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Anxiety and non-anxiety in a distance language learning environment: The distance factor as a modifying influence

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Abstract

Foreign language anxiety in classroom-based language learning has a long history of research, but there are fewer studies examining this particular phenomenon with respect to the distance language learner. The isolated context and the physical absence of tutor and peers suggest that FL anxiety might be intensified in a distance setting. A longitudinal study using questionnaires, think-aloud protocols and one-to-one telephone interviews with students enrolled on a distance lower-intermediate French course at The Open University (UK) set out to test this hypothesis and to explore the nature of language anxiety in a distance learning environment and the strategies students use to cope with it. The findings indicated that although there were areas in which distance language learners shared aspects of anxiety with face-to-face learners, the distance factor could be causally linked to some marked differences with regard to the nature and extent of language anxiety. Moreover, there was evidence that the distance language learning setting may be associated with absence of anxiety for some learners, a finding that merits further investigation.

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1. Introduction

Language anxiety ranks high among factors influencing language learning, whatever the learning setting (Oxford, 1999), and has become central to any examination of factors contributing to the learning process and learner achievement. Arnold and Brown (1999, p. 9) contend that anxiety is ‘quite possibly the affective factor that most pervasively obstructs the learning process and that there are few, if any, disciplines in the curriculum which lay themselves open to anxiety production more than foreign or second language learning’.

In the distance learning context, affective problems may be intensified because of (1) the specific features of languages which make them more difficult to learn at a distance than other disciplines (Sussex, 1991), (2) the fact that language learning, an inherently *social* activity, sits awkwardly in a learning mode whose defining characteristic is *distance*, and (3) isolation and separation from tutor and peers, which militate against easy identification of learners who could benefit from guidance in affective control.

The study reported in this paper aimed to establish the elements of the distance language learning process that are associated with anxiety and non-anxiety and to explore the strategies distance language learners deploy to reduce their anxiety.

2. Literature review

The extensive body of research into language anxiety spans over three decades (Arnold, 1999; Brown, 1973; Ehrman, 1996; Gregersen, 2003, 2005; Horwitz et al., 1986; Kleinmann, 1977; Kondo and Ying-Ling, 2004; MacIntyre, 1999; Mills et al., 2006; Oxford, 1999; Spielmann and Radnofsky, 1999; Young, 1999). Learning a new language is said to be ‘a profoundly unsettling psychological proposition’ (Guiora, 1983, p. 8) and an ‘uncomfortable and unsettling experience’ (Horwitz, 2001, p. 121), implicating self-concept and self-expression to a degree not experienced in the study of other disciplines (Horwitz et al., 1991). The anxiety experienced by language learners is said to be unique to the language learning process and completely distinct from other forms of anxiety (Horwitz et al., 1986; MacIntyre, 1999). Studies point in particular to the way in which anxiety can inhibit successful language learning through its ‘subtle’ and ‘pervasive’ effect on cognitive processing (MacIntyre and Gardner, 1994; Oxford, 1999) which can result in problems with learning, for example listening comprehension and vocabulary acquisition, and ultimately low achievement (Gardner et al., 1997).

Critics, most notably Sparks and Ganschow (1995, 2000), do not accept a causal relationship between anxiety and language learning, in other words that anxious learners make poor learners or that poor language learning can result from anxiety. They consider affective variables, in particular anxiety, to be ‘sealed off during cognitive processing’ (1995, p. 239), and devoid of any explanatory power. According to them, anxiety is more likely to be related to problems inherent in a particular task and to poor decoding skills in the learner. In other words, anxiety may *result* from poor language learning but does not *cause* it, and therefore cannot be used as a variable to explain differences in language learning ability.

The rejoinders to Sparks and Ganschow by MacIntyre (1995a,b; 1999); in the 1990s and, more recently, Horwitz (2000, 2001), seek to defend the importance of language anx-

69 iety as a multifaceted variable that can be both a cause and a consequence of poor language
70 learning. Horwitz (2000, p. 256) reminds us that ‘the potential of anxiety to interfere
71 with learning and performance is one of the most accepted phenomena in psychology and
72 education’ and ‘fundamental to our understanding of how learners approach language
73 learning, their expectations for success or failure, and ultimately why they continue or dis-
74 continue study’ (2001, p. 121). In summary, Elkhafaifi (2005, p. 208) states that ‘the major-
75 ity of studies support the view that anxiety contributes to poor performance, not the
76 reverse’.

77 While there have been many studies investigating anxiety in the classroom (Cheng et al.,
78 1999; Frantzen and Magnan, 2005; Rodriguez and Abreu, 2003; Saito et al., 1999), affect
79 in the distance language learning context has received relatively scant attention (Bown,
80 2006; Harris, 1995), and yet it is possibly in this setting that affective problems are most
81 acute. As White (2003, p. 114) states: ‘Further demands on the affective resources of both
82 learners and teachers arise from the more isolated study context, separation from peers
83 and the teacher, and reduced or altered forms of social contact and interaction’.

