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Autonomy and the distance language learner

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Chapter 1

Autonomy and the Distance Language Learner

STELLA HURD

Introduction

Autonomy is a multidimensional concept now firmly rooted in mainstream literature and practice relating to language learning and teaching. However, while there are a number of theoretical descriptions of autonomous language learning, a single, universal theory has yet to emerge. The implications for a theory of autonomy are arguably even more complex in the case of distance language learning, where highly structured course materials and fixed assessment points would appear to run counter to notions of choice and responsibility. Taking as its point of reference the experience of distance language learning at the Open University (UK), this chapter examines the various dimensions of autonomy, in particular its relationship with affective aspects of learner differences and with metacognition. In conclusion, the chapter looks ahead to the potential of new technologies to create learning communities in which autonomy is promoted through social interaction, learner empowerment and reflection.

Interpretations of Autonomy

Despite the proliferation of research and publications over the last two decades, autonomy is a concept that remains elusive, particularly in relation to language learning and teaching. First, there are questions to do with definition, degree and application. Is it the 'ability to have and to hold the responsibility for all the decisions concerning all aspects of this learning' (Holec, 1981: 3) or is it a 'capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making, and independent action' (Little, 1991: 4)? Is it an attribute that signifies 'organic independence' (OED online) or does it also imply interdependence? Does it entail complete freedom and responsibil-

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ity on the part of learners, or does it come with constraints? Is it something that can be taught, or even imposed on learners, or is this a 'contradiction in educational terms' (Holec, 1985: 169)? There are also important issues to do with the role and timing of autonomy in learning. Is it a precondition for successful learning or an outcome of certain modes of learning, for example self-instruction?

Definitions

While there are no easy answers to any of these questions, there does appear to be almost universal acceptance of the development of autonomy as an 'important, general educational goal' (Sinclair, 2000: 5), and that autonomy can take a variety of different forms depending on learning context and learner characteristics. Where there are differences, it is not always a question of favouring one definition or interpretation over another. For example, the 'capacity' of Little and the 'ability' or 'skill' of Holec are not opposing constructs. Benson (2001: 49) argues that 'Little's definition is complementary to Holec's', in that it makes explicit the cognitive processes underlying effective self-management of learning, and thus adds 'a vital psychological dimension that is often absent in definitions of autonomy'. Benson (2001: 47) prefers to use the term 'control' over learning, because such a construct allows for easier examination than 'charge' or 'responsibility'. Others define autonomy in terms of what it entails or implies, hence, 'self-regulation' (Schunk & Zimmerman, 1998; Wenden, 2001) or 'self-direction' (Candy, 1991; White, 1999). Another approach is to describe what autonomy is not (Little, 1991). The main priority, according to Benson (2001: 48) is 'that we are able to identify the form in which we choose to recognize it in the contexts of our own research and practice'.

Social interaction, interdependence and reflection

The psychological dimension of autonomy has attracted a great deal

of attention over the last decade, largely as a result of renewed interest in the work of the Soviet psychologist Vygotsky and his emphasis on interdependence in learning. According to Vygotsky (1978), we do not learn in isolation, but through our interactions with others. His 'zone of proximal development' is the gap between what learners can achieve on their own and what they can achieve in collaboration with others. Both Kohonen (1992) and Little (1996) view the idea of collaborative learning through social interaction as essential for the reflective and analytic capacity that is central to autonomy. Kohonen's (1992) experiential language learning model, based on Kolbian experiential learning principles, involves a cyclical process moving through concrete experience,

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reflection, abstract conceptualisation and action. The reflective (inner) process interplays with the experiential and active (social) processes to bring about deeper awareness of the self in relation to language learning. Collaboration with others through sharing the insights of reflection can enhance knowledge and lead to deeper understanding. Little (1996: 211), in line with Vygotskian thinking, also claims that 'the development of a capacity for reflection and analysis [. . .] depends on the internalization of a capacity to participate fully and critically in social interactions'.

For some, the social, human element is seen to have particular significance for language learning. Warriner-Burke (1990: 131) maintains that 'many experienced foreign language professionals think that language and language learning are deeply human experiences' and that 'perhaps it is this human factor that distinguishes foreign language learning from other knowledge . . .'. Little's view (2001: 32), however, is that learning is the product of a complex interplay between both social and reflective processes and warns that 'in stressing the importance of the social-interactive dimension [. . .], it is important not to underplay the importance of the individual-cognitive dimension'. He cites Ackermann (1996: 32) who states that, 'without connection people cannot grow, yet without separation they cannot relate' and talks of learning as 'a dance between diving in and stepping out' (1996: 32). In other words, reflection (stepping out) is as important as social interaction (diving in) for cognitive

development and autonomy.

