Distant Voices: Learners' Stories About the Affective Side of Learning a Language at a Distance

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Stella Hurd
Department of Languages, The Open University, Milton Keynes, UK

Learning a language at a distance has its own special challenges. The remoteness of the learning context can mean isolation for the learner, communication difficulties for the teacher and problems of access for the researcher. Yet distance language learners are likely to be no more skilled in self-regulation than classroom learners, and to require high levels of support. Research tools are needed, therefore, which allow them to talk freely about their learning in order to help distance educators target support appropriately. This paper draws on data from two pilot ethnographic studies of distance language learners using think-aloud protocols to access their thought processes as they tackled two designated language tasks. They were carried out as part of a wider study in each case to investigate aspects of affect including beliefs, motivation and anxiety. The audio-taped voices provided rich insights into the advantages and disadvantages, pleasures and frustrations, comforts and anxieties of learning a language at a distance, and the strategies learners use to manage in a distance environment. The studies underlined the importance of listening to students and using their voices as a basis for discussion on improving aspects of the design and delivery of distance language courses.

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Introduction

The highly complex nature of the structures and systems of languages and the fact that they involve a significant social dimension differentiate them from other subjects (Dörnyei, 2003; Victori, 1992; White, 1994). In the distance context, as Hurd (2005: 143) points out, 'these aspects come into sharper focus, not only because learners are denied the classroom situation where speaking practice, sharing difficulties and giving immediate support can be easily incorporated into lessons, but also because of the inherently non-social nature of this mode of learning, which militates against the interdependence that many language experts would consider fundamental to successful language learning'. While affective learner variables such as emotions and feelings, attitudes, tolerance of ambiguity, anxiety and motivation need to be taken into account in the planning of any programme, the affective dimensions of language learning may be particularly significant for distance learners, in that they need to manage their own feelings in order to

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compensate for the physical absence of a teacher and peers (Harris, 2003; Hauck & Hurd, 2005; White, 2003). Support for the learner is therefore of paramount importance. The Open University (UK) promotes supported open and distance learning, and learner support, as an integral part of all its courses, both print-based (strategy development throughout the course materials, study charts, course guides, transcripts) and person-based (student services, personal tutor, self-help groups). The teacher's voice is ever-present in the course materials, the tutor's voice is heard in feedback on assignments and students can have a voice, if they wish, at face-to-face or online tutorials during their course.

The rapid advances in technology are enabling much higher levels of contact than ever before, anywhere and at any time. Since the beginning of 2006, all language students have had access to *Lyceum*, an in-house developed audiographic conferencing system which allows them the possibility of contacting their peers online at mutually convenient times. However, although students' voices in virtual and face-to-face contexts can tell us something about their language learning, they may not be the full story, nor may we be accessing the voices of all who need to be heard. Determining the nature and intensity of support needed is no easy task, given the lack of proximity of learners to tutors, to researchers and to each other. The relevance of think-aloud protocols (TAPs) to the distance language context remains underexplored, and yet it is arguably this group of learners for whom such a method might have particular application, given its potential to 'tap' processes that are normally hidden, among learners that are hard to reach.

The first small-scale pilot study using TAPs was carried out in 2003–04 with four learners studying the lower-intermediate level French course *Ouverture*, the lowest level course available from The Open University (UK) at the time. It was conducted as part of a longitudinal study using questionnaires and interviews to investigate the distance language learner experience, including learner perceptions of personality, motivation, anxiety and non-anxiety, roles and approaches (Hurd, 2006, 2007). Results from the TAPs strand indicated the strong potential of this research tool to yield important data on distance language learners, and prompted the second study with a larger sample (12) as soon as the French Beginners course *Bon départ* came on stream in 2004–05. This was also part of a main study which focused on motivation. Both pilots used TAPs to chart the cognitive and affective processes of students working through two designated language tasks from their respective course books. The findings were intended to be exploratory and not conclusive, and to enhance the quantitative results obtained in the main study in each case from questionnaires ($N = 500$; $N = 815$), by adding the actual voices of a small number of learners. Both were relatively small-scale and piloting a tool virtually unused in distance language learning. A further dimension of the two pilots, then, was to learn lessons that might influence future more substantial TAPs studies with learners in the early stages of language study at a distance.

