

## Chapter 4

# Supporting learner autonomy: theory and practice in a distance learning context

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There is overwhelming consensus among language learning researchers on the benefits of developing an autonomous approach by learners (Hurd et al. 2001, p.344). Despite the difficulty in defining what he describes as a “problematic term” and a “slippery concept”, Little (2003) suggests there is also broad agreement on what it means. Autonomous learners “understand the purpose of their learning programme, explicitly accept responsibility for their learning, share in the setting of goals, take initiatives in planning and executing learning and evaluate its effectiveness” (Little 2003). However, it is also argued (e.g. by Candy 1991; Little 1995) that the achievement of learner autonomy depends on the willingness of teachers to hand over these responsibilities. Teachers must be committed to creating a learning environment where learners can gradually ‘learn how to learn’ and experience autonomy in order to become more autonomous, a process which Little (2003) calls ‘autonomization’. In distance learning, much of the responsibility for autonomization rests with the teaching/learning materials. However, these materials are often mediated and supported by tutors who can use their contact with learners to develop learning skills. This chapter explores the tutor role in autonomization in a distance language learning programme of The Open University in the UK (OU(UK)).

### **Theoretical background**

Dam (1990) points out that autonomy involves the capacity for critical reflection on all aspects of the language learning process. Kolb's model of a reflective learning cycle (Kolb 1984) now underpins many learning programmes, despite criticisms of it for lack of definition (Moon 1999), exclusive focus on the individual (Brookfield 1987), potential for mechanical implementation (Boud and Walker 1993), and its view of experience as 'unproblematic' (Johnstone and Usher 1997). Kolb defined learning as "the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience" (1984, p.38). The learning cycle explains how this transformation takes place. Concrete experience is subjected to reflective observation. This leads to abstract conceptualization and active experimentation which in turn produces further concrete experience. Boud et al. (1985, p.26) suggested two main stages in reflective observation, viz. "returning to the experience and attending to feelings" before "re-evaluating the experience". Their aim was to avoid learners rushing into action without considering the original experience carefully, and recognizing and accepting the feelings generated by it which could block learning. They also argued that to be effective, reflection must be a conscious process resulting in decisions or choices about further action. Critical reflection involves not only becoming aware of one's existing knowledge, skills, attitudes and assumptions, but also questioning them in order to learn from experience.

Holec (1981, p.3) defined autonomy as "the ability to take charge of one's own learning". The concept of 'knowing how to learn' is central to this definition, which in turn is underpinned by the metacognitive skills of goal-setting, planning, implementing, self-assessment and self-evaluation. Each of these is heavily dependent on critical reflection and the capacity to make conscious decisions about one's learning. Cotterall (1995) links autonomy with successful language learning, seeing the capacity for self-monitoring and for self-assessment as crucial in both cases.

Researchers agree that language learner autonomy can be developed (e.g. Benson 2001, Candy 1991, Nunan 1996). They also point out the difficulties which learners may experience in developing the capacity for critical reflection in order to make conscious decisions about their learning (e.g. Benson 2001, Broady 1996, Little 1990, Moon 1999). These difficulties may be due to previous experience of language learning but affective factors have a significant influence (Boud et al. 1985, Ushioda 1996).

Distance learners are often assumed to be learning autonomously because they control a number of aspects of their learning, such as the time, the pace, what to study and when to study, but they do not necessarily take responsibility for setting goals, planning or evaluating learning. Hurd et al. (2001) identify tensions between developing autonomy and the constraints of a distance learning context, where learners are given detailed instructions and explanations in order to minimize ambiguity, which White (1999) identified as problematic for some distance learners. Distance learning materials have to anticipate a range of potential language learning needs and cater for students working in isolation without immediate access to teachers or peers. Benson (2001, p.133) notes that the response to this isolation is often an explicitly directive approach. White (2003, p.195) highlights the efforts that have been put into developing courses where the content is carefully predetermined. In this situation, tutors can have a vital role to play in helping learners to develop critical reflection and encouraging them to make decisions about their learning.

