



The Open University



Studying with The OU: UK Learning Approach

This booklet accompanies the Skills for OU Study website: www.open.ac.uk/skillsforstudy

Skills for OU Study

Studying with The OU:
UK Learning Approach

The Open University Walton Hall, Milton Keynes MK7 6AA

Copyright © 2008 The Open University

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, transmitted or utilised in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without written permission from the publisher or a licence from the Copyright Licensing Agency Ltd. Details of such licences (for reprographic reproduction) may be obtained from the Copyright Licensing Agency Ltd of 90 Tottenham Court Road, London W1T 4LP.

Open University materials may also be made available in electronic formats for use by students of the University. All rights, including copyright and related rights and database rights, in electronic course materials and their contents are owned by or licensed to The Open University, or otherwise used by The Open University as permitted by applicable law.

In using electronic course materials and their contents you agree that your use will be solely for the purposes of following an Open University course of study or otherwise as licensed by The Open University or its assigns.

Except as permitted above you undertake not to copy, store in any medium (including electronic storage or use in a website), distribute, transmit or re-transmit, broadcast, modify or show in public such electronic materials in whole or in part without the prior written consent of The Open University or in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

The Open University is incorporated by Royal Charter (RC 000391), an exempt charity in England & Wales and a charity registered in Scotland (SC 038302).

Edited, designed and typeset by The Open University.

Printed in the United Kingdom by Thanet Press.

ISBN 978-0-7492-2921-4

Skills for OU Study

Studying with The OU: UK Learning Approach

If you speak English as an additional language, you may find that your course subject is not the only thing you have to learn.

This book aims to give you an understanding of how some cultural meanings go unstated in the English language and what is expected of you as a student in a distance-learning UK university setting.

This booklet accompanies the *Skills for OU Study* website:
<http://www.open.ac.uk/skillsforstudy>



Contents

1	Who this booklet is for	7
2	Language and culture	8
3	Cultures at the OU	12
4	Your tutor	15
5	You as a learner	18
6	In conclusion	32

1 Who this booklet is for

The Open University has many students who speak English as a second, or even third or fourth, language.

We use the phrase 'multilingual students' for those who speak more than one language.

If you are a student who uses more than one language and your main language isn't English, this booklet is for you. You are probably reading this booklet because you want to prepare for a new experience: studying at a UK university. You may want to find out what will be expected of you and you may wonder how it might be different from your experience of education in the past.

This makes sense – The Open University (the OU) will almost certainly do some things differently from what you are used to and it is important that you become aware of these differences. For instance, you might find that some of the OU's ways of teaching and learning are very new for you, simply because it is a distance-learning university. In addition, while many students new to the OU will share this feeling, being aware of it is especially important for multilingual students because in fact some misunderstandings are created by cultural differences. If you are able to recognise what is unfamiliar in your new environment, you can begin to understand it faster – and progress more easily.

If you have time and would like to explore some of the aspects introduced in this booklet in more detail, you could look at the following website: <http://www.open.ac.uk/skillsforstudy>.



Although many OU students are based in the UK, thousands of students study OU courses in other countries.

Language

Perhaps your first concern about OU study is language: you may think you need to improve your English communication skills to succeed on your course. Or perhaps your tutor has suggested that if you improve these skills you're likely to get more out of your studies.

This applies to nearly all students – even students whose main language is English. There are various resources at the OU to help you with language and also with study techniques – for example, if you have difficulties in using English effectively for reading or writing.

Visit the English for Learning area of the *Skills for OU Study* website for more help <http://www.open.ac.uk/skillsforstudy/english-for-learning>



You might have found that cultural differences play an important role in how people communicate and how you understand spoken and written language. Section two discusses some of these issues.

2 Language and culture

When starting university-level study in English, it is important that you reflect on how you are influenced by your own culture (or cultures). This is because language is always used in a cultural context.

2.1 Language and culture are connected

Idioms

As a multilingual student, you will already know that there is more to effective communication than simply being able to use the 'nuts and bolts' of a language. By 'nuts and bolts' we mean the basic elements, such as spelling words correctly and following rules to write grammatically correct sentences. The basics elements of language are essential – but you need more.

For example, you need to understand idiomatic expressions such as 'nuts and bolts'! Idiomatic language consists of colloquial and often colourful phrases whose meaning is not always immediately obvious. Good dictionaries will explain the most common idioms. (You will find more idioms in this booklet: 'bump into' and 'on the right track', for instance.)

As with any other culture, English idioms often reflect UK culture and they are examples of how language and culture are connected. You may know many already, and will need to learn more in your studies, so watch out for them. To improve your understanding of idiomatic language, you could spend some time listening to English-language radio, watching TV and reading English-language magazines.

English contains many idiomatic phrases such as 'on the right track' (which means 'going in the right direction') and 'bump into' ('to encounter').

Tip

Listen out for idiomatic language while you study ... if your tutor or another student has said or written something you don't understand, don't be afraid of asking them what they meant. You will learn new phrases and new cultural associations much quicker if you ask them.

Cultural references and academic conventions

Effective communication at the level you need for university work assumes an awareness of both cultural reference and academic

conventions. Here are two comments made by multilingual students that are examples of this:

When I read a page I can understand every word in every sentence. But it doesn't make sense as a whole. 美玲 Meiling

In the feedback to my last assignment the tutor said I lost marks because some of my discussion was not relevant. But I thought it was all relevant. فؤاد Fouad

Sometimes the meanings of gestures differ from country to country. For example, in the UK during a conversation, nodding might simply indicate that the listener understands you, not necessarily that she or he agrees with you.

Sometimes even students whose main language is English also express these concerns, but when multilingual students don't understand what is going wrong in communication, it is worth looking at the 'hidden dimension' of language. This is the dimension of cultural reference.

