *The subjects*

A random selection of 204 students from all parts of the UK following the French course L210: *Mises au point*, was made by the Open University's Institute of Educational Technology in February 1998, at the start of the academic year. The students taking part in the study were at the third and final stage of the French Diploma and could therefore be assumed to have already reached an advanced level of language proficiency. They would have acquired their language competence through study at school or in further or adult education, through following the previous two Open University French courses or through spells of living or working abroad.

We might reasonably assume that such learners would have developed

confidence in their ability to make progress, and would, moreover, have at their disposal a range of tried and tested strategies for effective language learning. Such assumptions in relation to distance language learners would be risky, however, for two possible reasons: (1) good levels of language proficiency do not necessarily go hand in hand with superior language learning skills: "it is perfectly possible for a learner to be advanced in the first sense, yet a beginner in the second, and vice-versa" (Riley, 1987: 75), and (2) the lack of pre-requisites to Open University language courses increases the likelihood of a very diverse set of learner styles and varying degrees of competence in learning. Moreover, the relationship between language competence and learning competence is complex, and must take account of individual variables, such as gender, age, previous learning experiences, motivation, attitude and personal beliefs about self-efficacy, all of which are significant factors in the language learning process.

### *3.3. Research questions and methods*

The present study was set up to investigate the following questions: (1) what use do students make of learner support as provided by the course materials and tutorials?; (2) what are their perceptions of the successful distance language learner and of themselves as language learners?; (3) what specific difficulties do they identify with regard to distance language learning?; 4) which strategies do they use to improve their own learning and to what extent are these gender-related?

The main research tools used to gather information for the study were two structured questionnaires and a focus group discussion. Two small pilot surveys conducted in 1997 helped to fine-tune and test the research methods. In conjunction with experts in questionnaire design from the Open University's Institute of Educational Technology (IET), the author revised and extended the questionnaires in order to improve clarity and to correspond more closely with the research questions.

The initial questionnaire<sup>1</sup> dispatched in February 1998 and which included multiple-choice and Lickert-scale type of questions, had the following aims:

- 1) obtain background information of the sample in terms of age, gender and previous study of French;
- 2) elicit preliminary impressions of the course and the usefulness of the various course components, including video documentary, audio resource material, audio activities and print material;
- 3) make a preliminary assessment of the degree of student readiness for autonomy by analyzing: (i) their attitude towards the learner support

1. Due to space limitations, the questionnaires are not included.

systems available: the Course Guide<sup>2</sup>, the *dossier*<sup>3</sup> and the tutorials; and (ii) their perceptions of the 'good distance language learner' and of themselves as language learners.

The second questionnaire was sent out in June 1998, four months into the course. Its major aims were to:

- 1) make a fuller investigation of the use made by students of the learner support provided by the course. In addition to the Course Guide and the *dossier*, other forms of support including the Language Learner's Good Study Guide, the Notes on Language and Style<sup>4</sup> and the booklets containing transcripts of all audio-visual material were analyzed;
- 2) investigate in more depth perceptions of the factors necessary for successful distance language learning;
- 3) elicit the difficulties experienced by learners with distance learning;
- 4) analyze the actual strategies used by students to address those difficulties and improve their learning. In the design of this study no differentiation was made between types of strategies, but these mostly included those classed as metacognitive, and to a lesser extent, cognitive.

The early questions relating to the course overall and to the course components in both surveys were included for course evaluation purposes only. The analysis of responses to these questions was not therefore included in this study.

The final stage involved a small focus group of eight volunteers who had taken part in both surveys, led by the author. The group met once for discussion in December after the end of the course, but before end-of-course results had been released. Students were sent a set of questions in advance, designed to stand as a basis for a more detailed face-to-face discussion on some of the points raised in the surveys.

### 3.4. Data analysis

Data from both surveys were analyzed by the author, in terms of frequency and percentage response, and in the case of the second questionnaire, with the help of a computerized statistical analysis program. The response rate was

2. A 24-page supplement which explains the content of the course, the assessment process and how to get the most from your studies.
3. To help in the development of strategy use, students are encouraged to develop a *dossier* which might take the form of an exercise book or loose-leaf folder, a card index or a file on computer, and in which students note down whatever they feel might be helpful to them in their learning. Students are given general advice on how to do this, initially in the Course Guide and then in sections entitled *dossier* throughout the course books, which gradually build up suggestions for developing a wide range of strategies.
4. Seven supplements, one to accompany each course book.