Affect in a Distance Context

While research into affect in the classroom has attracted much interest in the research community, there is little that focuses on the distance language learning context, whether face-to-face or online. Affect is increasingly seen to have a very influential role in the learning process, in that it has the power to impede or interfere with learning in substantial ways. Hayes' (1996) model of the writing process integrates affect, in particular motivation, with cognitive processes. Arnold and Brown (1999: 6) contend that: 'The way we feel about ourselves and our capabilities can either facilitate or impede our learning . . .'. Ehrman (1996: 138) focuses in particular on the influence of motivation and anxiety on learning: 'The affective dimension affects how efficiently students can use what they have. For example, strong motivation tends to help students marshal their assets and skills, whereas low motivation or intense anxiety interferes with their ability to use their skills and abilities.'

Affective factors have an impact on all learning, but may be particularly significant for language learning at a distance because of the mismatch between an inherently *social* discipline such as languages and a learning context which is characterised by *remoteness*, and because of the specific features of languages which make them more difficult to learn at a distance than other disciplines. On the other hand, there is evidence that the privacy of the distance setting allows some language learners to feel less anxious (Hurd, 2007), and that computer-mediated communication can also help to reduce anxiety and maintain motivation (Hampel *et al.*, 2005; Hauck & Hurd, 2005; Thorpe, 2002).

The difficulty of investigating affective issues at a distance prompted the search for a research tool that would be appropriate and effective for the distance language learning context: appropriate in the sense that students would not find it intrusive and would be able to use it in private in their own way and in their own time; effective in that it might yield detailed data that could not be obtained through other means. TAPs seemed to fit the bill.

Using Think-aloud Protocols

Borrowed from cognitive psychology, TAPs have been extensively used in the language classroom to investigate learners' thought processes as they perform reading, writing, listening, speaking or translation activities (Anderson & Vandergrift, 1996; Bernardini, 1999, 2001; Block, 1986; Cohen, 1996; Cohen & Olshtain, 1993; Gascoigne, 2002; Levine & Reves, 1998; Pressley & Afflerbach, 1995; Roca de Larios *et al.*, 2006; Salataci & Akyel, 2002; Witte & Cherry, 1994). TAPs have also been used widely in distance learning and increasingly in web-based learning environments (Lewis & Fabos, 2005; Ruhleder & Twidale, 2000; Young, 2005). However, apart from an investigation into autonomy in distance English learning (Vanijdee, 2003) using TAPs, no studies have been found which use this research tool to investigate affect in a distance language learning context.

The theoretical framework for TAPs, largely attributed to Newell and Simon (1972) and Ericsson and Simon (1984, 1993), is based on the principles of

information processing theory. According to this model, verbal reports restricted to 'heeded' information, i.e. the information that is present in *short-term memory* and *concurrent with actual thinking*, have the potential to reveal in considerable detail the information students are attending to *while performing their tasks*, as well as the strategies they employ. Since the thoughts are concurrent rather than retrospective, they are considered to be more authentic and less structured than the results obtained from questionnaires, and also less subject to 'embellishment or decay of information' (Pressley & Afflerbach, 1995). Another major advantage is their human quality, in that they give the data, in Smagorinsky's (1994) words, 'a unique soul', deepening our understanding of human cognitive processing. Finally, they are said to have the potential to yield information on context and strategy use, in addition to cognitive and affective processes (Afflerbach, 2000).

TAPs as a research method is not, however, without its critics. A frequently cited potential problem is automaticity, the fact that we may be unaware of our cognitive processes as many are automatic (Singhal, 2001). The issue of reactivity, i.e. the effect of thinking aloud on participants' internal processes, also concerns some researchers (Matsumoto, 1993; Nielson *et al.*, 2002) who signal the interference that can be caused by the 'heavy' or 'double' cognitive load under which students are placed in having to keep talking at the same time as carrying out the task.

In response to the automaticity criticism, Ericsson and Simon (1980) point out that as processes become more automated and hence unconscious, only the final products are left in memory available for reporting. They suggest that researchers should select tasks that are complex and difficult for the learner as these are less likely to involve processes that are engaged in automatically; a relatively straightforward endeavour for the demanding task of language learning. With regard to reactivity, Leow and Morgan-Short (2004: 42) confirm the view of Ericsson and Simon (1993) that there is no evidence in TAPs studies that internal processes are altered. They conclude from their study that 'the only evidence of reactivity in studies to date is the amount of time required to complete the task'.

