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Making the most of others: autonomous interdependence in adult beginner distance language learners

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Abstract

Autonomy, acknowledged as a sine qua non for effective language learning, does not simply equate with independence, since language learning is a social activity requiring interaction with others. This also applies to distance learners, who need to reconcile independent language learning and interdependence with others. This paper draws on findings from 43 mid-course interviews with adult beginner distance learners of French, Spanish and German, and focuses on ways in which they engage with tutors and with other students, and the extent to which both interactions enhance their learning. It shows that many students are prepared to seek clarification from their tutors, but not strategic advice in areas of learning likely to be most problematic. It also highlights how feelings about working with other students can enhance or restrict progress towards autonomous interdependence. Finally it considers ways of facilitating greater learner control in these key aspects of their studies.

Key words

Introduction

Learner autonomy has long been recognised (cf. Holec, 1981) as an essential element for generating effective language learning in the context of distance education and, indeed, was equated initially with independent language learning (Dickinson, 1987). It has evolved subsequently from a specialist area of interest into the mainstream of language learning through its role of 'increasing students' competence as communicators, learners and individuals' (Littlewood, 1996, p. 434). Language learning is recognised as a social activity requiring interaction with others (Benson, 2001), and this has increasingly led to autonomy being redefined in terms of interdependence (Little, 1991; Sinclair, 2000 inter alia). The importance of this concept has been reinforced by its identification as an important aspect, not only of autonomy, but also more widely in the development of communicative skills (Benson & Toogood, 2002).

So how does the concept of interdependence relate to distance language learners, who conduct much of their learning on their own? Benson's broad definition of autonomy as 'the capacity to take control over one's own learning' (2001, p. 2) is widely acknowledged, but for distance language learners autonomy is not restricted to their independent study; increasing control over their own learning through initiatives vis-à-vis their tutors and mutually productive contact with other students is also important.

Drawing on an earlier study of beginner distance language learners' perceptions of, and responses to, tutor feedback on assignments and their implications for effective learning, increasing confidence and motivation maintenance (Furnborough & Truman, 2009), this paper analyses the extent to which the same sample of students initiated contact with their tutors, and engaged collaboratively with other students, as one aspect of developing their autonomy as learners. It also analyses how autonomous they perceived themselves to be in their own learning, and concludes with some reflections on possible follow-up action arising from these findings.

Theoretical framework: Autonomous interdependence in theory and practice

The argument for associating the concept of learner autonomy with social interaction (Little, 2000) rather than primarily with individuality and independence has been

expressed trenchantly by Little himself: 'Because we are social beings our independence is always balanced by dependence; our essential condition is one of interdependence. Total detachment is a principal determining feature not of autonomy but of autism.' (1991, p. 5).

Littlewood (2002) suggests that the concept of 'autonomous interdependence' originated in Ryan (1991), who identified what he termed 'contact, support and community with others' as a fundamental human need. Ryan warned that if this contact were perceived by learners to be 'instrumental or controlling', it would be counter-productive in terms of generating autonomy. Supportive contact, on the other hand, is seen by Ryan not as interference, but as a positive intervention, actively facilitating autonomy. Unsurprisingly, the interdependence strand within the learner autonomy debate has been associated traditionally with classroom-based learning, where approaches to cooperation and collaboration have been developed in the context of autonomy (Kohonen, 1992; Dam, 1995; Littlewood, 2002). Few studies of autonomy have been conducted with distance language learners until the last decade (Hurd, 2005; Murphy, 2005, 2007; White, 2003), and still less specifically with beginners (Hurd, 2007, 2008; Murphy, 2011). However, it can be argued that this concept is even more crucial for these learners, not least because of the singular nature of foreign language learning, which differs from other subjects insofar as it 'involves an alteration in self image, the adoption of new social and cultural behaviours and ways of being' (Williams, 1994, p. 77). Beginner language learners in particular are less likely to be familiar with this.

How might these 'social and cultural behaviours' be acquired? Vygotsky's concept of the zone of proximal development (ZPD) is defined as 'the distance between the actual development level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving … in collaboration with more capable peers' (1978, p. 86); this suggests a means of bridging 'the gap between what [distance] learners can achieve on their own and what they can achieve in collaboration with others' (Hurd, 2005, p. 2) through 'dialogic activity' involving not only the tutor, but other resources available to them (Aljaafreh & Lantolf, 1994, p. 468).