Developing reflection

Reflection is thus an integral part of the process of exercising autonomy, yet for most learners it does not come naturally and needs to be developed. Strategy or learner training programmes, either embedded in the materials or as stand-alone elements, can be effective. However, language 'advising' or 'counselling' is becoming a more widespread and popular option in universities in the UK operating self-access language learning systems (Mozzon-McPherson, 2001). Following an individual needs analysis, the student is shown over a period of time how to develop awareness and reflect on learning through the use of learning logs or diaries, given advice on strategy use, and encouraged to engage in self-evaluation as part of control over learning.

In some institutions teachers take on a timetabled adviser role; in others the advisory service is a separate unit operating in conjunction with teachers. Whatever the particular organisational structure, the shift in the locus of control from teacher to learner, which is central to an autonomous approach, involves a profound change in role, and can bring feelings of

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insecurity, uncertainty and discomfort (Little, 1995). Nevertheless, teachers in all educational contexts are the human interface between learners and resources and cannot therefore expect or help their learners to develop a capacity for critical reflection unless they have this capacity themselves. In this sense, learner autonomy is dependent on teacher autonomy. In a distance context, the challenges may be greater and the problems intensified, as the social interaction or 'pedagogical dialogue' Little (1995) regards as the 'decisive factor' in the development of learner autonomy can be infinitely more difficult to achieve. Dialogue can to a certain extent be promoted through the materials, but it is perhaps tutor feedback, paper-based or online, that can best create the conditions for learners to become good critical reflectors and develop self-management strategies. But what are the assumptions behind the nature and timing of autonomy within language learning?

Prerequisite or outcome?

Is autonomy a precondition for successful language learning, or a product or goal that emerges from learner exposure to certain contextual influences in language learning? Benson (2001: 9) highlights a common assumption among those working in self-access centres that 'self-access work will automatically lead to autonomy', and, from the producers of self-instructional and distance learning materials, that 'autonomy will be one outcome of these modes of learning'. These are false assumptions if applied generally. As argued in Hurd (1998a: 72–3), '[. . .] if learners are not trained for autonomy, no amount of surrounding them with resources will foster in them that capacity for active involvement and conscious choice, although it might appear to do so'. Little (2001: 34) also maintains that 'the pursuit of autonomy in formal learning environments must entail explicit conscious processes; otherwise we leave its development to chance'. Some studies into distance learning (Hurd, 2000b; White, 1995, 1999) have cited the importance of the context itself as a key factor in the development of autonomy in the learner: 'A self-instruction context for learning does not automatically equate with learner autonomy, but autonomy may arise and develop within the learner as a response to the specific demands of a self-instruction context' (White, 1995: 209). The distance learning context requires a certain degree of autonomy in order for a learner to function at all, which ties in well with Little's assertion (2001: 35) that 'essentially, the only way of becoming autonomous is to be autonomous'. The British Open University has over 30 years of experience in addressing these issues. How does it structure its materials and support for language learners?

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Open and Distance Language Learning at the Open University (UK)

In the 1980s, Holmberg's idea of distance learning as a 'guided didactic conversation' in which a relationship is established to 'involve the student

emotionally so that he or she takes a personal interest in the subject and its problems' (Holmberg, 1983: 117) became widely accepted as a basis for writing materials for distance learners. Specially written open and distance materials play a central role in all OU courses as the *teaching voice*, the link between teacher and learner. In other words, they carry out all the functions of a teacher in a more conventional setting. Derek Rowntree (1990: 11) sums these up as: 'guiding, motivating, intriguing, expounding, explaining, provoking, reminding, asking questions, discussing alternative answers, appraising each learner's progress, and giving appropriate remedial help'. Particular attention is paid to the design of print materials, both academic and visual, so that they are easy to follow and attractive to work with. Any audio-visual input is carefully researched, designed and produced to work with the other materials, so that the overall course is an integrated whole. A structured and supported approach ensures that students know what they are expected to do and at what point. In OU language courses, each activity or sequence of activities is introduced by an 'organiser' that gives a brief rationale for each activity or activities. This is designed to help students understand why they are being invited to take part in particular activities and how these fit into the wider structure, so that they can become more aware of the language learning process, begin to set their own goals and learn to monitor their own progress.

