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*S. Hurd*

*Dynamic role of distance language learner*

**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

**Towards a Better Understanding of the Dynamic role  
of the Distance Language Learner: Learner  
Perceptions of Personality, Motivation, Roles and  
Approaches**

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# **Towards a Better Understanding of the Dynamic role of the Distance Language Learner: Learner Perceptions of Personality, Motivation, Roles and Approaches**

This study investigated the experience of learners enrolled on an Open University (UK) French course, and included personality factors, motivation, and tutor and student roles. The data gathered from multiple elicitation methods gave useful insights into issues of special relevance to distance language education, in particular the lack of fit between an inherently social discipline such as language learning and the distance context whose main characterizing feature is remoteness from others. Motivation was seen to play a crucial role in success, along with tutor feedback, and personal responsibility for learning. Increased confidence and self-regulation were beneficial outcomes of the process of learning at a distance, and numerous suggestions for learning approaches, based on personal experience, were offered for language learners new to the distance setting. The study concluded that the task for distance practitioners is to build on the insights shown by learners themselves, in order to target support where it is most needed.

## **Introduction**

While distance education in general has attracted a great deal of research over many years (Gibson, 1998, Holmberg, 1986; Keegan, 1990; Lockwood, 1998; Moore, 1977; White, 2005), investigation into the distance learning of languages has really only taken off in the last decade. This could be attributed to the fact that languages were slow to join other subjects provided in distance settings. The Open University (UK), for example, did not present its first language course until 1995, some 25 years after it opened its doors to learners of other subjects. The recognition that languages are considered more difficult to learn in distance mode than other subjects (Sussex, 1991) and that distance language learners require a greater degree of self-regulation than learners of other subjects (White, 1994) contributed to a cautious approach. It is also true that learning in distance mode has always been seen as problematic for the acquisition, practice and assessment of foreign language speaking skills, given the physical absence of a teacher, the isolated context, and reduced opportunities for interacting in the target language.

Studies with distance language learners to date have investigated factors such as beliefs and expectations, learner support, feedback, critical reflection, autonomy and learning strategies (Harris, 2003; Hurd, 2000, 2003, 2005; Hurd et al., 2001; Murphy, 2005; Ros i Solé & Truman, 2005; White, 1995, 1999). Virtual learning environments and technology-mediated language learning are increasingly the subject of more recent studies (Hampel & Hauck, 2004; Shield, 2002). However, variables such as personality and affect, and their link with other variables have received less attention. It is now generally acknowledged that affective factors, in particular motivation, are critical to effective learning and often convincing predictors of language success or failure (Dörnyei 2001a; Oxford & Shearin, 1994; Ushioda 1996).

In relation to the distance language context, Hurd (2005, pp. 9) argues that the “perceived inadequacy of feedback, frustration at unresolved problems, and lack of opportunities to practise with others and share experiences can have an adverse effect on motivation levels”.

### **Theoretical Background**

Theories and models of personality and motivation in language learning, and the ways in which they relate to and influence each other have been discussed in the literature for some years. The interrelationships of personality and L2 learning have attracted a particular focus for researchers (Ehrman & Oxford, 1995; Lalonde & Gardner, 1984; Verhoeven & Vermeer, 2002). According to Dörnyei (2005, pp. 29) personality factors are “heavily implicated in the learning process in general and in SLA in particular”. They are generally seen to act as “powerful modifying variables” (pp. 24) which “shape the way people respond to their learning environment” (pp. 30). Motivation is regarded as subject to variation depending on situational and other factors. Gardner’s (1985) socio-educational model of language learning distinguishes between integrative motivation (wishing to integrate into the target culture) and instrumental motivation (desiring academic or work-related advancement), largely mirrored in Deci & Ryan’s (1985) model of intrinsic motivation (coming from within the individual) and extrinsic (coming from outside the individual). Ehrman et al. (2003, pp. 320) suggest that “a student’s total motivation is most frequently a combination of extrinsic and intrinsic motivation” and that it “depends greatly on the context, people involved and specific circumstances”. The link with other factors reflects the process model of motivation that has emerged more recently (Dörnyei, 2005, pp. 66) where motivation is seen as a “dynamic, ever-changing process” in

constant flux as it interrelates with other variables, such as personality, beliefs, attitudes and learning setting, and that these interrelationships are crucial to an understanding of the individual language learner experience. Dörnyei (2005, pp. 118) maintains that this paradigm shift characterised by an emphasis on process, on the “doing-side of personality”, has resulted in “an increased convergence of the concepts of personality and motivation, as both are now seen as antecedents of behaviour”.

The relationship between motivation, learner autonomy and success is also largely acknowledged by researchers in the field (Cotterall, 1995, 1999; Dickinson, 1995; Dörnyei, 2001b; Gardner & MacIntyre, 1993; Ushioda, 1996, White, 1999, 2003). Ushioda (1996, pp. 10) postulates that “motivation is now implicated in a dynamic relationship with learning experience and success” and that “autonomous language learners are by definition motivated learners” (pp. 12). In the case of the distance learner, motivation is directly implicated, given the demands of the distance setting and the need to persevere, sometimes against overwhelming odds. Both distance tutor and learner are engaged in a dynamic relationship at a distance, as the locus of control moves from one to the other, students increase their metacognitive awareness and skills; perceptions and behaviours evolve and change.

### **The Study**

This longitudinal study was part of a wider project investigating affective factors in the distance language setting and had four intervention points. Its aim was three-fold: to investigate learner perceptions of a variety of interrelated factors in the distance language learning context, including personality factors, motivation, and tutor and student roles; to ascertain any perceived beneficial changes in learning approach as

the course progressed; and to draw preliminary conclusions from the findings for distance language practitioners. The research questions were:

1. Which personality traits do students consider an advantage when learning another language at a distance?
2. What are distance language learners' perceptions of the role of motivation in distance language learning?
3. What are distance language learners' perceptions of the tutor's role and their own role in the distance learning process?
4. According to learners, does the process of distance language learning lead to better learning and if so, in what ways?

