



## **Exploring the link between language anxiety and learner self-management in open language learning contexts**

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### **Abstract**

Learning a language is said to implicate self-concept in a way that does not occur in other disciplines, and to entail a particular kind of anxiety related only to language situations (see Gardner & Mac Intyre, 1993; Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope, 1986, 1991). To date, however, research into affective learner variables such as anxiety, self-confidence and motivation and their impact on learner performance has concentrated on classroom-based learners. There are fewer studies that examine the special situation of those studying in a distance context (see Hurd 2000, 2002, 2005; Hurd, Beaven & Ortega 2001; White 1994, 1995, 1999) and - to our knowledge - none considering these factors within virtual distance language learning environments. White (1995) stresses that their need for self-direction requires distance learners to develop a comparatively higher degree of metacognitive knowledge - especially their self-knowledge. Her findings also reveal that distance learners make greater use of metacognitive strategies - particularly self-management - and affective strategies than do classroom learners. Here too, investigations taking virtual language learning contexts into account are scant (see Hauck, 2005). Based on the evaluation of data from two studies carried out at the Open University this paper seeks to explore the interrelationship between affective learner variables in particular language anxiety and, learner self-knowledge and management in face-to-face as well as virtual settings.

### **Keywords**

Distance language learning, language anxiety, self-knowledge, self-management, face-to-face settings, virtual learning spaces

### **List of Topics**

Introduction

Learning a Language at a Distance: Learners and Learner Support

Language Anxiety

Learner Self-Management

The Studies  
*Study 1: Language Anxiety*  
*Study 2: Learner Self-Management*  
Discussion: Linking Anxiety and Self-Management  
Conclusion  
References

## Introduction

The Department of Languages at the Open University/UK was set up in 1991 and presented its first course in French for lower intermediate learners<sup>[1]</sup> in 1995. Intensive course production over a number of years has resulted in a portfolio of courses from beginner to degree level in French, German and Spanish. Language learning resources are varied and include print, video and audio materials as well as ICT components such as, for example, course websites. All students are individually assigned a tutor who advises on learning, marks coursework and holds tutorials. Until recently all tutorials took place face-to-face in the Open University's regional centres throughout the UK and Continental Western Europe, but since 2002 tutorials for some courses have been conducted online using *Lyceum*, an Internet-based conferencing system originally developed by the university's Knowledge Media Institute which provides multiple synchronous audio channels as well as synchronous text chat and several shared graphic interfaces (for a more detailed description of the tool see [Hauck & Hampel, 2005](#)). As a result of the continuing success of this tutorial mode the Department of Languages now offers a choice of face-to-face or *Lyceum*-based tuition to all students.

This paper seeks to enhance our understanding of the interrelationship between affective issues, language anxiety in particular, and successful learner self-management in these learning environments. The findings are based on two *phenomenographic* studies, with the first one on language anxiety prompting the second one which explores the role of successful learner self-management. After some background information about the Open University's approach to distance education in general and the Department of Languages' approach to teaching languages at a distance in particular, this article looks at the theory underpinning the phenomena of language anxiety and learner self-management. This is followed by a presentation of the aforementioned studies, a discussion of their results and some preliminary conclusions.

## Learning a Language at a Distance: Learners and Learner Support

Learning any subject in distance mode has its own specific challenges, not least the need to develop self-awareness and acquire good self-management skills as part of developing autonomy as defined by Hurd *et al.* (2001) in their investigation of strategy instruction and learner support in relation to distance language learning. They stress that conscious selection of strategies and self-directed involvement are characteristics of an autonomous approach, and particularly relevant to those learning in independent contexts. How, then, does the Department of Languages at the Open University UK attempt to develop autonomy in its learners, while at the same time responding to the need for good support mechanisms?

Firstly, the materials play a central role as the teaching voice, the link between teacher and learner. Distinctive features are structured learning with explicit

aims, objectives and learning outcomes, and activities to give practice and encourage reflection. Activities are carefully sequenced to provide steady progression and ensure variety in type, skill, grammatical/style focus. To help students develop awareness of themselves in the learning process and encourage an autonomous approach, learning strategy sections are embedded into the courses and thus reflect an indirect and contextualised approach to strategy training. The aim is gradually to shift the locus of control from teacher to learner and build learners' confidence in taking an active part in their own learning.

Tutorials are not compulsory but those who attend when they can consider them to be an integral part of their learning. For these students, the face-to-face element, however irregular, is crucial for developing confidence and fluency, interacting in the target language along with the visual clues and cues that the presence of others can give and getting instant feedback. In order to provide more flexible speaking opportunities for all learners and to cater more specifically for those who do not or cannot attend the face-to-face tutorials, online tuition via *Lyceum* is a serious alternative. But can tutorials online offer the same level and quality of support as those conducted face to face? Do they have other advantages or disadvantages?

