



Affect in theory and practice: issues for learning and performance in distance language learning

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Outline

- key cognitive and affective constructs that are integral to the interpretation and use of feedback;
- the dynamic interplay between these constructs in terms of attitudes, reactions and the management of feedback;
- issues for learner support to encourage the kind of feedback that will lead to improved learning and performance.

Affect and independent learning



- 'Further demands on the affective resources of both learners and teachers [which] arise from the more isolated study context, separation from peers and the teacher, and reduced or altered forms of social contact and interaction' (White, 2003)
- '... the affective dimension affects how efficiently students can use what they have. For example, strong motivation tends to help students marshal their assets and skills, whereas low motivation or intense anxiety interferes with their ability to use their skills and abilities' (Ehrman, 1996)



Feedback

'Feedback is information about the gap between the actual level and the reference level of a system parameter which is used to alter the gap in some way' (Ramaprasad, 1983).

'Feedback plays a critical role for distance language learners, not only as a response to their performance, but also as a means of providing support, encouragement and motivation to continue' (White, 2003)



Lack of immediate feedback

- *Immediate correction during a lesson tends to stay in the memory; sometimes I feel I am not really learning certain points – or am learning them wrongly, especially pronunciation.*
- *Because there isn't the instant feedback if I'm doing something wrong, and where there's more than one way of expressing something, I just lack confidence/knowledge and then I'll leave it unresolved.*



Framework

- goal relevance;
- knowledge;
- roles;
- self-confidence



Goal relevance: motivation, identity, autonomy

‘... if proficiency in the target language is part and parcel of one’s *ideal* or *ought-to* self, this will serve as a powerful motivator to learn the language because of our psychological desire to reduce the discrepancy between our current and possible future selves’ (Ushioda and Dörnyei, 2009).

Knowledge:



- Cognitive:

- ‘information about the gap between actual and reference levels is considered as feedback *only when it is used to alter the gap*’ (Sadler, 1989).

In order for feedback to be usable, learners need to understand what it means (e.g. be familiar with the rule to which their tutor refers).

- Metacognitive:

- ‘Metacognitive knowledge’ is the basis for planning and monitoring. Thus, it is essential to the development and enhancement of a learner’s potential for autonomy’ (Wenden, 2001)
- ‘What students can do to eliminate confusion or repair the breakdown [in learning] depends in large part on the metacognitive knowledge they possess, and more importantly, are able to develop’ (White, 2003)



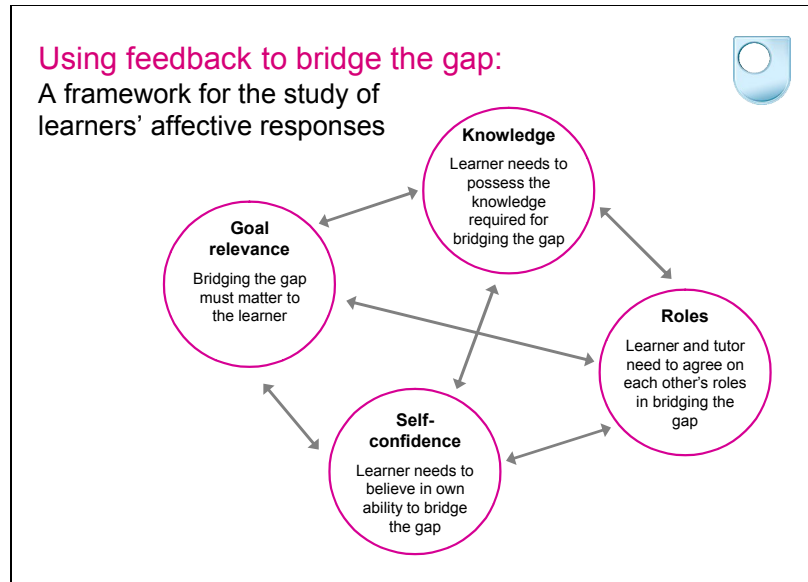
Roles: responsibilities, identity, locus of control

