Learner writing strategies of Seychellois ESL (English as a second language) secondary school students: A sociocultural theory perspective

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the writing strategies that ESL Seychellois learners use when given a joint writing task in a group work situation in class. There has been an increase in research on second language writing strategies that second language learners engage in while writing however, writing strategy research from a sociocultural perspective is limited and is often based on self-reported data. This research contributes to the literature by using a sociocultural theory framework and examined writing strategies of Seychellois ESL students by making use of observation, field notes, and audio-recording of group interactions. Evidence suggests that students made use of five types of strategies: brainstorming, use of the mother tongue, peer-scaffolding, use of background knowledge, and use of humor. While three of the five strategies (brainstorming, use of mother tongue, peer-scaffolding) have been discussed in earlier studies, using background knowledge, in particular, use of film knowledge and humor are additional strategies evident in this particular study. The study adds important evidence to the reconceptualization of writing strategies from a sociocultural perspective. For example, students' "cognition did not only exist within the confines of their bodies, but also in the sociocultural context" (Lei, 2008 p. 230).

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1. Introduction

"What makes a student a good language learner?" has been a preoccupation in the field of second language acquisition (SLA). Toohey and Norton (2001) present a historical account of the various attempts to discover and disseminate information about successful practices. This includes an investigation of the learning biographies of successful individuals in more than one language by Carroll (1967). Stern (1975) and Rubin (1975), among others, speculated that a study of learning strategies by successful language learners would shed light on how to help less successful language learners become more effective in their language use. Building on the work of these language learning strategies (LLS) pioneers, other researchers have conducted studies to ascertain the strategies which the "good" language learners use and the factors affecting the use of these strategies (Griffiths, 2004; Hsaio & Oxford, 2003; Oxford, 1989, 1990; Rubin & Wenden, 1987; Wenden, 1987). However, most of the studies have viewed LLS as a construct that resides within the individual (Bremner, 1999; A. Cohen, 1998; Grainger, 1997; Nacera, 2010; R. Oliver & Purdie, 1999; Oxford, 1990; Rubin & Wenden, 1987; Teh, Embi, Yusoff, & Mahamod, 2009; Wenden, 1987, 1991; Wharton, 2000). The social aspects of LLS have been viewed mainly as marginal compared to the individual or intrapsychological processes (Palfreyman, 2003, 2006). The dichotomy between the individual and the social context has left the interactions between these two aspects largely under-explored (Coyle, 2007). The studies did not consider the interdependence of social and individual processes in learning and that individuals develop through social interaction, which leads them towards self-regulation (Coyle, 2007, p. 65).

In the last three decades, there has been an increase in research on second language writing strategies that aims to discover the actions and behaviors that second language learners engage in while writing. Some of these studies have focused on mental operations that second language learners do while planning, drafting, and revising texts (Raimes, 1985; Zamel, 1983). The Flower and Hayes (1981) writing model indicates the use of background knowledge about topics before beginning the writing process as a useful strategy. The writer retrieves stored information from long-term memory and organizes it before writing. This suggests that a learner's ability to write hinges to a large extent on his or her personal experience.

Other second language writing research has looked at the role of context in which the second language writing takes place and how the second language learners made use of strategies in response to the demands from the discourse communities (Wong, 2005). In line with Vygotsky's sociocultural theory of the relevance of social context in teaching and learning to write, Wigglesworth and Storch (2012) pointed out that studies, including their own, that examined learners' writing and their responses to feedback indicate that "collaborative writing may activate the mechanisms necessary for learning through a variety of language processes which occur during collaboration and particularly during writing collaboration where the object of the activity, the written work, is not ephemeral and transient as is the case in many collaborative oral tasks" (p. 366). An important finding in those studies that examined learners' writing and their responses to feedback was that discussion which occurs around the written object may include a variety of interactive speech acts, such as disagreements, agreements, and explanations. In Wigglesworth and Storch's (2012) paper, the dynamics of writing in groups was also considered in relation to the role of learning in collaborative writing. This is because not all pairs work as effectively as other pairs, and this may impact on learning outcomes. The differences among pairs arise because the dynamics of working in pairs or groups varies in relation to many other affective variables such as personality type, confidence, experience, and goals.

In recent years, we have seen an increase in second language writing strategy research informed by sociocultural theory. However, this is still in its infancy, and most studies have used interview data to identify learners' writing strategies. What people say they do and what they actually do can differ. This study moves beyond self-report data and includes classroom observation. The study specifically focuses on the observed mediated actions involved in the writing process of secondary school Seychellois students learning English as a second language. The section that follows provides the background to this study by giving an overview of literature related to writing strategies and sociocultural theory.

Sociocultural theory (SCT) provides useful insights into the development of writing and LLS use and the context that supports these forms of strategic learning. The theory views human activity as fundamentally mediated by cultural and textual resources and sees learners as agents that play a significant role in their own learning (Lantolf, 2000). This suggests that activities and tasks in the ESL classroom do not occur in isolation but "are built on complex systems of relationships" (Coyle, 2007, p. 60). SCT enables us to examine writing strategies as a social practice and consider students as active participants in constructing knowledge. It helps us to understand how second language learners' socially situated context interrelates relates to his or her writing behaviors and strategies.

This study was inspired by the concept that human cognition is a social process and mediated by the use of cultural tools such as language (Vygotsky (1978). "Language is the most powerful tool which mediates human development, and it is important to the effectiveness of learning" (Coyle, 2007, p. 66). From this perspective, students are seen as who possess past experiences and prior knowledge and are able to participate actively in the construction of knowledge. They make sense of experiences and re-shape understanding to gain a new perspective on the world.

The Seychelles National Curriculum promotes student-centered learning where students are supposed to take an active role in the learning process. The teacher's role switches from controller to facilitator, and their responsibilities are to help students develop communicative competence and promote positive values and attitudes towards English language learning (Seychelles