For distance language learners, however, the skills for individualised learning that they need to acquire from the outset in order to deal with their apparent isolation are metacognitive and cognitive (cf. Hurd, Beaven & Ortega, 2001, p. 4):

> The relationship between autonomy and the teaching and learning of languages at a distance is particularly complex. In order to complete successfully a distance-learning programme, learners have to maintain their motivation while working alone and develop a series of strategies and skills that will enable them to work individually.

Even though social and affective strategies relative to autonomy development have also been analysed, e.g. by Oxford (1990), and the importance of collaborative interaction in distance learning contexts recognised, 'findings from studies demonstrate that affective strategies are the least frequently used by students' (Hurd, 2008, p. 221). The concept of autonomous interdependence has also been reformulated in the context of distance learning by White (2003, pp. 151-2):

> The most recent development in the debate on autonomy and control in distance learning is that learner autonomy develops through *collaborative control* of learning experiences.

> According to this view, a commitment on the part of learners to responsibility for and control of the learning process can - and should – be enhanced by opportunities for sustained collaboration. The notion of collaborative control in distance language learning is based on the idea that while cognitive autonomy is largely the responsibility of each learner, this autonomy does not imply social independence. … Within emerging paradigms of distance learning, the opportunity to exercise collaborative control of learning experiences is seen as central to the development of learner autonomy.

Whilst this is a model relevant to the beginner language learners in our study, would they recognise this type of collaboration as autonomy in practice, bearing in mind their need to develop strategies and skills for working individually, possibly for the first time in a formal learning context? This paper examines what they reported about their contact with their tutor and fellow students and how they perceived their own autonomy in order to try to answer this question.

Background: responses to assignment feedback
A previous study analysed students' responses to tutor feedback on assignments and their implications for confidence and motivation maintenance, all elements which relate closely to the exercise of autonomy (Furnborough & Truman, op. cit.). It revealed three clearly defined groups of learner: group A (41%) used feedback strategically as a learning tool; for group B (33%) feedback was also important, but primarily as a progress indicator, rather than to be utilised in their subsequent learning; whereas group C (26%) seemed too inhibited by doubts or anxieties about their learning to make constructive use of it.

A further distinguishing characteristic of group A was their approach to assessing their own progress. Unlike the other groups, they showed a strong tendency to set evidence from marks and tutor feedback against their own assessment of performance in the target language, which they generally defined in terms of their ability to interact effectively with target language speakers or in tutorials. Significantly, group A also demonstrated the highest motivation levels (measured in terms of successful learning over a two-year period). By contrast, motivation maintenance in group B, which regarded feedback purely as a judgement on their progress, was predominantly shorter term. Predictably, completion rates were far lower in group C.

The study also confirmed a link between confidence in language learning and the development of proactive learning strategies. Most group A students were confident at the start of the course, drawing on previous successful learning experiences (rarely in languages), and this confidence increased as the course progressed. By contrast, fewer group B students felt confident, generally due to a fear of speaking, and their confidence only increased slightly as the course progressed. Almost all of group C lacked confidence as language learners, often based on previous negative experiences of language learning; doubts and anxieties about their learning on the course prevented their confidence from increasing.

Participants in group A can be regarded as developing a degree of autonomous interdependence through internalisation of the feedback they received from their tutors and consciously drawing on it in their subsequent learning. The present paper examines learners' contact with their tutors and with other students, the course elements with greatest potential for developing dialogic activity and autonomous

interdependence, in order to identify whether strategic use of feedback, as demonstrated by group A, was an indicator for these other aspects of autonomy.

Research questions
1 To what extent do learners initiate contact with their tutors?
2 To what extent do learners engage collaboratively with other students?
3 To what extent do learners perceive themselves as in control of their own learning, and for what reasons?

Method

Context
The subjects of this paper are students on beginners' language courses in French, Spanish and German designed by the Open University in the UK (OU). These 11-month courses consisted of specially prepared learning materials, regular assignments and group tutorials. The latter were designed to offer communication skills development and especially speaking practice, since this is acknowledged as the most problematic skill to acquire through distance language learning (Sussex, 1991). However, even though students are strongly encouraged to attend tutorial sessions, these are not a compulsory element within the course, and some students are unable to attend because of professional or personal commitments, or simply because they choose not to. Tutors are also available to answer students' queries by e-mail or by phone at other times and make it clear from the outset that they welcome such contact as an integral part of their role.