67.8% for the first questionnaire and 65.2% for the second. The open-ended sections in both questionnaires provided useful qualitative feedback which helped raise awareness of key issues, and provided concrete information on which to base further study. The focus group discussion allowed a different method of data collection and helped to clarify and extend information arising from the two surveys. It also acted as a forum for exchange of ideas, and enabled a clearer picture to emerge of the views, beliefs and needs of a group of language learners within a distance learning set-up.

In the following section, results from both surveys and the focus group discussion are presented together. For some variables a comparison of the data obtained from the two surveys is made with regard to those questions relating to the use of support materials, and to the "good distance language learner". A breakdown of percentages in terms of gender is also presented in relation to the questions in the second survey on the use of language learning strategies and learning through assessment.

#### 4. Major findings

##### *Learner variables, reasons for present study, preliminary impressions*

The sample of returned questionnaires contained 87 women and 51 men. Students were spread across all age ranges from 20-70+, with 28.9% in the 50-69 age range. 24.1% of women and 15.7% of men were in the 20-39 range. The first questionnaire revealed that 94.2% of the sample had studied French at school, of whom 39.1% had gained an advanced qualification (e.g., 'A' level or Scottish Highers, the level required for entry to most undergraduate programmes). 68.1% had studied French post-school in further, adult or higher education and 71.7% had studied both the first and second stage French courses. A few claimed to have gained proficiency solely through reading French books and magazines and listening to French radio. Some were clearly at the entry level expected. Others may also have reached a good standard through other means. It was interesting to note that 44.2% had already studied French in an independent context, for example using Linguaphone, Berlitz or BBC courses, although it can only suggest rather than prove that these students would have already developed some of the skills and strategies needed for learning a language at a distance. Nearly half the sample gave 'for pleasure' as the most important reason for studying the course, followed by 'to gain the Diploma' (26.8%). Only 4.3% gave 'work' as the most important reason. Further comments from students indicated strong francophile tendencies, for example wanting to live and/or work in France or to read in French about French life and culture. Keeping the mind active and gaining communication skills were other general reasons.

Although initial impressions of the course were extremely positive, open-ended comments revealed some anxiety over the amount of work to be covered in eight months and the need for strategies to cope with the pace in par-



ticular, but also with the absence of the classroom for regular oral interaction in the foreign language.

### *Attitudes to learner support*

Attitudes to support materials were investigated in both surveys, the first concentrating on the Course Guide and *dossier*, while the second covered all support materials. Figures were low for the Course Guide, with less than half (46.3%) of the participants in the first survey finding it extremely or very helpful. Some explained that in order to cope with an 'overwhelming' amount of material arriving all at the same time, they had to prioritize, and this meant, in many cases, choosing course books and audio-visual materials over supplements. The numbers responding positively were even lower for the Course Guide in the second survey (35.8%). While some considered it "necessary for distance learning", others clearly felt guides were superfluous: "By the third year students should know what to do"; "as I have always studied either at work or home, I am in the habit of studying and have evolved my own system". The transcripts of all the audio-visual material, on the other hand, were found by 87.6% of students to be indispensable or very valuable and 77.5% gave these same ratings for the Notes on Language and Style.

Learner support in terms of tutorials revealed quite diverse attitudes. Attendance was considered extremely important by 34.8% and very important by 26.8%. Only 1.1% thought that it was not important. Some students were very positive: "I think attendance should be compulsory in language courses. If a group has a very consistent attendance rate, the group 'gels' and is supportive of one another". Others found tutorials more useful for learning how to approach assessed tasks than for anything else: "Their main importance for me is the tips about how to tackle the assignments and the exam". Tutorials were clearly seen by many as a context for the development of socio-affective strategies to combat isolation and to practise oral skills, perceived as a major problem for distance language learners.

