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## Managing and supporting language learners in open and distance learning environments

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# Managing and Supporting Language Learners in Open and Distance Learning Environments

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## **1 Introduction**

This chapter explores the nature of support for the language learner within the context of open and distance learning. It argues that, in order to be in a position to advise and support appropriately and effectively, it is necessary to address the many variables that exist in any body of learners, including beliefs and attitudes, styles and strategies, and to take these into account when designing a course for distance learners.

Preliminary work in this area is reported through the findings of a study into the beliefs, strategies and attitudes to support carried out with a group of Open University (OU) students of French. Finally, it is proposed that if we are to promote an autonomous approach to distance language learning, we need to extend our research into the kinds of strategies that prove particularly effective in this context, and the links that these may have with other learner variables. Tutors and course writers should also embrace the potential of the Internet to advise and support distance learners on-line, to offer new opportunities for knowledge gathering and language practice, and to encourage mutual support.

## **2 The context of open and distance learning**

Language learning can take place anywhere: in the more formal confines of a classroom, at home in your own time, or through living in the country where the target language is spoken. While many adults prefer the more secure environment of the classroom, increasing numbers find that this is not a realistic option. Falling into this category are likely to be (1) those who live in geographically remote areas and are therefore unable to attend classes and (2) those whose time is severely limited by family and work commitments and therefore seek more flexible learning methods. A third group can be considered to be distance learners through volition, in that they actively choose this method for a variety of reasons: they may have had negative experiences of learning, prefer the flexibility that distance learning can offer, and feel that working away from the watchful eye of the teacher, in your own time and at your own pace, is less stressful and potentially more enjoyable.

None of these groups could be said to have a particular advantage or disadvantage in terms of their learning environment. Other factors are likely, however, to have an impact on their learning, and these will include individual beliefs about language learning, together with attitudes and expectations with regard to personal achievement. While such learner variables need to be taken into account in the planning of any programme, it is perhaps even more important for course writers and tutors working in distance learning environments to be mindful of their powerful role in the learning process. It is easier in face-to-face classroom settings to get to know your learners and respond appropriately to their needs. At a distance, the task is a great deal more complex and places particular demands on all those involved.

The materials, therefore, play a central role in all open and distance learning environments as the *teaching voice*, the link between teacher and learner. In other words they must carry out all the functions of a teacher in a more conventional setting. Rowntree (1990:11) sums these up as: 'guiding, motivating, intriguing, expounding, explaining, provoking, reminding, asking questions, discussing alternative answers, appraising each learner's progress, and giving appropriate remedial help.' Particular attention needs to be paid to the design of print materials, both academic and visual, so that they are easy to follow and attractive to work with. Above all, they must be well structured with clear aims and learning outcomes, unambiguous instructions and effective navigational aids. Activities need to be sequenced very carefully so that they provide steady progression and ensure variety in the medium used (video, audio, print, CD-Rom, on-line), in the skill being practised (reading, listening, writing, speaking, translating, interpreting), in the input of grammar (when, where, how much), and in the type of activity proposed (long and demanding or short and snappy, conventional or creative, closed or open-ended). While print-based materials are likely to be the structuring force of the course, it is equally important that materials for other media are carefully designed to integrate with the rest of the course, so that the finished product is a coherent whole with a transparent structure.

This does not imply rigidity of approach. Good distance learning materials provide room for flexible interpretation of the writers' intentions, and the opportunity to

choose personal pathways towards assessed outcomes. This is likely to happen anyway in an environment where learners are out of the immediate *control* of their tutors and can adopt their own preferred approach. But it is something that should be anticipated and planned for positively, in recognition of the diversity of learning needs and styles, and the desirability for learners to construct their own learning and take responsibility for their own learning actions. Promoting autonomy in terms of encouraging and giving legitimacy to learner choice should be at the heart of any design of distance materials.

### 3 The nature of learner support

How can those involved in the writing or tutorial support of distance language courses best support their learners? It is a task which presents many challenges and for which there are no easy or obvious ways to respond. No assumptions can be made about types of learner, learning styles or individual preferences. The teaching voice needs to *speak* to learners of all types and be capable of appealing to any and every learner. The tone must be straightforward, without being restrictive or patronising. Distance learners are adults with experience and competence in a variety of fields and will be looking for varying degrees of support. Many lack confidence about their ability to reach the desired levels of proficiency in a second language and need the security of an authority voice. Others dislike being told what to do and prefer to be left to their own devices. All distance learners, however, need constant encouragement, and regular opportunities to reflect on their own learning and develop the capacity for self-direction. Without such opportunities, their learning is likely to be less effective.

