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FOREWORD

Welcome to the Special Issue of the Philippine ESL Journal!

This special issue is an offshoot of the concerted efforts of the eight authors and the pool of experts who meticulously reviewed the articles included in this volume. The eight carefully selected and evaluated papers cover a wide spectrum of topics in English language teaching in the Philippines. The proponents are from the leading universities in the country and from other reputable learning institutions beyond the walls of the National Capital Region. Hence, the Journal has become a very suitable venue for their scholarly publications that regard ESL teachers in the local and global language instruction milieu as their target audience.

The featured articles in this volume were written by Zayda S. Asuncion (St. Mary’s University-Nueva Vizcaya), Marites B. Querol (St. Mary’s University-Nueva Vizcaya), Ma. Melvin P. Alamis (University of Santo Tomas), Katrina Ninfa S. Morales (University of Santo Tomas), Sterling M. Plata (De La Salle University), Bonifacio T. Cunanan (Bulacan State University), Alejandro S. Bernardo (University of Santo Tomas), and Paolo Nino Valdez (De La Salle University) and are a mark of the Filipino ESL teachers’ heightened interest in research which in return, would affect improved pedagogy and classroom practices. It is therefore hoped that a greater number of ESL teachers and researchers will find them very timely, informative, interesting, and worth applying in their respective contexts.

The circle of reviewers comprised of Dr. Allan Benedict I. Bernardo (De La Salle University), Dr. Bonifacio T. Cunanan (Bulacan State University), Dr. Shirley N. Dita (De La Salle University), Dr. Merlyn V. Lee (De La Salle University – Dasmariñas), Dr. Marilu R. Madrunio (University of Santo Tomas), Dr. Carlo P. Magno (De La Salle University), Dr. Isabel P. Martin (Ateneo de Manila University), Dr. Remedios Z. Miciano (De La Salle University), Dr. Emely B. Orillos (University of Santo Tomas), and Dr. Sterling M. Plata (De La Salle University) spent much time to critique the articles and to ensure that they pass the publication standards and meet the expectations of local and international readers.

It is our fervent desire that this special issue of Philippine ESL Journal will contribute to making ESL teaching and learning a setting for more investigative and scholarly pursuits not only in the country but also far outside the Philippine shores.

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Filipino College Freshman Students’ Oral Compensatory Strategies

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Abstract

This study aimed to determine the compensatory strategies most frequently used by 41 Filipino college freshman students in a private university and their relation to course, first language, type of high school graduated from and English 1a grade. Two oral tasks namely oral interview and picture-cued narration were used as the primary sources of data. The results indicate that from the seven compensatory strategies namely switching to the mother tongue, getting help, using mime, selecting the topic, adjusting the message, coining words, avoiding communication partially or totally, and using circumlocution or synonym, the most frequently used was switching to mother tongue. When the compensatory strategies and the four identified variables were correlated, there was a negative relationship between compensatory strategies used and grade in English 1a. This implies the need to explicitly teach students these compensatory strategies for them to cope with their limitations in oral communication.

Key words: compensatory strategies, code-switching, approximating the message, getting help, using mime, avoiding communication partially or totally, selecting the topic, adjusting the message, coining words

Introduction

One important goal of language teaching is to develop the communicative competence of learners. Whenever language proficiency is addressed in the English classroom, both language and content area teachers face problems regarding the use of English as the students’ medium of communication particularly the students’ inability to express themselves orally. It has been observed that when
learners are asked to explain, discuss, converse or ask questions in English, they frequently stop speaking because they hardly know what to say. Put more simply, learners exhibit limitations in oral communication. One reason for this is that second language (L2) learners attempt to use a language which is not their own. Their experience is different from those who think and speak in the same language. Cook (1996) argues that "unlike L1 children, L2 learners are always wanting to express things for which they do not have the means in the second language" (p. 67). To cope, L2 learners need to employ compensatory strategies to be able to go on in any communicative situation.

Oxford (1990) popularized the most comprehensive listing of strategies that language learners employ. In Oxford’s taxonomy, there are two main types of language learning strategies: the direct strategies and the indirect strategies. Among the direct strategies are compensatory strategies that "enable learners to use the new language for either comprehension or production despite limitations in knowledge" (Oxford, 1990, pp. 50). These compensatory strategies include (1) switching to the mother tongue, the use of a first language term for an English term; (2) getting help, used when the learner asks for the correct term; (3) using mime, the use of nonverbal strategies; (4) avoiding communication partially or totally, used when the learner starts to say something but gives up because it is too difficult or when the learner decides not to say anything in order to avoid communication; (5) selecting the topic, used when the learner chooses to say something about a topic that he/she knows; (6) adjusting the message, used when the learner tries to express the message in an alternate acceptable construction where the appropriate form or construction is not known or not yet stable; (7) coining words, the construction of a new word or term; and (8) using circumlocution or synonym, the use of another word or phrase which has similar meaning to the appropriate word or phrase.