### *The 'good distance language learner': factors in successful distance language learning*

Perceptions of the characteristics of the 'good distance language learner' (see figure 1) in the first survey centred on being well-organized and having the ability to prioritize, which were identified by 90.6% of the whole sample, though only 44.2% and 48.6% respectively indicated that they could personally demonstrate these abilities. High motivation was also high up on the list of 'good distance language learner' characteristics (89.1%) followed by persistence (76.1%) and the ability to assess one's own language strengths and weaknesses (76.1%). 71% ticked 'ability to seek help' though only 42% felt they could actually do this. 65.2% considered it important to be willing to accept constructive criticism, with slightly more indicating that this also

Factors influencing learning	Survey 1		Survey 2
	You as a distance language learner	The good distance language learner	The good distance language learner
Being well-organised	90.6%	44.2%	84.4%
Self-confidence	44.2%	28.3%	96.7%
Enthusiasm/motivation	89.1%	65.2%	98.9%
Being self-aware and reflective	37%	31.2%	64.4%
Persistence	76.1%	60.1%	98.9%
Ability to assess own strengths and weaknesses	76.1%	53.6%	82.3%
Ability to seek help	71%	42%	82.2%
Willingness to accept constructive criticism	65.2%	65.9%	85.6%
Being good at taking the initiative	46.4%	24.6%	61.1%
Ability to prioritise	90.6%	48.6%	78.9%
Age*	—	—	43.3%
Gender*	—	—	11.1%
Intelligence*	—	—	82.2%
Knowledge of grammar in your own language*	—	—	88.9%
Ability to analyse*	—	—	72.2%
Ability to get on with others*	—	—	50%
Willingness to take risks*	—	—	86.7%
Other*	—	—	15.6%

\* These categories were added and surveyed in the second questionnaire only.

**Figure 1.** The good distance language learner (first and second survey results).

applied to them personally (65.9%). Being good at taking the initiative (46.4%), self-confidence (44.2%) and being self-aware and reflective (37%) were considered less important.

A comparison of the two columns in figure 1 gave a useful insight into learners' beliefs and perceptions about the characteristics of the "good distance language learner" and about their own self-efficacy as distance language learners. The gap between the 'good' distance language learner" (column 2) and the 'actual' distance language learner (column 1) is significant, particularly in relation to metacognitive skills. Organization and time-management, including prioritizing, represented a gap of over 40%; the ability to assess one's own strengths and weaknesses was slightly less at 22.5%. Being reflective, a key metacognitive process, was considered an important char-

acteristic by only just over a third of participants (37%) and even fewer reckoned that it described their own learning (31.2%). This was not as low, however, as the figure for taking the initiative (24.6%). Planning, organizing, self-monitoring, reflecting, all major metacognitive skills or processes were clearly not much in evidence at the start of the course for the sample overall. Students considered themselves to be highly motivated and persistent, yet their levels of confidence were low, and less than half (42%) felt able to ask for help.

In the second survey a question on factors relevant to successful distance language learning largely mirrored the 'good distance language learner' characteristics from the first survey, though there were some important additions, including age, gender, intelligence, analytical skills, knowledge of grammar in your own language, ability to get on with others and willingness to take risks. For all coincident factors, bar two—being well organized and the ability to prioritize—the figures from the second survey were considerably higher than those from the first, ranging from a 52.5% differential (self-confidence) to 6.2% (ability to assess own strengths and weaknesses). It is reasonable to conclude that students overall were beginning to develop a greater awareness of what was needed for effective language learning in terms of overall skills and attributes as they progressed through the course.

Motivation, persistence, self-confidence, knowledge of grammar in your own language and willingness to take risks attracted the highest percentage of responses for factors important to successful distance language learning. In terms of related strategies, the finding on motivation is reflected in a study of 1,200 American university students in which a self-report survey, SILL, the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (Oxford 1990), was used as the primary instrument, accompanied by a background questionnaire. This study concluded that "motivation was the single most important influence on learning strategy use" (Ehrman and Oxford, 1989i: 2). Gender was rated lowest at 11.1%, an interesting response given the findings from some studies (Carroll, 1985; Oxford, 1989) indicating that females make better language learners. Age, although rated second to last, nevertheless, attracted a significant 43.3% of the sample. In terms of metacognitive factors overall, being well-organized and being able to assess one's own strengths and weaknesses were rated high enough to be in the first half of the list (84.4%; 82.3%). Analytical and planning skills, reflectiveness and initiative were rated lower, although students were certainly more aware of their value midway through the course than they had been at the start.

