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Exploring Homework Completion and Non-Completion in Post-Secondary Language Study

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Abstract

While homework is something that language professionals often assign, based on the paucity of research on the topic, it is clearly not something to which much attention is given in terms of professional discourse or research. In the following pages, the author reviews the limited available research and describes a case study that seeks to examine what students are doing, as well as not doing, in terms of written and online homework in beginning post-secondary foreign language courses. Results are examined through the lens of self-efficacy theory. Implications include allowing for student choice in homework options, particularly for those students with high levels of self-efficacy.

Of the many aspects of the second language teaching-learning process that have been researched and debated in the professional literature, the topic of homework has been notably absent, in spite of the fact that most language teachers--at least those teaching introductory and intermediate levels--admit to assigning it regularly (Wallinger, 2000). Perhaps this is due to the messy nature of homework study. Indeed, how does one set out to study something that is subject to so many internal and external factors? For Cooper (1989), "homework probably involves the complex interaction of more influences than any other instructional device" (p. 87).

Still, the role and impact of homework has been studied in other disciplines, particularly in the areas of English, math, and science. (Cooper, Lindsay, Nye, & Greathouse, 1998; Wallinger, 2000). Most investigations within these other disciplines, however, have overwhelmingly targeted elementary, junior-high, and high-school learners. In a meta-analysis of 120 studies of homework's effects, Cooper (1989) concluded that homework has a positive effect on learning among high school students, a slightly lower, but still positive, effect on junior high school students, and essentially no effect on elementary school learners (p. 88).

While grappling with homework questions in post-secondary French classes at the University of Nebraska at Omaha, such as how often, how much, what type, and whether or not homework should be graded, a new question has recently surfaced: who is completing, or not completing it, and why? In years past the answer at least appeared to be clear: serious students completed assignments, and the disaffected students often did not. Upon closer inspection, this may no longer be the case, or perhaps never was. Instead, self-efficacy theory may provide insight into understanding who is completing and who is not completing homework.

Literature Review

Turning to the professional literature for insight into the general topic of for-eign language homework proved disappointing in terms of the number of studies or even position papers on the topic. Among the few exceptions is a distant study by Politzer (1960). He sought to examine 1) the relationship between homework and foreign language achievement, and 2) the contribution of time spent in the language lab to student achievement. Each of the two research questions was studied at a dif-ferent institution. The first question was examined in a multi-section first-semester French course at the University of Michigan, where the total amount of time spent in the language lab by 396 students was compared to their final course grades. Politzer found that "the amount of time spent in the laboratory correlated quite neatly with the achievement of the student" (p. 14). In a first-semester French course enrolling 250 students at Harvard University, Politzer compared the amount of time spent completing homework, as revealed by study surveys, to final course grades, wherein he found a negative correlation. Specifically, the A students reported spending the least amount of time doing homework. Politzer concluded that the best combination for success is aptitude and "a normal amount of assiduity" (p. 15), as there appears to be a

> straight reverse correlation between achievement and time input. The more time students have to put in on their homework, the less they achieve [….] Evidently, assiduity in laboratory attendance can offset aptitude factors and will pay off. Assiduity in 'doing homework' does not seem to have any such effects (p. 16),

at least for students at the University of Michigan and Harvard in the late 1950s.

In a much later study, Wallinger (2000) surveyed 49 high school teachers of French and sought information on what type of homework teachers assign and how they treated completed assignments. The teachers reported that they expected stu-dents to spend time on homework assignments outside of class, and assignments fell into one of five categories:

1) Practice homework: homework that reinforces the learning of material that has already been presented in class.

2) Preparation homework: homework that introduces material to be present-ed in upcoming lessons.

3) Extension homework: homework that requires students to transfer knowl-edge or skills previously learned to new situations.

4) Integration homework: homework that requires students to apply sepa-rately learned skills or concepts to produce a single product such as a book report, a skit, or a project.

5) Creative homework: homework that provides students freedom of choice in content, format, and skill use to produce a final product. (p. 492).

Wallinger found that the most commonly assigned homework type in begin-ning French was practice homework, followed by extension, integration, and creative homework. In a very distant fifth place was preparation homework. Once back in

class, the most common follow-up use of homework was to check it for completion. The second most popular use was to check it for both completeness and correctness. Very few teachers reported grading assignments or quizzing assigned material.

