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# **Reacting to feedback on language learning tasks: A model of cognitive and affective engagement in independent learning contexts**

María Fernández-Toro and Stella Hurd

*Department of Languages, The Open University, Milton Keynes, United Kingdom*

Department of Languages

Stuart Hall Building, first floor

Walton Hall

Milton Keynes

MK7 6AA

United Kingdom

Tel.: +44 1908 655250

maria.fernandez-toro@open.ac.uk

**María Fernández-Toro** is a lecturer in Spanish at the Open University, UK. Her research interests are independent learning, assessment, and feedback. She is the author of *Training Learners for Self-Instruction* (London: CILT 1991) and co-author of *DIY Techniques for Language Learners* (London: CILT 1991).

**Stella Hurd** is a retired senior lecturer in French and currently a doctoral supervisor at the Open University, UK. Her research interests are learner autonomy, learner difference, learning strategies, metacognition and affect in self-access and distance

language learning. Publications include journal articles, edited books and book chapters on all these topics.

## **Reacting to feedback on language learning tasks: A model of cognitive and affective engagement in independent learning contexts**

In independent learning contexts, the effectiveness of the feedback dialogue between student and tutor or, in the absence of a tutor, the quality of the learning materials, is essential to successful learning. Using the voices of participants as the prime source of data through a combination of data-driven and concept-driven approaches, this investigation attempts to gain deeper insights into the dynamics of the learning process as students express emotional reactions to the learning environment and in particular the written feedback from their tutors and the learning materials. To account for the different ways in which adult learners studying independently engage both cognitively and emotionally with external feedback, we propose a model based on four key drivers: goal relevance, knowledge, self-confidence, and roles. We conclude that only when these key drivers are aligned with each other can learners in independent settings engage with external feedback and learn from it.

Keywords: feedback; independent learning; adult learners; distance learning, identity; motivation; roles; goal-relevance; feedback alignment; self-confidence, self-discrepancy; possible selves

Subject classification codes: < tbc>

## **Introduction**

Feedback plays a central role in any learning process, and is particularly important in independent settings (White, 2003). By this we mean learning contexts which include both self-access and distance learning, where the learner receives feedback from a tutor on assignments, has access to tutorials, generally online, but also relies on feedback in the materials in the form of model answers or answer keys. Hurd (2006) specifically mentions providing feedback as the most important role of the tutor, according to the distance learners who took part in her study. However, as Nicol (2010) points out, ‘while the quality of the [feedback] comments is important, the quality of the students’ interaction with those comments is equally, and perhaps more important’ (Nicol, 2010, p. 503). Furnborough and Truman (2009)’s qualitative study underlines this point. They investigated the perceptions of beginner distance language learners and their use of assignment feedback from tutors identified different patterns of student engagement with external feedback: Groups A and B were positive about feedback, either seeing it as a learning tool which ‘empowered’ them to take on more responsibility for their own learning, or more generally as connected with a sense of achievement. Group C were hampered in their learning by doubts and anxieties about their own performance, lacked strategies to deal with their negative emotions and did not particularly value feedback from their tutors, showing an inability or unwillingness to take on board comments that were made on their work. The authors concluded that ‘the attitudes and motivational factors affecting students in this group may warrant further investigation’ (Furnborough & Truman, 2009, p. 413). This is reflected in the findings of another investigation into corrective feedback on writing tasks, which

involved four case studies (Storch & Wigglesworth, 2010) of advanced classroom-based learners and found that the way in which students deal with feedback ‘may be affected by a host of linguistic and affective factors, including the type of errors the learners make in their writing and, more importantly, learners’ attitudes, beliefs, and goals’, adding that: ‘affective factors influence not only the type of strategies learners adopt in dealing with the feedback received (e.g., memorization) but also their willingness to accept the feedback and their likelihood of retaining it’ (p. 328).

This paper is a response to the call for further investigation into cognitive and affective factors as they relate to external feedback in independent learning contexts. The purpose of the present research was to examine distance learners’ responses to external feedback and to propose a preliminary paradigm model that can be tested in future research. The data was derived from three earlier studies carried out with students enrolled on language courses at the Open University (UK), which examined, as a main or subsidiary part of their investigation, affective factors and the reactions to feedback of students learning at a distance. Two of the studies used think-aloud verbal protocols (TAPs) with French learners at beginner and lower-intermediate level (Hurd, 2006, 2007a, 2007b), and the third (Fernandez-Toro, Truman, & Walker, 2013) used structured interviews with advanced Spanish learners. In all three studies distance language learners responded to external feedback (either from their tutors or the teaching materials). The data were therefore re-examined with special attention to the students’ cognitive, affective and metacognitive responses to the feedback provided. The main themes arising from that analysis were then considered in relation to relevant research on affect, cognition and performance and their interrelationships. In this paper we identify four cognitive and affective constructs that emerged as playing a key role in

the feedback process. We then propose a model which integrates them, indicating possible directions of influence in an attempt to account for the different ways in which adult learners respond to feedback and the ways in which these interrelate.

## **Affect, cognition and performance in independent learning settings**

According to (Imai, 2010, p. 278) emotions are often referred to by second language learning (SLA) researchers as ‘the principal element of affect, along with feeling and mood’. There has for sometime been a consensus in the literature that all learners benefit from taking an active part in their own learning (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier, & Ryan, 1991; Holec, 1979). However, in independent learning contexts, there is a greater need for self-reliance among language learners, and the deployment of strategies that encourage self-regulation including the constructive management of emotions. As White tells us: ‘Feedback plays a critical role for distance language learners, not only as a response to their performance, but also as a means of providing support, encouragement and motivation to continue’ (White, 2003, p. 187). Affect also has an influence on performance as it may facilitate, impair or interfere with our learning (Arnold & Brown, 1999; Ehrman, 1966; Stevick, 1999).