Given that fewer and fewer British students are taught English grammar at school, the percentage for knowledge of grammar in their own language (88.9%) was high and confirms a view found among many language learners of all ages that grammar is the key to unlocking the mysteries of language learning. This sample was also not unusual in demonstrating another com-

monly held belief that ageing has a negative effect on learning (43.3%). Correcting inaccurate beliefs can be deemed a necessary pre-requisite to the teaching of good learning strategies. This involves "considering this knowledge which students themselves bring to the task of language learning and help(ing) learners modify it if it (their metacognitive knowledge) is potentially impeding their learning and their potential for autonomy" (Victori and Lockhart 1995: 225). It is a task which presents particular difficulties for all those involved in a distance learning set-up.

In the second survey 15.6% of students also contributed ideas of their own concerning factors influencing successful learning, which covered a wide range: good family support, opportunities for natural exposure to the language, having a goal in mind, opportunities to practise speaking and listening, having a structure and regulated study. Furthermore, when the focus group discussed whether specific skills, qualities or characteristics were needed by the successful distance language learner, students were unanimous on the following: "determination, high self-esteem, will-power, guts [...]". There was no room for 'weaklings', as they put it.

### *Difficulties for distance language learners*

On the process of distance language learning in the second survey, students were asked simply to tick 'yes' or 'no' as to whether they were experiencing any particular difficulties. Of the 90% who answered the question, 70% reported in the affirmative and 20% in the negative. Unsurprisingly, the main barriers were: 1) lack of time (46.7%), e.g., "difficult to pace work as well as fulfil family responsibilities", and 2) few opportunities for practice with others (46.7%), e.g., 'lack of spoken interaction is a problem'. Over a third of students found it hard to assess their own progress; a further 10% had difficulty asking for help, e.g. "I feel overwhelmed by all the material - it can be isolating".

### *The use of strategies*

In terms of strategy use overall in the second survey (see figure 2), the strategy cited most frequently, a cognitive one, was repeating words and phrases out loud (73.3%). This ties in with a study carried out by O'Malley and Chamot (1993) among beginner and intermediate students where 'both groups' were found to favour "repetition as the most frequently used strategy" (p. 80). Another frequently cited cognitive strategy was regular testing of vocabulary (60%). McDonough (1999) also highlights the importance of vocabulary strategies, which he reports as "central to all other language use situations" (p. 9). Other cognitive strategies used by students involved recording themselves speaking (35.6%), making notes as they watched or listened to recordings (28.9%) and keeping a log of all course-based activities that had been completed (17.8%).

Strategy	All students	Female students	Male students
Make lists of vocabulary and regularly test yourself	60%	58.9%	64.7%
Play word games/use mnemonics/make mind maps	10%	8.9%	11.8%
Note down vocabulary from French radio/TV/films	31.1%	28.6%	35.3%
Make notes as you listen/watch a recording to help concentration	28.9%	30.4%	23.5%
Repeat words and phrases out loud	73.3%	71.4%	70.6%
Record yourself speaking	35.6%	35.7%	35.3%
Use ideas from the <i>dossier</i> sections	40%	44.6%	35.3%
Create your own language exercises/activities	4.4%	5.4%	0%
Reflect on which learning techniques work best for you and make a point of reusing them	33.3%	32.1%	35.3%
Set your priorities for the day/week/month in terms of how much time you are going to spend, what you are going to do and what you intend to achieve	50%	57.1%	44.1%
Note down as you go along what language points are causing difficulty and ask for help	33.3%	33.9%	29.4%
Try to make use of any language practice opportunities that come your way	65.6%	46.4%	64.7%
Allow time for checking and double checking your TMAs before sending them off	61.1%	66.1%	55.9%
Keep a log of all course-based activities that have been completed	17.8%	23.2%	8.8%
Keep a separate diary of your progress	0%	0%	0%
Other ( <i>please specify</i> )	12.2%	10.7%	11.8%

Figure 2. Use of strategies.

In terms of metacognitive strategies, “allowing time for checking and double checking TMAs” was the strategy most frequently cited (60%). Half the sample set their priorities for study in advance and 40% used ideas from the *dossier* sections. A third ringed “noting down language points causing difficulty as you go along” and “reflecting on techniques which worked best for you”, a surprisingly low figure, but nonetheless one that ties in with results from the first survey which revealed that over a third of students (37%) perceived being self-aware and reflective as less important characteristics of the ‘good distance language learner’. A 0% return for keeping a progress diary was disappointing, if not unexpected, given that (1) students had not been specifically asked to do this, (2) 40% were already using ideas from the *dossier*, over 17% were keeping a log of all course-based activities that had been completed, and a third were regularly noting down as they went along the language points causing difficulty, and (3) students have severe constraints on their time and tend to favour familiar, well-trying

approaches. Nevertheless, given the research indicating how useful out of all 'log-type' documents a learner diary can be for fostering self-awareness and helping in the development of metacognitive behaviours, it might be prudent for course writers to reconsider how best to advise students on this particular strategy.