Building on earlier studies (Hauck & Haezwindt, 1999; Shield & Hewer, 1999; Shield, Hauck & Hewer, 2001), more recent studies (Hampel & Hauck, 2004) examined these questions and in particular the challenge of implementing online tuition in a distance learning setting, including pedagogic rationale, activity design, tutor training and student support. Findings highlighted the number and complexity of the issues involved, in particular those relating to the technology used and how these affected student behaviour and motivation. Hampel and Hauck (2004) stress that a great deal of practice and training is required in order to optimally exploit the special affordances offered by a multimodal system such as *Lyceum*. Among the areas to be prioritised when setting up online tuition in an audio-graphic environments they mention training of tutors, arrangements for adequate ICT support, (including induction and setting up and maintaining comprehensive online help), initial and ongoing communication to manage student expectations, clarity to students in channelling queries (e.g., all technical enquiries to be directed to helpdesk, all academic enquiries to tutor), and an ongoing evaluation of task design.

The studies that are the focus of this paper complement that research by investigating the nature and extent of anxiety among distance language learners and the role of self-knowledge and self-management in dealing – among other things – with affective difficulties such as anxiety. Why is it, then, that anxiety is seen to have particular relevance to language learning?

## Language Anxiety

Research into anxiety in language learning has a history spanning over three decades (Curran, 1976; Gardner *et al.*, 1976; Kleinmann, 1977; Stevick, 1980). According to Guiora (1983, p. 8), "the task of learning a new language is a profoundly unsettling psychological proposition", a view reinforced by Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope (1991, p. 31) who contend that "probably no other field of study implicates self-concept and self-expression to the degree that language study does". Research has focused on a type of anxiety termed language anxiety that is seen as "a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors [...] arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process" (Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope, 1986, p. 128) and which "does not appear to bear a strong relation to other forms of anxiety" (MacIntyre, 1999, p. 30). Language anxiety is

said to have a 'subtle' and 'pervasive' effect on cognitive processing (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994; Oxford, 1999) and to be associated with "deficits in listening comprehension, impaired vocabulary learning, reduced word production, low scores on standardized tests, low grades in language courses or a combination of these factors" (Gardner, Tremblay & Masgoret, 1997, p. 345). In response to their critics (notably Sparks & Ganschow, 1995, 2000) who do not accept a causal relationship between anxiety and learning, MacIntyre (1995a, 1995b, 1999) in the 90s and, more recently, Horwitz, (2000, 2001) strongly argue that anxiety is a multifaceted variable that can be both a *cause* and a *consequence* of poor language learning and remind us (Horwitz, 2000, p. 256) that "the potential of anxiety to interfere with learning and performance is one of the most accepted phenomena in psychology and education".

The majority of studies into language anxiety refer to classroom-based learning and there is little that specifically investigates anxiety in the distance context. Apart from the work of Hauck (2005), Harris (2003), Hurd (2000, 2002), Hurd *et al.* (2001), and White (1995, 1997, 1999), to date, there also seems to be little published research about the link between affective factors such as anxiety and meta-cognitive strategies such as learner self-management taking into account the particular situation of those studying at a distance. Distance learners are, however, said to make more use of meta-cognitive strategies than do classroom-based learners, self-management being the most frequently used (White, 1995).

The first study presented in this paper, therefore, attempts to fill this gap through an investigation of language anxiety at a distance and the strategies students use to address it. The second study seeks to contribute to a more comprehensive picture of the relationship between self-knowledge and self-management in distance learning both in more traditional contexts and in virtual learning spaces such as *Lyceum*.

## **Learner Self-Management**

The demands and opportunities of a distance learning context make it necessary for students to re-evaluate their role(s) and responsibilities as language learners and their need for self-direction requires them to develop a comparatively higher degree of metacognitive knowledge, particularly in terms of self- or person knowledge (White, 1995). This is confirmed by Hurd *et al.* (2001) who describe the dilemma of these learners as follows: Not only do they have to find out by trial and error which strategies seem to work for them; they also have to learn the skills of assessing their individual learning needs, including their strengths and weaknesses as learners. Thus they have to be self-aware and knowledgeable about their own perceptions, attitudes and abilities. At the same time, course writers and tutors are faced with a particular challenge, given that they are not 'in touch' with the learners and cannot easily find out about them in order to support them.

Recent studies of learning strategies emphasise the importance of enabling learners to understand and then manage not only their repertoire of strategies but also their learning patterns, attitudes and feelings (Wenden, 1995; Butler, 1997; Rubin, 2001). Hauck (2005) takes this notion a step further to include online learners. She contends that the degree to which language learners are aware of both themselves - their attitudes, aptitudes and beliefs - and of the affordances of the learning environment, and the degree to which they demonstrate control and flexibility in the use of metacognitive strategies such as self-management are interdependent.

Successful learner self-management (LSM) is a strong indicator of a high level of metacognitive knowledge in learners, i.e. awareness of the circumstances in which they, as individuals, learn best, and possession of the skills necessary to create those conditions. According to White (1995, p. 215), "self-management takes place when learners draw on their understanding of how they learn best to set up the learning conditions which they have found to be favourable [...] to manage their interactions with the TL (Target Language)". This perception of LSM reflects O'Malley and Chamot's (1990, p. 137) definition in their taxonomy of language learning strategies, i.e. "understanding the conditions that help one successfully accomplish language tasks and arranging for the presence of those conditions." Yet, considering the situation of distance language learners, particularly those operating in virtual spaces, Hauck (2005, p.73) calls for a slightly more comprehensive definition of self-management: "understanding the conditions that help successfully to accomplish language tasks in independent and virtual learning contexts and arranging for the presence of those conditions in such contexts". Such a wider notion of self-management, that is one which takes the learning environment into account, can be found in Rubin's (2001) Interaction Model of LSM where she illustrates the complex dynamic processes between the learning task, the procedures for LSM (planning, monitoring, evaluating, problem-solving and implementing) and LSM knowledge and beliefs. The latter include self-knowledge, strategic knowledge and prior knowledge such as, for example, contextual knowledge about setting and situation, i.e. about the learning environment.