84 3. The study

85 The investigation of anxiety and non-anxiety reported in this paper was a major strand
86 of a wide-ranging longitudinal study investigating affect in the distance language learning
87 context. The findings from the whole study were too extensive to report in one paper. For
88 this reason, results from the same study relating to motivation, roles, personality and
89 approaches have been reported separately (Hurd, 2006).

90 In order to provide a context for anxiety in the distance language context and in line
91 with Spielmann and Radnofsky (1999)’s contention that tension in language learning is
92 linked to personal expectations and a priori beliefs about language, the first stage of
93 inquiry aimed to gather data on students’ reasons for studying at a distance and their
94 beliefs about learning a language in distance mode. The following research questions were
95 addressed:

- 96 1. Why do learners study at a distance and what are their beliefs about distance language
97 learning?
- 98 2. What elements of the distance language learning process are associated with anxiety
99 and non-anxiety?
- 100 3. What strategies do distance language learners deploy to reduce anxiety?

102 3.1. Participants

103 The sample of 500 students following The Open University (UK)’s, lower-intermediate
104 French course *Overture* represented around half the total number enrolled on the course,
105 which runs from February to October each year. Table 1 gives details of the participants
106 and numbers involved at each stage of the study.

107 The course materials consist of printed material – three course books, transcripts and a
108 course and study guide – and related audio–visual material. Each student is assigned a per-
109 sonal tutor who marks their assignments and conducts face-to-face tutorials (18 h

Table 1
Participants

	Number of participants	Age range	Gender	Prior educational experience
		16–29 = 15%	71% female	Degree or professional equivalent = 42.5%
		30–49 = 46%		Post-school qualification = 13.3%
		50+ = 39%		Basic or advanced school qualifications = 24.9%
				No formal qualifications = 1.4%
				No information = 17.9%
Original sample	500			
Questionnaire 1 (February): returns	277			
Questionnaire 2 (June): returns	145			
Think-alouds (July)	4			
Interviews (December)	15			

throughout the course)¹ and the occasional dayschool. These are optional, and many students, either through necessity or volition, have little or no contact with their peers or tutor.

3.2. Procedure and methods

The study used multiple elicitation methods administered at four intervention points to investigate anxiety (see Table 1):

- questionnaires (February and June) to contextualize the study by providing background information, and to indicate any global changes in perceptions as the course progressed;
- audio-recorded think-aloud protocols (July) to allow a better understanding of the processes involved as students worked through two designated course book tasks;
- one-to-one semi-structured telephone interviews (December) to provide a wider perspective on anxiety and strategy use after completion of the course.

Existing anxiety scales, including the most widely used FLCAS (Horwitz et al., 1986) were examined, but not found to have enough relevance to a distance setting because of their emphasis on classroom-based learning and the anxiety associated with language classes and tests. The questionnaires were developed, therefore, to fit the specific aspects of distance language learning, including context, tutor and student roles, strategy use and learner support, and a pilot was carried out with 100 students. Following an analysis of the pilot, the research questions and instruments were refined and adapted for use in the main study which was conducted the following year with a new larger cohort of students studying the same course ($N = 500$). Questions that had not yielded much informa-

¹ Tutorials have been offered online as an alternative to face-to-face since 2006, after this study was carried out.

tion in the pilot or to which there had been large numbers of answers recorded as ‘missing’ in the statistical analysis were omitted in the main questionnaires. In other cases, findings from the pilot were incorporated into the questionnaires, or included in the form of examples to clarify the kind of information being sought, e.g. ‘Do you have any ideas for dealing with anxiety in learning a language at a distance? Previous *Ouverture* students came up with suggestions such as raising concerns with their tutor, and speaking where no-one can hear you – in the car for instance.’ MacIntyre and Gardner’s (1994) three-stage model of anxiety measure was incorporated into the second questionnaire with a few minor modifications to the processing and output scales: any references to the classroom situation or to tests were removed, as these were not relevant to the study.

The first questionnaire (see Appendix A) was dispatched in February at the start of the course, and the 277 who responded were sent a further questionnaire four months later, i.e. in June, halfway through their course (see Appendix B). The think-alouds (see Appendix C) were conducted in July as a small-scale pilot within the main study and have been reported in detail in a separate paper (Hurd, in preparation). Four volunteer students registered on the course audio-recorded their thoughts as they worked through all stages of a reading and a writing activity from their course book. Fifteen students took part in the one-to-one telephone interviews in December (see Appendix D), after the end of the course. Students were given an undertaking that all written and recorded materials would remain confidential and would not be linked to personal details in any subsequent reports or publications.