### *Participants*

The study involved 500 Open University (UK) students enrolled on the lower-intermediate French course L120 *Ouverture*. The course runs from February to October and learners are provided with three course books, each with related audio-visual material. The course books contain study charts, activities with answer keys (*Corrigés*), grammar explanations, learning strategies and study skills sections. Transcripts, and a course and study guide make up the package. Each student is assigned a tutor in her or his region who holds tutorials (18 hours overall) at regular intervals throughout the course, and the occasional day school. Neither is compulsory.

The sample for this study was drawn from all regions of the UK. Just over half the students fell into the 40-49 and 50-59 age groups, and 71% were female. 42.5% had a degree or professional equivalent and 13.3% had some post-school qualification; 24.9% had either basic or advanced school qualifications and 1.4% had no formal qualifications; the remaining 17.9% declined to give any information. The

majority of students (85.9%) cited “for pleasure/interest” as one of their reasons for learning French and over a fifth regarded it as their main motivation. 42.2% wanted to gain credits towards a qualification but only 8.8% considered this to be the most important reason for study. Other reasons high on the agenda were love of France, being able to communicate with French-speaking friends and the desire to speak another language. Their motivations, therefore, were largely intrinsic

### *Procedure and methods*

An initial pilot study was carried out in 2002 with 100 students of French studying *L120 Ouverture*, randomly selected by the Open University’s Institute of Educational Technology (IET). Research methods included one questionnaire and a set of end-of-course interviews. Following an analysis of the pilot, research questions and instruments were refined and adapted for use in the main study which was conducted with a new cohort of students studying the same course the following year.

The main study combined both quantitative and qualitative methods to investigate the language learner experience at a distance. Data collection methods were chosen according to their suitability for the distance learning context and for their ability to provide multiple insights. They included two questionnaires containing a variety of question types and sections for open-ended answers; audio-recorded think-aloud verbal protocols; and one-to-one telephone interviews. The Open University (UK)’s IET was called upon again to select a much larger sample consisting of 500 students from the 1,021 enrolled on *L120 Ouverture*. The first questionnaire (see Appendix 1) was dispatched in February at the start of their course, and the 277 who responded were sent a further questionnaire four months later, i.e. in June, halfway through their course (see Appendix 2), to which 145 responded. Four



volunteer students carried out the audio-recorded think-aloud verbal protocols in July, and 15 took part in the one-to-one semi-structured telephone interviews in December, after the end of the course.

The quantitative data from both questionnaires were analyzed using SPSS statistical software, backed up where appropriate by qualitative data from open-ended questions, the think-aloud protocols and the interviews. Most questions which required students to select from a range of options also contained an “other - please give details” option to allow for personal responses in addition to those provided in the list.

## **Findings**

### *Personality factors considered an advantage in distance language learning*

Personality factors were examined in both February and June. Students were asked first to tick from a list *all* the traits that they felt might be an advantage in distance language learning and then, in a separate column, the three that they considered most important. Given the maturity of the participants and their relatively high level of education, interpreting these traits was not considered to be problematic. The results for all traits are shown in rank order in Table 1:

### ***Place Table 1 about here***

Being motivated attracted the highest results overall by a large percentage in both questionnaires; “persistent” and “enthusiastic” also attracted very high scores. Moreover, these traits were also considered to be the three most important in both February and June. The rank order for the overall results was very similar at both

intervention points; with the main changes affecting “independent-minded” and “reflective” which both rose two places in June, and “relaxed” which fell three places.

Students were then asked to repeat this exercise, but this time selecting *all* the traits that described *themselves* as distance language learners, and then selecting the three traits they felt described them best. The results for all traits are presented in Table 2:

***Place Table 2 about here***

Being motivated, persistent and enthusiastic and systematic were again selected by the majority, both overall and for the three most important. The higher figure for “persistent” in June suggests that after four months of study, students were realizing just how much staying power was needed for distance language learning. Participants in June were also more willing to take risks and more reflective, both important attributes of the distance language learner. These contrasted with lower figures for “communicative”, “optimistic”, “relaxed” and “self-confident”, which suggest that a significant number of students were still in need of support to raise their confidence levels, to make them feel more positive and extend their risk-taking to the oral domain. Additional personality traits suggested by a small percentage of students under “other” were being goal-oriented, not easily discouraged, pragmatic, willing to try anything and having a good sense of humour.

#### *The role of motivation*

Motivation was clearly signalled as the most important factor in distance language learning by an overwhelming majority. To ascertain the relative ease or difficulty of

maintaining motivation at a distance at the start of the course and after four months of study, the following question was asked:

Do you think it is (Feb)/ Are you finding it (June) easier or more difficult to maintain motivation learning at a distance rather than in the classroom?

The results are shown in Figures 1 and 2:

*Place Figures 1 and 2 about here*

Only 7.9% of the students at the start of the course in February had anticipated finding motivation easier to maintain at a distance, which rose to 14.5% in June, with over a third claiming there was no difference. These figures could be explained by the fact that those who completed both questionnaires might have been more motivated students anyway. More important, however, is that halfway through the course nearly half of them were still finding it more difficult to maintain motivation at a distance than in the classroom.

The one-to-one interviews after the course had ended provided a set of qualitative findings based on the full eight months of study, which served to triangulate the predominantly quantitative data from the questionnaires. Eight of the 15 students interviewed claimed that it was more difficult to stay motivated at a distance, citing reasons such as getting side-tracked and finding other priorities, the pressure to sort out your own problems, lack of continuity in study, and insufficient conversational practice. Four felt it was easier or the same, because of prior experience of distance learning, more maturity as an adult learner or, from a more negative perspective, pressure of assessment. One comment raised an unexpected comparison with face-to-face learning:

It's got to be easier because there's none of the things that might worry you with face-to-face. Face-to-face means you get things coming at you in situations that you can't always get back straight away and that can be upsetting for some people. You probably feel that you're not terribly bright – it spells out your weakness in a way.

Comments from students taking part in the think-alouds added further qualitative data and reflected a degree of frustration, particularly with essay-writing:

... oh well, this is a very slow process this essay writing, because not only do I have to think what I want to say, and then I have to think how I want to say it in French. In a way I try to avoid saying it ... I don't want to write it in English and then translate it, but it's very difficult to know the approach. Or I get to the point where I think: Oh I won't bother. Or I just end up writing the same sentences in there and just changing a few words here and there. I dunno.