One of the problems with TAPs is the difficulty in practice of isolating what is concurrent thinking from what is retrospective. Cohen (1996) separates verbal reports into self-report (reports of general behaviour), self-observation (introspective or retrospective reports of generalised language behaviour) and self-revelation (think-aloud stream-of-consciousness disclosure of thought processes). Graham (1997: 43), however, finds no clear-cut distinction between thinking aloud, introspection and retrospection: 'The difficulty with all of these various categories is their tendency to overlap.' This study made use of a version of TAPs which accesses data on learner discourse about emotions and metacognitive awareness, as well as providing evidence of emotional responses concurrent with task performance.

Despite possible methodological weaknesses, TAPs have a major advantage in that they can reveal insights which are difficult or even impossible to obtain by other methods. It is important, however, to recognise that most investigations are exploratory and need to be supplemented by data from other research (Smagorinsky, 1994).

To sum up, then, the reasons for choosing TAPs for these pilot studies were:

- they would allow direct access to distance students' mental processes;
- they had the potential to yield information on more than just cognitive activity (for example: affect, context, strategy use);
- they could be carried out by individual students in private in an environment of their choice; and
- the unmediated data might usefully add to our understanding of the ways in which distance language learners approach and work through language tasks.

The Studies

Research questions

The following research questions were addressed in the studies:

(1) What emotions, both positive and negative, do distance language learners experience as they work through tasks?
(2) How aware are learners (a) of themselves as learners (b) of the context of their learning?
(3) What strategies do distance language learners use to manage their emotions as they tackle tasks on their own?

Participants

For the first study with lower-intermediate level learners, the sample contained four women between the ages of 40 and 60. The older two had a first degree or equivalent professional qualification, while those in their 40s had acquired basic qualifications from school in four or five subjects. A large amount of data was gathered and important lessons were learned which prompted a second pilot with a more representative sample: nine women and three men. For the purposes of this paper I examine the protocols of the three men and three of the women, selected to include as wide a range of demographic variables as possible. Out of the six subjects: two (one man and one woman) had no previous knowledge of French. The age span covered 50 years: the youngest student was female (28) and the oldest was male (78). None had any experience of learning a language in distance mode. The participants in this study were enrolled on *Bon départ*, Part 1 of the Certificate in French, and the four students in the first study were following *Ouverture*, Part 2. Both courses contain course books with related audio material, transcripts, a study chart and a course guide. Tutor-marked assignments (TMAs) are marked by the tutor to whom each student is assigned, and students can also attend tutorials face-to-face or online and day schools in their region if they wish.

Procedure and methods

The participants in the first study were volunteers who responded to a request to take part in a new piece of research. In the second study, they were randomly selected by The Open University's Institute for Educational

Technology from those in the main project who were following the beginners' course and who had agreed to take part in additional studies during the year. All were contacted by e-mail and given details of the project. The tasks were chosen in each case from the course book students would be starting in each case at the time the TAPs were scheduled to take place. Fuller information was provided in a follow-up letter including instructions to students to verbalise all their thoughts while carrying out their tasks as set out below:

> We 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.*

Participants were also encouraged to do a practice run with an earlier activity, just to get used to the idea of talking aloud on their own and to contact the researchers if they had any queries or needed any help. None did. These were mature learners, which might explain why their recordings showed no evidence of difficulty in understanding the instructions or articulating their thoughts. An assurance was also given that all information was confidential and that personal details would not be linked in any way with published results.

Data Analysis

The audiocassettes were transcribed, with emotive reactions indicated in parenthesis, for example *[sighs]*, *[laughs]*, *[groans]*. As Afflerbach (2000: 174) points out: 'It is difficult to transcribe verbal protocols ... without encountering affect and motivation, which are evinced by readers' exclamations, expletives, grunts, groans and affirmations ...'.

The first stage involved segmenting the transcripts according to the 'thought units' expressed, then re-segmenting as new strands emerged during the process, and finally coding each segment. Coding categories used by other think-aloud studies were consulted in the first instance and helped in the initial stages. The coding process was informed by three paradigms – affective factors, metacognitive knowledge (of self and context) and strategies – but data-driven, in conformity with Bracewell and Breuleux's view (1994: 56) that 'coding categories arise largely in an ad hoc manner from consideration of the protocol, rather than from a rational analysis of the processes required for the task'. Intercoder reliability was initially established at 72.4% for the second study. The coding scheme was then reviewed, agreed changes were implemented and the coding process was repeated in both studies to ensure greater reliability and consistency.

