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Dr. Jyotirmoi Bordoloi

Dr. Gitartha Goswami

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Learner Dimensions in Language Learning in the Open and Distance Learning (ODL) Mode: A Review of Literature Focussing on Motivation, Learning Strategies and Learner Autonomy

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Abstract:

The paper briefly traces the origins of the open and distance education in general and then it proceeds to make a specific study of language learning in the ODL mode – the way scholars have defined distance learning; the crucial aspect of 'learner dimension' in open and distance education; the constraints of distance learning experience; the importance of motivation and the choice of language learning strategies in the ODL mode; the different factors that influence the choice of strategies among learners and the question of autonomy in distance education.

Key words: Open and Distance Learning (ODL) mode, learner dimension, motivation, learning strategies, autonomy etc.

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1. Introduction:

Studying in the Open and Distance Learning (ODL) mode is different from the traditional method of study within the four walls of the classroom. There are numerous advantages of studying in the ODL mode – flexibility is one such; but there are disadvantages as well. And when it comes to learning or mastering a language in the ODL mode, the whole endeavour is bound to remain fraught with newer challenges. It is evident that learning an L2 or a foreign language is quite unlike studying any other subject – the level of linguistic competence varies from learner to learner. Unlike the teacher fronted traditional classrooms, the onus is on the learner in the case of distance and open education. The learner is wholly responsible for his/her own progress in the ODL mode and there is also a greater amount of learner autonomy. But at the same time there are a number of constraints – the time factor, the pressure to meet deadlines for submission of assignments, the absence of the regular teacher etc.; therefore, the learners have to be self-motivated and have to employ a number of learning strategies to counter the constraints of studying in the Open and Distance Learning.

2. Objectives:

The objective of this paper is to make an appraisal of the literature available on language learning in the ODL mode and as to assess the importance of motivation and learning strategies for learners in this mode.

3. Significance of the Study:

This appraisal of available literature is significant in view of the fact that distance education is becoming increasingly popular among learners across India. The *All India Survey of Higher Education 2016 – 2017* published by the Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India reports that, distance courses have become useful modes of getting degrees for a large number of students; and that students' in the distance mode constitute 11.45% of the total enrolment in higher education (p.20). So, the findings from this review of available literature will have an important bearing upon research studies on language learning in the ODL mode.

4. Methodology:

The research paper is based on close reading of secondary sources – available books, journal articles (both print and online), and theses on language learning in the ODL mode; in other words, the paper is a review of literature on learner dimensions in language learning in the ODL mode.

Discussion: 5.1 The Origins of Open and Distance Learning (ODL):

Renga Ramanujam (2009, p. 31) notes that the British Open University – OUUK served as the model for the establishment of open universities across the developing countries: Allama Iqbal Open University, Pakistan (1974); Indira Gandhi National Open University, India (1985);

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Ramkamhaeng University (1971) and Sukhothai Thammathiraj Open University (1978) in Thailand. But the British Open University itself was inspired by the tremendous success of the distance education programmes in the former USSR. White (2003, p.13) notes that the distance education has evolved through a number of successive waves: in the first generation model the correspondence between the teacher and the learner was usually only by post which necessarily meant a time lag between mailing and response; the second generation course model in the 1960s incorporated television to supplement the print based model – it was the Open University, UK which for the first time incorporated a range of media; the third generation of distance education was marked by the use of information and communication technology in the course computers with internet connectivity was being used to help improve opportunities for synchronous interaction between teachers/counsellors and the learners, between learners themselves – either individually or in groups. He further notes that although OUUK came into existence in the 60s of the last century, its language programmes started in 1995 and so course developers and learners could draw upon the expertise and quality practices within the university. With reference to India Khan (1990, p.41) writes that the correspondence courses were started in the country with the following goals:

- a) To democratize higher education;
- b) To provide higher education at lower cost;
- c) To offer a second chance at education to early dropouts.

outs;

- d) To make the higher education flexible through correspondence;
- e) And to allow learning while earning.