A good number of studies on compensatory strategies and their relation to oral communication were also conducted in the past years. Poulisse (1990) as cited in Cook (n.d.), for example, found that the use of compensatory strategies varies greatly according to task and proficiency of learners. In addition, Flyman (1997) investigated the type of compensatory strategies employed in three potential oral tasks in the classroom and the role these strategies play in language
acquisition. In the Philippines, Bautista (1999) analyzed the functions of Tagalog-English code-switching using Poplack and Sankoff framework while Borlongan (2009) identified the Tagalog-English code-switching practices of teachers and students in English language classes. These studies, however, restricted their scope within the frequency of the strategies and the role they play in language acquisition. Hence, the present study aimed to identify the compensatory strategies frequently used by ESL college freshman students in a private university and to correlate them with course, type of high school graduated from, first language, and grade in English 1a, which were not taken into account in the aforementioned studies. The results of this investigation may help ESL teachers in enhancing their students’ oral communication skills and eventually make them full participating members of the language classroom as they use efficient compensatory strategies.

Method

Participants

The present study involved 41 college freshman students randomly selected from eight colleges and schools in a private university: College of Accountancy (5); School of Arts and Sciences (5); School of Business (5); School of Education (4); School of Engineering and Architecture (7); College of Information Technology (5); School of Health Sciences (6); School of Public Administration and Governance (4). All were enrolled in the course English 1a or Communication Arts 1.

In reference to the respondents’ first language, 20 speak Iloco, 16 speak Tagalog, 4 speak Tuwali, and only one speaks Gaddang. The respondents’ profile also indicates that there is a preponderance of private high school graduates. Out of the 41 respondents 29 were from private institutions and only 12 were from public high schools.

Instruments

To gather pertinent background information, the respondents were asked to fill out a questionnaire asking for their first language
(L1), course, and type of high school graduated from. Their grades in English 1a were secured from the University Registrar’s Office.

The compensatory strategies the respondents employed were obtained through an oral interview and a picture-cued narration. The oral interview consisted of 10-12 “wh” questions related to their personal background such as: (1) What course are you taking up?; (2) Is it your choice or the choice of someone else?; (3) Why did you choose that course?; (4) Why did you choose to study in this university? and (5) During your leisure time, what do you love doing?

The picture-cued narration, also known as picture story, was adopted from Heaton (1988). It presented six pictures in a series. The first picture shows two painters wearing caps and appropriate outfit for painting. They had just painted a wooden chair in a park. One of them is holding a can of paint and the other one is putting a note/sign on the chair which reads “WET PAINT”. In the second picture, the note is blown away. In the third picture, a man holding a newspaper approaches a chair. He is wearing a coat and a tie and a cap on his head. The fourth picture shows a man sitting on the newly painted chair and reading his newspaper. In the fifth picture, a man stands up and notices that his coat is wet with paint. The last picture shows a man holding his coat and he is going to a dry cleaner.

To create a story, the respondents were asked to describe and narrate the events that take place in each picture.

Procedure

The procedure consisted of preparing the needed instruments: interview guide, information sheet, and tally sheets for the oral interview, picture-cued narration, and compensatory strategies. The participants were scheduled by course for the oral tasks. To capture the transactions, a handy video camera was used. As the oral activities were conducted, the researcher and the language teacher who assisted her counted every compensatory strategy employed by each participant. To illustrate, if the participant code-switched and at the same time used another term in place of a more appropriate term, the strategy was counted and categorized as code-switching and synonym. For purposes of verification, the videotapes were viewed several times. The frequency of the compensatory strategies used in
the actual task and in the video was carefully recounted and compared. It must be noted that there was not a case of differences in the coding and counting of the researcher and the language teacher who helped in the gathering and analysis of the data.

Because the study also focused on the use of mime as a compensatory strategy, gestures or nonverbal actions were assigned interpretations. The compensatory strategies that were used by the respondents during the interview and the picture-cued narration were clarified during the post conference. The post conference was made informal to ease the respondents’ tension, and thereby draw their genuine responses regarding their performance.

Data Analysis

To determine the relationship among compensatory strategies and variables namely college enrolled in, type of high school graduated from, first language, and grade in English 1a, Pearson coefficient of correlation (r) was used. The significance level was tested at .05. Test statistics whose observed significance levels were less than or equal to .05 were taken to indicate significant relationship.

Results and Discussion

Respondents’ Compensatory Strategies

Table 1 presents the compensatory strategies most and least frequently employed by the respondents in the oral interview and picture-cued tasks.

The data in Table 1 indicate that code-switching was the most often used compensatory strategy in the respondent’s attempt to repair communication breakdown. During the researcher-respondents conference, the participants disclosed their reasons for code-switching. Out of 41 respondents, 25 shifted to the use of L1 when their lack of vocabulary blocked them in their communication. Some switched completely to their mother tongue, but some used their L1 simply to replace an unknown vocabulary or utterance. Further analysis of the data also shows that more participants were inclined to switch to their L1 during the interview than in the picture-
cued narration. Thus, it seems that the use of this compensatory strategy depends upon the kind of oral tasks the learners performed.

