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## **An Investigation into the Optimal Experience in Reading Journalistic Texts in Light of Instructing Fairclough's and Van Dijk's Model**

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# **An Investigation into the Optimal Experience in Reading Journalistic Texts in Light of Instructing Fairclough's and Van Dijk's Model**

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## **Abstract**

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The present study aims at exploring the extent to which Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) familiarity may have an impact on flow experience. In so doing, the community sample of 60 students comprising 16 males and 44 females participated in the study. Initially, the pretest was conducted to ensure the homogeneity of their proficiency level. Besides, the participants were asked to reflect on their flow experience while reading three distinct genres of journalistic texts prior to the application of the treatment. During the treatment phase, they were instructed how to critically examine other journalistic texts relying on Fairclough's (1989) three dimensional model along with Van Dijk's (1995) theoretical framework of CDA over 10 successive sessions. Finally, utilizing paired- samples t-tests, the results of the posttests on the very three texts which were conducted at the pretest stage, indicated that the application of CDA has a significant influence on the students' optimal experience while reading descriptive, expository, and narrative genres of journalistic texts.

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**Keywords:** critical discourse analysis, flow experience, reading, journalistic texts, Fairclough's model, Van Dijk's theoretical framework

# Una Investigación sobre la Experiencia Óptima en la Lectura de Textos Periodísticos para la Enseñanza de los Modelos de Fairclough y Van Dijk

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## Resumen

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Este estudio pretende explorar hasta qué punto la familiaridad con el Análisis Crítico de Discurso (ACD) puede haber tenido un impacto en el flujo de experiencia. Con esto, una muestra de 60 estudiantes, 16 chicos y 44 chicas, participó en el estudio. Inicialmente, el pre-test se llevó a cabo para asegurar la homogeneidad de su nivel. Por otro lado, se pidió a los participantes que reflexionaran sobre su experiencia de flujo al tiempo que leían tres tipos distintos de géneros periodísticos antes de aplicarles el tratamiento. Durante la fase de tratamiento se les enseñó durante diez sesiones a evaluar críticamente textos periodísticos en base al modelo de tres dimensiones de Fairclough (1989) y al marco teórico de ACD de Van Dijk (1995). Finalmente, utilizando muestras pareadas de t-test los resultados de los post-test en los tres textos que se repartieron durante la fase pre-test, indicaron que la aplicación de la ACD tiene una influencia significativa en la experiencia óptima de los estudiantes en la lectura de los géneros descriptivos, expositivos y narrativos de textos periodísticos.

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**Palabras clave:** usos del e-marketing, tecnología, rendimiento empresarial, manufactura, pequeña y grande empresa

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Numerous psychologists have been focused on positive aspects of human existence, such as hope, wisdom, creativity, future mindedness, courage, responsibility, spirituality, and perseverance (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Relevant to such fields of interest is the concept of optimal experience or flow which has developed new lines of inquiry in the field of positive psychology (Asakawa, 2004).

The term flow has been described as “a state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter; the experience itself is so enjoyable that people will do it even at a great cost, for the sheer sake of doing it” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, p. 4). In other words, it is an intense engagement or complete absorption in the task as the mind is in its optimal state in which the individual feels deeply involved, highly motivated, and cognitively efficient (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Indeed, from the time Csikszentmihalyi pioneered studying flow in the mid-sixties, several flow studies have been conducted in various contexts and across a variety of cultures to develop a robust and empirically well confirmed universal theory of flow (Asakawa, 2004; Csikszentmihalyi & Csikszentmihalyi, 1988; Ghonsooly & Hamedi, 2014; Inghilleri, 1999; McQuillan & Conde, 1996; Massimini & DelleFave, 2000; Mirlohi, Egbert & Ghonsooly, 2011; Webster, Trevino & Ryan, 1993).

To gain this objective, amateur athletes, chess masters, rock climbers, dancers, high school basketball players, and composers of music were the target population (Csikszentmihalyi, 1988). Actually, in gaining optimal experience two criteria must be met (Csikszentmihalyi, 1988, 1990). Firstly, the perceived challenges of the activity should be in accordance with the individuals’ perceived abilities or skills and secondly, such task challenges and the individual’s abilities or skills must be at a relatively high extent (Massimini & Carli, 1988). Henceforth, experiencing optimal learning is bound to the skills-challenge balance along with the person’s enjoyment, control, and intense attention (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975).