A third study by Kaznierzak (1994) examined final course grades and homework completion of 13 high school students in second-year German. In the first semester, homework was assigned, checked daily, and included in the final grade. In the second semester, homework was assigned and discussed, but not checked by the teacher, and therefore was not included in the final grade. Initially, grades were higher in the first semester when homework completion was included in the final grade. However, after factoring out the homework completion grade for the first semester, and thereby looking at more direct performance measures such as exams, there was no difference in student performance. Students were also asked to complete a survey indicating which assignments they found to be most helpful. Students reported that open-ended writing assignments were more useful than word- and sentence-level practice.

While homework is something that language professionals often assign, based on the paucity of research on the topic, it is clearly not something to which we give much attention in terms of professional discourse or research. Taken together, the limited research on foreign language homework appears to question the contribution of homework to exam performance, or at least the contribution of traditional practice and extension homework activities to exam scores.

Self-Efficacy Theory

Two related topics that are accorded a great deal of discussion and are the object of sustained research among cognitive and educational psychologists are the notions of self-efficacy and self-agency. Bandura (1982a), for example, set out to study one of the most basic and pervasive observations concerning human behavior: why is it that "people often do not behave optimally, even though they know full well what to do" (p. 122). Or, applied to the present situation, one might ask: why is it that some students do not complete homework assignments even though they know full well that it is expected and often impacts their final course grade? Bandura's strain of socio-cognitive theory contends that self-efficacy beliefs are the "foundation of human agency" (Bown, 2009, p. 577). Specifically, perceived self-efficacy is related to judgments of how well one can execute courses of action required to deal with prospective situations" (Bandura, 1982a, p. 122). It is concerned with "how people judge their capabilities and how, through their self-percepts of efficacy, they affect their motivation and behavior" (p. 122).

While self-concept and self-esteem are general and global constructs, self-efficacy is domain or task specific. It is precisely task-specific self-efficacy, rather than global self-concept, that has been "found to be related consistently to student academic performance" (Zimmerman, 2000, p. 84). In fact, self-efficacy has emerged as a highly effective predictor of human motivation and agency in general, as well as of student motivation and learning (Bandura, 1993). According to Bandura (1982a), "strength of efficacy predicts behavior […wherein] judgments of one's capability partly determine choice of activities" (p. 128).

As an example of self-efficacy's impact on behavior, Salomon (1984) found that children with high levels of self-efficacy demonstrated high levels of cognitive effort

and superior learning when working with what they believed to be difficult instructional media, yet the same children showed significantly less investment of effort, which ultimately resulted in poor learning, when they interacted with media materials that they considered easy. In this case, high self-efficacy correlated positively with persistence and effort on challenging tasks, and negatively with effort and performance on less challenging tasks. In approaching learning tasks "those who perceive themselves to be supremely self-efficacious in the undertaking see little need to invest much preparatory effort" (Bandura, 1982b, p. 196).

Bandura believes that "both children and adults maintain or increase their interest in activities when rewarded for performance attainments, whereas their interest declines when they are rewarded for undertaking activities irrespective of how well they perform" (1982a, p. 134) and "extrinsic rewards are most likely to reduce interest when they are given merely for performing over and over again an activity that is already of high interest" (p. 133). It is possible that students with high levels of self-efficacy in language learning will be less interested in routine homework practice activities than they might be in more open-ended and challenging tasks such as communicating with native speakers, watching target-language movies, and listening to music.

A Homework Completion Case Study

For many elementary and intermediate post-secondary textbook programs, companion workbooks have provided an obvious and immediate source of homework assignments. French faculty members at the University of Nebraska at Omaha only recently transitioned from the use of pen-and-paper workbooks to electronic or online versions in beginning- and intermediate-level French courses. Before the transition to the online workbook in 2010, faculty members would collect student workbooks at 5-6 predetermined points (usually on exam days) throughout the semester. After the transition, this practice continued. Only now the physical handing-in of workbook homework was replaced by students logging-in and completing the assigned activities before the due dates, and the instructor logging-into the grading portal to access results. Completion of workbook exercises (either on paper or on line) has always been included in the calculation of final course grades, although the percentage has changed slightly at times and for different faculty members. However, it has tended to hover around 10%, meaning that failure to complete workbook homework could drop a student's final course grade by an entire letter grade.

Since transitioning to the online workbook faculty members have noticed that some students are not doing the online homework at all. These students are purchasing the online access code, creating an account, but never returning to the site to complete the assignments. After three consecutive semesters of noticing that 1-2 students per 18-22 student class were simply not completing any of the online homework, the following questions surfaced: Is this a fluke or do some students consider the online homework to be less important than pen-and-paper homework? Does the act of physically handing in assignments directly to the instructor make assignments more salient for the student or hold the student more accountable? Or, is our student body changing? Unfortunately, all of these questions are beyond the scope of this exploratory paper. The research questions that are addressed, however, are:

1) who is electing to ignore the online homework;

2) is it accidental or intentional; and

3) what, if anything, are they doing instead?