Dickinson (1987, p.122) examines the issues surrounding teacher preparation and readiness to support and develop decision-making and autonomous learning. He suggests that teachers may need to become aware of the impact this can have on learning and become convinced of its value. He notes that this requires psychological and methodological preparation. Dickinson (1987) and Chamot (2001) point out that tutors have generally trained as

subject specialists and may not have experienced autonomization in their own learning. This underlines the need for substantial support and development if they are to encourage critical reflection and decision-making among their students. Otherwise a situation may occur where tutors support the notion of critical reflection and learner control at an intellectual level, but are not fully aware of the implications for their students and their practice. Candy (1991, p.241) describes this as 'pseudoautonomy', not a deliberate attempt to mislead learners, but the result of an unrecognized disjunction between what Argyris and Schön (1974) called 'espoused theory' and 'theory-in-action'. At the same time, Little (1999) suggests that previous experience and student expectations can lead tutors to hesitate to risk devoting time to 'learning to learn' rather than to language learning.

#### **The research study**

Against this background, a study was carried out with a group of tutors in the South Region of the OU(UK). It took place in the context of a project involving tutors in the preparation and piloting of materials and activities to enhance students' capacity for critical reflection and decision-making and the effectiveness of their learning. The project provided an opportunity to examine the effect of this involvement on their practice.

#### **Research questions**

- How do tutors support autonomization at a distance? In what ways do they encourage critical reflection and decision-making?
- Are tutors aware of specific difficulties in this process?
- How might tutor practice be developed to increase support for this process?

#### **The learning/teaching context**

Seventeen part-time tutors working with approximately

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300 students across the French, German and Spanish programmes offered by the OU(UK) at the time took part in the study during 1998/1999 (see Appendix 1 for details of the tutors and the courses). The university has a policy of open access. The students were part-time distance learners of all ages and educational backgrounds, with an equally varied experience of language learning, from across a large area of Southern England and the Channel Islands. Students were expected to study for an average of 6-8 or 12-14 hours a week, depending on the credit rating for the course (30 or 60 credit points respectively) and completed 4 or 7 assignments during the course, each comprising a written and spoken task.

The role of OU(UK) language tutors is to facilitate students' study of a programme designed and prepared by a course writing team. The two main channels for tuition are a limited number of optional tutorials and feedback on students' assignments. Students can contact their tutor individually if they have queries about aspects of their study, but relatively few take advantage of this.

#### **Tutor preparation and development of project materials**

Tutors were invited to take part in the project to enhance language students' capacity for critical reflection and decision-making and the effectiveness of their learning. In view of the concerns about teacher preparation expressed in the literature and reviewed above, efforts were made to give tutors thorough psychological and methodological preparation. All tutors in the region (33) were invited to an initial briefing. Twenty attended the briefing. This outlined reasons for an increasing national and university interest in helping students to 'learn how to learn' and to take more control of their learning. Reasons included the focus on Key Skills in UK Higher Education (Dearing 1997); a DfEE<sup>1</sup> project *Supporting Key Skills Achievement in Higher Education*, which had developed a set of generic materials published as *Key Skills: Making a Difference* (OU 1998) based

on Kolb's Learning Cycle; research linking autonomy and successful language learning (see, for example, Benson 2001, Cotterall 1995, Wenden 1998); information gathered from University surveys identifying student problems with workload in OU language courses; and research which indicated limited language learning strategy use among OU language students (Schrafnagl and Fage 1998). Tutors discussed these issues and examined the generic materials designed to develop the skill of 'learning how to learn' by encouraging students to reflect on their performance, needs, strengths and weaknesses in order to make informed decisions about what and how they learn. Tutors were then asked to consider what adaptations would be necessary to tailor them to the needs of language learners.

