Open Research Online

The Open University's repository of research publications
and other research outputs

Open and distance language learning at the Shantou Radio and TV University, China, and the Open University, United Kingdom: a crosscultural perspective

Journal Item

How to cite:

Hurd, Stella (2006). Open and distance language learning at the Shantou Radio and TV University, China, and the Open University, United Kingdom: a crosscultural perspective. Open Learning, 21(3) pp. 205–219.

For guidance on citations see FAQs.

Version: Not Set

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:
http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.1080/02680510600953161

oro.open.ac.uk

Author Query Sheet

AUTHOR: The following queries have arisen during the editing of your manuscript. Please answer the queries by making the necessary corrections on the CATS online corrections form. Once you have added all your corrections, please press the SUBMIT button.

QUERY NO.	QUERY DETAILS
Q1	Confirm White (2003a) is correct
Q2	State as White (2003a) and/or (2003b), ensure both are cited in the text
Q3	Confirm White (2003b) is correct - if (2003a) then provide page number for the quote
Q4	Provide page number for quote
Q5	Provide city for publisher
Q6	Provide page number/span for article
Q7	Provide volume number, or name and city of publisher/institute
Q8	Provide dates for conference
Q9	Provide full web address for discussion
Q10	State what data in parentheses are

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Open and distance language learning at the Shantou Radio and TV University, China, and the Open University, United Kingdom: a cross-cultural perspective

Stella Hurd[a]* and Junhong Xiao[b]
[a]*The Open University, UK;* [b]*Shantou Radio and TV University, P.R. China*

Open and distance learning is experiencing rapid growth throughout the world. China in particular is undergoing a massive expansion of its distance EFL programmes. This global phenomenon challenges all those involved in delivering distance learning materials to examine current practice and the assumptions and expectations that underlie it, with particular regard to the factors influencing approaches to learning, not least the extent of the effect of differing cultural backgrounds. The cross-cultural study which forms the subject of this paper investigates foreign language students in two very different open and distance learning cultures, The Open University, United Kingdom and the Shantou Radio and TV University, China. It seeks to investigate different attitudes to the distance teaching of languages as spelt out in the two groups' answers to questions relating to beliefs, difficulties and learning strategies.

Keywords: *Autonomy; Beliefs; Culture; Open and distance learning; Languages; Strategies*

Introduction

The Open University, United Kingdom (OU) has provided language courses for over 10 years, using its well-tried model of supported open and distance learning. There are now around 8000 students registered on courses in French, German and Spanish, from beginners to degree level. In China, English as a foreign language has seen unprecedented growth in the past 20 years, and distance learning is also gaining popularity since 'increasing numbers of mature students are keen to pursue continuing education to upgrade their skills' (Krasocki, 2001, p. 15). It is estimated that the Radio

*Corresponding author: Department of Languages, Faculty of Education and Language Studies, The Open University, Walton Hall, Milton Keynes MK7 6AA, UK. Email: m.s.hurd@open.ac.uk

and TV Universities, the largest of the 67 universities that offer courses at a distance, have around 1.3 million students currently enrolled on higher education programmes in which English is a compulsory course (China Central Radio and TV University [CCRTVU], 2004). What are the perceptions and goals of UK and Chinese students following distance language courses? What specific problems do they encounter as they study, and what strategies do they use to address them? In what ways do students from these two different cultures differ with respect to these factors? This paper attempts to address these questions using the findings from questionnaires deployed in a study of 204 students learning French at the OU, and 170 students learning English at the Shantou Radio and TV University (SRTVU).

The UK and Chinese open and distance language learning contexts

The Open University, United Kingdom

Students at the OU essentially learn on their own but can call on support from a variety of sources, including Student Services who operate regionally, and their personal tutor who is responsible for marking assignments and giving feedback. They also have access to print or web-based support materials in the form of course guides, transcripts and study skills advice (The Open University, 2003, 2005). The materials play a central role as the teaching voice, the link between teacher and learner, and are highly structured, with study charts, navigational aids and fixed assessment points. This element of directed learning does not, however, preclude the development of autonomy. Efforts are made in the materials to encourage students to experiment with different learning strategies and to raise their awareness of both themselves as learners and of the language they are learning (Hurd *et al.*, 2001).

There are between 18 and 21 face-to-face or online optional tutorial hours for each course, depending on the level. OU learners are encouraged to set up self-help groups; they can also use the University's First Class electronic conferencing system to contact other students for information exchange and mutual support. Other more general support is available through the Open University Students Association and *Sesame*, a free bimonthly newspaper produced in-house.

The Shantou Radio and TV University, China

The Chinese B.A. in English was set up in 1996 by the CCRTVU in collaboration with Beijing Foreign Studies University, and with support from the British Council and Overseas Development Agency. In addition to providing advanced undergraduate courses for teachers of English in primary or secondary schools, the CCRTVU also caters for professionals who need English for special purposes; for example, trading abroad.