The Courses and Students

To answer these questions and attempt to begin to understand students' thoughts on homework completion and study habits, a survey (see Appendix A) was administered in three post-secondary French classes in the fall of 2012 and spring of 2013. These courses included a second-semester, a third-semester, and a fourth-semester French class, all falling within the four-semester foreign language requirement in place at the institution. The third- and fourth-semester classes used the same intermediate textbook and online workbook for homework. Students in the third-semester course completed chapters 1-5, and those in the fourth semester completed chapters 6-10. Students in the second-semester class used a different (an elementary level) textbook and accompanying online workbook. For both of the workbooks used in the three classes the overwhelming majority of the activities were designed to practice material covered in class. In Wallinger's (2000) terms, there were no preparation, integration or creative activities, and very few extension activities. The second-semester class met for 250 minutes per week and was worth five credit hours. The third- and fourth-semester courses meet for 150 minutes per week for three credit hours.

The courses were taught by two different instructors. Both instructors required that the online homework be completed by each of the five exam dates throughout the course of the semester. The requirement and the due dates were stated in the course syllabus and posted on the online workbook site. Each instructor also made it clear on the syllabus that the online homework would count 10% toward the final course grade. While each course enrolled 18-20 students, 14 completed the homework survey in the second-semester course, 14 did so in the third-semester class, and 17 completed the survey in the fourth-semester class. The voluntary surveys were administered during the final week of the term.

Survey Instrument and Results

The first and second survey questions asked students about their general study habits for the course in terms of how many days per week they studied, both in general and when preparing for exams. Results are presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1

Study days per week in general and pre-exam by level.

	In General	Pre-Exam
2nd Semester	1.85	3.28
3rd Semester	2.64	2.71
4th Semester	1.64	2.17

Students in the second-semester class reported studying an average of 1.85 days per week in general, and 3.28 days per week when preparing for an exam. Students in the

third-semester course reported studying 2.64 days per week in general and 2.71 days per week when preparing for an exam. Students in the fourth-semester class reported studying 1.64 days per week in general, and 2.17 days per week when preparing for an upcoming exam. The survey only asked for number of days per week in which students reviewed or studied, not for total amount of time in minutes or hours.

The third and fourth survey questions focused on online homework, instead of general study or review (see Table 2). Among the second-semester students, one student reported accessing the online homework every day, 10 students said they did so 3-4 times per week, two reported 1-2 times per week, and one said never. Among the third-semester students, four students reported accessing the online homework 1-2 times per week, seven said that they did so only right before the exam, and three said that they never did the online homework. Among the fourth-semester students, one student reported accessing the online homework 3-4 times per week, 12 said they did so 1-2 times per week, two said that they only accessed the homework right before the exam, and two admitted that they never did the online homework.

Table 2

Frequency of online homework access by level.

	Daily	3-4/Week	1-2/Week	Before Exam	Never
2nd Semester	1	10	2	0	1
3rd Semester	0	4	0	7	3
4th Semester	0	1	12	2	2

With regard to preference of having more frequent due dates for the online homework, as opposed to having it due at five points throughout the semester, which corresponded to exam days, 11 of the second-semester students said *yes*, with only three reporting *no* (See Table 3). Among the third-semester students, four wanted more frequent due dates, while 10 said *no*. For the fourth-semester students, six wanted more frequent due dates while 11 did not.

Table 3

Desire for more frequent due dates by level.

	More Frequent	No Change
2nd Semester	11	3
3rd Semester	4	10
4th Semester	6	11

When asked how they would describe their studying style/preferences, three students from the second-semester course agreed that they would prefer to have frequent deadlines set in order to keep them motivated, two preferred to have the autonomy to study when and how they felt was best, and nine indicated that they prefer autonomy, but sometimes need deadlines in order to stay on task and on schedule. In the third-semester course, one student preferred having deadlines to keep him/her motivated, two preferred to have the autonomy to study when and how they felt was best, five indicated that they prefer autonomy, but sometimes need deadlines in

order to stay on task, and four claimed to be self-disciplined enough to keep themselves on task and on schedule. Among the fourth-semester students, two agreed that they would prefer to have frequent deadlines set to keep them motivated, one preferred to have the autonomy to study when and how s/he felt was best, eight indicated that they prefer autonomy, but sometimes need deadlines in order to stay on task and on schedule, and four claimed to be self-disciplined enough to keep themselves on task and on schedule.

