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CHAPTER 12

Affect and strategy use in independent language learning

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Introduction

Affect is about emotions and feelings, moods and attitudes, anxiety, tolerance of ambiguity and motivation. For some it is also connected with dispositions and preferences (Oatley & Jenkins, 1996). It is generally accepted that the affective domain encompasses a wide range of elements which reflect the human side of being, and play a part in conditioning behaviour and influencing learning. We are becoming more knowledgeable about the importance of attention to affective factors, but there is still a huge gap in terms of our knowledge of the affective strategies that students use or could use to promote more effective language learning. Moreover, the research that has been carried out into affect over several years has largely concentrated on language learning in the classroom (Arnold, 1999; Ehrman, 1996; MacIntyre, 1999; Young, 1999) with very few studies devoted to independent learning settings. Independent language learners, whether learning through self-access, distance or other modes, are a fast-growing group, and we need to know more about them, in particular the ways in which their affective needs differ from those of classroom learners (Harris, 2003; Hurd, 2002; White, 2003).

This chapter investigates affect and strategy use in independent settings. It looks first at the concept of affect and its interrelationships with other domains, continues with an exploration of strategy definitions and classification schemes in relation to affect, and concludes with a study carried out with a small group of distance language learners using think-aloud verbal protocols.

Affect and cognition: interrelationships

The cognitive and metacognitive domains of language learning have been a dominating force on the second language acquisition (SLA) research agenda for at least three decades (Flavell, 1976; Victori & Lockhart, 1995; Wenden, 1998, 2001), while affective considerations have attracted less interest. Inspired by the work of Gardner and Lambert (1972), Gardner and MacIntyre (1993), Horwitz *et al.* (1986), and others, the 1990s, however, witnessed a growing interest in affect which has continued to gather momentum. In her seminal book on language learning strategies, Oxford (1990: 140) asserts that 'the affective side of the learner is probably one of the very biggest influences on language learning success or failure'. She adds that '… negative feelings can stunt progress, even for the rare learner who fully understands all the technical aspects of how to learn a language. On the other hand, positive emotions and attitudes can make language learning far more effective and enjoyable'. Elaborating on this, Ehrman (1996: 137) focuses on learner identity and self-concept: 'Every imaginable feeling accompanies learning, especially learning that can be as closely related to who we are, as language learning is'. Others talk of learning a new language as an unsettling or uncomfortable experience (Guiora, 1983; Horwitz, 2001).

In sum, there is an emerging consensus on the primacy of affect in learning and that language learning is greatly enhanced by attention to affective aspects (Arnold, 1999; MacIntyre, 2002; Rossiter, 2003).

With regard to one important independent setting, distance language learning, Hurd (2005: 7) suggests that, of all the individual differences, 'for the distance language learner it is perhaps affective variables – in particular motivation and anxiety – that are of greater relevance, because their effect on learning may be intensified in an independent context, and because of their capacity for modification and change'. White (2003: 117-8) identifies as a 'further critical dimension' for distance learners, 'the circumstances in which they pursue their learning, including learning sites, life roles, and support structures within their learning environment'. These circumstances can 'impact on affective experiences' by requiring learners to focus on managing their own feelings more so than in the classroom, in order to compensate for the lack of peer support and the physical absence of a teacher. Harris (1995: 48) talks of 'affective inhibition' in the distance language learning context, which can 'arise from academic or practical problems, or from the unsatisfying emotional experience of attempting solitary study' and may lead to 'loss of impetus, confidence and study lapses'.