Courses, students and materials

The Centre for Modern Languages at the Open University (OU), renamed the Department of Languages in 1999, was set up in 1991 and offers a Diploma in French, German or Spanish that students may count towards a BA or BSc Open degree or one of the named degrees in Modern Language Studies, Humanities, European Studies or International Studies. There are around 7000 students registered on one or more of the 13 language courses currently available, making the OU the biggest language provider in the UK university sector. Since November 2003, students have also been able to study at beginners' level. A beginners' course plus the next stage together make up the Certificate at Level 1.

Students register from all parts of the UK and from Continental Western Europe (CWE). The typical distance language learner at the OU is in the 35–50 age range, in work and with family commitments. The University is

'open' in that there are no prerequisites to courses. Students may, if they

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wish, take advantage of the Self-Assessment Tests offered in all three languages, to help them determine their level of proficiency. Course materials include course books and recorded video, audio and CD extracts. There are also print support materials in the form of course and study guides, transcripts, study charts and supplementary notes, and a web-based guide to OU study containing general information and study tips. Assessment consists of Tutor Marked Assignments (TMAs), some formative, that assess both written and oral skills, and are submitted on a regular basis to the tutor for marking and feedback. On some courses there are also Student Marked Assignments (SMAs), which allow learners to assess grammatical and semantic knowledge themselves as they progress through the course. Detailed feedback is given to help students understand and correct their mistakes, analyse and address more serious errors, and develop the skills of self-correction and self-monitoring. A two-part written and oral examination completes the assessment for the year.

Learner support

For those who choose or have no option but to study at a distance the demands are great: 'distance learners must regulate and oversee the rate and direction of their learning to a much greater degree than classroom learners' (White, 1994: 12–13). But support is available to those who want it. First, there is Student Services, a dedicated unit that operates in all the 13 OU regional centres across the UK, using staff trained to advise on a range of issues concerning academic study. Second, each student is assigned to a designated tutor in their region, who can be contacted at agreed times for advice, and who conducts regular tutorials and the occasional dayschool at one of the regional centres. Tutorials are optional and are conducted either face-to-face, online or by telephone, depending on the particular course and personal circumstances of individual students.

In such a highly structured set-up it is reasonable to ask if autonomy has any role to play at all. Hurd *et al.* (2001: 344) raise just this question: 'How can we reconcile two notions clearly at opposite ends of the spectrum:

learner autonomy and highly structured and rigid instructional programmes?’ The solution adopted by the OUIs ‘to turn those constraints and limitations imposed by a distance teaching and learning medium into opportunities for students’ (2001: 349). This is achieved by taking specific aspects of autonomy and building them into activities in the course materials. Thus students are offered activities to promote reflection, to self-assess and monitor progress, to identify gaps and solve problems. They are also provided with examples of how to transfer the knowledge and skills they have acquired to other contexts, which, as Little (1991: 4) maintains, is one of the ways in which the capacity for autonomy is

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displayed. The contention is that even in such a structured and supported mode of learning, autonomy can be promoted through specially designed materials, which are varied and flexible enough to cater for a range of learner differences.

Individual Differences: Affective Factors and their Impact on Autonomy

Individual differences refer to the different factors or variables that characterise learners, such as age, gender, aptitude, intelligence, personality, learning style and previous learning experience. Learners also come to learning with their own individual beliefs, attitudes, expectations, anxieties, motivations and strategies. Whether classified as cognitive or affective, such variables are generally considered to have some bearing on the ways in which a learner is likely to interpret, relate and respond to the learning materials.

For the distance language learner, it is perhaps affective variables – beliefs, motivation and anxiety – that are of greater relevance, because their effect on learning may be intensified in an independent context, and because of their capacity for modification and change. According to Oxford (1990: 140), ‘the affective side of the learner is probably one of the very biggest influences on language learning success or failure’. Results from studies carried out with undergraduate language learners in the late 1990s into affect in language learning have supported ‘substantial links among

affective measures and achievement' (Gardner *et al.*, 1997: 344).

