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Citation

Hurd, Stella; Beaven, Tita and Ortega, Ane (2001). Developing autonomy in a distance language learning context: issues and dilemmas for course writers. *System*, 29(3) pp. 341–355.

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Developing autonomy in a distance language learning context: issues and dilemmas for course writers

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Received 25 January 2001; received in revised form 5 April 2001; accepted 18 April 2001

Abstract

The relationship between autonomy and the teaching and learning of languages at a distance is complex. On the one hand, in order to complete successfully a distance learning programme, learners need to develop a series of strategies and skills that will enable them to work individually. At the same time, distance learning programmes have a clear structure in which the amount, rate and content of the learning programme is determined by the course writers, and not by the student. If autonomy is about the learner being 'able to make significant decisions about what is to be learned, as well as how and when to do it' (Van Lier, L., 1996. *Interaction in the Language Curriculum, Awareness, Autonomy and Authenticity*. Longman, London and New York, pp. 12–13), then it would seem to be incompatible with distance learning. This paper investigates the notion of autonomy in relation to distance language learning, and examines the skills and strategies needed by those learning at a distance in order to achieve successful outcomes. It explores in particular the dilemma posed by the highly structured nature of Open University language courses and the need for learners to develop autonomous approaches. Using examples from the Spanish Diploma, it outlines ways in which autonomy can nevertheless be effectively promoted through careful attention to materials design. © 2001 Published by Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Autonomy; Language learning; Distance learning; Learning strategies; Course design; Metacognition; Learning support; Self-evaluation

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1. Introduction

This paper investigates the notion of autonomy in relation to distance language learning, and examines the skills and strategies needed by those learning at a distance in order to achieve successful outcomes. It explores in particular the dilemma posed by the highly structured nature of Open University language courses and the need for learners to develop autonomous approaches. Using examples from the Spanish Diploma, the paper goes on to outline ways in which autonomy can nevertheless be promoted through careful attention to materials design.

2. The Open University context

The Centre for Modern Languages¹ was set up at the Open University (OU) in 1991 and produced its first course L120 *Ouverture* for learners of French post-GCSE in 1995, attracting around 1700 students. Since then, 3-year Diplomas have been developed in French and German, and the new 2-year Spanish Diploma will be completed for presentation in February 2001, bringing the number of students learning a language at a distance to around 6000. Plans are also in place for ab initio courses in Spanish, followed by French and German.

The OU is famed for its specially designed materials which support the learner as she or he progresses through the course, anticipating needs and difficulties, adopting a pre-emptive approach and endeavouring to equip the learner with the skills and strategies needed for learning at a distance. The philosophy of the OU is that in order to be open, there can be no assumptions about students' ability to find learning resources by accessing libraries, satellite TV, or the Internet. In order to enable all students to follow OU courses, and this includes of course students in remote rural areas, students with disabilities, or those whose personal, professional or financial circumstances prevent them from having access to outside resources (such as libraries, bookshops, etc.), the OU traditionally provides students with all the materials they need in order to complete their studies.

Success and what leads to it is a complex mixture of elements. Motivation is essential, as with it comes persistence when the going gets tough, and energy to keep studying when other commitments encroach on your time. But motivation levels can drop dramatically if the right support is not there. Equally important is the ability each student has to make the most of that support in terms of developing as a learner. This is not much different from any learning context — we all know that the teacher can teach but only the learner can learn, and this applies as much to face-to-face language learning as to learning a language at a distance. However, whereas in the classroom, good teachers can ascertain fairly rapidly whether their learners are making progress and what kind of support they might need to help them along that road, the distance learner, particularly if she or he has little contact with a teacher, must not only find out by trial and error which strategies seem to work, but

¹ Renamed the Department of Languages in September 2000.

1 also learn the skill of assessing personal learning needs, including strengths and
2 weaknesses, and have some idea of how to address them and monitor progress. In
3 order to develop these skills, learners need to be self-aware and knowledgeable
4 about their own perceptions, attitudes and abilities.