All students at the SRTVU, a metropolitan wing of the CCRTVU, take the general English module. They can then choose the courses within the specialized module that relate specifically to their professional needs. The course books, specially prepared for

the programme, are thematically structured and integrate all language skills within the activities or tasks. They complement each other in content and follow similar presentation formats designed to encourage learner autonomy. This is unusual in Chinese universities, where coherence across courses is not an issue, and the norm is for each team to determine the content and presentation format of its own course or courses, independent of other existing courses. In each year, students are provided with a *Guide to Success*, which features orientation in Year One, learning strategies in Year Two and professionalism in Year Three.

Optional tutorial hours at two hours per week are substantially more than at the OU. Students are nonetheless strongly advised to participate in online conferences or join self-help groups for extra practice, and to work collaboratively on activities and tasks. Unlike OU students who are very widely dispersed, most SRTVU students live within easy reach of their college by public transport, which makes it relatively straightforward to set up learning groups for mutual support, a feature of open and distance learning in China.

Student profiles in both countries

The typical distance language learner at the OU is in the 35–50 age range; students at SRTVU are mostly in their thirties. Distance-taught courses provide the flexibility and autonomy needed by students in both universities, the majority of whom are in work and have family commitments (Xiao, 2004a). While there are no prerequisites to OU language courses, students at the SRTVU who have not taken English as a major part of their degree must pass a compulsory English test before formally enrolling, in order to prove that they are at the requisite level. Supported distance learning is less familiar in China, where pupils are used to being 'spoon-fed' at school and relying totally on the teacher (He, 2000; Liu & Xiao, 2004) as the 'holder of authority and knowledge' (Littlewood, 1999, cited in Wei & Chen, 2003, p. 2). Independent thinking or showing evidence of critical awareness is not normally encouraged in a culture where learning is characterized by 'dependency in student-tutor relations, and lack of autonomy in study practices' (Gieve & Clark, 2005, p. 262).

The study

The cross-cultural study that is the focus of this paper was set up to compare the results of a survey carried out among distance language students in the United Kingdom and China (Hurd, 2000; Xiao, 2003). Its primary aim was to extend our knowledge and understanding of student perspectives in the two cultures, and to explore the influence of cultural background on language learning and its implications for the design of distance language learning materials, as a basis for further research. The study involved 204 learners of French at the OU studying the third-stage French course and 170 learners of English at the SRTVU enrolled on each of the three years leading to the B.A. Two questionnaires were used in the OU study, administered at two intervention points during the year of study, while for the

SRTVU study there was one questionnaire only, containing selected questions from the OU survey. In order to be able to make accurate comparisons, the results are based only on questions that were put to both cohorts.

The following research questions were addressed:

1. What are the main reasons students have for studying French (OU) or English (SRTVU)?
2. What are SRTVU and OU student perceptions of the factors important for successful distance language learning?
3. What specific difficulties do SRTVU and OU students identify with regard to distance language learning?
4. Which strategies do SRTVU and OU students use to improve their language learning?

Findings

The data were analysed using exploratory-interpretative methods based on the numerical findings, and took into account the structural elements of the specific educational systems and the differing stages of economic development, both of which are likely to have affected learner aspirations and approaches to study.

Reasons for enrolling on the course

In both studies, the students were asked to tick from a list their main reason for enrolling on the course and to state additional reasons if they wished.

Of the three specifically named reasons, the top priority for SRTVU students was 'for work', followed by 'to gain the diploma', with only 8.3% studying 'for pleasure'; while for OU students, pleasure was the main motivation. This reflects the fact that British language learners are generally motivated not by a desire to progress in the world of work, but to find out more about the culture of the other country and to be able to converse with its people. Chinese students showed themselves to be particularly vocationally oriented, in keeping with the desire to gain a recognized qualification in English, as China rapidly moves to becoming a major world economy. Further
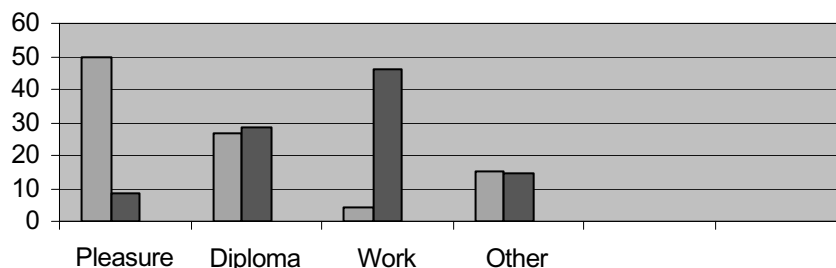

Figure 1.   Reasons for enrolling on the course in response to the question 'What is your main reason for following this course?' (column 1, OU students; column 2, SRTVU students)

evidence of this came from an examination of the 'other reasons' given by Chinese students for studying their course, which included going abroad, teaching your own children, hoping for a better future and changing job for a higher salary.