Affect and cognition are increasingly seen as multidimensional overlapping and interdependent constructs. As Arnold (1999: 1) points out: 'Neither the cognitive nor the affective has the last word, and, indeed, neither can be separated from the other'. Arnold and Brown (1999: 8) contend that 'the way we feel about ourselves and our capabilities can either facilitate or impede our learning …' and underline the

'difficulty of isolating the cognitive, for at many points affect inevitably enters the picture' (p. 16). Arnold (1999) emphasises the need to treat students as whole persons, referring to the complex relationship between affect, learning and memory, and the inseparability of emotion and cognition in the workings of the human brain. Stevick, too, (1999: 47) contends that 'affect is encoded to various degrees in the cognitive schemata of memory' and that 'affect participates in the process of learning … by *interfering* with it.' (p. 50). The theme of 'interference' is also emphasised by Ehrman (1996; 138): '… the affective dimension affects how efficiently students can use what they have. For example, strong motivation tends to help students marshal their assets and skills, whereas low motivation or intense anxiety interferes with their ability to use their skills and abilities'. These findings are strengthened by those working in the field of cognitive neuro-science (Damasio, 1994; Schumann, 1999). Neural scientist LeDoux (1996, quoted in Arnold & Brown, 1999:1) sees emotion and cognition as 'partners in the mind', a view backed up Ramnani (2006) who considers that 'reason and emotion work in concert' and that 'we use our emotions to guide our reasoning, to encode and retrieve our memories and to bias our responses'.

The integral relationship between cognition and affect is a sound basis for arguing that affective strategies are as strongly implicated in successful language learning as cognitive and metacognitive strategies. The next section discusses the place of affect within the field of language learning strategies, and suggests a re-think of current classifications.

Affect and strategies

The definition of language learning strategies has been variously described in the literature as 'elusive' (Wenden & Rubin, 1987: 7) 'fuzzy' (Ellis, 1994: 529) and 'fluid' (Gu, 2003a: 15) and a variety of classification schemes have been proposed during the last two decades (Kondo & Ying-Ling, 2004; O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1990; Wenden, 1991; Wenden & Rubin, 1987). In her Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL), Oxford (1990: 17) stated that there is 'no complete agreement on exactly what strategies are; how many strategies exist; how they should be defined, demarcated and categorised …' and that 'classification conflicts were inevitable'. Oxford (1993) later drew attention to the predominance of cognitive and metacognitive strategies in the literature and the lack of attention to affective strategies.

This lack of attention is manifest in some classification schemes. Rubin (1981), for example, did not recognise affective strategies as a category in their own right. O'Malley and Chamot (1990) combined social and affective strategies to produce socio-affective strategies, while Hsiao and Oxford (2002) concluded from their study using factor analysis that they should be separated. Oxford's SILL (1990) remains the most comprehensive inventory of affective strategies and covers:

- anxiety reduction (using progressive relaxation and deep breathing exercises, music and laughter)

- self-encouragement (making positive statements, taking risks wisely, and rewarding yourself)

- monitoring emotions (listening to your body, using a checklist, writing a language learning diary, and discussing feelings with others).

Despite the increasingly accepted view of the critical role of affect in successful language learning (Dörnyei, 2001; Griffiths, 2004; Nunan & Lamb, 1996; Oxford & Shearin, 1994; Ushioda, 1996), findings from studies demonstrate that affective strategies are the least frequently used by students (Hong-Nam & Leavell, 2006; Oxford, 1990; Wharton, 2000). Moreover, it is often the case that those who need them most are least likely to be using them. As Oxford (1993: 177) says: '… some of the best learners use *affective* and *social* strategies to control their emotional state, to keep themselves motivated and on-task, and to get help when they need it', yet many students are unaware of the potential of such strategies, and affective strategies in particular are 'woefully underused' (Oxford, 1990: 143). Oxford (1993: 179) considers that a possible reason for this is that learners are 'not familiar with paying attention to their own feelings and social relationships as part of the L2 learning process'.

A further dimension to the strategies debate is the suggestion of overlap between cognitive and metacognitive strategies (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1990; Phakiti, 2003) and between affective and metacognitive strategies (Macaro, 2006). This is a reflection of the interrelationships of affect and cognition, discussed earlier, and prompts a closer look at what precisely affective strategies are and whether it is useful to keep them as a separate category. Kondo & Ying-Ling's (2004) typology of 70 strategies grouped according to five main categories - preparation, relaxation, positive thinking, peer seeking and resignation – contain a mix of cognitive, metacognitive and affective strategies that can be used to deal with anxiety.

