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Reacting to feedback on language learning tasks: A model of cognitive and affective engagement in independent learning contexts

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Abstract

Successful independent language learning has strong links with high quality feedback and the way in which feedback in general is received and acted upon by students (refs – Furnborough and Truman; Truman and i Solé; Murphy ??). Given the relative isolation of those learning in independent contexts, an essential ingredient of the learning process is pedagogic dialogue between tutor and student, the kind of dialogue that effective feedback can generate and which involves support, motivation maintenance (Murphy, 2010) and critical reflection, leading ideally to improved learning outcomes. To account for the different ways in which adult learners studying independently engage both cognitively and emotionally with external feedback, we propose a model based on four key concepts: goal relevance, knowledge, self-confidence, and roles. The findings reported in this paper take an ethnographic perspective on student reactions to feedback, problematising issues around the affective dimension of this critical process. Using the voices of participants as the prime source of data in a grounded theory approach, the investigation attempts to gain deeper insights into the dynamics in the learning process of this particular learning culture (Spielmann, 1999), as students express emotional reactions to the learning environment and in particular the written feedback from their tutors and the learning materials. Our conclusions are in line with those of Storch and Wigglesworth (2010: 329) who carried out case studies with advanced language learners that 'whether and which type of feedback is effective depend on a complex and dynamic interaction of linguistic and affective factors'. We would add, however, that in independent learning contexts, the mix and balance of factors may well differ from that of classroom-based learning, given the extra affective demands of a distance setting.