Student perceptions of factors important for successful distance language learning

In this section, students were first asked to select from a given list all factors that—in their opinion—were important for successful distance language learning, and then to select from a shorter list which factors they believed applied to themselves as distance language learners. Tables 1 and 2 show the results in rank order for each university.

Of the nine characteristics suggested as important for successful distance language learning, three were identified as equally important by roughly the same numbers in both the OU and the SRTVU cohorts: self-confidence, persistence and ability to assess your own strengths and weaknesses. However, there were notable differences for the first two of these factors when applied to themselves as learners, with the Chinese cohort showing considerably higher levels of confidence (28.3% OU, 61.3% SRTVU) yet lower levels of persistence (60.1% OU, 43.9% SRTVU). There were also major disparities between the two cohorts with regard to 'being self-aware and reflective' when applied to both the 'good distance language learner' and to themselves (66.4% OU, 79.5% SRTVU and 31.2% OU, 49.2% SRTVU). An explanation for this could lie in the deep-rooted tradition of self-awareness and reflection in Chinese culture (Pang, 2003), which is less prevalent among UK learners. 'Being good at taking the initiative', a key skill widely encouraged in western societies, was selected for the 'good distance language learner' by an even higher percentage of the SRTVU cohort (90.1%)—a surprisingly high figure, which was not reflected in either cohort in their responses to the same factor when applied to themselves as learners (24.6% OU and 25% SRTVU) and illustrates the wide gap in this case between the

Table 1.   Beliefs about successful distance language learning (OU students) in response to 'Which characteristics would you say describe (1) a good distance language learner, (2) yourself as a distance language learner?'

	A good distance language learner (%)	Yourself as a distance language learner (%)
Persistence	98.9 (1)	60.1 (3)
Enthusiasm/motivation	98.9 (1)	65.2 (2)
Self-confidence	96.7 (3)	28.3 (8)
Willingness to accept constructive criticism	85.6 (4)	65.9 (1)
Being well organized	84.4 (5)	44.2 (6)
Ability to assess own strengths and weaknesses	82.3 (6)	53.6 (4)
Ability to prioritize	78.9 (7)	48.6 (5)
Being self-aware and reflective	66.4 (9)	31.2 (7)
Being good at taking the initiative	61.1 (10)	24.6 (9)

AQ10   Data in parentheses represent.

208   *S. Hurd and J. Xiao*

Table 2.   Beliefs about successful distance language learning (SRTVU students) in response to 'Which characteristics would you say describe (1) a good distance language learner, (2) yourself as a distance language learner?'

	A good distance language learner (%)	Yourself as a distance language learner (%)
Persistence	96.2 (1)	43.9 (5)
Self-confidence	96.2 (1)	61.3 (1)
Being good at taking the initiative	90.1 (3)	25 (7)
Enthusiasm/motivation	86.3 (4)	50 (3)
Ability to assess own strengths and weaknesses	85.6 (5)	53.7 (2)
Being self-aware and reflective	79.5 (6)	49.2 (4)
Ability to prioritize	63.3 (7)	34 (6)
Being well organized	58.3 (8)	12.8 (9)
Willingness to accept constructive criticism	34 (9)	24.2 (8)

Data in parentheses represent.

AQ10

desirable and the actual. Many years of experience of teaching in China where students seldom volunteer a comment in class or initiate a conversation lead us to believe that the SRTVU learners were almost certainly embracing what they perceived to be a particularly western aspiration, influenced perhaps by exposure to western culture in the course of their learning.

With regard to being well organized, only 58.3% of the SRTVU students (84.4% OU) selected this factor, and only 12.8% (44.2% OU) applied it to themselves. One explanation of the discrepancy could be the emphasis in Chinese culture on spontaneous action, rather than meticulous advance planning, something perceived as a particularly British phenomenon by the Chinese, which corresponds to the stereotype of the 'typical Brit' derived from novels, films or even textbooks. This was also borne out in a study investigating the experience of Chinese students at Southampton Institute (United Kingdom) who commented on the 'slower pace of life in Britain' as a major cultural difference (Collins & Lim, 2004, p. 1). Moreover, pupils in Chinese schools have very little say in the activities they undertake, with the result that, even though at university they are given much greater choice in a distance learning mode, they still rely heavily on teachers to direct and organize their studies (Xiao, 2004b). The accepted norm is to follow instructions and not to think for yourself (Liu & Xiao, 2004), and this is not seen to be in conflict with a tradition of self-awareness. Chinese students do not therefore give the same priority to the metacognitive skills of planning, prioritizing and self-monitoring, considered particularly relevant to learning in distance mode (White, 1999, 2003a; Hurd, 2000). This would also explain why fewer SRTVU students (63.3%) rated 'ability to prioritize' than OU students (78.9%), who are likely to have at least some familiarity with the concept as applied to learning, even if they personally find it difficult.

