

Autonomous Distance Language Learning: Supporting Critical Reflection, Interaction and Decision-Making

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Abstract

Language teaching researchers highlight the role of critical reflection, interaction and decision-making in the process of 'autonomisation' where learners experience autonomy in order to become more autonomous (Little, 2003). Distance educators have long been concerned to develop learners' capacity to take decisions and control their own learning in a context where course materials have to anticipate a wide variety of potential learning needs and cater for students working in isolation. More recently, interaction has taken an increasingly significant role in distance education, aided by technological developments.

This paper examines the experience of the Open University (UK) Department of Languages in responding to the challenges of 'autonomisation' in distance education courses for adult learners of French, German and Spanish, and considers the issues which still need to be addressed by course writers and researchers.

Introduction

This paper explores the relationship between distance learning/language learning and autonomy, drawing on the experience of the Open University (UK) Department of Languages in developing autonomous language learning at a distance. Following a brief outline of the elements identified in the literature as key to the development of autonomy, namely: critical reflection, decision-making and interaction, the tensions and challenges in integrating these elements in distance learning/language learning programmes are noted before presenting examples of how these challenges have been approached in Open University (UK) language courses and identifying what further action is needed.

Key Elements in Developing Autonomy

Critical Reflection

Critical reflection is central to Henri Holec's classic definition of autonomy as 'the ability to take charge of one's own learning' (1980, p. 3), since in order to 'take charge' learners must be able to analyse needs and plan a course of action accordingly. Little (2003, p. 1) suggests that autonomous learners 'explicitly accept responsibility for their learning, share in the setting of goals, take initiatives in planning and executing learning and evaluate its effectiveness'. All these activities depend on the process of conscious (i.e. not intuitive), critical reflection. This process underpins major conceptions of learning; the cognitive view, as expressed in the quotation from Little (2003) above; the experiential view represented, for example, by Kolb (1984) or Boud *et al.* (1985), where learning is the outcome of the transformation of experience through critical reflection leading to new conceptual understanding tested via fresh experience; or the social constructivist view which sees learning and the development

of autonomy as the result of a complex interplay between social and reflective processes (Little, 2001, p. 32) during social interaction.

Decision-making

Van Lier (1996, p.12) argues that the central features of autonomy are responsibility and choice. Learners need the opportunity to make decisions about their learning in order to develop their capacity for autonomous learning. As noted by Little (2003) above, this includes decisions about the goals of their learning programme and the activity in order to achieve them. For example, learners need opportunities to try out learning strategies or approaches and make decisions about when and how to use them rather than simply experiencing 'awareness raising activities' if they are to become confident in using them and able to make meaningful choices (Candy, 1991; Chamot, 1993; Cohen, 1998; Macaro, 2001). In other words, as Little (2003) explains, learners need to undergo a process of 'autonomisation' whereby they 'learn how to learn' and experience autonomy in order to become autonomous. The challenge of encouraging decision-making in distance learning is discussed below.

Interaction

The significance of interaction in the development of critical reflection and autonomy has already been noted. Vygotsky (1986) describes how learning and the development of internal cognitive processes, including language, critical reflection and self-direction, proceed from the internalisation of meaning during social interaction. This is achieved through repeated exposure to language use by others within a 'zone of proximal development', where the learner is not yet able to function independently, but can achieve the desired outcome with relevant 'scaffolded' help from their interlocutor. Benson and Lor (1998, p. 14) point out that because social interaction is so significant for the development of reflection and self-direction, it must follow that guidance and collaboration or 'pedagogical dialogue' (Little, 1995) are crucial for the development of autonomy. Social interaction also provides language learners with the 'experience' which they can transform into learning through critical reflection in experiential terms, 'noticing' differences in their language from that of their interlocutor or aspects of performance or gaps in knowledge to work on (Lightbown & Spada, 1993; Long, 1996 cited in Ellis, 2001). Others note the possible drawbacks in reflection as an individual activity. Brookfield (1987) and Brockbank and McGill (1998) argue that dialogue is essential, otherwise reflection may be limited to individual insights, self-confirmation or self-deception. How can such interaction and 'pedagogic dialogue' be fostered in distance learning?

Distance Learning and Autonomy

In her discussion of the development of distance language learning, White (2005) notes that learner decision-making and control has long been a preoccupation in distance learning, along with concern to support learners in developing the capacity to take decisions and control their own learning (Holmberg, 1986; Moore 1993; Garrison, 1989 all cited in White, 2005, p. 57-60). More recently, as White explains, the work of researchers such as Garrison, (1989, 1997, 2000 cited in White, 2005, p. 60) has highlighted the importance of interaction in distance learning. This has led to the transformation of distance learning from a 'private form of learning based on self-instructional texts' into 'an emphasis on direct communication between teachers and students, and interaction between groups of learners' where control is negotiated between them. Indeed supported collaboration is now seen as an important way to foster learner autonomy. The rapid development of communications technology has greatly increased the potential for interaction and collaboration between learners and tutors and among groups of learners.