Table 1
Frequency of the Respondents’ Oral Compensatory Strategies in Oral Interview and Picture-cued Tasks (N=41)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Compensatory Strategies</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Oral Interview</th>
<th>Picture-Cued Narration</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Switching to the Mother Tongue</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Getting help</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Using mime</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Avoiding communication</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Selecting the topic</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Adjusting/Approximating</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Coining words</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Circumlocution Synonyms</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>106</strong></td>
<td><strong>129</strong></td>
<td><strong>235</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1 also shows that *adjusting or approximating the message* was the second most frequently used oral compensatory strategy. Perhaps the respondents also considered this as an efficient strategy like how Flyman (1997) sees it. Thus, among the 41 respondents 29 used this signifying that the respondents were more inclined to use approximating or adjusting the message in their oral production. Further, between the two oral tasks, this compensatory strategy was more frequently used in the picture-cued narration than in the oral interview.

The same table indicates that the third most frequently used compensatory strategy was the use of *circumlocution* or *synonym* in oral production. This means “getting the meaning across by describing the concept or using a word that means the same thing” (Oxford, 1990, p. 51). The figures show that using circumlocution or synonym was more prevalent in the picture-cued narration than in the oral interview task.
The results also indicate that the fourth most often used strategy was avoiding communication partially or totally. Further, the data show that it was more frequently used in the oral interview task than it was in the picture-cued narration. Though the respondents had the tendency to falter, there was not much avoidance of communication in the picture-cued narration.

The use of mime was also evident in the data. Oxford (1990) describes this as “using physical motion, such as mime or gesture, in place of an expression to indicate the meaning” (p. 50). To Cohen and Aphek (1981) (as cited in McDonough, 1995), this type of compensatory strategy is a neutral strategy. There were eight participants who used mime during the oral tasks. Mime or gestures were more frequent in the picture-cued narration than in the oral interview. This is supported by Flyman’s (1997) findings when she investigated the compensatory strategies of Swedish students using three tasks: translation task, picture narration task, and discussion task. In her study, it was found that the Swedish students used mime or gesture more frequently in picture-cued than in the other two tasks.

Getting help seems to be one of the least popular compensatory strategies. Cohen and Aphek (1981) (as cited in McDonough, 1995) also considered this as a neutral strategy. Oxford (1990) describes this strategy as “asking someone for help by hesitating or explicitly asking the person to provide the missing expression in the target language” (p. 50). It is possible that the respondents are not comfortable in seeking help or assistance from others in attempting to cope with their limitations in oral discourses.

Selecting the topic was also one of the least frequently used compensatory strategies in both tasks. It means “choosing the topic of conversation in order to direct the communication to one’s own interests” (Oxford, 1990, p.50). The data show that this strategy had a total frequency of only five – two in oral interview and three in picture-cued narration. Like in other cases, this strategy was utilized more in the picture-cued narration than in the oral interview. In the picture-cued narration, the five participants who utilized selecting the topic had the tendency to start their narration not in the first picture but in the second picture. More so, they opted to narrate the events in the picture they thought they had enough vocabulary or grammar to
use in their oral production. Some selected only the pictures that they understood.

Table 1 also shows that the least frequently used compensatory strategy was *coining words* or making up new words to communicate desired ideas. Cohen and Aphek (1981) (as cited in McDonough, 1995) argue that this is also a neutral strategy. The data show that only one respondent used this strategy in the oral interview task.

### Analysis of Extracts

The following sample extracts illustrate the oral compensatory strategies utilized by the respondents in the two oral tasks:

#### Switching to Mother Tongue

Analysis of Extract E shows that the participant switched to his mother tongue because he could not think of the English term for *nagbubulakbol* (gallivant). The switch involved just one utterance in the whole sentence.

**Extract E: Student no. 13, School of Business**

L1: Tagalog  
T: What do you love doing during your leisure time?  
S: I stay in our store to help my mother sell our goods. Sometimes I...I... uh I go with my friends and... *nagbubulakbol* (gallivant).

In Extract F, the speaker switched to her L1 by saying the whole answer in Filipino. The use of second language in this situation did not materialize because the respondent could not translate what she actually intended to convey in English.

**Extract F: Student no. 12, School of Business**

L1: Tagalog  
T: How do you describe yourself?  
S: I am simple ma’am.  
T: Why do say you are simple?  
S: Uh... *Hindi ako nagme-make up* ma’am at *hindi ako mapili sa baro*.
A total use of the mother tongue was observed in the following example. The extract was a verbatim transcription of the picture-cued narration of one of the respondents. Prior to the picture narration, the respondent hesitated and he could hardly start. He was then urged to begin by asking this question in Filipino, “Ano ang nangyari sa unang picture?” [What happened in the first picture?] Then he started narrating the story in his L1. It was observed that he did not start the narration from the first picture; rather he began narrating the incident in the second. It can be observed from the transcription that even when the story was narrated in L1, still there were some missing details such as the two painters painting the chair and the sign placed on the chair to warn people about the newly painted chair. During the post-conference, he expressed his difficulty in using English. He claimed that he understood the contexts shown in the series of pictures but he could not narrate the events in English. When asked why he did not use Filipino, he again said that he could only say a little if he used Filipino and that he could say many when he would use Iloco. This is one extreme situation where the participant used pure Iloco to narrate the story. It appears that he could understand what was in the picture but the problem was he could not express what he wanted to say in the English language.