‘... a student with an internal control orientation might attribute success in a task to working hard, while a student with an external control orientation might believe that success is due to the ease of the task. Internal locus of control is one of the characteristics of autonomy’ (Oxford, 2008)



Self-confidence: self-efficacy, self-esteem

‘Personal efficacy and self-evaluative standards influence not only the level at which goals are set but also the response to performances that fall short of adopted goals’ (Zimmerman & Bandura, 1994)



A study of students' responses to written feedback



- **Focus on two Spanish Diploma courses:**
L(ZX)204: *Viento en Popa*
L(ZX)314: *A Buen Puerto*
- **Tutor feedback data:**
72 assignment scripts & related feedback forms
(all electronically submitted and returned)
→ 4000 comments/annotations
Each comment/annotation coded for *category* and *depth*
- **Student response data:**
20 telephone interviews, semi-structured
14 questions, 4 of which focused on specific feedback
comments found in their own assignments

Goal relevance

Bridging the gap must matter to the learner



In the study...

- Perceived usefulness of feedback on language / content is related to the learners' personal backgrounds
- Perceived relevance of feedback to subsequent assignments determines whether feedback is used or not
- Result-driven students value the score rather than qualitative feedback

Perceived usefulness of feedback on language / content

2 out of 20 found feedback on content most useful

I pay special attention to structure because that is my weak point. I need feedback about that. [Spanish native speaker]

8 out of 20 found feedback on language most useful

I have the feeling that if my language is correct, it really matters very little what I say in terms of content. Every time I go to Spain my Spanish neighbors notice that I have improved, and I know my grammar is getting better. Grammar is more related to the real, practical language than the content. Having to think about the "content" and "structure" reminds me of when I was at school. Other comments are not about Spanish. They would have been the same if I had written the essay in English.

Perceived relevance of feedback to subsequent assignments

Students find feedback to be useful when they see the relevant skills as transferrable to subsequent work

The feedback on the first assignments told me what was expected from me, and if I should keep writing the way I did. It showed me that my approach was right. Previous feedback guided me.

Comments about recurrent grammar mistakes were useful.

Students do not find feedback useful when they see no relevance to subsequent work

I didn't use past assignments, they were not related to each other.

it didn't help me a lot because the exam was much more difficult.[...] you had a limited time to hear the recordings, whereas at home you could take as long as you needed.

Result-driven students

I didn't use the feedback [...] I concentrated more on the score.

Knowledge



Learner needs to possess the knowledge required for bridging the gap

- Cognitive knowledge:
The **depth** of feedback i.e. whether errors are indicated, corrected, or explained (Brown and Glover 2006) needs to match the learner's current ability
- Metacognitive knowledge:
Students' assumptions about task requirements also need to be in tune their tutors' expectations

The depth of feedback needs to match the learner's current ability:

I was a bit confused at first; I couldn't see what it was about. But then, reading it again, I could see what she meant. I do tend to make long sentences some times, and I think that that was what s/he was referring to. [...] I didn't need more explanations. I think it is good what s/he did, making you work for yourself what the mistake was about, rather than saying just "this is how it should be done".

I don't know. I looked up some of the errors s/he indicated in the dictionary, and the words were there. I couldn't understand why there were wrong in my text. [...] For example, in the first line of my essay, my tutor pointed out that the preposition was wrong. However, I was using the same preposition in the rest of the essay, and then it seemed to be ok. I don't understand.

→ Numerous requests for more specific feedback. In other words, a need for more corrections, explanations and examples.

Students' assumptions about task requirements also need to be in tune their tutors' expectations

Well, I couldn't see why you shouldn't talk about the history, because surely the reader needs background information. I had to dissent with my tutor.

Sometimes my tutor wanted me to put more information than I had, but that was not possible in such a small amount of words. [...] I would like to know if I had lost points for leaving out certain points. I assume I did, because otherwise my tutor wouldn't have mentioned that issue. And if that was the case and it affected my score, my tutor should have explained why that information that I hadn't included was more important than the information I had included.

