

Task Type and Independent Learning

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Abstract

Considerable research has been conducted into the affective and environmental factors which influence learner autonomy (Masgoret & Gardner, 2003; Benson & Lor, 1999). This study focuses on the impact of different task types on learner autonomy, as related to self-efficacy (after Bandura, 1996) and motivation. Participants included a cohort of tertiary students who voluntarily undertook a non-credit bearing 'self directed learning programme' in their summer break. Qualitative data was generated by surveys and focus group discussions. The study examined the extent to which students' development of autonomy was shaped differently by structured/closed or unstructured/open-ended tasks. It was found that while the students' confidence was enhanced by tackling structured tasks, the task itself could be associated with a continued dependence. Conversely, the open-ended task had the potential to stimulate and encourage a deeper sense of self-efficacy and autonomy.

Introduction

Among the attributes Australian universities hope graduates have acquired over the course of their degrees, a capacity for 'independent and critical thought' features prominently (ACER, 2001). As a result, literature and critical review tasks are common in both undergraduate and postgraduate courses, especially the latter. These tasks require students either to review a set of literature on a given topic, or in a given field, or to closely read, summarise and evaluate a single piece of academic literature. In such tasks, two aspects of independent learning come together: independence in process and thought. That is, the learning task can be done in a variety of ways and students will have to self-manage the learning involved; at the same time the student's responses will be 'individual'; a product of the student's own reflection and judgment rather than simply a restatement of the literature. Our experience and research as learning and teaching advisers in the Australian context, however, is that many students commencing both undergraduate studies, and postgraduate studies, particularly those from non-English speaking backgrounds and with different educational and cultural backgrounds, have little or no experience of such tasks, and the particular demands of independent learning involved (Ramburuth & McCormick, 2001).

The 'literature or critical review' task, as such, can present something of a paradox: in order to perform the task successfully, a capacity for independent learning is required. But the capacity may only be developed as a result of performing, or at least, attempting, such a task. Given this paradox, an emphasis in English for Academic Purposes (EAP) courses toward closed, or highly structured tasks would be a cause for concern. That is, while closed exercises might be useful and necessary in terms of language development, and may even be seen as allowing students to study independently (being online, or self-paced) they may not actually aid learners to develop the kind of independence expected in tertiary study. As such, our own efforts to encourage students to develop independent learning skills and approaches

(including time management, learning strategies, language skills, and independent and critical thought) in a 'preparatory', self directed learning programme for new and returning students at Monash University, led us to examine further the relationship between particular learning tasks and independent learning. Specifically, we sought to investigate how the particular demands and expectations of a critical review task (i.e., an unstructured/opened-ended task), as compared with a structured/closed task, influenced the students' development of independent learning strategies, and autonomy as learners.

Context and Methodology

Students participating in this study were enrolled in a four-week 'Self Directed Learning Programme'. The programme was open to both undergraduate and postgraduate coursework students from all Monash University faculties and did not contribute to any assessment for their degrees. The majority of the cohort of forty-six were international non-English speaking background (NESB) students who were about to commence postgraduate coursework degrees.

The participants were provided with a workbook, timetable, in-class tasks and preparatory information for the independent tasks. They were invited to attend classes once a week during the programme and asked to develop their own schedule and plan for approaching the various learning activities. Each week the participants were to complete independently structured interactive online tasks, such as closed (i.e. 'one correct answer') grammar and vocabulary exercises, and unstructured text-based tasks, such as reading journal articles, summarising and paraphrasing. These led to the final task of writing a critical review (approximately 500 words long) of an academic journal article.

A theme of student tourism and backpacking in Australia was chosen to give the learning programme a focus which would be relevant to the students without favouring any particular discipline area. The articles selected as readings and for the critical review task (Loker-Murphy & Pearce, 1995; Weaver, 2004) were chosen using the criteria of general readability, academic structure and discourse. These articles did not employ especially difficult or technical language and as such did not require significant 'prior' knowledge. Twenty six out of forty six enrolled participants in the programme completed the critical review task.

The data were collected in the final session of the programme. Therefore, twenty-nine participants were asked to complete a survey (see Appendix A) and to participate in four focus group discussions (see Appendix B). The data were transcribed, collated and analysed using the NVivo7 software package for qualitative research.

Previous Research

Independent learning or learner autonomy has been linked to a learner's willingness and ability to take responsibility for his or her own learning and to develop effective learning strategies (Littlewood, 1996; Sheerin, 1997; Wenden, 1991). According to Purdie, Hattie and Douglas (1996), autonomous learners are 'purposeful, strategic, and persistent in their learning' (p. 87). They evaluate their own progress and select behaviours to respond to this evaluation. Autonomous learners can direct their own learning experience and are likely to have more adaptive cognition and motivation (Schunk & Zimmerman, 1994; Dole & Sinatra 1998). These affective variables have been the focus of a considerable proportion of the research into independent learning.

Alexander and Judy (1988) and Wenden (1995) have suggested that an important factor affecting learner autonomy is self-efficacy. Self-efficacy is not another way of saying 'self-esteem' (Maddox, 1995). Where self-esteem refers to a person's overall sense of his or her 'value' as a person, 'self-efficacy' refers to a person's sense of his or her capability in a particular situation or task. Judgement of one's efficacy has

been shown to exert a strong influence over human development and adaptation by shaping goals, goal commitment, and level of motivation in both social and academic contexts (Bandura, 1996; 1977). The central tenet of the notion of self-efficacy, as developed by Bandura, is that a person will engage with a task more effectively when he or she believes that they are capable of performing well on that task (Bandura, 1977; 1996). Conversely, faced with a task 'beyond' what a person perceives to be his or her own present abilities, a person will perform less effectively. Moreover, perceptions of one's ability to do something (one's level of self-efficacy) can either foster or impair the development of autonomous learning (Littlewood, 1996).

Wenden (1995) also notes that much of the focus of 'learner training' has been on the cognitive and metacognitive aspects of learning, with relatively little attention paid to 'cognition', or 'task-knowledge'. 'Task-knowledge', in Wenden's summary, involves both knowledge of the 'content' and the 'structure' of a task. A task, in this context, is defined variously as 'something to be done', or as a 'problem posing activity': 'At the heart of a task, there is a learning problem or a communication problem or both' (Wenden, 1995, p. 184).

Studies of language acquisition, genre, discourse and discipline communities (which among other things have shown the limits of transferability of language or 'writing skills' from one context to another) also confirm that successful performance within a genre is dependent on context (see Taylor, 1988; Swales, 1990; and Chanock, Clerehan, Moore, & Prince, 2004). Such understandings find further support in research showing the limitations of 'learning strategies'. Garner's (1990) study of situations when students don't use learning strategies and Tuckman's (2003) investigation of 'learning to learn' strategies, for example, both argue that the specific context and nature of a task has an impact on student learning.

In response to this relative dearth of attention on the impact of the task itself on learner autonomy, the present qualitative study captures students' responses to the notion of learner autonomy when confronted with a structured or unstructured task. The findings of this study suggest that some tasks may promote learner independence while others may promote dependence among students.

Findings

Participants in this study, unsurprisingly, indicated that both structured and unstructured tasks could be an occasion for worry. In the case of structured, or 'closed' language tasks, concern appeared to be closely related to the language ability of the participant. As one participant reported in the survey: 'I'm not really confident in doing this sort of tasks, because it [English] is my biggest problem'. A lack of language proficiency, nevertheless, was related to a lack of experience in all learning tasks. Hence, learners who expressed language-related concerns about structured tasks also expressed significant concerns about unstructured/open-ended tasks.

Setting language issues to one side, time management, and general motivation to undertake the tasks were mentioned as concerns with both unstructured and structured tasks. It is clear that such concern could negatively impact on learner motivation, and could also lead to low self-efficacy. Several participants expressed particular concerns about the freedom associated with unstructured tasks, as reflected in the following quote:

I spend all this time worrying and doing nothing about it.

While unstructured tasks could thus be associated with uncertainty and fear to a greater degree than structured tasks, numerous participants, nevertheless, stated that they appreciated the opportunity to 'do the task anytime and anywhere' and 'in their own time', so they had more 'flexibility'. Moreover, they said that they felt more free, excited, enthusiastic and interested in approaching the unstructured task and this enhanced their concentration. Such a positive impact was not simply an issue of

choosing their own time and place to undertake the task (as was the case with the structured online tasks). The particular nature of an open-ended task such as evaluating, or reviewing a journal article was seen by some participants as having a positive impact on motivation and control:

I feel I have greater control of my learning with an open-ended task because I can explore my idea[s] widely.

Open-ended task[s] open the ways for critical thinking and writing and also self-reflecting.

...you're not limited in expressing your views.

Some participants enjoyed the process of an unstructured task because, in their terms, 'though it might take a while to write, you can edit over and over till you are satisfied'. The opportunity to work on a task until you are satisfied may not be seen as 'task-specific', but could be seen as a 'surface' attribute of a writing task. Nevertheless, other comments indicated that participants were influenced by more significant, or deep features of the task. For instance, participants stated that because the task 'involves interpretation, it involves our own opinion'; and that it represented an opportunity to develop 'a strong voice in analysing/reviewing articles'. The task, also, was seen as being more than simply a matter of meeting certain requirements, but challenged knowledge and understanding:

There may be something that grabs your interest then you will be guided to look for something else...with this you look a bit broader...you have a bit more knowledge in the area than what you just have to do.

The way you interpret what the question is may be different to what someone else does...It makes you think more lateral. You actually can take in other ideas and change the way you think about something.

There were indications that the participants gained in confidence from completing the task ('...when you are done, you feel good'). However, again, it did not simply seem to be satisfying because it was out of the way. In fact, the concerns noted by some participants, as cited above, appeared to have been outweighed by the completion of the task. One participant reported that 'It [the critical review task] makes students' confidence improve' and '[I begin with] very low [confidence] but eventually the more difficult, the more challenge, the more fun'.

Some comments suggested more negative associations of this aspect of the unstructured task, with participants stating: 'I am not confident of being able to present my ideas in the style required'; or, 'I find it hard to grasp the "real meaning", what is being said'. To some extent, confidence in language, generally, as opposed to the specific task was an issue: 'In writing I often feel un-confident especially with the grammar'. But a number of comments from the surveys make clear that it is the specific 'uncertainties' involved in forming an independent, or individual judgement about a journal article that contributed to learners losing confidence:

[The] evaluation part was really difficult for me as I was not sure I am evaluating correctly or not.

Quite confusing when I do the evaluating.

...I am afraid I might not fully understand the article and I might interpret the article wrongly.

This contrasted markedly with comments on structured tasks, where the immediacy of feedback was cited as a strong positive: 'I enjoyed the automatic answer check feature so that I can know the right answer immediately'. While being able to get immediate feedback could have a positive effect on confidence ('after I receive the result I become more confident'; '...I feel greater control when doing [a] structured task because the answer is definite and I can check the correct answer straight away'), it is not clear whether this contributed to any further development of independence. For example, even when participants indicated that having clear step-by-step instructions and clear expectations helped them to manage time better, they still felt unsure as to whether they were right or wrong and wanted, as one respondent put it, more 'instruction and guidance' when doing the unstructured task. Thus, the immediacy and certainty of answers in a structured task could build a degree of dependence on instructors, and an expectation that instructors will provide equivalent support with unstructured tasks. At the extreme, a focus on structured tasks could promote resistance to the notion of taking full responsibility for one's own learning, thus hindering the development of independent learning.

Discussion

Overall, participants' comments indicated that both structured and unstructured tasks could have negative or positive impacts on learner motivation and confidence. However, unstructured tasks were associated with some effects which were unique to the task. That is, the positive, even 'exciting' sense of being challenged to extend knowledge, or to re-think one's assumptions, or the negative sense of uncertainty about whether one was 'correct', even after completing the task, were specifically related to the demands of the unstructured task. Such positive and negative aspects of the unstructured task are more consistent with notions of independence, and not only in terms of 'learning'. The sense of being unsure about conclusions, far from being negative, may be an inevitable precursor to, and consequence of, developing independent thought. The sense of being challenged to question and deepen knowledge, moreover, seems a strong motivator for future independent learning.

