

What Goes On When Tertiary Students Are Engaged In An Online Academic Writing Course?

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Introduction

The learning process is a complex one with many intertwining variables. The learners' characteristics could be a defining factor and so is prior learning experiences and knowledge, which are the manifests of metacognitive, socio-affective and cognitive systems. A learning task engagement calls for an exertion of personal control and the fulfillment of efficiency expectations. In learning, the learner activates a number of processes such as those that concern attentional, retrieval, metacognitive and rehearsal strategies. McCombs (1988) sums up these complexities in his multimodal model of learning with certain underlying assumptions. Among them is that learning success can be manipulated. In promoting learning, the teacher can promote strategy learning such as self-directed learning. Learners if trained can select and be their own judge as to the efficacy of strategy use for the learning task. Lessard-Closton (1997) identified several basic characteristics to describe language learning strategies: they are learner-generated, they enhance language learning and competence, they may be visible or unseen and they involve the processing of information and the use of memory.

Language learning strategies are very much influenced by the development of general learning strategies that see their roots in cognitive and educational psychology. They can also be traced to developments in L1 language studies. Language learning strategies span a history that began in the 1970s. The early concerns focused on observation of a good language learner in order that weaker students were aided to improve their learning. Exploratory studies of this nature included works by Rubin (1975), Wong-Fillmore (1976), Naiman et al. (1978), and Bialystok (1978). The next stage involved more multi-pronged approaches to gather information about strategy use in language learning. These studies may be identified with Politzer and McGroarty (1985), O'Malley et al. (1985), Wenden (1987), and Chamot and Kupper (1987). In the third phase, research became more definitive, focusing on specific groups of ESL learners, proficiency levels, and gender and learning strategies. These are seen in works by Ehrman and Oxford (1989), Oxford (1990) and Green and Oxford (1993) In the Malaysian scene, numerous others complemented the effort such as those by Iswander Kaur (2001), Lim (2003), Lau (2004), and Rashidah Begum (2005).

Traditional learning has undergone many a change, among which learning through computers is. Online learning as a variation or innovation is a current area that has attracted new explorations in this age of computers and technology. Currently, learning English using the computer in Malaysia suffers a low priority. Pandian (2003) conducted a survey on computer literacy and found that only 19.2% of the population surveyed (n=376) said that they used the computer for learning English. He further elaborates that it is highly possible that an even much smaller figure would be obtained if people are asked about learning specific language skills (reading, writing, listening and speaking) with the aid of the computer. In the Malaysian

context, online learning which involves writing is therefore unsurprisingly still very much experimentation with researchers continually contributing to the effort of understanding what goes on in this new learning environment.

Online learning that involves writing is, however, considered widely practised in the U.S.A. Sullivan and Dautermann (1996: 202) expressed this about the U.S. learning situation, "...many instructors have a sense of inevitability that computer use is pervasive throughout the professional workplace and the writing classroom must "evolve" to remain relevant". In tandem with this development, many online language courses have been developed by many U.S. institutions. A web search reveals numerous sites that dealt with writing and these include

<http://www.ipl.org/teen/aplus>

<http://msppiggy.etl.noaa.gov/write/>

<http://webster.comnet.edu/mla.htm>

<http://www.io.com/~hcexres/tcm1603/acchtm/acctoc.html>

The Study

In this study, the learning environment is web-based and the learning situation is related to a course in research writing put together from web-based resources for a group of ESL tertiary students. The challenge in this study is to address the question: How do students decode learning material (in an online writing course) and do they use the various cognitive, metacognitive and socio-affective strategies to learn, retain and recall the new information and integrate it with prior knowledge?

Specifically, the study raised the following questions:

1. What are the metacognitive and socio-affective strategies used by Malaysian students in an online course on academic writing?
2. What are the perceptions among students about the online training course?

Methodology

The study adopts both quantitative and qualitative means to obtain the data. It is a mixed design. The quantitative data allows predetermined attributes to be evaluated and synthesized while an ethnographic design allows the investigation to be set in an authentic and naturalistic environment. The naturalistic setting entails an attitude of detachment that permits the researcher to observe the conduct of self and those under observation to understand the mechanisms of social processes, and to account for the related processes. The mix method design provides a holistic approach in which one method enhances the other in its contribution to salience of data.