AQ1

Finally, virtually all OU students in the sample (98.9%) believed strongly in the importance of enthusiasm/motivation, as opposed to 86.3% of their Chinese

counterparts—although the figures were lower when applied to themselves as learners (65.2% OU, 50% SRTVU). What is surprising is that although the result for enthusiasm/motivation was lower than at the OU, it was nevertheless very high in the context of a culture emerging from a 'planned' social system in which rule-governed behaviour has for so long been the norm, and is perhaps evidence of a move towards a more intrinsic motivation linked to the achievement of personal goals. Gan *et al.* (2004, p. 238) reported similar findings among the Chinese learners of English in their study: '… positive language learning experiences seem to trigger the development of intrinsic motivational processes in learners'. To a certain extent it also reflects the view of Lee (1996) that the pursuit of human perfectibility and the belief in attainability have provided a basis for self-actualization and, therefore, intrinsic motivation in learning.

Difficulties with learning a language at a distance

In this section, students were asked about difficulties, different approaches and whether they felt it was possible to change and improve the way you learn a foreign language. The results with respect to difficulties were as presented in Table 3.

Chinese students appeared to experience more difficulty learning English than OU students learning French. Language origins could account for this: English and French having similar roots and many words in common—in contrast to English and Chinese, whose roots are entirely different. For example, 47.7% of SRTVU students found it 'hard to remember new vocabulary' against 36.7% of OU students. The SRTVU students also demonstrated more problems in relation to the learning process itself; for example, 'find it hard to concentrate on one's own/get easily distracted'

Table 3. Difficulties with learning a language at a distance in response to 'Do you experience any particular difficulties learning a language at a distance?'

	OU students (%)	SRTVU students (%)
Takes more time than anticipated	46.7 (1)	71.9 (1)
Few opportunities for practice with others	46.7 (1)	40.9 (4)
Find it hard to remember new vocabulary	36.7 (3)	47.7 (2)
Find it hard to assess my own progress	34.4 (4)	28 (8)
Feel overwhelmed by all the material	28.9 (5)	18.1 (9)
Feel that I make progress less rapidly than others	16 (6)	32 (6)
Find it hard to concentrate on my own/get easily distracted	15.5 (7)	31.8 (7)
Don't like to ask for help	10 (8)	5.3 (11)
Requires too much self-discipline	6.7 (9)	44.6 (3)
Get easily demotivated if I don't understand something or if I get a bad mark	6.7 (9)	18.1 (9)
Access to video and /or TV difficult	4.4 (11)	34 (5)

AQ10 Data in parentheses represent.

(15.5% OU, 31.8% SRTVU), 'requires too much self-discipline' (6.7% OU, 44.6% SRTVU), 'takes more time than anticipated' (46.7% OU, 71.9% SRTVU), 'get easily demotivated if I don't understand something or get a bad mark' (6.7% OU, 18.1% SRTVU) and 'feel that I make progress less rapidly than others' (16% OU, 32% SRTVU). A possible explanation could be that although for many OU students the idea of active participation in your own learning and taking responsibility, while fraught with difficulty, is not a totally alien concept, in China it is completely new and unfamiliar (Zhang, 2004). However, this was not the case for problems related to certain other aspects of distance language learning where autonomy is required, such as self-monitoring (34.4% OU, 28% SRTVU) and coping with large amounts of material (28.9% OU, 18.1% SRTVU). More OU students also had difficulty seeking help (10% OU, 5.3% SRTVU). Finally, while 34% of SRTVU students found 'access to video and/or TV difficult', only 4.4% of OU students had access problems. This is almost certainly due to the fact that China is still a developing country with an uneven distribution of resources (Teng *et al.*, 2004).

As regards changes in approach, 94.1% of OU students and 95.2% of SRTVU students answered yes to the question: 'Do you think it is important to consider different ways of learning a foreign language?' A total 87.4% of OU students and 91.3% of SRTVU students also considered it was possible to change and improve the way they personally learned a foreign language. This is encouraging in that it indicates the beginnings of a move from a rigid way of thinking to a more open-minded approach, which can facilitate autonomous learning. It is possible that the actual experience of learning a language at a distance is a causal factor in these changing perceptions.

Learning strategies

Students were asked to select learning strategies from a given list (see Tables 4 and 5).

In China, English is studied for international use, hence the assumption that its grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation are of paramount importance (Gan *et al.*, 2004, p. 234). One of the key features of English-language teaching is the emphasis on the linguistic aspects of the target language, even at the expense of its communicative and cultural dimensions. This was reflected in the survey, where 56.8% of SRTVU students selected 'note down as you go along what language points are causing difficulty and ask for help', compared with only 33.3% of OU students. The prioritizing of good note-taking skills in China (He, 2000) was also evident from this study where more Chinese students selected 'noting down vocabulary from foreign language radio/TV/films' (31.1% OU, 44.6% SRTVU) and 'making notes as you listen to/watch a recording to help concentration' (28.9% OU, 54.5% SRTVU). On the other hand, fewer Chinese students ticked 'repeat words and phrases out loud' (73.3% OU, 48.4% SRTVU), and 'make lists of vocabulary and regularly test yourself' (60% OU, 24.2% SRTVU), which could be attributed to the assumption widely held by both Chinese teachers and students that these strategies are of very little value to advanced learners, who should be focusing on reflective strategies rather than mechanical methods.