Learner support falls into two main categories: print-based (with occasional back-up on audio for pronunciation practice) and person-based. Print-based will cover all materials designed specifically to support the learner, which will include course and study guides to support the learning process, study charts to help in planning, key learning points, self-assessment activities or checklists, and bilingual instructions in the initial stages. Careful sequencing of activities with *organisers* which tell the student what she or he is about to do and why (see Figure 1), clearly numbered step-by-step instructions, vocabulary lists and cultural notes, answer keys or models for open-ended activities, also form part of the structure of learner support. In addition,

supplements aimed at specific features of learning (for example, grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation) can greatly assist in the diagnosis of weak areas, and provide appropriate remedial activities.

Dans l'activité qui suit, vous allez vous concentrer sur des aspects précis du documentaire. Les notes que vous allez prendre vous seront utiles pour l'activité 8.<sup>1</sup>

(Open University, 1997: 6)

Figure 1 Example of an organiser

In terms of person-support, OU students may seek general guidance from Student Services who operate regionally and have staff who are trained to advise on a range of issues concerning academic study. In addition, all students have access to a designated tutor who holds monthly tutorials, and most regions offer the occasional day school. Students are also strongly encouraged to set up or join existing self-help groups for mutual support and extra practice. *Mises au point*, the third French course, has sections in the course books entitled *Boîtes à idées* which give suggestions for further practice suitable for use in self-help groups (see Figure 2). The compulsory weeklong residential summer school for all students at second and third level is perhaps the most effective means for students to gain confidence in their speaking ability with the support of their tutors and fellow students. There is, therefore, a great deal of support available. However, the degree of support needed varies enormously from student to student, and students must be free to take advantage of it or not, according to their own volition.

Pour travailler votre prononciation et votre intonation, relisez le poème en changeant le ton de votre lecture. Vous pouvez exprimer des émotions différentes comme la colère, la peur, l'enthousiasme ou le mépris. Par exemple, relisez le poème à la manière de quelqu'un qui:

- a horreur de la mer (c'est très pollué);
- ne sait pas nager et traverse la Manche en canoë au cours d'une tempête;
- adore la mer, la plongée sous-marine.<sup>2</sup>

(Open University, 1997b: 38)

Figure 2 Example of a boîte à idée

The role of tutors should not be underestimated. As well as being competent professionals in all aspects of teaching and learning, including the use of all technologies old and new, they must be prepared to treat students as individuals and

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respond appropriately to the heterogeneity present in any language group. This point is well stated by Little and Singleton (1989: 32-3): ‘The expertise required of the teacher is no longer confined to the target language system but embraces the analysis of learners’ needs and interests, [...], the stimulation and monitoring of learners’ interaction with target language texts and with one another, advice on the selection of input materials, and counselling on various aspects of the learning process.’

In addition to the more practical aspects, the most effective support that tutors can give will include concrete ideas and strategies for developing learner autonomy. And this is no easy task: ‘Autonomous language learning makes particular demands on the language teacher for it involves not just knowledge of its theoretical and practical possibilities and limits, but also an awareness of what it is to be a good language learner, the metacognitive strategies needed to reach this state and how to transfer such knowledge to the learner’ (Hurd 1998: 227). Learners need to be shown how to reflect on their own learning styles and strategies, to become self-aware, in order to be in a position to take an active part in their own learning. A major part of the tutor’s task, then, is to enable students to develop appropriate learning strategies that will lead to increased autonomy and more effective outcomes.

#### 4 Learner beliefs and attitudes

According to Oxford (1990: 140), ‘the affective side of the learner is probably one of the very biggest influences on language learning success or failure’, a view widely held by researchers in the field, many of whom would go as far as to say that core beliefs underlie all attitudes, motivation and strategies. Stern (1987: xii), reminds us that ‘adult learners are active, task-oriented, and approach their language learning with certain assumptions and beliefs which have a bearing on the way they tackle new language.’ Bandura (1986: 235) considers personal beliefs about self-efficacy as a proximal cause of success or failure and writes with Zimmerman (1994: 859) of ‘the magnitude of the contribution of self-processes to academic achievement.’ It is important, therefore, to take account of the power of learners’ beliefs and attitudes in the design and delivery of any language programme.