QSR N6 was employed as an appropriate ethnographic tool to facilitate qualitative analysis. This entailed a continuous process of interrogation and interpretation of the data in accordance with affective themes and their related components. The process reflected the view of Manchon *et al.* (2005: 203) that

'working with protocol data involves a compromise between your original aims and your gradual construction of a model from the data'.

Coding activity constantly reinforced the interplay between the cognitive, and affective, a point made by Arnold and Brown (1999: 16) who underline the 'difficulty of isolating the cognitive, for at many points affect inevitably enters the picture'. Several instances of these interrelationships were to be found in the protocols in these studies where, for example, an emotion (anxiety) might trigger a cognitive strategy (re-reading the text or checking the answer).

The software enabled each transcript to be coded to tree-nodes (main categories) and sub-nodes (subcategories), both of which could be modified at any time during the coding process. After many iterations, 10 tree nodes were created. The creation of sub-nodes allowed for fine-grain distinctions to be made within the tree nodes, for example positive emotions included items such as pleasure, satisfaction, relief, laughter and excitement. Negative emotions covered frustration, boredom, disappointment, anticipated and actual difficulty, uncertainty, confusion and embarrassment (see Figure 1).

QSR N6, in particular the 'node browser', enabled access to the utterances from *all* participants that were coded to any particular node or sub-node, e.g. a positive emotion such as pleasure, or a negative one such as frustration, or a particular strategy. The report function showed the overall coding of each individual transcript (see Figure 2).

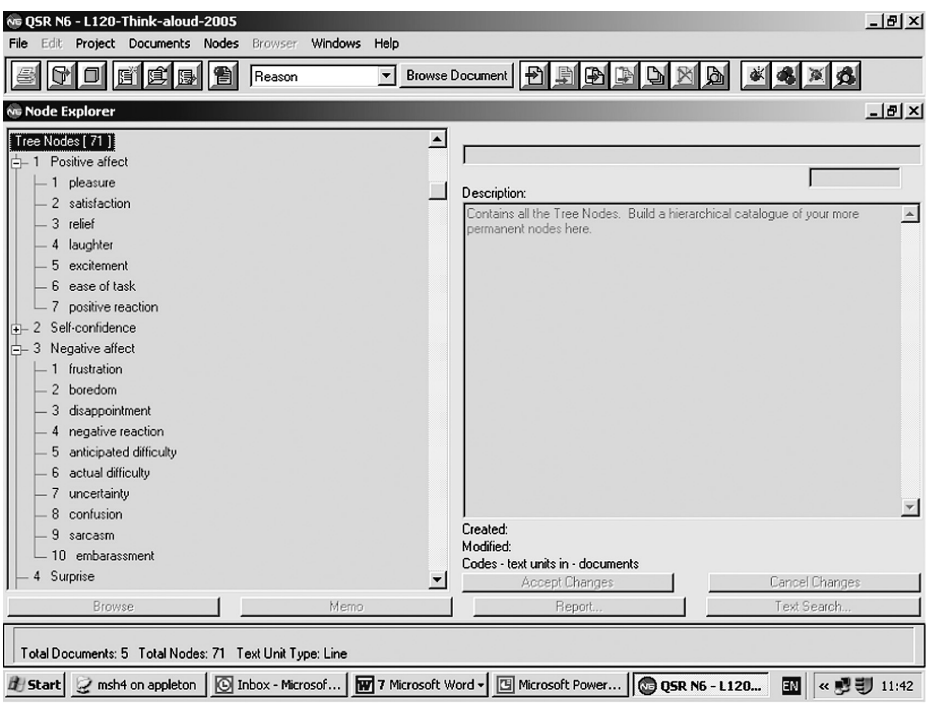

Figure 1 Tree-nodes 'positive affect' and 'negative affect' and their sub-nodes

```
(1 1)              /Positive affect/pleasure
++ Units:119-121   151-155   171-175   224-228
(1 2)              /Positive affect/satisfaction
++ Units:81-83     230-233   263-263
(1 4)              /Positive affect/laughter
++ Units:53-53
(1 6)              /Positive affect/ease of task
++ Units:41-41
(2 1)              /Self-confidence/decisive
++ Units:16-18     39-39     75-77     196-196
(2 2)              /Self-confidence/clear plan of action
++ Units:11-12     23-24     47-48     156-159   215-219
(2 3)              /Self-confidence/positive global assessment
++ Units:19-20
(3 3)              /Negative affect/disappointment
++ Units:239-240
(3 6)              /Negative affect/actual difficulty
++ Units:67-68     128-129   200-202
(4)               /Surprise
++ Units:81-81
```