From this we can hypothesise that it is not only the constructs in themselves but their interrelationships that can be helpful in understanding SLA processes. While there is still a strong focus on the cognitive and metacognitive skills needed to achieve success in language learning, there is now a growing consensus that, although it is without doubt integral to successful learning, cognition is only part of the picture, and that affective factors, both positive and negative, have an equally important role to play in

terms of their effect on behaviour (Imai, 2010). As Arnold and Brown (1999, p. 1) point out: ‘Neither the cognitive nor the affective has the last word, and, indeed, neither can be separated from the other’. In independent settings the inseparable nature of the two constructs has a special significance, in that tutors must pay attention not only to the corrective nature of feedback, but to the ways in which it is constructed and expressed, in order to allay anxiety, boost confidence and maintain motivation in their students.

In recent years, motivation research has shifted focus from cognition and achievement to the role of identity in learner motivation (Ushioda, 2011). This introduces a further dimension that needs to be considered when investigating distance learners’ engagement with external feedback. The next section examines the links between feedback and identity theory.

## **Feedback and identity theory**

Hunt (2001, p. 173) defines feedback as a means of closing ‘the gap between the actual and the desired levels of performance’. That ‘gap’ may be more difficult to close in a distance learning setting where feedback is less immediate and less frequent.

Indeed, a particular problem for those learning in independent contexts is the lack of immediate ad-hoc external feedback, which is readily available to classroom learners. In the studies that Hurd (2007a, 2007b) carried out with beginner distance learners of French, lack of immediate feedback was signalled as one of the major causes of anxiety reported by participants, as shown in this statement: *Because there isn’t the instant feedback if I’m doing something wrong and where there’s more than one way of expressing something, I just lack confidence/knowledge and then I’ll leave it*



*unresolved*. This reaction indicates an urge to resolve uncertainties in order to reach a ‘correct answer’ that enables a learner to close the gap.

But why does it matter so much to a learner not to leave matters ‘unresolved’? How can this commonly occurring urge to ‘close the gap’ be explained? In his self-discrepancy theory, (Higgins, 1987) postulates that ‘we are motivated to reach a condition where our self-concept matches our personally relevant self-guides.’ According to his theory, the self has three basic *domains* or *self-states*:

- the ***actual*** self, which is your representation of the attributes that someone (yourself or another) believes you actually possess;
- the ***ideal*** self, which is your representation of the attributes that someone (yourself or another) would like you, ideally, to possess (i.e., a representation of someone's hopes, aspirations, or wishes for you);
- the ***ought*** self, which is your representation of the attributes that someone (yourself or another) believes you should or ought to possess (i.e., a representation of someone's sense of your duty, obligations, or responsibilities).

(Higgins, 1987, pp. 320-321)

Markus and Nurius proposed the term *possible selves*, which refers to “the ideal selves that we would very much like to become” as well as “the selves we could become and the selves we are afraid of becoming” (Markus & Nurius, 1986, p. 954). The term is also used in this paper to refer to Higgins’ categories of *ideal self* and *ought self* as defined above, on the understanding that they do not exactly correspond to Markus and Nurius’ original *possible selves* categories.

Higgins (1987) defines each of his proposed selves in terms of two *standpoints*: your own beliefs about yourself, and what others believe about you. Table 1 summarises these categories and reformulates them in terms of what they mean to the individual:

<Insert Table 1 about here.>

He argues that any discrepancy between two or more of these domains and/or standpoints represents a type of ‘negative psychological situation’ which causes a specific type of discomfort. For example, within a learner’s *own* standpoint, a discrepancy between the learner’s ideal and actual selves (e.g. *I wish I were fluent in French and yet I believe that I actually am not fluent at all*) is likely to generate ‘dejection-related emotions’ such as disappointment, dissatisfaction, or sadness (Higgins, 1987, p. 319). Because the role of feedback is potentially instrumental in closing the gap between actual and ideal performance, it can help narrow the discrepancy between actual and ideal self-states. Conversely, a learner who is unable to utilise feedback in order to close the gap is likely to experience some degree of psychological discomfort. Ushioda and Dörnyei (2009) define the ‘ought-to’ self in terms of the ‘attributes one believes one ought to possess’, maintain that ‘if proficiency in the target language is part and parcel of one’s *ideal* or *ought-to* self, this will serve as a powerful motivator to learn the language because of our psychological desire to reduce the discrepancy between our current and possible future selves’ (Ushioda & Dörnyei, 2009, p. 4). In a distance setting, this discrepancy can be particularly acute. A study carried out with Chinese distance language learners of English (Xiao & Hurd, 2010) found a marked mismatch between the *ought* and the *actual* self, and concluded

that ‘although participants had a good understanding of the *ought self*, metacognitive skills essential to distance learners were somewhat undervalued in comparison with enthusiasm/motivation, confidence and persistence’ (2010: 80).

The ‘dynamic interplay between cognitive and affective engagement’ (Ushioda, 2007, p. 22) in language learning works in concert with constructs such as learner identity, individual difference, learning approaches and learning strategies, all of which come into play when learners process and act on feedback from their tutor or the learning materials. More recently, in examining motivation and its link with autonomy, Ushioda (2011, p. 222) has noted ‘a shift away from individual-cognitive perspectives on motivation towards *dynamic perspectives integrating internal, social and contextual processes* shaping motivation’. She further identifies ‘a move away from achievement-oriented analyses of motivation to *identity oriented analyses of personal motivational trajectories*’ (ibid.).

In line with this recent development, the present study adopts an identity-oriented approach to account for the different ways in which adult learners respond to external feedback. So far we have seen that affect has an impact on learning as well as on the ways in which learners respond to feedback. We have also proposed Higgins’ self theory as a potentially useful framework for understanding the complex relationships between affect, cognition, identity and motivation that come into play when learners respond to external feedback. Drawing on the three studies previously mentioned, these relationships will now be explored further in order to identify the key drivers of feedback.

## **The study**

The three initial studies that were combined in this follow-up investigation had been carried out with students enrolled on language courses at the Open University (UK). All three studies included data relating to affective factors and students' reactions to feedback in a distance learning context, although the links between affect and feedback had not been specifically examined.