'Culture' and 'cultural' are words with many meanings in different contexts, but here we are concerned with culture in relation to language. For instance, have you noticed that in rainy places there are specific words in the language to distinguish between different types of rain? Or that in languages other than English it is usual to find several different ways of saying 'you' – depending on what the relation is between 'I' and 'you' – a more formal relationship or a less formal one, for instance? How you indicate formality and politeness is a language matter that reflects culture.

These are simple examples of how every language contains views and knowledge about the world and about people, values and relationships. In other words, every language reflects culture: the culture both of where the language originated and of where it is being used. English in Nigeria, for example, reflects the cultures of Britain and Nigeria.

You probably recognise this connection between language and culture, even if you have never consciously thought about it, because you are multilingual. In using your languages, you experience at least two different ways of viewing the world and relating to other people.

In addition to an awareness of unspoken cultural associations, you need to be aware of UK academic conventions (see Figure 1). Different countries often require different types of behaviour and writing from their students. You may encounter new academic conventions while you study with The Open University. For example, you might contact your tutor and fellow students more often using email and online forums rather than in face-to-face tutorials. You might also need to become accustomed to being an 'independent learner' (see Section 5).

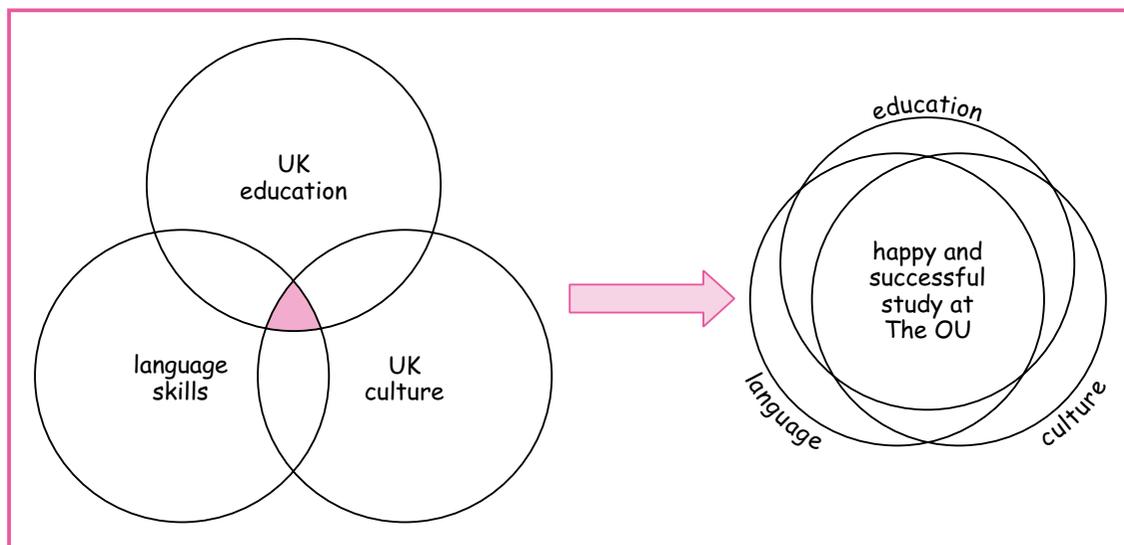


Figure 1 As a multilingual student you will benefit from learning how UK culture and language interact. Knowing what is expected from you as a distance-learning student will also be useful. Your understanding of these issues will grow as you continue your studies.

2.2 Culture and context

Let's go back to Meiling, the multilingual student who understood each word in a piece of course material but not the overall meaning. What might be the problem here? One explanation is that the writer used words with specific associations that are familiar to students whose main language is English, but unfamiliar to some multilingual students. These associations are often not directly written about, but are implicit in the words the author has used.

Cultural associations

Meiling says that she understands the meaning of the individual words. The problem is that she hasn't been able to capture the cultural associations intended by the writer. These associations are based on shared cultural knowledge and act as important links between ideas. When students whose main language is English read this material, their brains automatically fill in the links. But for Meiling these important links are missing, so the text as a whole doesn't make sense to her.

Sometimes in a language which is not your main one these associations are 'invisible' to you: so you think you understand a text in detail but you don't. (In fact, we often over-estimate what we

understand in a language other than our main one.) Sometimes understanding in detail doesn't matter, but for university work, of course, it is often crucial and you will have to spend more time working closely with written texts than you would in everyday life.

Academic conventions

Think back to Fouad, the other multilingual student, who couldn't understand why the tutor said that some of his assignment material was irrelevant. Perhaps he was using the conventions of good writing that were learnt in another context but that were not right for his OU work. For instance, he might have given a long factual introduction that he assumed was essential but that was in fact unnecessary.

These are examples of how unfamiliarity with the cultural context (English in the case of OU study) can explain language difficulties that are more complicated than the 'nuts and bolts' type.

Living and studying in the UK helps students to understand some cultural associations. If you are not based in the UK you might need more time to become more familiar with some cultural issues.

Meiling couldn't understand the text properly because her lack of knowledge of the UK cultural context did not give her the necessary associations. Fouad was writing in a style that was suited to another culture, but that was not relevant for the culture of his OU course.

The key to progress for both Fouad and Meiling is for them to be aware of both the cultural associations of the English language and the academic conventions of studying in the UK. With increased awareness and practice over time Meiling's comprehension will improve, and Fouad will learn the relevant conventions for his essay writing at the OU.

If you are a multilingual student and have problems like these, you can try improving your use of English by looking at the 'hidden' cultural dimension of language.