4. Findings

The questionnaires provided mainly quantitative data which were analysed using descriptive statistics (frequencies), and indicated general trends in the cohorts at the start and mid-point of the course. Qualitative data gathered from responses to open-ended questions in the questionnaires, think-aloud verbal protocols and telephone interviews helped to triangulate the findings by complementing and giving depth to the quantitative results. The findings are presented in line with the research questions they set out to address.

4.1. Learners’ reasons for studying at a distance and their beliefs about distance language learning

The first questionnaire provided some general information about learners’ backgrounds, their reasons for choosing to learn in distance mode and their beliefs about learning. Students were asked to give all their reasons for learning at a distance and then to select the most important reason. The results are shown in Table 2 in rank order for ‘most important’ reason.

Practical reasons were the driver for nearly two thirds of all students (64.5%) whose main reasons for distance study included the need to fit their learning round work and family, lack of proximity to an educational institution or mobility problems. The remaining students (35.3%) appear to have been already well disposed towards learning at a distance from the outset and believed that it had major benefits. Their ‘most important’ reasons for studying at a distance included the chance to work at your own pace, the challenge, reduced stress, and preference for solo learning. Other reasons given were value for

Table 2
Reasons for learning a language at a distance

Reason	% All reasons	Rank	% Most important reason	Rank
Need to fit learning around work	56.0	1	39.3	1
Need to fit learning around family	48.7	2	20.6	2
Other	14.1	10	11.8	3
Can learn at my own pace	45.8	3	9.2	4
Interesting challenge	40.8	4	6.9	5
Live too far from an education institution	14.8	8	3.1	6
Less stressful than learning in a classroom	15.9	7	1.9	7
Classroom-based learning has never worked for me	8.3	12	1.9	7
Prefer to learn on my own	21.7	5	1.5	9
Can't get out of my home easily	9.4	11	1.5	9
Want to try something different	18.8	6	1.5	9
Learn better at a distance	14.4	9	0.8	12
Easier than learning with others	6.5	13	0	13

money, accessibility, flexibility, control over learning, and the quality of Open University materials.

Students were asked in both questionnaires about anticipated or actual problems with learning a language at a distance. Over two thirds anticipated problems at the start of the course in February, a figure that rose to over three quarters in June, with the gap widening further between those who were actually experiencing problems after four months of study and those who were not, as shown in Table 3.

The problems considered more serious after four months of study were (1) language acquisition factors: developing fluency, having enough practice and finding opportunities to talk to others, (2) metacognitive factors: prioritising, assessing strengths and weaknesses and measuring progress, and (3) affective factors: worrying about failure and feeling isolated. As this study was concerned with anxiety, the affective aspects were examined in more detail, firstly in the questionnaires, and then in the think-alouds and interviews.

4.2. Elements of the distance language learning process that are associated with anxiety

Students were asked in February and June whether they felt more or less anxious learning a language at a distance than in a classroom, or if there was no difference (see Table 4).

The results were interesting in that percentages for June were slightly lower for both more and less anxious, and considerably higher for 'no difference'. A breakdown of results from students who replied to both questionnaires showed that 55.4% held the same view at both intervention points. However, four months into the course, the remaining 44.6% had changed their minds: while 27.4% now felt there was no difference, 10.8% felt more anxious, and 6.4% less anxious. Although the direction of change was mainly towards 'no dif-

Table 3
Anticipated problems (February) and actual problems (June) with learning a language at a distance

	% Questionnaire 1 (February)	% Questionnaire 2 (June)
Yes	68.4	76.1
No	31.6	23.9

Table 4

Anxiety and distance language learning

	% Questionnaire 1 (February)	% Questionnaire 2 (June)
More anxious	23.9	21.3
Less anxious	36.6	27
No difference	39.5	51.7

Table 5

Changes in view of anxiety and distance language learning

	% Questionnaire 2 (June)
No change	55.4
Less anxious to more anxious	3.6
No difference to more anxious	7.2
No difference to less anxious	5.0
More anxious to less anxious	1.4
More anxious to no difference	10.1
Less anxious to no difference	17.3

ference', more students had moved from 'less anxious' to 'more anxious' than the reverse (see Table 5).

To examine the specific phases of the distance learning process – input, processing and output – that were associated with anxiety, a slightly modified version of MacIntyre and Gardner's (1994) anxiety measure, as outlined earlier, was used in the June questionnaire. The *input* measure concerns the external material that students encounter. Anxiety may be associated with, for example, listening material where the participants speak rapidly, or written text that may be complex or dense. The *processing* phase involves learning and thinking in the target language. Anxiety can impair cognitive processing on the kinds of tasks that are heavily reliant on memory and poorly organized (MacIntyre and Gardner, 1994). *Output* anxiety refers to the apprehension experienced when speaking or writing in the target language. All stages are seen to be interdependent. Students were presented with a Likert scale and asked to indicate the strength of their view by ticking the appropriate box (see Appendix B Q6). The results giving the totals of the first two (strongly agree and agree) and last two (strongly disagree and disagree) columns are shown in Tables 6–8.