Extract G: Student no.26, School of Engineering and Architecture

L1: Iloco


[They placed that it is prohibited yet to sit because it is wet. The chair is newly-painted. When they placed it and uh… and then the wind blew and it was blown. There was a man who went to sit but he did not know that it was newly-painted. When he finished reading, he saw his dress was painted. And then he went to the shop to have his dress washed ma’am.]
Adjusting or Approximating the Message

In Extract H, the word recognized as it was used in the context was an example of adjusting or approximating the message. The more appropriate word to replace this is noticed. Another word that was adjusted or approximated in its meaning is the word clothes. Clothes is a general term used to refer to any kind of clothing used in any particular occasion. The respondent used this word in place of coat which was considered more appropriate in the context.

Extract H: Student no. 28, College of Information Technology
L1: Iloco
The man recognized that the chair was wet with paint and his clothes was stained. So he went to the dry cleaner to remove the stain.

The word bench in Extract I was used by the respondent in place of chair. This shows another example of adjusting or approximating the message. Bench is a term referring to a long seat for two or more people, usually made without a back or arms. The word was used by the participant to approximate the meaning of chair.

Extract I: Student no. 11, School of Business
L1: Tagalog
One day, two painters painted uh... uh... a bench and after painting it uh they placed a notice that it was newly painted.

In Extract J, the meaning conveyed was adjusted or approximated by the speaker through her use of the words boys for carpenters or painters and wet paint to mean the warning sign or notice placed on the chair and again the word bench for chair.

Extract J: Student no. 14, School of Business
L1: Tagalog
There are two boys who painted the bench. Then they placed a wet paint. The next day the wet paint was blown.
The clause *the money abroad are expensive* in Extract K was considered an approximation of the real message the respondent wanted to convey. When asked about what she meant by this during the post-conference, the respondent said *the salary abroad is high*.

**Extract K: Student no. 34, AHSE**

*L1: Tuvali*

T: What are your plans after graduation?  
S: I will go abroad first because that’s what my parents and my relatives like. Another reason is **the money abroad are expensive**.

---

**Circumlocution or Synonym**

The answer of the participant in Extract M was an example of circumlocution. Instead of directly saying the adjective *sociable*, she used clauses *I can go with others easily and I am always pleasant to them* to express her intended meaning.

**Extract M: Student no. 4, College of Accountancy**

*L1: Iloco*

T: How do you describe yourself?  
S: I am friendly. **I can go with others easily and I am always pleasant to them**.

---

In Extract N, perhaps the speaker wanted to say that she loves reminiscing the past during her leisure time. It is possible that due to limited vocabulary, she used other phrases to convey similar meaning.

**Extract N: Student no. 20, School of Engineering and Architecture**

*L1: Tagalog*

T: During your leisure time, what do you love doing?  
S: I usually go back to the past by looking at some stuff in my box that remind me of my friends in high school.
In Extract O, the word *jacket* was used as a synonym of *coat*. The respondent hesitated to use the word as she groped for the desired term.

**Extract O: Student no. 22, School of Engineering and Architecture**

*L1: Tagalog*

The man holding a newspaper sat on the chair. After a while, he noticed that his… his… *jacket* was wet with paint.

**Avoiding Communication Partially or Totally**

Extract P shows a partial avoidance of communication because the speaker started saying something then he paused as indicated by the series of dots. Eventually, he did not continue what he wanted to express rather he started another sentence.

**Extract P: Student no.32, AHSE**

*L1: Ilocano*

T: What are your plans after graduation?
S: Well, uh yeah I want to practice my course… then… … …

Some want to go abroad but me it’s OK if I stay here because I want to help those who are in need.

Extract Q illustrates the strategy of avoiding communication both partially and totally. In the first question, his answer was fragmentary. In the second and third questions the speaker was not able to answer the given interview questions. When asked about it, he said that he could not say his reason in English. According to him, he opted to totally avoid the communication rather than to speak in Filipino.
Use of Mime

In the sample extracts below, without saying the right words, the participants used hand gestures and body language to express what they meant. Though mimes were used, the listener understood the intended meanings of the speakers. This explains the importance of gestures or non-verbal communication in oral production. Another observation noted was the use of gestures simultaneous with the use of words to emphasize what they wanted to convey. The participants claimed that using mimes or gestures somehow helped them express the meaning and intention they wished to convey.

Extract Q: Student no. 31, College of Information Technology
L1: Tagalog

T: Why do you love reading? What can you gain from reading
S: knowledge.
T: What else?
S: (no answer)
T: Why do you prefer to work here in the Philippines
S: Uh... Uh... ...(shakes head)

Extract R: Student no. 19, School of Education
L1: Ilocano

When the man noticed that his coat is painted, he go to the dry cleaner to... (performed the act of washing) his coat.

Extract S: Student no. 3, College of Accountancy
L1: Ilocano

The man placed a ... (made a gesture using her hand illustrating a square to refer to the sign placed on the chair).

Extract T: Student no. 5, College of Accountancy
L1: Ilocano

T: Why did you take up accountancy?
S: Shrugged her shoulders meaning she doesn’t know the answer.
Getting Help

In extract U, the participant used *getting help* by explicitly asking herself in Filipino the question, “Ano na ang tawag dun?” (What is it?) However, in Extract V, the nonverbal expression of the respondent, that is looking at the interviewer after hesitating to continue speaking was considered a getting help strategy. Flyman (1997) supports the idea that getting help or appeal for assistance is a compensatory strategy because the speaker employs it to achieve his intended meaning.