Because of the under-researched nature of beginner distance language learners at the time a large scale survey was undertaken within the OU in 2004-6 in order to obtain data about learning experiences associated with students' initial motivation and longer-term motivation maintenance (i.e. beyond the initial eleven-month course). In line with the long established links between motivation and learner autonomy (Dickinson 1995; Dörnyei 1998; Ushioda 1996; Williams, Burden & Lanvers, 2002) this survey, consisting of pre- and post-course questionnaires, also highlighted certain aspects of the respondents' journey towards learner autonomy.

Data collection and analysis
Mid-course telephone interviews were conducted by the author; themes included learner support and interviewees' perceptions of themselves relative to aspects of autonomy. This paper, based on those interviews, analyses their uses of the different types of support available through their tutor and other students. Interview questions relevant to this paper are available in the Appendix.

Interviewees were drawn from respondents who had completed the pre-course questionnaire mentioned above and expressed their willingness to take part in a follow-up interview. They were selected at random from those who had indicated little or no knowledge of the target language. 56 students were interviewed, although 13 were subsequently eliminated from the study, primarily because the interviews revealed considerably greater prior knowledge than indicated through self-assessment.

The interviews were semi-structured and consisted of open-ended questions designed to elicit students' perceptions of studying a new language through distance learning in

relation to motivation maintenance and the development of learner autonomy. They took place around the mid-point of the beginners' courses, by which time participants were fully engaged with it. They were recorded and transcribed, and responses analysed using QSR N6. A sample of six interviews was initially tagged independently by two coders using a coding framework which was subsequently refined to take account of further issues identified. The two trees on which this paper is based are learner autonomy and support for language learning (tutor and other students). The data were then all tagged, and subsequently checked independently.

It should be noted that students were offered a choice of tutorial support, either face-to-face in regional centres or on-line using a synchronous audiographic tool (Lyceum) developed at the OU. Since both pass rates and learner enjoyment were equivalent for both modes of tuition (Coleman & Furnborough, 2010), this study does not make a distinction between these two modes.

This paper also draws on background data from the questionnaires mentioned above regarding interviewees' previous educational and language learning experience, and information on their progression to higher level courses in the same language obtained from the University's databases. The OU's strict ethical guidelines were followed in capturing and analysing the data and responses.

In view of the evidence advanced through the Feedback study, it was decided to use for the new study the same sample (N=43) and groupings:
Group A (N=18) strategic users
Group B (N=14) non strategic users
Group C (N=11) non users

Profile of the interview participants
The sample consisted of 28 females and 15 males. Educational levels ranged from basic school leaver certificate to postgraduate, with a majority (25 interviewees) possessing university or equivalent qualifications. 20 had previous experience of distance learning, mostly on OU courses outside the field of language study. This broad profile was typical of the students as a whole across the three languages in the beginners' study, as reflected in data from the questionnaires (Coleman & Furnborough, op. cit.). Their main reasons for undertaking a beginner language course included holidays and cultural interest, closely followed by intellectual stimulation and studying for a degree or work. Other reasons cited were a desire to live abroad, either permanently or for extended periods or - in the case of many of the learners with no previous experience of learning any language - a desire to rectify an acknowledged gap in their earlier education. It should be noted that 33 interviewees regarded developing speaking and listening skills as most important, together with opportunities for speaking practice. This is particularly relevant to the second research question in this study.

Results

Research question 1: Contact initiated with the tutor
Apart from the feedback that learners receive from tutors on their assignments, their individual study of the materials is likely to generate queries and issues requiring clarification from time to time. 17 respondents stated that they had contacted their

tutor for help, and a further 18 had not done so only because they had either felt no need, or could draw on other sources of support. There were, however, differences in response between the three groups, as shown in Table 1.

<Insert Table 1 about here>

Group B students were the keenest to contact their tutor with queries, whereas fewer students in group A appeared to experience a need to do so. This may be a reflection of group B's relatively lower confidence as language learners, resulting in a greater dependence on tutor support. A far smaller proportion of students in group C contacted their tutor, despite appearing to have the greatest need to do so, in view of their lack of confidence, anxieties or doubts about their performance and the fragility of their motivation, as identified previously (Furnborough & Truman, op. cit.).

In group A only one student who felt that he could have benefited from doing so did not contact his tutor:

> I've not done that, and maybe again I should have done, but I tried to struggle through things. I should have just e-mailed, 'cos certainly the other people have been saying she gets back to you straight away, even on the phone. … but that's my fault … the first tutorial we had, she went through the literature and she explained how the OU works and that sort of thing, so yeah, I think I'm really clear on that, I feel I was just old fashioned and that, I don't like to bother.