7 **3. Metacognition: knowledge and skills**

8
9 The knowledge and skills we are talking about can both be described as meta-
10 cognitive. According to Flavell (1976, p. 232) metacognitive knowledge is “the
11 knowledge concerning one’s own cognitive processes and products or anything
12 related to them” and metacognitive skills “the active monitoring and consequent
13 regulation and orchestration of these processes”. O’Malley and Chamot (1994, p.
14 372) suggest that on the basis of information to date,

15
16 metacognition [...] may be the major factor in determining the effectiveness of
17 individuals’ attempts to learn another language and that conclusions about
18 strategic differences between good and bad language learners appear to suggest
19 that explicit metacognitive knowledge about task characteristics and appro-
20 priate strategies for task solution is a major determiner of language learning
21 effectiveness.

22
23 Metacognitive knowledge is also centrally involved in monitoring, which Wenden
24 (1999, p. 437) describes as “the regulatory skill that oversees the learning process
25 that follows the initial planning. It is the basis for determining how one is progress-
26 ing, and it is what constitutes the internal feedback i.e. the state of awareness which
27 lets the learner know that he/she has encountered a problem”. The essential link
28 between metacognition and strategic competence is elaborated by Bachman and
29 Palmer quoted in Cohen (1998, p. 14) who describe strategic competence as “a set of
30 metacognitive components, or strategies, which can be thought of as higher-order
31 executive processes that provide a cognitive management function in language use”.

32 Those unaccustomed to reflection in any aspect of their lives, may find it difficult
33 to accept this link between self-awareness, strategic competence and effective learn-
34 ing, and may well resist it if they are not convinced of the so-called benefits and
35 relevance to themselves as individual learners. Most language learners want to
36 get on with it, to see rapid results. They are prepared to work hard, but may need
37 some convincing that effective learning is not just about following instructions from
38 teacher or book and doing exercises, (even if you do get the answers right).

41 **4. Autonomy: individual and social aspects**

42
43 Metacognitive knowledge, strategic competence and reflection are all aspects of
44 autonomy and refer to explicit intervention by the learner in her or his learning.
45 Wenden (1991, p. 15) gives a clear statement on autonomy and its relation to

1 successful learning: “In effect, *successful* or *expert* or *intelligent* learners have learned
2 how to learn. They have acquired the learning strategies, the knowledge about
3 learning, and the attitudes that enable them to use these skills and knowledge con-
4 fidently, flexibly, appropriately and independently of a teacher. Therefore, they are
5 autonomous”. In fact there is now an overwhelming consensus among researchers in
6 the field of language learning and teaching (Holec, 1981; Riley, 1985; Little, 1991;
7 Dickinson, 1992) of the benefits of an autonomous approach. As Phil Benson (1996,
8 p. 28) states: “the concept of autonomy is indeed beginning to enter the mainstream
9 of language learning methodology”, though he does warn that “we must recognise
10 that, so far, we have no theory of autonomous language learning”, and that “its
11 application in the field of language learning is highly problematic”.

12 The relationship between autonomy and the teaching and learning of languages at
13 a distance is particularly complex. In order to complete successfully a distance-
14 learning programme, learners have to maintain their motivation while working
15 alone and develop a series of strategies and skills that will enable them to work
16 individually. At the same time, distance learning is not the same as open learning or
17 self-access, and distance learning programmes such as those offered by the Depart-
18 ment of Languages at the Open University have a very rigid structure in which the
19 amount, rate and content of the learning programme is determined by the course
20 team in charge of producing the materials, and not by the student. If autonomy is
21 about the learner being “able to make significant decisions about what is to be
22 learned, as well as how and when to do it” (Van Lier, 1996, pp. 12–13), then it
23 would seem that highly directed learning programmes such as those developed at the
24 OU cannot promote autonomy, as the elements of choice and decision-making on
25 the part of the student would seem to be almost non-existent. How can we reconcile
26 two notions clearly at opposite ends of the spectrum: learner autonomy and very
27 structured and rigid instructional programmes? The key to this lies in the quality of
28 the learning materials, the approach learners adopt towards these materials and the
29 skills and strategies they already have at their disposal or succeed in developing as
30 they progress through the course.