Figure 2 An extract from a QSR N6 'report' on one of the coded transcripts

Findings

The data from the transcripts of the four students in Study 1 was very extensive – 12,469 words – and from the six participants in Study 2, even more so – 21,834 words. Findings are selected, therefore, according to the ways in which they illuminate understanding of affective factors, levels of awareness, and strategies, as evidenced by the two groups of students. I was concerned more at this point of the study with the overall picture than with individual differences.

Positive and negative emotions

In Study 1, pleasure was expressed at particular French words like *conseils.* The Collins Robert dictionary was described as 'absolutely wonderful' by one

student, and another loved the way the Larousse dictionary explained the meaning of words. There were examples of a relaxed attitude: 'Now then I am going to use *en.* Where do I put it? *[laughs]* 'Cos there are a few *ens* in there!' Items in activities that could be associated with friends or family were also popular. In Study 2 with beginners, one student came over as particularly relaxed and confident, although he was in the minority. His transcript was peppered with comments like 'yeah got that'; 'yeah fine'; 'OK good'; 'I'm happy with that'. There were also many favourable comments from beginner students about the course materials, including the language learning tips, grammar boxes, *Corrigés* (answer keys and feedback), instructions for activities and cultural information sections, and examples of beginners talking positively about certain types of activities such as gapfill and translation which they found motivating and confidence building.

On the negative side, difficulty, uncertainty, frustration and confusion were very prevalent emotions. The protocols from the two youngest beginner female students in Study 2 contained many pauses, and were full of 'ums and ahs' and words and phrases such as 'scary', 'confused', 'annoying' and 'struggling'. There were also instances of tentativeness and uncertainty from one of the men: 'I suppose', 'I think', 'I don't know', 'I'm never sure', 'it's probably . . .'. The writing task caused particular frustration for students in both studies: 'Oh nooo. . . that's a whole essay! 150 words, that's bloomin' long, of a memory from your childhood *[groans]*'; 'It's very slow . . . that's why I don't like doing it, I think, 'cos it's too stop-start . . . look a word up, look up this, go back, look up that . . .' (Study 1). 'Doing something from scratch that isn't going to be marked, I just find very frustrating, so I'm not going to do it' (Study 2).

It was also the writing task that caused the most anxiety:

> I always get terribly worried about accuracy. I know that a language is really about communication. I understand that, but I always worry that I am not being accurate in how I put things down, so that is one of my concerns. (Study 1)

One student in Study 1 expressed feelings of inadequacy when faced with sample answers to open-ended writing tasks:

> When they are not precise answers, it can be a little bit intimidating because you look at what's given in the suggested answer and my answers are nowhere near as formal or as accurate or as interesting. It's useful to have them but I don't know, I think it would be helpful maybe if you sort of were not made to feel too inadequate about not writing as much as there is in the answers given.

Interestingly, the fewest instances of negative affect came from the two beginners who had no previous knowledge of French. It is possible that they felt less pressure than the students who had studied French at school, albeit many years ago, because they had no preconceptions about their French proficiency.

Awareness of self, strategies and the distance learning context

There was evidence of self-awareness at both beginner and lower-intermediate level. Students reflected on themselves as distance language learners in relation to both self and strategies, which sometimes overlapped:

> *Self:* I never know whether it's me remembering it wrong with these answers, but sometimes I seem to get it. I do have trouble sometimes quite getting exactly what's wanted, not in terms of the words 'cos I know it doesn't matter if they're not exactly the same words, but the gist of what they want in the answer... As long as I'm doing, learning what I need to learn, I don't think it matters too much. (Study 1)

In Study 2, the most aware was the 28-year-old female who commented on how much she felt she learned from doing things herself:

> I think I learnt a lot more there by trying to do it myself and learning from my mistakes, because I would have just copied those out into the right places and that would have been it and I would have done it in two minutes, and that's fine. But I think I learnt a lot more there trying to do it myself.