Two valuable comments from the think-alouds concerned the process of distance learning, which implied motivation or demotivation:

That's one advantage of remote teaching and remote studying ... no-one knows what you actually put, not even your tutor ... I can practise, I can write rubbish and I know no one is gonna mark it.

This is part of the problem of working remotely: by the time I see anybody I'll have forgotten it (what I needed to know).

Questionnaire 2 contained five additional questions on motivation to probe further its link with distance language learning after four months of study. The first two were:

If you are managing to stay motivated, to what would you attribute this?

If you are not managing to stay motivated to what would you attribute this?

In each case a list was provided for students to select one option, including “other - something or someone else (please give details)”. Two additional options were given in the second question: “the assessment content” and “the assessment deadlines”. The percentage results the first question ( $N = 111$ ) and for the second ( $N = 82$ ) are shown in Figure 3:

***Place Figure 3 about here***

The materials were considered as the most significant factor in maintaining motivation levels, but were also implicated by nearly a quarter in depressed motivation levels. The 38.7% whose motivation was attributed to “something or someone else” cited: the desire to complete (“I’ve started so I’ll finish!”); having done well in assignments so far and seeing progress; planning to live in France; imagining the end result; a combination of the materials, the tutor’s encouragement and determination; and for some, financial considerations.

The 42.1% who attributed *lack* of motivation to “something or someone else” cited: lack of time; finding it difficult to fit OU coursework in around other commitments; the mixed media aspect of the course; other distractions; the lack of interaction with other students; and lack of space to shut oneself off to study. Others

laid the blame on themselves exclusively: “myself”; “my own fault!”; “my personality and home circumstances”. Over a fifth were demotivated by assessment deadlines.

The remaining three questions concerned fluctuation of motivation levels; wanting to give up; and personal ways of keeping motivated. Over half admitted to fluctuation in motivation levels, and around a quarter to wanting to give up the course at some point. 76 students (52.4%) had developed ways of keeping themselves motivated, as shown in Figure 4 (frequency indicates number of students:  $N = 76$ ):

*Place Figure 4 about here*

The most important was positive self-talk, followed by setting goals, and keeping in touch with French native-speaker friends. While opportunities to speak French kept many students motivated, reading was also popular, but watching French films and listening to or singing French songs were, perhaps surprisingly, not selected by anyone as the most important way of staying motivated. The six students who had “other” ways suggested: remembering the main reasons for taking L120; trying to stay in touch with fellow students; using a rewards system; and French conversation classes for extra practice.

### *Tutor roles*

Given the importance attached to the teacher as a critical factor in successful learning (Frantzen & Magnan, 2005; White, 2003), students were asked in Questionnaire 1 in February at the start of the course to give their view of the tutor’s role in distance language learning by choosing and ranking three roles from a list. The same question

was repeated in June but with additional items, and students were asked to select only one as the most important role. The results for June are shown in Table 3:

***Place Table 3 about here***

“Provide feedback” was selected by the highest percentage on both occasions. “Monitor and assess my learning progress” and “identify my problems as a learner” were high on the list of important roles in February, but less so in June, where “keep me motivated” and “correct my mistakes” were considered more important. Clearly, direct comparisons cannot be made between the February and June results as there were three additional questions in June. These results do, however, give an indication of students’ thinking on this topic and an idea of how this might have changed over four months of study.

*Student roles*

The need for distance learners to “regulate and oversee the rate and direction of their learning to a far greater degree than classroom learners” (White, 1994, pp. 12-13) implies a change in the balance of traditional responsibilities and roles. How learners in this study saw their own role in the learning process was examined using a similar approach to that used to investigate tutor roles. Students were asked in both questionnaires to select the all roles which, in their view, were the responsibility of the learner. The roles that attracted the highest numbers overall were the same in both questionnaires, but with higher percentages in June and prioritized slightly differently, as shown in Table 4. Although “ask for help when needed” was considered quite an important student role in February, it slipped to 11<sup>th</sup> place in June, ranked several

places lower than using French as often as possible and working hard and systematically.

*Place Table 4 about here*

Students were then asked to select the three they considered most important in February and the one they considered most important in June. Figure 5 gives the results for June (frequency indicates number of students:  $N = 141$ ):

*Place Figure 5 about here*

What came through strongly from the results at both intervention points was the importance students gave to being responsible for their own learning. Over a quarter in June chose it as the most important role, and nearly half in February chose it as one of the three most important. Other items that were also ranked highly on each occasion were “work hard and systematically”; “use French as often as possible”; and “do tutor-marked assignments (TMAs) with care and hand them in on time”. It would seem that, even at the start of their course, many students had a good degree of awareness of learner roles in distance language learning. It was equally important that they develop the skills of self-management implied by these roles. Later questions were designed to investigate the extent to which this was the case.

*Tutorial and other forms of “people” support*

With regard to tutorials, the majority were attending. Of those 118 students, 85.6% were finding them very helpful or helpful and only 6.8% were finding them not very or not at all helpful. 27 students gave their reasons for non-attendance which included: clashes with work/family/domestic commitments; distance from centre; cost of travel



and transport difficulties; living abroad; being in prison; time constraints; ill-health and age.

The Open University (UK) promotes actively the setting up of self-help groups for mutual support among students. Participants were therefore asked in February whether they had joined or would like to join a self-help group. 49.5% answered “Yes”. However, by June when the question was repeated, only 6.5% had actually joined one. Reasons for not joining included not wishing to commit and be “tied down”, lack of anyone prepared to set it up; lack of time; geographical distance; impossibility of finding a time to suit everyone. Some cited lack of confidence; age and disability also featured. Other forms of people support were friends and work colleagues who had some competence in French, neighbours with a degree in French and/or who taught French, and above all, family members: partners, children and parents.

#### *Becoming a better distance language learner*

The study aimed to find out whether the process of learning a language at a distance was in any way influencing learning effectiveness. The following question was asked in June:

Do you feel that through studying L120 *Ouverture* you are learning to develop better approaches to learning a language?