The 12.2% who cited 'other' strategies read French books, newspapers and magazines for extra practice. Some watched French films or listened to French radio. Others attended Adult Education classes. These could generally be classified under "try to make use of any language opportunities that come your way". Additional strategies included collecting cuttings from the French press, photocopying each book's grammar points to use when revising, and highlighting relevant vocabulary and language structures.

A breakdown of the percentage results by gender showed some similarity between each gender and the overall sample, but there were some notable differences between the genders (see figure 2). Men featured in greater numbers than women in six of the fifteen cognitive strategies by a percentage ranging from 18.3% (making use of language practice opportunities) to 2.9% (playing word games). Women outnumbered men for seven of the strategies by a percentage ranging from 14.4% (keeping a log of all completed course-based activities) to 4.5% (noting down the language points causing difficulty and asking for help). Figures were roughly the same for repeating words and phrases out loud and recording yourself speaking, the former placed top by both men and women and the latter around the middle by both sexes. Although there are similarities, the results of this study do not entirely reflect the findings from the previously mentioned survey carried out among 1,200 American university language students (Oxford and Nyikos, 1989 iii), which suggested that gender "had a profound effect on strategy choice" (p. 294) and found that in three out of five categories of strategy "females reported more frequent strategy use than males, while males reported no more frequent strategy use than females in *any* factor" (p. 295). While women in the OU survey did indeed report more frequent strategy use overall than men, this was not the case for each type of strategy. The one known factor which distinguishes the two studies is distance. This could suggest that distance learners use strategies in a different way.

An analysis by gender of the metacognitive strategies —setting priorities, managing time, reflecting— revealed that women outnumbered men in their use, except for reflecting, where the percentage difference was 3.2%. This ties in to a certain extent with another study investigating the language learning strategies of 79 adults (Oxford, Nyikos and Ehrman, 1988) which found that "women in the study exhibited greater use of self-management strategies, which involve taking charge of one's own learning through self-monitoring, self-evaluation, identifying goals, planning language tasks, and so on" (p. 325). In our study, women also showed a greater willingness to take it upon themselves to reach out to other students when it came to assessment problems. In answer to a question on what steps respondents took when a marked

TMA was returned, although figures were very low overall, men were more likely to contact their tutor for advice (8.8% of men; 3.6% of women), while women preferred to contact a fellow student for comparison and support (25% of women; 11.8% of men). An overwhelming majority of the whole sample (96.7%) checked their tutors' comments and followed the advice given. 14.7% of men and 8.9% of women, however, assumed that any language problems would sort themselves out in time.

The focus group who met at the end of the course and were asked to comment specifically on strategies to help them cope with the pace of the course and the development of speaking skills had some interesting ideas for prioritizing, including 'being selective' about the course book activities, i.e., not trying to do everything, and "using the unit objectives to focus efforts" (these appear at the start of each course book section under "key learning points"). They also advocated having a 'routine' in order to help with the pace of the course and "keeping going at all costs", even if this meant leaving things out, as opposed to systematically undertaking all suggested tasks and risking getting behind. There was general agreement too, that completing the monthly TMAs was essential to the learning process, and the group seemed to be suggesting assessment as a personal structuring device in learning. With regard to strategies for developing speaking skills, they considered that it was very much up to the learner to take the initiative, through becoming involved in self-help groups, attending conversation classes, going to French films or recording them off-air, having the car radio permanently tuned to French stations and reading French novels, magazines and newspapers. The week-long compulsory Summer School was seen as invaluable for improving speaking skills, given that it takes place at a French University and the only language of communication for a whole week is French.