Studies of this kind beg the question as to whether we should be talking in terms of *affective states* and strategies to deal with them, rather than affective strategies. In other words, it might be more useful to abandon the traditional separation of strategies that are more emotion-focused from those that involve mental processes. In this scenario, strategies would be classified according to their intended goal, for example: taking a break (a metacognitive strategy to deal with frustration, anger, disappointment), re-reading a section of text (a cognitive strategy to deal with anxiety caused by incomplete comprehension), planning and prioritising (a metacognitive strategy to combat anxiety caused by overload), rehearsal and repetition (a cognitive strategy to cope with nervousness about speaking aloud), deep breathing (an affective strategy to address the stress of spoken interaction), and many more.

Macaro (2006: 328) proposes that 'metacognitive strategies subsume affective strategies … because the latter require knowledge of oneself as a learner through recurrent monitoring of one's learning'. The link between affective control, metacognitive self-knowledge and learner self-regulation would lend support for this view. When faced with a particular language task, asking certain questions, for example 'How do I feel about this?' and 'Is there anything I could do to make the task more pleasant and less stressful? (Rubin, 2001: 28) involves both metacognitive knowledge of self and the use of affective strategies, for example:

- using a checklist to monitor emotions;
- doing some relaxation exercises to reduce anxiety;
- positive talk for self-encouragement;
- promising a treat as a reward for completing a task.

Others, however, might have strong arguments for keeping the traditional distinctions in place. Blurring or removing the boundaries between affective and metacognitive strategies might risk affect losing visibility and being consigned to its customary low status, at a time when there is a growing awareness of its importance, not just for learning enjoyment but also as explicitly implicated in success or failure. These issues clearly need further investigation.

In the last few years there has been a noticeable shift in focus among some researchers (Dörnyei, 2005; Tseng *et al.,* 2006) away from *product* (strategies) towards *process* (self-regulatory and self-management processes and the learner capacity underlying them), and to recognise strategies as 'integral components of processing theory' (Macaro, 2006: 332). A focus on self-regulation has relevance for affective strategies which are used by learners to 'manage' their emotions, feelings and motivational states.

The link between affective strategies and self-regulation has been made by Rossiter (2003: 4) who considers that affective strategies lie in a spectrum from teacher to learner control: 'For example, the use of humour, music, visualisation and relaxation in the classroom would likely be initiated by the teacher, whereas self-talk, risk-taking, and monitoring are more student-regulated strategies'. Self-regulated strategies are of special importance to language learners in independent settings, given the need for these learners to take control in a situation in which teacher and peers are physically absent for most or all of the time.

While some researchers struggle to reach a consensus on important theoretical considerations concerning language learning strategies such as definitions, interrelationships and shifts in focus, others also push forward the practical agenda which includes concentrating on the learning context (Chamot, 2005; Cohen 1998; Gu, 2003b; Hsiao & Oxford, 2002), encouraging learners to talk about their learning experience (Harris, 1995; Hurd, 2006; 2007b; White, 2005) and attempting to make sense of all this within a cognitive-affective framework. The following sections discuss ways in which learners cope with their affective states, in particular language anxiety and motivation, and the role of learner support.

Managing affect in independent learning settings

All learners, whatever their mode of learning, bring their own 'baggage' to the learning process and this encompasses a wide spectrum of individual differences that influence and are influenced by the learning process. For Gu (2003b: 3): 'Person, task, context, and strategy are interrelated and work together to form the chemistry of learning'. Griffiths (2004: 14) cites 'gender, psychological type, motivation, culture' as factors influencing strategy choice. While a strong correlation between metacognitive strategies and effective language learning has been found in a number of research studies (Griffiths, 2004; Hurd, 2000; O'Malley & Chamot, 1990), Ehrman *et al.* (2003: 319) contend that 'it is at least as important to manage feelings as it is to use more cognitive strategies, since negative feelings reduce the effectiveness of most learning activities'. For learners in independent contexts, affective considerations, as we saw earlier, are likely to be more pressing than in classroom settings. Other factors which illustrate the particular situation of SLA at a distance are the 'lack of fit

between an inherently social discipline such as language learning and the distance context whose main characterising feature is physical remoteness from others' (Hurd, 2006: 299); and the fact that languages are considered to be more difficult to learn in distance mode than other subjects (Sussex, 1991).