Sample

Eleven undergraduate students participated voluntarily in the writing project. Their age ranged from 20 to 24 years. Altogether, there were four females and seven males. All of them were from the science discipline with English grades ranging from A1 to C 4 in their fifth form school leaving certificate examination, *Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM)*.

Instruments

The instruments used in the study involved the Oxford's SILL Questionnaire (see Appendix), online materials on research writing, evaluation forms, journal entries, field notes, and interviews. Online materials were sourced from the AltaVista search engine. A URL dictionary and a thesaurus were supplementary facilities that accompanied the use of the online materials.

Findings and Discussion

A total of 12 meetings were scheduled for the online writing experience which focuses on research writing. The schedule was as follows:

Meetings	Topics	Websites
1	An orientation: Getting started	Learn the Net
2	General Overview of research writing process	Internet Public Library's A+ Research and Writing
3	Specific information of the research writing process, Online activities and exercises for practice	C.Guildford's Paradigm Online Writing Assistant
4	Specific details of analytical writing for science and technology	TRM. George's Analytical Writing for Science and Technology
5		
6	Managing research	C.Darling's Guide to Grammar and Writing
7	SEMESTER BREAK	
8	Grammar, punctuation and word choice	Odessa College's Hypertext Writing Tutorials
9	Online tutorials and practice	McMurrey's Online Technical Writing
10	Writing research proposals	Odessa College's Hypertext Writing Tutorials
11	Prose style and mechanics	Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute Writing Centre
12	Writing research grants and thesis	Michigan State University Writing Centre
13	Wrapping up	

The students were immersed in the prepared programme for one semester and the students were in constant contact with the facilitator. As they learn how to write online, the facilitator made field notes and also monitored their progress using evaluation forms to confirm strategies used. Interviews were conducted to obtain further information or to confirm data.

Quantitative Data

The bulk of the data on strategy use were collected mainly from a pre- and a post test (SILL). The pre-SILL and post SILL scores with a total possible score of 5 are reported for each of the parts found in the questionnaire. The results are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Pre and Post test SILL Scores

SILL Components	Pre test Scores	Post test Scores
Part D (Organizing and evaluating learning)	(3.4)	3.6
Part C (Compensating for missing knowledge)	(3.2)	3.5
Part F (Learning with others)	(3.2)	3.4
Part B (Using mental processes)	(3.1)	3.6
Part A (Remembering more effectively)	(2.6)	3.1
Part E (Managing emotions)	(2.6)	3.0
Average	(3.1)	3.4
Percentage	(62)	(68)

It is observed that the pretest scores ranged from 2.6 to 3.4. The range became narrower as a result of the online intervention (3.0 to 3.6). All the scores showed an increase although it was not substantial. The highest increase was 0.5 and the lowest was 0.2. The most notable increase was in: Remembering more effectively (Part A) and Managing emotions (Part E) domains. The details in these domains are as follows:

Part A

- I think of relationships between what I already know and new things I learn in English.
- I use new English words in a sentence so that I can remember them.
- I connect the sound of a new English word and an image or picture of the word to help me to remember the word.

Part E

- I try to relax whenever I feel afraid of using English.
- I give myself a reward or treat when I do well in English.
- I write down my feelings in a language learning diary.

Although the score increases are not substantial, it stands to reason to note that a large number of the increases crossed the medium level of 2.5 which could be interpreted as the mean performance. Thus a score of 3.0 could be considered as a benchmark that showed better than average performance. The highest increase of 0.5 was recorded for **Part B** (Using mental processes). This is noteworthy, as it seems to indicate that learning how to write online appears more stimulating. With greater mental stimulation, it leads likely to a parallel increase in all other domains. This increase is higher than the score increase for Part D (Organising and evaluating learning) which also reached a post test score of 3.6 (from 3.4). It is interesting that students reported that online learning stimulated learning with others (Part F). Online learning is generally considered less interactive as far as human contact is concerned. However, in this instance, the students felt that they became more interactive. The reason could be that after-class discussion among students was generated after the online task engagement. This is an encouraging indication as the learning environment is not seen to promote an “isolationist” attitude where learning support could be lacking. This also points to the need for providing chat-room facilities for students to express themselves after a learning encounter if students are unable to interact physically. Part A (Remembering more effectively) and Part E