Reasons for contacting the tutor
In the section of the interviews on student-tutor relationships, students' reasons for contacting or not contacting their tutor were explored. It was apparent that students' queries, as discussed in the interviews, related almost exclusively to specific linguistic features of the course materials (e.g. points of grammar) rather than more strategic issues. This finding would appear to be confirmed in a parallel study (Murphy, 2011). There was one obvious exception:

> … she wanted us to actually say a bit about ourselves in French, and I don't feel confident enough yet, or I don't feel I know enough French to do that. I feel confident within my class, but because I don't know enough French to actually stand up and do it, I just basically emailed her and said I don't feel confident enough, and she said that's fine, you know, there wasn't a problem.

This student raised a matter of personal concern, which her tutor was able to resolve to her satisfaction. This was however a unique example in the interviews.

Even among those students who did contact their tutor, several mentioned a reluctance to do so if they could avoid it, generally on the grounds of time constraints affecting both student and tutor:

> I haven't asked for any [help] so far […] I think she's busy, as am I, so perhaps it was a case of not wanting to, really. But you know, it's finding a time that would suit both of us to actually speak for a while, and it's not so easy.

Although there are many possible reasons why a student might be reluctant to contact the tutor, for example a 'traditional' view of the tutor as someone who imparts knowledge in tutorials rather than as a facilitator, or a perception of this as an admission of defeat, students in groups A and B both made explicit references to their

desire to solve the problems themselves, which demonstrates their increasing autonomy as learners:

> Um, no, but I know she's always there, and I know that I could; she's made it very clear that if I needed to contact her about anything that I could do. A couple of times I've thought about it, and then I've worked it out for myself. But I know that I could contact her if I needed to.

The tutor is obviously an important resource that any student in control of his or her own learning might be expected to make use of, and indeed the possibility of being able to contact their tutor was a source of reassurance for many. On the other hand, one of the reasons which conscientious students cite for not doing so is their wish to solve the problem themselves. This applied particularly in group A, and appears to represent the more traditional concept of autonomy as independence.

Issues not discussed with the tutor
The interviews also shed light, not only on the queries which students presented to their tutors, but also, significantly, those of a broader nature which they did not consider appropriate. This student, who had been happy to contact her tutor on specific linguistic points, discussed in our interview her difficulties with retaining new vocabulary:

> I have [contacted my tutor] on a couple of occasions, but haven't done recently, because – well, at the moment I can't think of a reason why I should need to contact her, apart from the fact that I'm struggling with – you know, the vocabulary set out, but equally she goes over that in the classes anyway.

Students were clearly conscious of the need to take sole responsibility for their own learning; significantly, they rejected the notion of sharing broader concerns about their learning, as in the case of one student who had fallen behind and was struggling to catch up:

> Not a lot, simply because I don't request it very often. […] No, no, I don't think it's not because I don't need to, because I think she would always offer it if I needed it because she always says: e-mail her or telephone her. I feel at the moment I need to catch up. I think it's more on my side, certainly not on [the tutor's] side.

All these students took seriously the notion of trying to take control over their own learning, and in some cases appeared to agonise over their decisions. Only rarely did it appear that a student was consciously taking avoidance action (and this student gave up the course shortly afterwards):

> I'm trying to [cope with learning the grammar], but I don't think (laughs) I'm as successful! Because I get it wrong! … No, I haven't [discussed it with my tutor], 'cos I don't really see the tutor, because I don't go to my tutorials. […] Yeah, I don't think I have had any problems before apart from the fact that I don't go to a tutorial.

In conclusion, analysis of the interview data indicates that although students, especially those in groups A and B, do to a greater or lesser extent avail themselves of opportunities to contact their tutor with queries, their concept of control over their own learning in this respect is generally based on an individual rather than a collaborative approach; in other words, the more difficult or strategic the problem, the more they feel inclined to try to solve it on their own rather than in consultation with their tutor. Whilst members of group A (see Table 1) felt less need to contact their tutor, the absence of student-tutor consultation on *strategic* issues does suggest that

this may mask areas where a more collaborative concept of control may have been desirable. At the other end of the spectrum, the group C students (who made least use of feedback) were also the least likely to contact their tutor with queries of any kind. It should be noted that the nature of the advice students were invited to solicit was extremely broad: 'Your tutor will also be able to help between tutorials if you get 'stuck' ...' (Course Guide, 2004), so although students were not explicitly invited to seek strategic help with their learning, they could clearly have chosen to do so if they had wished. A parallel set of interviews (unpublished) conducted with tutors revealed that some were also aware of a need for advice on strategic learning issues, but they were rightly reluctant to try to intervene with 'solutions' in a way which might compromise students' control over their own learning (cf. Ryan, op. cit.).