Beliefs and expectations

According to Cotterall (1995: 195) and many others writing in the field, learner beliefs are said to have a profound influence on the learning behaviour of language learners. She argues further that 'the beliefs learners hold may either contribute to or impede the development of their potential for autonomy' (1995: 196), thus making explicit a link between beliefs and autonomy. Her view is that through investigating learner beliefs, teachers can assess learners' 'readiness' for autonomy and give appropriate support. White (1999: 444), in writing about distance language learners, makes a similar point: 'attention to expectations and beliefs can contribute to our understanding of the realities of the early stages of self-instruction in language'.

The growing cultural diversity among distance learners has prompted a closer look at the nature and extent of cultural influences on beliefs and expectations with regard to language learning. Culture is said to influence both the learning process and its outcomes (Dunn & Griggs, 1995) and cul-

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tural behaviour is 'always and inevitably culturally conditioned' (Little, 2002: 3). While there is evidence to suggest that the idea of autonomy as an educational goal is shared by diverse cultures (Aoki & Smith, 1999; Yang, 1999), it is important to recognise that the emphasis on an autonomous approach may be inappropriate for those whose cultural background brings with it expectations of language learning in which the teacher has sole responsibility for directing learning activities, setting goals, assessing work and measuring progress. In China, for example, the idea of self-management is at odds with the philosophy of learning that is deeply rooted in Chinese culture (Hurd&Xiao, 2003). The risk of cultural inappropriateness, or worse, the charge of cultural imperialism, through attempting to impose Western practices on other cultures, has to be taken seriously and addressed sensitively.

Researchers into the effects of cultural difference (Dunn & Griggs, 1995;

Horwitz, 1999; Sanchez & Gunawardena, 1998), while underlining the importance of understanding the beliefs and values of different ethnic groups, nevertheless argue that in addressing cultural difference we should not lose sight of the individual differences to be found in all cultural groups. Horwitz' (1999: 575) study finds that 'within-group differences' are likely to account for as much variation as the 'cultural differences' and that 'there is not strong evidence for a conclusion of cultural differences in learner beliefs' (1999: 576). Sanchez and Gunawardena (1998) maintain that while it is important not to make generalisations about individuals based on evidence from particular culturally defined groups, distance teachers and writers should provide a variety of methods, strategies and activities to accommodate a wide range of affective and cognitive needs and preferences.

For all learners, the power of beliefs, whether grounded in cultural background, psychological make-up or personal experience, is such that they can enable or seriously disable language learning. According to a survey done for the European Year of Languages (2001), 22% of the EU population do not learn languages because they believe they are 'not good' at them. Materials writers and teachers face a significant challenge when it comes to addressing such disabling beliefs and encouraging learners to change them through developing the ability to reflect critically. As Benson (2001: 74) points out, 'there is considerable anecdotal evidence in the literature that learners are capable of reflecting on their learning experiences and changing their beliefs or preferences in ways that are beneficial to learning'. The distance language learner who is denied the classroom experience and regular face-to-face contact with other learners has fewer outside factors to influence her or his beliefs and must rely to a greater extent on personal resources. White's study (1999: 449) underlines the adaptive nature of

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beliefs among distance language learners through engagement with the materials: '[. . .] learners are influenced in new ways by the solo learning context, to extend and develop their learning skills and knowledge about themselves as learners. Obviously this is one indicator of recognition of metacognitive growth'. Beliefs and expectations can have an effect on motivation, another powerful affective factor.

Motivation

Extensive research carried out over three decades has consistently underlined the importance of motivation as in many instances the best overall predictor of language learning success (Dörnyei, 2001; Gardner & Lambert, 1972; Naiman *et al.*, 1978; Oxford&Shearin, 1994; Ushioda, 1996). For distance language learners, motivation has a special and direct role. In many cases it is the determining factor in whether to study or not in the first place, and it remains crucial for enjoyment, goal-setting and retention throughout the course of study. Motivation, at least in the early stages, is largely intrinsic, although extrinsic elements may come into play as aspirations to achieve higher qualifications begin to emerge. Maintaining motivation levels is a particular challenge at a distance. The demands of self-instruction, together with the shift of control from teacher to learner can be overwhelming for many students. Some have difficulty in coping with the amount and range of material that makes up the course, particularly at the start. For others, perceived inadequacy of feedback, frustration at unresolved problems, and lack of opportunities to practise with others and share experiences can have an adverse effect on motivation levels. In many cases, these difficulties diminish or are resolved as students become more skilled in self-management, learn to use their tutor as a key resource, and take the initiative in forming or joining a self-help group.