While reading and just listening to others speaking French presented very few problems, two thirds (66.2%) were bothered by disorganized written input, in this case notes

Table 6

Anxiety associated with language input

Input	% Strongly agree/ agree	% Strongly disagree/ disagree
I enjoy just listening to someone speaking French	77.5	2.8
I am not bothered by someone speaking quickly in French	24.6	54.3
I get flustered unless French is spoken very slowly and deliberately	26.0	48.6
I get upset when French is spoken too quickly	26.7	48.6
It does not bother me if my French notes are disorganized before I study them	16.2	66.2
I get upset when I read in French because I have to read things again and again	5.6	78.8

Table 7
Anxiety associated with language processing

Processing	% Strongly agree/agree	% Strongly disagree/disagree
I constantly feel that if I make more of an effort I will get better results	76.9	9.1
Learning new French vocabulary does not worry me; I can acquire it in no time	18.2	49.0
I am confident in my ability to appreciate the meaning of French dialogues	48.2	21.3
I do not worry when I hear new or unfamiliar words; I am confident that I can understand them	32.9	33.6
I am anxious with French because, no matter how hard I try, I have trouble understanding it	10.5	65.0

Table 8
Anxiety Associated with Language Output

Output	% Strongly agree/agree	% Strongly disagree/disagree
I may know the proper French expressions, but when I am nervous they just will not come out	61.3	19.7
I get upset when I know how to communicate something in French but just cannot verbalize it	48.5	24.6
When I become anxious during a tutorial I cannot remember anything I have studied	32.3	38.3%
I feel confident that I can easily use the French vocabulary that I know in a conversation	39.4	36.6
I never feel tense when I have to speak French	14.0	68.5

they had made themselves but had not organized prior to studying them. ‘Anxiety-arousal at this stage has an impact on all subsequent stages’ (MacIntyre and Gardner, 1994, p. 286) and distance learners, obliged to rely to a much greater extent on their own resources, need to be highly organized. This reflects other studies where metacognitive skills such as organisation and time-management have been identified by researchers as being particularly applicable to the distance context (Hurd, 2000; White, 1999, 2003). People speaking fast in French bothered over half the sample (54.3%), but far fewer became flustered (26%) or upset (26.7%) by this. The majority, therefore, while experiencing some apprehension about speed of input, did not get unduly upset by it.

When it came to processing, while 76.9% equated effort with results, nearly half the sample (49%) worried about learning new vocabulary. Fewer experienced anxiety associated with the understanding of new or unfamiliar words (33.6%) and only 10.5% were anxious about understanding French in general. We might speculate from these results that the processing stage did not cause anxiety for the majority of respondents, because they could work at their own pace at times to suit them.

The output stage produced, as anticipated, the highest evidence of anxiety. This ties in with the widely held view that foreign language anxiety is predominantly associated with the oral aspects of the language, and that fear of speaking in front of others is the single most important source of language anxiety (Horwitz, 2001; MacIntyre, 1999). 68.5% felt tense when they had to speak in French. Nearly two thirds (61%) could not retrieve known

expressions when nervous, and just under half (48%) got upset when they knew how to communicate something in French but could not verbalize it. Nearly a third (32.3%) could not remember what they had learned when feeling anxious in a tutorial and 36.6% did not feel confident that they could easily use the French vocabulary they knew in a conversation.

The qualitative data from open-ended questions provided further evidence overall of the anxiety caused by speaking and the embarrassment of painful self-exposure. The words ‘panic’, ‘fool’, ‘idiot’, ‘embarrassment’, ‘fear’, ‘humiliation’, ‘failure’, ‘mistakes’, ‘confidence’ (lack of) and ‘worries’ frequently occurred in their responses, reflecting the view of Dewaele (2001, p. 153) that ‘language production is particularly vulnerable to high levels of anxiety’ and ‘speaking a foreign language requires courage, lots of it. It is like jumping into the deep end of the pool after having read a manual on swimming techniques’. In this respect the distance context was not different from other learning settings. Murphy’s study of distance language learners (2005, p. 30) gave a similar picture of oral assignments which were found to be ‘nerve-wracking’, as explained by one student: ‘I was just so worried about making a fool of myself, I realize that my difficulties were caused by anxiety and an inability to relax’.

While many of the comments above would support those of classroom-based learners, the distance factor was associated with additional specific anxiety-provoking elements.

4.2.1. Lack of instant feedback

‘No tutor on a daily basis to check your learning.’

‘Lack of feedback/praise/constructive comments of encouragement.’

‘Because there isn’t the instant feedback if I’m doing something wrong, and where there’s more than one way of expressing something, I just lack confidence/knowledge and then I’ll leave it unresolved.’

4.2.2. Difficulty assessing personal progress in comparison with other students

‘Not aware of others’ level/ability, so difficult to gauge your own progress.’