Interestingly, a respondent with several years' experience of studying arts subjects with the OU – in her pursuit of a degree she was completing an advanced level course in a different language, and complementing it by studying on the beginners' course - appeared most aware of the importance of collaboration and interdependence, and suggested her own favoured solution:

> I think it would help if you could have an arrangement where you could speak to your tutor for 10, 15 minutes, maybe once every couple of weeks, at a time that suits you, just to have a chat and possibly talk in French or Spanish, and talk about any problems you have.

Research question 2: Collaborative engagement with other students
At the time of the survey, tutorials (whether face-to-face or on-line) were the main point of contact between students, who are encouraged to participate, not only to practise oral interaction but also share experiences with their peers (Course Guide). 25 did so on a regular basis, and of those who did not, most were prevented from doing so by work or family engagements, so a strong commitment is evident, as indicated in Table 2.

<Insert Table 2 about here>

On the other hand there was inevitably a small minority of students who, for different reasons, found any notion of collaboration alien and preferred not to engage at all with their peers:

> I think maybe I'm somebody who likes to do things myself behind closed doors really, and that's what I'm doing with my French course.

Predictably these students struggled with the course, especially the communicative aspects at its core. It might be anticipated that those respondents with previous successful experience of distance learning, albeit in a different area of study, would be at some advantage, and mostly this was the case (Coleman & Furnborough, op. cit.). In a few instances, however, already established learning patterns could place them at a disadvantage, as suggested by this student:

> I don't know; in the past, when I've been doing other courses, physics and maths, I've never really collaborated with other students at all, except at summer schools; and then I found generally the subjects I was doing, I got a little help from them but I think I was giving more than I was receiving, in the different subjects I was doing. … I tend to be a bit of a loner like that when I'm studying. Yeah, I generally enjoy studying on my own - it's just that the actual subject of a language is a little different studying for that.

Positive reactions to working with other students
Students were predominantly appreciative of the approach to teaching and learning in tutorials. As one beginner experienced in other languages explained:

> … because we always get mixed up, she always makes sure you're working with people you haven't worked with before, and so you get a good interchange of ideas, and things like that. Listening to other people, making mistakes or not making mistakes, and you think: Oh, I'd have said it like that; so that's good, learning from other students.

This example conveys very well an ethos based on sharing experiences, for example tips for developing language strategies or overcoming any problems faced, within the learning process. Even if that process was potentially stressful for some learners, they were still able to regard it as worthwhile, and even motivating:

> Oh, I think though [tutorials] are always slightly nerve-wracking and exhausting, I think they're very valuable, just to share experiences sometimes and also to practise – I mean with a language, you know, you can't learn it in isolation…

> … at best I am only an average student, probably under average, and when I go on to Lyceum I am struggling with, you know, with the aces, the three or four best people there, I should think. And I am very conscious of that; but however, you know, it's still a learning experience, you know, and when I see that other people can do things that I can't do, I suppose it does give me a motivation, you know.

<Insert Table 3 about here>

Other students were very conscious of how well (or badly) their performance compared with that of their peers:

> Yes I find it interesting because – well, I mean it's a bit of a negative way of looking at it, but when you see others struggling, you think: oh, I understand that, so I'm not too bad (laughs), so it's a bit of a negative way of looking at it, but at least it gives you some idea of the kind of level that everyone's at and then it can be either - I suppose that it can work two ways, can't it? It can be either encouraging or discouraging, depending on how well you can cope with it yourself, but it's good to hear that others struggle with the pronunciation as well (laughs).

Although this kind of informal feedback from peers can be positive and confidence boosting (Murphy, 2011), for this student the comparison is clearly more like a double-edged sword, largely dependent on one's own level of performance. Students who were able to treat this collaboratively rather than competitively seem to have experienced a greater sense of their own control. This control was obviously greatest when they were making a conscious and informed choice about the benefits of working with 'more competent others' (Ushioda, 2006):

> … there's a couple of really interesting characters there, but in terms of the language, I find I pair up with another guy who – he actually studies more than I do, because he's doing conversational Spanish at the local tech and the OU course … he kind of does five or six sessions of Spanish a week and he's quite good, and in fact if I manage to pair up with him during the tutorial it's really quite a challenge to keep up with him!