71% (103 students) said that they were. This was probed further in a follow-up question:

If Yes, cross all the boxes that are relevant in column (a) and one box only in column (b) to indicate the way in which you feel you have improved most through studying the course so far.

The results are shown in Table 5.

*Place Table 5 about here*

Increased confidence and greater awareness of strengths and weaknesses were signalled as the most significant changes by nearly two thirds of the sample. Worrying less about making mistakes when speaking, and greater willingness to participate in conversation were also in the top five for improved approaches to learning overall, but selected as the most important by only a small percentage. These were positive results on the whole, although managing anxiety was very low down the list and not a single student chose it as most important.

The 15 interviewees backed up some of the ideas above, including increased confidence and risk-taking, better organization and time management, and added some more of their own:

It certainly helped enthusiasm-wise.

I've certainly become more selective or clearer about what I think I want to do for myself and what I feel helps me.

I think perhaps being able to focus a bit better.

It made me a lot more courageous.

I basically learnt how to learn a language; that was one of the things I got out of it really – apart from the language itself. I actually learnt that you just have to give it a go really and usually it's not so bad.

A recognition that the style of learning appropriate for learning a language is not necessarily the same as the one used for other types of learning ...

The final question in this section of Questionnaire 2 asked students to point to anything in particular which they felt had helped them to become a better distance language learner. The results based on the 120 students who answered were as follows in rank order:

- Being persistent and determined to succeed in the language goals I have set myself (34.2%)
- Making more of an effort because I am learning a language for and by myself (30.8%)
- Having to rely more on myself to improve my language proficiency (16.7%)
- Having to develop skills to cope with fitting language learning around other commitments (10.8%)
- Realising that I can make good decisions for myself about my language study (4.2%)
- Needing to prove to others that I can be successful at languages (2.5%)

These results gave further evidence of increased self-reliance and growing autonomy among the majority of students. To ascertain further the degree to which students were becoming more self-aware and knowledgeable about effective learning approaches, the yoked-subject procedure (White, 1994), in which students are asked to put themselves in the place of a new learner, was used for the final question:

A friend of yours who has never learned a language at a distance before is intending to study L120 next year. What are the three main pieces of advice you could give to help him/her get the most out of the course?

The response was extremely high: 141 students (97.2%) offered their thoughts, and most gave three pieces of advice. The results are too extensive to reproduce in full; a selection of statements has therefore been drawn together under nine general headings:

*Getting prepared:* “Get up to scratch before you start and get used to listening to French.”

*Self-knowledge:* “Think carefully about what you want to learn and what you want to achieve”; “Ask what your motivation is: is it strong enough to carry you through the course when the going gets tough?”

*Learning approaches:* “Pace yourself and try to do little and often”; “Take risks in both TMAs and tutorials – better to try out a new phrase and have it corrected than repeat one you know is correct (or you will learn nothing)”

*Making the most of support:* “Make sure you attend tutorials for support from tutor and other students for listening and speaking practice, boosting confidence, for face to face practice and helpful pointers”

*Reassurance: do's and don'ts:* “Be patient, it does take some time to accustom yourself back into learning”; “Don’t think you are the only one having difficulties keeping up to date, everyone else is behind. Remember – ‘mid-course crisis’ (m.c.c.) is normal”

*Organisation and time management:* “Ensure you’re able to put aside time on a regular basis; cramming is ineffective in language learning”; “Make your own timetable that fits your lifestyle”

*Motivation:* “Give yourself rewards for completing sections”; “Be positive and enjoy the course”

*Language practice opportunities:* “Listen to the language at every opportunity – even if you don’t understand it all, the sound and rhythm of the language will be helpful”; Speak French as often as possible with other Francophiles; it helps to overcome nerves/embarrassment”

*Being realistic:* “It’s more difficult than you think to get the studying done”; “Allow time for contingencies, holidays etc.”

The same question was adapted for the interviews to take account of the fact that students had now completed the course. Comments largely reinforced those from the questionnaires and included staying positive and reflecting on just how much you have learned - “It is far too easy to focus upon what you can’t do”; using the videos and CDs for oral practice; being clear about aims and goals; taking every opportunity for speaking - “You’ve just got to be able to jump in with both feet and think well, sod the consequences, here goes”; efficient use of time; effort; dogged perseverance - “You just have to keep ploughing on somehow”; being focused on what you are doing; persistence, patience, tenacity and determination - “You do have to keep going over and over some things to get them into your head”; having an open mind, being flexible and believing in yourself.

## **Discussion**

The data gathered from this study using both quantitative and qualitative methods gave a comprehensive picture of language learning in a distance context from the perspective of the actual learner. Multiple elicitation methods used at different intervention points during the year helped to triangulate the data and increase the reliability of the responses.

The findings for being motivated, persistent, enthusiastic and systematic as traits advantageous to distance language learners reflected good levels of self-awareness. Interestingly, the bottom three personality traits in both February and June - “extrovert”, “perfectionist” and “introvert” - did not correspond with findings from other studies with face-to-face learners, where extroversion, at least in terms of oral skills, is considered to be an advantage (Dewaele & Furnham, 1999).

The student perspective on motivation as the key factor in successful learning echoed the general consensus among researchers described earlier. Over half admitted to fluctuation in motivation levels, reflecting Garcia’s view (1999, pp. 231) that “one of the prime characteristics of motivation is that it ebbs and flows”. The importance of tutor feedback, which emerged as considerably more important than any other tutor role, was in line with White’s contention (2003, pp. 187) that “feedback plays a critical role for distance language learners, not only as a response to their performance, but also as a means of providing support, encouragement and motivation to continue”.

In terms of their own roles as learners, the fact that four months into the course being responsible for their own learning was considered by over a quarter of respondents to be the most important role that they should take on was evidence of

greater self-regulation. This was further reinforced in the post-course interviews where comments supported higher levels of metacognitive awareness as well as improved self-management. These results reflect those of other studies which note evidence of metacognitive growth among advanced distance language learners (Hurd, 2000) and from “novice” self-instructed language learners (White, 1999).