Distance learners, for whom learner independence is a defining characteristic, present a particular problem for those trying to investigate individually held beliefs. Not only are they physically remote for most or all of their learning, and therefore difficult to access, but they may also dislike any attempt to interrogate them on what might be regarded as personal matters, such as beliefs and attitudes. This is likely to be particularly the case with those who are learning at a distance from personal preference, rather than because there is no other option. Among them will be a range of learner-types, from the super-confident to the shy and tentative. Paul (1990: 34) warns us 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.’ Such students fall into the category likely to need the most help and to benefit from some degree of tutor intervention, while at the same time shying away from it. Others, unaccustomed to reflection and self-analysis, may have considerable difficulty in providing answers to questions about beliefs, perceptions, assumptions and attitudes. As Ridley says (1997: 8): ‘we cannot take for granted that learners will have already reflected on their learning, nor can we assume that all learners can articulate their thoughts.’ It is crucial, nevertheless, that those involved in distance set-ups endeavour to find ways of getting to know as much as possible about their learners’ beliefs in order to be in a position to target their needs and respond appropriately. ‘Investigation of learner beliefs, it is argued, should enable teachers to assess their learners “readiness” for autonomy, and then determine appropriate support for each learner’ (Cotterall 1995: 196).

## 5 Learning styles and strategies

The beliefs that learners hold are likely to be mirrored in their approach to learning and their learning style. Keefe (1979: 4) defines learning styles as ‘cognitive, affective and psychological traits that are relatively stable indicators of how learners perceive, interact with, and respond to the learning environments.’ Esch (1976: 973-75) cites the work of Pask in identifying two basic types of learners: *serialists* who prefer the lock-step approach and *holists* who prefer to immerse themselves in the language and try to engage with native speakers right from the beginning, however meagre their language skills. She warns that ‘if you impose on learners the strategy which does not correspond to their ‘type’, they do not learn properly and do not retain what they have

learnt.’ Spolsky (1989: 110) also contends that ‘learning is best when the learning opportunity matches the learner’s preference.’

Learning strategies also vary widely and do not automatically divide up into distinct categories, hence the efforts by many researchers (Naiman et al 1978; Oxford 1990; O’Malley and 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 analysing) metacognitive (related to the learning process, for example organising, planning and monitoring) and socio-affective (involving oneself and others, for example co-operating with peers, seeking clarification).

However, ‘strategies are not good or bad in themselves, but they are only as good or bad as the use that is made of them’ (Mozzon-McPherson 2000). For those learning in open and distance contexts, metacognitive strategies would, nevertheless, seem to have special significance. Drawing on Flavell’s (1976: 232) definition of metacognition, which covers both knowledge and skills of particular relevance to language learners, 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 (1992:19) 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.’ Open and distance language learners need to develop such skills in order to become effective learners and be in a better position to make the most of the range of opportunities open to them. O’Malley and Chamot (1990: 8, 216) make the point strongly 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.’ Tutors as advisers can have a very influential role here. They are without doubt the best placed to act as the human link between learner and resources. ‘Self-direction does not necessarily emerge of its own accord; for most learners it needs to be fostered and developed [...] and is basically an attitude of mind on the part of the



learner [...] which can be most effectively developed by the teacher' Carver (1984: 129). For those working in open and distance learning contexts this is no easy task.

## 6 Findings of a study of distance language learners: support, beliefs, difficulties, use of strategies

In order to gain more insight into specific aspects of distance language learning and variables among learners, a study was set up by the author in 1998. The study sought answers to 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? Two structured questionnaires were dispatched to a random sample of 204 students enrolled on the third-stage French course *L210: Mises au point*, one in February at the start of the course and the second in June, halfway through the course. The final stage involved a small focus group of eight volunteers who had taken part in both surveys, who met with the project leader once for discussion in December after the end of the course, but before end-of-course results had been released. The findings are summarised in the following sections.<sup>3</sup>

### **6.1 Use of learner support materials**

Attitudes to and use of support materials were investigated in both surveys, the first concentrating on the course guide<sup>4</sup> and *dossier*<sup>5</sup>, while the second covered all support materials. While the majority at the start of the course considered the course guide 'helpful' or 'very helpful', the figures were considerably lower for the second survey, possibly because students were needing to rely less and less on the guide as they progressed through the course. While some considered it 'necessary for distance learning', others clearly felt guides were superfluous: '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

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students to be indispensable or very valuable and 77.5% gave these same ratings for the *Notes on Language and Style* <sup>6</sup> (See Figure 3).

	Course guide	Study guide	Transcripts	Notes on language and style
indispensable (1)	7.4%	7.8%	57.3%	23.6%
very valuable(2)	28.4%	23.4%	30.3%	53.9%
of some value(3)	53.1%	54.7%	12.3%	19.1%
not particularly valuable (4)	9.9%	14.1%	1.1%	3.4%
of no value(5)	1.2%	0%	0%	0%
do not use it (6)	7.8%	7.8%	1.1%	1.1%

Figure 3 Attitudes to learner support (survey 2)

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, while others found tutorials more useful for learning how to approach assessed tasks than for anything else. 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.