‘Not knowing, but fearing, I am less able than others on the same course.’

4.2.3. Isolation

‘One cannot easily learn a language in isolation – a language is a living organic entity.’

‘I feel isolated.’

4.2.4. Lack of opportunities for speaking practice

‘Feel anxious about not speaking enough.’

‘Because I don’t get the opportunity to speak in French with other students, that side of language learning is not being developed – so I feel anxious because I don’t feel I can speak the language.’

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4.2.5. *Lack of confidence when working on your own*

I am not sure how long to devote to any one aspect and how to make the information sink in.'

'When you are learning on your own then there is no-one to guide you and help you learn.'

'I have little confidence speaking French so I don't get the chance to build up confidence that I would at a weekly evening class, for example.'

The think-aloud students backed up the comments from the questionnaires with respect to anxiety associated with linguistic aspects – vocabulary and expression, accuracy – and added other anxiety-provoking elements, such as unclear task instructions, the answer key sections (*Corrigés*) and, in one case, the nature of the task itself:

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4.2.6. *Task instructions*

'Sometimes I can't quite think what they want me to do for this exercise.'

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4.2.7. *Corrigés (answer keys)*

One student suggested that the *Corrigés* were helpful for compensating for inadequate task instructions, because they told you what you were supposed to be doing. Another sometimes found them

'intimidating, when you look at what's given in the suggested answer because my answers are nowhere near as formal or as accurate or as interesting. I think it would be more helpful if you were not made to feel too inadequate about not writing as much as there is in the answers given'.

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4.2.8. *Nature of task*

One student described her anxiety about tasks that require you to talk about the past:

'My parents died when I was young, and it's hard for me to talk about that. 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.'

The telephone interviews after the course had ended provided another source of information to triangulate the data from the questionnaires and think-alouds. The 15 students who took part in them had also responded to Questionnaires 1 and 2 and were in a position to give their views based on the whole course. Six of them felt that learning a language at a distance had caused them some anxiety at times. Their explanations supported previous comments made in the open-ended sections of the questionnaires, and centred around lack of direction, the need for self-discipline, isolation and oral performance:

'It's sometimes difficult with all these sorts of courses to know if you are going in the right direction all the time; you could quite easily go on making mistakes and not pick them up, which is a big problem.'

'Not much contact with other students and the tutor; I got a bit worried and anxious about certain things.'

331 A new anxiety-provoking element related to studying the course was the mention by
332 one interviewee of

333 ‘the complexity of all the technologies where you’ve got a CD player hanging off
334 your ears and trying to run a video, stop, start and all that sort of thing – that’s
335 the only anxiety sense really for me’.

336 4.3. Elements of the distance language learning process that are associated with non-anxiety

337 It was evident that while learning at a distance provoked more anxiety for some than
338 learning face-to-face, the reverse was the case for 27% of students after four months of study
339 who claimed that the distance factor actually made them less anxious. Their reasons covered:

- 340 ● opportunity to work at your own pace and be more in control;
- 341 ● absence of exposure to public criticism;
- 342 ● lack of competition and peer pressure;
- 343 ● chance to practice and make mistakes in private, to reflect and to try things out;
- 344 ● better option for those with low self-confidence.

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346 Comments included:

347 ‘I feel more in control as I can plan and organize myself.’

348 ‘My mistakes are not laid bare to class criticism.’

349 ‘No fear of speaking publicly.’

350 ‘Nobody around who appears to find it easy or is better.’

351 ‘Having time to listen, read, reflect on my own and try out expressions with the CD.’

352 ‘Distractions are fewer, and practice and repetitive work is more easily carried out in
353 private.’

354 ‘Gives me more confidence.’

355 In terms of confidence, while some of the learners above felt more confident away from
356 the gaze of tutor and students, others, as indicated earlier, associated lack of guidance and
357 absence of correction with loss of confidence and subsequent anxiety.

358 The interviewees who said that learning a language at a distance had not caused them
359 any anxiety put this down to various factors:

360 4.3.1. Age

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364 ‘The older you get the more relaxed you are at being on your own and going at your
365 own pace.’

366 4.3.2. Competence in another language

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370 ‘I feel with French that it will also come in the same sort of way, so I’m not too wor-
371 ried that I’m not great shakes yet; I might have felt differently if it was a new lan-
372 guage to me.’

4.3.3. *Not having to perform in front of others (other than for the end-of-course assessment)*

‘I think that obviously the anxiety isn’t there, having to do it in front of others. Certainly the heart beats much faster when you are in the classroom so that bit, the anonymity and the privacy, it gives you for speaking. I found that quite good.’
‘I’m quite happy doing things like talking to myself.’

4.3.4. *The fact that they were studying through choice*

‘My life is so stressful anyway that things I do voluntarily don’t get on the radar screen in terms of worrying about them. I’m anxious about some things but not about something voluntary, no.’