Language anxiety and motivation are both considered to be highly influential in facilitating or inhibiting SLA, and have become central to any examination of factors contributing to the learning process and learner achievement (Dörnyei, 2001, 2005; Ellis, 1994; Horwitz, 2000, 2001; Horwitz *et al.*, 1986; MacIntyre, 1995, 1999; Matsuda & Gobel, 2004; Oxford, 1999; Young, 1999). A longitudinal study of affect carried out with distance language learners investigated both anxiety (Hurd, 2007b) and motivation (Hurd, 2006). After four months of study, 21.3% of participants said they were more anxious learning in distance mode and 51.7% felt that there was no difference in terms of anxiety between learning at a distance and learning face-to-face. Among the strategies used for coping with anxiety were risk-taking, self-encouragement, relaxation techniques, sharing worries with tutor and other students, ticking off completed tasks, revision and repetition to build confidence, joining a French self-help group, and engaging in leisure activities such as gardening. The 27% who claimed that the distance factor made them less anxious gave the following reasons: opportunity to work at your own pace and be more in control; absence of exposure to public criticism; lack of competition and peer pressure; and the chance to practise and make mistakes in private, and to try things out.

Motivation is the factor most frequently cited as critical to successful learning by distance learners themselves (Hurd, 2000, 2006; White, 1999, 2003). Its close link

with autonomy (Dickinson, 1995; Ushioda, 1996) is further evidence of its critical role in independent contexts, As Hurd (2005: 9) states: 'Maintaining motivation levels is a particular challenge at a distance. The demands of self-instruction, together with the shift of control from teacher to learner can be overwhelming for many students'. The strand of her study investigating motivation (2006: 304) found that this 'was clearly signalled as the most important factor in distance language learning by an overwhelming majority of students'. The main strategies students used for keeping motivated were positive self-talk, followed by setting goals and keeping in touch with French native speakers. Using a rewards system and talking to peers were also popular. Their advice to new learners, using the yoked-subject technique in which students are asked to imagine that they are talking about their strategy use to another person who is about to embark on similar tasks (White, 1994), included good preparation, developing self-knowledge, pacing, risk-taking, making the most of support, patience, organisation and time management, a positive and realistic approach, and making the most of all language practice opportunities.

Developments brought about by the rapid advance of technology, including blended learning and blended tuition through the use of synchronous and asynchronous tools way well have a beneficial effect on the learner by offering a different kind of support and complementing a particular advantage of distance language learning: the opportunity to work at your own pace and control output according to individual preference and need. There is already evidence that computer-mediated communication can help to minimise anxiety and increase motivation (Debski, 1997; Hampel *et al.,* 2005; Hauck & Hurd, 2005; Lamy & Hampel, 2007; Roed, 2003). Virtual learning environments available 24/ 7 can provide an ideal opportunity,

particularly for independent language learners, to work together, to discuss and reflect on learning, to give and receive support, and thus gradually overcome their inhibitions. Referring to online learning, Macdonald (2003: 378) cites the 'interplay between competence and affective factors such as growing confidence, motivation and group dynamics' and 'the importance of the affective aspects of collaborative working – group cohesion and the evolution of mutual trust'. Creating and maximising opportunities for online interaction through the use of blogs, wikis, discussion forums and other tools is having an increasingly important role in addressing the affective challenges of a distance language context, although they are relatively untested in language learning, and the risk of new forms of anxiety arising from their use should not be underestimated. (For a full discussion of strategies for online environments, see Chapter 15.)