*Extract U: Student no. 6, School of Arts and Sciences*

*L1: Iloco*

The painter put a… ano na ang tawag dun? (What is it?)… uh a card. The man put a sign that the bench is painted.

*Extract V: Student no: 15, School of Business*

*L1: Iloco*

The carpenter put a… a… a… (she looked at the researcher).

Selecting the Topic

Extract W shows that the student’s response was categorized as *selecting the topic* because he chose to start narrating the story with picture 2 used in the picture-cued task. In her narration, some details in picture 2 and in the succeeding pictures were given. Thus, this cannot be categorized as partially avoiding communication because the participant did not evade speaking even he did not include describing picture 1. The participant chose to begin his narration in the second picture because he thought he knew what happened in this picture more than he knew about picture 1.

*Extract W: Student no. 9, School of Arts and Sciences*

*L1: Tuwali*

Then the sign was blown.
Coining Words

In Extract X, the word the participant coined to express her idea was *balanced-headed*. She coined the words *balanced* and *head* to create a description about herself which she thought was appropriate for the meaning she wanted to express. During the post-conference, she explained that *balanced-headed* referred to her ability to maintain balance such as balancing her time to suit her activities and balancing her heart and mind. Apparently, the words she coined to describe herself seemed inappropriate. Perhaps she meant *level-headed*.

*Extract X: Student no. 1, College of Accountancy*

**L1: Iloco**

**T:** How do you describe yourself?

**S:** I’m a *balanced-headed* person ma’am.

Correlation between Oral Compensatory Strategies and College, Type of High School Graduated From, First Language and Grade in English 1a

Table 2 shows the relationship of compensatory strategies and course, type of high school graduated from, first language and grade in English 1a.

Among the correlations made, the result between compensatory strategies and grade in English 1a produced a moderate negative significant relationship. The association between compensatory strategies and grade in English 1a implies that the respondents who most likely used more compensatory strategies most particularly switching to the mother tongue and avoiding communication partially or totally earned low grade in English 1a. This inverse relationship between compensatory strategies and grade in English 1a does not, however, imply the irrelevance of effective strategies since there was no sufficient data to support such claim. Aside from this, the study did not exhaust the use of *efficient compensatory strategies* referring to the compensatory strategies that enable the listener or evaluator to understand the intended message in contrast to *inefficient compensatory strategies* referring to the compensatory strategies that lead to non-comprehension and the need to employ clarification or another strategy (Flyman, 1997).
Table 2
Correlation of Compensatory Strategies and College, Type of High School Graduated from, First Language, and Grade in English 1a

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Pearson r</th>
<th>P value</th>
<th>Decision</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Compensatory Strategies and course</td>
<td>.052</td>
<td>.746</td>
<td>Not significant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compensatory Strategies and first Language</td>
<td>.024</td>
<td>.881</td>
<td>Not significant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compensatory Strategies and Type of High School</td>
<td>-.016</td>
<td>.922</td>
<td>Not significant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compensatory strategies and Grade in English 1a</td>
<td>-.040**</td>
<td>.009</td>
<td>Significant</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)
** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

The present study has shown that language learners employ oral compensatory strategies in their attempt to recompense their limitations in oral communication. Several studies such that of Cohen & Aphek (1981), Rost & Ross (1991), Huang & Van Naerssen (1987), as cited in Brown (1994), have proven that the use of strategies help learners become more successful in learning a language. Hence, teachers are encouraged to make the language classroom an avenue for students to learn how to learn with the use of language strategies.

Findings of the present study may also prompt language teachers to examine the compensatory strategies frequently employed by their students. In this paper, code-switching was found to be the most popular. In formal classrooms, however, code-switching may be disfavored and may be considered an inefficient strategy (Flyman, 1997) most especially when students are strictly evaluated in terms of oral communication skills in English. However, Baker (2006) posits that code-switching may be valuable tool because “There is usually purpose and logic in changing languages. It is using the full language resources that are available to a bilingual usually knowing that the listener fully understands the code-switches” (p.109). Also, Tupas (2004) believes that code-switching “enables the students to cope with the communicative complexity of language use in society” (p. 338). Hence, the practice of code-switching should not be considered as wrong or illegitimate because it somehow helps the learners become communicatively competent bilingual members in the society. Tupas adds that such a practice “helps them cope with the
multilingual and multicultural intricacy of second language acquisition” (p. 338). Bautista (1999) also points out that code-switching among Filipinos happens for the purpose of communicative efficiency which she means “the fastest, easiest, most effective way of saying something” (p. 26). Considering the social implication of code-switching, Mondada (2007) states that code-switching is used by participants in order to organize multiple activities and their participation frameworks in distinct and orderly ways. Hence, these different perspectives should propel teachers to raise further questions as regards the effectiveness or inefficiency of code-switching as a language learning strategy.