Roughly three quarters of respondents felt that they had improved their learning approaches through the process of learning a language at a distance. In some cases, learners who were used to a highly dependent way of learning found themselves taking a fresh look at learning approaches, becoming more self-aware and acquiring new skills, for example, in self-monitoring and reflection, planning and prioritizing, self-discipline and taking responsibility. These shifting perceptions and evolving approaches were evidence of “dynamic individuals within the distance learning experience” (White, 2005, pp. 171), with clear insights into the all the elements that make up the distance language process, including the roles of tutor and student.

Virtually all participants had some advice for new learners, ranging from the need for advance preparation, both mental and practical, to adopting appropriate learning approaches, grabbing all practice opportunities and making the most of support of all kinds. Students were very clear about the need to be organized and stick to a timetable, many of them having learned from their own failure to plan and be realistic. In the affective domain, there was much helpful advice on staying motivated and adopting a reflective attitude, recognizing that anxiety and panic were common and that you were not alone, and focusing on the enjoyment and fun of learning a language.

However, it is important to bear in mind that the demographic make-up of this random sample included 47% who had previously taken an Open University (UK) course and could therefore be considered to have a reasonable knowledge of the requirements of distance learning, although not necessarily in relation to the specific demands of language learning. The age range - around two thirds over 40 - could be an additional contributory factor to the relatively high levels of metacognitive awareness and skills that students demonstrated and developed as the course progressed. These largely positive results should also not obscure the fact that although at the start of the course, intrinsic motivation was the main driver for learning a language, nearly half the students in June were still finding it hard to maintain motivation levels. Moreover, 11.8% did not feel they were developing better approaches and the 17.2% who did not answer this question are likely to have also been among this group.

Given the importance of being and staying motivated when learning a language at a distance, a fruitful avenue for further research would be a more detailed exploration of the elements of motivation specific to distance language learning, in order to provide more targeted support to those who need it. The evidence of a correlation between motivation and achievement with face-to-face learners would also argue for the inclusion of achievement measures in future studies with distance language learners. Other future directions could involve follow-up in terms of individual case studies to correlate specific results by student and thus be able to track individual metacognitive and affective development throughout the course. As White (2005, pp. 170) contends: "... there is still much work to be done in terms of understanding attitudinal and affective orientations to the development of self-knowledge".



## **Conclusion**

The outcomes of the study extend our knowledge of the roles and interrelationships of key variables in a discipline whose specific features mark it out as very different from other subjects taught at a distance, in particular the mismatch between the inherently social nature of languages and the essentially solo mode of learning. As such it makes a valuable contribution to the distance education field. Useful insights were obtained from both the quantitative results and from individual student comments into the ways in which as distance language providers and teachers, we could improve our support in the affective domain, given its potential to influence how efficiently students can use the skills and assets that they have (Ehrman, 1996).

As distance learning institutions reach out increasingly to the young and to under-represented sections of the community, it becomes even more incumbent on distance practitioners to take steps to ensure that the needs of all learners in a rapidly changing learning environment are being met. White (2003, pp. 118) rightly warns that “understanding the dynamics of distance learner characteristics has profound implications not only for the design of courses and learner support, but for the individual distance language teacher”. The challenging task for all distance language practitioners is to engage not only in the general debates around the distance learner, but to focus in particular on the elements specific to language learning, how these impact on the learner at a distance and how best they can be addressed. Listening attentively to learners is an important first step.

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Appendix 1

**Learning a language at a distance**

**L120 Questionnaire 1, February 2003** (questions relating to personality factors, motivation, tutor and student roles)

*Personality factors*

Listed below are a number of different personality traits which might be an advantage when learning a foreign language at a distance.

- i) In the first column please cross all that you think apply to **all** distance language learners.
- ii) In the second column please put a cross against the three you think are the most important.
- iii) In the third column, please put a cross against all the personality traits that describe **you** as a distance language learner.
- iv) In the fourth column cross the three traits which you think describe **you** best.

	<i>All distance language learners</i>		<i>You as a distance language learner</i>	
	(i) All that apply	(ii) 3 most important	(iii) All that apply	(iv) 3 most important
Extrovert.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Introvert.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Perfectionist.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Willing to take risks.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Imaginative.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Persistent.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Relaxed.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Reflective.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Self-confident.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Motivated.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Optimistic.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Enthusiastic.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Systematic....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Independent-minded...	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Patient.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Communicative.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<i>(please give details)</i>				

*Motivation*

Do you think it is easier or more difficult to maintain motivation when you learn at a distance rather than in the classroom?

Easier.....	<input type="checkbox"/>
More difficult.....	<input type="checkbox"/>
No difference.....	<input type="checkbox"/>

At this stage, do you have any ideas about how to keep yourself motivated as you begin to study L120? Please list them here.

*Tutor's role*



What would you say is the tutor's role in distance language learning?

Rank the three most important to you by placing a

1 in the box beside the most important

2 in the box beside the next most important

3 in the box beside the third most important

Provide good models of speaking and writing in French .....	<input type="checkbox"/>
Correct my mistakes.....	<input type="checkbox"/>
Help me to become a better language learner.....	<input type="checkbox"/>
Provide feedback.....	<input type="checkbox"/>
Identify my problems as a learner and correct them.....	<input type="checkbox"/>
Monitor and assess my learning progress.....	<input type="checkbox"/>
Keep me motivated.....	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other ( <i>please give details</i> ).....	<input type="checkbox"/>

*Your role*

What would you say is your role as a distance language learner?

Cross **all** that apply in column **(a)**, and cross the **three** most important in column **(b)**.

Work hard and systematically.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Plan my work.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Do TMAs with care and hand them in on time.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Turn up for exams.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Be responsible for my own learning.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Use French as often as possible.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Seek out opportunities to speak French.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Learn how to cope with speaking French in front of others.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Make a full contribution in tutorials.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Keep a check on my progress.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Ask for help when needed.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Try out different strategies for successful language learning.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Keep an open mind.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Keep going even when I make mistakes.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Act on tutor feedback.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Take time to reflect on how I might improve.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Use my own initiative.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other ( <i>please give details</i> ).....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

**(a)**  
All

**(b) (cross 3 only)**  
Most important

Have you been to a tutorial yet?