The point of the fact is that among the most reported flow inducing activities, reading is the most noted flow generating activity (Massimini, Csikszentmihalyi & DelleFave, 1988; McQuillan & Conde, 1996; Sato, 1988). Initially, Trevino and Webster (1992) held a view that flow experience can be noted in native language reading, however, subsequent

studies (e.g., Ghonsooly & Hamed, 2014; McQuillan & Conde, 1996) notified a number of non-native English speakers who reported flow while reading English texts. The participants' characterized concentration on the task, interest, attention, immersion, and the loss of self sense as the major determinants of the flow experience (McQuillan & Conde, 1996). Moreover, with regard to the modes of writing Ghonsooly and Hamed (2014) found the descriptive genre as the most contributing cause of incidence of optimal experience in reading. Likewise, Mirlohi, Egbert, and Ghonsooly (2011) discovered the descriptive genre as the most flow inducing one in the realm of translation.

As a matter of fact, although the widespread occurrence of flow in reading has been well confirmed, little is known about the procedures through which people engage with the optimal experience promoting texts (McQuillan & Conde, 1996). As Chastain (1988) maintained that reading is sometimes erroneously regarded as a passive skill while it requires mental processing for communication to take place, specifically, the present study attempts to examine the effectiveness of the application of Csikszentmihalyi's (1988) flow model along with Fairclough's (1989) model and Van Dijk's (1995) framework for CDA, in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classes as the contributing factors to promoting optimal experience in reading journalistic texts. Taken together, the following research questions guided the present investigation:

1. Can reading journalistic texts be flow inducing for EFL learners?
2. Can the integration of Csikszentmihalyi's (1988) flow model with Fairclough's (1989) CDA model and Van Dijk's (1995) framework for CDA be conducive to promoting flow while reading journalistic texts?

## **Literature Review**

### **Optimal Experience**

With the introduction of flow to the field of positive psychology, it is deemed as an underlying driving source for the individuals who pursue to enhance their life quality along with attaining more mental and emotional complexity (Asakawa, 2004).

Originally, flow theory was developed by Csikszentmihalyi's (1975) who believed that learners can gain optimal experience during the tasks if the relationship between challenges and skills was high. When skills are high and challenges are low either relaxation or boredom occurs; when skills are high and challenges are low anxiety or worry can arise; when both skills and challenges are low apathy may result. Thus, flow can be experienced on the condition that both the skills and challenges are high. More specifically, Csikszentmihalyi (1990, p. 71) defines flow as:

A sense that one's skills are adequate to cope with challenges at hand in a goal directed, rule bound action system that provides clear clues as to how one is performing. Concentration is so intense that there is no attention left over to think about anything irrelevant or to worry about problems. Self-consciousness disappears, and the sense of time becomes distorted. An activity that produces such experiences is so gratifying that people are willing to do it for its own sake, with little concern for what they will get out of it, even when it is difficult or dangerous.

Overall, Csikszentmihalyi (1997) characterizes clear goals, immediate feedback, deep concentration, avoiding distractions, control, loss of self-consciousness, fleeting time, and autotelic experience as the required conditions for the occurrence of flow. More importantly, Egbert (2003) specifies skill-challenge balance, attention, interest, and control as the fundamental flow dimensions.

### **Flow in Language Learning and Reading**

A few studies which have applied flow theory in language learning have confirmed the relationship between flow and classroom language learning (Egbert, 2003; Ghonsooly & Hamedī, 2014; McQuillan & Conde, 1996; Schmidt & Savage, 1992). As noted, among the classroom activities, reading is reported as a flow inducing task in that the recreation of the writer's intended meaning can be accomplished only when the reader integrates the textual information with his background knowledge (Haji Maibodi, 2008). Hence, the input just beyond the learners' current competence that is mostly comprehensible but still be challenged to make a progress (Brown, 1994) might be influential in generating flow experience in language classes at all levels. Nonetheless, Egbert (2003) contended that the students at the

rudimentary levels might hardly gain flow as they lack the sufficient competence to be far immersed in the texts. Indeed, since language learning is a complex activity, the kinds of factors that might promote or prohibit flow experience are still shrouded in mystery, however, Egbert (2003) has depicted the relationship between optimal experience and language learning by highlighting the importance of the target language task as well as general environmental factors which might be practical in clarifying the issue with all its complexities (Figure 1).