Statements from two of the male beginners were few and brief: 'When I leave a section, it has to be complete ... I'm the sort of person who likes to be at the airport three hours before the plane goes'; 'I know what my weaknesses are and I really need to work on them'.

Strategic thinking was evident among the students in both studies, and where this concerned using the dictionary or consulting the *Corrigés*, it was sometimes accompanied by feelings of guilt:

> *Strategies:* Right, try not to use the dictionary too much, but I do when I'm writing things, I find that I do, 'cos occasionally I have mental blocks, can't remember a single word... (Study 1)

> I sometimes look at the *Corrigés* to see what I am supposed to do, and then it's like cheating – you've looked at the answers first, then you find there's no point in doing it again 'cos you know what it is now. (Study 1)

> I have set myself a sort of strict timetable as to when I study and I have got the course timetable and I've followed that strictly and I always set aside... what I try and do is get as much done over the weekend and at the beginning of the week. (Study 2)

> I'm learning better to prioritise. ... What it means as well is that sometimes I take my ... if I do find that I'm getting a little bit behind, I haven't worked over the weekend or something, then I'll take my books and CDs into work and I'll work over my lunch hour, do work at my desk. Spend my lunch hour doing it, which is good because it means I don't have to go to the gym! It's a good excuse! (Study 2)

In the main study with lower-intermediate learners studying *Ouverture*, lack of instant feedback, difficulty assessing personal progress in comparison with other students, isolation, lack of opportunities for speaking practice and lack

of confidence when working on your own were seen as particularly attributable to the distance factor. However, there were also many advantages cited, including the opportunity to work at your own pace and be more in control, the absence of exposure to public criticism, the lack of competition and peer pressure, and the chance to practise and make mistakes in private, to reflect and to try things out. Some of these views were expanded in the TAPs protocols:

> *Distance language learning:* That's one advantage of remote teaching and remote studying … no-one knows what you actually put, not even your tutor. (Study 1)
>
> … the good thing about doing these sorts of essays … I can practise, I can write rubbish and I know no one is going to mark it … but then do I really gain anything from that? (Study 1)
>
> This is part of the problem of working remotely: by the time I see anybody, I'll have forgotten it. (Study 1)
>
> The speaking bit is the tricky bit on distance learning, obviously. (Study 2)
>
> The difficulty with this, being distance learning of course, is that if I check the, erm, the section at the back *Corrigés*, it's going to be something completely different, which is going to be useful to look at but obviously I'm not really going to know if what I've written is correct, because there's nobody to check it through, and I'm reasonably happy with it. (Study 2)

Students in both studies expressed their feelings about their own performance, which also often helped illuminate their emotional state. Aoki (1999: 153) makes the link between emotions and self-evaluation in asserting that 'students often refer to the feelings and emotions that they have experienced in learning, as criteria for their self-evaluation'. Positive self-evaluations in Study 1 included statements such as: 'Getting the pronoun *en* – I got the hang of that in the end'; and 'Yeah, I've covered all the stuff and certainly I know how to use all the … using *en*, using *de* and all those sorts of things'. In Study 2, the beginner students generally experienced more problems, went into great detail and often tempered their successes with negative comments:

> I think I've got the hang of the *il y a* – I'm just getting a bit confused with the others. I'll just check those. Right Activity 44: *j'ai quitté Edimbourg* – oh I missed the accent off, but I'm still quite impressed with that – *il y a vingt ans. [pause]* Spelt twenty wrong – that's not very good is it; done that right the way through. Er *à l'université j'ai étudié l'espagnol pendant quatre ans et le portugais pendant deux ans* – brilliant! *J'ai travaillé à partir de l'âge de vingt ans* – spelt it wrong again *[pause] et j'ai arrêté il y a deux ans.* Yeah I'm quite pleased with that!

Where negative self-evaluations were made, in Study 1 students were often hard on themselves and took personal blame for not understanding or underperforming, rather than attributing this to the type of activity, the time

allowed, the clarity of explanation or any other factor. Examples were: 'I don't want to recite my essay on this tape because I feel embarrassed, it's so bad!' 'Yeah, I just really misunderstood that completely.' The protocols were more mixed for the beginners in Study 2. Some blamed themselves: 'I missed out 1980. My attention must have gone at that point'; 'I don't know why I don't need the *eu* but I keep getting that wrong'.