### ***TMA study***

This study was an investigation into the types of written assignment feedback provided by Language tutors on two Spanish undergraduate distance learning modules taught at the UK Open University together with students' responses to it.

The study focused on the written feedback given by 25 tutors on a written assignment. Three sets of feedback were collected from each tutor. The final sample, once incomplete records had been discarded, comprised 72 scripts and feedback summaries, with a total of 4000 written comments/annotations which were analysed using an adapted version of a coding system developed by Brown and Glover (2006). The system is based on the notions of *category*, which refers to the aspect of performance that a feedback comment addresses, and *depth*, which refers to the extent of information provided in the feedback.

The present study is based on the follow-up to this analysis, which consisted of telephone interviews with 20 of the students whose commented work had been analysed, eliciting their attitudes to written feedback and discussing a total of 60 specific annotations/comments that tutors had written on their assignment (3 per student). Students had their copy of the marked assignment and relevant feedback to

hand so that they could identify the sections of the assignment or feedback to which the questions referred. Interviewers worked from a guidance sheet of questions to ask, prompting for further information where needed.

The main categories of feedback discussed in the interviews were comments relating to content, comments relating to skills development, and what Brown & Glover define as ‘motivating comments’, such as praise and encouragement. Feedback had also been coded according to the ‘depth’ of information provided, using three possible levels: depth 1 just indicates a weakness or a strength; depth 2 gives a correction or specifies what is good; depth 3 gives an explanation (Ibid., pp. 83-85).

While the principal focus was on the students’ perceived usefulness of different types of feedback, interview responses also yielded valuable data relating to cognitive and affective responses to the feedback which were not fully analysed at the time. However, through the process of relating Brown and Glover’s coding criteria to students’ interview responses, four recurrent themes seemed to emerge:

1. the relevance of the feedback to the students’ own goals,
2. the extent to which the information provided was considered to be sufficient (depth of feedback),
3. the students’ perception of their own ability to learn from feedback.
4. the students’ perception of what the tutor’s and learner’s roles entail with regard to feedback.

### ***The Think-Aloud Protocols (TAPs) studies***

The first TAPs study was carried out by Hurd with a small group of lower-intermediate distance learners of French, as part of a wider study investigating aspects of affect, including beliefs, personality factors, motivation and foreign language anxiety, which also involved quantitative data collection methods such as questionnaires and interviews. The second study was conducted with a larger group of learners of French, but this time at beginner level. Participants in both studies were asked to verbalise their thoughts and feelings as they worked through designated language tasks from their course books (Hurd, 2006; 2007a; 2007b).

The research questions for the studies addressed the emotions experienced by students while carrying out the designated tasks; their levels of awareness as learners and of the context of their learning; and the strategies they used to manage their emotions. QSR N6 was used to facilitate qualitative analysis which involved segmenting the transcripts, re-segmenting as new strands emerged, and finally coding. The coding process involved a mix of a concept-driven approach informed by the research questions, and a data-driven approach in accordance with Manchon *et al.* (2005, p. 203) who state that ‘working with protocol data involves a compromise between your original aims and your gradual construction of a model from the data’. Although feedback had not been an explicit strand of the study, the data revealed its critical importance to distance language learners, specifically in terms of the problems caused by lack of instant feedback, and the need for encouragement and reassurance where language points are particularly complex. Feedback was therefore identified as a relevant area for follow-up analysis.

Examples drawn from this dataset will thereafter be signposted as ‘TAPs study’.

### ***Identifying the key drivers of feedback***

Beyond the fact that they were based on different language modules (Spanish and French) there were two important differences between the two approaches:

- 1) While the TMA study focused on the feedback provided on a written assignment by the student’s tutor, the TAP studies focused on the feedback provided on a learning task by the learning materials.
- 2) Both studies were based on self-reported data, however the TMA study used semi-structured, retrospective interviews whereas the TAP study used talk-aloud introspection in real time.

This offered us a valuable opportunity for extending the study to the two situations in which a distance learner is most likely to receive feedback (a third one, feedback from peers –e.g. through online forums – is being considered for a future study). The different data collection methods also provided a means of triangulating the findings. The student’s TAPs and interview responses from these studies were re-examined qualitatively with particular attention to any comments relating to cognitive and metacognitive strategies, affect, motivation and identity as well as the themes that had already emerged from the TMA study. The aim of this more focused look at the data was to identify what drives a learner’s engagement with external feedback, and to gain a better understanding of the ways in which such drivers might contribute to successful or unsuccessful learning. From this data-driven approach we derived the four concepts that informed our model of cognitive and effective engagement as set out below. The data analysis strategy for this investigation thus involved both a bottom-up grounded theory

approach and a top-down concept-driven approach, in line with a growing body of mixed-methods research in social and behavioural sciences (Tashakkori & Creswell, 2007).

According to the previous discussion of Higgins' theory, effective feedback helps learners narrow the gap between their actual and desired performance, and thus narrow the gap between their actual and ideal/ought selves. Four key elements emerged from the qualitative analysis of the data appeared to drive this process and determine the extent of a learner's engagement with assignment feedback. These four key drivers are:

- goal relevance (the extent to which closing the gap between actual and desired performance matters to learners);
- knowledge (the means that learners require in order to close the gap);
- self-confidence (the extent to which learners believe themselves to be capable of closing the gap);
- roles (the extent to which learners believe themselves to be responsible for closing the gap).

## **Key drivers of feedback**

Each one of these will now be examined in the light of identity theory and illustrated with examples drawn from the studies described above.