Creating and using a *dossier* can reflect more than any other component of the course the degree to which learners are autonomous. The responses obtained in the second survey about its usefulness (see figure 3) showed that the highest readings were for reinforcement of what had been learned (68.9%), followed by as an aid to revision (67.8%). Some reported on more cognitive uses: developing vocabulary (66.7%) and style (41.1%), focusing on particular language structures (52.2%), improving accuracy (40%). Fewer students used it to develop metacognitive strategies: assessing language strengths and weaknesses (24.2%), improving study skills (21.1%), and gaining more control over learning (18.9%). The fact that lower numbers chose to use it for metacognitive purposes suggests that levels of autonomy are not as high as one might expect among distance learners, or conversely, it might suggest the opposite, that students are already autonomous in their approach to language learning and therefore have no need of additional support mechanisms.

The ratings for the *dossier* overall indicate, however, that for at least three-quarters of the sample it is of some benefit. However, when answering the

Use	Reasons	Most important reason
to reinforce what I have learned	68.9%	27.8%
to help me develop my vocabulary	66.7%	13.3%
to remind me of what I need to practise	58.9%	7.8%
to help me focus on particular language structures	52.2%	3.3%
to help me improve my style	41.1%	1.1%
to help me assess my language strengths and weaknesses	24.2%	4.4%
to help me improve my accuracy	40%	4.4%
to give me more control over my learning	18.9%	2.2%
to help me improve my study skills	21.1%	0%
to give me new ideas for solving specific language problems	28.9%	2.2%
to help me improve my pronunciation	10%	1.1%
as an aid to revision	67.8%	21.2%
other (please specify)	6.7%	3.3%

Figure 3. Use of the dossier.

question on strategies, only 40% of the sample claimed to actually use ideas from the *dossier* sections in the course books. Comments focused very heavily on the time factor: “Basically the ideas are excellent but I just don't have time”. Those who were good at prioritizing reported with confidence: “Probably because I am an advanced language learner I know what I want to achieve”. Negative reports indicated some frustration and feelings of inadequacy: “[...] too focused on an ideal learning situation, which seldom exists!”; “Lack of time to follow up suggestions —so they make me feel inadequate”. This supports a general view that “time pressures work against those experimenting with their learning strategies” (Murphy, 1998). The student who suggested that “the *dossier* needed to be organized before the start of the course (because) there is insufficient time during the course”, possibly summed up the situation for everyone.

Students tended to perceive the *dossier* as an optional extra, rather than as a key element in the development of effective learning strategies. This was confirmed in discussion with the focus group who found that it caused “additional stress”. This group also made a useful suggestion: that there should be a ‘sample *dossier*’ included in the course materials, which they could use as a model for their own if they so wished.

## 5. Discussion

The findings of this study are significant in terms of widening our knowledge base with regard to specific variables among distance language



learners, and identifying areas for further investigation. With regard to learner support, it was perhaps surprising to note the lack of reliance on guides, given the importance the course writers attach to these to inform and support students at a very early stage in their preparation for the course. Attitudes to the *dossier* were also disappointing, though the findings were not entirely unexpected, given the amount of course material to be covered in a relatively short space of time. Less surprising, given the particular situation of the distance language learner was the fact that 61.6% felt that tutorials were extremely or very important, and only 1.1% considered them unimportant.

Students taking part in the first survey had their own perceptions of the characteristics that might constitute the 'good distance language learner', particularly in terms of planning and prioritizing, though over half considered that they personally fell short of these skills. Being self-confident was not considered an important characteristic and certainly lack of confidence was very evident among students in the first survey. Findings from the second survey on perceptions of factors relevant to successful distant language learning indicate that the pattern had changed. Self-confidence was considered almost as important as motivation and persistence. Students were also more aware of metacognitive skills as important to learning at a distance and how these might help them to cope with the special difficulties of learning at a distance. It is useful to note that 54 of the 138 students who completed the open-ended sections in the second survey chose to comment on the improvements they felt they had made as language learners, many of which indicated increased metacognitive awareness and the use of metacognitive strategies. This ties in with Garner's contention that "to make an individual metacognitively aware is to ensure that the individual has learned how to learn" (1988). Comments indicated ways in which they felt they had improved: "more willing to take risks and make mistakes"; "better at prioritizing"; "much more aware of my grammatical faults"; "better organized"; "improved in ability to assess my own strengths and weaknesses and seek help"; "have increased self-confidence"; "have a better understanding of the need for commitment and persistence"; "better at time-management"; "more assertive in conversation" and, most impressive of all, "I now understand how to learn a language". Responses from the focus group confirmed that it was the responsibility of learners to organize ways of working and manage their own time. The tutor can "help but can't do it for you".