Well, I think s/he was asking me to put all that information quite a limited amount of words. I would have struggled to do that in such a limited space. Anyway, I realise that in the end that is how it should be done. My tutor set a high standard, and in Level 3 that is what you can expect.

My tutor pointed out that I hadn't included a bibliography. I was marked down for that, which was not fair, because we hadn't been told to do that in the past. Besides, there was just one single line in the whole book about how to write a bibliography. I contacted my tutor afterwards,

and she said it was obvious that I had to include it. I didn't agree. I already have a degree and I am trying to learn Spanish. I don't want to be penalised for that. It is not relevant to the language.

It surprised me that my tutor was asking me to put in more references, when the title itself was not properly referenced. I needed the context for that, but they hadn't included the reference for that quotation. I have lots of experience in the academic context, and I know these quotations that are sometimes used as a title for an essay. But then, you need to give the source. That was inconsistent.

Roles



Learner and tutor need to agree on each other's roles in bridging the gap

Observed responses in the study:

- Assertion of own status (social, intellectual or linguistic)
- Learners (lack of) assertiveness in voicing their needs
- Learners confused when tutor's response is not assertive enough
- Guilt (for not taking the action required from a good learner)
- (Lack of) reliance on tutor for encouragement

Assertion of own status (social, intellectual or linguistic)

"I already have a degree "; "I have lots of experience in the academic context"; "I am a native speaker"; "I teach as well"

Learners (lack of) assertiveness in voicing their needs

"I need the full correction for my mistakes."; "I want to see how it could have been better."

I read this a couple of times, and I thought that it was not so unclear. But s/he is the tutor.

It is hard to say. If you look in the book immediately, it doesn't matter not having the full explanation; but in my case... I don't know. Selfishly, I think I would have liked to have the explanation for everything I had done wrong, but I appreciate that probably most of the mistakes are covered in the book, and the tutor may think it is explained more clearly there. Besides, perhaps it is more "beneficial" to look things up for yourself.

Confused when tutor's response is not assertive enough

It confused me a bit that my tutor said "(I think!)". I thought that s/he was not sure, so I paid extra attention when checking the answer in the book. I also thought that perhaps my tutor said "(I think!)" out of humility, not to sound arrogant. S/he didn't want to make me feel bad.

Guilt (for not taking the action required from a good learner)

I rarely read the tutor's comments. She/he was great, but I should have paid more attention in order to be able to absorb more. Anyway, I think that correction was clear and useful.

Anyway, some comments referred to mistakes that I could have avoided easily if I hadn't been so "lazy", so I can basically "dismiss" all of those comments.

I kept moving on. Perhaps I was not as good student as I should be. [...] I tend to leave everything for the last minute, and I didn't have the time to revise, so I didn't refer a lot to previous TMAs.

Perceived locus of control for motivation purposes:

Generally the tutor was seen as largely responsible for keeping students motivated through encouraging feedback, however a minority did not rely on their tutor for encouragement

The question seems strange to me, because I have already committed to doing the course. I am not sure that it would matter what this TMA has said unless there was something absolutely ridiculous. But I know that this TMA carried a score, I know that there are more TMAs coming, but no matter what this one tells me, I know I am going to do the next one. The question is a little bit awkward because I don't see it in those terms.

Well, it was almost at the end of the course. I didn't need any encouragement to finish the course. I would have finished it anyway; it wouldn't have mattered what s/he had written. S/he could have given me 0 marks, or told me it was dreadful...But I would have continued anyway. I was already too far into it. His/her feedback was encouraging, though, but without being ridiculous. S/he had the right balance.

Self-confidence



Learner needs to believe in own ability to bridge the gap

- Rapport with tutor is particularly important in distance learning
- Self-confidence determines how important praise will be to the student
- Encouragement may be used in two possible ways:
 - **metacognitively** (as a reference for assessing own performance and in order to plan future strategy),
 - or for **social-affective** purposes (reinforcing own sense of achievement, feeling that “somebody is there for you”)

How do these elements interact?