### ***Goal relevance***

Higgins's self-discrepancy theory (Higgins, 1987) implies that individuals are naturally motivated to close the gap between their actual and ideal performance. It follows that a learner will perceive any feedback that helps achieve this as relevant to



their goals, and will therefore be more likely to want to engage with it. Conversely, any feedback attempting to close a gap in an area not perceived as relevant to a learner's ideal self is unlikely to be given consideration. For example, a learner whose goal is to be able to communicate fluently with the local population in Spain is not likely to engage with feedback on the academic content of an essay in the same way as he or she would do with feedback on vocabulary and pronunciation: *Every time I go to Spain my Spanish neighbours notice that I have improved, and I know my grammar is getting better. Grammar is more related to the real, practical language than the content* (TMA study). As she read feedback about the correct use of two French prepositions, one student responded: *I was pleased to see that, because expressions of time are very very important in everyday language.* Another student considered good pronunciation his main goal: *I'm working on that, I am anxious to get it right. The spoken French is the most important thing.* (TAPs study). Conversely, the particulars of language usage were of little relevance to students for whom the main priority was to obtain a high grade: *I didn't use the feedback [...] I concentrated more on the score.* (TMA study). For these students, the most relevant aspect of the feedback was the grade itself.

It should be pointed out, however, that individual goals are not always defined in terms of achievement, and that, as Ushioda (2011, p. 225) referring to (Brophy, 2009) argues, 'motivation theories have been treating many of their central processes and outcomes as *achievement-based* (i.e. focused on success), whereas in fact they are *value-based* and *identity-oriented*'. She further postulates (2011, p. 226) that 'in the language motivation field we have begun to re-theorise L2 motivation in relation to concepts of self and identity, particularly one's aspirations towards certain kinds of linguistic or cultural identity [...] (e.g. Dörnyei, 2009; Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2009)'. Thus, a student's main

reason for wanting to achieve good pronunciation could be that he or she aspires to be perceived as an insider rather than a mere visitor in the target community.

### ***Knowledge***

However motivated learners may be to use feedback and self-evaluation in order to close the gap between their actual and ideal performances, they need to have enough knowledge at their disposal in order to achieve this. If they feel that they do not have the means of actually closing the gap (for example, information that helps identify, understand, and correct a previous error), they may experience negative emotions such as frustration, anger or helplessness (see Higgins, 1987). These were a common occurrence among participants in the TAPs study (authors' emphasis): *Let me look up 72 because it's annoying me, oh right soixante douze; I don't like written exercises at all. How is someone going to know if I've written it right, that's the thing; In some part of the course it says you can use either. Um, [sighs] well, that's, that's fine, that's wonderful, but, you know, when would you really use 'on' more than 'nous'? [...] that's something that bothers me a little bit.*

Conversely, if learners are able to close the gap, they will experience a sense of achievement, increased confidence and self-esteem, and greater motivation to keep learning: *I saw I had made the same mistake again, so I went to look it up in the on-line encyclopaedia. I wanted to see more examples. As a future teacher of Spanish, I need to know these things. I spent half an hour, but I learnt a lot.* (TMA study)

The knowledge required to close the gap in question may relate either to learning strategies, a metacognitive type of knowledge which forms part of what Anderson (1976, 2000) defines as 'procedural knowledge'; or it may relate to an understanding of

the rules of the language, a purely cognitive type of knowledge that belongs to what Anderson categorises as ‘declarative knowledge’.

Learners in both studies made numerous references to their need for plain factual information such as the rule for a particular use of the subjunctive in Spanish, the correct translation for a word, or the basic rules governing the use of formal and informal forms of address. In other words, learners want subject-related declarative knowledge, reflecting the old-fashioned approach that considers knowledge in terms of simply ‘knowing stuff’. They value factual information that they are able to comprehend and remember, and this type of knowledge can be very effective in keeping them motivated. This could be because unlike procedural knowledge, declarative knowledge can be acquired through verbal explanations and is therefore an area where tangible gaps can be easily closed by means of verbal feedback: *I don’t know what the French for contract is; I’ll have a look... ‘Contract: contrat’. Fair enough.* (TAPs study)

Procedural metacognitive knowledge, in the form of learning strategies, is also widely acknowledged as a necessary condition for motivation and effective learning. Dörnyei states that, ‘in order to translate the aroused motivational potential into action’, learners need to have a ‘accompanying procedural strategies’ at their disposal (Dörnyei, 2009, p. 21). Wenden (1998) identifies three subcategories of metacognitive knowledge: person knowledge (general knowledge learners have acquired about human factors that facilitate or inhibit learning and beliefs about their own effectiveness as learners); task knowledge (related to the purpose, nature and demands of the task in hand); and strategic knowledge (related to the purpose, benefits and uses of different learning

strategies). This is how one student explains how feedback helped her improve her task knowledge:

I went back and looked at the instructions of the TMA, and it then became clear that what I had produced was not what had been asked. It made me realise that the work was not about 'my perception of the task', but just about 'the task'. It helped me when approaching TMAs from then on; to learn that I had to respond to what was requested instead of wasting time. (TMA study).

The need for strategy knowledge, often referred to as 'strategic knowledge', was also identified in some cases:

I need to look up, if I can, Portuguese, L, M, N, O, P. Portuguese, portugaise, portugaise, ah, well, er, I think that's the person, the language portugais. [...]  
I could do with some [...] training in dictionary skills. (TAPs study)

The amount of additional information that a learner needs in order to close a particular gap will depend not only on the learner's existing knowledge, but also on a number of other factors related to the learners' beliefs, assumptions and emotions. All things being equal, a highly autonomous learner will be able to close wider gaps than a less autonomous one, and the level of support required in each case will vary accordingly. Therefore, it is important to provide feedback that is gauged at the appropriate level for the recipient, as comments such as *I'd never have got that one myself* (TAPs study) illustrate.