33 5. Learning strategies, strategic competence and effective language learning

35 Going back to Wenden’s contention that autonomous learners have acquired the
36 knowledge and strategies that enable them to learn effectively, we need to look in
37 more detail at definitions and classifications of learning strategies and possible links
38 both to metacognitive knowledge as described earlier, and to learning outcomes.

39 All strategies have their place in learning and there is general agreement among
40 leading researchers in the field (Brown and Palinscar, 1982; Wenden and Rubin,
41 1987; Oxford, 1990; Ridley, 1997) in support of the claim made by O’Malley and
42 Chamot (1993, p. 105) that “individuals who take a more strategic approach learn
43 more rapidly and effectively than individuals who do not”. Cohen maintains that
44 “the element of consciousness is what distinguishes strategies from those processes
45 that are not strategic” (1998, p. 4) and goes on to describe language learner strategies

1 as constituting “the steps or actions consciously selected by learners either to
2 improve the learning of a second language, the use of it, or both” (p. 5). Cohen is
3 here making a useful distinction between language learning and language use strate-
4 gies. O’Malley and Chamot (1994, p. 371) contrast learner strategies which “iden-
5 tify those (strategies) that students have developed on their own to solve language
6 learning problems” with learning strategies which they use to describe “those (the
7 strategies) that have been (or could be) taught, explicitly as part of instruction”.
8 Learning strategies for them are “always an explicit process in language learning”,
9 whereas learner strategies “may be explicit or implicit, depending on the degree of
10 awareness with which the individual employs them” (pp. 371–372). Oxford (1990, p.
11 1) supports the involvement of self in defining strategies, considering them as
12 “especially important for language learning, because they are tools for active, self-
13 directed involvement”, and adds that, if used appropriately, they “result in
14 improved proficiency and greater self-confidence”. Conscious selection and self-
15 directed involvement, both features of strategies as described above, are also char-
16 acteristics of an autonomous approach, and of general relevance in particular to the
17 needs of those learning in independent contexts.

18 Learning strategies vary widely, however, and do not automatically divide up into
19 distinct categories, hence the efforts by many researchers (Naiman et al., 1978;
20 O’Malley and Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1990; Wenden, 1991) to differentiate them in
21 order to understand better their role in language learning and how they can best be
22 taught and transferred. O’Malley and Chamot (1990, 1994) classify strategies under
23 three main headings: cognitive (applying a specific technique to a particular task, for
24 example repetition, deductive reasoning, retrieval and rehearsal), metacognitive
25 (executive processes used to plan, monitor and evaluate a learning task) and socio-
26 affective (interacting with others for practice or to combat isolation or anxiety).
27 They give a special emphasis to those classed as metacognitive, maintaining that
28 “students without metacognitive approaches are essentially learners without direc-
29 tion or opportunity to plan their learning, monitor their progress, or review their
30 accomplishments and future learning directions” (1990, p. 8, p. 216).

31 Whatever the individual context, each learner, ideally with the help of a tutor, has
32 to find a way through the learning process, developing strategies which will suit her
33 or his needs. This poses particular problems for distance course writers and tutors
34 because there are few if any opportunities to ‘get at’ learners and find out about
35 them. Given that not all attend tutorials or dayschools, and some have grounds for
36 excusal from Summer School, we cannot rely on these contexts to communicate
37 with them and seek their views. Questionnaires and recorded interviews or focus
38 groups seem to be the most appropriate methods, despite their inherently prob-
39 lematic nature, relying as they do on self-report mechanisms which may give a
40 varying picture. But, as Cotterall maintains, they do give “useful indicators of
41 group norms” (1999, p. 507), and certainly have their place along with other
42 research instruments. A study of learners following the third-stage and final course
43 of the OU French Diploma *L210: Mises au point* in 1998 (DU, 1997), using ques-
44 tionnaires and focus group discussions, provided useful data on student attitudes to
45 learner support, factors perceived by learners to be relevant to successful distance

1 language learning and, in particular, the strategies students actually use to improve
2 their language learning.²