Since language classrooms are a milieu for learners’ interactions, communications, discussions, and other communicative functions using a target language, explicit teaching of oral compensatory strategies remains well advised. As students are made aware of these compensatory strategies specifically the efficient ones, they can compensate their limitations in oral communication. As they utilize these strategies, they become more confident to speak and to express whatever it is that they have in mind during class activities. Moreover, the language teachers’ awareness that these strategies can be utilized by learners in oral communication can help in establishing a more conducive language classroom where students are not at all afraid or intimidated to talk. As Krashen (1981) puts it, learners with low affective filter learn better than those with high affective filter.

The result of the present study may also motivate language teachers to use functional techniques to lead the learners in capitalizing on their preferred strategies. In doing so, learners are empowered to “learn how to learn” and to become autonomous learners. The present study may also propel language instructors to promote strategies-based instruction (SBI) or learner strategy training (Mc Donough, 1999). Through this, one of the most important goals of language teaching – learners’ autonomy, would be better facilitated since they will be taught the technical know-how of acquiring a language and sensitized to the significance of taking charge of their own learning (Brown, 2000). Lastly, it may be necessary to note what Bernardo & Gonzales (2009) suggest that language teachers must “start with knowing what their students do, can do, do not do, and cannot do in line with language learning strategy use” (p.26). This can only be done if teachers have adequate understanding of the kind of
strategies students employ and if they themselves can strategically and flexibly model and teach the different strategies.

**Conclusion**

The present study affirms that learners employ compensatory strategies in oral communication. It reasserts that these strategies can help learners to overcome limitations in speaking. It also reaffirms the findings of previous studies that the type of compensatory strategies used is greatly influenced by the kind or oral tasks learners participate in. Further studies using a bigger population and other authentic oral communication tasks, however, are needed to provide additional solid support to the findings of the present investigation. It is also necessary to conduct studies correlating compensatory strategies and other oral language proficiency variables.

**References**


About the Author

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College Students’ Use of Affective and Social Language Learning Strategies: A Classroom-Based Research

Marites B. Querol
Saint Mary's University, Bayombong, Nueva Vizcaya, Philippines

Abstract

This study is a classroom-based research that investigated the use of affective language learning strategies (ALLS) and social language learning strategies (SLLS) of 24 senior education students majoring in English in a private university and the possible relationship between the two taxonomies. To gather data, a researcher-made questionnaire adopting six ALLS and six SLLS by Oxford (1990) was developed and classroom observation was conducted. Results showed that the students did utilize the identified ALLS and SLLS; however, the use of these strategies was not optimized. The results also showed that positive correlation exists between the use of ALLS and SLLS. Based on the findings, this paper proposes means to popularize the different strategies that will result in better learning of a language.

Key words: affective language learning strategies, social language learning strategies, language learning strategies

Introduction

All language learners use learning strategies either consciously or unconsciously when processing new information and performing tasks in the language classroom (Oxford, 1994; Arani, 2005). Hence, for the past years, the utilization of language learning strategies (LLS) has been extensively explored by local and foreign researchers such as Oxford (1990), Stern (1983), Weinstein & Mayer (1986), Chamot (1987), Rubin (1987), Oxford (1989) as cited by Ellis (1999), Asuncion (2004), Min-hsun (2005), and Querol (2009). Early researchers were concerned with the listing of strategies and other features presumed to be essential for all ‘good language learners’ (GLL). Such studies were that of Rubin (1975), Naiman et al (1975), Reiss (1983), Gillete (1987), and Lennon (1989) as cited in Ellis (1994). Most likely, these
studies were prompted by the idea that if language is for communication, then language learning should find its essence from the mere significance of communication in which the communicator must be able to say exactly what he/she wants to say whoever the recipient is.

Oxford (1994) described LLS as actions, behaviors, steps or techniques that learners themselves devise, employ, adopt or use, often consciously, to improve their progress in apprehending, internalizing, and using their second language (L2). Oxford (1990) as cited in Bernardo & Gonzales (2009) also endeavored to present a comprehensive taxonomy or nomenclature of language learning strategies. The key distinction in her taxonomy is that between direct strategies and indirect strategies. Direct strategies are further divided into three categories: memory strategies (used for storing and retrieving aspects of the target language); cognitive strategies (used for using the language and for understanding how it works); and compensation strategies (used for using the language despite gaps in knowledge). On the other hand, indirect strategies cover metacognitive strategies (used for planning, organizing, and evaluating learning); affective strategies (used for approaching the task positively); and social strategies (used for collaborating with others for assistance).

Current research has also supported the effectiveness of using LLS and has shown often use of such strategies by successful language learners (Oxford, Park-Oh, Ito & Sumrall, 1993). Successful language learners tend to select strategies that work together well in accordance to the requirements of the language task (Chamot & Kupper, 1989). O’Malley and Chamot (1990) also found that cognitive (e.g. translating, analyzing) and metacognitive (e.g. planning, organizing) strategies were often used together, supporting each other. The combination of strategies such as the cognitive and metacognitive strategies often has more impact than single strategies. Chamot and Kupper (1989) also found certain strategies or clusters of strategies that are linked to particular language skills or tasks. For example, L2 writing, like L1 writing, benefits from the learning strategies of planning, self-monitoring, deduction, and substitution. L2 speaking demands strategies such as risk-taking, paraphrasing, circumlocution, self-monitoring, and self-evaluation while L2 listening comprehension gains from strategies of elaboration,
inferencing, selective attention, and self-monitoring. In addition, reading comprehension uses strategies like reading aloud, guessing, deduction, and summarizing.