Finally, the role of the tutor in distance and other independent learning contexts is of crucial importance for 'developing a palpable sense of belonging' (White, 2007: 104) and supporting learners in managing their learning. As the only contact with the tutor for some students is through assignments, clear, detailed feedback in a sensitive framework that addresses learners' concerns is essential for building confidence which can lead to better outcomes. Highlighting progress made and giving value to experimentation with language in a structured environment can encourage learners to take risks, which will extend their range and ultimately improve proficiency. Recognising affective differences, providing reassurance and encouragement, and giving advice in the use of appropriate strategies can minimise negative feelings as well as building on more positive emotions and attitudes.

Investigating affect and strategy use among distance language learners using think-aloud protocols: a pilot study

The acknowledged power of affective factors to influence language learning prompted the longitudinal study investigating motivation (Hurd, 2006) and anxiety (Hurd, 2007b) referred to earlier. As part of this main study, a small-scale pilot, presented in the next section, was set up using audio-recorded think-aloud protocols (TAPs) with distance learners of French at lower-intermediate level. This mini-study aimed to raise awareness of the feelings and emotions experienced by distance learners, and the strategies they use to manage them.

Think-aloud protocols have been used extensively in classroom contexts but less widely with students learning in independent language settings. To date, none have been found which investigate affect and strategy use with distance language learners. Based on the principles of information processing (Newell and Simon, 1972; Ericsson and Simon, 1984, 1993), TAPs record information that is present in *short-term memory* and *concurrent with actual thinking,* while a task is being performed. The small lapse of time between the thought and its articulation render them potentially more accurate and less subject to 'embellishment or decay of information' (Pressley and Afflerbach, 1995) than other more structured self-report methods, such as questionnaires. They are also said to have a human quality, in that they give the data, 'a unique soul' (Smagorinsky, 1994) which can enhance our understanding of human cognitive processing. Moreover, they have the potential to yield information on context and strategy use, in addition to cognitive and affective processes (Afflerbach, 2000).

The main methodological criticisms directed at TAPs are automaticity (Singhal 2001), defined as fluent performance without the conscious deployment of attention i.e. there is no thinking going on; reactivity (Matsumoto 1993; Nielson *et al.,* 2002) which refers to the extra load placed on students who are having to carry out a task and talk about the process at the same time; and incompleteness, in that students don't always finish their sentences or even construct whole sentences. In response to the automaticity concerns, Ericsson and Simon (1980) point out that researchers can counter this potential problem by selecting tasks that are complex and difficult for the learner, as these are less likely to involve processes that are engaged in automatically. With regard to reactivity, Leow and Morgan-Short (2004: 42) find no evidence in TAPs studies that internal processes are altered and that 'the only evidence of reactivity in studies to date is the amount of time required to complete the task.' McDonough (1995: 12) finds the charge of incompleteness 'no more a criticism of verbal protocol research than of any kind of research where data is necessarily limited: if anything, verbal reports suffer from the opposite, being too rich'.

Despite possible weaknesses, Oxford & Burry-Stock (1995: 2) contend that: 'Think-aloud protocols offer the most detailed information of all because the student describes strategies while doing a language task'. These factors were persuasive in the selection of TAPs as a research tool to try out with distance language learners. It was hoped that the unmediated data might usefully add to our understanding of the ways in which distance language learners approach and work through language tasks. The fact that they could be carried out in private at a time and in a place of the individual student's choice was an additional advantage.

Participants, procedure and methods

Three areas were investigated for this pilot study using TAPs: (1) the nature and prevalence of positive and negative affective factors among distance language learners; (2) learners' awareness of themselves as learners, and of the context of their learning; (3) the strategies language learners use to cope with the demands of distance learning

The four participating students were all female volunteers studying the Open University, UK lower-intermediate French course *Ouverture*. Two were in their early forties and two in their early sixties. The older two had a first degree or equivalent professional qualification, while those in their forties had acquired basic qualifications from school in four or five subjects.