3 Apart from the work of White and Hurd, there seems to be very little recent
4 research published relating to the particular situation of *distance language* learners.
5 While much of the classroom-based research on metacognition, autonomy and
6 strategic competence applies to language learners in all contexts, the special cir-
7 cumstances of distance language learners need particular attention. At the Open
8 University, our Institute for Educational Technology can give us data on certain
9 variables, for example, educational background and previous learning experience,
10 age and gender. But it is much more difficult to get information on a whole range of
11 personal learner characteristics which have a crucial effect on language learning:
12 aptitude and attitude, concepts, assumptions and beliefs, which in turn affect learn-
13 ing style, which itself, as many researchers in the field maintain, affects choice of
14 learning strategy.

15 What emerges is a complex picture of learners collectively embracing a multitude
16 of cognitive and affective variables, some of which we can know and act on, others
17 which we can only guess at, and all of which have an impact on language learning to
18 a greater or lesser degree. Moreover, with regard to training, Rees-Miller (1993),
19 quoted in Cohen (1998, p. 108), suggests that:

21 the stage the learners are at in the learning process, their language proficiency at
22 that stage, the educational background that they have, their beliefs about
23 language learning and the beliefs of their teachers, their varying cognitive styles,
24 and any cultural differences that exist across learners all complicate the imple-
25 mentation of learner training.

28 **6. Promoting autonomy through learner or strategy training: the OU Spanish** 29 **model**

31 For distance language learning, learner or strategy training is clearly an area
32 where there are more questions than answers. As we cannot assume tutorial
33 attendance, we are left with two main possibilities, training via the materials and/or
34 through tutor feedback. Choices then have to be made as to whether the training
35 should be implicit, embedded and contextualised or explicit, interventionist and
36 decontextualised, whether it should be devised to fit learner type or learning task;
37 and of course there are also all the presentational aspects, including language of
38 discourse and length of rubrics, use of metalanguage, avoidance of patronising tone,
39 and general design issues. Ellis (1985, p. 188) sums up the situation neatly: “Peering
40 into the *black box* to identify the different learner strategies at work in SLA is rather
41 like stumbling blindfold around a room to find a hidden object [. . .] The mapping of
42 strategies into a tight conceptual framework is bound to be arbitrary to some
43

44 ² Full details of this study appear in an article entitled ‘Distance language learners and learner support:
45 beliefs, difficulties and use of strategies’ in *Links and Letters* 7, 61–80, 2000.

1 extent". The advantage of contextualised strategy training is that "learners can
2 develop their learning strategy repertoires while learning the target language at the
3 same time" (Cohen, 1998, p. 80). On the other hand, developing the knowledge and
4 skills that make up strategic competence, particularly use of metacognitive strategies
5 is more likely to come about through decontextualised methods. As Skehan says:
6 "We would expect the metacognitive strategies to transfer more readily than the
7 cognitive strategies" (1989, p. 91). Finally, there are questions of focus, placing and
8 implementation: do you build strategies around existing course materials or start
9 with the strategies and build the materials around them?

10 The OU language courses do make some attempt at strategy development, largely
11 contextualised through, for example, in the third-stage French course, *L210: Mises*
12 *au point*, the *dossier* sections which give ideas for strategies to improve language
13 learning, and the *boîtes à idées* which give opportunities for further practice. Study
14 skills and learning strategies are also given space in some of the Language course
15 guides. The *Language Learner's Good Study Guide* (DU, 1995) is another good
16 source of information on many aspects of effective language learning.

17 Building on the French and German experience, the Diploma in Spanish has gone
18 a great deal further in promoting autonomy through the development of learning
19 strategies contextualised within the materials, and deserves a more detailed exam-
20 ination. Following on from a Certificate which takes students from ab initio to
21 lower-intermediate level, the Diploma is made up of two full credit courses, as
22 shown in Fig. 1.