Brown and Glover (2006, pp. 83-85) refer to this as the 'depth' of feedback, and identify three possible levels: 1. Indicating an error or a strength; 2. Correcting the error or describing the strength; 3. Providing an explanation. In independent settings where external feedback is either limited or not available, learners have to rely on their own

knowledge and resources in order to notice and correct their own errors, become aware of their own strengths, and take the necessary action to improve their own performance. Thus, when a learner receives external feedback that is not set at the appropriate depth, the problem may be left ‘unresolved’ and this can result in frustration: *I don’t know. I looked up some of the errors s/he indicated in the dictionary, and the words were there. I couldn’t understand why there were wrong in my text.* (TMA study). However, when external feedback is set to the level of depth required for a particular individual, that learner is able to operate within his/her zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978), i.e. the area between what learners can achieve on their own and what they can achieve in collaboration with others:

I was a bit confused at first; I couldn’t see what it was about. But then, reading it again, I could see what she meant. I do tend to make long sentences sometimes, and I think that that was what s/he was referring to. [...] I didn’t need more explanations. I think it is good what s/he did, making you work out for yourself what the mistake was about, rather than saying just ‘this is how it should be done’. (TMA study).

Offering the appropriate level of scaffolding in this manner presents the learner with ‘optimal challenges’ and what Ryan and Deci (2000) refer to as ‘effectance-promoting feedback’, which help to elicit ‘feelings of competence’ and increase motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 70).

### ***Self-confidence***

In order to engage with external feedback and attempt to close an existing gap between their actual and desired performance, individuals must believe that they have the ability to close the gap in question. The notions of perceived competence (Ryan &

Deci, 2000), perceived plausibility (Dörnyei, 2009), and self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977, 1994) all refer to the belief in one's own ability to achieve a goal as a fundamental condition for motivation and success. Students in the TAPs studies often voiced their preference for those tasks they felt most competent to achieve:

I quite like these kind of exercises because I feel I can usually do them. [...] I am much more comfortable with written type exercises than with ones based on listening and understanding.

...now I have to listen to extract 22 to check your answers. [...] Um, this is the bit that I really feel anxious about. I know I'm not good at it.

I like it when it starts off and lists all the things, as opposed to having to write sentences, [...] it just gives you a bit more confidence when you're starting a new section..

Presented with a new challenge, all individuals have certain 'beliefs about their capabilities to produce designated levels of performance' which Bandura (1977, 1994) refers to as *self-efficacy expectations*. People fear and tend to avoid situations that they deem to be beyond their coping skills, whereas they engage in those that they judge themselves able to handle. Consequently, any feedback that reinforces a learner's belief in his/her own ability to perform motivates the learner to engage actively in the learning process. However, so-called 'positive' feedback is only effective in reinforcing self-efficacy if certain conditions are met. Vallerand & Reid (1984, p. 99) point out that 'if the feedback does not affect perceived competence, intrinsic motivation remains unchanged.' In other words, the comment 'well done' can only work if the recipient believes that indeed s/he has done well, as shown in the following two responses from disappointed students in the TMA study:

Comments were encouraging. At some point my tutor even used the expression ‘the cherry on the cake’ to describe my progress. I was just disappointed by my final results, which were not consistent with my work during the course – I got a ‘pass 2’. I didn’t expect it and felt very sad.

Sometimes I was upset. I didn’t understand why I sometimes got 100%, and sometimes 90%, when everything was ok. That was important for me because it affects the average mark at the end. I cannot complain, because my scores were very high, but I was confused about that issue.

The use of terms such as *I was disappointed*, *I felt very sad* and *I was upset* show the negative impact that such perceived inconsistencies can have on a learner’s emotions.

Furthermore, according to Ryan & Deci (2000, p. 70), ‘people must not only experience competence or efficacy, they must also experience their behavior as self-determined.’

The importance of perceiving achievement as self-determined was clearly articulated by several learners in the TAPs studies:

I have checked it in the ‘corrigés’ to see the suggested version and I feel quite happy with what I have done. [...] quite confident with the ‘passé composé’, quite pleased with that and my progress on that exercise. (TAPs study, our emphasis)

I wouldn’t want to work through a book too quickly and think that was easy [...] So I suppose it’s getting a balance between not getting too disappointed and having a challenge. (TAPs study)

I’m determined I’m going to do it, and I will do it.

Even unsuccessful performance is perceived as less worrying when the individual feels in control:

Ah, my fault, I can’t read instructions. (TAPs study)

Anyway, some comments referred to mistakes that I could have avoided easily if I hadn't been so 'lazy', so I can basically 'dismiss' all of those comments. (TMA study)

White (1999) refers to this as *locus of control*: 'a belief in one's ability to shape events is referred to as internal locus of control, while a belief that outside forces control performance is referred to as external locus of control.' (White, 1999, p. 452). She found that learners, as they become accustomed to self-instruction, tend to experience a shift from external to internal locus of control, but a small group of individuals fail to experience such a shift. A similar result was reported by Furnborough and Truman (2009) among the 50 Open University beginner students that they interviewed: 'Group A' reported that they made active use of feedback as a learning tool; 'Group B' regarded it as a means of checking their progress; and 'Group C' regarded assignment feedback as 'extraneous to the learning process' and were unable to internalize the locus of control.

### ***Roles***

The ways in which different learners use feedback and self-evaluation depends upon how individuals perceive their own role in the learning process. Those with a highly internalised locus of control will consider themselves in charge of many aspects of the learning process (for example, revising a piece of writing critically and making the necessary corrections), while those who have an external locus of control are likely to expect others (their tutors, for example) to take a leading role in the process: *I read this a couple of times, and I thought that it was not so unclear. But she is the tutor.* (TMA study, our emphasis). Thus, such students are likely to prefer feedback in which all errors are fully corrected – what Brown & Glover (2006) call *Depth 2* – and



explained – *Depth 3* – rather than feedback in which errors are simply indicated –

*Depth 1:*

That's the one thing I find difficult [...] But then you've got dictionary skills: looking up verbs on Page 45 which is very helpful so I suppose it's up to me to look back at the verbs and so on. [...] which I don't usually do (TAPs study).

Conversely, students with an internal locus of control are prepared to do more of the work themselves in order to bridge the gap:

You've just got to remember them, you know, and if you're a student worth your salt, you will. Um, you know, irregular verbs, there is no other way to tackle them other than to, actually learn them [...] I think I would have been extremely self-critical to be perfectly frank, if I hadn't had got the right answers to those, because I think that they are, they are quite easy and shouldn't cause people problems. (TAPs study).

Generally the tutor was seen as largely responsible for keeping students motivated through encouraging feedback, however a minority did not rely on their tutor for encouragement: *I didn't need any encouragement [...] She could have given me 0 marks, or told me it was dreadful... But I would have continued anyway.* (TMA study)

Indeed several students explicitly asserted their own status as experienced and competent learners, perfectly capable of taking control of their own learning: *I already have a degree; I have lots of experience in the academic context; I am a native speaker; I teach as well* (TMA feedback study). While learners' perceptions as to their own roles affect their attitudes and responses to feedback, the roles that an individual is able or willing to assume cannot be reduced to a simple matter of internal versus external locus of control within a teaching and learning situation. The next section adopts a concept-

driven approach to examine the close links that exist between the drivers of feedback and the learners' perceived identity.

## **Identity and feedback in distance learning**

People who learn languages, like everyone else, assume a variety of roles and identities in their everyday life. Ushioda (2009) advocates a 'person in context' approach in the study of human motivation, and argues that 'we should not position the central participants in our research simply as language learners, since this is just one aspect of their identity'. Her position is echoed by Murphy (2011, p. 121), who reported that the participants in her study displayed 'multiple identities' such as 'mother, child of aged parents, worker, perseverer, conscientious learner or member of a specific interest group'. Individuals carry these identities with them across the various environments in which they operate, which is why they are often referred to as *transportable identities*. Conversely, roles such as 'teacher' and 'student' are defined in relation to a specific situational context such as the language learning environment, and are therefore regarded as *situated identities* (Richards, 2006; Ushioda, 2009; Zimmerman, 1998). Thus, participants in the TAPs studies often made more or less implicit references to transportable identities such as 'retired': *I worked from the age of twenty and I stopped two years ago. Yeah, I know the feeling*; 'mother of young children': *I usually just make bit and pieces of notes, I'm sitting in the spare room, I've got two little kids so I don't sit at a table, I'm sitting on the floor which probably isn't a good thing*; or 'single person': *I practise at home at night. I live alone, but I have two cats and they're, they're the most multilingual animals under the sun, because they get spoken to in French*.

While the link between identity and feedback is not explicit in the above comments, the

fact that students chose to mention such information while completing a task indicates that those aspects of their identity were a relevant consideration as they engaged with the task in question. Dörnyei postulates that, in order for the ideal and ought selves to have a positive impact on motivation, they must be in harmony with each other (Dörnyei, 2009: “Condition 3”). Let us consider for example a mature student at the Open University, who has a young family, an assignment submission deadline in the middle of the half-term holiday, and is expecting some old friends to come and visit her town around the same time. In her case, what Higgins refers to as her ‘own’ standpoint would actually be made up of at least three different standpoints ‘OU student’, ‘mother’ and ‘friend’. Conversely, the ‘other’ standpoint would comprise a variety of significant others such as her OU tutor, her children, her partner, and her visiting friends.

Table 2, expands the table previously shown in Table 1 in order to incorporate this type of multiple dimension within the notion of ‘standpoint’. The new table clearly illustrates the complexity of potential discrepancies that may occur between different self-states.

<Insert Table 2 about here>

Table 2: Self-discrepancy relations in distance learning: A multi-standpoint framework (based on Higgins 1987):

At the beginning of this paper we discussed how discrepancies between the actual and ideal selves may generate psychologically uncomfortable tensions, as in our earlier example: *I wish I was fluent in French* [ideal self], *and yet I believe that I am not fluent at all* [actual self]. But discrepancies may also exist between different roles within a person’s ‘own’ standpoint, for example: *as an OU student, I ought to submit this assignment in time and yet as a mother, I ought to take my children on holiday.*

Furthermore, different ‘significant others’ may themselves elicit internal discrepancies within the ‘other’ standpoint: *My tutor believes that I ought to spend a few hours reading the preparatory materials for this assignment, and yet my friends believe that I ought to spend a few hours relaxing in their company.* If, as Higgins (1987) suggests, each of these discrepancies potentially elicits a different emotional response, the sheer number of possible combinations resulting from this analysis clearly places emotions at the centre of any learning situation involving real people, or as Ushioda (2009) would call them, ‘persons in context’. Not surprisingly, Murphy (2011) found that the comments made by a group of distance learners in their personal logs ‘showed how these other roles or identities could conflict with study, or had to take priority, but also how they might help motivation’ (Murphy, 2011, p. 121).

## **The proposed Model**

Having identified goals, knowledge, self-confidence, and roles as the key elements that drive the feedback process, the proposed model shows how these four drivers can now be integrated to present the potential interrelationships and interactions between them in the light of identity and motivation theory. The nature of the data used in the present study did not allow for systematic testing of the model, so at this stage it should be considered as a data-driven hypothesis. The purpose of the following discussion is to demonstrate that the model has internal consistency and the potential to explain independent learners’ responses to feedback from an identity-driven perspective.

Figure 1 illustrates the processes that take place in effective feedback, whereas figure 2 illustrates the different ways in which such processes may fail to occur in ineffective

feedback. Let us first consider what happens when feedback does work.

<Insert Figure 1 about here>

In figure 1, feedback is represented in the form of an arrow that starts from the actual self and aims in the direction of the possible selves. These comprise the ideal self and the ought self which, in this instance, are in agreement with each other. In other words, the goals related to the ideal and the ought self are either similar or compatible with each other. Consequently, feedback has a clear direction which results in a perfect alignment between actual self, feedback, goals and possible selves. This alignment also contributes to learner engagement in pursuit of a clear set of goals.

Feedback adds to the learner's existing knowledge by providing information that is within their zone of proximal development. In other words, gauged at a depth that gives the learner just enough information to be able to work out a way for closing the gap himself/herself. Again, this cognitive enablement through appropriate scaffolding contributes to learner engagement. When, as a result of his/her engagement, a learner succeeds in getting closer to their goal, a new layer of knowledge is built so that next time less scaffolding is needed and greater challenges become possible.