Rubin and Thompson (1994) look at ways in which knowledge and use of strategies – particularly metacognitive and affective strategies – influence language learning. They note the interdependence between, on the one hand, a low 'affective filter' and thus low anxiety levels and on the other, improved self-esteem, self-efficacy and motivation resulting in improved performance. Accordingly Rubin (2001, p. 26) characterizes skilled self-managed learners as those who "possess sufficient knowledge and appropriate well-developed beliefs about self, the learning process, possible strategies, the nature of tasks, and prior knowledge" and who are able "to access their knowledge and beliefs in order to orchestrate their use of procedures". She takes the task as the starting point for her considerations about successfully self-managed learning. At times affective strategies and self-management overlap in that the former "serve to regulate emotions, motivation and attitudes (e.g. strategies for reduction of anxiety and for self-encouragement)" (Cohen, 1998, p. 8). In a new approach the two studies described in the next section focus on the self and the learning context.

## The Studies

In 2003 and 2003/2004 two studies were carried out with Open University language learners based on a so-called phenomenographic research approach which is described as "the finding and systematising of thought in terms of which people interpret significant aspects of reality" and "aims at description, analysis and understanding of experiences" (Marton, 1981, quoted in White, 1999). The first study investigated language anxiety among learners supported by face-to-face tutorials. The second study included online as well as face-to-face learners in its investigation of affective and contextual factors, and focused in particular on language anxiety and LSM skills.

### Study 1: Language Anxiety

The study into language anxiety was part of a wider longitudinal study investigating a range of affective variables including anxiety, motivation and

beliefs among a group of distance language learning students registered on L120 Ouverture, a French course for students at lower intermediate level. There were three intervention points during the course which ran from February to October: Questionnaire 1 was administered in February at the start of the course, Questionnaire 2 in June at the midway point; and one-to-one recorded telephone interviews were held in November at the end of the course.

With regard to language anxiety, the study aimed to extend existing knowledge gained in face-to-face learning environments to the distance context, and to find out what, if any strategies those students experiencing anxiety were using after four months of study. The first of the two questionnaires was sent out to a random sample of 500 subjects selected by the Open University's Institute of Technology (IET) at the start of the course from the 2003 cohort of learners. 277 students responded i.e. 55% of the overall sample. The second questionnaire (n = 277) achieved a response rate of 52%, i.e. 145 responses. Questionnaire 1 aimed to elicit some preliminary information at the start of the course on student beliefs about anxiety in relation to learning a language as opposed to other subjects, and whether the distance element was a factor in raising or lowering levels of anxiety. Questionnaire 2 probed the concept of language anxiety in more depth, exploring further its nature and extent after four months of study. It included questions on specific language tasks that made students feel anxious and on the use of affective strategies to deal with anxiety. The questionnaires included Lickert-type and yes/no questions, selecting and ranking activities, and some open-ended questions for qualitative analysis.

We report findings of the two questionnaires as related to the following research questions on language anxiety:

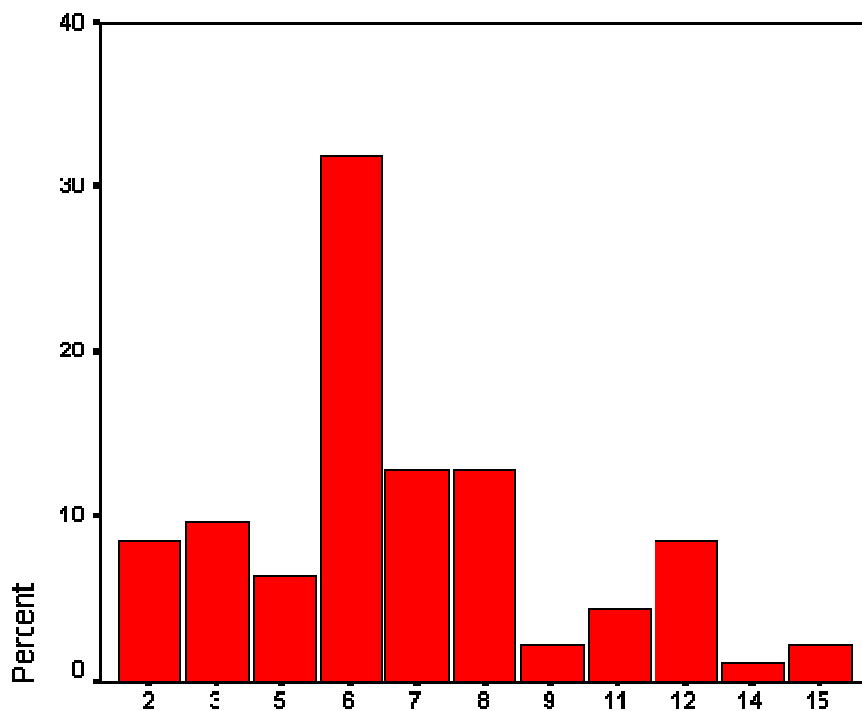
1. Are there any elements of the language learning process which distance learners associate with anxiety?
2. What are the strategies that distance language learners deploy to cope with anxiety?