In sum, further investigation into flow is required as it might have significant potential to act on one's personality along with improving the life quality (Asakawa, 2004). Surprisingly, to the researchers' best knowledge, relatively a small number of studies have been conducted on flow theory and its implications in Eastern cultures as compared to Western cultures. More importantly, such studies have been exclusively focused on physical activities rather than exploring its possible application in education, mental activities, or other related areas which might contribute to the quality of life as well (Asakawa, 2004). Henceforth, regarding the scarcity of flow research in the Iranian EFL context, it seems that more rigorous empirical investigation of the concept is called for.

### **CDA as a Research Tool**

CDA has emerged from critical linguistics, critical semiotics, and from a socio-politically conscious and oppositional way of investigating language, discourse, and communication and is widely used as a special approach in the analysis of text and talk (Van Dijk, 1995). Fairclough and Wodak (1997) characterized the main tenets of CDA as follows:

- I. CDA addresses social problems
- II. Power relations are discursive
- III. Discourse constitutes society and culture
- IV. Discourse does ideological work
- V. Discourse is historical
- VI. The link between text and society is mediated
- VII. Discourse analysis is interpretative and explanatory
- VIII. Discourse is a form of social action

Since CDA does not have a unitary theoretical framework (Van Dijk, 1995), the present study utilizes two widely applied models which are developed by Fairclough (1989) and Van Dijk (1995) as the major research tools for the instruction of systematic theoretical analysis of the journalistic texts. Fairclough's (1989) model for CDA takes the three inter-related dimensions of discourse into account. These dimensions are the object of analysis, the processes through which the object is produced and received, and the socio-historical conditions which govern these processes. Similarly, each of these dimensions requires a distinct type of analysis including text analysis (description), processing analysis (interpretation), and social analysis (explanation). In short, Fairclough's three dimensional model comprised of the three stages of CDA as follows:

Description is the stage which is concerned with the formal properties of the text.

Interpretation is concerned with the relationship between text and interaction with seeing the text as a product of a process of production, and as a resource in the process of interpretation.

Explanation is concerned with the relationship between interaction and social context with the social determination of the processes of production and interpretation, and their social effects (Fairclough, 1989, p. 26).

On the other hand, Van Dijk (1995) framework highlights the significance of CDA in bridging the gap between micro and macro level of language analysis. More specifically, to arrive at a unified critical analysis of these various levels, one must consider:

- I. Members- groups: Language users participate in discourse as members of social groups, and organizations, and conversely, groups may act by their members
- II. Actions-process: Social acts of individuals are the main components of group actions and social processes, such as legislation, news making, or the reproduction of racism
- III. Context-social structure: Discursive interactions are the constituent part of social structure
- IV. Personal and social cognition: Language users have both personal and social cognitions through which they can exert influence on the interaction and discourse of individual members.



In addition, Van Dijk's (1995) theoretical framework underlines social power of groups or institutions in controlling people's mind and subsequently their actions more discursively. Thus, issues of discursive power would address the two following basic questions:

- I. How do more powerful groups exercise control on the public discourse?
- II. How does such a discourse control the minds and actions of less powerful groups and with what social consequences?

Concerning the prominent role of political discourse in the enactment, reproduction, and legitimization of power and domination, CDA seems to be a practical tool in clarifying the implicit discursive notions such as power, dominance, hegemony, ideology, class, gender, race, discrimination, interests, institutions, social structure, and social order (Van Dijk, 1995). Therefore, the present study aims at investigating the effect of the application of these two models on promoting optimal experience while reading three genres of journalistic texts.

