

Use of Self-regulated Learning Strategies in Paragraph Writing at Van Lang University

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EOI: <http://eoi.citefactor.org/10.11250/ijte.01.03.001>

Received: 29/08/2021

Revision: 13/09/2021

Accepted: 17/09/2021

Online: 19/09/2021

ABSTRACT

Keywords: self-regulated learning strategies, challenges, paragraph writing

This cross-sectional study aims to find out what self-regulated learning (SRL) strategies the English-majored freshmen at Van Lang University in Vietnam exploited during the academic writing course and their challenges when using such SRL ones. 100 English-majored freshmen selected randomly from twenty Writing-2 classes in the second semester of the school year 2020-2021 made up the paper's participants. To collect the relevant data, a set of 30-item questionnaires, which are categorized into six dimensions: motive, method, time, performance, physical environment, and social environment, served as the instrument, accompanied by interviews. Descriptive analysis revealed that students used SRL strategies in their writing moderately. The findings indicated that most students had difficulties using three dimensions: time management, method, and motive in writing. Despite a number of writing challenges, students tended to take up dimensions, namely physical and social environment, to surpass their writing difficulties.

Introduction

It is strongly believed that writing skills are considered one of the most difficult ones to be mastered and hard to teach (Richard & Renandya, 2002). Undoubtedly, academic writing plays a crucial role in tertiary students' life, and it is of great importance for students to succeed in a particular discipline (Ndoricimpa & Barad, 2021; Elsegood & Rahimi, 2009; Pham & Usaha, 2009). Not surprisingly, it requires numerous aspects, namely grammatical and rhetorical devices, conceptual and judgment elements. Also, learning writing, the students need to enhance their critical reasoning skills in order to be able to express their ideas apparently (Elsegood & Rahimi, 2009). However, helping students to be more effective in writing is not an easy job for the teachers (Pham & Usaha, 2009).

Regardless of its significance as a sign of literacy in language acquisition, writing skill has not been taught much in the school-based curriculum. In spite of spending many years learning English, Vietnamese students' English ability is still far from the expectation, especially writing skills. Indeed, students' weak writing results were clearly shown through the survey of

Tuoitre Newspaper (2015). When taking the National High School Graduation Examination in the academic years of 2013-2014 and 2015-2016, the majority of the candidates had a really low score, mainly between 0 and 2.0 points out of 10.0 points. In regard to Do (2018)' findings, most of them supposed that writing a paragraph for a given topic was too difficult for them to know how to start and what to write (Do, 2018). Also, English major freshmen at Van Lang University kept complaining that the writing section was really a challenging task.

The first semester of the school year 2020-2021 witnessed students' scores in writing one course at an alarming rate. Specifically, the statistical marks showed that 53.4% of 783 students got an average mark (5 to 6), and 6% of them got a good mark (8 to 9). Noticeably, up to 25.2% of them failed the exam.

Table 1. The students' grades in writing one course

Mark	Number of students	Percentage
<5	197/783	25.2%
5	259/783	33.1%
6	159 /783	20.3%
7	121/783	15.5%
8	36/783	4.6%
9	11/783	1.4%
10	0/783	0%

From such an alert circumstance, there comes a must to find out a number of suitable methods that catch learners' special attention to their autonomy and guide them to take their own learning strategies up. Of all these strategies, self-regulated learning is generally considered as one of the best predictors of learning and personal development (Zimmerman & Martinez-Pons, 1986; Pintrich & DeGroot, 1990; Purdie & Hattie, 1996).

In the light of the positive results of the previous research on using self-regulated learning (SRL) strategies in a different context, i.e., Magno (2009), Bakry and Alsamadani (2015) and Abadikhah, Aliyan and Talebi (2018), the paper was conducted to investigate into the use of SRL strategies among English major freshmen at Van Lang University as well as to explore the difficulties they faced when using the strategies in learning writing.