> They came to France – I said: *Ils sont venus à la France [pause] en France –* oh *[disappointed]* oh yeah of course, feminine countries take *en*. I should have remembered that because that came up in one of my TMAs.

Others were less reticent about apportioning blame elsewhere:

> OK so, I found that very hard, erm, and I just, I don't know, I felt as though I could have done with a bit more guidance, erm, and pointers to revision exercises before, erm, tackling that exercise.

Strategy use

The link between affect and cognition with regard to strategies is reinforced by Flading (cited in Nielson *et al.*, 2002), who maintains that emotions are interior signals, and function as a guide for actions and cognition. They are therefore central to the way in which students approach what they are doing, and this was evident from the use of strategies in both studies. In Study 1, all students at lower-intermediate level used some strategies to cope with their emotions, although frequency of use was low. The strategies selected for report were those employed as a response to negative emotion such as anxiety or frustration, and these strategies often involved cognitive or metacognitive processes. Those noted included using positive self-talk, skipping bits of text, re-reading text, keeping going regardless, consulting the *Corrigés*, not dwelling on problems, taking a break, reflecting on possibilities, taking notes to combat anxiety caused by memory lapses, and checking back for reassurance. The two examples which follow are further evidence of the inseparability of affect and cognition. In these two cases affect (anxiety; lack of confidence) provoked a cognitive strategy (consulting the answer key; stopping the activity). They also indicated a degree of metacognitive knowledge, as defined by Wenden (2001), including person knowledge (awareness of self in the learning process), task knowledge (awareness of the nature and demands of a task) and strategic knowledge (choice of strategy):

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

> You see, these are the bits that I don't mind doing, but I sometimes find if my mindset is not right on the day, I have to just stop and leave it, because it's thinking of something to write about that I have the trouble with, rather than anything else.

There were also instances in Study 2, which illustrated the close relationship between affect and cognition:

> When I'm feeling a bit insecure about the answer, I quite often check it straight away.
>
> I'm not going to do this now because I feel quite tired and it's, erm, this exercise looks quite scary, erm, so I think I might tackle it when I feel a bit fresher.
>
> I'm just wondering if I'm doing this right actually, erm, I think I am because it's just *être* and if it was *avoir*, then it would be *avant* and *avait* and it's not, so I think this is OK. Erm ... Right OK, erm, so I think I've finished, I'm a bit confused actually about the difference, so I'm just going to check.
>
> The expectation ... is you have to do it yourself, and I'm not sure how many people struggle with that. Me, I've got 50 cards all with irregular verbs written on them, fully conjugated with the past participles and future stems, and I learn them religiously. It's the only way they stick in my head, OK, but well everybody's got their little ways.

The students responded well to the TAPs and no adverse comments were received on any part of the procedure. One lower-intermediate student in Study 1 even remarked on the positive benefits to her personally of taking part in the study, which lends support for the idea that TAPs can also be an important learning tool, particularly for distance learners who need to rely more heavily on their own resources than classroom learners:

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

Discussion and Conclusion

These two pilot ethnographic studies aimed to give some preliminary insights into affect in the distance context and suggest a way of developing a better understanding of this particular learning culture. Although small-scale, the findings showed the potential of TAPs to 'get at' what students really think and feel when they are tackling a language task.

The student profile that emerged showed high levels of commitment to study, and in most cases good levels of self-awareness. Students were asked to record their thoughts 'as they come to mind and not after having had time to reflect'. However, they did offer their reflections, which were generally prompted by some aspect of the activity they were tackling and often indicated the feelings and emotions they were experiencing. At this point, they were, strictly speaking, engaged in self-observation, introspectively or retrospectively, as defined by Cohen (1996). However, the findings resonated with those of Graham's (1997) study in which she found that students' think-aloud comments 'suggest that they might be engaged in different kinds of self-report

while completing one task; they might begin by simply externalizing thoughts going through their head, then make inferences about the processes involved and finally make an observation which would suggest an element of looking back on what they had done. The comments were probably thus an amalgam of thinking aloud, introspection proper and retrospection after a few seconds.'