(Managing emotions) remain the domains with the lowest scores (2.6 for pretest score and 3.1 for posttest score), 2.6 for pretest score and 3.0 for post test score, respectively). However, as noted earlier, these domains in fact were observed as the highest and second highest score increase. Thus while these strategy domains are least activated when compared to the others, the online experience nonetheless saw students becoming increasingly encouraged to tap on these resources for learning.

On the whole, the scores showed that students in an online environment became more conscious about strategy use. This positive relationship between strategy use and writing awareness could eventually lead to an improvement in performance after an online course. The average score obtained shows an above average use of strategies for online language learning among tertiary ESL students. In a sense, the data point to an elaboration of e-learning which is contextualized as knowledge management. In Jeung's (2003: 595) words, this stage of e-learning involves learning from a pool of expert knowledge that is delivered online. This learning can result in intense interactions among members in the community. E-learning illustrates the gaining of new experiences situated in an environment that gives the extended right to education and expanded opportunity for learning.

As to the sub categories of strategy use, the most used (90% and above) and least sub-strategies (0 -5%) were tabulated in Tables 2 and 3.

Table 2: Most used sub-strategies for online learning to write

Question for clarification	(social-mediation)	100%
Summarising	(cognitive)	91%
Advance organization	(metacognitive)	91%
Self-monitoring	(metacognitive)	91%

Table 3: Sub-strategies that are seldom used or not used at all for online learning to write

Keyword method	(cognitive)	0%
Recombination	(cognitive)	0%
Self-reinforcement	(social mediation)	0%
Rehearsal	(cognitive)	3%
Delayed production	(metacognitive)	3%

From the observations, use of questions as a strategy predominates. This could be due to the presence of the facilitator during the online learning and the familiarity with face-to-face interaction. It could also point to the need to provide opportunities for students to ask questions even in an online environment as questions are likely to lead to better learning. Summarizing is also a favoured strategy and on a wider plane, the students were seen to constantly plan their learning through advance organization with attention given to self-monitoring. These data augments well for the development of an autonomous online learner.

On the other hand, there were some strategies that were not used at all. There were the uses of keyword method (cognitive), recombination (cognitive) and self-reinforcement (social mediation). Two other sub-strategies registered only 3% of use, which are that of rehearsal (cognitive) and delayed production (metacognitive). The students were not given any explicit strategy training and this area could be further explored if the repertoire of strategies were to be increased.

Qualitative Data

The ethnographic aspect of the research design was more data driven as the information evolved from the observations. From the observations, two new strategies were uncovered aside from those listed by O'Malley et al. and Chamot and Kupper. They were the use of repetition that falls in the cognitive domain (15%) and cooperating with others (social-affective domain) which shows a frequency of 61%. Repetition as a strategy could perhaps be a useful aid to learning especially in the ESL situation. It recorded only a 15% of use, but it remains noticeable among the students under study. The other strategy, cooperating with others (61%), is more defined. In managing their personal space in online learning, the students are seen to accommodate learning through cooperating with others. The students learn on a cooperative basis and attest to collaborative learning as a dominant feature even in an online environment. Subscribing to the notion that greater strategy use will promote learning, collaborative learning is of potential as a pedagogical approach in online learning. Online learning is said to offer pedagogical renewals as a new form of learning takes place.

Other information is obtained through evaluation forms that require students to answer open-ended questions. Their opinions about the online experience are presented below:

1. Do you think you have learnt from the online classes?

There is a 100% total agreement about having learnt from the online experience.

2. Which website was the most informative?

The answers were mixed. There was no discernable pattern. It could be concluded that students had a variety of interest. The online resources appear to give learner's choice and autonomy in self-directed learning. They were given a spectrum of learning experiences and they could extend their learning by choosing a channel that attracted them. This personal choice in online learning resources could motivate learning.

