

## **Independent Language Learning in Distance Education: Current Issues**

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### **Introduction**

Learner independence and learner autonomy occupy a central place in discussions of language learning in distance education. They are linked to ideas and assumptions about what constitutes an ideal learning environment and quality learning experiences and about the roles and responsibilities of distance learners. In this paper I discuss the ways in which independent learning has been interpreted and critiqued in distance education, particularly by advocates of a collaborative control approach to learner autonomy. I argue that independent learning in the distance context is concerned with developing the ability to engage with, interact with and participate in particular learning environments, which are not always directly mediated by the teacher. This view is congruent with the way in which learners conceptualise the process of distance language learning, as centred on the construction of the learner-context interface, which then guides and informs future independent learning experiences. The learner-context interface theory also emphasises the importance of emergent learner identities and beliefs in the process of independent language learning, and the influence of the context of delivery on independent learning experiences. In the latter part of this paper I argue for the value of including learner perspectives in identifying current issues for independent language learning in distance education. To begin with I will outline something of the nature and constraints of a distance context for language learning which will be useful for readers who have not participated, as either learners or teachers, in distance or online learning environments.

### **The nature of distance language learning**

A distance context for language learning presents learners with new demands and new opportunities compared to those experienced in face-to-face classrooms. In particular learners are involved to a much greater degree in self-management and environment management (White 1995 and 1997a), and are faced with numerous decisions and roles which are usually carried out by the teacher in classroom contexts. These may include decisions about the fit between the target language materials and particular learner needs, how to proceed in the face of confusion or uncertainty and how to make connections between different parts of the course. As learners interact with the distance learning environment and make these kinds of decisions which underpin the learning process, they begin to establish an interface between themselves and the learning context, an idea explored later in the article.

The ability of each learner to identify, participate in and manage learning experiences, which match their individual learning needs, is essential to fully benefit from the opportunities available in distance learning. In my view it is the development and exercise of this ability, the hallmark of learner participation in independent language learning environments, which may be supported by, but not always directly mediated by, language teachers. In particular learners need to develop awareness of what it means to be a distance language learner and what is required of them (their identity), and what is available to them within the wider learning context (the context of delivery) as they seek to adjust to a new learning environment. These points will be considered later in this paper together with a discussion of how learners conceptualise the process of distance language learning, which forms the basis of the learner-context interface theory.

It is possible to identify four fundamental areas in which a distance language learning context may differ significantly from a face-to-face classroom experience. Firstly there are the immediate demands of the new context and new conditions for learning which learners need to accommodate to. These include a more isolated study context, facing problems of maintaining initial motivation without the regular scheduling of face-to-face classes and limited access to real-time interactions. Real-time interactions can structure and support the learning process by providing immediate feedback and opportunities to clarify expectations.

Secondly, the teacher is remote from the sites of learning and is not there moment by moment to mediate between the learner and target language sources. The teacher is less available to provide immediate monitoring and feedback or ongoing assistance with developing language skills. In a recent paper on learning environments for distance foreign language learning, Doughty and Long (2002)

identify this as a key feature of the environment: *the classroom teacher – who is ... (a) ordinarily the most reliable source on local circumstance, (b) the one who can best make decisions as a lesson unfolds, and (c) a major source of native L2 input and feedback on error – is now removed in space and time from the learners, who may, in turn, be removed from one another.*

Of course teacher mediation has an important place in distance learning but it is changed in both the form it takes (attention to affective aspects is crucial) and the way it operates (mostly technology mediated often asynchronous communication) and this represents a major point of adjustment for learners.

Thirdly, as mentioned earlier, a distance language learning context requires more awareness on the part of learners, as frequently they must oversee the rate and direction of their learning and these functions, ideally, are informed by knowledge of themselves as learners and skills in self-management (White 1995). Distance learners need to make their own internal adjustments in the process of developing awareness, a point which is elaborated further in a later discussion of learner identities. And finally there are many issues concerning the new technologies and the kinds of borders learners may be required to cross in accessing new learning spaces. It is now apparent that as learners start to work within the new learning spaces developed for distance language learning (integrated electronic learning environments, audiographics and online collaborative learning opportunities) they require new kinds of skills, motivation and commitment (Rogers and Wolff 2000, Catterick 2001 and Kötter 2001). They need to learn to work with an interconnected community of learners, using a number of new mediums such as text-based online conferencing, and using higher levels of interaction and collaboration than have been possible in earlier paradigms of distance language learning. In addition, in order to make language learning meaningful in their immediate environment they need to learn how to use the affordances of the new technologies in ways that contribute to their developing target language competence.