Visit the English for Learning area of the *Skills for OU Study* website for more help with this: <http://www.open.ac.uk/skillsforstudy/english-for-learning.php>

Remember that:

- if you find a phrase confusing or meaningless, it may be an idiomatic phrase
- some comprehension problems are caused by gaps in cultural knowledge
- academic conventions are shaped by culture. They are not the same in all countries or in all institutions
- you may need to adapt what you've learnt previously so as to communicate effectively.

3 Cultures at the OU

It is normal to think of 'culture' as something unified. 'Japanese culture' for example, is shared by people who speak Japanese, or 'European culture' is shared by people who live in Europe. However, this may be an over-simplification because everyone belongs to several different sorts of groups, each with its own 'culture'. In this sense, culture means that the people in the group share certain ideas and agree about the way certain things should be done.

The OU belongs in a set of groups, or contexts, each with its own culture. What are they?

- the UK context
- the UK educational context
- the UK Higher Education context
- the distance-learning context.

All these cultures influence the OU's beliefs about teaching and learning (see Figure 2). They also shape the OU's expectations of you as a student. So it makes sense for you to become aware of them.

Students' previous experience of education before they start a course at the OU is naturally very diverse. Here are four examples:

Sunday

Sunday was from Ghana and he'd recently moved to the south of England. Although all his previous education was in English, he had never studied outside of his country. In fact, adapting his use of English to the OU's way of using English was one of the main difficulties at the beginning of his first course. He needed to be especially aware of UK conventions for communicating, and also that sometimes he could understand other people in the university better than they could understand him. He found he had to check that he had made himself clear, and sometimes adjust his essay style so that it was distinguished from an everyday speaking style and suitable for written academic work.

Bettina

Bettina had studied to the end of secondary school in her native Austria. Though she had lived and worked in the UK for many years, she had never studied here. The tutor on her first course said that her essays were well structured, but she should write in plainer and less formal language. She spent some of her study time each week working specifically on this with OU resources, and was making good progress by the end of the course.

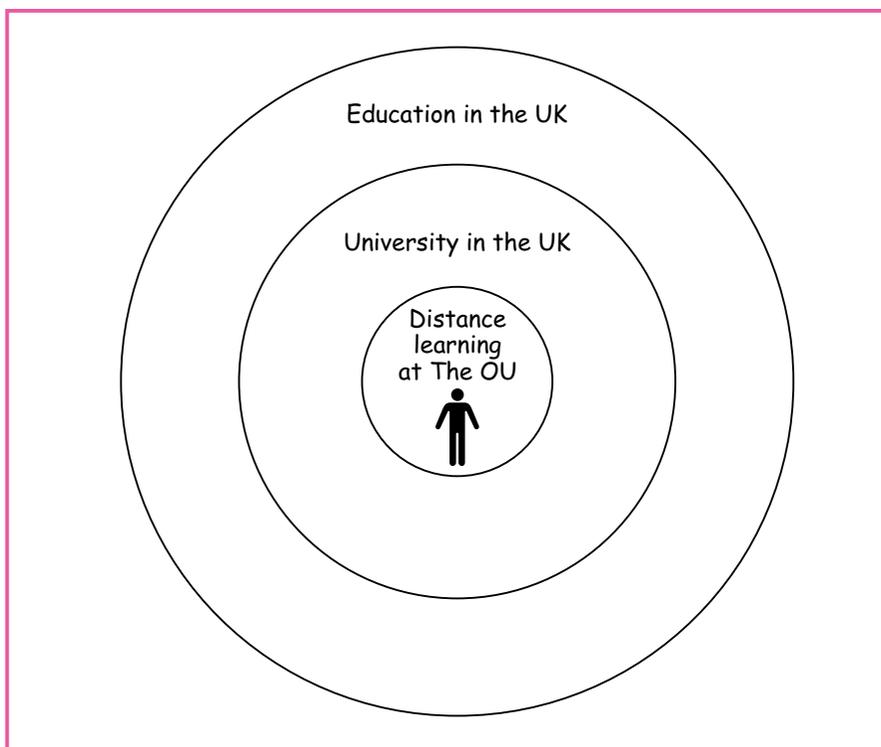


Figure 2 As you learn with The OU, you will become aware of the influence of many areas of UK life in your studies

Adela

Adela's family was from Mali and everyone spoke French at home, though she was born and educated in London. She wanted to study modern languages at the OU to become a teacher, while she worked to support herself. She didn't grasp the importance of deadlines for the assignments and administration related to her course, and assumed that if she sent all her work in at some time, then somebody from the OU would 'sort it out' for her in the end. By the time she realised that she needed to meet deadlines and take the initiative

in contacting the University when necessary, she was in danger of failing the course.

Miguel

Much of your study material will be available online. We call these 'e-resources'.

You are likely to contact your fellow students and your tutor by email and online forums (e-communications).

Miguel was from Colombia and had begun a degree at a university in the USA. When he moved to Europe he aimed to complete his qualification with the OU. He found the work was taking him longer than he'd planned for and it seemed much more demanding than he'd expected. But he assumed he just had to persevere by himself because he lived a long way from his tutor and other students in his group. Several months passed before he explored the e-resources available to him fully. When he did, he found useful e-communications and also advice to help with his learning strategies so that his study time was lessened but spent more productively.

You may not think you are like any of these four students. But whatever your previous experience of education, becoming aware of any differences between your expectations and assumptions and the OU's will help you to integrate and succeed faster.

The next sections look at how inaccurate assumptions can affect your study, and give advice on how to approach aspects that may be new for you.



4 Your tutor

Your tutor is probably the first person who ‘embodies’ the OU for you. An OU tutor gives you guidance as you study, helps you to engage with the course material and grades your assignments. If your course offers tutorials, the tutor will lead them (a few courses have a team of study advisers instead of a tutor to guide you, but the advice in this section still applies in general).