The strategies used to deal with managing emotions were relatively few in terms of frequency of occurrence. Moreover, they did not include many that are normally classified as affective (Oxford, 1990), such as anxiety reduction (relaxation and deep breathing exercises), self-encouragement (positive self-talk, rewards) and monitoring emotions (using checklists, discussing feelings). The lack of affective strategies was very notable at these lower levels of learning and reflects Oxford's (1990: 143) view that affective strategies, although crucial to learning success, are 'woefully underused'.

Patterns of strategy use varied, and there were strong indications that more was needed to help students develop the capacity for self-regulation in a distance language learning context. The protocols provided a valuable starting point for a reappraisal of certain aspects of distance language courses, for example:

> *Clarity of instructions:* avoiding language open to varying interpretations e.g. the word 'brief'.
> *Feedback:* re-stating where necessary, and giving encouragement and reassurance where language points are particularly complex.
> *Open-ended tasks:* embedding the 'model' or 'sample' answer in a more supportive structure.
> *Scaffolding:* better staged and guided preparation tasks, particularly at beginner level.
> *Learner support:* taking more account of the full range of personality characteristics; anticipating sensitivities and offering strategies that are practical and appropriate for adult learners.

Limitations and future directions

The size of the samples could be seen as a limitation, and is an issue that will be addressed in future TAP studies, although it is not unusual for TAP studies to include small numbers. Moreover, these were pilot studies using a research tool virtually untried with distance language learners, and an important dimension of the study was to learn lessons from the experience which could inform future, more extensive TAP studies.

Any account of learners' thoughts and emotions is bound to be incomplete. As Hayes and Nash (1996: 45) tell us: 'People cannot articulate everything that crosses their minds'. Moreover, not everyone is comfortable with such self-exposure. We also cannot be absolutely certain that what learners say accurately reflects the emotions they are experiencing. Granger (2004: 90) warns that any discourse from students 'can only ever paint a partial picture' and that 'the study of affect is a speculative art'. The 'sighs', 'laughs and 'groans' gave an indication of how students in this study felt, but future studies should take more account of changes in tone and 'pausal data' (Hayes & Nash, 1996: 46), both of which can also be strong indicators of emotional

states. Gillette (1987: 269), however, makes the point that, although the use of introspective data in language learning cannot offer outcomes that can be measured with certainty, they can 'reveal aspects of language learning previously inaccessible to investigation'. She adds: 'Moreover, such qualitative research is invaluable if our goal is to consider the individual learner as a whole person, not just a hypothetical entity in an anonymous language-learning process.'

Other positive outcomes from the pilot studies were the use of QSR N6, which emerged as a very appropriate ethnographic tool for organising such large data sets and making it possible to 'home in' on particular aspects. The fact that these students were operating entirely on their own with no built-in constraints may also have had a liberating effect, allowing them to express themselves more freely and openly than if they had been observed.

A valuable extension to the project would be a comparison between distance learners and other adult learners to confirm or disconfirm the widely held view among distance language researchers (C. Harris, 1995; V. Harris, 2003; Hurd, 2006; White, 2003) that the affective dimensions of language learning may be particularly significant for distance learners. Future directions with larger samples might also include intervention studies involving additional materials and the use of a control group; explorations of individual difference and its possible effects on learning at a distance; and the use of post-TAPs stimulus recall methods to probe further and/or clarify the thoughts expressed, which can improve the validity of TAPs as a research instrument.

Contemporary researchers in applied linguistics continue to call for 'more empirical studies and different kinds of investigation' that could 'reveal useful insights into how students learn' (Elkhahaifi, 2005: 216). Knowledge of the process of learning a language at a distance is crucial if we are to design courses that truly meet the needs of our students, and we can achieve this best by listening to their stories. Protocol analysis is acknowledged as both messy and time-consuming (Green & Gilhooly, 1996; Oxford, 1993; Smagorinsky, 1994). Nevertheless, as Young (2005: 31) states:

> For any researcher who develops an understanding of when thinking aloud is appropriate and carefully considers the activity used to elicit such verbal data, the rewards will certainly be evident through the enhanced data which the student voice provides.

For distance language learning, the data coming 'direct from the source' constitute a valuable resource which can illuminate our understanding about the experience of being a distance language learner and help shape future provision in line with the needs of learners.

Correspondence

Any correspondence should be directed to Stella Hurd, Department of Languages, Faculty of Education and Language Studies, Open University, Walton Hall, Milton Keynes MK7 6AA, UK (m.s.hurd@open.ac.uk).

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