Learners who enter a distance language course also identify many new opportunities. The flexibility of access in terms of time and place has long been acknowledged (see Keegan 1990 and Shelley 2000). There is more freedom from input and interactions which are not immediately relevant to individual learning needs (White 1997b). There is also the possibility of developing skills in self-direction and management of learning experiences (Hurd 2004, Weasenforth, Meloni and Biesenbach-Lucas 2004). In particular, the opportunities for learners to develop a more independent approach to learning a language, together with the requirements for self-management, mean that distance learners are arguably well prepared to take advantage of other independent language learning opportunities. These may include immersion contexts in the target language country, tandem learning and self-access environments. The following comments from distance foreign language learners in the final stages of a five-phase study (White 1999) reflect this point:

*What I've learnt from this course is that I can learn French without a teacher providing most of the direction and help. I seem to be better at making use of the videotapes and practising conversations with myself, and learning with my French online pal.*

*Ifly to Japan every six weeks for my job. Since I've been studying the course I notice I'm much more confident in learning Japanese on the job. I didn't get this from earlier classes. I'm more prepared for learning Japanese under my own initiative.*

I now want to discuss the concept of learner independence, and critiques of that concept, within distance education, before I explore learner-based perspectives of independent language learning at a distance.

### **Learner independence vs collaborative control**

In recent years in distance education there has been something of a sea-change in the debate concerning issues of autonomy, control, independence and self-directed learning. While the debate is not widespread and has largely been raised by only two theorists in the field (Anderson and Garrison 1998, Garrison 2000, Garrison and Anderson 2000), it raises fundamental questions about the essential nature of distance education, online learning, distributed learning and the like, and about language learning experiences within those contexts. The debate has largely been prompted by a close examination of the meaning of learner independence and how it relates to roles of learners and the nature of particular learning environments. It represents an important critique of the traditional view of learner

independence as an ideal associated with traditional distance learning environments, and points ahead to the possibilities for learners to exercise their autonomy through collaborative control of learning experiences within technology-mediated environments.

#### *Learner independence*

The focus on independence has had a long history in distance education. The expectation that learners can be independent, and that this is an important goal, underlies much of the early research in the field. Ross Paul (1990: 37), for example, argues that the most important criterion for success in distance education should relate to learner independence and that *the ultimate challenge ... is to develop each individual's capacity to look after his or her own learning needs*. The design of high-quality materials, including a comprehensive range of learning sources, has been seen as the key component in fostering and maximising learner independence. Within this approach, quality is measured by the extent to which course materials support the self-instruction process and maximise self-sufficiency on the part of the learner. The development of in-text support is seen as the most feasible way of helping learners in large-scale distance contexts, such as those reported by Vanijdee (2003) at Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University in Thailand where there may be up to 10 000 students in Foundation English each semester.

Commonly, strategy development and learner training are incorporated into the materials as a way of facilitating learner independence and enhancing each student's repertoire of learning skills. One illustration comes from Hurd, Beaven and Ortega (2001), based on their experience in foreign language courses at the Open University in the United Kingdom. They argue that in recognition of the level of strategic competence required for distance study, strategy development and a reflective approach to learning are incorporated into the course materials. Given the often-isolated contexts of learners, and the fact that many have limited access to further learning resources, the learner training approach they use aims to scaffold opportunities for learners to manage their independence in optimal ways. Course structure is designed to fit with this approach to learner independence and Hurd, Beaven and Ortega (2001: 344) emphasise that the content of the program and the rate of study is determined beforehand by the course development team, and that the overall course structure is deliberately *very rigid*. The philosophy underlying this approach is that the transparency of the framework of the course supports learners, who are then free to make decisions and develop awareness of their learning within those set parameters.

#### *Collaborative control*

The notion of collaborative control involves an implicit critique of the focus on learner independence in distance education. This critique challenges and extends our understanding of distance learning, and is related closely to the emergence of new learning spaces. Anderson and Garrison (1998) are the main proponents of this position which involves questioning the extent to which, and the way in which, independence is seen as a key component in distance learning. They associate the ideal of learner independence with the view of distance education as a private form of learning based on self-instructional texts. They argue that when independence is seen as a desirable goal, it may not be balanced with an understanding of the demands placed on learners in terms of individual proficiency nor of the ways in which interaction can help learners in developing control of what they do. Their view is that learner autonomy best develops through collaborative control of learning experiences and a commitment on the part of learners to develop and assume responsibility for learning processes can only take effect if they have the opportunity to collaboratively control learning experiences. Collaborative control can be exercised through opportunities for meaningful interaction with other learners and teachers. This is aligned to approaches to language learning which emphasise the importance of negotiation in enabling learners to exercise and extend their agency in learning (see Breen and Littlejohn 2000).

Accounts of the philosophy of particular distance language courses are rare, but one given by Candlin and Byrnes (1995) can be seen as aligned to Garrison's view of collaborative control. The approach documented by Candlin and Byrnes is also noteworthy since it emphasises the importance of flexibility, negotiation, learner networks and open materials without reliance on computer-mediated communication. For the migrant adult language learners in Australia studying at a distance, Candlin and Byrnes argue that developing the ability to access learning opportunities in their environment was a key goal. To do this they recognised that learners must move beyond the prescribed content in the distance course to engage with learning sources in their immediate context. A key principle here is that learners acquire skills in the language as they participate in personally meaningful activities in the

context of social interaction, rather than by receiving knowledge in the materials. This view can be seen as close to the work of Little (2001) when he argues that autonomy in language learning develops through interaction and that independence for the learner develops from interdependence.

The challenge within this approach for distance language learning then shifts to issues concerning interaction, collaboration, participation, social presence, learner networks and a host of related issues (White 2003). Such an approach challenges the capacity of individual distance language teachers, together with the essential component of appropriate institutional support, to facilitate interaction and collaboration between and among students and within their environment. It is important to acknowledge that the response of learners to computer-mediated opportunities for interaction within distance language programs has been more complex than anticipated (Goodfellow, Manning and Lamy 1999, Grosse 2001). In addition it has been argued that the assumptions made relating to participation, access and motivations of language learners have not been sufficiently examined (Moore 2002).

From this we have a view of two ways of conceptualising independent language learning in distance education. The first is the more pervasive and is linked to traditional paradigms of distance learning and views of learner independence. It recognises the fact that many learners are in relatively isolated contexts and have few opportunities to access more interactive learning experiences or opportunities. Thus emphasis is placed on providing learners with the means to manage their independent learning experience, to organise, monitor and reflect on their learning and make decisions within the structures provided by the course. Learner training within this approach is generally incorporated into the materials and may or may not relate to assessment processes. A measure of quality in this model is the degree to which course materials support learner independence. The second view argues that distance learners should have the opportunity to manage their learning within an interactive environment which is possible within the advent of information and communication technologies. This alternative framework replaces the idea of learner independence with one of collaborative control, based on a belief that learners can best achieve autonomy and control within their learning experiences when they can collaborate with others in ways which support their learning. It places emphasis on the exchange of ideas and the development of abilities within collaborative learning experiences.

These two strands of thought then underlie much of the literature on distance language learning, though they are seldom explicitly identified as such. In practice, most courses represent a mixture of the two approaches and generally independent language learning involves support for the individual learner, together with some opportunities for interaction and collaborative learning experiences. Thus, in this paper reference to independent language learning in distance education should not be equated with the more problematic view of learner independence associated with early generations of distance education.