2. Literature review

2.1 Definition of SRL

SRL has gained popularity among a wide range of scholars and researchers, e.g., Pintrich (2000); Zimmerman (1994, 1989, 2002); Andrade and Evans (2012), Abadikhah, Aliyan & Talebi (2018), Teng (2021), etc. owing to its significance in language achievement. There are numerous ways to define SRL, according to many authors. One of the most commonly accepted definitions is from Zimmerman, who used to define SRL as when learners actively take part in their own learning process meta-cognitively, motivationally and behaviorally (Zimmerman, 1989, p.329). Pintrich later gave his more detailed definition. He referred to SRL when learners follow the process, including setting goals, monitoring, regulating and controlling their cognition, motivation, and behavior (Pintrich, 2000, p.453). In 2008, Zimmerman clarified SRL is a proactive process ranging from setting goals, setting and deploying strategies, and self-monitoring. Thus, self-regulated students have to be more active

and pay attention to their learning. Also, they know how to manage their learning in a logical way.

For the sake of the study, three phases of self-regulation suggested by Zimmerman (2000) are of avail, including the forethought phase (students utilize task analysis), the performance phase (students deploys the forethought phase and utilize self-control and self-observation) and the self-reflection phase (students self-evaluate their progress and self-adjust their achievement). Zimmerman (2000) proposed the cycle of SRL strategies in Figure 1 below:

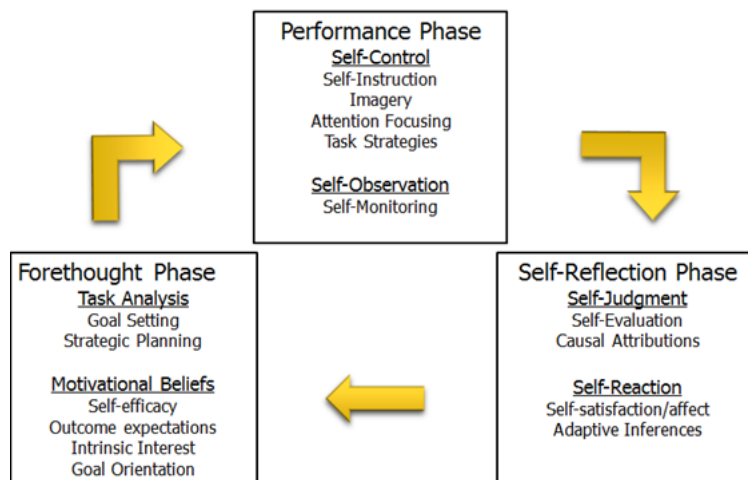


Figure 1. The cyclical self-regulation phases (Zimmerman, 2000)

2.2 Frameworks for SRL strategies

Several different self-regulated learning models have been worked out over the past two decades (Puustinen, & Pulkkinen, 2001, p.269). Accordingly, a self-regulated learning practical framework comprises six dimensions that are similar to why, how, when, with whom, where, and what. These dimensions are named motive, methods, time, social environment, physical environment, and performance, respectively (Dembo & Seli, 2012; Zimmerman & Risemberg, 1997; Zimmerman, 2000). The six dimensions were summarized by Andrade & Evans (2015) presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Dimensions of SRL Strategies (Andrade & Evans, 2015)

Dimensions	Keywords	More information on the scale
Motive	Why	Learners get motivated on their own to get through challenging tasks. (Andrade & Evans, 2015, p. 118)
Method	How	Learners deploy different strategies, techniques and methods to complete the tasks. (Andrade & Evans, 2015, p. 118)
Time	When How long	Learners prioritize and split time reasonably into each task. (Andrade & Evans, 2015, p. 118)
Performance	What... accomplished What... improved	Learners self-analyze their learning progress to have better performance. (Andrade & Evans, 2015, p. 119)
Physical environment	Where	Learners are aware of getting distracted by exterior and interior factors. (Andrade & Evans, 2015, p. 119)
Social environment	With whom	Learners search for aids from a variety of resources to facilitate learning. (Andrade & Evans, 2015, p. 119)

2.3 Relationship between SRL strategies and L2 writing

The impact of SRL strategies on writing achievement has been proved by numerous studies, e.g., Goy (2017), Abadikhah, Aliyan & Talebi (2018), Teng (2021), Bai & Wang (2021).