Following this briefing, a group of 11 self-selected tutors volunteered to work on the adaptations, prepared the project materials and piloted them with their tutorial groups. Students were invited to use these materials to carry out specific activities linked to their assignments and in conjunction with their normal study activity at intervals throughout the course. The project materials (see note 1) consisted of:

- **a skills audit** which summarized the range of skills that might be needed in order to complete an assignment. Students were encouraged to identify the skills required for a specific assignment; reflect on previous learning, strengths and weaknesses in these skills; select one or two priorities to work on and draw up an appropriate action plan.
- **a self-assessment sheet** which asked students to reflect on the work they had done, to share their priorities with their tutor and assess the extent to which they felt their goals had been achieved. Students were encouraged to complete a self-assessment sheet and send it in with each assignment.
- **a reflection sheet** which invited students to study and summarize their tutor's feedback and use it alongside their own judgements, the skills audit and the next

assignment task in order to review their priorities, set new goals and decide how best to achieve them.

- **a tips sheet** which advised students on what to do when an assignment was returned. It was designed to help students to 'return to the experience' and 'attend to feelings' (Boud et al. 1985) before moving on, making active use of the feedback.
- **skills sheets** which offered advice on developing specific skills (reading, listening, writing, speaking and vocabulary extension) as well as referring students to other sources of help. They were made available by tutors to students who needed them.

By repeating the activities in connection with each assignment, students were encouraged to engage in the different stages of Kolb's Learning Cycle. They moved from 'reflective observation' of their language learning and performance, i.e. their 'concrete experience', into 'abstract conceptualization' where they formulated new priorities and action plans ready for 'active experimentation' and further 'concrete experience' in the next assignment. Apart from the skills sheets, all materials were bilingual, students could complete them either in English or in the language they were studying.

After the pilot, the 11 tutors participated in a review and revision of the project materials. At this point, they were joined by 6 other tutors. Together, they refined the design of the materials, taking account of feedback from students, revisited methods of introducing them and devised some target language activities to use when introducing the materials to students. They also tested and refined a set of tutor guidelines, before introducing the materials to their tutorial groups in the next academic year for the main phase of the project.

Tutors experienced a substantial amount of preparation and development before participating in the pilot phase. During the pilot, they were able to work through Kolb's cycle themselves, reflecting on their experience and preparing for further active experimentation. They were

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keen to continue using the project materials and to share what they had learned with colleagues.

### **Concerns identified during the pilot phase**

During the briefing and pilot phase, a number of methodological and ethical issues arose. Tutors received payment and expenses for attending the briefing and for producing the project materials, but there was no additional payment available for introducing them to their tutorial groups and supporting their use. Some tutors felt that it would result in a lot of additional work. For the researcher/line-manager of the tutors, this raised concerns about whether enough tutors would be willing to participate, or whether they would end up doing so in order to 'keep in' with their line-manager, rather than out of genuine interest or commitment to the aims of the study. Tutors thought that students would see the project materials as a lot of extra work on top of an already heavy load. They were worried about how students would react to spending their very limited tutorial time on activities which were not immediately recognizable as language practice. They debated which language they should use to introduce and explain the purpose of these materials and whether or not tutorials were the appropriate place to do this as student attendance is optional. As it had been agreed that student use of the project materials was to be optional, some tutors were concerned about what would happen if few or no students in their group opted to use them.

Fears that tutors might feel under pressure to participate were allayed by the number who opted not to come to the initial briefing (13 out of 33) and by those who attended the briefing but then decided against participation (8). During the pilot, tutors indicated that they participated for various reasons. These could be summarized as an interest in helping students to develop their learning and succeed in their studies, and a desire to work more closely with colleagues to reduce the isolation of working as a distance tutor. For the majority, who could be described as 'portfolio'



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workers with a number of part-time contracts, involvement in the project also offered an opportunity to develop their practice and gain experience which could be valuable in other contexts and enhance their employability.

Experience during the pilot showed tutors that fears about the project materials generating additional work for tutors were unfounded. Tutors reported that any such work was more than compensated for by increased communication with students, opportunities to give more focused and relevant feedback on assignments, and identification of skill development needs which could be tackled in tutorial activities or addressed in assignment feedback. Tutors were assured that there were 'no prizes' for securing student participation, and no penalties for low or no participation. Participation levels during the pilot ranged from one or two students to 15 out of a group of 20.