Querol (2009) also explored students’ perception and actual use of language learning strategies in science and technology among high school freshmen. Her study suggests that LLS are important, but their use is not maximized by the students. LLS, though used directly in language classes, were also observed and used in science classes. LLS in science were classified as teacher-initiated (TI) or student-initiated (SI). The study investigated the LLS used in science classes, to ascertain if LLS are related to academic performance in science, and if the use of LLS is influenced by learner characteristics such as section, first language, gender, IQ, reading comprehension, English proficiency, and shyness. Results showed that the strategies in learning a language are also used in learning science concepts. Further, teacher-initiated responses dominated in the science classes observed. English proficiency, reading comprehension, school type, and shyness as a personality trait proved significantly related to academic performance in science. All types of LLS were found related to academic performance in science with Pearson r. LLS with learner characteristics removed partially proved significantly related to academic performance using full model and stepwise regression analyses.

Wu (2008) gathered qualitative data on the use of LLS from 10 Chinese ESL learners studying at a vocational institute. Results revealed that research participants used a wide variety of metacognitive, cognitive, and social/affective LLS. Social/affective LLS were found to be more popular than metacognitive and cognitive LLS among the participants. The more popular LLS found were: the metacognitive LLS of advance organization, advance preparation, organizational planning and self-management; the cognitive LLS of resourcing, grouping, note-taking, summarizing, and translation; and finally the social/affective LLS of questioning for clarification, cooperation, and positive self-talk. Also, the subjects were found to use different LLS for different tasks and in different situations.

Oxford (1990) posited that the social and affective strategies are found less often in L2 research. She further stated that there is paucity of research on affective and social LLS perhaps because such
behaviors are not studied frequently by L2 researchers and because learners do not usually pay attention to their own feelings and social relationships as part of the L2 learning process. Hence, the same reason inspired this study on the affective and social LLS.

Affective in its broadest sense is a term that relates to any external expression of emotion associated with an idea or action. Oxford (1990) defines it as the emotions, attitudes, motivations and values that language learners can gain control through affective strategies. The three main sets of affective strategies are: (1) lowering anxiety which includes (a) using progressive relaxation, deep breathing, or meditation, (b) using music, and using laughter; (2) encouraging oneself which includes (a) making positive statements, (b) taking risks wisely, (c) rewarding; (3) taking emotional temperature including (a) listening to the body, (b) using a checklist, (c) writing a language learning diary, and discussing feelings with someone else.

Language being a social behavior and an element of communication involves other people. According to Oxford (1990) the three sets of social strategies are: (1) asking questions for clarification or verification and for correction; (2) cooperating with others which covers cooperating with peers and cooperating with proficient users of the new language; (3) empathizing with others that includes developing cultural understanding and becoming aware of others’ thoughts and feelings.

In light of the foregoing, the present study vied to identify the affective language learning strategies (ALLS) and social language learning strategies (SLLS) used by college students in a university and to correlate the use of the two taxonomies. This study also affords strategies that students can utilize to improve their use of English and prods teachers to reflect on and promote strategy-based teaching to aid students overcome fear in studying and using English and eventually, to help students succeed in their academic life.

Method

Research Design

The study used the descriptive design since its primary aim was to identify and describe the ALLS and SLLS utilized by 24 college
students and to establish possible correlations between the two. A questionnaire was developed as the main instrument for gathering data. Because the items in the questionnaire require self-reported responses, observation of classes was also conducted. It was done during the scheduled demonstration teaching of the 24 students in which 2 demonstrations were done per meeting. Each student demonstrated for 40 minutes and was asked to choose a lesson from their major course Teaching Literature. Each student demonstrator was required to integrate collaborative activities in his/her lesson. The researcher acted as the observer and recorded the proceedings on video.

Participants

The participants were 24 college junior students majoring in English and enrolled in a strategy class, Teaching Literature, in a private university in the Philippines. The students were composed of 4 males and 20 females who were purposively chosen to be the respondents. Their grades in the subject ranged from 80 to 95 in a grading system with 75 as the lowest passing grade possible and 100 as the highest.

Instrument

To gather data, a two-part questionnaire was administered. The first part included items on the students’ background information. The second part consisted of items on ALSS and SLLS adapted from Oxford’s (1990) Strategy Inventory for Language Learners (SILL). Each category of strategy, affective and social, consisted of six items or statements that are reflective of the students’ use of strategies in learning English. The tool required the students to answer in terms of how well the statements describe them using the following ratings: 1 - never or almost never true of me, 2 - usually not true of me, 3 - somewhat true of me, 4 - usually true of me, and 5 - always or almost always true of me. The overall average tells how often the strategies are used for learning English. The following were used in interpreting the averages:
High Always or almost always used 4.5 to 5.0
   Usually used 3.5 to 4.4
Medium Sometimes used 2.5 to 3.4
Low Generally not used 1.5 to 2.4
   Never or almost never used 1.0 to 1.4

Data Analysis

The data obtained were transformed into numerical values and were later analyzed using descriptive statistics focusing on the means and standard deviations. To find possible relationships between ALLS and SLLS, Pearson correlation was used.