While there was some evidence to support other studies on gender-related use of strategies (Oxford & Nyikos, 1989; Bacon & Finneman, 1992), the findings did not indicate that women use all types of strategy more frequently than men. It is suggested that the element of distance might have some bearing on this and more detailed follow-up studies are needed to evaluate this hypothesis.

## 6. Implications for course writers and tutors

The majority of students who responded to the second survey (60%) firmly believed that they had become more effective learners during the course of their eight months of study. We were clearly doing something right, but which elements of the course helped to bring about these perceived improvements, particularly with regard to metacognitive skills, would need further investigation. The findings also suggest that we need to target our efforts more specifically towards the 40% who did not provide feedback through the open-ended sections. While there are numerous reasons why they might have remained silent, including probably lack of time, it is also highly probable that a number of them had not perceived any improvements and were among those who had not developed competence in the use of appropriate strategies.

The lesson to be learned for course writers and tutors is that language learners at a distance need to be shown more clearly and with more concrete examples why and how developing strategies, in particular metacognitive ones, can help promote more effective learning and by doing so, be time-saving rather than time-consuming in the long run. If this can be explicitly linked to language gains, in particular, improved oral skills which students find the most difficult to develop at a distance, reaction is likely to be more positive.

This is no easy task. Developing autonomy happens over time and "metacognitive skills cannot be simply taught, blanket-fashion" (Ridley, 1997: 66). Distance learners repeatedly tell us that their time is strictly limited. It is therefore understandable that they tend to prefer to use simple surface strategies that are aimed at reproduction of learning matter, and have quick, measurable results. We need to remind ourselves that the process is ongoing and that "we cannot make any assumptions or expectations about learners' willingness or ability to become autonomous learners" (Hurd, 1998: 222). We also need to be aware that metacognitive monitoring processes in particular can lead to an "overburdening of the cognitive apparatus and may therefore disturb the processing of information" (Scheumer, 1993: 8).

## 7. Conclusion

In classroom-based learning, much of the planning and prioritizing is carried out, at least initially, by the teacher on a regular basis. For the learners there is a structure, a support system and constant checks on learning that make it easier for them to cope. While there is a general consensus among leading researchers in the field (Brown and Palincsar, 1982; Wenden and Rubin, 1987; Oxford, 1990; Ridley, 1997) to support the claim by O'Malley and Chamot (1993: 105) that "individuals who take a more strategic approach learn more rapidly and effectively than individuals who do not",

it is the distance learners who are especially at risk if they fail to develop strategies that will help them to plan and monitor their work in the absence of regular classroom contact. A great deal of research needs to be undertaken to determine how to promote strategy development and strategy use among distance learners. The question of the degree of autonomy appropriate to individual distance learners also needs to be addressed. Total autonomy may well be counter-productive for those who may be "unused or unwilling to self-direct in other areas of their lives and who find it stressful, if not impossible, to relinquish the role of passive recipient in the teaching and learning process" (Hurd, 1998: 72). It is quite likely that some students do not want to develop skills that empower them to monitor, regulate and orchestrate their learning and prefer others to do that for them. If people choose to be dependent rather than autonomous in the ways they go about their daily life, why should they want to do the reverse when it comes to learning? Learners' beliefs and attitudes are highly relevant and cannot be ignored. As Oxford says (1990: 140), "The affective side of the learner is probably one of the very biggest influences on language learning success or failure".

A balance needs to be struck between a highly structured directive approach which provides short-term security, and a more flexible approach that includes some degree of negotiation and choice but can appear more risky to the learner. It is also important to bear in mind that "while students with a lower self-esteem are those most likely to have difficulty with independent learning, they are also the group most apt to choose distance education courses (out of false impressions that they are less demanding than classroom-based ones)" (Paul, 1990: 34). They may also be the most difficult group to reach. We must, however, endeavour to find out as much as we can about our learners in order to be in a position to target their needs and respond appropriately. Diversity and distance present particular problems and are a major challenge to all those working in distance language contexts.

A number of key questions arise which point to the need for further research: How can we best communicate to distance language learners the advantages of developing appropriate metacognitive strategies? Which strategies are best for which learners and at which point? Should strategies be an integral part of course book tasks or have a separate identity? Should we assess strategy use and, if so, how and when? And finally, bearing in mind the limitations of self-report measures: which research methods would most accurately and effectively yield this information?

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