### ***6.2 Beliefs about the ‘good distance language learner’ and factors in successful distance language learning***

Two columns were provided for student responses: column 1 to tick from a given list the characteristics they believed applied to *good* distance language learners and column 2 to record which of these characteristics they felt applied to themselves. A comparison of the two sets of responses gave a useful insight into learners’ beliefs and perceptions, particularly in relation to their own self-efficacy as distance language learners. The gap between the *good* distance language learner and the *actual* distance language learner was significant, particularly in relation to metacognitive skills. Organisation and time-management, including prioritising, 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 characteristic by only just over a third of participants (37%) and even fewer reckoned

that it described their own learning (31.2%). Planning, organising, 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.

In the second survey being well-organised and being able to assess one's own strengths and weaknesses were rated high enough to be in the first half of the list, alongside motivation, persistence, self-confidence, knowledge of grammar in your own language and willingness to take risks. 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. 16.7% of students in the second survey 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. The focus group in discussion about whether specific skills, qualities or characteristics were needed by the successful distance language learner, were unanimous on the following: 'determination, high self-esteem, will power, guts [...].'

### **6.3 Difficulties and strategies**

70% of the sample claimed to be experiencing difficulties. The main barriers were lack of time and few opportunities for practice with others (see Figure 4). An examination of learning strategies revealed that repeating words and phrases out loud was the most popular strategy, followed by regular testing of vocabulary. Other cognitive strategies used by students involved recording themselves speaking, making notes as they watched or listened to recordings, and keeping a log of all course-based activities that had been completed.

find it hard to assess my own progress	44.4%
find it hard to concentrate on my own/get easily distracted	14.3%
requires too much self-discipline	6.3%
takes more time than anticipated	58.7%
find it hard to remember new vocabulary	49.2%
access to video and/or TV difficult	6.3%
few opportunities for practice with others	57.1%
get easily demotivated if I don't understand something or if I get a bad mark	12.7%
feel that I make progress less rapidly than others	15.9%
don't like to ask for help	15.9%
feel overwhelmed by all the material	38.1%

other ( <i>please specify</i> )	15.9%
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Figure 4: Difficulties experienced by distance language learners (survey 2)

In terms of metacognitive strategies, allowing time for checking and double-checking TMAs (tutor-marked assignments) was the strategy most frequently cited. Half the sample set their priorities for study in advance and 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’. The 12.2% who cited ‘other’ strategies read French books, newspapers and magazines for extra practice, watched French films or listened to French radio. Others attended Adult Education classes. 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.

The ratings for use of the *dossier* indicated that for at least three-quarters of the sample it was of some benefit. However, when answering the question on strategies, only 40% of the sample claimed to actually use ideas from the *dossier* sections in the course books. The highest readings indicated use as an aid to revision. Others focused on more cognitive uses: acquiring vocabulary, improving style and focusing on particular language structures. Fewer students used it to develop metacognitive strategies: gaining more control over learning, improving study habits, assessing language strengths and weaknesses. They clearly needed more help with this. Time was again the overriding factor in explaining negative attitudes to use of the *dossier*. This supports a general view that ‘time pressures work against those experimenting with their learning strategies’ (Murphy 1998). In general, students tended to perceive the *dossier* as an optional extra rather than as a key element in the development of effective learning strategies. This view was confirmed in discussion with the focus group who found that the frequent mention of the *dossier* caused ‘additional stress’ in an already very busy schedule of work. The unambiguous message is that students need to be shown more clearly and with more concrete examples why and how developing metacognitive strategies through the use of a *dossier* can help promote

more effective learning and save time. It should, nevertheless, be mentioned that more students in the second survey found the *dossier* extremely or very useful (38.2%) than found it not very useful or not at all useful (23.6%).

## 7 Developing independent approaches to learner support and strategy use

The second survey included an open-ended section for students who felt they had improved as a language learner to indicate in what way(s). An encouraging 60% of participants chose to respond. Many of their comments indicated increased metacognitive awareness and the use of metacognitive strategies: ‘better at prioritising’; ‘better organised’; ‘better at time-management’; ‘improved in ability to assess my own strengths and weaknesses and seek help’. This ties in with Garner’s (1988) contention that ‘to make an individual metacognitively aware is to ensure that the individual has learned how to learn.’ The 40% who did not give any feedback are a reminder, however, that there are no grounds for complacency. While there are numerous reasons why they remained silent, including probably lack of time, it is nevertheless highly likely that among them were some who clearly did not cope well and needed more support and guidance in order to develop their own strategies for learning.