## **Methodology**

### **Participants**

A sample of 60 EFL Iranian university students comprising 16 males and 44 females who were studying at a private university in Mashhad, Iran, volunteered to participate in the study. They were majoring in Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL). The data were collected from junior students attending a Reading Journalistic Texts course. The respondents were advanced learners of English who were taking the course as the compulsory one at the university. Their age ranged from 18 to 44 years with the mean age of 25.65. All participants received an extra credit for their participation in the study.

### **Instruments**

The informants' perceptions of their experiences were reflected on a perceptions questionnaire (see Appendix A) adapted from Trevino, Webster,

and Ryan (1993) and Terevino and Webster (1992) ( $r = .79$  Cronbach's  $\alpha$ ). The questionnaire contained 14 items in the seven-point Likert-type rating scale format from 7 (strongly agree) to 1 (strongly disagree). Four questions were scored reversely. For the sake of clarity, the scale was pilot studied with 20 university students and edited in the content but not the structure of the questions for the further intelligibility of the scale. To examine whether high scores on perceptions scale truly reflected flow experience as well as probing the informants' reactions to the texts, flow dimension open-ended form consisting of eight open-ended questions which was adopted directly from Mirlohi, Egbert and Ghonsooly (2011) was administered (see Appendix B). Moreover, the instructional materials consisted of some agreed upon journalistic texts by all the students were taken from Reading English Newspapers (Shams, 2007) and some other online newspapers. Finally, to instruct critical analysis of the journalistic texts, both Fairclough's (1989) model and Van Dijk's (1995) framework were applied.

## **Procedure**

The present study was conducted over 16 sessions between January to May 2015. Four steps were followed to determine the sequence of the study. 1) Conducting a TOEFL sample to ensure the homogeneity of participants regarding their proficiency level, 2) flow perceptions questionnaire to reflect on their flow experience after reading three agreed upon genres of journalistic texts at the pretest phase 3) integration of CDA into classroom activities through the application of Fairclough's (1989) model and Van Dijk's (1995) framework to raise the students' awareness of discursive aspects of language followed by discussing the multiple inner layers, 4) administration of flow perception questionnaire during the posttest after reading the very three texts given at the pretest stage.

The mutually agreed instructional materials were from Reading English Newspapers (Shams, 2007) and some journalistic texts extracted from online newspapers. The course book aimed at promoting the students' skills in reading journalistic texts by introducing critical aspects of reading newspapers such as detecting various forms of biases and ideologies, however, it did not provide them with the theoretical coherent framework to

facilitate further the processes of analysis. Therefore, to tackle this problem, the explicit instruction and application of Fairclough's (1989) model along with Van Dijk's (1995) framework were incorporated within the syllabus during the treatment phase. To be more specific, CDA models were applied to pinpoint how language is used discursively to establish specific ideologies by drawing the students' attention to the biased presentation of language in the media which might be imperceptible to the common readers.

Initially, the students' flow experience was assessed on three agreed upon journalistic texts by devoting each session to one text. The extent of flow experience was captured on the perception scale as well as the open-ended form after reading each text. After the instruction and application of CDA models on 10 agreed texts which were taken either from the course book or the online newspapers, the students were asked to reflect on their degree of optimal experience on the same three texts which they read during the pretest phase. Finally, paired-samples t-tests were employed to examine the effect of the integration of these two models on the students' flow experience while reading three genres of journalistic texts.

## **Results**

To investigate whether reading journalistic texts might be flow inducing for EFL learners or not, the means and standard deviations (Table 1) were examined on the perceptions scale right after reading three texts, each on the separate session, once prior to the instruction and once after it on the same texts.

According to Egbert (2003) the participants who averaged 5.0 or above on any survey (equivalent to agree on all questions) are believed to have experienced flow. In this respect, previous research designates the flow experience as being above average on skill and challenge. From these data, it can be established that reading journalistic texts has demonstrated to be flow inducing for EFL learners on all the three tasks both during pretests (NT1, ET1, DT1) and posttests (NT2, ET2, DT2). Moreover, the results designated the descriptive as the most and the narrative as the least flow generating genres. To examine the effect of the instruction of Fairclough's (1989) model and Van Dijk's (1995) framework, paired-samples t-tests were conducted to evaluate the impact of the intervention on students' scores on

the flow perceptions questionnaire after reading the same texts once during the pretest and once the posttest phase.