Discussion

The survey feedback presented above considered each class as a whole. A closer look at the six students across the three levels who never completed any of the online homework throughout the course of the semester reveals some surprising information. At first blush, one might expect to find students who are not interested in French, not serious students, have poor attendance records, earn poor exam scores, and do not study or review material very often. This was not the case. For each of the three classes, the non-homework student or students reported studying/reviewing material presented in class more days per week than their respective class average for both question 1 (when there was no exam approaching) and for question 2 (when preparing for an exam). Due to the small numbers overall and the small number of non-homework students within each course, no tests for significant differences were conducted. Nevertheless, the simple fact that in every case the non-homework students reported studying more often than the classroom average was not expected. Not surprisingly, however, the non-homework students did not want more regular and frequent due dates for online homework assignments and they reported either preferring to have the autonomy to study when and how they felt best, or in one case, being self-disciplined and able to keep him- or herself on task / on schedule. Of course, this last self-assessment is clearly debatable given the circumstances.

Each of the non-homework students reported that he or she expected to receive a relatively high final course grade, ranging from B+ to A+ in spite of the fact that receiving an A or A+ was a mathematical impossibility without the completion of the online homework. Their grade expectations did, however, reflect their exam scores.

Finally, it is the non-homework students who offered some of the most creative study tips on question 7 of the survey: "Do you have any study tips that you would recommend to other language learners?" As a whole, the majority of students at each level left this question blank or responded "N/A" or "No." Other overall responses included suggestions such as, "Look up a word if you don't know it." "Practice writing sentences." "Review constantly." "Pay attention in class." "Get a tutor." "Visit websites in the language." "Go over notes frequently." "Don't wait until the last minute." "Listen to music." and "Cram." The non-homework students, however, offered the following suggestions: "I listen to a lot of French music and watch films that make learning French easier." "Practice with native speakers, watch movies, listen to music in the language." "Get practice in communicating, instead of only learning grammar and vocabulary, although they are important." "Spend a lot of time talking to yourself and trying to make original sentences." "I write down everything a lot of times."

There are three notable differences in the advice given by the students who completed their homework and those who did not. First, students who did not do

the online homework offered lengthier advice, using longer sentences and providing more detail. Next, the non-homework students were the only students to personalize their advice, using the pronoun I: "I write down everything a lot of times." "I listen to a lot of French music and watch films that make learning French easier." Finally, with only two examples appearing among the responses given by the 39 homework-completing students, it is the non-homework students who recommended using the language instead of practicing the language. For example, using the language to watch movies, listen to music, and communicate.

A Follow-up

Based on their high-levels of in-class participation and apparent interest in French—this in spite of not engaging with the online homework—we hypothesized that the non-homework students might have high levels of self-efficacy in learning French. This trait would likely serve students well in reaching more distal learning goals, such as high levels of communicative competence, even if it had a negative effect on attaining proximal goals such as completing online homework. Distal goals are "too far removed in time to effectively mobilize effort or direct what one does in the here and now" (Bandura, 1982a, p. 134).

Once the semesters were completed and final grades had been posted, the non-homework students were contacted and asked to complete a self-efficacy survey. There was no explicit mention of homework completion rates in the communication or on the self-efficacy survey itself. According to Zimmerman (2000) "self-efficacy questionnaire items should be related to specific tasks" (p. 85). Therefore, Schwarzer et al.'s (1997) 10-question self-efficacy scale was modified slightly to tie each item to language learning in French (see Appendix B). Each item had a four-point response range (one low, four high).

Of the six non-homework students, three agreed to complete the survey, one was unavailable, and two were participating in study abroad programs. The simple fact that two students who had not bothered to complete any of the assigned online homework during the semester had immediately enrolled in a study abroad program can at the very least be taken as a sign of interest in learning the language.

Each of the three students willing and available to complete the survey produced high self-efficacy scores (a score of 30 or greater). The three overall scores were 33, 34, and 36. The only statement to which none of the respondents produced a high score was statement 2, "I am confident that I can communicate effectively in French."

Results of the self-efficacy survey align with the original assumption that the students who were not completing the online homework, despite signs of interest in the material, did indeed have high levels of self-efficacy concerning language learning. These highly self-efficious language learners therefore displayed the behaviors predicted by Bandura (1982b) in that they did not invest effort in the seemingly less challenging online homework tasks, yet, as revealed by the original homework survey as well as by the high ratio of study abroad participation, they were willing to engage in more challenging and perhaps more meaningful language-learning tasks.