To start with, Goy (2017) did action research to investigate the effect of strategy instruction on foreign language learners' writing skills and self-regulation abilities. The paper was conducted in three weeks with the participation of 18 students. The results demonstrated that learners found it helpful to enhance their writing skills through strategy training. Simultaneously, since learners used a small number of techniques and only their writings were improved slightly, there was a need to have further instruction and feedback.

What is more, Abadikhah, Aliyan & Talebi (2018) found out the perceptions of EFL university students towards self-regulated learning strategies in writing academic papers. The result exposed that the participants used the self-regulatory strategies and processes ranking from moderate to a slightly high degree. Moreover, the findings revealed that participants failed to appropriately employ particular writing strategies, including pre-writing, goal-setting and self-consequence, which suggested a necessity to apply additional strategies for their writing.

For the study of Teng (2021), she looked into the effects of motivational beliefs and self-efficacy on SRL strategies in EFL writing. With the participation of 389 undergraduate students, the findings indicated that the effects of motivational beliefs on SRL strategies were remarkable, while self-efficacy turned out to be a strong indicator of metacognitive, cognitive, and motivational regulation strategies. Noticeably, text processing was supposed to heavily rely on linguistic self-efficacy; meanwhile, self-regulatory efficacy influenced students' use of SRL strategies ranging from knowledge rehearsal, goal-oriented monitoring, idea planning, peer learning to interest enhancement.

In the same year (2021), Bai & Wang examined the relationships among motivational beliefs, SRL strategies use, and competence in EFL writing for the sake of 540 grade 8 students. The results revealed that the samples were slightly interested in writing with their low-level use of self-efficacy. Also, there came a conclusion that both motivation and SRL strategy use generated writing competence, which suggested a necessity of providing more strategy-based instructions to learners.

Generally, SRL strategies benefit students in many ways, such as increasing students' motivation & confidence in their personal learning, raising students' awareness of their limitations and abilities to adjust their learning, facilitating them to their goal-setting, developing students to feel like they belong to the academic program. More importantly, self-regulated learning enables even teachers to provide their students with different academic tasks.

2.4 Research Questions

This paper aims to explore which SRL strategies the English-majored freshmen deployed in their writing of two courses and their difficulties in using such strategies. To reach the purpose of the paper, the survey was designed to answer the two research questions as follow:

- a) What self-regulated learning strategies did the English-majored freshmen use in learning paragraph writing at Van Lang university?
- b) What challenges in using self-regulated learning strategies did the English-majored freshmen face?

3. Methods

3.1 Pedagogical Setting & Participants

For the purposes of the study, 100 English majored first-year students consisting of twenty-two male students and seventy-eight female ones made up the research samples. The participants were chosen randomly from twenty different Writing-2 classes at Van Lang University, Vietnam, during the second semester of 2020-2021. The majority of the students, the average age of 19, were at the pre-intermediate level of English, and they have been studying fundamental subjects pertained to English language major.

For the Writing 2 course, they studied with the compiled coursebook named writing two, whose content was selected from the two-course books Great Writing 2-Great paragraph and Effective Academic Writing 1. Its goals are to offer students abundant step-by-step writing

practice and develop final written products at the B1 level. Also, the writing course provides students with a variety of topic-based vocabulary. The course included 30 teaching periods with two credits. The average number of learners is forty students who study 3 periods a week and complete the course in 10 weeks.

Under the auspices of the course, students have availed the opportunity to study how to write a descriptive paragraph, a listing-order paragraph, a how-to paragraph and an opinion paragraph. After studying a one-hour theoretical period, students are asked to practice writing a 120-word paragraph in 45 minutes and then have peer correction before handing their handwriting out to the lecturer for corrective feedback.

3.2 Design of the Study

This case study research was carried out in a cross-sectional explanatory design; that is, the data were collected at one point in time (Creswell, 2009). Specifically, this research paper tries to find out what SRL strategies students regularly use at Van Lang University, as well as their challenges of using these SRL strategies.