Feedback also provides encouragement. Here again, if the encouragement is in tune with a learner's individual needs, they will be more likely to engage with the feedback and thus get closer to their goal. Success will reduce anxiety and elicit positive emotions such as satisfaction and pride. Provided that it is seen as a direct result of the learner's own engagement, success will also help the learner perceive the locus of control as internal, thus strengthening self-confidence.

In the previous discussion of actual and possible selves, we saw that actual, ideal, and ought self could each encompass a variety of selves related to different standpoints such as mother, student, friend, carer of elderly parents, people person, near-native speaker, etc. The particular combination of identities that is at play in a specific learning situation determines the roles (situated identities) that a learner is prepared to assume in that situation. When such roles are compatible with each other, the learner is able to engage with the feedback in a focused manner. If the learners are self-confident and have a strong sense of self-efficacy, belief in their own ability to close the gap will encourage them to adopt a proactive role in the learning process and engage with it even more. For example they may undertake to follow up feedback comments that only provide little information, where less confident students might just expect the tutor to close the entire information gap for them.

In summary, effective feedback is feedback in which goals, knowledge, self-confidence and roles are aligned with each other and together contribute to closing the gap between actual and possible selves through both cognitive and affective learner engagement. Conversely, ineffective feedback fails to engage the learner because one or more of these key drivers is/are not aligned with the rest. This is illustrated in fig.2,

<Insert Figure 2 about here>

Lack of alignment may occur because different sets of goals are in conflict with each other. For example the ideal and ought selves may elicit contradictory priorities, for example the ideal self is an extrovert who can speak spontaneously in real-life situations, while the ought self is a perfectionist whose grammar is absolutely faultless. Or it may be the tutor whose priorities are different from the student's, producing

feedback that does not focus on the student's target areas. Lack of alignment may also occur when the information given in the external feedback does not match the learner's needs and fails to answer his/her internal questions. If, for example, an error is indicated, or even corrected, but the learner does not understand the reason for the correction, knowledge building will be impossible even if the student tries to engage initially. Furthermore, negative emotions such as high anxiety, frustration, or even guilt and shame may result from failed attempts to narrow the gap.

Encouragement that learners cannot relate to actual performance and their own engagement with the task may be perceived as a mere pat on the back. Instead of strengthening self-confidence, such feedback will be dismissed and may also result in the type of negative emotions just mentioned.

Finally, lack of alignment may be due to a conflict between the different roles that the learner's multiple selves call for in a particular situation. Multiple roles can bring about a conflict of identities, particularly when they concern family responsibilities, and this can make study difficult: *I would really like to spend some time on this TMA but my son needs help with his homework* ['student' versus 'mother']; *I'd love to stay in tonight and work on my French, but my partner is desperate to go out* ['student' versus 'partner']. This conflict can lead to loss of self-confidence when a learner cannot devote the time needed to study because of competing and conflicting demands on his or her time. Self-confidence is needed from the start in order for learners (1) to feel able to assert their right to time for study; (2) to cope with managing a variety of roles and identities and to be able to prioritise between them; and (3) to be able to develop the staying power and persistence necessary to deal with obstacles and difficulties in the

course of their learning. If they have been unable to take on the identity of independent language learner' from the outset and to believe that the *actual self* can become the *ideal self*, they are less likely to succeed. There may also be a lack of clarity about the roles of tutor and learner, particularly in a distance setting, and this can add another layer to the confusion. In some cases, learners may feel that they are being asked to take on too much responsibility for their own learning and feel unable to cope with the demands of self-regulation. This too can lead to loss of self-confidence, particularly where, in the absence of a teacher to give immediate feedback, students compare themselves negatively to their peers.

Any one of the reasons discussed above may disrupt the alignment of feedback with goals, knowledge, self-confidence and roles, thus impairing student engagement and preventing learning from taking place.

## **Conclusion**

The proposed model has a number of strengths. Firstly, it integrates the cognitive, metacognitive and affective dimensions of a learner's engagement with external feedback. This is especially important in independent learning settings, and more particularly within a distance learning context in which the principal sources of feedback are in the form of answer keys on the learning materials and tutor comments on assignments. It also accounts for the dialogic nature of feedback in independent learning settings, insofar as it considers the interactions between learners and the external sources of feedback just described. Finally, the model accounts for the conditions under which external feedback is internalized by learners in independent learning settings.



However, the present study represents only a snapshot of these interactions and conditions at a particular moment in time, rather than a full account of them over a person's learning journey. Moreover, in focusing only on the learner's responses to assignment feedback and feedback from the learning materials it does not fully examine interactions with other forms of external feedback, which could usefully be followed up in further studies. Further research is also needed in order to gain a better understanding of the complex ways in which the four concepts proposed in the model interact with each other, given the growing number of opportunities to broaden the range of feedback-generating interactions offered by new technologies in recent years. These include interaction with peers (for example through social media, module forums, etc.), social interaction outside the instructional setup, or student-tutor interaction that is not related to a specific assignment (e.g. online tutorials). The tutors' perspective is another area to be followed up. Future perspectives need to consider ways in which tutors and course developers could ensure that goals, knowledge, self-confidence and roles are aligned with each other.

Despite these limitations, the model's principal contribution is that it integrates current theories of the self within the areas of feedback research and independent learning. In particular, the multi-standpoint framework for self-discrepancy relations provides a theoretical framework to account for the emotional tensions affecting motivation in distance and other forms of independent learning. As such it offers a solid foundation for future directions which could address the issues emerging from the growing interest into the role of identity in learner motivation.

<Word count: so far about 8335, plus title, abstract and refs (was 8667 in first submission).>

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Table 1. A summary of Higgins' (1987) self theory

'Standpoints' → 'Self-states' ↓	Own	Other
Actual self	I believe that I actually...	Somebody else believes that I actually...
Ideal self	I wish/ I hope that I...	Somebody else wishes/ hopes that I...
Ought self	I believe that I ought to...	Somebody else believes that I ought to...