Yes	No
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

If Yes, please say how helpful you found the tutorial

	Very helpful	Helpful	Neither helpful nor unhelpful	Not very helpful	Not at all helpful
( <i>Cross one box only</i> ).....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

If you are not attending tutorials, please say why

Have you joined, or would you like to join a self-help group?

Yes

No

Appendix 2

**L120 Questionnaire 2, June 2003 (additional questions)**

*Motivation*

If you are managing to stay motivated, to what would you attribute this?  
 (Please cross one box only)

The materials .....	<input type="checkbox"/>
Your tutor.....	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other students.....	<input type="checkbox"/>
Something or someone else ( <i>please give details</i> ).....	<input type="checkbox"/>

If you are not managing to stay motivated, to what would you attribute this?  
 (Please cross one box only)

The materials .....	<input type="checkbox"/>
Your tutor.....	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other students.....	<input type="checkbox"/>
The assessment content.....	<input type="checkbox"/>
The assessment deadlines.....	<input type="checkbox"/>
Something or someone else ( <i>please give details</i> ).....	<input type="checkbox"/>

Has your motivation fluctuated so far during the course?

Yes	No
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

If **Yes**, please give details

Have you at any point wanted to give up studying L120 *Ouverture*?

Yes	No
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

If **Yes**, please say why

Have you developed any particular ways to keep yourself motivated throughout your study of L120 *Ouverture*?

Yes	No
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

If you answered **Yes**, to the previous questions please cross **all** that apply in column **(a)** and cross the **one** most important in column **(b)**.

**(a)** All      **(b)** Most Important

		<b>(cross <u>one</u> only)</b>
Keeping in touch with French native-speaker friends.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Listening to French news on the radio or watching it on the TV.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Watching French films.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Reading French – newspaper articles, extracts from novels, poems, etc.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Listening to or singing French songs.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Talking in French to friends.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Talking in French to relatives, including children or grandchildren.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Visiting France as often as possible.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Keeping up to date with what’s going in France and the French-speaking world.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Setting goals and keeping them under review.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Positive self-talk (e.g. some bits of the course are bound to be more difficult than others; I shall be so pleased if I stick it out/I shall be disappointed with myself if I give up now; I really enjoyed the video activities in Book 1 and there will be more of them, etc.).....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other ( <i>please give details</i> ).....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

*Becoming a better distance language learner*

Do you feel that through studying L120 *Ouverture* you are learning to develop better approaches to learning a language?

Yes       No

If **Yes**, cross **all** the boxes that are relevant in column **(a)** and **one** box only in column **(b)** to indicate the way in which you feel you have improved most through studying the course so far.

	<b>(a)</b>	<b>(b) Most Important</b>
	All	<b>(cross <u>one</u> only)</b>
I feel more confident about using the language.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I am better at prioritising.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I am better organised.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I manage my time better.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I am more aware of my strengths and weaknesses.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I am more self-aware.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I am less dependent on my tutor.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I am more willing to participate in conversation.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I worry less about making mistakes when speaking.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I am more willing to take risks.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I am more willing to ask for help.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I manage my anxiety better.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I am more willing to try out suggested strategies for more effective learning.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I feel more confident about trying out my own strategies to help me learn better.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other ( <i>please give details</i> ).....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Can you point to anything in particular that you feel has helped you to become a better distance language learner? (*Please cross one box only.*)

Having to rely more on myself to improve my language proficiency...

- Realising that I can make good decisions for myself about my language study.....
- Making more of an effort because I am learning a language for and by myself.....
- Having to develop skills to cope with fitting language learning around other commitments.....
- Needing to prove to others that I can be successful at languages.....
- Being persistent and determined to succeed in the language goals I have set myself.....
- Other (*Please specify*).....

*Getting help from other people*

Have you joined a self-help group?

Yes       No

If **Yes**, in what way is it helpful to you as a distance language learner?

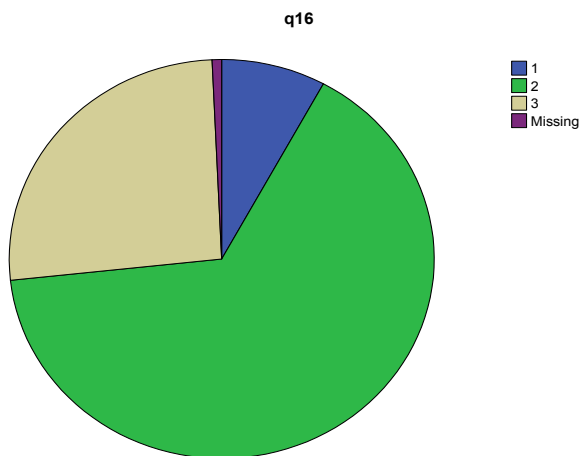
If **No**, is this because

- You didn't feel it would be useful.....
- There wasn't an established one in your area.....
- You did not want to set one up yourself.....
- Other(*please give details*).....

Is there anybody else (family, friends, other students) from whom you have sought help? (*Please give details*)

A friend of yours who has never learned a language at a distance before is intending to study L120 next year. What are the three main pieces of advice you could give to help him/her get the most out of the course?

Figure 1. Maintaining motivation (February)



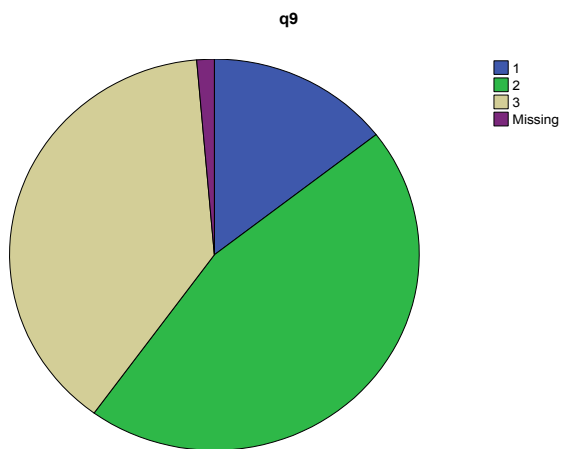
1 = easier (7.9%)

2 = more difficult (65.3%)