Negative reactions to working with other students
Whilst the student in the previous example recognised the advantages of working with a student more experienced than himself when the opportunity arose, others reacted in the opposite way:

> I'm not in direct contact with any other students doing the course, a couple of people from my tutorial group I could see, and I was always thinking to go and do an exercise in a separate room, and I was thinking: Well I hope I get paired with him or her; because I know they're struggling as well, so we might work through it together … Please don't put me with that person, because I know they can already speak German!

Clearly it requires a certain confidence, as well as strategic awareness, to cope with an approach to learning which can be potentially threatening despite the facilitating skills of the tutor (widely acknowledged by respondents across the spectrum). For a small minority of students the demands of engaging collaboratively in this way appeared to be simply too great, so they opted out:

> …because people are at different levels, … and we weren't getting enough time to practise speaking, and because some people were taking more time than others, I find that distracting in some ways, as well [so I] decided not to return after first tutorial.

Ironically, being one of the relatively more advanced students also posed problems in using tutorials effectively:

> … but I felt that I was one of the better students on the course anyway, which meant I wasn't gaining so much out of it. I also think it's probably better for the people who are not doing so well, they probably get more out of it … I think a lot of the students were worse, which meant that the tutor had to spend more time helping them …

And, despite the mixed levels inherent in the tutorial system, some students considered themselves collectively at a similar basic level; they regarded this as limiting their scope for learning from their peers to some extent, resulting in a degree of disempowerment:

> Sometimes, sometimes with study methods, you know, somebody's come up with a good idea, … but basically we're all really at the same kind of level so there's nobody really knows any more than anybody else, which is unfortunate!

This comment implies a reduced role for learners and increased dependence on the tutor, indicating a greater distance from autonomy. Clearly the route to collaborative control is an uneven one, on which some learners have travelled further than others.

Contact outside tutorials
Tutors encouraged contact with other students outside tutorials, for example through self-help groups or 'study buddies', with a limited success. By the mid-point of the course nine students had established on-going contact with at least one member of their group, and a further six were actively considering this option. Those who did so appeared to gain some moral support from the activity, despite the concomitant time factor, but the comment below reflects the fact that the course represented simply one element, albeit an important one, in already busy lives:

> [My study buddy] contacted me – initially we were encouraged to find someone – and she and I got together and I don't know, the others probably have done as well, but she's been the only one to contact me, but I think that's enough, really, just to have one person …

Research question 3: Student perceptions of their autonomy as learners
Interviewees were also asked whether they felt in control over their own learning on the course, and reasons for their views. The differences between the three groups are presented in Table 4.

<Insert Table 4 about here>

Strikingly almost none of the students in group C felt in control. Some stated that they were falling behind in their studies, and were concerned that they would not be able to catch up. Others experienced anxiety about aspects of the course and in a few instances this was combined with a realisation that they did not enjoy studying in isolation. Several also commented on stresses in other aspects of their lives which made study more difficult, although this was not confined to group C.

On the other hand, all but one of the students in groups A and B did feel in control, although it was apparent that for many this control was seen primarily or even solely in terms of time management, especially among group B students:

> I'm quite strict with myself, you know – I do timetable study periods, and I try not to have any interruptions during that time, so yes, as long as I can do that, then I feel in control.

This reflects very well the situation of adult learners juggling the demands of professional and personal life with their studies, which often required considerable effort, even extending in one case to changing job:

> Last year [when I was studying history] I also had a really intense, highly committed job, so I had a lot of experience of feeling out of control, and the feeling that I was running out of time … that I hadn't given it one hundred percent. But now I've changed my situation to be able to concentrate more on my studies, and it's certainly improved the situation as far as feeling more in control.

Some students, primarily in group A, gave reasons for feeling in control which extended beyond, although obviously also included, time management. These included a sense of freedom engendered by the learning process:

> It's not like having to go and study at university every day, whether you've got problems at home or whatever, you've got to go and that's it, whereas this is a bit more adaptable and there's maybe bits, you know that you already know that you can skip and do that, … pay more attention to things that you don't know, and things like that really

> Yeah, I do my own pace according to what's happening in my life.

Other responses demonstrated reflection on their own learning styles and a desire to understand and engage with the learning process on the course:

> I think I've got a basic understanding of my style, and I know what my responsibilities are and I know what works for me and what doesn't work for me, but I know that even the things that don't work particularly well, I have to put a little bit more effort in, because I know I need to adapt my strengths, so yeah, I do feel in control, but I think I've got some knowledge of myself.