3.3 Data collection & analysis

3.3.1 Questionnaires

A 30-item questionnaire with a 4 Likert scale was used for gathering the information to answer the first research question. Thirty items were categorized into six dimensions which were adapted from Andrade & Evans (2015) - time, motive, method, social environment, performance and physical environment. At the ninth teaching session of the course, one hundred and ten first-year students (110 students) in these twenty classes received a copy of the questionnaire. The questionnaires were employed as a means for the researcher to explore what SRL strategies students used at Van Lang University. A total of 100 valid questionnaires (90.9%) were returned to the researcher right after they had been finished. The students' opinions were tabulated and grouped into six dimensions and then calculated into a percentage to identify what SRL strategies students use.

3.3.2 Interview

Two open-ended questions were used to explore the challenges students faced when using SRL strategies as follow:

Question 1. *What are the challenges you deal with when you use the strategies in learning writing?*

Question 2. *What are the easiest and the most difficult sub-strategies to be used? Why?*

3.4 Data collection procedures

The questionnaires were first delivered to the participants. All of them were encouraged to complete the questionnaires in about 25 minutes. After that, ten students were randomly chosen to participate in the interview. Each student answered the interview questions in 5-7 minutes, and the researcher took notes of their responses carefully.

For presenting the results of the study, percentages of each item were calculated to describe and summarize the responses of the samples. The results of items related to each dimension were presented in tables, and explanations were provided accordingly. Together with the data from the questionnaires, responses collected from the interviews were presented.

4. Results/Findings & Discussion

4.1 Results/Findings

Research question 1: What self-regulated learning strategies did the English-majored freshmen use in learning paragraph writing at Van Lang university?

SRL strategies used by students were explored, including (1) which ones they use most and (2) which ones they used less. This could be explained through the mean score in Figure 2. The data collected from the questionnaires showed that the students deployed SRL to some extent with an unbalanced level as follow

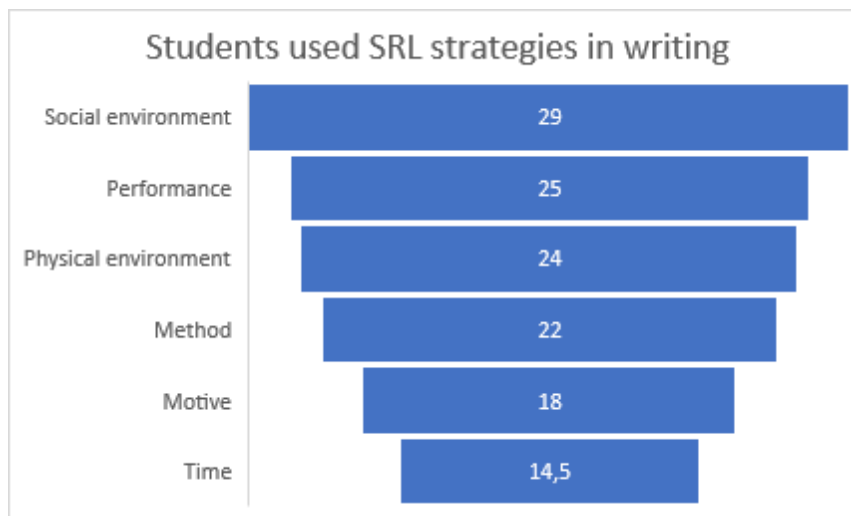


Figure 2. The SRL strategies used by the first-year English majors in learning writing

As can be shown by Figure 2, the social environment was the most frequently used strategy with the highest mean score of 29. Meanwhile, time was the least frequently used strategy, with the lowest mean score of 14.5. It revealed that most of the samples had trouble budgeting their writing time. Another strategy that had a low mean score was motive (M=18). That could explain why writing skills were considered to be the most boring to study. Lack of the main drive for learning may cause sequencing challenges in learning writing. Moreover, the mean score of the method was also low (M=22).

From the students' responses in Table 3, most of the participants heavily relied on support from others to facilitate them to writing easily. In addition, to these samples, getting feedback and grades played a key role in directing them to acknowledge, accept and turn their drawbacks into strengths. Then, the majority of samples reflected that their writing activities were somehow affected by surroundings and internal factors.