Distance learners have always been able to control some aspects of their learning such as the time, pace, and what they study when, but this does not necessarily mean they take responsibility for setting goals, planning or evaluating learning. Opportunities for meaningful decision-making may be limited. The development of autonomy can be constrained by aspects of the distance learning context as explained by Hurd, Beaven and Ortega (2001). Detailed instructions and explanations may be required to minimise the 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, which has often led to an extremely directive approach (Benson, 2001). Much effort has been put into carefully pre-determining content (White, 2003). In addition, financial constraints on the amount of material that can be included and concerns about overloading the learners can encourage a narrow focus on language skills rather than 'autonomisation'. In the same way that student expectations can discourage classroom tutors from devoting time to anything other than language learning (Little, 1999), the same pressures undoubtedly apply to distance course writers with limited 'space' at their disposal.

Autonomy in Distance Language Learning: The Open University (UK) Experience

Research Questions and Study Context

In the light of these constraints, an investigation was carried out to explore the following questions:

1. How do Open University (OU) language course materials develop the capacity for critical reflection?
2. What opportunities do these course materials provide for choice and decision-making, or the exercise of autonomy, by learners?
3. What use is made of 'pedagogic dialogue' and interaction in the courses?
4. What further support for 'autonomisation' is needed?

The nature of Open University study has been described by Hurd (2005, p. 5-6). Key features relevant to this investigation are: courses are open entry (no prior entry qualifications are required); students are part-time adults from 18-80+ years of age; they work through a programme of materials and have the support of a tutor who marks their assignments; they have access to optional tutorials (face-to-face, online or telephone) and online conferencing with fellow students.

Data Collection

As the Open University has offered language courses since 1994, and greater understanding of the key elements required for the development of autonomy was gained during the first decade of course production and presentation, the study examined and compared a sample of the language course and assessment material for all French, German and Spanish courses prepared by course writing teams which were available in 1999 and a similar sample from 2005, for evidence of key elements derived from the literature:

- teaching about/opportunities for reflection;
- choice/decision-making opportunities;
- self-evaluation teaching/practice opportunities;
- goal setting/planning opportunities;
- self-assessment teaching/practice opportunities;
- 'pedagogic dialogue' and interaction;
- learning strategy teaching/practice and selection opportunities.

In-depth telephone interviews were held with a sample of students studying in 1998-9 (n=32). These interviews, together with the examination of the sample 1999

materials were carried out as part of a wider study into reflection in distance language learning (Murphy, 2005a, 2005b, 2007). The interviews were recorded, transcribed and analysed for evidence relating to these issues using NUD*IST (QSR, 1997). Details of the course material available, samples for both 1999 and 2005 and a detailed comparison are presented in Murphy, 2008.

Key Findings

1. How Do OU Language Course Materials Develop the Capacity for Critical Reflection?

Examination of and comparison between the course materials available in 1999 and 2005 revealed a major shift away from simply advocating and encouraging reflection without any practical guidance on how to reflect or activities to back up suggestions and enable students to experience and gain confidence in reflecting. By 2005 such encouragement was supported by explanation and suggestions for how to engage in reflection.

For example, the section 'Improving your learning' in the French Level 3 *Nouvelles mises au point* Course Guide (The Open University, 2004, p. 15) suggests:

As you work through the course it is important to reflect on what you are learning, how you are progressing, any changes in your priorities, and your general approach to learning. Keeping a dossier in which you record these things will help you do this. Under the Dossier headings in the course books, you will find advice on working out your own strategies for improving your learning and suggestions for organizing your study. Try to be as active as possible, for example by:

- making notes on your progress, including areas in which you feel have improved or where you now feel more confident;
- identifying difficulties and how to remedy them, or issues to follow up or return to;
- organizing a system for storing vocabulary and grammar points that you want to use;
- noting down points of style and cultural references; .
- commenting on activities and their usefulness: whether you enjoyed doing them, what you learned from doing them, how long they took and so on;
- commenting on assignments, what you learned from doing them and how long they took;
- recording any change or shift in your priorities.

At the same time, courses now teach the development of critical reflection through the deployment of metacognitive strategies, rather than, as before, simply advocating their use. Students are encouraged to consider their goals in learning the language. They are helped to examine their strengths and weaknesses in relation to these goals and to use them in order to determine which activities and aspects of the course to focus on as well as in evaluation of progress towards these goals. For example, the German Level 2 *Motive* course guide (The Open University, 2001, p. 11) states:

Before you go any further, think about your reasons for studying this course and what you want to achieve. Where do your priorities lie in terms of the four skills of reading, writing, speaking or listening to German, expanding your vocabulary or consolidating your use of grammatical structures? What do you feel more confident about at the

moment and where do you feel you could make most improvement? Make a note of your goals and share them with your tutor who may be able to suggest ways of working to achieve them. For example, you might want to improve your pronunciation of certain sounds, or you might find it difficult to understand people speaking in different situations. Setting your own goals can help you to make decisions about the activities which you will spend more time on and those which you will simply skim through. Review your priorities and your progress towards your goals from time to time, perhaps when you receive feedback on an assignment.