4.4. *Strategies distance language learners deploy to reduce anxiety*

For many learners, language courses are the most anxiety-provoking courses they take and yet what they actually do to cope with anxiety has received very little attention (Kondo and Ying-Ling, 2004). Students in this study were asked in February if they had any ideas for dealing with anxiety. Suggestions involved practising as much as possible and using radio and TV programmes for extra practice. Others included contacting other students; discussing concerns; learning songs; recording yourself and comparing your performance with the course extract; and focusing on the fact that other students probably have similar anxieties. In June, students were asked if they had managed to work out ways of dealing with anxiety that they would recommend to others. A third claimed to have done so and these students were invited to study a list of strategies drawn from other studies (Oxford, 1990; Young, 1999) to indicate firstly all those that applied to them and then to identify which for them was the most important strategy. The results are shown in Table 9 in rank order for all strategies used.

Table 9
Strategies used to cope with anxiety

Strategy	% All	Rank	% Most important	Rank
Actively encourage myself to take risks in language learning, such as guessing meanings or trying to speak, even though I might make some mistakes	87.5	1	41.7	1
Use positive self-talk	64.6	2	37.5	2
Imagine that when I am speaking in front of others, it is just a friendly informal chat	35.4	3	0	7
Use relaxation techniques	29.1	4	6.3	3
Share my worries with other students	20.8	5	4.2	5
Let my tutor know I am anxious	20.8	5	4.2	5
Give myself a reward or treat when I do well	18.8	7	0	7
Be aware of physical signs of stress that might affect my language learning	16.7	8	0	7
Tell myself when I speak that it will not take long	14.6	9	0	9
Other	6.3	10	6.3	3
Write down my feelings in a day or notebook	2.08	11	0	7

Taking risks was the strategy used by an overwhelming majority and was also considered the most important. Positive self-talk came next in both categories, followed by imagining you are having an informal chat and use of relaxation techniques, although none considered the informal chat strategy as the most important. Calling on support from tutor or peers was used by around a fifth of students but not considered the most important by many. 6.3% had other strategies they used, among which were ticking completed tasks, reviewing material already covered to see how you have progressed, revision and repetition to build confidence, joining a French self-help group, and outdoor activities like gardening 'to clear confusion'.

Data from the think-alouds complemented findings from the questionnaires. Strategies included getting something down on paper; concentrating on getting the gist; checking with the answers to ensure you're on the right track, and keeping going, being persistent:

'As long as I've grasped a bit of each section, I want to keep moving forward, and as you move forward, bits from the back come with you anyway.'

Two of the students taking part in the interviews were fortunate in having access to French speakers, and practised regularly with them. Others referred, as before, to self-encouragement to relieve anxiety:

'I just kept on saying to myself, as long as you come out of this having learnt something it doesn't actually matter – so that's how I sort of calmed myself down a bit.'

Ideas from students to reduce anxiety which were addressed to course writers and tutors included: more frequent tutorials and 'less putting on the spot'; French native-speaker groups for practice; slowing down the speed of speech on the audio CDs; more reassurance and pre-course guidance. Others suggested that the onus was on the student to deal with anxiety and that it was sometimes practical problems that needed addressing:

'I think the materials/tutorials are fine – it's me!'
'Not a problem with the course – it's the rest of my life!'

It should be borne in mind, however, that nearly two thirds of those responding to Questionnaire 2 had not worked out any strategies for dealing with anxiety. This could of course be because they did not feel that it was necessary to do so. However, given that just over a fifth of students at each intervention point (23.9%; 21.3%) felt more anxious about learning a language at a distance than in the classroom, the number of those who had not found appropriate strategies is significant. It would be reasonable to speculate that the most anxious students are also the least able to help themselves and that these are the students who could benefit most from guidance in affective strategy development.

5. Discussion and conclusion

A multi-instrument approach with several intervention points enabled valuable data to be gathered on the prevalence of anxiety overall, the elements that related specifically to the distance learning environment, and the strategies students use to combat anxiety. The results indicate that anxiety is an influential factor in language learning at a distance, and thus support findings from classroom-based studies. Anxiety-related problems focused mainly on speaking, in particular when called on to speak in front of others, and fear of not being understood.

444 However, the picture is not altogether clear in terms of the distance factor effect. While
445 21% of students overall after four months of study felt that learning at a distance made
446 them more anxious than learning in a classroom, 27% found that the distance factor made
447 them *less* anxious and 51.7% did not consider that the learning mode made any difference.
448 Further analysis revealed that 44.6% of students who completed both questionnaires had a
449 different view of anxiety in distance language setting after four months of study (see Table
450 5). These preliminary results indicate that there might be some interesting differences with
451 regard to non-anxiety, which will need to be followed up. The interviews revealed that age,
452 competence in another language, not having to perform in front of others/being able to
453 practice on your own, and the fact that they had chosen to study at a distance, were all
454 factors contributing to a feeling of comfort and the reduction of anxiety. Nonetheless,
455 the drop in numbers overall of those who felt that learning at a distance made them less
456 anxious between February and June (36.6–27%) may also be significant. In other words, in
457 terms of distance reducing anxiety, the reality did not match the expectation.