> … and I think: Hang on! What are they doing here now? And your automatic response then is: I can't cope with this. No, I don't understand this. And then of course if you go back, and you think about it, and you say: Okay, fine, you don't have to understand all of it, let's just take it and see. But it throws me each time – I'm getting more used to it, and I think it may just be the way the Open University does things …

It is encouraging that three-quarters of all interviewees felt themselves to be in control of their learning in a variety of ways and to differing degrees. Unsurprisingly, the skills to which they referred in order to describe this were almost entirely metacognitive ones, since these are the basic building blocks for independent learning. There was only one example from interviewees in the sample where the role of others was mentioned specifically in the context of learner autonomy:

> Unfortunately, now we've started new shift patterns at work, that means I don't actually get to do many of the on-line tutorials, which is unfortunate, but just something that I can't help. But I tried to get round that by talking to some German colleagues at work, and doing an hour a week …

Whilst the earlier findings point unequivocally to a measure of interdependence in the approach of many learners in the study, it was not reflected in their answers to this question. This does raise the possibility that they may place less value on or reflect less about interdependence.

Summary of findings and conclusions

The earlier study of learner responses to feedback had identified that group A, which had adopted a strategic approach to assignment feedback, also offered evidence of a combination of interdependence (internalising tutor feedback and consciously drawing on it in their subsequent learning) and independence (assessing for themselves performance in the target language) in their approach to assessment. This paper has examined whether the same combination might be transferred to other aspects, and suggests that this was indeed the case. Only relatively few students in group A initiated contact with their tutors, but for the most part this was because they were happy to operate independently, or had other sources of support. In addition, almost all those who attended tutorials expressed satisfaction at their interaction with other students, even those who found the experience demanding or stressful. Crucially, their reasons for feeling in control of their own learning reflected a sense of enjoyment and in some cases an added freedom derived from distance learning. The success of members of this group in reconciling interdependence and independence may also be viewed as a contributory factor in maintaining their motivation over an extended period.

In their contact with other learners there was little to distinguish group A and B students, although the latter were the group most likely to contact their tutor with queries. However, the main difference between the two groups lay in their perception of themselves as autonomous learners; in group B this was strongly linked to time management, a necessary condition for independent learning, but arguably only an initial step in a hierarchy of skills and strategies on the road towards a more complete autonomy. Members of the smaller group C, by contrast, were more inhibited in initiating contact with their tutors, and especially in their interaction with other students, often giving up attending tutorials; this could be regarded as a retreat into isolation rather than independence, and was reflected in feelings of loss of control over their learning.

Whilst clear distinctions have been drawn between the three groups in this study, it remains a snapshot of learning approaches and perceptions at a single point in time. However, if social interaction is to contribute to achieving autonomy this

cannot be an absolute concept (Nunan, 1997); it is a dynamic process through which learners can move towards increased autonomy. This also implies that there is ample scope for learner self-perceptions to change and for action to support them in this.

Group B students were assiduous in approaching their tutors and working with others in tutorials, displaying levels of commitment which suggest that they could be assisted on their journey towards greater learner autonomy. Whilst they were keen to raise queries with their tutor, there was evidence that opportunities to formulate and raise more strategic concerns – some of which were clearly a source of anxiety to individual students – were widely missed. In effect these learners reflected a classic independent rather than interdependent stance on autonomy. Tutors are right to hold back from intervening, not wishing to wrest control from their students (Ushioda, 2007).

An obvious starting point for support is to ensure that official guidance to students gives specific examples of issues, including strategic ones, which students could legitimately raise with their tutors. However, space is required for such a dialogue to be initiated by the student. One option for fostering autonomous interdependence could be for learners to identify, analyse and articulate a problem, and the tutor or other support mechanism to interpret and respond, not with 'solutions' but with suggestions (cf. Murphy 2005, for a comparable approach to self-regulation). The student could then decide which, if any, of the suggestions to pursue. The initiative needs to rest with the student since a feature of the effective language learner is evaluation of strategies and taking decisions about when to deploy them (Macaro, 2001). Such an initiative does have policy and resource as well as pedagogic implications, as discussed among others by White (2006), but it is clearly an area for further investigation.

Group C students faced far more extensive problems, but as a starting point two issues stand out: first, for the most part they did not feel in control over their own learning, and second, increasingly they had avoided interaction with other learners as a way of trying to resolve anxieties that this had generated. Whilst no single learning style is appropriate for all learners, approaches which integrate engagement with others can be deemed more appropriate for language learning, and in particular more consistent with the widespread desire expressed at the outset by the learners in this study to develop oral interaction skills. Whether the presence in a group of more advanced students is regarded as a positive learning opportunity or as a threat may therefore be critical for effective learning. It is open to question whether interviewees who preferred to avoid working with such students were exercising control: to what extent were they making a conscious decision about what they felt was right for them, or was it an instinctive emotional response? While autonomy depends on individual learner decision-making it is obviously vital for those decisions to be taken on an informed basis, and one which takes account of feelings as well as reasons. The importance of affective strategies has long been recognised (Arnold & Brown, 1999; Ehrman, 1996) but has only more recently been explored in depth in distance learning contexts (e.g. Hurd, 2007, 2008).