Table 3. The SRL strategies most used by the English-majored freshmen in writing

Social environment	I ask my lecturer for help when I have trouble writing.	51%	27%	18%	3%
	I search on the Internet, which helps me write better.	33%	31%	27%	9%
	I use Google translation to help me write easily.	29%	39%	29%	3%
	I actively participate in writing communities via Facebook.	21%	20%	41%	18%
	I read different sample paragraphs from reference books to help me write easily.	27%	35%	25%	13%
Performance	I use feedback from my lecturer to improve my writing skills.	48%	23%	22%	7%
	I understand how well I am doing in my English writing class through my writing marks.	41%	32%	21%	6%
	I know what I need to improve when it comes to writing tasks.	40%	31%	26%	3%
	I always monitor my progress through each writing assignment.	45%	27%	19%	9%
	I appreciate others point out my writing errors.	31%	59%	6 %	4 %
Physical environment	I can write when my classmates make noise.	58%	26%	14%	2%
	I need a place having enough brightness to write.	60%	39%	1%	0%
	I get distracted easily when I write.	35%	65%	0 %	0 %
	I have some anxiety when writing.	26%	48%	22%	4%
	I feel sleepy when writing.	27%	41%	19%	13%

Regarding students' use of SRL strategies (see Table 3), most samples took advantage of the social environment as their most frequent strategies (Mean=29). Specifically, 78% were accustomed to asking for help from teachers, friends, or other online sources to overcome the lack of writing ideas, vocabulary or even the writing outline. More than 60% of samples made use of other sources such as websites, sample paragraphs, google translation to help them write better, while the others found studying via writing communities and reference course books useful with 41% and 62%, respectively. The second frequent strategy used by students was the performance which was revealed through the findings that more than 70% of participants strongly agreed and agreed that feedback from teachers and peers as well as grades helped them make progress in their writing skills. Therefore, 71% could get through their weaknesses when they got involved in writing tasks and assignments. The third frequent strategy with mean=24 reflected how students' writing depended on the physical environment. Particularly, external factors such as noise and brightness prevented students from concentrating on writing (accounted for more than 80% of the samples). Meanwhile, internal factors also hindered 74% of students in their efforts to write and caused 68% of them to fall asleep when writing.

Table 4. The SRL strategies less used by the English-majored freshmen in writing

Dimension	Items	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Time	I always have adequate time to cover the writing process.	0%	3%	78%	19%
	I submit my writing paper on time or before the due time.	1%	6%	32%	61%
	I split time for each writing step.	0%	2%	21%	77%
	I use my time effectively when writing.	3%	11%	69%	17%
	I know how to prioritize writing tasks.	6%	12%	53%	29%
Motive	I have a clear goal to learn writing.	12%	19%	46%	23%
	I am highly motivated to learn writing.	5%	11%	64%	20%
	I feel comfortable when I deal with my writing tasks.	13%	18%	46%	23%
	I know clearly what I am supposed to write.	20%	24%	28%	28%
	I feel encouraged by my writing progress.	17%	24%	48%	11%
Method	I am aware of some writing techniques that improve my writing skills.	19%	29%	30%	22%
	I adapt writing techniques that fit my learning style.	15%	21%	49%	15%
	I search for writing techniques to improve my writing.	17%	28%	42%	13%
	I strictly follow the writing process step by step.	2%	14%	58%	26%
	I apply a variety of writing techniques to improve my writing.	6%	19%	53%	22%

Regarding the samples' feedback in Table 4, method (mean=22) was the strategy the participants made bad use of. Particularly, despite 48% of the students' awareness of practical writing techniques and 45% of them even sought a variety of techniques, only 16% and 25% of them could make good use of these techniques to better writing. Motive with mean=18 also was the dimension students deployed at a moderate level in their writing. Specifically, while 44% of the samples understood their writing purposes and 41% found their progress encouraging, not many students were motivated and convenient with the percentage of 18 and 31, respectively. More importantly, the use of time (mean=14.5) was shown to be used at the least level. Noticeably, although nearly 20% of students mastered how to budget time, the majority (less than 10%) failed to manage their time effectively when dealing with the writing process and the due time to hand in their written product.

Research question 2: What challenges in using self-regulated learning strategies did the English-majored freshmen face?