#### **Data collection and analysis**

The study adopted an exploratory-interpretative approach (Grotjahn 1987). The experience and practice of the 17 tutors who used the project materials during the main phase of the study was explored via in-depth, semi-structured interviews. The interviews took place by telephone during the second half of the course. Telephone was the only practical option for interviewing such a widely dispersed sample. Questions focused on how tutors had introduced the materials and supported their use during the year, and on the outcomes they perceived. They were also asked about the extent to which they incorporated learning skills into their correspondence teaching and tutorial programmes (see Appendix 2 for the prompt questions). The interviews were recorded with tutors' permission, transcribed and analysed using NUD\*IST (QSR 1997). This package allows responses to be broken down and grouped according to categories emerging from the data or determined by the researcher. Transcripts were examined for evidence of practices which supported critical reflection and decision-making. They were also examined for

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awareness of the difficulties experienced by students in this respect, particularly those related to affective factors, and for evidence of the impact of use of the materials on tutor practice.

### **Findings**

#### **How did tutors encourage critical reflection and decision-making?**

All 17 tutors opted to introduce the project materials at their first tutorial as students generally make a big effort to attend in order to meet their tutor and fellow students. Four tutors also mentioned the materials in their introductory letters and phone calls to students. The manner of introduction varied. Five tutors included activities in the tutorial which focused on learning strategies, encouraging an exchange of ideas as well as enabling students to share their feelings about different aspects of their study. For example, T14 described an icebreaker where students talked about how they studied, how often, what they found difficult, etc., and concluded:

I think it was quite reassuring for them because they realized that not everybody was doing everything three times a week.

The other tutors explained the project materials to the students. Several Level 1 tutors did this in English to avoid misunderstandings. Others used the target language, but pointed out the English versions on the project sheets. Some tutors indicated the arguments they used to 'persuade' students to use the materials to identify their strengths and weaknesses and identify priorities to work on. For example, T3 presented the audit and self-assessment as something which would help her to give them more pertinent advice and assistance. T7 suggested:

it could help us [...] strike up a better working relationship

T12 said:

it helps you plan your work more effectively

At this stage, tutors gave out the audit and self-assessment/reflection sheets only. Students were asked to work through the audit at home and identify priorities to work on. They were invited to contact the tutor if they needed to. Twelve tutors felt that the materials were self-explanatory enough to send them, together with a brief commentary, to students who did not attend the tutorial.

In subsequent tutorials, tutors used the project materials or devised activities to help students become more aware of their learning to varying degrees. Two tutors made use of the skills audit. T1 explained which skills were included in the intended outcomes for the tutorial activities, and commented in the interview:

It helps to spell out why we are doing it and which skills they are using.

T2 had compiled a checklist based on the audit and the assessment criteria for the course and provided opportunities for students to use it from time to time to assess their own and other students' work. This was the only example given of explicit development of self-assessment. This tutor emphasized the need to first build a climate of trust and felt that in such circumstances, students were very supportive of one another, but realistic in their assessments.

Seven tutors reported incorporating activities in their tutorials which enabled students to become aware of and/or try out alternative strategies for developing different language skills so that they could decide which they found most useful. For example, T7 described a series of activities to help students write summaries in their own words, to explore ways of enriching vocabulary, remembering words and phrases and making their language more complex in style. Two tutors reported using skills sheets in tutorials. T9 used one to summarize an activity on speaking skills and T6 used them as the basis for brainstorm and discussion about the strategies students were adopting. T3 felt it was

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more effective to encourage students to think about what they were doing and why, and how effective they found it, rather than presenting new techniques. Five tutors said that they had not devoted any tutorial time to this kind of activity. This was because they felt their students didn't need it, because they didn't feel confident enough, they didn't see this as any different from their previous approach, or they felt there was not enough tutorial time.

All tutors responded to the comments made by students who submitted the self-assessment sheets with their assignments. The majority (13) did this by writing comments or giving explanations on the assignment feedback form only. The other four also wrote brief responses on the self-assessment sheets giving reasons like:

It helped them to see if I had really looked at their comments (T6)

The tutors were pleased to note some development of the capacity for critical reflection among students who had used the project materials, for example:

They are really looking at their work [...] their language development in a more critical way, which I don't think they would have done otherwise. (T6)

Tutors particularly valued these sheets, for example:

I found that was enormously helpful (T7)

The sheets were also seen as a way for students to:

Get things off their chest (T7)

by acknowledging negative feelings about the task or their performance.