Self-assessment was already a significant part of the OU language courses, through practice activities with model answers. Material produced since 1999 includes advice on how to use these model answers, what to look out for or check, or how to use them for further practice. Most courses now include teaching about self-evaluation and some offer explicit practice, rather than only implicit opportunities. For example, Spanish Level 2 *Viento en popa* (The Open University, 2000) features regular sections to develop writing skills accompanied by activities which prepare and guide students to carry out an 'autoevaluación'.

2. What Opportunities Do These Course Materials Provide for Choice and Decision-Making, Or the Exercise of Autonomy, by Learners?

In the 1999 sample, opportunities for choice and decision-making appeared to be very limited. Informally, members of course writing teams suggested that students would select what they needed depending on their level and confidence, but there were no explicit invitations to do this. Interviews with students indicated that most decisions which they took about their learning programme were governed by the time they had available. More than two-thirds of interviewees (24) indicated concern about the volume of work to be completed in the time available. Students did not recognise the implicit invitations to be selective. By 2005, materials included explicit invitations and guidance to select material, activities or strategies depending on need or interest. Optional practice activities and reading materials were more clearly identified. Some post-2005 courses now invite students to decide on their own route through course units, although a suggested route is provided. However, this approach has implications for course design, as discussed below.

3. What Use Is Made of 'Pedagogic Dialogue' and Interaction in the Courses?

In 1999, following the model of other distance education materials, language course materials were written in a style which addressed the learner directly and encouraged interaction with the resources provided and the learning environment via a variety of activities and tasks. This remains the case in 2005 and subsequently. Learners are guided through these tasks by: 'organisers' (text which explains the structure of a section or activity and what learners will do); 'instructions' (explaining what to do); 'explanations' (of grammar points for example); 'feedback' (e.g. commentaries on activities or model answers). The shift towards explicit teaching and practice opportunities outlined above in relation to the development of critical reflection and decision-making has been accompanied by a substantial increase in 'pedagogic dialogue' and 'scaffolded' support for the learner in relation to these processes, provided through explicitly articulated guidance and invitations to engage in self-assessment, self-evaluation or deployment of learning strategies. There are questions and prompts for learners to consider their reactions as in the example from French Level 3 quoted above. There is encouragement to interact with other learners or speakers of the target language, and post-2005, social interaction and collaboration is

being formally planned into the study programme using the opportunities afforded by a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE).

4. What Further Support for 'Autonomisation' Is Needed?

Although teaching, practice, support and opportunities for critical reflection, decision-making and interaction have increased, significant issues remain. An area of concern is that of assessment. In 1999, tasks were largely prescriptive, offered little or no choice and provided little recognition for critical reflection on content or performance. By 2005, the situation was largely unchanged apart from efforts to encourage planning, self-assessment and self-evaluation in relation to assignments. Students are unlikely to trust the course rhetoric and teaching about student responsibility for learning if it is not reflected in the assessment process. Biggs (1999, p. 11) points out the importance of 'constructive alignment' of all aspects of learning programmes. Assessment task design to support 'autonomisation' remains an urgent challenge for distance language course writers.

Although the level of 'pedagogic dialogue' has increased, a stronger role for social interaction in learning, as suggested from a social constructivist perspective, was still largely absent in 2005. This is now being addressed by course writers currently creating interactive tasks to encourage more active participation using online course forums and other VLE tools such as blogs and wikis which can ultimately feed into the assessment process directly or indirectly. The interviews carried out in 1999 indicated that many OU language students actively seek social interaction in a variety of ways outside the course (Murphy, 2005b) and that study programmes could profitably support and value this activity through the allocation of study time and through assessment which draws on the outcomes of this interaction.

If students are encouraged to make and evaluate decisions about the way in which they work through a unit of study based on their learning needs rather than the time available, there are implications for course design. Materials can no longer be closely integrated. Different elements of a course unit (e.g. different media components) have to make sense when studied in any order or in isolation. The implications in relation to course design have to be thought through. Does this approach limit opportunities to encourage 'noticing' of forms that have in theory already been taught? How might this be addressed?

Because of 'space' constraints distance course writers cannot afford to repeat teaching unnecessarily, but the OU is 'open' in that there are no entry qualifications for specific courses. Students signing up for Level 3 French, for example, may have acquired their language skills via a variety of routes, such as residence in France, rather through study of the previous course. This raises questions about the relationship between the development of critical reflection or the capacity for decision-making and learner language levels. How can coherent development best be achieved across a language programme in the context of open entry, or indeed otherwise? Part of the solution so far has involved providing a substantial amount of teaching, and guidance via material separate from the main course books, which can be accessed by those who need it, when they need it. However, during the in-depth interviews in 1999, students made it clear that any advice or activities in separate or additional materials would not be used unless they were referred to and timed into the study programme.

Conclusion

It appears that many challenges remain in providing support for 'autonomisation' in distance language learning. Further research is also needed to establish learner perception of the changes effected so far in this respect, and to establish the extent to which they recognise, trust and accept the opportunities offered in distance language courses to take responsibility for their own learning.

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