23 The production of an OU language course takes 3 years and includes the follow-
24 ing stages:

- 25 1. Writing a preliminary draft syllabus, with functions, topics and linguistic ele-
26 ments to be studied.
- 27 2. Drawing up the specifications of the audio-visual materials, prepared by the
28 academic team and closely discussed with the editorial team in charge of
29 the technical part of the project at the BBC.
- 30 3. Gathering of authentic audio-visual resources in the target countries.
- 31 4. Editing the video resources and the preselection of suitable audio resources.
- 32 5. Producing a refined version of the syllabus, based on the linguistic exponents
33 present in the audio-visual materials gathered.
- 34 6. Writing the course-books, and reviewing drafts by the course team.
- 35 7. Producing activities on CDs (which include extracts of authentic audio and
36 scripted activities recorded in the studio).
- 37 8. Editing the written materials (involves editorial queries to academic team,
38 production of artwork, book design and printing).
- 39 9. Producing an assessment strategy and assessment materials for the course.
- 40

41 Since the production of a course is such a complex process, and has huge resource
42 implications, once the course is written, it will undergo no or very few changes for
43 the duration of its life, which is between 6 and 10 years.

44 The highly rigid and structured format of OU language courses appears to leave
45 little room for promoting learner autonomy. Within the way courses are currently

	L204	L314
	Viento en popa	A buen puerto
Level	University level 2	University level 3
	Threshold level ³	Vantage level ⁴
Hours of study	440 hour course 13 hours/week	440 hour course 13 hours/week
Tutorials	21 hours per course	21 hours per course
Residential school	1 week residential school	No obligatory residential school
Assessment	Continuous monthly assessment and exam	Continuous monthly assessment (includes a project) and exam

Fig. 1. The structure of the OU Diploma in Spanish.

³This is the B1 level of the Council of Europe Framework, which is the first level in the *Independent User* category. At this level students 'can understand the main points of clear standard input on familiar matters regularly encountered in work, school, leisure, etc.; can deal with most situations likely to arise whilst travelling in an area where the language is spoken; can produce simple connected text on topics which are familiar or of personal interest; can describe experiences and events, dreams, hopes and ambitions and briefly give reasons and explanations for opinions and plans.' (Council of Europe, 1998).

⁴This is the B2 level of the Council of Europe Framework, and is the second level in the *Independent User* category. At this level students 'can understand the main ideas of complex text on both concrete and abstract topics, including technical discussions in his/her field of specialisation; can interact with a degree of fluency or spontaneity that makes regular interaction with native speakers quite possible without strain to either party; can produce clear, detailed text on a wide range of subjects and explain a viewpoint on a topical issue giving the advantages and disadvantages of various options'. (Council of Europe, 1998).

presented: (1) students cannot negotiate the syllabus to fit their own linguistic needs; (2) they have little choice as to what to learn, in that they are expected to cover all the course materials, and the course assumes that all students follow the same path; (3) they cannot easily work at their own pace, as they have to complete their monthly assignments (and therefore cover the preceding units) by a specified cut-off date; (4) they are not encouraged to take their own initiative and do their own research, i.e. the assumption is that they use only the materials provided by the OU as part of the course.

So, the question can reasonably be posed: how can a rigidly structured course such as the Spanish Diploma and the notion of autonomy be reconciled in any useful and meaningful way? One solution to this dilemma is to be found in the work of Van Lier (1996, p. 21) who contends that:

1 the language curriculum — and any syllabus enabling it — provides structure
 2 to the students' learning world. This structure [...] has two sides to it [...]. On
 3 the one hand the structure limits or constrains the kind of things that can be
 4 done, and on the other it provides opportunities and resources for doing things.

5
 6 The aim of the Course Team in producing the Spanish Diploma has been precisely
 7 to turn those constraints and limitations imposed by a distance teaching and learn-
 8 ing medium into opportunities for students. In becoming aware of the medium's
 9 constraints, the writers have been forced to revise thoroughly current methodology
 10 in order to maximise what the medium can offer.