4.1 Communicating with your tutor

You might be surprised at the informal way students address the tutor. Your tutor will probably sign her emails to you ‘Gill’, even if her title is Dr Smith and she’s a world authority on her subject!

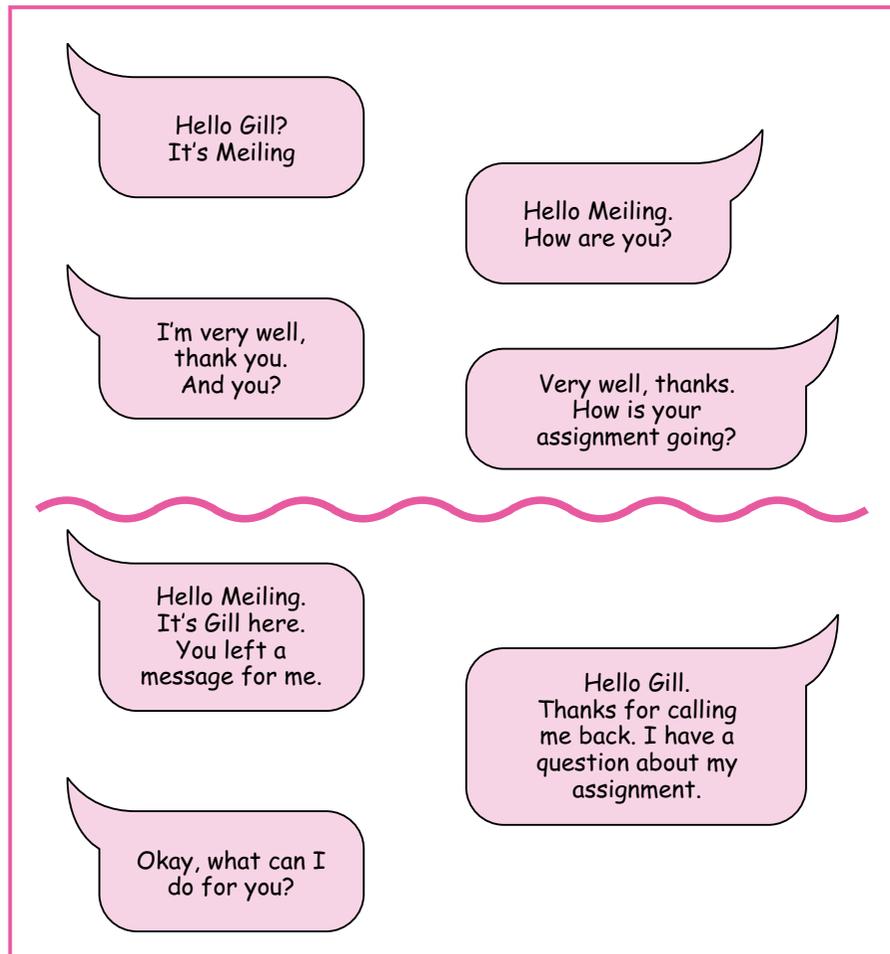


Figure 3 An example of a typical telephone conversation between a student and tutor

It is not disrespectful to call your tutor by their first name. This is part of an informal style of communication which helps learning. If you feel comfortable with your tutor, you are more likely to:

- ask questions
- admit to not knowing something
- ask for help when you need it.

... and your tutor will encourage you to do all these things.

You can tell your tutor how you would like to be addressed. ... they may not know which name you would like to use.

Be reassured – you don't have to call her 'Gill' if this makes you feel uncomfortable: 'Dr Smith' is fine.

You are probably already aware of the different conventions for indicating respect towards others in English – be careful to use them. If you are uncertain, be observant of what your tutor and other students do.

In some cultures, it is not important which name you use – a first name or a family name (or perhaps your culture has no exact equivalents anyway). In the UK it is considered disrespectful just to call someone by their family name ('Hallo, Smith') so avoid this (see Figure 3).

4.2 Respect and authority

Communicating with your tutor informally doesn't mean you don't respect their authority. The tutor knows their subject, your course and its assessment methods very well. It is important to trust their expertise about all of these.

At the OU a tutor:

- can help you to engage with the academic content on your course
- has some flexibility in accepting work after the deadline
- grades your assignments in line with appropriate University standards.

This does **not** mean that your tutor will provide you with 'the right answer'. Your tutor will not be able to accept assignments at any time and cannot 'negotiate' grades. If you come from another culture (or perhaps straight from school in the UK) you might be unconsciously assuming that the tutor can do any or all of these three things. It is

important to look at what you are expecting from your tutor. Think about these three examples.

The ‘right answer’ – as you know, many academic questions do not have ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ answers. Some do, of course, and your tutor will correct mistakes where necessary. But many of the most interesting debates at university level develop because in fact the issues do not have a single correct ‘solution’. Your tutor’s academic authority does not imply that they ‘know all the right answers’ and making progress in learning does not mean that *you* will come to know ‘all the right answers’. Progress means that you will develop a range of thinking skills and your tutor will help you to do that.

Flexibility with deadlines – The OU gives your tutor some authority to accept students’ work late, but they have to follow University rules too. These include regulations on when they can authorise late submission – and when they can’t. Think about any upcoming assignments early. Contact your tutor as early as you can to discuss the possibility of an extension if you feel that you need more time to submit.

Assignment grades – The OU also provides your tutor with guidelines for grading assignments. Just as every student on your course is carrying out the same assignment task, every tutor on your course is following these guidelines for grading.

The OU will send you information about how your work will be assessed. Your tutor will tell you how he or she will support your learning. Make sure you understand this information and don’t be reluctant to make contact if you need clarification. In a distance-learning university, you won’t have the opportunity for ‘spontaneous’ contact that you do at a conventional university – you won’t just bump into someone on campus. So you must be proactive. Your tutor will tell you the best times and ways to make contact.