As Table 2 suggests, there was a statistically significant increase in flow scores on the narrative journalistic text (NT) from Time 1 ( $M = 71.93$ ,  $SD = 7.99$ ) to Time 2 ( $M = 76.28$ ,  $SD = 11.75$ ),  $t(59) = 3.12$ ,  $p < .0005$  (two-tailed). The mean increase in flow scores was 4.34 with a 95% confidence interval ranging from -7.13 to -1.55. The eta squared statistic (.14) indicated a large effect size. Besides, the flow scores on the expository journalistic text (ET) gained a statistically significant increase from Time 1 ( $M = 74.78$ ,  $SD = 9.05$ ) to Time 2 ( $M = 78.23$ ,  $SD = 9.86$ ),  $t(59) = 3.33$ ,  $p < .0005$  (two-tailed). The mean increase in flow scores was 3.44 with a 95% confidence interval ranging from -5.51 to -1.37. The eta squared statistic (.15) indicated a large effect size. Finally, flow scores took a significant incremental trend on the descriptive journalistic text (DT) from Time 1 ( $M = 76.03$ ,  $SD = 6.03$ ) to Time 2 ( $M = 79.30$ ,  $SD = 8.35$ ),  $t(59) = 3.69$ ,  $p < .0005$  (two-tailed). The mean increase in scores was 3.26 with a 95% confidence interval ranging from -5.03 to -1.49. The eta squared statistic (.17) indicated a large effect size. Therefore, as the data suggest, it seems that the application of Fairclough's (1989) model and Van Dijk's (1995) framework for CDA can pave the way for promoting optimal experience while reading journalistic texts.

## **Discussion and Conclusions**

The present study attempted to provide information to extend our understanding of the impact of implementing CDA on fostering the flow experience while reading journalistic texts in EFL classes. In doing so, firstly, the researchers investigated whether reading journalistic texts can be flow generating by itself or not. The results indicated the positive and significant effect of journalistic materials on creating optimal experience. In this respect, the growing literature plausibly asserts that reading is the most widely reported flow inducing activity (McQuillan & Conde, 1996).

In particular, Sato (1988) has conducted several studies on flow experience in that the participants' descriptions of the flow of reading fit other optimal experiences. It can be reasonably argued that attaining optimal experience in turn can result in sustaining more control, attention, interest,

and immersion in the text (Massimini, Csikszentmihalyi & DelleFave, 1988). More specifically, attention as the flow dimension is consciousness raising given that undivided attention has a facilitative role in detecting the stimulus, categorizing it depending on the prior information, and organizing it more effectively (Csikszentmihalyi, 1988).

Moreover, the results confirmed findings of Mirlohi, Egbert and Ghonsooly (2011) in the field of translation along with Ghonsooly and Hamedei (2014) in the EFL context in that the descriptive mode revealed to be the most and the narrative as the least flow inducing genres. More importantly, the ultimate issue that may make a substantial contribution to the higher productivity of instructional materials is that the study corroborates McQuillan and Conde's (1996) assertion that the students' selected texts are far likelier to produce flow than the assigned texts. Taken together, Kubey and Csikszentmihalyi (1990) concluded that flow experience can be conducive to developing personal abilities along with promoting higher learning to respond to the potential challenges more successfully and readily.

The findings also substantiated the researchers' presumption that the explicit instruction and application of CDA models may have an impact on flow experience while reading journalistic texts. The role of CDA in affecting the optimal experience is not surprising given the fact that CDA is, in essence, concerned with an oppositional analysis of the structures and strategies of dominant discourse and their cognitive and social conditions and implications. In this respect, it conforms to Brunner (1976) model of scaffolding as it highlights the significance of explicit instructions at the initial stages to help the learners develop their full potentials. To reach this end, the application of Fairclough's (1989, 1995) model can be beneficial as it directs the learners' attention to the signifiers that make up the texts, the specific choice of vocabularies, their juxtapositioning, sequencing, and so forth (Janks, 1997) by specifying textual analysis, processing analysis, and social analysis as the three interrelated dimensions of discourse required for conducting a detailed critical analysis.