3 = no difference (26.0%)

4 = missing (0.7%)

Figure 2. Maintaining motivation (June)



1 = easier (14.5%)

2 = more difficult (45.5%)

3 = no difference (38.6%)

4 = missing (1.4%)

Figure 3. Elements influencing motivation (June): column 1 (positive influence); column 2 (negative influence)

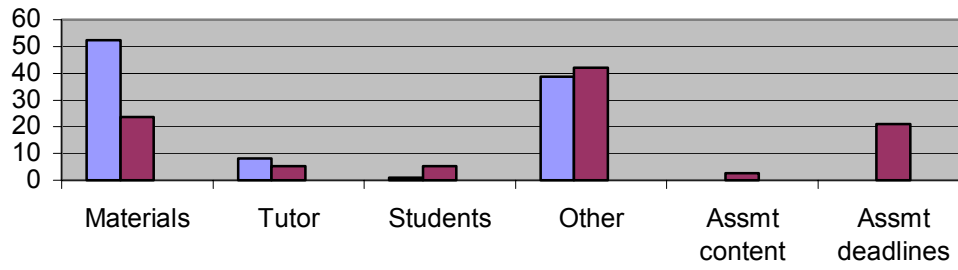
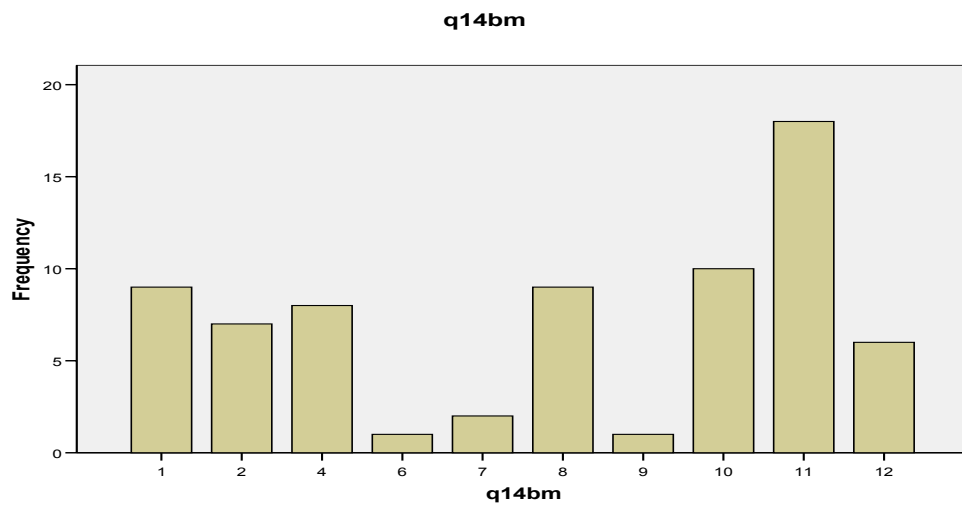




Figure 4. Ways to stay motivated (June)



1 = keeping in touch with French native-speaker friends (12.7%)

2 = listening to French news on the radio or watching it on the TV (9.9%);

3 = watching French films (0%);

4 = reading French – newspaper articles, extracts from novels, poems, etc. (11.3%);

5 = listening to or singing French songs (0%);

6 = talking in French to friends (1.4%);

7 = talking in French to relatives, including children or grandchildren (2.8%)

8 = visiting France as much as possible (12.7%);

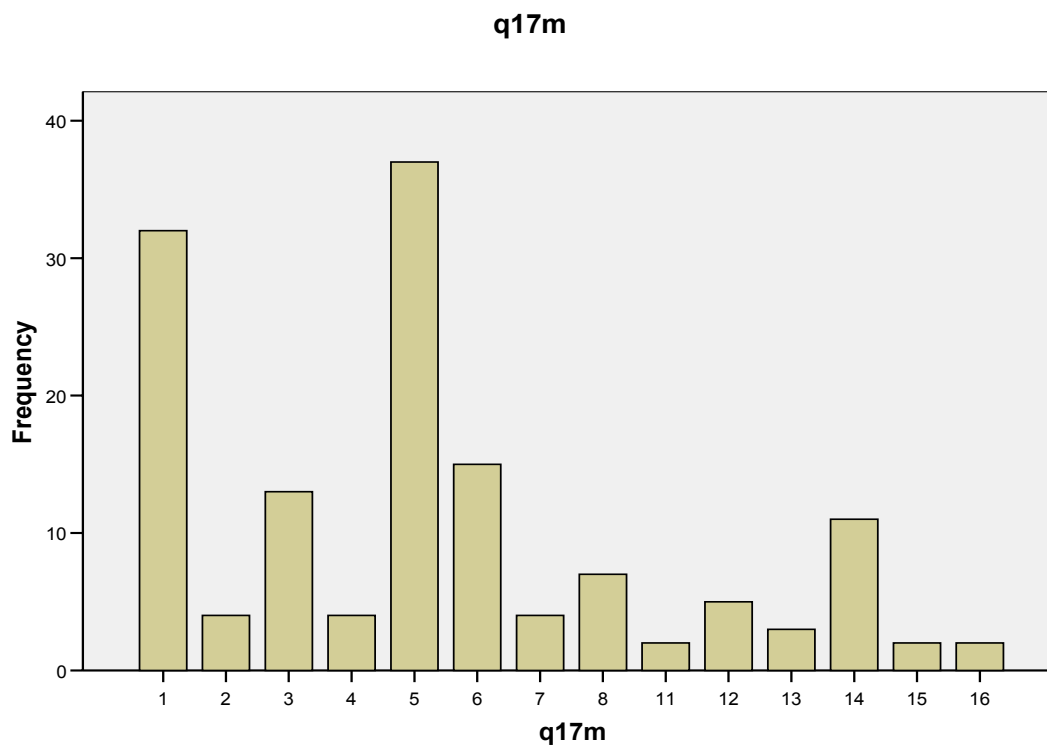
9 = keeping up to date with what's going on in France and the French-speaking world (1.4%);

10 = setting goals and keeping them under review (14.1%);

11 = positive self-talk (25.4%);

12 = other (8.5%).