The two tasks for the study both involved the use of the imperfect tense in French and were chosen from the end of the first unit of Book 3 of their course which was the book they would be starting at the time the TAPs were scheduled to take place:

- a reading task - a passage of around 200 words in French with three comprehension questions;
- a writing task - a short essay of 100-150 words.

Detailed information was sent out to all participants which explained what TAPs were and the rationale for their use. Students were also given full instructions on how to proceed, including the need to 'record everything that is going through your mind *as you work through each step of the two activities',* to 'keep talking' and 'to record your thoughts *as they come to mind and not after having had time to reflect*.' It was also

suggested that they do a practice run with an earlier activity to get used to talking to themselves and to contact the researcher if there were any problems. The absence of queries and the quality of their protocols is evidence that they fully understood what they were required to do. This is undoubtedly linked to their maturity as adult learners.

Data analysis

The data was analysed with the help of QSR N6, a qualitative software tool which allows the researcher to organise the data into main categories ('tree-nodes') subdivided into further sub-categories ('sub-nodes'), to allow for a more detailed analysis. For example, the tree-node 'Positive affect' contained the sub-nodes 'pleasure', 'satisfaction', 'relief', 'laughter', and 'excitement', while the tree-node 'Negative effect' was the umbrella for the sub-nodes 'frustration', 'boredom', 'disappointment', 'uncertainty', 'confusion' and 'embarrassment. The other main categories included self-confidence, anxiety, affective strategies, positive and negative self-evaluation and feelings. The N6 software made it possible to see the coding of an entire transcript in one document, and to access all utterances from all participants that were coded to any particular node.

Findings

The transcripts of the TAPs amounted to over 12,000 words, providing data that was immensely rich and varied. Selected extracts follow which illustrate the areas investigated.

1   Affective factors

Positive utterances included enjoyment of certain French words, occasional lighheartedness about grammar, and satisfaction or even excitement when students found they could do an activity: 'That's easy!'; 'Oh yeah, that's obvious!; 'I know, I know this, I know I've read it already!; 'I understood the first question, no problem … I'm sure I'll understand the other ones, except … ah yes I do!'

All four students gave evidence of reasonably high levels of confidence. This category included being decisive, having a clear plan of action and focusing on the 'can do':

> I can recognise the imperfect tense, that's not a problem to me.

> I think I probably understand when to use expressions that go with it, it's fairly obvious.

However, difficulty, uncertainty and some frustration were evident in a number of utterances, for example:

> I do find this kind of question difficult. It's a question of … er… using the language that you have … er … but also trying to think about something that you can write about realistically … er …

> This is a bit annoying 'cos I keep going backwards and forwards on the page, which is a bit frustrating.

> I don't know whether I should be writing just the verb or the subject of the verb as well … I haven't understood what they're on about.

I can't think of anything to write.

Written accuracy caused concern for some:

> … I always worry that I am not being accurate in how I put things down, so
> that is one of my concerns.

One student felt particularly inadequate when faced with sample answers to open-ended writing tasks:

> When they are not precise answers, it can be a little bit intimidating because
> you look at what's given in the suggested answer and my answers are nowhere
> near as formal or as accurate or as interesting.

Another student's anxiety focused on the content of the writing activity, which evoked strong feelings:

> … There's been a lot in this course … 'cos it's a way of teaching you to use the
> past tenses …about talking about the past and your childhood, and then of course
> there was the thing you had to do about Christmas, … I found that very hard to do
> because… my parents died when I was young, and it's hard for me to talk about
> that. So it's … you know ... there's lots of people have difficulty talking about the
> past for lots of different reasons … and I can't be the only person who feels that
> way, but it does sort of add a little extra emotional blanket on to everything when
> I have to do that … it makes it sometimes hard to think straight.

2   Awareness of self and context

Awareness of self in terms of learning was illustrated by the following:

> I do have trouble sometimes quite getting exactly what's wanted, not in terms of the words 'cos I know it doesn't matter if they're not exactly the same words, but the gist of what they want in the answer.