In Questionnaire 1, students were asked if they thought there was anything specific to language learning as opposed to learning other subjects that might cause anxiety, and to give details. 84% responded yes and most included speaking as a major cause of anxiety. This was probed further in the second questionnaire, where features related to oral performance were cited more widely than other possible causes of anxiety, in particular 'freezing' when called upon to speak, which was also considered the 'most important' cause of anxiety by nearly a third of respondents. The full range of activities, thoughts or states that students identified as associated with anxiety is shown in [Table 1](#) 'Causes of anxiety' below, in descending order. The numbers in the left column represent the random order in which the items were originally placed in the question. [Figure 1](#) 'Most important cause of anxiety' shows the particular item students considered most significant in its association with anxiety.

**Table 1.** Questionnaire 2: All causes of anxiety

	<b>Causes of anxiety (n=145)</b>	<b>All %</b>
6	'Freezing' when called upon to speak	41.4
8	Remembering vocabulary	41.4

5	Worrying about my accent	37.2
7	Getting to grips with grammar	33.1
11	Realising how much work it takes to learn a language	32.4
3	Fear of not being understood	30.3
2	Fear of making mistakes	27.6
12	Not making progress quickly enough	24.1
9	Wanting to translate every word but finding it doesn't help	20.7
4	Fear of critical reaction from others	20.7
10	Discovering that another language does not follow the same patterns as my own language	11.7
13	Not matching up to the expectations of others	8.3
14	Feeling too much is expected of me	8.3
15	Other	2.8
1	Negative experiences of learning a language at school	2.1



**Figure 1.** Questionnaire 2: Most important cause of anxiety

- 1. = Negative experiences of learning a language at school \*
- 2. = Fear of making mistakes
- 3. = Fear of not being understood
- 4. = Fear of critical reaction from others \*
- 5. = Worrying about my accent
- 6. = 'Freezing' when called upon to speak

7. = Getting to grips with grammar
8. = Remembering vocabulary
9. = Wanting to translate every word but finding it doesn't help
10. = Discovering that another language does not follow the same patterns as my own language \*
11. = Realizing how much work it takes to learn a language
12. = Not making progress quickly enough
13. = Not matching up to the expectations of others \*
14. = Feeling too much is expected of me
15. = Other

Students were asked in Questionnaire 1 if they felt more or less anxious about learning a language at a distance than in the classroom or if there was no difference. The same question was repeated four months into the course in Questionnaire 2. In both cases students were asked to explain their answer. The most frequent reason given by those who answered 'more anxious' (Questionnaire 1 = 23.9%; Questionnaire 2 = 21.3%) was lack of instant feedback, with the attendant difficulty of assessing personal progress, particularly in comparison with other students, followed by isolation, speaking and pronunciation problems, and lack of confidence. The most frequently cited reason from the respondents who answered 'less anxious' (Questionnaire 1 = 36.6%; Questionnaire 2 = 27%) was the opportunity to work at their own pace, followed by absence of exposure to public criticism, lack of competition and peer pressure, and the chance to practise and make mistakes in private, to reflect and to try things out. An interesting finding here was the figure of 51.8% in Questionnaire 2 as opposed to 39.5% in Questionnaire 1 who found that the distance factor made no difference. It would appear that while the figure for 'more anxious' was roughly the same in both questionnaires, some of the students who had considered the distance factor made them less anxious at the start of their course were now not so sure and more of them felt there was 'no difference'. More research would need to be undertaken to investigate more closely the reasons for this change, for example whether this finding was indicative of general language anxiety prevalent in all learning environments, or related to something specific to learning in a distance mode.

Questionnaire 2 asked students to volunteer any types of tasks, activities or aspects of the course that made them feel particularly anxious, and over two-thirds of the sample (97), chose to answer. Nearly half of these students reported anxiety related to aspects of oral production: that is, recording assessed oral presentations and speaking in front of others, either during tutorials or during the examined group speaking test.

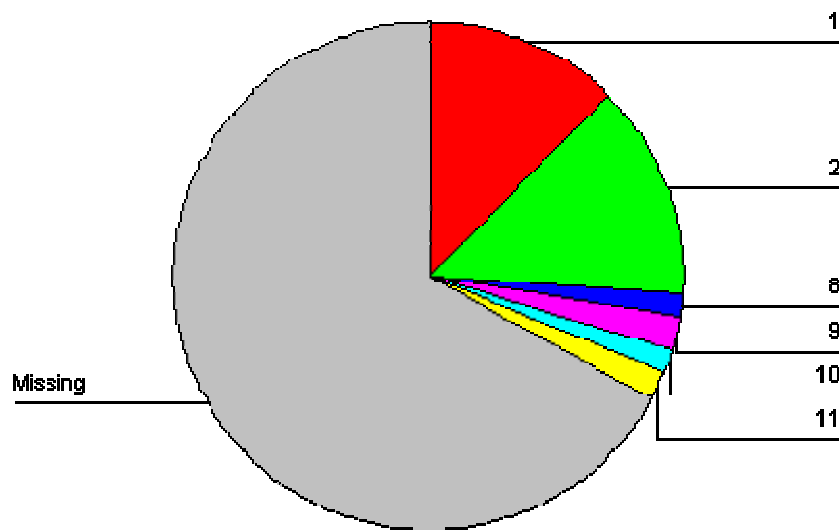
With regard to the second research question: 'What are the strategies that distance language learners deploy to cope with anxiety?' 37% of students who responded (n = 48) had some strategies to offer for dealing with language anxiety that they would recommend to other learners. These students were asked to look at a list of eleven strategies, tick any that applied to them, and then select the most important one. Table 2 shows all strategies selected in descending order, and Figure 2 shows the strategy considered to be the most important.