Tip

If you feel you don’t understand something crucial you should ask your tutor. Perhaps you need more clarification on a key aspect of your course, or how your assignment grade was reached. It is perfectly acceptable to ask about this type of doubt.

If you find it difficult to communicate with your tutor, try to discuss the difficulties with him or her. If this doesn’t help, contact your regional or national centre and talk to someone there.

Building up clear and comfortable communication with your tutor will prevent misunderstanding and help your learning.

5 You as a learner

At the OU you'll be working a great deal on your own and this may make you wonder 'Am I on the right track? I feel I'm not as good as all the others on the course, perhaps I should give up'. In fact, as Miguel in the recent example found, there are many ways you can contact others in the OU for support and information and this section outlines some of them. Like all university students, though, you need to be aware that your learning and progress depend on *you*. It is important to be proactive – explore your resources and use them in the ways that suit you best.

5.1 Becoming an independent learner

Through your course, you'll be expected to develop as an independent learner. This aspect of university study might be very different from what you have found in your previous experience of education, but it is central to progressing as a student in the OU.

Asking for help

One characteristic of an independent learner is that they know when they need to ask for help. Knowing when you don't understand something, or can't find the right way forward by yourself, is a sign of good judgement. Finding someone who can help you will make you independent more quickly and so you'll make faster progress.

If you get stuck, you could first ask another student, or students – perhaps in your group or in an online forum. Or you can ask your tutor for help and clarification and he or she will be happy to answer you. In fact, your tutor will probably think that if you don't ask questions you are confident about your studies. So if you don't let them know that you are struggling to understand something, they will assume you don't need them to contact you. In other words, you must be proactive in getting help when you need it in order to become an independent learner.

If you are struggling to understand something or if you are falling behind schedule, contact your tutor early. This is part of behaving like an independent learner.

If you haven't understood something, you should ask. This is not an admission of failure or a sign of weakness. Often the best students ask the most questions!

An active approach to learning

Another characteristic of independent learners is that they have an active, not passive, approach to learning. This means they reflect and interact with what they study.

How are you encouraged to reflect and interact at the OU?

Importantly, this is achieved through your course materials and the other people involved in the course. We shall examine this in more detail now.

Course materials: their function and how to use them

Your course belongs to an academic discipline (or perhaps it covers more than one discipline). An academic discipline has its own culture, often shared across the world, though it may have local and contextual characteristics.

Your course introduces you to the culture of your discipline. For example, Literature is an Arts discipline and Physics a Science discipline, so their respective ways of studying and communicating are different. The course materials teach you some of these ways of studying and communicating.

An Open University 'course team' prepares the materials on your course. The course team is made up of a group of academics who select and plan the content. They also write the materials so that distance learners find them manageable. So, in a fundamental sense, the course team members are your teachers, even though you will probably never meet them. Use the materials as they advise. Your tutor then guides you through the materials and acts as a personal teacher for you and the other students in your group.

You may be surprised that the course materials use an informal style – perhaps you'll notice that they seem to 'talk' to you, as if in a conversation or dialogue. An informal style helps to make the academic content approachable for learners. It avoids non-essential language, so that the concepts stand out clearly. (We hope this is happening as you read this booklet.)

An informal style also helps you to think about the ideas and arguments in the materials in a way that is relevant to *you*. Your teachers hope that quite soon you will find that you're not only *following* what the materials are explaining, but that you're also agreeing and disagreeing with them, finding examples from your own experience, discovering questions of your own ... In other words, you are learning actively. You're reflecting on the materials, and interacting with them.

Your course materials use an informal style of writing and aim to encourage you to adopt a more enquiring approach to your studies.

If activities are set for you to think about and work through, try to do this before looking for the ‘answer’ or discussion. If you don’t, it is like going to the gym and watching people exercise: you might learn something but you won’t build up your own strength.

Top tips

- Use the materials as the course timetable shows you.
- Learn from them actively – test out the ideas against your own experience and arguments.
- Try not to miss out any activities.
- Doing extra reading or internet searches may make you run out of time – concentrate on the course materials first.

5.2 Learning with others

Some courses include a ‘residential school’. This is a short period of up to one week when you study at a conventional university campus. Tutors guide you through selected parts of your course at the school. You meet fellow students and take part in conventional campus social life.

Even though you are at a distance-learning university, you can learn with other students. In fact, in some courses there are times when you’re *expected* to learn in a group – perhaps in an online activity, or a face-to-face tutorial, or at residential school.

You might be concerned about this. Many students whose main language is English are anxious too, but for some multilingual students there are extra worries – perhaps about your level of English (‘Is it good enough? Can I say what I mean accurately?’) or perhaps because you realise that learning with others at the OU might be done differently from what you have experienced before.

Tutorials

Tutorials might make you anxious about your spoken English. If you are, here are some tips and things to remember:

- It might help to tell your tutor before the tutorial and ask for their advice.
- Try to make just one point in the discussion at a first tutorial but aim to build up your confidence until you are comfortable with contributing more as the course goes on.
- If you want to, you could start by saying something like ‘I’m afraid my English isn’t as good as everyone else’s.’

Tutorials are a good opportunity to listen out for idiomatic speech.

- Often students watch the person talking, showing that they are listening carefully. Making eye contact is common in UK culture and isn't considered to be bad mannered or challenging: it is a normal part of communication.
- Show you're actively following the discussion by an occasional nod and smile, even if you don't say much.

Residential school

Residential school can understandably intensify worries about working in a group. If you are anxious about the experience of residential school, find a person from the OU who can help (for example, your tutor or contact your regional or national centre). At the residential school itself, there may be a learning adviser to talk to about your worries – or perhaps the course director or a tutor can reassure you. Residential school may be a very new experience for you but other students are usually a good support. Many will probably feel like you do, even if they are students whose main language is English.