Dickinson (1995: 168) finds a strong link between motivation and autonomy, in that the two constructs share certain key concepts: 'these are learner independence, learner responsibility and learner choice. Incorporated within these, or entailed by them are other concepts such as decision-making, critical reflection and detachment, all of which are important in cognitive motivation'. He quotes Deci and Ryan (1985: 13) who, in describing self-determination and learner locus of control as key features of intrinsic motivation, are citing the very elements that also characterise autonomy. Ushioda (1996: 2) states unequivocally that 'autonomous language learners are by definition motivated learners'. In terms of a causal link, Ellis (1999) warns that 'we do not know whether it is motivation that produces successful learning, or successful learning that enhances motivation'. Gardner and MacIntyre's original socio-education model of second-language acquisition (1993: 2) 'explicitly proposes recip-

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rocal causation'. The results of Yang's study (1999) suggest a cyclical rather than a uni-directional relationship between learners' beliefs, motivation and strategy use. Larsen-Freeman (2001: 20) argues that 'it is conceivable that as we search for an advanced conceptualisation of learner factors, we will also find that they are not only mutable, but that they also vary in their influence, depending on the learner's stage of acquisition', and, arguably as important, on the context in which they are learning.

Anxiety, introversion and extraversion

Often implicated in motivation as a negative influence, anxiety is increasingly seen as a powerful factor in language learning. According to Oxford (1999: 59), anxiety 'ranks high among factors influencing language learning, regardless of whether the setting is informal or formal'. With regard to language learning, Horwitz *et al.* (1986: 128) argue 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 related specifically to language situations (Gardner & MacIntyre, 1993: 5), and is not connected with general ('trait') anxiety. Its effects are described as pervasive and subtle (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994: 283) and are also associated with 'deficits in listening comprehension, impaired vocabulary learning, reduced word production, low scores on standardised tests, low grades in language courses or a combination of these factors' (Gardner *et al.*, 1997: 345). Anxiety is said to be strongly associated with low self-confidence (Cheng *et al.*, 1999) and with introversion. Introverts tend to have higher anxiety levels than extroverts and take longer to retrieve information. On the more positive side, however, they are more accurate and show greater cognitive control (Dewaele & Furnham, 1999). While extrovert students worry less about accuracy and have a tendency to take risks with their language – both of which are assets when it comes to communicative oral competence – the potential for introverts to become autonomous in their learning through their capacity to self-regulate may be a distinct advantage in distance language learning.

Metacognition, Self-regulation and Autonomy

Self-regulation, self-direction and autonomy are often used synonymously in the literature, and while this does not necessarily lead to confusion, a useful distinction might be to interpret being autonomous as an attribute of the learner, self-direction as a mode of learning and self-regulation (a term borrowed from cognitive psychology) as the practical steps taken by learners to manage their own learning. Learning a second language is generally perceived by learners to be 'different from

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learning other subjects, and to involve more time, more practice and different mental processes' (Victori, 1992, cited in Cotterall, 1995: 202). Distance creates a further difficulty. Sussex (1991: 189, cited in White, 1994) maintains that 'languages are more difficult than most subjects to learn in the distance mode because of the complex combination of skills and information required for language mastery'. The knowledge and skills most needed by those learning a language, particularly in the distance context, are those that entail self-awareness and self-management, in other words metacognition. Metacognition is about the management as opposed to the process of learning. Chamot and O'Malley (1994: 372) argue that on the basis of information to date, it 'may be the major factor in determining the effectiveness of individuals' attempts to learn another language'.

Metacognitive knowledge

Flavell (1976: 232) identifies two components of metacognition: (1) metacognitive knowledge, which is 'the knowledge concerning one's own cognitive processes and products or anything related to them'; and (2) metacognitive strategies or skills, which refer to 'the active monitoring and consequent regulation and orchestration of these processes', in other words the ability to carry out the planning, monitoring and evaluation that constitute self-regulation. Wenden has written widely on the subject of metacognitive knowledge, which she terms the 'neglected variable' (2001), and its critical role in the self-regulation of learning. She makes an explicit link between metacognitive knowledge, self-regulation and autonomy: 'a recognition of the function of metacognitive knowledge in the