5.2 Language learning in the distance mode as defined by scholars and researchers and the implications:

Language learning in the distance mode has been explained by researchers in many ways: Kotter *et al.* (1999) understands language learning in the distance mode as developing a level of strategic competence enabling themselves to learn without the regular guidance of the teacher; Harris (1995) argues that successful learners need to create appropriate kind of environment for learning to happen; further, she notes that distance language learning can be productive for those learners who can match the level of the course, teacher support and their self supporting strategies. Hurd *et al* (2001) adds another dimension to language learning in the distance mode by saying that language learning can be successful when strategies are complemented by the knowledge of personal needs, strengths and weaknesses and the ability to address and monitor progress.

The definitions make it evident that language learners in the distance mode need to be metacognitively aware so as to maintain optimum learning conditions. Therefore, self knowledge of learners, knowledge of the learning context and adequate interface between the two are very much necessary

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for success as language learners in the distance mode. White (2003, p. 89) 4 describes the interface between the learner and the context as the 'nucleus of language learning' in the distance mode.

5.3 The aspect of 'Learner Dimension' in language learning in the open and distance mode:

The 'learner dimension' (White 2003, p. 89) that the language learner brings into language learning comprises characteristics and attributes that the learner brings into language learning. White (2003, P. 90) adapts the learner dimension from Breen (2001) in the form of a list:

- innate language acquisition capacity;
- psycholinguistic processes;
- gender;
- age;
- aptitude;
- cognitive style;
- learning disabilities;
- personality;
- self/social/cultural identity;
- agency;
- metacognitive knowledge;
- beliefs;
- attitudes;
- motivation;
- constructs of self as learner, of teacher....;

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- conceptualizations of learning environments.

White (2003, p. 91) notes that the context dimension for the distance language learner includes:

- learning sources (including the course and the other

Target Language sources);

- learner support;
- learning spaces;
- opportunities for interaction;
- the teacher(s);
- the distance learning community;
- features of the learner's immediate learning

environment;

- other resources (human and material).

So the distance language learner plays a key role for selecting and structuring elements within the learning context to provide an optimal learning environment (White 2003, p. 90). In a regular language classroom, the teacher guides, instructs, motivates, provides feedback to the learners; but in the distance learning situation, the language learners have to 'develop, monitor and maintain their own means of working within the learning context' (White 2003, p. 92). The effective interface between the learner dimension and the context dimension may be possible when the learner devotes active mental resources towards that end. Referring to Mitchell and Myles (1998), White (2003, p. 95) points out that the relationship between the individual learner and the context is dynamic and constantly evolving. The dynamic nature of the

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interface is the product of a number of factors, White (2003, p. 95) lists these as follows:

- learners' ideas about their needs and preferences;
- perceptions of the learning context;
- perceptions of the usefulness of the TL sources within that context;
- familiarity with distance language learning;
- knowledge and skills in self management;
- the demands of 'the course' (e.g., assessment demands);
- successful and less successful learning experiences;
- feedback from within the learning context;
- the kinds and extent of interaction preferred by learners;
- preferred learning environments.

White (2003, p. 112) notes that the major work done on the area of setting for study or milieu is by Gibson (1998). The latter highlights the way in which language learners make changes in the external learning environment in order to develop conditions suitable for learning. Establishing a physical study space, choosing the area of focus, deciding the extent of participation with teacher or peers – all these comprise external learning environment. The different learning sites distinguish ODL from regular course; that apart, the relationships of individual learners to different life roles definitely affect their language learning in the distance mode in contrast to learners in the regular mode who have the

advantage of the developing an exclusive relationship with the learning context and the learning environment (White 2003, p. 113).