If you're worried about taking part in a residential school you could:

- ask your tutor for advice before you go
- find out in advance if someone you know – perhaps from your tutor group or in an online forum – is going at the same time and suggest meeting up
- talk to someone from the OU at the school as soon as possible after you arrive
- find another student when you arrive at the school who seems to be feeling the same – you can support each other.

At tutorials and residential school, learning is organised through group work. You may find this a new experience because your previous education was different. Perhaps you agree with one or both of these multilingual students:

“ If I'm the learner, my opinion *doesn't* count. What counts is what the tutor thinks.” Daniela

“ Questioning someone else's point of view is disrespectful.”
Wentao 文涛

But what you think *is* important – it is your course and your learning. As a multilingual student, you have insights from at least one other culture that will enhance your understanding of the teaching. Sharing

your insights with others will enrich them (see Figure 4). Tutors often comment on how much they appreciate hearing their students' views and the experience they bring to the course.

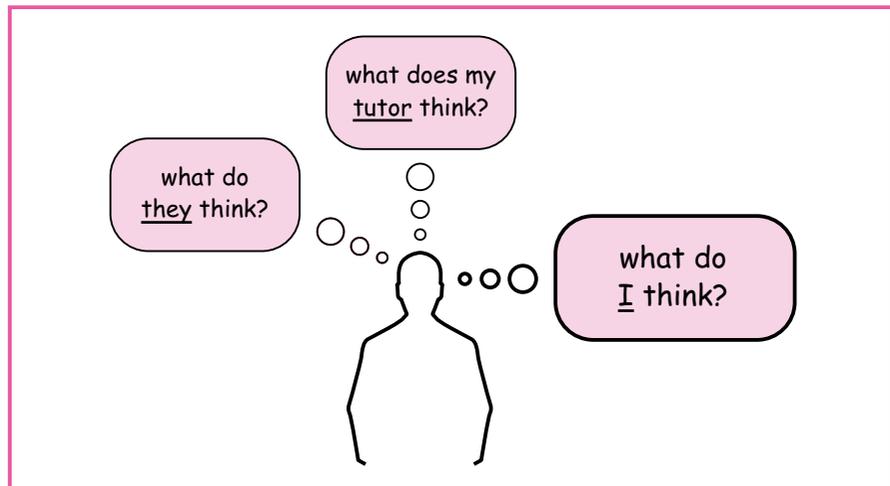


Figure 4 Being an independent learner will be an important part of your experience as an OU student. This means actively engaging with your learning and developing your own well informed understanding of your subject. This will involve listening to the views of your tutor and fellow students as well as formulating your own ideas.

Questioning someone else's point of view is not disrespectful. To question is not to imply their views are worthless. Challenging the tutor, or another student, in an academic discussion means asking them why they hold that point of view.

Questioning someone else's point of view is not disrespectful. It is an indication that you are interested in their reasoning.

In the same way, if another student or the tutor questions *your* point of view, it is because they are interested in your reasons and want to hear them.

You don't have to agree with what other people think. You do have to have reasons for disagreeing. This is what academic debate is like.

You learn through discussion by:

- defending your views by giving reasons for them
- listening to others defend their views
- being receptive to different points of view.

Of course, debate should be respectful, and you will find help on the website if you are unsure how to challenge someone politely: <http://www.open.ac.uk/skillsforstudy/english-for-learning>

Online forums

These are another way of working with other students. Using e-tools and e-communications can be particularly useful to multilingual students. They allow you to see how other students use language in discussion and allow you to learn both from what they say and also by *how they say it*. You might want to observe how others communicate informally when there are no other 'clues' – such as a smile or tone of voice – to indicate meaning.

You need to remember this especially if most of your contact with other students and your tutor takes place in forums or email. If you don't understand something, nobody can see you looking puzzled! So it is very important in e-communication to express yourself clearly.

If you are studying an online course, there will be specific forums that you need to become familiar with. There might be a group forum, where your tutor sets activities for discussion (as in a face-to-face tutorial). You might also find one that is open to all students in the university on the same course and can be used for discussion and support. You might find important resources within an online forum.

Reading these forums helps you focus on important topics on your course. You benefit from other students' and tutors' questions and thoughts. Contributing to the forums is even better because it means you are learning *with* others and not simply *from* others. By giving your views and asking questions you are learning through interaction.

Forums can also have a 'social' and informal side, just as in face-to-face contact at a café on a conventional university campus. Many students find this social networking supportive. Explore an online forum – perhaps an Open University Students Association (OUSA) forum, or one related to your course. If you choose not to take part in social forums, though, that's fine – you don't have to join in.

Your course guide or your course website will advise you which online forums you should log onto.

Remember that becoming an independent learner means you ask questions when you need to: email your tutor or post a message to other students on a forum.

The potential advantages to you of e-communications include:

- your comment in a forum can be short (often the short ones are the best)
- you have time to choose your words
- the style is informal, and informal language can be easier to use
- you have the opportunity to learn and practise informal language in the right context.

5.3 Assignments

Every student will probably say preparing assignments demands the greatest effort on their course. Multilingual students often have specific concerns about assignments. Perhaps you are not sure of OU conventions and practices. Or you're aware that there could be significant differences between the assignments you have done in the past and OU assignments. Perhaps you are wondering what you need to do and how the work is assessed.



The OU has resources to help with assignments:

<http://www.open.ac.uk/skillsforstudy/assignments.php>

There is also the *Preparing Assignments* booklet which you can order from your regional or national centre free of charge. And of course you will find advice in the course materials themselves.