> I think this is half the problem: I sometimes look at the *Corrigés* to see what I am supposed to do, and then it's like cheating – you've looked at the answers first, then you find there's no point in doing it again 'cos you know what it is now.

> … However much practice I have, I still need more practice on all of it really, because I understand it when I'm doing it, but if I waited until I could just do it without thinking or without looking, I'd be here forever …

Students were also very forthcoming about their own ability and performance. Examples of positive self-evaluations were:

> I've used the right endings on everything.

> So I've got all those right, and one they missed, which is satisfying.

Other evaluations were a little more tentative:

> … well I can do that, not necessarily good though, not easily, not fluently, not without thinking, but I know when and how to use it …

Negative self-evaluations revealed that learners often took personal blame for lack of understanding or poor performance, rather than attributing this to factors outside their control such as the type of activity, the time allowed, or the clarity of explanation. Examples were:

> My conclusion is bad compared to that … ooooh, looks bad!

> Yeah, I just really misunderstood that completely.

> I didn't pick up any of that.

Awareness of the advantages and disadvantages of learning at a distance expressed in the TAPs were particularly valuable. Advantages were the fact that you could prepare, practise and rehearse in private and 'no-one knows what you actually put, not even your tutor'. However, the long interval between tutorials was seen as a distinct disadvantage when you had a query:

> This is part of the problem of working remotely: by the time I see anybody, I'll have forgotten it.

3   Strategies

All four students used a range of strategies to manage their affective states, although the frequency of use overall was low. Self-encouragement, skipping bits of text, re-reading text, keeping going regardless, consulting the *Corrigés* (answer keys) when worried, not dwelling on problems, taking a break, and checking back for reassurance were among the strategies employed. Examples of strategies (underlined) included:

> If I have trouble with an activity, I sometimes, if I'm really anxious, if it's become a block, I will just mark it with a post-it note, and come back to it another time. I try to keep going, because I think it's easy to get hung up …

> Sometimes when I'm not sure or anxious, I have given in to the temptation to look at the *Corrigés* there and then, because otherwise I'm going to waste my time… so if I'm really unhappy and unsure, I do sometimes do that.

> I've now decided I am just going to write whatever comes to mind and not worry about the spelling of the words, and if I can't think of the words, I'll just blag it, and then look them up in the dictionary afterwards.

Evaluation of TAPs as an ethnographic research tool for investigating affect

This small-scale pilot study aimed to give preliminary insights into positive and negative affective factors, awareness and strategy use, as demonstrated by language learners engaged in a reading and writing task in a distance environment.

A particular advantage of the TAPs methodology was the opportunity to get a sense of the diversity of learners, the range of affective factors that characterise individual learners and which are intricately connected with learning capacity and learning success. A comment from one student also indicated the potential of TAPs as a useful learning tool for raising self-awareness:

> I think in a way doing this project has concentrated me and focused me on my own study skills and made me think about what I should be doing and not doing ...

Although students were asked to record their thoughts as they came to mind and not after having had time to reflect, there was nevertheless some evidence of reflective thinking in their protocols. As Graham (1997) points out, it is in practice very difficult to separate out the concurrent thoughts of TAPs from other introspective and retrospective thoughts, as the categories tend to overlap. One task is likely to generate all three activities in a very short space of time: externalising thoughts as they occur (concurrent), making inferences or analysing the processes or strategies involved in completing the task (introspective) and finally commenting on those processes and strategies (retrospective). Think-aloud comments from her own study were an 'amalgam of thinking aloud, introspection proper and retrospection after a few seconds' (p. 44). In this study, had the reported findings been confined to concurrent thoughts only, much of the richness of the data relating to affective factors would have been lost. The problem is one of terminology and clearly raises important questions for investigations of this kind. What is certain is that findings from TAPs must be considered as exploratory and not conclusive and that TAPs investigations

need to be supplemented by data from other research (Smagorinsky, 1994; Young, 2005).