When they returned the assignment, tutors sent a copy of the Tips sheet. Six tutors made a point of sending the sheet to all students, not just those opting to use the project materials, and encouraged them to use it to reflect on their performance. T16 made a point of going through these tips in a tutorial and explained in the interview:

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I'm not treating them as idiots, but you can't make unreasonable assumptions [...] a lot of them haven't had any experience of correspondence tuition.

Eight tutors sent one or more of the strategy sheets relevant to students' needs, highlighting particular points or techniques for the student to try. T3 preferred to give her own suggestions.

**Were tutors aware of student difficulties in critical reflection and decision-making?**

T15 felt with hindsight that students might have needed help with the audit, due to their lack of experience of this kind of approach. She realized that it would have been helpful to allow time for students to work on it during the first tutorial, as students are often reluctant to contact their tutor with any difficulties otherwise. However, none of the tutors reported devoting tutorial time or individual contact time, at this point or later, to helping students to work through the process of identifying strengths and weaknesses, setting goals and thinking about how to achieve them or using the reflection sheet after each assignment was returned. Despite the lack of time given to the skills audit by tutors, a majority of students reported the skills audit to be the most useful part of the material. It widened their view of what was involved in developing their language skills beyond the popular perception of grammar, and enabled them to identify priorities for their own development. However, some found it difficult to be specific and would have appreciated more advice and support.

In contrast to their more positive view of the skills audit, students reported that they did not like completing the self-assessments, or did not know what to say. They confirmed the difficulties and lack of confidence which many people have with this process. Tutors were aware that students had difficulties completing them. T14 said "it was just so vague" and T3 felt some students just filled

them in “to please me.”

Tutors noted that they often left blank the section on what they had done well or added phrases like “I hope” (T1). Some felt students concentrated on issues like how long it took them, or the problems of keeping to a word count rather than considering their language performance. Some students appeared to be rather hard on themselves. Although tutors felt that in many cases students’ self-assessments were very accurate, they were aware that this was an area which students found difficult and only one third of their students completed them.

Tutors had previously expressed concern about time and student workload and these themes regularly recurred during the interviews. They were very conscious of pressures on tutorial time as they met students so infrequently. They talked about presenting the materials as part of a ‘break’, an ‘admin slot’, doing it in English to save time, and trying to slip in skill development,

without the students noticing [...] you have to be careful for the students to feel that everything they are doing is related to the course, what they want is to speak French (T5).

They frequently commented on the workload pressures on students:

it seems like a lot of work on top of a very intensive course. Students’ priority is keeping up (T2)

Tutors were aware of results from the pilot project indicating that this approach could save students time and give them a feeling of greater control over their workload. However, their responses showed that the knowledge was probably not enough to overcome this particular barrier.

Tutors made many references to dealing with negative feelings, giving reassurance and opportunities to motivate and encourage further self-assessment and revision of priorities via feedback. This indicated that they were well aware of the affective factors involved in completing an assignment, engaging in self-assessment and sending it to

a tutor whom the student had perhaps never met. It takes courage for students to be honest and explicit about their performance unless they have learned to use self-assessment as a learning tool rather than seeing it as something else to 'get right'. T6 summed up the situation:

I think we are asking a lot of them aren't we? [...] emotionally? [...]

Tutor responses indicated a need for reassurance on their part too. Writing feedback at a distance to people they hardly know involves making some assumptions about the students and their needs. It is easy to get it wrong, with disastrous consequences, or to hold back in case the analysis isn't correct.