Open and distance language learning: cross-cultural perspective 211

Table 4.   Learning strategies (OU students) in response to 'Which strategies do you use to improve your learning?'

	OU students (%)
Repeat words and phrases out loud	73.3
Try to make use of any language practice opportunities that come your way	65.6
Allow time for checking and double checking your TMAs before sending them off	61.6
Make lists of vocabulary and regularly test yourself	60
Set your priorities for the day/week/month in terms of how much time you are going to spend, what you are going to do and what you intend to achieve	50
Use ideas from the *Dossier* or *Boîte à idées*	40
Record yourself speaking	35.6
Note down as you go along what language points are causing difficulty and ask for help	33.3
Reflect on which learning techniques work best for you and make a point of reusing them	33.3
Note down vocabulary from English radio/TV/films	31.1
Makes notes as you listen/watch a recording to help concentration	28.9
Keep a log of all course-based activities that have been completed	17.8
Play word games/use mnemonics/make mind maps	10
Create your own language exercises / activities	4.4
Keep a separate diary of your progress	0

Table 5.   Learning strategies (SRTVU students) in response to 'Which strategies do you use to improve your learning?'

	SRTVU students (%)
Note down as you go along what language points are causing difficulty and ask for help	56.8
Makes notes as you listen/watch a recording to help concentration	54.5
Repeat words and phrases out loud	48.4
Allow time for checking and double checking your TMAs before sending them off	47.7
Note down vocabulary from English radio/TV/films	44.6
Reflect on which learning techniques work best for you and make a point of reusing them	43.1
Set your priorities for the day/week/month in terms of how much time you are going to spend, what you are going to do and what you intend to achieve	40.1
Use ideas from the *Guide to Success*	38.6
Try to make use of any language practice opportunities that come your way	38.6
Play word games/use mnemonics/make mind maps	34.3
Create your own language exercises / activities	31
Make lists of vocabulary and regularly test yourself	24.2
Keep a log of all course-based activities that have been completed	15.9
Record yourself speaking	12.8
Keep a separate diary of your progress	5.7

212 *S. Hurd and J. Xiao*

The OU students tended to use more strategies related to the metacognitive skills of planning and managing their time than their Chinese counterparts; for example, 'set your priorities for the day/week/month in terms of how much time you are going to spend, what you are going to do and what you intend to achieve' (50% OU, 40.1% SRTVU) and 'allow time for checking and double checking your tutor-marked assignments (TMAs) before sending them off' (61.6% OU, 47.7% SRTVU). Moreover, far fewer SRTVU students (38.6%) tried to make use of any language practice opportunities that came their way, compared with OU students (65.6%). This ties in with another study that looked at strategy use among Chinese learners of English and found that 'learners' utilization of language production opportunities seemed to be rather limited' (Gao, 2003, p. 51). However, the tradition of self-awareness and reflection that is prevalent in Chinese culture is reflected in the relatively high figures for this particular strategy, 'reflecting on which learning techniques work best for you and make a point of reusing them' (43.1% SRTVU, 33.3% OU). It as found that 5.7% of SRTVU students also kept a separate diary of their progress, while not a single OU student in the survey claimed to do this. The majority of OU students favoured other more cognitive strategies, possibly at the expense of developing a reflective capacity, one of the essential strategies of the autonomous learner.

Discussion

The main goal of the cross-cultural study was to elicit information on the perceptions, difficulties and use of strategies of distance language learners coming from very different cultural backgrounds, to make comparisons with respect to these cultures and to draw some conclusions on the extent to which cultural background may contribute to learning approach.

Some major differences in approach appeared to be closely related to cultural background, for example:

- More vocationally oriented learning among students at the SRTVU than among OU students, one-half of whom were learning primarily for personal enrichment. While the results for the Chinese cohort are almost certainly related to economic reasons, vocationally oriented motivation is also deeply embedded in the learning culture. Language courses on offer at the Radio and TV Universities are designed to be solid preparation for the world of work and to provide access to a wider range of careers both nationally and internationally, as an integral part of China's mission for higher education institutions of this kind.
- Higher levels of self-awareness among Chinese students, related to a tradition of reflective practice in Chinese culture, but not seen as part of an autonomous approach as in the United Kingdom.
- Lower levels among the Chinese students of key aspects of autonomy such as the ability to pace, prioritize and self-monitor, linked to a culture of dependence on the teacher as the sole authority.

- The emphasis in Chinese culture on spontaneous action, rather than meticulous advanced planning and organization, promoted as part of autonomous practice in British universities.
- Greater language-specific difficulties for Chinese students and more problems related to language learning in distance mode; for example, self-discipline, maintaining motivation and negative comparisons with other students.