While the preceding debate has not taken place explicitly within the context of distance language programs, it nonetheless illuminates important issues and emphases within different programs, and underlines some of the concerns expressed by commentators in the field (Murray 2000, Warschauer 2000, Warschauer, Shetzer and Meloni 2000). Murray (2000) argues that while there has been a shift in the positioning of distance education largely due to the advent of computer-mediated communication (CMC), less attention has been paid to the actual effectiveness and outcomes of CMC use compared to earlier forms of distance language programs.

Warschauer (2000) suggests that the field of distance education is at a crossroads. While computers and the Internet have the potential to make learning opportunities more flexible and interactive, significant amounts of personal interaction are costly in time and resources. Because the need for economies of scale frequently dominates thinking within educational institutions, it is possible that providers may choose to emphasise individual access to pre-packaged material rather than opportunities for interaction, collaboration and negotiated learning opportunities. Thus raising questions about the meaning and nature of independent language learning in distance education relates directly to questions about the quality and contribution of learning experiences.

With this background in place, I now want to turn to the question of how learner perspectives on the process of distance language learning can contribute to our understanding of the essentials of independent language learning.

### **Independent learning and the construction of a learner-context interface**

In order to investigate how learners conceptualise the process of distance language learning, I undertook a detailed longitudinal study with a cohort of novice distance learners, which involved five phases of data collection over a twelve week semester and a later follow-up phase (see White 1999 and 2003). The participants in the first study were studying either Japanese or Spanish and for all nineteen students this was their first experience of distance study. A second study included a follow-up phase over eight weeks with the fifteen students who continued to the next level of distance language study. A more detailed discussion of the iterative data collection process is given in White (1999). A central question in both studies was: *How is distance language learning conceptualised by learners?* Extracts from learner reports included in this paper are based on interview and scenario tasks completed by participants in the study.

In reflecting on and articulating their experience of language learning through the two studies, one distinctive feature of distance language learning emerged as a key and recurrent point of discussion among learners, namely, the view that learners must develop and assume control of a personally meaningful and effective interface between themselves and the learning context. The process of distance language learning was seen as a matter of learners making a bridge between their needs, preferences, prior experiences, skills and beliefs and the particular features of the distance learning context. To do this, learners need to identify elements within the context which are appropriate for themselves and then use them to construct an individual learning environment.

The idea of learner independence figured quite prominently in the reports of learners as they saw constructing the learner-context interface as an individual process requiring decisions about the learning environment in relation to themselves as learners without direct teacher guidance. The following report from a learner of Japanese refers to the processes she used to construct an interface between herself and the distance learning context:

*The key thing is to work out for yourself how you will move forward and make progress. Really you have to learn to deal with quite fundamental issues such as establishing a physical learning space and choosing the best way to use time. But you also have to find out what works for you, and what is available in the course which works for you. There's plenty of choice, but picking out the best bits and bringing them together in ways which work is quite an art ... And then of course it changes as you move forward and learn more about the course, about yourself and about the language ... Most of this you can only sort out for yourself.*

Construction of the interface involves choices about elements which will figure significantly in the learning environment of the individual learner. While this choice may be influenced by the learning context, such as assignments or opportunities for interaction, it will also be influenced by the preferences and needs of the individual learner at a particular point. Making choices about, and participating in, distance language learning environments are supported by the interface learners develop with the learning context, in which teacher guidance plays an essentially limited role, as this student explains:

*I've had lots of help and support from a local study group, the tutor and the online component. But these have only been a means to help me sort out what I need to do for myself. That was the big thing for me to get started – knowing how I could get the course to work for me. I knew what wasn't working, but it was difficult to get enough bits in place that were going the right way. A key thing was learning vocabulary on flash cards, and learning not to worry about all the course material that was ahead of me. Once I got started in that way other things began to fall into place. Now I can sort the course out pretty much for myself.*

Distance language learning contexts make demands of a different order on learners, and these are reflected in the way they conceptualise the process. The idea of the learner-context interface and the central role it plays in distance language learning reflects something of the nature of the demands on learners. A common theme is that distance language learning is a highly complex endeavour requiring a great deal of independent action on the part of the individual. Much of this centres on the need to develop an interface with the learning context which is the result of the interplay of personal and contextual influences. If individuals are not able to establish this interface, the learning context remains relatively inert and lacks any personal meaning or significance. This quote from a learner who withdrew from the study in Week 7 points to the link between the construction of the learner-context

interface and the identity-formation process for distance language learners, which is discussed in the next section:

*I found it really hard to get a foothold in this distance course. In fact I haven't really managed to work for me even though I put in a lot of time and get help. I have tried lots of things but I can't find a good way of doing things that carries over to the next time. By now I'm losing interest.*

To sum up, I have argued that a learner-based perspective on independent language learning is concerned with developing the ability to engage with, interact with and participate in particular learning environments, which are not always directly mediated by the teacher. Learners manage this largely by the construction of a personally meaningful interface with the learning context.

### **Independent learning and learner identities**

In distance language learning the teacher is generally remote from the sites of learning, and only has glimpses into the processes by which learners form, and struggle to form, their identities as distance language learners. The process of adjustment to a more independent learning environment can be seen as requiring learners to establish a viable interface between themselves and the learning context, and to develop a sense of identity and self-efficacy as a distance language learner. An illustration of this point comes from the following learner of French in Week 8 of the semester:

*I've now found a way of doing the course, and I've got some idea of how to keep my motivation going, I suppose the whole experience is growing on me – it's beginning to suit me, and I can fit it into my other commitments.*

As learners embark on the process of distance language learning in the environment they choose, and at the times they choose, they need to bring together the following: their individual circumstances, characteristics and attributes, their social/work/family environment and relationships and the features of the distance language learning context (White 2003).

It is possible to see the process of developing an identity as a distance language learner as reconciling features associated with these areas in a way that supports their ability to engage with and derive benefit from the distance learning experience. Of course many learners struggle to establish a viable interface with the distance learning context and an identity for themselves within that context, as reflected in such comments as: *Distance learning wasn't for me, I couldn't get used to it, I didn't like it – I need a teacher right there.*

Pursuing independent language learning in distance education involves making contact with a new learning context, coming to understand initial encounters with that context and developing a new view of what it means to be a language learner. One way in which teachers may help in this process is to pay attention to the overall context of delivery.

### **Independent learning and the context of delivery**

Both learners and teachers who are new to the experience of distance language learning tend to see the courseware or course materials as central to the process of independent language learning. However, the experience of independent language learning in distance education is a complex totality, and access to course materials does not constitute the entirety of the learning context nor of learning opportunities. Laurillard (2002) refers to what she calls the importance of the *context of delivery* in distance education, which includes support services, organisation structures, staff commitment, feedback options, response times, opportunities for interaction between course participants and numerous other more fluid course elements which may develop. The contribution of the context of delivery may ultimately be more important to the quality of the student's learning experience than a singular focus on courseware. The context of delivery may facilitate the process by which learners establish an effective interface with their context, or it may impede that process. An important issue for independent language learning in distance education is to come to know the nature of the context of delivery for learners, and how it is experienced through a semester.

### **Conclusion**

Approaches to independent language learning in distance education are closely related to different views about the nature of learning experiences and the ways in which learners can best develop their

autonomy and abilities to direct and derive benefit from their learning experiences. The particular nature of distance learning contexts means that it is crucial for learners to develop the ability to engage with aspects of the learning context without direct mediation from the teacher, in ways which are personally meaningful and useful for themselves. Distance language learners see a distinctive feature of independent learning in distance contexts as the interface which each individual constructs with the learning context to guide and inform learning. The ways in which learners do this, and the composition of each interface is likely to differ between learners and over time.

While the contexts for distance learning are very diverse, ranging from correspondence forms of education to virtual learning spaces, the need to construct an interface with the learning context remains largely an independent process. Current issues for independent language learning in distance education include:

- the need to understand further the competencies required of all participants, learners, teachers and course developers, in both traditional and emerging paradigms for distance language learning
- the need to learn more about how learners adjust to more independent contexts for learning and the enabling factors which can assist in the process of developing a new sense of themselves as language learners
- the need for attention to be paid to the context of delivery of independent learning opportunities
- the need to explore opportunities for collaborative control in distance language learning
- the need to investigate the ways learners respond to independent learning experiences in the new learning spaces.

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