458 5.1. *Limitations and future directions*

459 The think-aloud verbal protocols and interviews backed up results from the question-
460 naires but also yielded additional information on both language anxiety and strategies to
461 deal with it. Lack of instant feedback, difficulty assessing personal progress in comparison
462 with other students, isolation, lack of opportunities for speaking practice and lack of con-
463 fidence when working on your own, were seen as particularly attributable to the distance
464 factor. However, because numbers involved in these qualitative interventions were very
465 small, the results, while adding depth to the quantitative findings, can only be broadly
466 indicative. While it is not unusual for qualitative investigations to be carried out with small
467 samples, future studies might benefit from larger numbers of participants in order to
468 increase the reliability of the results.

469 Findings from the two questionnaires were compared using the global results in order to
470 determine the nature and extent of learner anxiety overall at the beginning and mid-point of
471 the course. An individual differences approach involving the use of case studies would be a
472 useful extension of this study, in order to track individual student responses through both
473 questionnaires, and build a clearer picture of the ways in which individual students change
474 and develop throughout their course of study. Given that there is considerable evidence of
475 a negative correlation between anxiety and low achievement with face-to-face learners (Hor-
476 witz et al., 1986; MacIntyre and Gardner, 1989; Gardner and MacIntyre, 1993a,b; Matsuda
477 and Gobel, 2004), the inclusion of achievement measures in future studies with distance lan-
478 guage learners would be another fruitful extension of the research.

479 5.2. *Implications for distance language educators*

480 Useful insights were obtained into the ways in which, as distance language providers
481 and teachers, we could do better in terms of reducing anxiety, by reviewing elements of
482 our course materials and improving our support in the affective domain, given its potential
483 to affect how efficiently students can use the skills and assets that they have (Ehrman,
484 1996). Strategies to combat anxiety need to be complemented by those that foster self-effi-
485 cacy, which might actually reduce the need for anxiety-reducing strategies (Mills et al.,
486 2006). Spielmann and Radnofsky (1999, p. 259) also focus on the positive, maintaining

that it is the ‘development of an emerging L2 self’ that needs to be consciously fostered in instructional materials and methods. Students at The Open University (UK) are already encouraged to raise their awareness of both themselves as learners and of the language they are learning, and to experiment with different learning strategies (Hurd et al., 2001). *Success with Languages* (Hurd and Murphy, 2005), a set book for beginners and recommended at all levels, also provides a range of suggestions as a solid starting point for supporting the affective side of student learning. Some of the strategies suggested by students themselves could be considered by course writers, for example more reassurance and pre-course guidance from the course team; encouragement to keep in regular touch with the tutor and other students to discuss concerns rather than bottling things up; using songs in the target language to relax while also extending or reinforcing vocabulary or grammar points; addressing the common problem of imagining that you are the only one having difficulties by focusing on the fact that other students probably have similar anxieties. For those not experiencing anxiety because of the protected and private environment that distance learning affords, strategies are needed to help bridge the gap between private practice/rehearsal which can promote comfort and confidence, and public performance which can cause anxiety.

It is also important to realize that the requirement to respect the right of distance adult students to be left alone if that is what they wish, and the fact that some of those suffering language anxiety may well employ a well-known anxiety coping tactic, that of avoidance, mean that inevitably some students will not be reached.

Since this study was carried out, more learning choices have become available and students can now register for their preferred tutorial mode, face-to-face or online, using an audio-graphic interactive conferencing system developed in-house. This facility is now open to all students, whether registered for online tutorials or not, to allow them to communicate with each other in designated ‘discussion rooms’ for mutual support or additional oral language practice. With regard to online learning, there is evidence that the anonymity and collaborative nature of computer-mediated communication can help to reduce anxiety (Hampel et al., 2005; Lamy and Hampel, in press; Kern and Warschauer, 2000; Macdonald, 2003; Roed, 2003), and this may well have implications for distance language learners as online learning opportunities become more established in institutions such as The Open University (UK).

The outcomes of the study enhance our knowledge of the extent and nature of anxiety in distance language learning and the attempts of learners to counteract its negative effects. In so doing, they also provide some useful pointers for course writers and tutors. With regard to the interplay between the various factors at work in language learning, Young (1999) advises language educators to make their number one priority the language learner, and recognize the interdependent role that linguistics, cognition and affect play in language learning. White (2005, p. 177), specifically in relation to distance learning, underlines the importance of understanding the learner’s perspective and developing ‘a more informed understanding of the circumstances of learners, their needs and the ways they respond to distance learning opportunities’. These are important avenues for further research.