#### **How might tutor practice be developed to support autonomization?**

Tutors talked about a number of changes in their practice and insights gained as a result of using the project materials. Previously they had seen tutorials as primarily opportunities to enhance students' language performance, and had not engaged in activities to promote 'learning how to learn' a language. Approximately half said they now made more overt reference to learning skills. This included fostering tutorial discussions on approaches to study, and opportunities to try out alternative techniques often in the target language, with encouragement to try them out and to choose to use what worked best for them. Tutors also reported encouraging more participation in decision-making about tutorials by asking for 'requests' and eliciting feedback on activities.

Tutors reported changes to the way they gave feedback on assignments. As in tutorials, their focus had been on language performance. They now gave more attention to learning skills and referred students to sources of advice or techniques via the skills sheets, or references to specific course material. They did this in the light of the priorities identified by students, but at the same time, they com-

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mented on the priorities, confirming or explaining when they felt that students were worrying unnecessarily or should consider different priorities. All tutors responded to students' self-assessment comments in their assignment feedback. Some persisted throughout the course in attempts to get more students to complete self-assessments because they felt they were so beneficial. Being aware of students' priorities and how they felt about the work they had submitted enabled tutors to feel more confident in the advice they gave. As in the pilot, they felt able to give more personal, focused feedback, and able to reassure. They also reported commenting on priorities in their feedback for other students. Many reported improved communication with students via the sheets, for example:

it was a real dialogue focused on the assignment work (T4).

### **Discussion**

Tutors showed strong commitment to developing students' capacities for critical reflection and decision making through their involvement in the pilot and main phase of the project and their responses during the interviews. They appeared convinced of the benefits of increasing students' control over their learning, particularly to overcome workload problems and to enable students to make progress by moving out of their 'comfort zone' and focusing on specific areas of weakness in order to enhance their performance. They commented on the value of the project materials and the improvements they had seen among students who used them regularly. They were keen to continue to use them in future. Nevertheless, it seems tutors still made too many assumptions about students' capacities for critical reflection and decision making or their ability to deploy them in support of their language learning. Despite involvement in producing materials designed to develop these capacities and becoming aware of the difficulties which students had in selecting priorities to work on, and their difficulties with self-assessment and self-evaluation, none reported



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using tutorial time or other individual contact to help with the skills audit and action planning, and only one tutor reported using any activities to develop confidence and capacity in self-assessment.

Tutors showed considerable awareness of affective factors involved in critical reflection on performance at a distance and indicated how these apply no less to tutors. In addition to the development of tutorial and individual activities to develop students' confidence and help them to handle the positive and negative emotions involved in activities such as self-assessment, more attention needs to be given to supporting tutors in handling affective issues involved in distance learning and teaching as well as in autonomization. An important aspect of this learning and teaching is the feedback which tutors give on assignments. The project materials encouraged students to pay more attention to and make more use of this feedback but further research is needed to examine students' perceptions of this feedback. It is important to establish what they find most helpful and the styles of assignment feedback which do most to promote critical reflection and decision making in a context where the tutor is acting as both assessor and adviser.

Tutors had made some changes to their practice in order to support the development of critical reflection and decision making rather than giving all their attention to language development and practice as they had done previously. They reported making these changes in both tutorials and assignment feedback, which can be a basis for future development. Tutors have relatively little tutorial contact with students and are keenly aware of pressures on this time. Their comments showed they responded to student expectations of language practice, confirming Little's concern (1999) about tutors' willingness to risk diverting time from this. They demonstrated positive enthusiasm for the underpinning ideas, but had not fully worked through the implications. Their 'theory-in-action' probably demonstrated their concerns about time pres-

suers and workload and a view of 'learning to learn' as less significant than language practice.

The preparation and pilot phase did not pay enough attention to the methodological changes that this approach entails, although it appears to have won tutors over to the approach. Although tutors underwent initial briefing, worked on the materials and piloted them; more time should have been spent in the preparation phase on developing activities which enabled students to practise and gain confidence in auditing their strengths and weaknesses, deciding on action plans to work on their priorities, and using self-assessment. Further research and development is needed in the design of tutorial and individual activities supporting self-assessment and self-evaluation combined with language development. Students may need to acquire certain target language items in order to be able to discuss their learning. Activities in the target language, tailored to the different levels, could avoid some of the need for specific language to talk about learning, for spending tutorial time speaking English, or for complex explanations in either language. Experience from the project highlights the importance of working through the process in order to fully understand the methodological implications for practice. In effect, these tutors were embarking on longer-term professional development.