Simply put, Fairclough (2001) presents ten questions for text analysis and divides them under three headings of vocabulary, grammar, and textual structures based on Halliday's Introduction to Functional Grammar (1994).

In this regard, one has meticulously to examine lexicalization, patterns of transitivity, use of active and passive voice, nominalization, mood, modality or plurality, thematic structure of the text, cohesion devices, and the information focus (Janks, 1997). Concerning the interpretation level, Fairclough (2001) emphasizes on intertextual contexts, quotes, sources, and assumptions as well as the discourse types and frames which are connotative and give additional information to the message. The ultimate level, explanation, aims at interpreting discourse in view of power relations, ideologies, and socio-historical conditions by analyzing social determinants and the expressed ideologies within the text (Fairclough, 2001), however, Van Dijk (1995) contended that CDA is beyond the usual methodological three dimensional model in that CDA is a part and parcel of social and political life which explicitly takes its oppositional stance. Consequently, it goes beyond saying that CDA can be effective in enhancing the learners' flow experience as long as it enables the readers to take the engaged or estranged positions. In other words, estrangement or alienation can facilitate the critical analysis of the text (Janks, 1997).

The findings of the present study are also compatible with the theories that underline the primary role of readers' exposure to the ideological assumptions of the text in the improvement of their critical thinking abilities (Wallace, 1992; Hashemi & Ghanizadeh, 2012) which can be a plausible explanation for promoting optimal experience, accordingly. Viewing from this perspective, as CDA would have an impact on detecting the inherent hybrid discourses and presuppositions, it would pave the way for reading between the lines to discover and reflect on the ideological assumptions of the text more effectively (Hashemi & Ghanizadeh, 2012), henceforth, it would result in the easier attainment of three dimensions of Egbert's (2003) flow model namely, skill-challenge balance, attention, and control. This would be hardly surprising since the profound effect of CDA on interpretation and identification of unstated assumptions as the two components of critical thinking has been well established (Watson & Glaser, 2002 as cited in Hashemi & Ghanizadeh, 2012). Ultimately, the development of critical thinking abilities would lead to the enhancement of emotional, motivational, and metacognitive factors (Leung & Kember, 2003) which

might be in turn another contributory factor in the rise of the flow experience by affecting the reader's interest as another dimension of the flow model.

Taken together, the findings of the present study should be treated cautiously as it is suffering a number of limitations. Firstly, the participants were chosen based on available sampling structure. Secondly, a true experimental design consisting of the control group along with the experimental one could not be applied due to the ethical issues of depriving the control group from the beneficial treatment for a two-credited course. Thirdly, the role of gender, age, degree of familiarity with all the subject materials, and other confounding variables could not be taken into account, exclusively. Besides, in spite of the researchers' awareness of using qualitative methods such as interviews, observations, case studies, and more importantly experience sampling method as the most commonly applied method in the flow studies, the flow perception questionnaires as well as the descriptive open ended form were the major sources of data collection due to the operational conditions. Therefore, a new line of inquiry is recommended to examine the potential effect of the extraneous variables on flow experience coupled with overcoming the stated limitations more practically.

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### **Appendix A: Flow Perceptions Questionnaire**

1. This task excited my curiosity.
2. This task was interesting in itself.
3. I felt that I had no control over what was happening during this task.
4. When doing this task I was aware of distractions.
5. This task made me curious.
6. This task was fun for me.
7. I would do this task again.
8. This task allowed me to control what I was doing.
9. When doing this task, I was totally absorbed in what I was doing.
10. This task bored me.
11. During this task, I could make decisions about what to study, how to study it, and/or with whom to study.
12. When doing this task I thought about other things.
13. This task aroused my imagination.
14. I would do this task even if it were not required.

### **Appendix B: Flow-Dimension-Open-Ended Form**

1. What did you find challenging or too hard in this task?
2. What did you find that was boring or too easy?
3. What made this task interesting to you?
4. What made this task not interesting to you?
5. What helped you to focus on this task?
6. What made you lose focus during this task?
7. What parts of the task could you control?
8. What parts of the tasks could you not control?

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