For independent language learning settings, where gathering qualitative data is problematic, the opportunities TAPs offer to gain insights into what students really think and feel about their learning make them a particularly valuable research tool. TAPs cannot offer outcomes that can be measured with certainty, but they can 'reveal aspects of language learning previously inaccessible to investigation' (Gillette, 1987: 269).

Implications of the study for strategy research and learner support

Robinson (2002: 63) reminds us that 'researchers in the field of language learning have not paid sufficient attention to emotional phenomena'. The purpose of the study was, therefore, to provide a starting point for developing a better understanding of the affective factors that facilitate or inhibit learning at a distance and the ways in which learners deal with them.

Participants exercised affective control by using a variety of strategies, of which only 'self-encouragement' comes into the category of affective strategy. Yet, learners clearly found that certain cognitive and metacognitive strategies, for example skipping or re-reading text, keeping going regardless, consulting the *Corrigés* or a dictionary, making notes, taking a break when in difficulty, and checking back for reassurance, helped them to manage their emotions, underlining the integral link between cognition and affect, and lending support for the need to review current

classifications or abandon them, and concentrate more on intended goals and underlying processes.

The results from this pilot, although limited by the small sample and the fact that it was entirely female, provided useful insights and information which give food for thought about how distance language educators might better support their learners. Larger, more representative samples are needed in follow-up studies. Both Block (1986) and McDonough (1995) emphasise the importance of hearing what students have to say, in order to inform the ways in which their tutors are trained. Equally important is how those learner stories can be used to improve learning materials. The protocols provided a valuable starting point for a reappraisal of certain aspects of distance language courses, for example clarity of instructions, the design of open-ended writing tasks, and learner support. Findings indicated that students without support do manage to find ways of coping, but would benefit from explicit guidance in affective strategy development which would take more account of the range of personality characteristics; anticipating sensitivities and offering strategies that are practical and appropriate for adult learners.

According to Robinson (2002: 8) 'motivation and anxiety can clearly often be changed and shaped through teacher intervention in learning'. For independent learners, this intervention has to happen within the learning materials. If cognitive and metacognitive strategies in addition to affective strategies are useful for dealing with affective problems, an explicit focus on these in learning materials would clarify and validate their importance in this respect, and give concrete advice to learners whose negative emotions are impeding their learning. Of equal importance is the need to

focus on positive emotions and attitudes and build in strategies in the materials that can help students to maintain a positive outlook.

Finally, given that reflecting on experience is an important pre-requisite for taking control of feelings and emotions, the potential of TAPs as an awareness-raising tool could be maximised for independent learners as a way of developing the 'reflective and analytic capacity that is central to autonomy' (Hurd, 2005: 2).

Conclusion

Affect is a 'complex phenomenon in language learning' (White, 2003: 117) and needs careful consideration because of the extent to which it is implicated in effective language learning. Dörnyei (2005: 219) calls for 'the integration of linguistic and psychological approaches in a balanced and complementary manner'. This chapter attempts to bring the affective domain into sharper focus and to underline the special place affect has in SLA in independent settings.

Learner support is critical for helping learners adjust to the demands of independent learning, for encouraging self-motivation, for providing high quality feedback, and for ameliorating as far as possible any difficulties that may arise, in particular, language anxiety. It is important to remember that learning is a dynamic process and that 'as the locus of control moves from one to the other, students increase their metacognitive awareness and skills; perceptions and behaviours evolve and change (Hurd, 2006: 301). Teachers, writers and researchers need to be constantly aware of changing

support needs, and to be prepared to adopt a flexible approach. The challenge is to re-conceptualise language learning strategies to include the social and affective sides of learning as well as the more intellectual and 'executive-managerial' sides. As Oxford & Burry-Stock (1995: 18) affirm: 'Language learning, more than almost any other discipline, is an adventure of the whole person, not just a cognitive or metacognitive exercise'.

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