- Lack of harmony → Debilitating effect



Comments were encouraging. At some point my tutor even used the expression “the cherry on the cake” to describe my progress. I was just disappointed by my final results, which were not consistent with my work during the course– I got a “pass 2”. I didn’t expect it and felt very sad. [...] That affected me a lot. I don’t even know what I am going to do now, if I will be able to get a job as a teacher in a good school. I feel very discouraged: my University finds that I don’t deserve a pass 1.

Another quote:

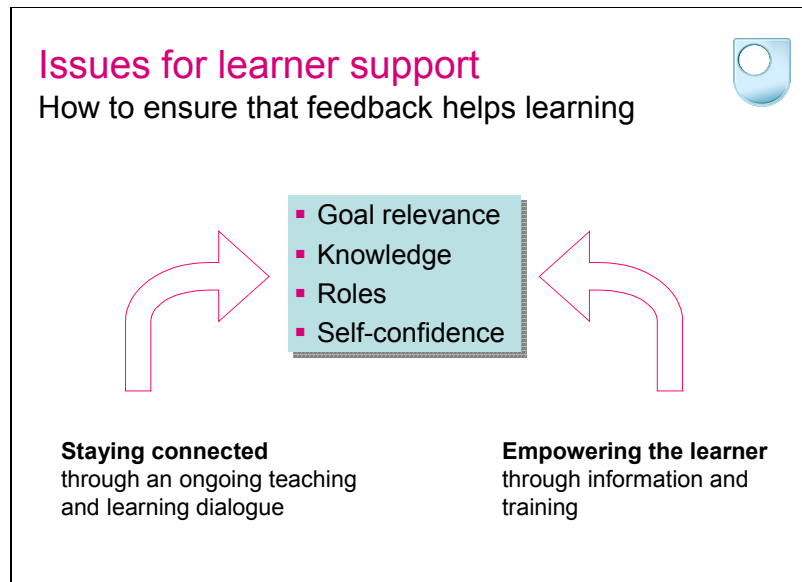
Sometimes I was upset. I didn’t understand why I sometimes got 100%, and sometimes 90%, when everything was ok. That was important for me because it affects the average mark at the end. I cannot complain, because my scores were very high, but I was confused about that issue.

- All elements interacting in harmony → Facilitating effect

At the beginning I was very discouraged, but then I thought that was a “stupid response” from me. I wrote my tutor an email and her reply was valuable in two ways. She told me what I could do to improve, but she was also very sympathetic. I felt my tutor was on my side, working with me. [This assignment] was a turning point in the course.

Another quote:

The comments on this assignment made me more determined, because I was angry... I went through the previous courses easily, so I approached this course with a confidence that was “over-founded”. When I got this assignment back I realised that it was “rubbish”. It made me think about the reasons behind it –I was leaving it to the last minute, I wasn’t in the frame of mind to re-check... You know, when it is 11 in the evening you are too tired to re-read... I had to change my approach. Seeing that I had made so many mistakes made me more determined.



Goal relevance:

Adapt learning outcomes to the learners' goals, but also encourage learners to widen their perspective.

Knowledge:



Ensure that the depth of feedback matches the learners' current ability and that task requirements are perfectly clear.

Roles:

Open channels for a teaching & learning dialogue so that roles are very clear & any misunderstandings resolved. Provide learner training to demonstrate how feedback can be utilised.

Self-confidence:

Provide encouragement whilst ensuring that all praise is also informative, i.e. can be utilised at metacognitive as well as affective level.



'Language learning, more than almost any other discipline, is an adventure of the whole person, not just a cognitive or metacognitive exercise'

(Oxford and Burry-Stock, 1995: 18)




Thank you!

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I will continue listing relevant examples for each bullet point (sorry I had to stop here).

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