The strategies used by students to improve their language learning tended to reflect the views expressed by the cohorts on factors in successful distance language learning. For example, the SRTVU students' favoured strategies linked to reflective practice and creative language use, but used fewer strategies aimed at developing time-management and prioritization skills than their OU counterparts. The emphasis in China on mastering grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation would account for higher figures in the SRTVU cohort for strategies related to acquiring good language learning habits.

The OU students were more likely to try to make use of any language practice opportunities that came their way. While the relatively low figure for this strategy among the SRTVU students reflects the lack of access to English native speakers in China, the rapid development of Information and Communications Technology is likely to bring about radical change in this respect, as online resources become available to a wider population of learners.

Autonomy is increasingly linked to successful learning (Little, 1991, 2001, 2002; Wenden, 1991; Benson, 2001, 2002) and is seen to be particularly relevant to the distance language-learning environment (Hurd *et al.*, 2001; White, 2003). While both Chinese and UK distance learners had difficulty with a number of aspects of autonomy, such as prioritizing, planning and self-monitoring, this was far more pronounced among the Chinese cohort. The difficulty of implementing autonomy in non-western cultures is summed up succinctly by Nicole White (2003b):

> In my experience it has a lot to do with the style of learning previously engrained in the students. In many Asian countries, especially those that have had a Confucian influence, students are traditionally taught to respect their teacher (older and wiser) as the authority.

White's statement is echoed by Benson *et al.* (2003), who conclude that:

> a particular image of the Asian learner has emerged – that of an individual whose learning styles and preferences are largely conditioned by values of collectivism, conformity and respect for authority inculcated through early experiences at school and in the family.

Yet, although figures in the survey for certain key aspects of autonomy—ability to prioritize and being well organized—were low among the SRTVU students, nearly four-fifths of them regarded other key aspects, such as being self-aware and reflective, as important factors in successful distance language learning. Moreover, nearly one-half claimed to possess these attributes, as opposed to less than one-third of OU students. These are positive qualities in successful learners and essential to autonomous learning (Pang, 2003). It would seem, however, that although the Chinese students in this study had good reflective skills, they may not yet have learned how to
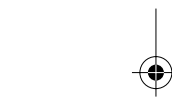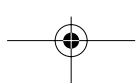
use them as part of autonomous learning. In other words, their reflective powers do not seem to connect with or lead to other autonomous learning skills, but are more an end in themselves.

The transmission model of teaching is deeply engrained within Chinese culture and, although over two-thirds of the OU students claimed to experience difficulties in learning French at a distance (68.2%), this was considerably lower than the figure for the SRTVU students (92.8%). This mirrors the Southampton study (Collins & Lim, 2004, p. 3), where the researchers found that 'students 'had no knowledge really … of what we would understand by an autonomous learner'—students had been 'brought up to learn by rote and regurgitate …' However, according to Wong (2002), the assertion that Chinese learners excel only in rote learning and do not aim for understanding is not justified. The Chinese learners' view of learning does not see memorization and understanding as opposites, but rather as interdependent elements in the learning process (Marton *et al.*, 1996). In terms of learner responsibility, in the United Kingdom, schoolchildren are increasingly being taught to think for themselves in their learning, which helps to familiarize and popularize the link between autonomy and learning—although, as the study shows, there is still a long way to go. This has not been the case in Chinese schools until more recently, although it is now one of the main education reform targets in China (Ministry of Education, China, 2004), and this could intensify the difficulty for adults on distance courses who are having to battle against a sense of 'learned helplessness' (Gan *et al.*, 2004, p. 236). The SRTVU is taking steps to address this, as reflected by the number of tutorials, the *Guides to Success*, which aim to provide students with systemic training in self-study skills, the 'tutorials-in-print' for each course and the availability of a 'supervisor' for personal support.

Limitations and future directions

The following limitation should be borne in mind in interpreting the results and drawing conclusions from these two studies. As stated earlier, the OU study was longitudinal and the questionnaires were administered at different times during the course, whereas the SRTVU study was more of a snapshot investigation and used one questionnaire that was an amalgamation of the two used in the OU study. Other potential limitations concern the level and language of students who participated: the OU study involved one group of advanced learners of French, while the SRTVU study included three groups of advanced learners at different levels of English. However, the lack of evidence that good levels of language proficiency go hand in hand with superior language learning skills leads us to believe that this is not a major limitation. As Riley (1987, p. 75) states, 'it is perfectly possible for a learner to be advanced in the first sense, yet a beginner in the second, and vice-versa'. Hurd (2000, p. 65) further contends that:

> the relationship between language competence and learning competence is complex, and must take account of individual variables, such as gender, age, previous learning experiences, motivation, attitude and personal beliefs about self-efficacy, all of which are significant factors in the learning process.