Learning the rules: cut-off dates and word limits

In the UK university system, the rules for assessment can seem inflexible or strange to multilingual students at first. But remember these rules are intended to ensure fairness. Every student's work is assessed in the same way, to the same standards.

One of the rules is that you must send in work by the 'cut-off date'. This is a *deadline that you must keep to*. If you are ill (or can't meet the cut-off date for another good reason) you can usually ask your tutor for some extra time to complete the work (this is called an 'extension') but you should ask as early as possible. Extensions help ensure that you are not at a *disadvantage* through circumstances outside your control.

Perhaps the idea of word limits for assessed work is not familiar from your previous education. Writing within a word limit is another OU rule that partly exists to ensure fairness. It's helpful to you, too. Many students agree that the discipline of keeping to a word limit improves their use of language and the quality of their argument.

Find out what the word limit is for your assignment and keep to it as closely as you can.

(In oral assignments on language courses, there are time limits instead of word limits for the same reasons.)

Submitting assignments

- Be aware that sometimes you are not allowed to submit an assignment late.
- If you need an extension, contact your tutor *before* the cut-off date.
- Keep to the word limit.

Writing assignments: being an active learner

Assignments exist for assessment reasons, of course, but even more importantly they exist to help you learn. Assignments test both understanding and skills.

Outside of the UK university system there are many different types of assessed written work, and your past experience might form your expectations of what will be assessed and how. In case your expectations are different from the OU's it is important to become aware of what an assignment means in the OU context.

The materials on your course promote your development as an independent learner through reflection and interaction. Assignments are a powerful tool for developing this. Assignments will often check you have understood the course teaching by asking you to apply it in an argument. In academic terms, an 'argument' means a piece of reasoning, not a conflict.



You can find out more about what an academic argument is on the *Skills for OU Study* website at <http://www.open.ac.uk/skillsforstudy/thinking-reading-and-taking-notes>

Developing an argument involves skills such as critical thinking and logical reasoning. In your assignments, you might have to show you understand the course concepts by *applying* them in a reasoned argument using evidence.

For example, suppose a history assignment asks you to 'Evaluate changing attitudes to the seaside in the mid-twentieth century'. The course material has given you information and evidence about people visiting the seaside – who visited the seaside, how they got there, why they went, etc. It has also given you practice in some

Your assignments will encourage you to interpret and evaluate what you have learned, rather than simply to reproduce information.

skills that historians use to interpret and evaluate information. So your assignment doesn't require you to simply reproduce the information and evidence, you would also need to use the skills in interpreting and evaluating it, as the course material has demonstrated. Depending on your discipline, the assignments on your course might test other types of understanding and skills too. Students whose main language is English, of course, also need to practise all these skills as much as multilingual students

It is also vital that you show that you can think independently. Your ideas are important because they indicate clearly how you are absorbing the course materials:

“ I try to find out what the tutor thinks about the topic before sending in my assignment.” Laura

This comment by a multilingual student at the OU showed what she believed about authority and the unimportance of her own thinking. She began to make progress on her course when she moved away from these beliefs and accepted more responsibility to learn actively and try to think independently. This involved using her own words to express her own ideas more confidently.

Occasionally, an assignment task might not be suitable to your situation: for example, the assignment asks you to measure rainfall, and it hasn't rained where you live for several months. If this happens, you need to discuss the problem with your tutor.

Using your own words in assignments

If you are writing an essay, you need to refer to points and information from your course material, and perhaps other sources. Referring to sources when you create your argument is crucial to university study – but this is not the same as copying them.

Students are often unsure about how to use sources and how to express ideas in their own words. Acknowledging your sources is essential to avoid being accused of plagiarism, which is a serious academic offence. Using your own words in assignments is part of independent thinking and active learning. These two issues, acknowledging sources and using your own words, are separate but closely related.

It is important to write in your own words, rather than copying the words of others.

Dimitri was a new student at the OU. He held similar beliefs about authority to Laura, quoted above. His first assignment was entirely

made up of extracts copied from his course materials and the internet. He didn't state where he found any of the extracts in his work.

Dimitri's assignment was an example of plagiarism, and was given zero per cent. He could have been penalised even more severely, because plagiarism is a serious matter.

You'll find statements about what the OU defines as 'plagiarism' and what the penalties are in places such as the Assignment Booklet and other course materials. They also often give advice on how to avoid plagiarism. Statements about penalties for plagiarising are given in the Code of Conduct for Student Assessment, available from your Student Homepage at www.open.ac.uk/students.

Many multilingual students read these statements, feel they understand them, but then produce work that contains plagiarised material.

Plagiarism

It is extremely important to understand the issues around plagiarism early in your OU study. The OU has software programmes that can be run on students' written work to detect plagiarism. There are penalties for submitting an assignment that contains plagiarised material.

If your tutor comments on 'plagiarism' in your assignment, there are several possible causes. Perhaps you have misunderstood how to:

- use printed sources in preparing your assignment
- use internet sources appropriately
- use conventions of referencing and bibliography correctly
- paraphrase from the course materials
- combine your own judgements with ideas you have found somewhere else
- ensure your assignment represents your *own* work and conclusions (even if you have discussed the assignment with others while preparing it).

You must be clear *what you have done wrong*. Act on any feedback mentioning possible, or real, plagiarism in your work. Your tutor will help you to check your understanding of what you should do to avoid plagiarism in future work. For more information on plagiarism and how to avoid it, go to the *Skills for OU Study* website at <http://www.open.ac.uk/skillsforstudy/assignments>.



Your grades

Your tutor will grade your assignment and give you feedback. There are mechanisms in the OU to maintain objectivity in grading: if your work matches the standards for a certain grade, that is the grade the tutor will give you.