- a. Internet Public Library A + Research and Writing for High School and College Students (<http://www.ipl.org/teen/aplus>)
- b. The Asian Institute of Technology Centre for Language and Educational Technology (<http://www.clet.ait.ac.th/EL21INT.htm>)
- c. Empire State College's Research Room (<http://www.esc.edu/htmlpages/writer/menuhtm>)
- d. Amicus Software and Multimedia Services (<http://www.amicus.nl.copyedit.html>)
- e. Purdue University Online Writing Lab (<http://owl.english.purdue.edu/Files/132/3-scope.html>)

However, 27.3% felt that none of the sites were informative. It indicates that not every subject found learning about writing a novel experience.

3. Which of the online classes were the least informative?

About 36.4% of the students felt that the lessons offered by the Department of English, University of Victoria did not offer anything new about the writing of summaries. The students were probably very familiar with this aspect of writing.

4. Which of the online classes was the most uninteresting?

About 27.3% of the students identified The Asian Institute of Technology Centre for Language and Educational Technology as the most uninteresting. They felt the lesson was too tedious, with excessive reading a chore leading to one losing sight of the beginning half way through the page. The reading–writing connection must be carefully applied in an online situation. Too much reading may be detriment to the achieving of the writing goals.

5. Would you go for another similar online English course like this?

While some students felt that the writing exposure was not an enhancing experience they had a positive outlook for online learning. The question elicited a 100% affirmative answer. In other words, the new environment could be very much exploited for learning. None of them are adverse to this channel of obtaining information, though materials must be attractive enough to make learning meaningful. In this respect, e-learning instructors are encouraged to gauge the efficacy of their own home grown e-materials which could go a long way in harnessing learner's imagination with an understanding of learner's interest, language use, and sense of humour of the target group" (Ennals, 1993: 22).

On the whole, the students felt that the online classes provided a useful introduction and guidelines to research writing. The classes generated greater confidence about learning to write and web-based instruction had exposed them to a wide array of resources. There was much reinforcing of existing knowledge and additional knowledge was also acquired.

Another source of information was from journal entries which encouraged students to verbalize their thoughts about their online experience. This 'think aloud' version was a guided effort as students generally had problems in verbalizing their thoughts if the task was totally unstructured. In fact, some initial training was provided to ensure that useful data could be obtained. Sample questions include:

- a. Before starting on the exercises, did you tell yourself in advance that you will look at a certain aspect of grammar? If yes, what did you pay attention to and why? If not, why not?
- b. What specific strategies did you use? Did you skim first for headings and italicized words? Did you pause to take notes? Where? Why? Did you read aloud? Why?

The entries revealed a major problem of having to concentrate and read from the screen. Online learning must not be too taxing in this aspect. Often, the overloading of information leads to negative responses to this mode of learning. The pedagogue must be consciously aware of how much attention can be harnessed in an online lesson. Online lessons obviously

come with many traditional problems which include that of concentration and like any other lesson, the teacher would need to modify her teaching style to suit the students. Having to read from the screen for too long is something that could confound the problem. The students reported that one of the strategies that they resorted to as self help was to resort to good old fashioned reading aloud. Some of them also highlighted the fear of having to explore the World Wide Web on their own and felt overwhelmed by the amount of information.

Online learning is yet to be widely practiced in their local situation. To date, the university does not support a formal online course in language learning. The experience of learning online is still very novel and the accompanying psychological fears could indeed be translated into frightening encounters. The presence of the facilitator was reassuring as they found her helpful and her presence contributed to a relaxing mood whereby they could joke and laugh with her. This support is likely to be important for the initialization of online learning. The students were aware that they need to take charge of their own learning and that the learning involved changes in learning style and use of strategy. Skimming and scanning for overall meaning was still the often practiced skill and once important parts of the text were located, they spent time reading them. The traditional dictionary was preferred over the online version as a facility to learning.

To round up the discussion, useful denominators that make up a good strategy user vis-a-vis a poor strategy user could be surmised. From the data gathered, the following profiles were drawn:

Profile of a Good Online Strategy User – Student A

- Female, good language mastery (grade 1 in English for SPM – school leaving certificate)
- Initially suffered from cognitive overload.
- In the beginning she hoped to be clearer about how to manage the online information.
- This shows that the student has a goal, developed after she realized that there would be challenges that would require a lot of reading in order to learn.
- Her journal entries show that she always summarizes the content of the class before commenting on how the new information has helped her or how it will be useful.
- “I tried doing the summarizing and paraphrasing exercises and I think it’s worth a try. These exercises would help me when I’m doing my conclusion... (Summarizing and elaboration strategies)
In order to understand all of the text, I reread the text (advance organizer) and I made a conclusion of what exactly it is about.”
- There is an increase in number of strategies used - from 9 to 14.
She testifies: “As time passed by, and as I had a better in- depth view on the lessons... this online learning should work as well.”
- She cooperates with other students and asks questions when she was unsure.
This shows a substantial amount of risk-taking in learning.
- She is purposeful, monitors her own comprehension and is in control of her learning and is able to evaluate her own learning as well.

Profile of a Poor Online Strategy Use (Student B)

- Male with a grade 3 in English SPM.
- He is more concerned with web presentation rather than content. He made comments such as the web site is not attractive; colours were too bright
- He is overconfident and has a poor attitude.
- He is not a problem solver and did not monitor his own comprehension
- There is a lack of purpose in learning

What seems to be the obvious contrast are the affective attributes. An appropriate openness is important for online learning. Like the successful learner, Student B must be focused, with an initiative for problem solving and he should monitor his own learning. The profiles were obtained through a case study approach where two students were identified based on their scores that showed them to be the most successful strategy user (post SILL score = 78%) on the one hand, and the lowest scores on the other (post SILL score = 52%). Their behaviours and characteristics were then investigated through observations, interviews and journal entries.

On the whole, students do exhibit a high level of motivation and found the course useful. This is reflected in the following comments:

Journal comments: "It is good. If I hadn't come to this course, I wouldn't have known all this. I would have solely depend on my lecturer, feeling frustrated for not knowing what to do."
"Our other course mates and friends certainly do not know what they are missing out on ..."

Conclusion

Essentially, there was not much of a significant difference in the strategies used in an online environment when compared to the traditional mode of learning. However students did demonstrated their versatility and flexibility in adapting their skills to a new learning mode. Three strategies were not used at all: contextualization through keyword association, recombination and self-reinforcement through rewards or praise. Two new sub-strategies were however identified, repetition as reinforcement of learning, and conferencing. The students were generally seen to exhibit an above average user of strategies and the variety and frequency could be increased for more efficient online learning.

Most students commented that the Internet did encouraged them to be independent learners, but they expressed reservations about making online writing classes an option in schools. A facilitator seemed necessary to keep them focused and he/she had to be knowledgeable and well-prepared to answer the many questions posed by the students.

The efficient online learner was different from the less efficient learner in terms of self-monitoring, problem solving and motivation. On the whole, the online course resulted in a general improvement in the frequency of strategy use. The attitude was positive though some caution was expressed for online application in the classroom. However, such negativism could be outmatched by other considerations. Among them is the cultivation of a new mode of independent and democratic learning which encourages broader thinking in the context of rapid networked communication. In the process, there is constant construction of new knowledge and new meaning. Tornow (1997: 218) aptly observes that students' resistance to online learning "appears to be more than matched by their enthusiasm for the new processes

and genres which computer polylogue appears to engender". Change is to a certain extent a risky enterprise, but there is no denying that the World Wide Web promises many exciting challenges as the connection between the immediate and the distant becomes less intimidating, with learning becoming more and more democratic, recognizing the central tonality of the new shift in teaching and knowledge acquisition facilitated by the computer.

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APPENDIX

Oxford's (1989) Strategy Inventory for Language Learning

Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) Version for Speakers of Other Language Learning English

Direction

This form of the STRATEGY INVENTORY FOR LANGUAGE LEARNING (SILL) is for students of English as a second or foreign language. You will find statements about learning English. Please read each statement. On the separate Worksheet, write the response (1, 2, 3, 4, or 5) that tells HOW TRUE OF YOU THE STATEMENT IS.

1. Never or almost never true of me
2. Usually not true of me
3. Some what true of me
4. Usually true of me
5. Always or almost true of me

NEVER OR ALMOST NEVER TRUE OF ME means that the statement is very rarely true of you.

USUALLY NOT TRUE OF ME means that the statement is true less than half the time.

USUALLY TRUE OF ME means that the statement is true of you about half the time.

ALWAYS OR ALMOST ALWAYS TRUE OF ME means that the statement is true of you almost always.

Answer in terms of how well the statement describes you. Do not answer how you think you should be. Or what other people do. There are no right or wrong answers to these statements. Put your answer on the separate Worksheet. Please make no marks on the items. Work as quickly as you can without being careless. This usually takes about 20-30 minutes to complete. If you have any questions, let the teacher know immediately.

EXAMPLE

1. Never or almost never true of me
2. Usually not true of me
3. Somewhat true of me
4. Usually true of me
5. Always or almost always true of me.

Read the items and choose a response (I through 5 as above), and write it in the space after the item.

I actively seek out opportunities to talk with native speakers of English_____

You have just completed the example item. Answer the rest of the items on the Worksheet.

1. Never or almost never true of me
 2. Usually not true of me
 3. Somewhat true of me
 4. Usually true of me
 5. Always or almost always true of me
- (Write answers on Worksheet)

Part A

1. I think of relationships between what I already know and new things I learn in English.
2. I use new English words in a sentence so I can remember them.
3. I connect the sound of a new English word and an image or picture of the word to help me remember the word.
4. I remember a new English word by making a mental picture of a situation in which the word might be used.
5. I use rhymes to remember new English words.
6. I use flashcards to remember new English words.
7. I physically act out new English words.
8. I review English lessons often.
9. I remember new English words or phrases by remembering their location on the page, on the board, on the street sign.

Part B

10. I say or write English words several times.
11. I try to talk like native English speakers.
12. I practice the sounds of English.
13. I use the English words I know in different ways.
14. I start conversations in English.
15. I watch English language TV shows spoken in English or go to movies spoken in English.
16. I read for pleasure in English.
17. I write notes, messages, letters, or reports in English.
18. I first skim an English passage (read over the passage quickly) then go back and read carefully.
19. I look for words in my own language that are similar to new words in English.
20. I try to find patterns in English.
21. I find the meaning of an English word by dividing it into parts that I understand.
22. I try not to translate word-for-word.
23. I make summaries of information that I hear or read in English.

Part C

24. To understand unfamiliar English words, I make guesses.
25. When I can't think of a word during a conversation in English, I use gestures.
26. I make up new words if I do not know the right in English.
27. I read English without looking up every new word.
28. I try to guess what the other person will say next in English.
29. If I can't think of an English word, I use a word or phrase that means the same thing.

Part D

30. I try to find as many ways as I can to use my English.
31. I notice my English mistakes and use that information to help me do better.
32. I pay attention when someone is speaking English.
33. I try to find out how to be a better learner of English.

1. Never or almost never true of me
2. Usually not true of me
3. Somewhat true of me
4. Usually true of me
5. Always or almost always true of me

(Write answers on Worksheet)

34. I plan my schedule so I will have enough time to study time to study English.
35. I look for people I can talk to in English.
36. I look for opportunities to read as much as possible in English.
37. I have clear goals for improving my English skills.
38. I think about my progress in learning English.
- 39.

Part E

40. I try to relax whenever I feel afraid of using English.
41. I encourage myself to speak English even when I am afraid of making a mistake.
42. I give myself a reward or treat when I do well in English.
43. I notice if I am tense or nervous when I am studying or using English.
44. I write down my feeling in a language learning diary.
45. I talk to someone else about how I feel when I am learning English.
- 46.

Part F

47. If I do not understand something in English, I ask the other person to slow down or say it again.
48. I ask English speakers to correct me when I talk.
49. I practice English with other students.
50. I ask for help from English speakers.
51. I ask questions in English.
50. I try to learn about the culture of English speakers.