self-regulation of learning should contribute to a clearer understanding of learner autonomy [. . .]. The realization of this potential (to develop autonomy) for language learners is in part dependent on their ability to self-regulate or self-direct their learning' (2001: 62). In an earlier work, Wenden (1999: 437) gives two examples of how metacognitive knowledge can influence self-regulation: (1) task analysis in which students call upon their metacognitive knowledge to identify what they need to do and how; and (2) monitoring: 'the regulatory skill that oversees the learning process that follows the initial planning. It is the basis for determining how one is progressing, and it is what constitutes the internal feedback, i.e. the state of awareness which lets the learner know that he/she has encountered a problem'. Little (2001: 35) finds a link between motivation, metacognition and autonomy: '[. . .] the pursuit of autonomy engages the learner's intrinsic motivation and stimulates reflectivity. In other words, the development of learner autonomy brings the motivational and metacognitive dimensions of learning into interaction with each other'. The regulatory

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skills that characterise an autonomous approach are widely considered to be dependent on the use of appropriate learning strategies.

Learning strategies

The research into learning strategies, both cognitive and metacognitive, is extensive and varied (Cohen, 1998; Dickinson, 1990; McDonough, 1995, 1999; O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1990; Wenden, 1991). Cohen (1998: 15) contends that 'learning strategies do not operate by themselves, but rather are directly tied to the learner's underlying learning styles and other personality-related variables (such as anxiety and self-concept) in the learner'. Dickinson (1990: 200) also talks of a likely 'relationship between cognitive style and preferred learning processes and strategies in language learning'. Ellis' case study of two adult German *ab initio* learners (1992: 174–89) suggests that learners do benefit if the instruction suits their learning style but asks: 'Are learning styles fixed or do they change as acquisition proceeds?' A consensus has yet to emerge, though there is some evidence (Cohen, 1998; Oxford, 1990; O'Malley & Chamot, 1993; Skehan,

1998) that preferences and styles can change as learners gain proficiency, or in response to pedagogical intervention in the form of strategy training.

Little (2002: 2–3) remains sceptical, contending that ‘the benefits of teaching learners strategies have still to be demonstrated’. He favours an approach in which learners are encouraged to explore alternatives to find what works for them personally.

Given the particular need for self-management skills in the distance learning environment, it is perhaps unsurprising that studies into the use of strategies in distance language learning have shown distance learners make more use of metacognitive strategies than do classroom learners (White, 1995: 211). Hurd (2000a: 46) also found that women tend to use more metacognitive strategies overall than men. While some learners do succeed in developing many of the features of autonomy through the experience of learning in distance mode, they are unlikely to do so without appropriate support and intervention, and we ‘cannot make any assumptions or expectations about learners’ willingness or ability to become autonomous learners’ (Hurd, 1998b: 222), just because they are adults and have chosen for whatever reason to learn at a distance. For distance learning, any attempts at pedagogic intervention to promote autonomy through the use and transfer of strategies must take place via the materials and tutor feedback on assignments, as attendance at tutorials is optional and cannot therefore be guaranteed. For this reason, all Open University language courses contain sections on learning strategies and study skills, language awareness activities and practical guidance in the development of specific language skills. Students are also encouraged to experiment

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with a range of strategies to determine which work best for them (Hurd *et al.*, 2001). This approach ties in well with Sanchez and Gunawardena’s view (1998: 61) that in a distance learning environment ‘variety itself becomes the solution’. An important strand of the variety necessary to support student diversity is the increasingly significant contribution technology is making to language learning.

The Role of Technology: Promoting Autonomy through Computer-mediated Communication (CMC)

The potential of the Internet to facilitate exchanges among learners in the foreign language is increasingly recognised and exploited in universities in the UK. Sophisticated software and growing expertise in the use of CMC for language learning make it possible today for language learners to communicate not just with one other person asynchronously through e-mail, but with groups of other learners either asynchronously or synchronously, through bulletin boards, text chat, audio-video conferencing or Multi-user Object-oriented domains (MOOs), as part of a virtual community.

E-mail tandem learning

Early attempts to include Internet-based activities in language programmes concentrated largely on tandem exchanges between native speakers of two different languages who were studying each other's mother tongue. One-to-one e-mail tandem learning, set up at Sheffield University UK in the mid-90s, following successful pilots in face-to-face tandem learning, is now an integral part of the modern languages programme. There are today many such schemes worldwide (Kötter, 2002) and the International E-Mail Tandem Network is now well established. The potential advantages lie in 'its combination of immediacy with asynchronicity [. . .] it can be used at any time of day or night; no external constraint governs the frequency of an exchange of messages, or their content (Lewis *et al.*, 1996: 113). It 'can offer genuine interpersonal and intercultural communication' and is 'an ideal tool for the autonomous learner' (1996: 117) in that the medium encourages learners to take control over their own learning.