**Table 2.** All strategies used to deal with language anxiety

Strategy (n = 48)	All %



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



**Figure 2.** Most important strategy

1. = use positive self-talk (e.g. I can do it; it doesn't matter if I make mistakes; others make mistakes)
2. = actively encourage myself to take risks in language learning, such as guessing meanings or trying to speak, even though I might make some mistakes
3. = imagine that when I am speaking in front of others, it is just a friendly informal chat \*\*

4. = tell myself when I speak that it won't take long \*\*
5. = give myself a reward or treat when I do well \*\*
6. = be aware of physical signs of stress that might affect my language learning \*\*
7. = write down my feelings in a day or notebook \*\*
8. = share my worries with other students
9. = let my tutor know that I am anxious
10. = use relaxation techniques e.g. deep breathing, consciously speaking more slowly, etc.
11. = other

As we can see, the most popular strategy, selected by 87.5% of the students who responded was: 'Actively encourage myself to take risks in language learning, such as guessing meanings or trying to speak, even though I might make some mistakes'. This was also signalled as the 'most important'. 'Use positive self-talk', a well-known affective strategy, was second: 64.6% of the sample ticked it and over a third - 37.5% - identified it as the most important. Nearly a third of the sample - 29.1% - used relaxation techniques. With regard to getting support from others, 20.8% let their tutor know they were anxious, and the same percentage shared worries with other students. 6.3% had other strategies they used and the same percentage judged these to be more important than any of the suggested ones. Among them were ticking completed tasks, reviewing material already covered to see how you have progressed, revision and repetition to build confidence, joining a French self-help group, and, with some originality, gardening to clear confusion. It is important to note, however, that nearly two thirds of the sample (identified as 'missing' in the above pie chart) had not worked out any strategies for dealing with anxiety. Given that over a fifth of students at each intervention point (23.9%; 21.3%) declared themselves to be more anxious about learning a language at a distance than learning in a classroom, the number of those who had not found appropriate strategies is significant. These may be the students who could benefit in particular from guidance in developing good self-management skills, with the emphasis on affective strategies.

## Study 2: Learner Self-Management

The second investigation is a small-scale longitudinal study and part of a larger comparative investigation into face-to-face and online tutorials focusing on beginners and examining issues such as learner-learner and learner-tutor interactions, individual difference, affective variables such as attitudes and anxiety, ICT literacy and familiarity, task design, achievement and learning strategies (see, for example, [Duensing et al., 2005](#) and [Furnborough, 2005](#)). In the first phase - in 2003, before the official start of their courses - volunteers (N=37) from both strands (face-to-face and online, German and Spanish) attended a day school where they worked collaboratively on tasks developed to enhance their self-knowledge. They were aware that the purpose of the day was to reflect on the process of language learning in various environments (face-to-face and online) and that they would engage in activities designed to help them become 'better' (online) learners which - in contrast to the embedded and indirect method to strategy development mentioned earlier - constituted a direct, interventionist and de-contextualised approach. The activities were based on Wenden's (1998) suggested procedures for the development of awareness raising activities for metacognitive knowledge acquisition and were tutor led. This approach also reflects the view of Nunan, Lai and Keobke (1999) that the sensitive tutor does not assume that learners are naturally endowed with the skills and knowledge they will need to identify what are, for them, optimal ways

of learning a language. Moreover, Harris (2003) points out that the absence of tutor mediation to scaffold LSM can be problematic. Although she acknowledges that "the ultimate aim of LSM is to enable the learner to function independently", her findings indicate that "initial support and scaffolding from the teacher is [...] indispensable" (2003, p. 14).

Some materials, such as a quiz on modal preferences (visual, acoustic, etc.), were distributed to volunteers before the day school took place. Participants were asked to work through these prior to attending the event. At the end of the day school they completed a questionnaire. At the time of writing, this study is still in progress. In April 2004, at the midway point of the courses, 12 one-to-one semi-structured telephone interviews were completed based on the yoked subject procedure first used by White in her 1999 study where she asked learners to articulate their thoughts on how to represent self-instructed learning to someone planning to take the same course the following year. Further data will be gathered from semi-structured telephone interviews and another questionnaire which will be administered at the end of the courses. The aim of these questionnaires and interviews is to find out how far participants experience a long-term benefit from their increased awareness in terms of self and learning environment in their language studies with the Open University.

We report findings of the two questionnaires as related to the following research questions on self-management skills:

1. Can instructed self-management skills contribute to an increase in learners' self- and contextual knowledge?
2. Can instructed self-management skills help distance learners to deal with affective factors such as language anxiety in both face-to-face and virtual learning contexts?

Table 3 shows the students' responses in descending order. The paragraph following the table groups key issues into themes and discusses them briefly.

**Table 3.** Impact of activities for metacognitive knowledge acquisition on student self- and contextual knowledge

<b>Self-knowledge / contextual knowledge (n=37)</b>	<b>All</b>	<b>%</b>
Participants agreed or strongly agreed that being self-aware or reflective are important characteristics for language learning.	94	
Participants agreed or strongly agreed that taking part in the sessions has made them <i>more aware of the ways in which they approach language learning in general.</i>	86	
Participants agreed or strongly agreed that taking part in the activities made them <i>more aware of their modal preferences</i> and acknowledged the relevance of this awareness in terms of language learning in different environments (audio-graphic conferencing vs. face-to-face).	95	
Participants agreed or strongly agreed that taking part in the activities <i>raised their awareness in terms of the varying modal preferences of other learners</i> and their potential impact on successful learning outcomes in different language learning contexts.	95	

Participants agreed or strongly agreed that they felt <i>encouraged to reconsider their perceived weaknesses</i> .	84
Participants found the tasks aimed at encouraging them to <i>reframe their perceived weaknesses</i> and at increasing their awareness of their limiting beliefs useful or very useful.	89
Participants found the tasks designed to <i>increase the learners' awareness in terms of their resources and skills</i> useful or very useful.	88
Participants agreed or strongly agreed that taking part in the day school <i>encouraged them to focus on their skills</i> .	95
Participants agreed or strongly agreed that they felt <i>encouraged to transfer skills from other areas of life to language learning</i> .	78
Participants agreed or strongly agreed that taking part in the sessions <i>encouraged them to be more flexible</i> .	84
Students agreed or strongly agreed that – as a result of the sessions - they <i>felt more positive about their abilities to learn and speak a new language</i> .	75

### **A multimodal learning environment**

The majority of the participants (95%) agreed or strongly agreed that taking part in the activities had made them more aware of their modal preferences (visual, acoustic, etc.) and thus their preferred mode when learning a language. Kress and van Leeuwen (2001, p. 15) point us to the relevance of this kind of awareness explaining that "each meaning-making system – *mode* – provides different communicative potentials". One student, for example, acknowledged that he "had not previously given this much thought." The same number of participants also agreed or strongly agreed that taking part in the activities had made them more aware of different modal preferences by different learners. This is particularly relevant with regard to online learning environments such as *Lyceum* where engagement with the learning process is likely to be easier for learners with an auditory preference. To a lesser degree, such learning spaces also cater for visual learners, allowing them to use graphical objects such as pictures or text. A possible perceived drawback, however, is the lack of visual contact with peers and the tutor, and that it is not possible to learn (from) body language. Thus Lecourt (1999) found that communication in virtual learning spaces can be depersonalized and Kress & van Leeuwen (2001, p. 92) point to the fact that technological developments may "signify the most profound loss of embodiment we have seen yet".

### **Flexibility: learners and learning context**

86% of participants agreed or strongly agreed that taking part in the activities had made them more aware of the ways in which they approach language learning in general and 84% felt encouraged to be more flexible. Findings from previous studies in the Department of Languages (Hurd *et al.*, 2001) show that the flexibility offered by distance learning is mainly appreciated by students in terms of external circumstances insofar as it allows them to combine learning with other commitments. They do not necessarily associate flexibility with themselves as learners or in terms of the possibilities offered by the learning environment i.e. the possibility to choose certain modes to express one's meanings and thus to overcome constraints which might be anxiety provoking.

This lack of flexibility has also been reported by White (1999). She found that in the early stages of her study "[...] fewer learners thought of self-instruction as offering flexibility in terms of [...] how to learn and so on." (White 1999, p. 449)

### Perceived weaknesses and limiting beliefs

84% of those who responded agreed or strongly agreed that taking part in the day school had encouraged them to reconsider their perceived weaknesses: "I am aware of my weaknesses and now think of them more positively, which is half way to overcoming them." 89% found the activities aimed at increasing their awareness of their limiting beliefs such as, for example, a strong focus on a perceived weakness, useful or very useful. This finding underpins the relevance of 'positive self-talk', a popular affective strategy which was also used by the learners in Study 1. One student who used to believe that she was a bad learner, not being able to remember details such as exceptions to grammar rules, etc. made the following comment on an activity on limiting beliefs: "Very useful – I keep saying to myself that I am good at overviews!" The activities designed to increase the learners' awareness of their resources and skills scored equally highly (88%). 78% felt encouraged to transfer skills from other areas of life to language learning, and one student commented: "This exercise is very helpful in building self-esteem!", an observation which confirms that self-confidence is a crucial affective learner variable.

### Attitude and aptitude

75% of the students agreed or strongly agreed that – as a result of the day school - they felt more positive about their abilities to learn and to speak a new language, with two participants making the following observations:

"I now feel encouraged to approach the things I find difficult differently and with a far more positive attitude."

"You have shown us a useful strategy to overcome our inhibitions and doubts with regard to language learning."