5.4 The importance of motivation in language learning in the open and distance mode:

In the affective domain, motivation is highlighted in research studies as one of the major requisites for learners in the open and distance mode. Harris (1995) from his studies from Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP) in Australia found that maintaining a high level of motivation to be the major challenge faced by learners in the distance mode. One of the major findings from Harris' study noted by White (2003, p. 115) is that learners who were able to remain motivated could match features in the course with their own self supporting strategies. The learners were also able to create for themselves 'study nurturing environment' similar to the learning environment in a regular language class. This major finding is an assertion of the link between motivation and the use of strategy in language learning; it is the distance mode learner who remains ultimately responsible for creating a suitable effective interface between the learner dimension and the study context.

Khan (1990, p.138) notes that motivation is a major factor in language learning process and that the psychological factor of motivation is best utilized in the context of correspondence courses. In his research findings, he mentions

that students in the correspondence courses usually have better motivation to learn than students from the regular mode.

5.5 An outline of the different stages in motivation research in L2 studies:

L2 motivation research has undergone a number of changes since its beginning in late 1950s. Dornyei and Ryan (2015, p. 73), charting the historical development of L2 motivation research, identify three stages:

a) The *social psychological period* (1959 -1990) characterized by the work of Robert Gardner and his students and associates in Canada.

b) The *cognitive – situated period* (the 1990s) characterized by moves to shift the research agenda away from its social psychological roots towards realignment with mainstream educational psychology, mainly driven by cognitive theories originally developed in non – L2 –specific research.

c) The *process –oriented period* (turn of the century to the present day) – characterized by an interest in motivational change, especially concerned with how motivation emerges from interaction between individuals and contexts.

Gardner's theory focussed on two key motivational components: an interpersonal / affective dimension (labelled integrative orientation) which is associated with a positive feeling about the community and practical/utilitarian dimension (labelled instrumental orientation/motivation).

associated with concrete benefits which language proficiency might bring about. In the *cognitive 7 – situated period*, Dornyei and Ryan (2015, p. 80) write, the motivational psychologists argued how one thinks about one's abilities, possibilities, potentials, limitations and past performance is a crucial aspect of motivation. Further, the focus shifted from a macro perspective to a micro perspective – researchers examined the motivational impact of the classroom situation, teacher, curriculum and the learner group. In the *process oriented period*, motivation is not seen as a static attribute but as a dynamic factor that displays continuous fluctuation with respect to the ever changing parameters of the context (Dornyei & Ryan 2015, p. 84). The language learner in the distance mode has to cope with a unique situation where there is isolation, lack of access to regular classroom, limited scope for clarification and feedback, few opportunities for interaction with other students and urgent need to resolve competing commitments as working students; therefore, learner has to maintain a high level of motivation and the discerning ability to choose the right strategy.

5.6 The characteristics that the language learner in the distance mode must possess for success:

Harrel (1998) identifies a number of characteristics from previous research which a language learner must have in order to adapt to distance language learning situation:

- the ability to meet deadlines and to develop effective

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time management;

- the ability to make the psychological adjustment to learning at home;

- self-management skills to organise one's life efficiently and effectively;

- motivation and discipline;

- the ability to manage the loneliness of distance language learning;

- the ability to self-monitor for personal control over the learning process;

- the ability to assume personal responsibility for learning.

What emerges is that language learner in the distance mode must develop ways of staying motivated and also develop cognitive and metacognitive strategies; ways of time and effort management keeping in mind the facts that language learning in the distance mode is more challenging than learning language in the regular mode. Summarizing the crucial role of the distance language learner, White (2003, p. 148) notes that the onus of maintaining optimal learning condition within the distance learning scene through ongoing environmental restructuring and internal restructuring of expectations is with the individual learner. But the process of adapting one's circumstances with that the distance language learning environment may be facilitated by a sense of belonging to a supportive community of teachers/counsellors and peer groups.