Advantages of online communication: Text-based and voice-based

Most practice and research is in text-based CMC, as an extension of rather than a substitute for classroom-based learning. The advantages are in both the cognitive and affective domain. Students working asynchronously have time to attend to grammar and develop their linguistic

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accuracy. The text-based mode allows them to pause and reflect while interacting, thus creating a 'special relationship between interaction and reflection' (Warschauer, 1997: 5). In an online environment, learners feel less inhibited as they are out of the spotlight, and peer support can have a positive impact on attitudes towards learning. Levels of participation are also found to be much greater and more equal in online as opposed to face-to-face discussion (Hudson&Bruckman, 2002; Warschauer, 1997). For distance learners, online communication 'can provide a sense of "presence"'. CMC in general offers the opportunity to communicate and socialize with other learners' (Shield, 2002). At the OU, an increasing number of language courses offer online tuition through Lyceum, an audio-graphic Internet-based conferencing system. Early findings from research studies (Hampel, 2003; Shield *et al.*, 2000) confirm that a voice-based as opposed to a text-based CMC is just as successful in supporting and engaging learners, reducing social isolation and anxiety and enhancing motivation. The combination of different modes that Lyceum offers – visual (through graphics), verbal (through writing and text chat) and acoustic – allows 'a choice between modes to suit the task in hand, as well as catering for different learning styles' (Hampel, 2003: 25). It also helps to address the well-known drawback of learning a language at distance – the development and practice of oral skills. In addition, it has the potential to promote autonomy through empowering learners to manage their own interactions, choosing and negotiating between options and gradually increasing their ability to take responsibility for their own learning, not only during online tutorials but at any time with other learners.

Critical reflection on both language (cognitive, form-focused) and learning (metacognitive), is also strongly encouraged as an integral part of successful online activity. For distance language learners, however, this is by no means automatic. Lamy and Hassan (2003: 54) in their study of what influences reflective interaction in distance peer learning, warn that 'distance learners cannot easily be persuaded to undertake either solo or interactive reflective work if task presentation is not completely explicit in its expectation that they do so' and suggest that task writers 'might encourage reflection by building in psychological and conversational "space" in which learners can be responsible for "task-management as "themselves".'

Challenges

It would be naive to suggest that technology mediated learning is problem-free. While a major advantage is seen to be the reduction in social isolation for geographically dispersed and/or shy learners, others dislike

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what they see as a lack of a human dimension. Moreover, while a CMC environment can be motivating and confidence boosting, without proper guidance the reverse can occur and, far from reflecting empowerment and expertise in self-direction, 'student work may become unfocused, unbalanced and trivial' (Schwienhorst, 1998: 119). Other difficulties are the level of technical expertise needed, the danger of information overload and the absence of paralinguistic elements such as body language. Some students and teachers simply find the medium depersonalising, fragmentary and lacking the humanity and intimacy that the face-to-face environment affords. There is still a major job to be done in convincing many actual and potential users of its benefits.

Conclusion

According to a recent working definition from Little (2002: 1), 'the practice of learner autonomy requires insight, a positive attitude, a capacity for reflection, and a readiness to be proactive in self-management and in interaction with others'. For distance language learners, this is just the starting point. 'Capacity' and 'readiness' need to become actualised rapidly as abilities and skills. Distance learning students are no more homogeneous than classroom learners, but they are by definition less accessible. This presents a real challenge to all course designers, task writers and tutors to devise ways of supporting their learners at a distance in developing the skills of self-management and self-regulation that are central to autonomy. Strategy development embedded in the OU course materials offers more than just the basic tools, and is constantly being improved and extended. The use of CMC programmes can enhance the potential for autonomy by giving greater freedom of control, a choice of

mode, tasks and activities that promote reflection and intercultural awareness, and a communicative environment which is non-threatening and supportive. What is important is that, in the effort to address the specific challenges of the distance language learning context, and the exciting potential of new technologies, we do not lose sight of the human dimension of language learning. Future research also needs to address the issue of transfer of language skills developed online, and to what extent the development of autonomy, equal participation and increased levels of self-confidence can translate to the real world in which language interactions are spontaneous, unpredictable, and conducted face-to-face.

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