‘Learners develop strategies for solving problems in their own way and in their own time’ (Ridley 1997: 42). In order to do this, they need encouragement and reassurance, a wide variety of suggested strategies to try out in order to find what works for them personally, strategy training if the context allows, prompts to notice what strategies they are using in relation to a particular task, and regular opportunities through their learning to develop metacognitive awareness. Encouraging learners to confront their own metacognitive knowledge, develop a reflective approach, believe in their own self-efficacy as learners, and seek help when needed should be a prime aim for all those working in open and distance learning. There is no reason why this should not happen through the course materials and in particular through more integrated use of the *dossier* and more attention to the kinds of strategies particular learning tasks might promote.

There is also a great deal that learners can do to support themselves. Self-help groups are one obvious way of providing mutual support, use of the Internet is another, particularly for those confined to the home. Email is increasingly being used by students to contact each other and their tutor. The Internet also offers exciting challenges for learning through interaction with a tutor on a one-to-one or a one-to-many basis. The Department of Languages at the UK Open University has piloted LEXICA<sup>7</sup> with third-stage French students and FLUENT<sup>8</sup> with French and German students at different levels. Feedback has been extremely positive and is likely to lead in the very near future to a more integrated use of on-line learning opportunities.

## 8 Conclusion

This chapter has given some insight into the nature of support in the specific context of open and distance language learning. The face-to-face contact that language advising in campus-based universities can offer is not available to distance learners, nor do they have the same opportunities for interaction with other learners, both for practice and mutual support. Support through materials is therefore a crucial factor for learners in the development of metacognitive awareness and autonomous practice. The findings of the study with OU language learners are useful in particular for the gaps they reveal in our present knowledge on learner support. This points to the need for further research into strategies, in particular (1) which strategies work best in independent contexts, (2) which strategies are best for which learners and at which point, (3) how strategies can best be developed and applied and (4) if/how we should assess strategy use. McDonough (1999: 4) is of the view that, there needs to be a more thorough investigation into the relationship between strategy use and language proficiency, particularly in terms of transfer. He also points to the lack of clarity over ‘what strategies, if any, learners adopt to extract general lessons they can use to improve their next piece’ (7) and reminds us of the difficulty of advising on strategy use, because of the number of variables which need to be taken into account. There also needs to be a fuller investigation into what links there might be between beliefs and strategy use and how these might impact on learning outcomes. The tension between highly structured courses such as those prepared for distance language

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learning and the flexibility that learner autonomy implies also needs more detailed analysis.

The role of the tutor will certainly continue to change and evolve, as more and more learning opportunities become available to those in open and distance learning environments, particularly with the rapid increase in on-line delivery and support. Access to the Internet is already changing the face of language teaching and learning and offers distinct advantages to distance language learners, specifically for interactive speaking practice and for mutual support. At the same time, the emphasis on quality assurance procedures and scrutiny through audit will require innovatory practice in teaching and learning to continue to meet the highest standards.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> 'In the following activity you will be concentrating on specific aspects of the video documentary. The notes you take will be useful for Activity 8.'

<sup>2</sup> 'To work on your pronunciation and intonation, read the poem again changing the tone of your voice. You can express different emotions such as anger, fear, enthusiasm or scorn. For example, read the poem as if you were someone who loathes the sea (it's very polluted); can't swim and is crossing the Channel in a canoe during a storm; loves the sea, deep-sea diving.'

<sup>3</sup> Full details of the study and its findings are published in Hurd (2000).

<sup>4</sup> A 24-page supplement which explains the content of the course, the assessment process and how to get the most from your studies.

<sup>5</sup> To help in the development of strategy use and encourage autonomy, students are advised 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 they 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. These might include ideas for organising and categorising, planning and monitoring, prioritising and making the most of the resources within and outside the course.

<sup>6</sup> Seven supplements, one to accompany each course book.

<sup>7</sup> A pilot project to support foreign language learning, which involves the use of specially designed stand-alone software for learning vocabulary at home, supported by tutorial and peer-group discussion via an on-line forum. First used with third-stage French learners, it has now been adapted and extended for level one users.

<sup>8</sup> A synchronous audio conferencing system which allows tutors to run a seminar in real time and students to interact in pairs or small groups. It has been extended through the use of Lyceum, which allows participants to post pictures, texts, etc on screen.