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5.7 The Constraints of the Distance learning experience:
 White (1999) notes that when asked to mention the essential conditions for the success in the distance mode, the students noted – motivation, confidence in one's capacity to cope with distance learning, quality of course materials, amount of study time, persistence, quality of interaction with tutor, amount of interaction with tutor, knowing how to learn best and the optional face to face element in the course. A high level of motivation to pursue the course and a metacognitive awareness of the learning process are key requirements for students in the distance learning mode. It is the context that differentiates the learners in the distance mode from the learners in the regular mode; a new language learner in the distance mode has to cope with a number of common hurdles, as noted by White (2003, p. 22):

- isolation, due to lack of social contact;
- lack of access to regular classroom interaction that support the learning process by providing scope for clarification and feedback;
- facing problems dealing with motivation and self – discipline;
- few opportunities to share perceptions through informal contacts and incidental learning;
- experiencing frustration due to hitches or delays with delivery of course materials;
- the need to resolve competing demands from study, family, social and professional contexts.

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The learner in the distance programme is challenged with the task of learning the language without the same amount of input, interaction and support. S/he must develop his/her own sets of learning behaviours to shape and manage the course. The opportunities for immediate support for guidance, interactivity, feedback and incidental learning is very limited in comparison with courses in the regular mode. So, the learner has to depend a lot on self management and effort management in order to succeed in the course. Technology plays a very important role in distance education and therefore, in the present scenario technological knowhow is also crucial for success in distance education (White 2003, p. 23).

Mention needs to be made of the report on Framework for Language Use in Environment embedded in New Technologies – FLUENT project at the OUUK by Hauck and Haezewindt (1999) referred to by White (2003, pp 70-71) while talking about the constraints faced by the learners in the distance mode. Time is another major constraint for distance language learners because a majority of the students there are adult part time learners having competing commitments. Synchronous language learning necessarily requires technology and learners must invest time in navigating through technology based resources. The use of technology enriches the learning process but at the same time it also burdens the learner with task of coordinating the resources from multiple sources. Kotter's report (2001) about the second phase of the FLUENT project noted by White (2003, p. 73) highlights

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as the single most important factor that accounts for student dropout. Most working adult students find it very hard to invest time for regular studies. Managing the subject matter of the course is another important issue which deserves special attention – many a time the quality gets compromised because the course developers simply work under economic and political pressure where – in the words of White (2003, p.77) – there is ‘the wholesale conversion of courses to digital form’ thus exposing the students to courses of questionable quality. This adds to the constraints of the learner who must depend on his/her cognitive/metacognitive skills in choosing the appropriate materials. Noting Calder (2000), White (2003, p. 77) states that when open and distance education is understood as simple, inexpensive solutions to complex social and economic problems, the quality of the course tends to get compromised. In such a situation, the onus is once again on the individual learner to develop and adapt his/her strategies to the demands of the course. Renga Ramanujan (2009, p.39) referring to Raden Dunbar (1991) explains the failure of the distance language experiment in Indonesia as the unthinking adoption of the western model without adapting it to suit the local context and situation.

Another danger that is pointed out with respect to the findings from the SOFNet (School for Future Network) programme in Australia by White (2003, p. 79) is that ‘a workable balance between attention to course development and attention to the context of delivery could not be achieved’

leading to the lack of sustainability of the programme. This could very well be a problem with almost all distance mode programmes across cultures. This mismatch between the content and delivery of the course puts the individual learner to devise learning strategies to stay motivated for the course.

Khan (1990, p.60) points out that learner in the distance mode has to motivate themselves as the teacher is not close by and so what the student does on his or her own is of great importance. He mentions a very concrete instance where the learner after admission, are at a loss upon confronting the wide range of study materials.

5.8 The question of autonomy in distance learning:

Benson (2016, p. 135) talking about the question of autonomy says that language learning in the distance mode was not designed to foster autonomy or even better language learning but to provide language learning opportunities to those who cannot afford to attend regular classes. White (2000, p. 150) also asserts that the development of autonomy in distance education is wholly incidental and the distance mode does not necessarily develop autonomy among learners. White further states (p. 167) that the understanding of the concept of learner autonomy stems from different paradigms: one of them emphasizes autonomy as total independence of the learner but this has been criticized as unrealistic and narrow. Another paradigm emphasizes peer group interaction, teacher – counsellor interaction, and has been seen as a necessary part of autonomy where the learner exercises ‘collaborative control’. While collaborating, the learner

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negotiate and work together with peers, teachers/counsellor so to create the right kind of learning environment.

5.9 Learning strategies in L2 studies:

Learning strategies in L2 studies emerged as a fertile area of research in the 80s of the last century; Wenden and Rubin in 1987 brought out a rich collection of research studies on learner strategies. Then the publication of three influential books – O'Malley and Chamot (1990), Oxford (1990), and Wenden (1991) which generated the momentum for strategy research in L2 studies.

Rubin (1975, p.43) defined the language learning strategies as 'the techniques or devices which a learner may use to acquire knowledge'. Oxford (1989) offered a functional definition of language learning strategies – "behaviours or actions which learners use to make language learning more successful, self-directed, and enjoyable" (p.235). Chamot and O'Malley (1990) explained strategies in terms of Anderson's (1983, 1985) general cognitive psychology theory as "special thoughts or behaviours that individuals use to help them comprehend, learn or retain new information" (p.1). Cohen (1998) emphasized that strategy use involves an element of choice or volition on the part of the learner. Macaro (2006) said that the successful language learning depends not on frequency of strategy use but on the 'orchestration of strategies available' to the learner. Cohen and Macaro (2007, p. 283) said – "It is unlikely that complete consensus will ever be reached on the unit of analysis (a strategy) even though we

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should continue to strive for such a consensus and towards a definitive model of a strategy within a cognitive framework. In the absence of a consensus, researchers should state clearly the theoretical framework on which they are basing their research and why they might be in a need to use different terminology rather than building on established terminology.

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Dornyei and Ryan (2015, p. 149) note that the basic taxonomies of language learning strategies proposed by Oxford (1990) and O'Malley and Chamot (1990) are very much compatible. Oxford's taxonomy comprises of the following classes – cognitive, memory, metacognitive, compensation, affective and social strategies while O'Malley and Chamot's perspective despite coming from a different theoretical perspective was similar to the Oxford's and had three main classes of strategies: cognitive strategies, metacognitive strategies and social/affective strategies.

5.10 The different factors that influence the choice of strategies among language learners in the open and distance mode:

Dornyei and Ryan (2015, p. 151) referring to Oxford's (1996) argument say that language learning is situated within a given cultural context which definitely has its influence on the choice of strategies. They note that the claim by Oxford has been supported by studies conducted across various cultural settings from different countries – Israel, China, Japan, East Asia. Further, they refer to the influence of gender in

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choice of language learning strategies found in Kaylani's study in Jordan (1996) – female students were found using more of memory, cognitive, compensation and affective strategies than male students (p. 151). Again, Peacock and Ho (2003) while comparing the learning strategies by students across eight disciplines – building, business, computing, engineering, English, math, primary education and science found that students with English Major used the most strategies and computing students used the fewest strategies. Psaltou – Joyce and Kantaridou (2009) in a study among Greek learners found that trilingual students used strategies more frequently than bilinguals especially those that promote metalinguistic awareness and again more advanced trilinguals made more frequent use of strategies that came from cognitive and metacognitive categories. Dornyei and Ryan (2015, p. 152) state that learning strategies are examples of motivated learning behaviour and so 'meaningful links with motivation are expected to exist'.

6. Conclusion:

What emerges from the review is that Language learning in the distance mode requires special effort on the part of the learners because of the different context. Studies by researchers and scholars across countries reveal that self motivation and suitable learning strategies are essential requirement for language learning in the distance mode.

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