### **Conclusion**

This examination of the tutor's role in autonomization in distance learning was restricted to tutors within one region of the OU(UK) who were involved in a project to enhance students' critical reflection and decision making. Findings indicate that tutors used the project materials and engaged in other activities to develop these capacities to varying degrees. The study underlines the extent of the psychological and methodological preparation which they needed, but points to a number of ways in which tutor practice can be developed to support autonomization. For example, by helping students to identify their strengths and weak-

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nesses and determining action plans for priority areas; by engaging in activities to develop students' confidence in self-assessment; and by focusing on 'learning to learn' as well as on language learning in tutorials and assignment feedback, as a way of helping students to reflect on what and how they learn in order to learn more effectively within the time and resources available to them. More research and development is required to produce appropriate target language activities for use in tutorials and by individual students to give practice and build confidence in these capacities. The study also suggests that tutors need the opportunity to experience this approach in order to be in a position to develop their practice further.

Tutors were aware of a number of specific difficulties, particularly in relation to self-assessment. They not only identified the significance of affective factors for students in this process, but also for themselves when giving feedback on assignments. Tutors need to help their students handle positive and negative feelings about their performance, but also need support themselves. Research into the impact of different styles of feedback and how they promote critical reflection and decision making could help to provide this. In view of the importance of course materials in distance learning and the relatively infrequent contact with tutors, research and development is also needed to see how autonomization can be promoted within the constraints on distance course writing.

White (2003, p.69) suggests that a study of the competencies required by distance language teachers is a high priority for the field. She lists the ability to support students at a distance in taking responsibility for their learning as one of the essentials. The study reported here shows some of the changes to practice which tutors can make in order to bring this about and to foster the process of autonomization in language learning at a distance.

**Note**

Copies of the project materials are available from the author who can be contacted at: l.m.murphy@open.ac.uk

**Appendix 1**

**Details of courses and tutors on OU (UK) language courses available for study in 1999 in OU (UK) South Region**

**Details of courses**

Language	Level	Course	Title	Credit Rating	No. of Tutorial Groups
French	Level 1	L120	Ouverture	30 points	10 groups
French *	Level 2	L221	Envol	30 points	5 groups
French *	Level 2	L210	Mises au point	60 points	6 groups
German	Level 1	L130	Auftakt	30 points	4 groups
German *	Level 2	L230	Motive	30 points	3 groups
German *	Level 2	L213	Variationen	60 points	4 groups
Spanish	Level 1	L140	En Rumbo	30 points	6 groups

\* Courses with a compulsory one week residential school

**Tutors involved in the project in the OU (UK) South Region**

Tutor	Language Taught	Level	Years with OU
T1	German	Level 2 60 points	2
T2	French	Level 2 60 points	3
T3	Spanish	Level 1	In first year
T4	French	Level 2 60 points	2
T5	French	Level 1	4
T6	French	Level 1	4
T7	French	Level 2 30 points	3
T8	Spanish	Level 1	In first year

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T9	French	Level 1	4
	German	Level 2 30 points	
T10	French	Level 1	4
		Level 2 30 points	
T11	French	Level 1	4
T12	French	Level 1	4
T13	French	Level 2 30 points	4
T14	Spanish	Level 1	In first year
T15	French	Level 2 60 points	3
T16	German	Level 1	2
		Level 2 30 points	
T17	German	Level 1	2

## Appendix 2

### Tutor interview prompts

1. How did you introduce the materials to your students?
2. What was the response and what use have the students made of the materials so far?
3. Are there any things you want to say about the materials (e.g. layout, wording, content, etc.)?
4. Have you incorporated "learning to learn" into your teaching in any way?
5. How have you responded to any self-assessment forms which you have received?
6. Any general observations or comments?
7. (For those involved in the pilot in 1998.) Do you feel you have done anything differently or have there been any differences in the response this year?