The interview results showed three main points. One of the most common problems the participants had to face was that when they dealt with a certain topic, they spent most of the time writing with less time for pre-writing activities, i.e., brainstorming and proofreading peer correction. They also explained that time seemed to go by quickly when they were asked to write. As a result, they failed to finish their writing without a conclusion or even no fully supporting ideas and examples. This was greatly related to time management. Another challenge was from the fear of writing. Specifically, eight of the ten participants expressed their anxiety over writing tasks and shared that it was hard for them to improve their writing abilities in a semester. Last but not least, all of the samples supposed that the social environment was the easiest sub-strategy to be used, especially the direct interaction with their classmates to exchange information and the help of technological devices to write their assignments. In terms of the most difficult sub-strategy, while six students claimed that time management is the hardest sub-strategy to be employed, three students said that it was their motive, the other thought that it was their method. In brief, the considerable challenges in applying the SRL strategies among students were method, motive, and especially time management.

4.2. Discussion

Through the data analysis, there was no balance among six dimensions in terms of rates. To be specific, while physical and social environment were in the highest rates, motive and time received much lower and lowest respectively. It could be explained that bad time management posed a series of difficulties for students. In fact, college academic writing requires more tasks full of supporting ideas, explanations and examples. As Andrade and Evans (2012) discussed, writing in a second language may take college students a long time, for they had to struggle against grammar and lexical choices.

Another dimension that was problematic to major English freshmen was motive or goal-setting. Noticeably, the significance of goal-setting used to be proved by Page-Voth and Graham's study (1999). They concluded that those who were taught goal-setting strategies outperformed those who were not in writing performance. One year earlier, in 1989, Britton and Glynn (1989) stated that there was a correlation between time management or task management and goal-setting. Specifically, according to them, poor time management resulted in not achieving specific goals, not segmenting them, and not understanding how to do their best to achieve particular objectives (as cited in Dembo, 2004). Therefore, if students did not know what they had to write, they would find it quite challenging to keep track of required tasks in due time. It, of course, was because time was not controlled suitably.

To solve this problem, Andrade and Evans (2012) suggested that the first step for teaching and learning writing is to arouse awareness of the writing process and of the need to split sufficient time into the different stages of writing (Andrade and Evans, 2012, p.14). They emphasized the nature of writing as a process that should be implemented step by step. (Weigle 2014) supplemented that SRL strategies should be introduced to students right at the beginning, and various stages of writing should be employed fully so as to create better writing.

With the help of technological devices, students felt no difficulties in making good use of them in their study, especially in writing. Indeed, social environment strategies gained popularity among students. The higher rate could explain that with a mean of 3.89. By means of technology, students looked up new words, got their ideas translated into Vietnamese, and asked for help from their friends.

Surprisingly, the participants made good use of physical environment strategies in their writing. With the highest rate, they showed that they could not be distracted much from the room facilities' outside noises. Although a few of them disagreed with the statement, "I switch off my phone to concentrate on my writing", the participants' concentration on writing tasks seemed not to be influenced much.

5. Conclusion

In summary, the study showed the reality of using SRL strategies of the first-year English majors at Van Lang University to improve their writing ability. Although the students used the strategies in learning writing, they only employed these strategies at a moderate level. This needs both lecturers and learners' great efforts to balance SRL strategies usage in teaching and studying writing effectively. Based on the findings, teachers should train their learners or give them more opportunities to improve their time management and method. Moreover, arousing learners' motivation is very crucial because it is positively related to their writing ability.

Due to the scope and nature of the study, shortcomings found from this paper are unavoidable since the findings and the implications were mainly specific to the teaching and learning of Writing two at the Faculty of Foreign Languages in Van Lang University, Vietnam. Moreover, it is such limited time and objective conditions that the statements from questionnaires and explanations are not actually sufficient. For adequate argument, the paper should have been strengthened by a larger size of samples, funds for deeper investigation, and the researcher's better design for interview questions.

For further research, it is recommended that the results be verified with other research instruments and even through an experiment to explore more reliable findings. The research itself also suggested conducting further investigations into the effectiveness of SLR strategies on students' learning outcomes.

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Biodata

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