Despite these limitations, we believe that the data from this study, which focuses primarily on cultural differences, offer a rich source of empirical evidence of the extent and nature of knowledge among distance language learners of their own specific learning situation in two very distinct cultures, the difficulties they experience and the differing strategies they use. It should be seen as a useful starting point for further research in this area, particularly in relation to the interpretation and practice of learner autonomy in distance as opposed to face-to-face language learning, across different cultures, and the issues this raises for curriculum design. Given the increasingly held view that language learning is 'culture-bound'—in other words, that learning a language is inextricably linked to learning about the target language culture (Palfreyman & Smith, 2003; Gan *et al.*, 2004)—other research routes might link more explicitly the 'distance' factor in language learning to the development of intercultural awareness, and seek to identify in what ways this might be significant in comparison with classroom-based learning situations. The relationship between motivations and aspirations among learners from different cultures studying a language in distance mode and the development of intercultural competence as a learning goal might also be a fruitful area to research.

Conclusion

This paper reveals significant differences between European and Asian student perspectives on distance language learning. In a global learning environment, where exchange of practice is increasingly easy, it is particularly important that these differences are recognized and respected when discussing 'best practice'. The risk of cultural inappropriateness, or worse the charge of cultural imperialism through attempting to impose western practices, however well researched, on other cultures has to be taken seriously and addressed with sensitivity. It is not a case of West knows best when it comes to autonomous practice, but rather 'different aspects of the "learner autonomy" agenda being promoted in a Western and an Asian cultural setting' (Broady, 2004, p. 71). Biggs (1996) reinforces the fact that teaching/learning practices have to be interpreted in their cultural context.

This study indicates the powerful influence that cultural background can have on approaches to learning and attitudes to autonomy in a distance context, yet it is equally important to recognize the heterogeneity that exists within all groups of learners from all cultural backgrounds. Broady (2004) and Gieve and Clark (2005) caution against cultural stereotyping and, in particular, the 'danger of characterizing groups of learners with reductionist categories' (Gieve & Clark, 2005, p. 261). While we should not ignore cultural differences, and should indeed design our distance language courses and tailor our learner support to take account of them, it is equally important that we work to achieve this in the context of a wider heterogeneity and avoid, as Sanchez and Gunawardena (1998) caution, making generalizations about individuals based on knowledge about specific culturally defined groups. There is some evidence from other studies (Gan *et al.*, 2004; Gieve & Clark, 2005) that Chinese students, particularly those learning English in distance mode, are becoming

216   *S. Hurd and J. Xiao*

increasingly aware of the benefits of autonomous study, and that 'apparently stable, culturally determined approaches to learning are far more flexible to contextual variation than we might expect' (Gieve & Clark, 2005, p. 262). This was borne out by this study in that 91.3% of SRTVU students considered that changes in learning approach were possible. The challenge for writers of distance language courses is to take account of an increasingly global market by providing flexible methods and sensitive learner support mechanisms, alongside strategies and activities that will foster autonomy while accommodating cultural difference as part of the wide range of affective and cognitive variables that reflect the diversity of learners in open and distance language learning settings.

References

Benson, P. (2001) *Teaching and researching autonomy in language learning* (Harlow, Pearson Education Limited).

Benson, P. (2002) *Learner autonomy 7: challenges to research and practice* (Dublin, Authentik).

Benson, P., Chik, A. & Lim, H.-Y. (2003) Becoming autonomous in an Asian context: autonomy as a sociocultural process, in: D. Palfreyman & R. C. Smith (Eds) *Learner autonomy across cultures: language education perspectives* (Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan), 23–40.

Biggs, J. (1996) Western misperceptions of the Confucian-heritage learning culture, in: D. A. Watkins & J. B. Biggs (Eds) *The Chinese learner: cultural, psychological and contextual influences* (Comparative Education Research Centre and Australian Council of Educational Research), 45–67.   AQ5

Broady, E. (2004) Sameness and difference: the challenge of culture in language teaching, *Language Learning Journal,* 29, 68–72.

China Central Radio and Television University (2004) Basic information communiqué for China's Radio and Television Universities in 2003, *CCRTVU Express,* 234. Available online at: http://www.crtvu.edu.cn/ddsx/index.php (accessed 22 November 2005).

Collins, R. & Lim, H. (2004) Research into the Chinese students' experience, The Higher Education Academy (HEA). Available online at: http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/embedded_object.asp?id=21689&filename=Collins_and_Lim (accessed 21 November 2005).

Gan, Z., Humphreys, G. & Hamp-Lyons, L. (2004) Understanding successful and unsuccessful EFL students in Chinese universities, *The Modern Language Journal,* 88(ii), 229–244.

Gao, X. (2003) Changes in Chinese students' learner strategy use after arrival in the UK: a qualitative inquiry, in: D. Palfreyman & R. C. Smith (Eds) *Learner autonomy across cultures: language education perspectives* (Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan), 41–57.

Gieve, S. & Clark, R. (2005) The Chinese approach to learning: cultural trait or situated response? The case of a self-directed learning programme, *System,* 33, 261–276.