11 First of all and most importantly, each course book, which covers four study
 12 weeks, contains comprehensive study charts in which the learning objectives are
 13 clearly indicated, together with the content, timing and materials for each activity.
 14 The aim of the study charts is not only to inform students of what lies ahead, and to
 15 allow them to plan their work, but it is also a means of enabling students to make
 16 the materials their own, to achieve ownership of the syllabus. By knowing what
 17 comes next, students can decide for themselves the relevance and relative difficulty of
 18 the materials, and decide how much time and effort they will devote to the learning
 19 unit (Figs. 2 and 3).

20 Once the students embark on their studies, they are guided to a number of features
 21 they will encounter throughout the course. One of them relates to that important
 22 element of autonomy already mentioned: learner training. As Little (1990, p. 86)
 23 suggests: "It is essential to the development of autonomy that learners become
 24 aware of themselves as learners — aware, for example, of the learning techniques
 25 they instinctively favour and capable of judging how effective those techniques are".
 26 A number of practical solutions have been adopted to make learners aware of their
 27 own language learning techniques. Firstly, a general introduction to learning strate-
 28 gies and study skills in the form of the previously mentioned *Language Learner's*
 29 *Good Study Guide*, which all language students receive at the beginning of the course
 30 and can refer to during their studies; and secondly, in the belief that advice about
 31 learning strategies is best presented as and when it is needed to solve specific learning
 32 difficulties, learner training techniques are included as and when appropriate.

<p>34 Unidad 2 35 Sueños de ayer y de hoy</p> <p>36 37 En esta unidad va a informarse sobre la Revolución cubana, su pasado, presente y 38 futuro.</p>
<p>39 Learning objectives 40 By the end of this <i>unidad</i> you should be able to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 41 • justify an action; 42 • construct an argument; 43 • refer to past and future dreams and expectations; 44 • recognize some features of spoken language; 45 • report past events using journalistic style.

Fig. 2. Example of Unit Introduction and Learning objectives.

SESIÓN 1		
1h 45	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Vocabulary relating to Spanish history • Locating in the past: time expressions and dates • Narrating in the past: the present historic 	
Activity	Description	Materials
1.1	Reading: introduction to Spanish history; time expressions	
1.2	Listening: origins of the acueducto; the present historic tense	Activities CD
1.3	Dictionary skills	Monolingual dictionary

Fig. 3. Example of Study Chart.

Therefore, learner training does not take place in a vacuum, but specific strategies are presented at specific times in order to address particular difficulties, thus providing students with practical and focused advice at regular intervals. Learners are, for example, presented at one stage with different ways of recording vocabulary or taking notes, and encouraged to experiment until they find a way that works for them (Fig. 4).

A third feature which is intended to help students to become more aware of how they learn and what works best for them is the learner diary, *Diario*. In the Spanish Certificate, and in the first course of the Diploma, learners are encouraged to comment on these aspects of their learning in their *Diario*, which also serves as a vocabulary and notebook (Fig. 5).

There is also a section at the end of most sessions, called *Más práctica*, in which, like the French *boîtes à idées*, students are presented with opportunities for further practice. This is an optional activity, and is designed to enable those students who feel they need further practice in one of the points covered in the unit (Fig. 6).

Some of the *Más práctica* sections, as well as a number of other activities in the materials, also provide students with an opportunity to transfer what they have learned to other contexts, which are often more personal ones, related to the students' own experience. As Little (1991, p. 4) points out, this transferral of what has been learned to wider contexts is one of the ways in which "the capacity for autonomy [is] displayed".

Two other and closely related aspects of learner autonomy, as Nunan among others has shown (Nunan et al. in Cotterall and Crabbe 1999, p. 77), are self-monitoring and self-assessment. In the OU Spanish Diploma, students are encouraged

Listening through noise

We can often have problems understanding someone because of background noise. When this is the case, we have to listen for the gist of what is being said. We might, also, without realizing it, predict what will be said next. The video you have just watched is a good example of this. It is a good idea to practise 'predicting' what comes next in any activity involving listening.

Fig. 4. Example of strategy.

1 What did you think of Actividad 1.8? Make some notes on your reactions to the activity in your
 2 *Diario*. If you keep a record of your impressions and difficulties, and try to think about how you
 3 can solve any problems you may be having, you will be able to monitor your progress more
 4 effectively.
 5 *Tome notas en su Diario sobre sus reacciones a la Actividad 1.9. Anote sus impresiones y*
 6 *sus dificultades.*
 7

Fig. 5. Example of *Diario*.