It might seem obvious, but hard work alone isn't necessarily rewarded by a high grade. By now you probably realise you have to demonstrate both understanding and skills in your assignment. Focus your efforts on preparing the work so that you demonstrate what you *understand* and what you can *do*.

Learning from feedback

If you don't understand any aspect of grading or feedback, ask your tutor.

OU tutors work hard to push their students to reach better and better grades. Feedback is intended to help you achieve this. Your tutor's feedback teaches you by indicating what you did well and how you could improve your understanding or skills.

Multilingual students, though, sometimes make wrong assumptions about feedback and grades. To interpret your grade and use the tutor's comments appropriately, you should not:

- take critical feedback personally – it is intended to help you fulfil your potential
- pay attention only to the grade or the summary of comments (the PT3)
- expect the tutor to teach you the English language – unless (rarely) the aims of the course include this
- think that if your OU grades are lower than the ones you reached in your previous education they are 'bad' grades
- expect a 'model' answer to be provided.

Instead, you should:

- remember that the feedback is personal to you and recognises qualities in your work
- read the comments on what you have written as if your tutor is talking to you directly – and try to act on their advice next time
- be proactive in getting help – especially if your feedback indicates English language problems (ask your regional or national centre and visit the *Skills for OU Study* website at <http://www.open.ac.uk/skillsforstudy/english-for-learning>)



- make sure you understand the grading system at the OU
- think about the different perspectives suggested by the tutor (you could discuss answers with other students after the assignment comes back).

Sometimes multilingual students find a more subtle difficulty: their response to feedback is a strong feeling of *resistance*. Students whose main language is English often feel unsure or troubled when existing ways of thinking are challenged – multilingual students can experience this even more strongly. Why?

Consider that your previous experience in education and another culture (or cultures) has to a greater or lesser extent shaped your identity. Feedback and advice are therefore sometimes experienced as a challenge – or even a threat – to that identity, and a strong feeling of resistance results. This is completely understandable.

If this happens to you, it is helpful to recognise the reasons why you feel resistance to feedback. If possible, discuss the feedback as objectively as you can with your tutor.

Try to look at new ways of thinking and learning as an opportunity not a threat – be *receptive* to them. A receptive attitude will help you to progress faster and more easily.

5.4 Examinations

If your course has an exam it may be different from ones you've taken before: you'll need to find out more about exams at the OU in advance. If your course does have an exam, the OU provides many resources to help you prepare. Your course materials will contain some information about your exam and you can also visit the Assessment website at <http://www.open.ac.uk/assessment>. In addition, see the *Skills for OU Study* website at <http://www.open.ac.uk/skillsforstudy/revising-exams-and-assessment>



Perhaps your course has an ECA (End of Course Assessment) instead of an examination. If so, you can find out about how to prepare for this in your course materials and in the Preparing Assignments Booklet. You can see this booklet on the *Skills for OU Study* website at <http://www.open.ac.uk/skillsforstudy/assignments>.



Even if their main language is English, other students will have many of the same worries about exams as you. As a multilingual student,

though, you may need to be aware of specific features of exams at the OU which might be different from what you expect.

- The date and time of your examination are fixed. If you simply don't attend the examination, you'll almost certainly fail your course.
- Examinations are nearly always written by hand.
- They are rarely oral exams.
- You should check your Examination Arrangements Booklet carefully. You may be allowed to bring a dictionary to your exam.
- The University will take disciplinary action if you break rules in the examination. The work must be your own.
- If you fail an exam, the University *may* offer you a chance to 'resit' – check that you understand the conditions for this.

Make sure you have read and understood all the relevant information well before the examination. If you are not sure you've understood properly, ask your regional or national centre for clarification.

Contact your regional or national centre as soon as possible if you have a problem with the date or time of your examination. For example, inform them if you have an urgent business trip that coincides with your examination date, or if you break your arm a week before.

The OU provides mechanisms to ensure fairness in examinations, just as in assignments. They help to make sure you are not disadvantaged for reasons outside your control. If you have additional requirements caused by a medical condition or a learning difficulty (arthritis or dyslexia are two examples, but there are many) you should contact your regional or national centre at the beginning of your course. You will be able to discuss what you need to help you succeed on your course, and especially in your exam. Make contact as soon as you can – the earlier you do this, the better for you.

Note that using English as an additional language is not considered a valid reason for making special arrangements for examinations. Any special arrangements would only be made on the basis of medical conditions or physical or learning disabilities.

But if you think about this, you'll see it means that *your* course results, and therefore, eventually, *your* diploma or degree, have

been achieved on exactly the same basis as a student whose main language is English. This enhances your achievement in passing your course and getting your OU qualifications.

Remember that the OU obviously maintains fairness in examinations just as in assignments. So this means that:

- every student's examination script is assessed in the same way and to the same standard
- it is marked anonymously
- you must keep to the OU's rules for examinations.



6 In conclusion

We hope that this booklet will make your entry into UK University level distance learning as smooth as possible. If you have time to explore the learning skills website you will find activities that give you further help with important aspects, signalled throughout this booklet with the 'mouse' symbol. Remember the English language resources too, referred to in Section 1.

This booklet covers the main areas where multilingual students find significant differences at the OU from what they expect to find. But there may be others – so be *alert* to your own situation.

Give yourself *time* – learning and adapting to different ways of perceiving and acting won't happen overnight.

Be *observant* – check with your tutor or regional or national centre if you suspect there is a key point of teaching or administration you haven't fully understood.

Our cultural backgrounds influence how we see the world. Many multilingual students comment on the sense of growth they experience when they break through to new ways of looking and understanding. Having more than one cultural background is a potential advantage – you can use your knowledge from other cultures to enrich your own experience of UK university study – and the experience of those around you.





The Open University

ISBN 978-0-7492-2921-4



9 780749 229214

ISBN 978-0-7492-2921-4