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Appendix A. Learning a language at a distance

Questionnaire 1, February 2003 (questions relating to reasons, beliefs and anxiety)

Q9 Why have you chosen to learn French at a distance? Please cross **all** the boxes that

apply in column (a) and **one** box only in column (b) to indicate which is your most important reason.

	(a) All reasons	(b) Most important reasons
Because I need to fit my learning around work	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
(If you put a cross in this answer, please say whether you work full or part time)		
part time <input type="checkbox"/> full time <input type="checkbox"/>		
Because I need to fit my learning around family commitments.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Because I prefer to learn on my own.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Because I prefer to learn at my own pace.....	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Because I want to try something different.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Because I live too far from an educational institution.....	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Because classroom-based language learning has never worked for me...	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Because it is easier than learning with others.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Because it's an interesting challenge.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Because I learn better this way.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Because it is less stressful than learning in a classroom.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Because I cannot get out of my home easily.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other (please give details).....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Q10 Do you anticipate having any problems studying this course?

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

Anxiety

Q14 Do you feel more anxious about learning a language at a distance than learning in a classroom?

Yes, more anxious.....	<input type="checkbox"/>
No, less anxious.....	<input type="checkbox"/>
No, difference between the two.....	<input type="checkbox"/>

If you answered **Yes**, please say what you think is making you more anxious about learning a language at a distance.

Q15 Do you have any ideas for dealing with anxiety in learning a language at a distance?

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

If **Yes**, please give details

Appendix B. Learning a language at a distance

Questionnaire 2, June 2003 (questions relating to anxiety)

Anxiety

Q2a Have you experienced any problems so far in learning French at a distance?

Yes

No

Q6 To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements? (*Please cross one box only in each row.*)

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
I am not bothered by someone speaking quickly in French.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
It does not bother me if my French notes are disorganized before I study them.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I enjoy just listening to someone speaking French.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I get flustered unless French is spoken very slowly and deliberately.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I get upset when I read in French because I have to read things again and again.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I get upset when French is spoken too quickly.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Learning new French vocabulary does not worry me; I can acquire it in no time.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I am anxious with French, because, no matter how hard I try, I have trouble understanding it.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I constantly feel that if I make more of an effort I will get better results.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

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I am confident in my ability to appreciate the meaning of French dialogues.....

I do not worry when I hear new or unfamiliar words; I am confident that I can understand them.....

I never feel tense when I have to speak French.....

I feel confident that I can easily use the French vocabulary that I know in a conversation.....

I may know the proper French expressions, but when I am nervous they just won't come out.....

I get upset when I know how to communicate something in French but I just cannot verbalize it.....

When I become anxious during a tutorial, I cannot remember anything I have studied.....

Q7a Are you finding learning a language at a distance makes you more or less anxious than learning in a classroom?

More anxious.....

Less anxious.....

No difference between the two.....

Q7b If you answered **More anxious**, please say what makes you more anxious about learning a language at a

Appendix C. Extract from think-aloud instructions (July)

When you get to Activité 11, start your tape recorder and work through Activités 11 and 12. For this part of the task, I would like you to record everything that is going through your mind as you work through each step of the two activities. You should not plan what you are going to say or try to explain what you are saying, but you should keep talking. It is important that you record your thoughts as they come to mind and not after having had time to reflect. You may find it helpful to do a practice run with an earlier activity, just to get used to the idea of talking to yourself!

that you would recommend to other learners?

Yes

No

Q8b If you answered **Yes**, to Q8a please cross **all** that apply in column **(a)** and cross the **one** most important in column **(b)**. **(a)** All **(b)** Most Import
(cross one only)

Use positive self-talk (e.g. I can do it; it doesn't matter if I make mistakes; others make mistakes).....

Actively encourage myself to take risks in language learning, such as guessing meanings or trying to speak, even though I might make some mistakes.....

Imagine that when I am speaking in front of others, it is just a friendly informal chat.....

Tell myself when I speak that it won't take long.....

Give myself a reward or treat when I do well.....

Be aware of physical signs of stress that might affect my language learning.....

Write down my feelings in a diary or notebook.....

Share my worries with other students.....

Let my tutor know that I am anxious.....

Use relaxation techniques e.g. deep breathing, consciously speaking more slowly, etc.....

Other (please give details).....

Appendix D. One-to-one telephone interview questions related to anxiety (December)

From the questionnaires we know that some students have found learning a language at a distance has caused them some anxiety at times. Would you count yourself among them?

(If yes) which aspects of studying the course did you find stressful? What steps did you take to deal with your worries and were you successful in your attempts?

(If no) Could you explain what it is about learning a language at a distance that you have found makes you less anxious?

Did you feel that you got enough support while you were studying the course?

(If yes,) was this down to the way the materials were structured, the feedback from the *Corrigés* and from your tutor, or something else?

(If no), what more do you think could have been done to support you?

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