There is scope for integrating awareness-raising measures focussing on decisions affecting learning, in particular with and from others, and their potential impact on learner achievement. In the case of beginner language learners, for whom

in some cases this may be their first attempt, this is even more important. At the same time it has to be recognised that no adult learner operates in a vacuum, being subject to a multiplicity of responsibilities and pressures in their professional and personal lives which impinge on their studies.

This study has explored the links between independent and interdependent learning processes in successful beginner distance language learners. It has demonstrated that many of the participants in the study felt able to take control over their learning, and others were making good progress in this direction. It also highlighted areas where learners could benefit from a more strategic approach and where they might need support to reflect on different options for collaborative learning.

The findings indicate a need for tutors and their institutions to find ways of assisting learners to talk about issues in their learning which they may otherwise consider irrelevant to, or off-limits for, their tutors. As Hurd (2008, p. 232) has suggested, the challenge may be 'to re-conceptualise language learning strategies to include the social and affective sides of learning as well as the more intellectual and 'executive-managerial' sides'. Apart from the logistical aspects of such an endeavour in a distance learning course where tutor-student contact time is at a premium, there is also the issue of the extra demands made on tutors and the additional skills required which may in some respects prove challenging.

It was not within its scope to examine in detail how specific types of interaction with other learners enhance students' control over their own learning, and this is an area for follow-up investigation, as is the extension of this study to additional sources of support available to learners unable to attend tutorials, and how they are utilised. Following the introduction in recent years of new online learning facilities, such opportunities have increased (cf. Murphy & Hurd, 2011). Their incorporation into a follow-up study of learners' self-perception at different points in their learning process in order to examine progression towards greater autonomy would be a valuable line of study to pursue.

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Appendix. Beginners' distance language learners' study: mid-course interview questions (extract)

1 When you started you said that your main reason for studying on the course was [individualised, from questionnaire response]. Can you tell me more about that, what you had in mind?

2 Do you feel you are in control of what you are doing on the course? for example, how you are learning, and when you are learning it? (Why? / Why not?)

3(a) Have you attended tutorials?
If YES, What have you gained from the tutorials? (Was it what you were expecting to gain?)
If NO, Why was that?
3(b) Have you received any other help from your tutor? (Do you ever contact your tutor outside the tutorials?)
If YES, What about? Was your tutor able to help you?
If NO, Was that because you haven't needed to? [or didn't like to?]

4 Do you feel other students in your group help you?
If YES, in what way?
If NO, is this something you had considered? something you had tried?

5 Do you get support from any other sources?
If YES, what kind of support? (How do they help you?)
If NO, are there any other types of support you would like to receive?

Tables

Table 1. Students contacting tutor with learning queries.

	Group A (N=18)	Group B (N=14)	Group C (N=11)
Yes	6	9	2
No:			
other sources of support	3	1	3
no need perceived	8	2	1
No (other)	1	2	5

Table 2. Students attending tutorials.

	Group A (N=18)	Group B (N=14)	Group C (N=11)
Yes	11	10	4
No:			
other commitments	4	2	4
did not wish to do so	1	1	0
Partly (started, but soon gave up)	2	1*	3*

Note: The four students marked with * all stated that they soon gave up attending tutorials because of feeling uncomfortable that other students appeared to be more advanced in their study of the language.

Table 3. Students learning with other students in tutorials.

	Group A (N=11)	Group B (N=10)	Group C (N=4)
enjoyed working with range of their peers	3	4	1
compared own performance with that of others	3	2	0
recognised others were better, but tried not to be put off	3	4	1
recognised others were better, and were put off by this	1	0 [+1]	2 [+3]
other	1	0	0

Note: The four students marked in square brackets stopped attending tutorials.

Table 4. Students' perceptions of their own autonomy as learners.

	Group A (N=18)	Group B (N=14)	Group C (N=11)
Feel themselves to be largely or to some extent in control of their learning, for a range of reasons	13	4	1
Feel themselves to be in control of their learning primarily or solely through time management	5	9	1
Do not feel in control of their own learning	0	1	9