At the mid-way point of their courses, 12 participants volunteered to take part in one-to-one telephone interviews. Half of them had taken part in face-to-face tutorials and the other half in online tuition via *Lyceum* on a regular basis. Table 4 shows answers provided by this focus group with regard to the two research questions:

**Table 4.** Impact of instructed self-management skills

Self-management (n=12)	All
Participants agreed or strongly agreed that <i>being self-aware or reflective are important characteristics for language learning.</i>	11
Participants agreed that <i>being able to asses one's own weaknesses and strengths is important for language learning.</i>	12
Participants agreed that <i>being able to manage one-self as a learner is important for language learning.</i>	12
Participants stated that <i>their self-awareness and their awareness of the learning environment had increased since they started the</i>	8

<b><i>courses.</i></b>	
Participants stated that <b><i>their attitude and approach to learning a language had changed since they started studying the Beginners' courses.</i></b>	8
Participants stated that <b><i>learning a language at a distance had caused them some anxiety at times.</i></b>	3
Participants stated that <b><i>taking part in the initial day school had enabled them to deal with language anxiety.</i></b>	6
Participants stated that <b><i>taking part in the initial day school had helped them to deal with their worries in general.</i></b>	4

All interviewees clearly recognise self-management as important in language learning. However, when invited to explain what exactly they consider self-management to be in the context of learning a language at a distance in different environments, few thought of factors other than time management. At the same time, their unanimous agreement on the ability to assess one's own strengths and weaknesses suggests some level of awareness of other important aspects of successful self-management and an autonomous approach to language learning in such contexts as illustrated by the following comments:

"Agree - I'm unwilling to stick my neck out and be laughed at, when I get it wrong, and I know that is a weakness in me, and I know that that is potentially stunting my development, so I would agree that it is important."

"Strongly agree - very important, because if you don't know what your weaknesses are, you can't build on them. And also if you know your strengths, you can build on those strengths, it might be things to do with how you learn things like visually or hearing, so it does give you the chance to build on things."

Some students also related self-management to establishing goals and to assessing their progress against those goals, or, as one learner put it:

"Management of the learning - knowing where you've actually got to get to, following through things that are interesting but at the same time being quite clear where you've got to get to."

Only three of the interviewees mentioned that learning a language at a distance had caused them some anxiety at times. The fact that 8 students stated the opposite indicates that taking part in the day school had a beneficial influence on their learning experiences – both online and face-to-face. 6 of those learners related the non-existence of anxieties specifically to their participation in the event:

"Anything that makes you more self aware and to try and understand what the worry is about- it helps you to kind of try and stand back and say, am I worrying about nothing? - I'm a great believer in reflection on anything that you're doing ...- I haven't thought about reflection in terms of language learning, but I've always seen reflection as being an important part of anything that one's doing."

4 interviewees found that the day school had helped them to deal with worries in general terms:

"I was more relaxed after the workshop than I was before."

## **Discussion: Linking Anxiety and Self-Management**

Both studies belong – to the authors' knowledge – to what seems to be a small number of investigations of language anxiety and learner self-management which take the 'self' and the learning context as a starting point for any considerations rather than the language learning task. However, the following limitations should be borne in mind in interpreting the results and drawing conclusions from these two studies:

- Firstly, the scale: 500 students were initially involved in Study 1, as opposed to 37 in Study 2. However, the 48 subjects in Study 1 who had used strategies for dealing with anxiety is a comparable figure to those subjects who underwent strategy instruction in Study 2.
- Secondly, Study 1 included a random sample, whereas the participants in Study 2 were self-selecting.
- Other potential limitations concern the level and language of students who participated: Study 1 involved lower-intermediate learners of French and Study 2 beginner learners in German and Spanish. However, so far no significant differences in findings can be attributed to language-specific factors.

Despite these limitations, we believe that the data offers a rich source of empirical evidence of the extent and nature of anxiety among distance language learners, the affective strategies that students use to minimize or combat anxiety, and the positive effect of systematic awareness-raising in terms of self and learning context in developing self-management skills. It also provides a solid foundation for further research in this area.

The results from Study 1 support the view that anxiety has a distinct role in FL learning at a distance. A significant majority of students found that there was something specific to language learning that caused anxiety, when compared to other subjects. Anxiety-related problems focused mainly on speaking, in particular when called on to speak in front of others, and fear of not being understood. There was more anxiety reported overall at the output stage, a finding confirmed by students who volunteered information on anxiety-provoking elements of the course materials. Paul (1990, p. 34) suggests when referring to independent learning in general that "while students with a lower self-esteem are those most likely to have difficulty with independent learning, they are also the group most apt to choose distance education courses (out of false impressions that they are less demanding than classroom-based ones)". While we cannot be sure that this holds true for language students, it nevertheless underlines the need for all distance learning students to have access to high quality levels of support. A major part of this is providing a framework which will enable learners to develop the skills and knowledge that "are considered to be central to self-management" (Rubin, 2001, p. 27).

Self-management is an essential strategy for language learners in general and for distance language learners in particular – in both face-to-face and virtual learning environments. Not only does it include self-knowledge and awareness and a reflective capacity, it also relates to the ability to set up optimal learning conditions in different learning contexts, including managing affective considerations such as anxiety and motivation. The relationship between a low

'affective filter' on one hand and improved self-esteem, self-efficacy and motivation on the other as noted by Rubin and Thompson (1994) is important in terms of strategies that can influence language learning in positive ways. The use of affective strategies as part of self-management has a direct and positive influence on language learning and reflects the link between high levels of self-esteem, self-efficacy and motivation and a low 'affective filter' (Rubin and Thompson, 1994).