He, M. (2000) English teaching method faces challenge, *China Daily,* 28 September.   AQ6

Hurd, S. (2000) Distance language learners and learner support: beliefs, difficulties and use of strategies, *Links and Letters 7: Autonomy in language learning,* 61–80. Available online at: http://www.bib.uab.es/pub/linksandletters/11337397n7p61.pdf (accessed 21 November 2005).   AQ7

Hurd, S. Beaven, T. & Ortega, A. (2001) Developing autonomy in a distance language learning context: issues and dilemmas for course writers, *System,* 29, 341–355.

Krasocki, J. (2001) *China: distance learning and in-country delivery—a report on the market* (The British Council).   AQ5

Lee. W. O. (1996) The cultural context for Chinese learner: conceptions of learning in the Confucian tradition, in: D. A. Watkins & J. B. Biggs (Eds) *The Chinese learner: cultural, psychological and contextual influences* (Comparative Education Research Centre and Australian Council of Educational Research), 25–41.   AQ5

Little, D. (1991) *Learner autonomy 1: Definitions, issues and problems* (Dublin, Authentik).

Little, D. (2001) How independent can independent language learning really be?, in: J. Coleman, D. Ferney, D. Head & R. Rix (Eds) *Language-learning futures: issues and strategies for modern languages provision in higher education* (London, Centre for Information on Language Teaching and Research), 30–43.

Little, D. (2002) Learner autonomy and second/foreign language learning, *Good Practice Guide* (LTSN Subject Centre for Languages, Linguistics and Area Studies). Available online at: http://www.lang.ltsn.ac.uk/resources/goodpractice.aspx?resourceid=1409 (accessed 20 November 2005).

Liu, D. & Xiao, J. (2004) A comparison between two English teaching patterns in current distance education, *Journal of the Foreign Language World*, 98, 30–34.

Marton, F., Dall'Alba, G. & Tse, L.K. (1996) Memorizing and understanding: the key to the paradox?, in: D. A. Watkins & J. B. Biggs (Eds) *The Chinese learner: cultural, psychological and contextual influences* (Comparative Education Research Centre and Australian Council of Educational Research), 69–83.

Ministry of Education, China (2004) *English curriculum for senior middle school* (Beijing, The People's Education Press).

Palfreyman, D. & Smith, R.C. (Eds) (2003) *Learner autonomy across cultures: language education perspectives* (Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan).

Pang, W. G. (2003) *Self-regulated learning: principles and education applications* (Shanghai, East China Normal University Press).

Riley, P. (1987) From self-access to self-direction, in: J. Coleman & R. Towell (Eds) *The advanced language learner* (London, Association for French language studies and the Scottish Universities' French language research association, in association with the Centre for Information on Language Teaching and Research), 75–88.

Sanchez, I. & Gunawardena, N. (1998) Understanding and supporting the culturally diverse distance learner, in: C. Campbell Gibson (Ed.) *Distance learners in higher education: institutional responses for quality outcomes* (Madison, WI, Atwood Publishing), 47–64.

Teng, H., Niu, Q. & Wolff, M. (2004) China's ESL goals: are they being met?, *English Today*, 79(20), 37–44.

The Open University (2003) *Learning with the OU: your guide to OU study.* Available online at: http://www.open.ac.uk/learning/induction/undergraduate/index.cfm (accessed 22 November 2005).

The Open University (2005) *A learner's guide to the OU.* Available online at: http://www3.open.ac.uk/learners-guide/ (accessed 23 November 2005).

Wei, Y. & Chen, Y. (2003) Supporting Chinese learners of English to implement self-assessment in L2 writing, paper presented at the *Proceedings of the Independent Learning Conference*, Melbourne, Australia.

Wenden, A. (1991) *Learner strategies for learner autonomy* (Hemel Hempstead, Prentice Hall Europe).

White, C. (1999) The metacognitive knowledge of distance learners, *Open Learning*, 14(3), 37–47.

White, C. (2003a) *Language learning in distance education* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press).

White, N. (2003b) Auto-L mailbase discussion, 12 December.

Wong, N.-Y. (2002) *Mathematics education and culture: the 'CHC' learner phenomenon.* Available online at: http://www.math.admu.edu.ph/tsg22/wong.html (accessed 8 February 2006)

Xiao, J. (2003) Distance English language learning at China's RTVUs—a survey on the BA in English by CCRTVU, *Modern Distance Education Research*, 4, 56–59.

Xiao, J. (2004a) New approaches to distance English language teaching, *Distance Education Journal*, 3, 35–37.

Xiao, J. (2004b) *Language learning advice and distance ELT in Radio and TV Universities (RTVUs)* (Shantou, SRTVU).

Zhang, Y. (2004) An experiment on the development of learner autonomy through learner training, *Journal of the Foreign Language World*, 99, 54–61.

AQ5

AQ5

AQ8

AQ9

5

10

15

20

25

30

35

40