Table 2. Self-discrepancy relations in distance learning: A multi-standpoint framework (based on Higgins 1987)

Domains ↓	Standpoints →	Own		Other	
		L2 learner	Mother, carer, employee, etc.	Tutor	Partner, parent, boss, friend, etc.
Actual self		As a learner/mother/etc... I believe that I actually...		My tutor/partner/etc... believes that I actually...	
Ideal self		As a learner/mother/etc... I wish/ I hope that I...		My tutor/partner/etc... wishes/ hopes that I...	
Ought self		As a learner/mother/etc... I believe that I ought to...		My tutor/partner/etc... believes that I ought to...	

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(based on Higgins 1987)

Figure 1. Effective feedback

Figure 2. Ineffective feedback

# Possible selves

*Ideal self*

*Ought self*



Goals

Learner engagement

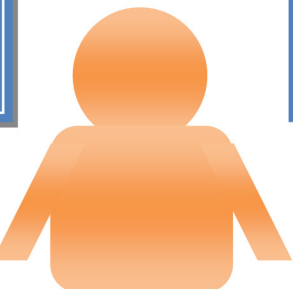
Feedback

information

encouragement

Knowledge

Self-confidence



*Actual self*

Roles

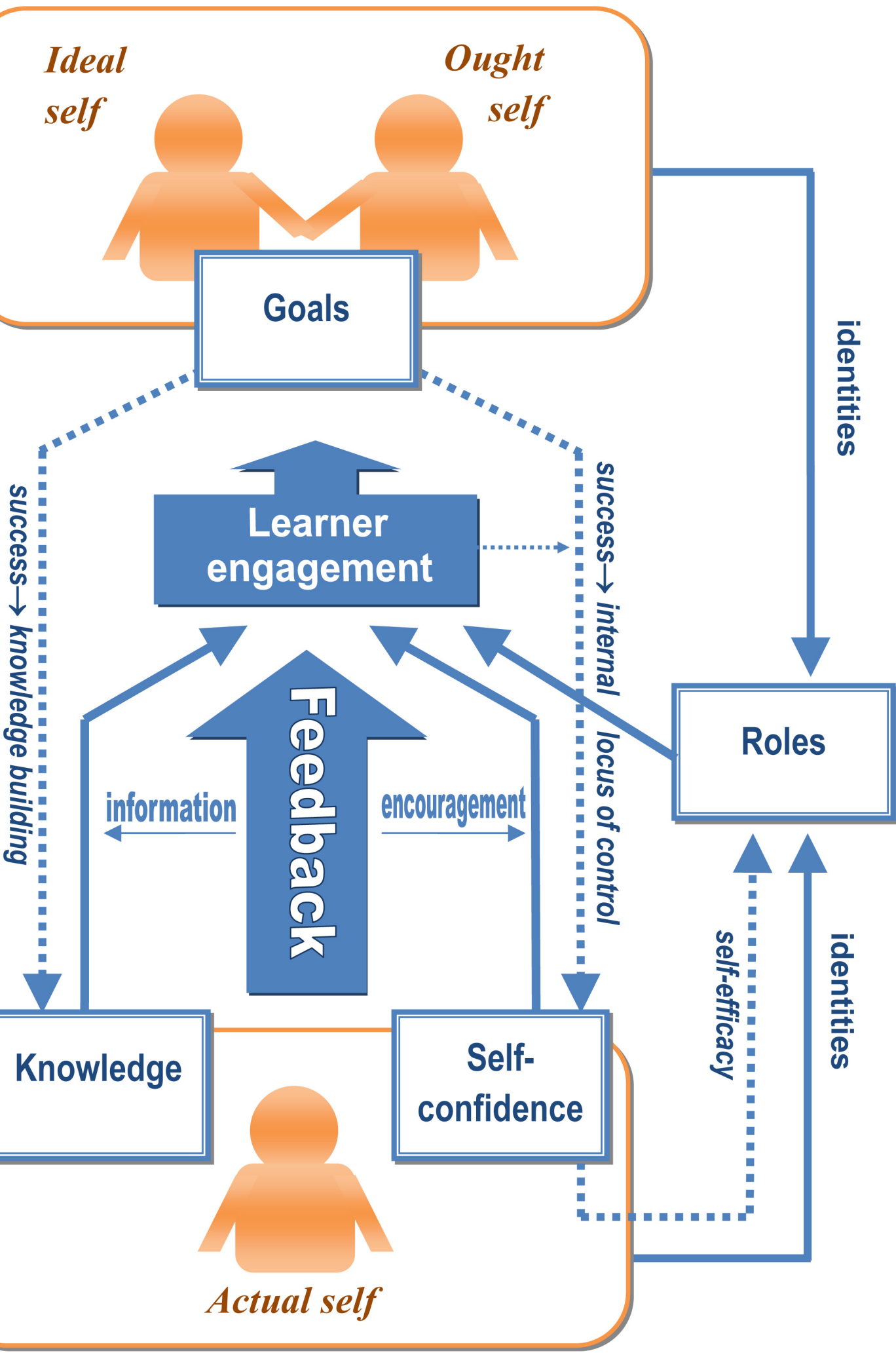
identities

identities

self-efficacy

success → knowledge building

success → internal locus of control





# Possible selves

*Ideal self*

*Ought self*



Goals

Goals



*information*

*encouragement*

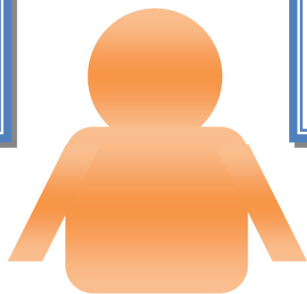
Goals

**Feedback**

Roles

Knowledge

Self-confidence



*Actual self*

Identities

Identities