Limitations and Future Directions

As an exploratory case study, there are several limitations inherent in this investigation. First, this study examined a small overall number of learners and an even smaller number of non-homework-completers. Second, the homework survey administered to all participants only asked for number of days/times per week that the students studied or accessed the online homework. It did not ask for total number of hours per week. Third, a limited number of prior studies or even open professional discourse on the topic makes contextualization of the present study difficult. Finally, this study did not address any differences in homework completion rates for physical workbooks compared to online assignments.

This exploratory investigation does not offer a panacea for our myriad problems and questions concerning homework's impact on learning or student engagement. It has, however, attempted to ignite discussion of this messy and often ignored topic. It has also highlighted a type of case study focusing on six otherwise successful students who have elected to ignore their traditional homework assignments. To this end, it has provided some insights into these students' level of motivation as well as the role that high levels of self-efficacy may be playing in their choices.

Based on this small sample of students, it could be suggested that students with high levels of self-efficacy should be given more creative and more meaningful homework options beyond those of the typical online workbook, such as those suggested by the students themselves: "I listen to a lot of French music and watch films that make learning French easier." "Practice with native speakers, watch movies, listen to music in the language." "Get practice in communicating, instead of only learning grammar and vocabulary." Or, in Wallinger's (2011) terms, students with high levels of self-efficacy could be allowed to forego practice and preparation homework in favor of extension, integration, and creative homework.

Of course, suggesting the use of meaningful and creative language practice is hardly a new idea. This is something that most language educators already know and do. In addition, self-directed learning, or independent learning opportunities, have been increasing in popularity over the past decade, often supported by technological applications and innovations in language learning (Bown, 2009). These independent options often allow for individualized practice. Similarly, changes in assessment techniques to include portfolio assessment and self-assessment are also allowing for more language practice options as well as increased ownership of learning for students. (Brown, Dewey, & Cox, 2014). In spite of these developments, the take-away from this exploratory study is that we may have motivated students for whom these more creative and meaningful options may very well be the only option. And, while some level of standard language practice is for many a first step leading to more creative options, there may be a strain of language learner for whom interest declines when pushed to perform "over and over again an activity that is already of high interest" (Bandura, 1982a, p. 133). Therefore, in addition to considering various learning styles and differentiated instruction, differentiated homework may well be worth exploring.

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Appendix A

Homework/Study Survey

Please circle the response that best fits for you.

1. If there is no exam approaching, how many days per week do you review or study material presented in class? (Excluding online homework.)

    0   1   2   3   4   5   6   7

2. When preparing for an exam, how many days per week do you review or study material presented in class? (Excluding online homework.)

    0   1   2   3   4   5   6   7

3. How often do you access the online homework? (Circle the best fitting response).
    Every day
    3-4 times per week
    1-2 times per week
    Right before the exam
    Never

4. I would prefer to have more regular and frequent due dates for the online home-work (as opposed to all being due on exam days).   YES   NO

5. How would you describe your studying style? (Circle the best fitting response).
    I prefer to have frequent deadlines set for me to keep me motivated.
    I prefer having the autonomy to study when and how I feel is best.
    I prefer autonomy but sometimes need deadlines to keep on task/on schedule.
    I am self-disciplined and can keep myself on task/on schedule.

6. What grade do you expect to receive in this class?
    A+   A   A-   B+   B   B   C+   C   C-   D+   D   D-   F

7. Do you have any study tips that you would recommend to other language learners?

Appendix B

Self-Efficacy Questionnaire

Scale: 1=Low, 4= High, *Circle best response*

1. I can always manage to solve language problems if I try hard enough. 1 2 3 4

2. If I decide to learn something, I can find means and ways to do it. 1 2 3 4

3. It is easy for me to stick with my aims and accomplish my goals learning French. 1 2 3 4

4. I am confident that I can communicate effectively in French. 1 2 3 4

5. Thanks to my resourcefulness, I know how to approach learning tasks. 1 2 3 4

6. I can solve most language learning problems if I invest the necessary effort. 1 2 3 4

7. I can remain calm when facing a language problem because I can rely on my learning abilities. 1 2 3 4

8. When I am confronted with a language problem, I can usually find a solution. 1 2 3 4

9. If I am having trouble understanding in French, I can usually think of some-thing to do.   1 2 3 4

10. No matter what comes my way, I am usually able to handle it. 1 2 3 4

Based on Schwarzer et al. (1997)