8
 9
 10
 11 **Más práctica**
 12 Piense en la última vez que su jefe o jefa hizo una evaluación de su trabajo y escriba lo que
 13 le dijo.
 14 *Think of the last time that you had an appraisal with your boss or line manager and write*
 15 *down what he or she said.*
 16

Fig. 6. Example of *Más práctica*.

17 to develop these skills through making full use of the following: (1) the key to all
 18 activities which includes model answers (written or spoken) where appropriate, so
 19 that they can assess their performance against the given model, (2) regular activities
 20 in which they are asked to correct errors in a piece of writing. These range from
 21 spelling and punctuation to factual, grammatical or syntactical errors, and are
 22 designed to encourage the development of good editing and self-correction skills;
 23 (3) opportunities for self-evaluation, both in the writing skills sessions and in the
 24 task students do as part of their revision sessions. Once they have completed their
 25 piece, students can consult a task-specific list of pointers to enable them to evaluate
 26 their piece and work on a new, improved version. They can also, if they wish, com-
 27 plete a self-evaluation form in which they reflect on their achievements and difficul-
 28 ties and which they submit with their assignment; (4) opportunities for self-
 29 evaluation in the form of self-assessment, which is part of the assessment strategy of
 30 the first Diploma course (Fig. 7).

31 The final element we have incorporated to develop autonomy is a language
 32 awareness component. Language awareness activities, which we call *Pensándolo*
 33 *bien*, ask students to think about a range of issues, from the use of a particular tense
 34 or structure in a given sentence or passage, to the choice of vocabulary or register in
 35 a particular text, or the characteristics of a particular text type or discourse. The aim
 36 is to relate the specific point being discussed in the particular activity to what the
 37 students already know or can work out by guided reflection, thus enabling them to
 38 make connections with aspects of the language previously covered, or with their
 39 knowledge of their own language. It is an attempt, as Little (1990, p. 82) contends,
 40 to enable students to “bring their existing knowledge to bear on each new learning
 41 task”. The element of self-discovery which is then explicitly presented in the sub-
 42 sequent section, is also designed to increase motivation, as it encourages students to
 43 relate grammatical or linguistic teaching texts in the course book to specific instan-
 44 ces of language, and to what they already know. It is another way of enabling them
 45 to establish ownership of the materials (Fig. 8).

1 **Autoevaluación**

2 **(a) Contenido y estructura (Content and structure)**

- 3 • ¿Ha utilizado el formato de carta adecuado? (*Did you use the appropriate format for letter*
- 4 *writing?*)
- 5 • ¿Tiene su carta una estructura clara según el guión que se le dio en el paso anterior?
- 6 (*Does your letter have a clear structure, similar to the model given to you in the previous*
- 7 *step of the activity?*)
- 8 • ¿Se ha asegurado de que su punto de vista y postura con respecto a lo que sucedió
- 9 quedan expuestos de modo eficaz? (*Are you satisfied that your point of view in relation to*
- 10 *the events is clearly expressed?*)
- 11 • ¿Ha expresado su valoración personal del espacio radiofónico *La radio de Julia*? (*Did*
- 12 *you give your personal evaluation of the radio programme La radio de Julia?*)
- 13 • Al leer esta carta, ¿no quedan dudas respecto a lo que usted opina sobre el tema y lo
- 14 que ocurrió? (*For anyone reading this letter, are your opinions and the events that took*
- 15 *place clear?*)