Figure 5. Most important student roles (June)



1 = Work hard and systematically (22.1%);

2 = Plan my work (2.8%);

3 = Do TMAs with care and hand them in on time (9.0%);

4 = Turn up for exams (2.8%);

5 = Be responsible for my own learning (25.5%);

6 = Use French as often as possible (10.3%);

7 = Seek out opportunities to speak French (2.8%);

8 = Learn how to cope with speaking French in front of others (4.8%);

9 = Make a full contribution in tutorials (0%);

10 = Keep a check on my progress (0%);

11 = Ask for help when needed (1.4%);

12 = Try out different strategies for successful language learning (3.4%);

13 = Keep an open mind (2.1%);

14 = Keep going even when I make mistakes (7.6%);

15 = Act on tutor feedback (1.4%);

16 = Take time to reflect on how I might improve (1.4%);

17 = Use my own initiative (0%);

18 = Other (please give details) (0%).

Table 1. Personality traits considered to be an advantage for all distance language learners

	%		%	
	<b>February</b>		<b>June</b>	
Motivated	89.9	1	93.8%	1
Enthusiastic	84.5	2	81.4	3
Persistent	81.9	3	88.3	2
Systematic	75.8	4	73.1	4
Self-confident	67.9	5	64.8	5
Communicative	67.1	6	59.3	6
Willing to take risks	57.4	7	55.9	7
Patient	55.2	8	53.1	8
Imaginative	46.6	9	50.3	9
Relaxed	45.5	10	39.3	13
Optimistic	44.8	11	41.4	11
Independent-minded	44.4	12	44.8	10
Reflective	29.2	13	41.4	11
Extrovert	28.5	14	25.5	14
Perfectionist	17.0	15	9.7	15
Introvert	6.1	16	4.8	16
Other	2.2	17	1.4	17

Table 2. Personality traits selected by participants to describe themselves as distance language learners

	%		%	
	<b>February</b>		<b>June</b>	
Motivated	83.8	1	72.4	1
Enthusiastic	74.0	2	63.4	3
Persistent	61.0	3	66.9	2
Communicative	53.4	4	42.1	9
Independent-minded	51.6	5	59.3	4
Systematic	50.2	6	45.5	7
Optimistic	49.8	7	39.3	10
Willing to take risks	46.6	8	48.3	5
Imaginative	42.6	9	45.5	7
Patient	39.7	10	36.6	11
Self-confident	39.7	10	33.8	13
Relaxed	37.5	12	36.6	11
Reflective	37.2	13	46.9	6
Perfectionist	30.3	14	29.7	14
Extrovert	22.0	15	16.6	16
Introvert	20.2	16	25.5	15
Other	2.5	17	1.4	17

Table 3. Tutor roles (June)

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	1	19	13.1	13.4	13.4
	2	1	.7	.7	14.1
	4	22	15.2	15.5	29.6
	5	12	8.3	8.5	38.0
	<b>6</b>	<b>41</b>	<b>28.3</b>	<b>28.9</b>	66.9
	7	11	7.6	7.7	74.6
	8	11	7.6	7.7	82.4
	9	11	7.6	7.7	90.1
	10	14	9.7	9.9	100.0
	Total	142	97.9	100.0	
Missing	System	3	2.1		
Total		145	100.0		

1 = Provide good models of speaking and writing in French (13.4%);

2 = Tell me how long I should spend on activities (0.7%);

3 = Set my learning goals (0%);

4 = Create opportunities for me to practise (15.5%);

5 = Correct my mistakes (8.5%);

6 = Provide feedback (28.9%);

7 = Monitor and assess my learning progress (7.7%);

8 = Identify my problems as a learner and correct them (7.7%);

9 = Help me to become a better language learner (7.7%);

10 = Keep me motivated (9.9%);

11 = Other (please give details) (0%).

Table 4. Student roles

Student role	%		%	
	Quest 1 (Feb)		Quest 2 (June)	
Do tutor-marked assignments (TMAs) with care and hand them in on time	92.1	(1)	92.4	(3)
Act on tutor feedback	89.9	(2)	90.3	(4)
Be responsible for my own learning	88.8	(3)	93.1	(1)
Keep going even if I make mistakes	88.1	(4)	93.1	(1)
Ask for help when needed	87.0	(5)	75.9	(11)
Use French as often as possible	84.1	(6)	85.5	(5)
Turn up for exams	83.8	(7)	85.5	(5)
Seek out opportunities to speak French	61.6	(8)	80.0	(8)
Work hard and systematically	78.7	(9)	82.1	(7)
Use my own initiative	78.3	(10)	79.3	(9)
Learn how to cope with speaking French in front of others	77.3	(11)	77.9	(10)
Plan my work	75.5	(12)	69.7	(13)
Make a full contribution in tutorials	72.2	(13)	73.8	(12)
Take time to reflect on how I might improve	71.8	(14)	67.6	(14)
Keep a check on my progress	68.6	(15)	66.2	(16)
Keep an open mind	65.3	(16)	67.6	(14)
Try out different strategies for successful language learning	59.9	(17)	55.9	(17)
Other ( <i>please give details</i> )	1.8	(18)	1.4	(18)

Table 5. Better approaches to learning (June)

	% <b>All</b>		% <b>Most important</b>	
I feel more confident about using the language	51.7	1	42.0	1
I am more aware of my strengths and weaknesses	45.4	2	20.0	2
I am more willing to participate in conversation	34.5	3	6.0	4
I am more willing to take risks	31.0	4	2.0	9
I worry less about making mistakes when speaking	29.7	5	9.0	3
I am more willing to try out suggested strategies for more effective learning	24.8	6	5.0	5
I am better organised	22.8	7	3.0	7
I manage my time better	20.7	8	4.0	6
I feel more confident about trying out my own strategies to help me learn better	20.0	9	3.0	7
I am more self-aware	16.6	10	2.0	9
I am better at prioritising	15.9	11	0	13
I am less dependent on my tutor	13.8	12	0	13
I am more willing to ask for help	10.3	13	2.0	9
I manage my anxiety better	7.6	14	0	13
Other ( <i>please give details</i> )	2.1	15	2.0	9