Raising awareness of personal resources and skills can have a significant effect on self-efficacy beliefs, i.e. whether students believe they are able to mobilize and manage the resources they need to learn and will be able to sustain the effort (Cotterall, 1995). Moreover, Zimmermann and Bandura (1994) found that learners' self-efficacy and achievement beliefs are interrelated. In other words, the stronger the learners' self-efficacy beliefs, the more challenging their choice of learning goals, and the more intense their search to overcome obstacles encountered in the process of learning. This seems to be particularly relevant to language learning in multimodal virtual contexts where obstacles can – at times – also be related to the technological demands of the environment.

The strategies employed by participants in Study 1 to manage their anxiety included getting together with other learners, perhaps reflecting a need for collaboration and a sense of community in order to combat isolation and worries about progress in relation to others. Anxiety levels are likely to be lowered if students can learn in a non-threatening environment which encourages them to try things out and have fun, which builds confidence and promotes respect for different learning styles, approaches and personality traits. With regard to online learning, Macdonald (2003, p. 378) cites the "interplay between competence and affective factors such as growing confidence, motivation and group dynamics" and "the importance of the affective aspects of collaborative working – group cohesion and the evolution of mutual trust". This view is also reflected in the following comments from two interviewees participating in Study 2:

"It helped reinforce my knowledge that I'm not the only one, and getting together with other people about to embark on the same thing sort of gives you a spirit that you're not on your own."

"It was nice to feel that there were real human beings there, doing the same thing. I keep on thinking back on that day and thinking there are other people who are in the same situation as me, it's a very strange experience really doing it online."

Virtual learning environments such as *Lyceum* are available on a 24-hour-a-day, 7-day-a-week basis and thus provide an ideal forum for students – distance language learners in particular – to meet and work together and to reflect on their learning, and thus gradually to overcome their inhibitions. Moreover, the preliminary results from Study 2 suggest that the aforementioned 'loss of embodiment' is – at times – perceived as an advantage as it allows learners to remain 'incognito' and to speak more freely.

Finally, the role of the tutor in providing good feedback as an integral part of learner support should also not be underestimated in terms of reducing anxiety and keeping motivation levels high. This came over strongly in Study 1 where the most frequent reason given by those who felt that learning a language at a distance was more anxiety provoking than learning in the classroom was lack of instant feedback from tutors and/or peers. Here, too, networked learning environments seem to offer an advantage since they provide more flexible



opportunities to support distance language learners in raising their self-knowledge and awareness of the learning context and to scaffold learner self-management accordingly.

## Conclusion

These studies have sought to contribute to the research into language anxiety, its effect on learners in a distance language learning setting and the role of learner self-management in both face-to-face and online tutorial contexts. An investigation of the elements of the learning process that cause anxiety among distance language learners and the strategies that distance language learners deploy to reduce prompted the second study. This explores the extent to which instructed self-management skills can contribute to an increase in learners' self- and contextual knowledge and whether they can help distance language learners in combating affective factors such as language anxiety in both face-to-face and virtual learning contexts. Early results suggest that they can, and that there is a strong link between cognitive and affective factors and self-esteem, with increased self-awareness having a positive influence on other affective factors such as learners' self-efficacy and achievement beliefs.

The findings from the second study reported in this article indicate that – at least for beginners - direct, interventionist and de-contextualised methods are most apt to systematically foster learner reflection and to enhance learner self-management. They also seem to confirm Skehan's (1989) proposition that metacognitive strategies such as self-management can be expected to transfer more readily than cognitive strategies. This leads Hurd *et al.* (2001, p. 347) to draw the conclusion that "developing the knowledge and skills that make up strategic competence, particularly use of meta-cognitive strategies, is more likely to come about through de-contextualized methods." Contextualised training, on the other hand, allows learners to "develop their learning strategy repertoires while learning the target language at the same time" (Cohen, 1998, p. 80). Thus the potential benefits of a direct, interventionist, de-contextualised approach which gradually moves along the de-contextualised-contextualised continuum as learners' linguistic competence increases need to be looked at more closely. This approach would eventually allow reflection on learner role and learning context in the language learning process to be carried out in the target language.

Further research would also address the role of self-management skills in enabling learners to deal successfully with so called 'metacognitive experiences', i.e. "points when learners are confused, or uncertain, or when there is a breakdown in learning" (White, 2003, p. 140) which are likely to evoke language anxieties. White's studies indicate that such experiences are a "significant point of growth" for distance language learners and that they are "not confined to specific learning difficulties, but [...] strongly directed towards a concern about how best to manage their learning within a new context" (White, 2003, p. 143). In multimodal virtual learning spaces such as audio-graphic conferencing, confusion and uncertainty can at times be caused by the context itself, namely the variety and simultaneity of modes available to make meaning and the additional technological challenges they raise. This extra dimension to LSM calls for a more detailed exploration of the metacognitive experiences of distance language learners and the role they could play in reflective online interaction.

<sup>1</sup> These are students in their second year of learning a language (i.e. GCSE-level in the UK).

\* This item does not appear in the bar chart, indicating that although students considered it as one of the contributory factors to anxiety, no respondent considered it as the most important.

\*\* This strategy does not appear in the pie chart, indicating that although it was selected by some respondents as one of the strategies they used, no respondent considered it be the most important strategy.

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