16 **(b) Uso del lenguaje (Use of language)**

- 17 • ¿Ha utilizado las fórmulas de cortesía adecuadas para empezar y terminar la carta? (*Did*
- 18 *you use the appropriate formulae to start and finish a letter of this type?*)
- 19 • ¿Ha expuesto los hechos que ocurrieron de forma concisa y clara utilizando el pretérito
- 20 indefinido? (*Did you refer to the events that took place in a concise and clear way, using*
- 21 *the preterite?*)
- 22 • ¿Ha explicado en lenguaje sencillo y directo el por qué del enfado del oyente? (*Did you*
- 23 *express in simple and direct language the reason for the listener's angry reaction?*)
- 24 • ¿Ha utilizado el estilo indirecto para contar lo que se dijo y quién lo dijo? (*Did you use*
- 25 *indirect speech to report what other people said?*)
- 26 • ¿Ha utilizado una variedad de estructuras para indicar su opinión? (*Did you use a variety*
- 27 *of structures to express opinion?*)
- 28 • ¿Se ha acordado de reaccionar a los puntos de vista de otros mostrando acuerdo o
- 29 desacuerdo con ellos? (*Did you remember to react to other people's opinions showing*
- 30 *agreement or disagreement?*)
- 31 • ¿Ha sabido mostrar su convicción utilizando expresiones de opinión enfáticas? (*Were you*
- 32 *able to show your conviction using emphatic expressions of opinion?*)

33 **(c) Estilo (Style)**

- 34 • ¿Ha utilizado las convenciones de este tipo de carta? (*Did you follow the conventions of*
- 35 *this type of letter?*)
- 36 • ¿Ha utilizado el registro adecuado para este tipo de carta? (*Did you use the appropriate*
- 37 *register for this type of letter?*)
- 38 • ¿Ha organizado las ideas en párrafos coherentes? (*Did you organise your ideas in*
- 39 *paragraphs?*)
- 40
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44 Fig. 7. Example of Autoevaluación.

45

Pensándolo bien

Some languages do not have a polite form of 'you' but can still express the idea of courtesy or familiarity by using different expressions or through body language. What means exist in your own language to communicate formally or informally?

Fig. 8. Example of Pensándolo bien.

To summarise, the following are the elements used in the OU distance-learning Diploma in Spanish to promote learner autonomy:

1. Objectives clearly explained so that students can feel they have ownership of the syllabus, and so they can plan their learning.
2. The possibility of doing further work on areas of specific difficulty — individualised homework.
3. Activities or tasks that enable students to transfer what they have learned to other contexts (in particular to contexts that are relevant to their own needs and interests).
4. Learner training that is specific enough to enable students to solve specific problems whenever and wherever they appear. Constant and varied suggestions for learning strategies so students can experiment and find those that work best for them.
5. Opportunities for students to think about how they learn — in the form of a learning diary.
6. Opportunities for self-evaluation and self-assessment, both through course activities and tasks, and through the formal assessment strategy.
7. Opportunities for students to relate what they are learning to what they already know, in the form of language awareness activities.

All the above elements have been developed as a way of promoting autonomy within the not inconsiderable constraints of working within a rigid syllabus and within a distance teaching and learning setting which is not as flexible as face-to-face teaching. The limitations of this medium have forced us to rethink our methodology and reassess how we teach. We do, however, firmly believe that the principles outlined in this paper are examples of good practice that are as relevant in distance learning as they are in the face-to-face context. Indeed, when developing materials for our face-to-face residential schools, we have used many of the above-mentioned elements. Feedback from students indicates that they believe their learning experience in the face-to-face context has been much enhanced because of the methodology we have used.

7. Conclusion

There are many ways in which autonomy can be promoted through strategy development or learner training, but most of the examples available are applicable only or mostly to the classroom, and while much of the good practice in distance

learning can be transferred to face-to-face contexts, the reverse is not generally the case. This paper has given some insight into the special situation of the distance language learner, and the inherent difficulties of providing for the needs of students one may never see and about whom little may be known. The examples from the Spanish Diploma demonstrate how an awareness on the part of course writers of specific aspects of autonomy, such as the ability to organise and reflect on learning, monitor progress, identify gaps and solve problems, can be a strong basis for targeted activities designed to promote such skills, and which can be built into the course materials. More detailed research needs to be carried out to evaluate such activities in terms of their individual effectiveness in improving language learning at a distance, and to enable a typology of such tasks to be drawn up for more universal application in the distance language-learning context.

8. Uncited references

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