Results and Discussion

Table 1 shows the minimum and maximum ratings of the respondents for each ALLS. The minimum rating given is 1.0 which means that the students ‘never or almost never’ utilized the six ALLS. The highest rating is 5.0 signifying that the students’ use of the ALLS is ‘always or almost always.’

Table 1
Respondents’ Affective Language Learning Strategies (N= 24)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Affective Strategies</th>
<th>Minimum</th>
<th>Maximum</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Qualitative Description</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Trying to relax when afraid to use English</td>
<td>2.00</td>
<td>5.00</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>Somewhat true</td>
<td>.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Encouraging oneself to speak English despite fear of making a mistake</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>5.00</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>Usually true of me</td>
<td>.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Giving oneself a reward or treat when one did well in English</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>5.00</td>
<td>2.96</td>
<td>Somewhat true</td>
<td>1.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Being aware if one is tense or nervous when studying or using English</td>
<td>2.00</td>
<td>5.00</td>
<td>3.88</td>
<td>Usually true of me</td>
<td>.85</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The data show that among the six ALLS, ‘encouraging oneself to speak English despite fear of making a mistake’ received the highest mean score. It indicates that this strategy is the most frequently utilized by the respondents. One possible reason for this is that the students are specializing in English; hence they are expected to use the language in varied, if not all, communicative situations. During the demonstration teaching, it is evident that all the students engaged in the group discussion using the English language.

‘Encouraging oneself to speak English despite fear of making a mistake’ has been proven to be very helpful among the students in their study and use of English. This idea is supported by Oxford (1990) who believes the affective domain has probably one of the very biggest influences on language learning success or failure. Examples of factors included in the affective domain are anxiety, culture shock, inhibition, risk-taking and tolerance. Such affective factors can impede the learning of a language. However, good language learners are said to be those who know how to control their emotions and attitudes about learning.

Table 1 also shows that (a) the second most utilized ALLS is ‘being aware if one is tense or nervous when studying or using English’. It seems that the respondents’ awareness of their fear in studying or using English helped them to actively participate in the discussion; (b) ‘Talking to someone about one’s feelings when learning English’ was the third most utilized ALLS. However, the manifestation of this strategy was not evident during the classroom observation; (c) ‘Trying to relax when afraid to use English’ is the fourth most utilized strategy. Some of the students were observed at
ease while discussing in English with their group mates; (d) ‘Giving oneself a reward or treat when one did well in English’ is the fifth most utilized affective LLS. The mean rate of 2.92 indicates that this strategy is sometimes used by the students. However, this was not apparent during the classroom observation; (e) The least utilized affective strategy is ‘writing one’s feeling in a language learning diary.’ The mean value of 1.92 signifies that the strategy is generally not used by the students. Again, this was not seen during the observation. Hence, there is a need to popularize such strategy.

The overall mean score of the students’ use of the affective LLS and the standard deviation of .50 signify that the extent of the students’ use of the ALLS is somewhat true of them or that they usually use the strategies and that their responses are not far or different from each other. In general, the respondents sometimes use the ALLS and sometimes not.

When asked what the students do when they feel nervous or afraid when studying or when using English, the students gave answers aside from the ones listed in the questionnaire. The other strategies students use when they feel nervous to speak in English and their corresponding frequency are listed in Table 2.

Table 2
Other Affective Language Learning Strategies of the Respondents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language Learning Strategies</th>
<th>f</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Refusing to speak or silence.</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doing unnecessary movements to ease myself</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smiling</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Looking at other things not the audience(ceiling)</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urinating</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talking to oneself or practicing</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talking briefly</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biting tongue</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pinching myself or other people</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dinking water</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Walking or moving to and fro</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staying in a corner</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3 shows the six SLLS and the extent of students’ utilization of these strategies. The data show that the respondents never or almost never used SLLS. The standard deviation of .53 shows that students’ ratings do not vary much from each other. Analysis of the individual strategies, however, would indicate that (a) among the six SLLS listed, the most utilized strategy is ‘asking the other person to slow down’. During the observation, this was very evident when some students said ‘Agray ka’ or ‘Teka Muna’ which is translated as ‘Wait’ in English. It can also mean slow down so that everybody can understand each other; (b) ‘Practicing English with other students’ is the second most utilized social LLS perhaps because the students have become familiar with each other since they have been together for at least three years. As observed, they really used English in discussing with their group mates. They could choose not to speak in English but they did not; (c) Both ‘letting English speakers correct me when I talk’ and ‘asking questions in English’ ranked as the third most utilized strategy. During the observation, there were few instances of corrections observed among the groups. Some corrections were on pronunciation e.g. interchanged sounds of /p/ and /f/ and rules of subject-verb agreement e.g. absence of the sound /s/ for singular verbs. During the group discussions, some students were observed to have manifested freedom in asking questions to clarify concepts they feel vague; (d) The fourth most utilized social LLS is ‘asking help from English speakers’. This strategy was observed, though minimally, in cases where the students asked for the appropriate term in English. Usually the question was ‘Ano na naman sa English yun? (‘What is the English counterpart of the term?’ or ‘What is this term in English?’). