

8 Suitable activities for independent learning

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Abstract

Working independently helps students develop a series of skills and strategies that will continue to be useful in their future professional careers. Teachers in Higher Education (HE) have a role in facilitating Independent Learning (IL) for their students. When creating opportunities for students to develop autonomy in learning, teachers may wish to provide learners with the appropriate resources by offering adequate bibliographies, finding and adapting existing resources to their needs, or even creating their own materials. Learning materials that teachers make available for their students' IL should meet the learning outcomes of the course, both in terms of the content they present and the skills to which they contribute. Teachers will, thus, be helping students use resources that enhance targeted learning while working independently, as well as developing the higher order skills expected at university level. In this article, we report on our research study that focuses on the benefits of using scaffolding strategies for students' IL materials. Such strategies overcome some of the problems usually linked to conventional resources designed for IL, namely loss of students' confidence in themselves and lack of room for creativity.

Keywords: creating teaching and learning materials, independent learning, scaffolding, creativity.

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1. Introduction

The importance of encouraging HE students to undertake IL has long been recognised and studied. It improves students' motivation and confidence (Meyer, 2008) and contributes positively to their future success in life as effective lifelong learners (Marshall & Rowland, 2014).

In HE, we aim for students to develop higher order thinking skills, such as those present in Bloom's (1956) taxonomy: synthesising, analysing, evaluating, and creating (as revised by Anderson et al., 2001), but we also target the development of communication skills required for understanding and expressing complex ideas (Littlewood, 1996). To this end, we have tested with undergraduate students of Spanish a series of scaffolding activities that progressively reduce the support offered (allowing progressive learning) while expanding the range of possible responses (giving room for creativity).

By scaffolding activities in IL materials, it is possible to offer guidance to students, helping them to take risks in completing tasks that would otherwise be beyond their unassisted capabilities (Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1976).

2. Building confidence towards independence

Holec (1981) defines 'autonomy' as the ability to take charge of one's own learning. However, autonomy is not an absolute concept, since there are different levels of autonomy (Benson & Voller, 1997, p. 193).

For this reason, teachers cannot assume nor control the type of IL that students might embrace autonomously when studying a second language. Students are guided and supported to reach their potential development level (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86), and teachers facilitate this process by scaffolding learning materials, since "it is the function of the materials augmentation [...] to develop skills and knowledge in learners which ultimately will leave them in apposition where they know what is best" (Benson & Voller, 1997, p. 193).

In line with this theoretical approach, authors have adopted three scaffolding strategies that facilitate gradual development of learners' independent study skills:

- (I) moving gradually from activities that require the use of lower order skills towards activities that require higher level skills (Edwards & Mercer, 1987, p. 193);
- (II) providing support systems such as missing words, illustrations (boxes, maps, images...), the first letter for the answer, etc. (Hammond & Gibbons, 2001. pp. 13-15); and
- (III) widening the range of answers to promote autonomy with activities which progressively expand the range of responses leading to a final open activity (Hammond & Gibbons, 2001, pp. 13-15).

3. Hypothesis

Research by Senninger (2000) shows that efficient student learning takes place if students' independence is encouraged and supported, so that they feel prepared to take risks when they are challenged. This avoids them crashing into the 'panic zone' – Senninger (2000) envisioned learning in three zones: panic zone, learning zone, and comfort zone. By using scaffolding strategies, we can help students to remain in the 'learning zone', so that by gaining confidence and progressing in their learning, they will feel capable and comfortable when undertaking the kind of activities that promote deep learning approaches (Biggs & Moore, 1993). Our hypothesis was that using the three strategies mentioned above would enable independent learners to feel confident and motivated.

4. Method

We have carried out a study to test the three scaffolding strategies. We asked 40 undergraduate students of Spanish, level B2-C1 (Common European

Framework of Reference for languages) to complete four activities. We divided them into three groups: G1, G2, and G3 to evaluate the impact of implementing different levels of scaffolding.

- G1 completed activities using strategies I, II, and III.
- G2 completed activities using strategies II, III.
- G3 completed activities using strategies I, III.

We expected G1 participants to feel more confident than G2 and G3 participants, so we asked them all to rate their confidence when completing activities according to [Senninger's \(2000\)](#) learning zone model categories.

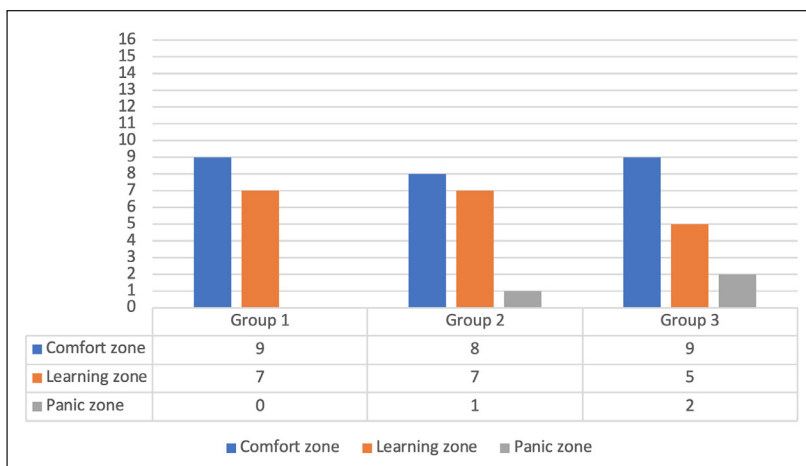
5. Results and discussion

We had responses from 12 participants, four in each group. In total, each participant gave us four answers, one for each activity, making 16 possible responses for each group (see [Figure 1](#)).

The data analysis shows that participants in G1 and G3 ticked the comfort zone the same number of times. This indicates that participants in G1 and G3 felt more confident overall when working with the materials than participants in G2. The difference confirms that the order in which activities are presented is relevant to participants' perceptions, as a progressive order allows students to build blocks of knowledge and skills step by step. In our case, the order we presented the activities was on the one hand, increasing the level of difficulty and, on the other, widening the range of answers. On the other hand, participants in G2 showed a lower level of panic than participants in G3, thanks to the clues and other support systems which had been added (strategy II). However, participants in G2 felt too challenged when lack of progression made them aware of some gaps in knowledge and skills that challenged them when facing activities with a wider range of possible responses. We noticed, though, that participants in G2 felt they

were within the learning zone as much as participants in G1. This confirms that activities were appropriate for their level, although they showed a lower level of comfort combined with some panic levels.

Figure 1. Participants' confidence when completing the activities



It was reassuring to see high levels of comfort zone in G3 with some of the activities, but it did not come as a surprise that as the difficulty of the activities increased and the range of answers widened, G3 participants were challenged to the point that levels of panic were felt or they did not feel they were learning.

Finally, it is worth highlighting that in G1 none of the participants indicated they felt themselves within the panic zone. This demonstrates that by adopting the three scaffolding strategies described in this study we have successfully enabled students to avoid the panic zone and this is in line with our initial hypothesis.

6. Conclusions

Our aim in preparing IL material has been to support learners' autonomy. To that end, we have used different strategies that facilitated sustaining development

in terms of autonomy, skills, and creativity. Those strategies not only enabled a smooth progression, building and keeping participants' confidence in their abilities, but they also proved to be effective at helping prevent students from crashing into the panic zone, and consequently, enabling their learning. Our findings will be of help in informing the practice of teachers who wish to create their own materials for IL using scaffolding strategies. More practical examples can be found in [Duque, Martín de León, and García Hermoso \(2019\)](#).

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