Conversely, the structured task, despite giving learners confidence and being an essential 'first step' for some learners, would not appear, intrinsically, to lead learners on to taking new and more demanding challenges. Rather, it could lead learners to continue at a 'safe' level, with dependence on feedback in the form of a teacher providing 'the' correct answers. With increasing numbers of students and assessment demands, structured online quizzes, such as those used here, are becoming more convenient forms of formative assessment in higher education. Many educators may indeed consider such tasks as promoting independent learning because they are done when or where the student can access them. In our view however, this builds nothing more than a 'pseudo-independence' and many students may consider that they are working independently when indeed they are becoming *direction dependent* due to the highly structured nature of the task, *correction dependent* due to the ongoing instant feedback, and *memory dependent* due to the right/wrong nature of many task items. Indeed the cognitive advantages of constructing a text in support of, or against an idea or thesis are not developed with such tasks.

The qualitative data provided by our participants show clear evidence that task type does have an effect on independent learning, confirming previous research findings, such as Alexander and Judy (1988) or Wenden (1995). An unstructured task type was also seen to inspire students to 'rise to the occasion' with expression of their self-efficacy, in particular their time management and task knowledge: fundamental attributes for independent learning. Moreover, those participants responding positively to this task recognised opportunities for development of their knowledge, opportunities for freedom of expression, and opportunities for satisfaction in the end product. This constitutes clear evidence of adaptive cognition and motivation, which, as noted by

Schunk and Zimmerman (1994) and Dole and Sinatra (1998), are attributes of autonomous learners. In seeing the challenges of unstructured tasks as opportunities for improvement, some of our participants demonstrated a high level of self-efficacy. No such opportunities were observed for the structured tasks. At least, that is, no respondents in this research reported that the 'structured tasks' challenged them to reflect on their learning, or challenged them to revise or try the task again with a view to improvement.

Conclusion

Although this study was limited to two very different types of tasks, the implications are that unstructured tasks (even if introduced initially as staged sub-tasks with feedback) play a significant role in assisting students' positive approaches to independent learning, not to mention independent thought. Further research is obviously required into the specific effects of the many different task types and task knowledge on learner autonomy. The study also implies, however, that while motivation, self-efficacy, and many other variables not considered here, are vital factors in independent learning, these factors may be placed at risk when a student is exposed to dependence-inducing tasks.

While we would acknowledge that there is a place for both types of tasks in knowledge development, and that the two can work together to help build learner autonomy and confidence when implemented in a balanced, pedagogically principled manner, we would also warn that one is not necessarily a prerequisite for the other. In fact in terms of developing independence, structured and unstructured tasks could, in some situations, work against each other. Further research on the impact of task type in learner autonomy could usefully be directed toward answering these questions.

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Appendix A

Survey Questions

Self directed Learning or Independent Learning involves successfully managing a lot of skills (e.g. a reading to critique or summarise, an assignment to research and write, a take home task, etc). We would like you to write some short responses to the following questions about how you manage your independent learning.

1. What sort of independent learning tasks have you met in your studies so far?
2. Describe how you set goals for yourself and what sort of expectations you have of yourself when learning independently.
3. Describe your first thoughts when you are given an independent learning task?
4. Describe your level of confidence when doing structured online tasks (e.g. grammar quizzes)?
5. Describe your level of confidence when doing open-ended reading or writing tasks (e.g. reading and evaluating a journal article)?
6. Do you feel that you have greater control of your learning with a structured task or an open-ended task? Explain your answer.
7. What sort of independent learning tasks usually make you feel successful as an independent learner? Why?
8. What do you do when you find you need help with a particular independent task?
9. When working independently do you feel the need to connect with other students?
If yes, describe how you connect with other students?
10. Explain how helpful working in groups is for you.
11. When working alone, describe what you do after a helpful tutorial or a helpful meeting with the lecturer or tutor.
12. Have your attitudes to independent learning changed after completing this programme? If yes, in what way?

Appendix B:

Focus Group Discussion Questions

1. Has your understanding of independent learning changed?
2. When were you more confident? When working on simple grammar tasks or when working on the reading/critical review/writing tasks.
3. How did you find the group work? Was it helpful?
4. What difficulties did you experience in learning independently?

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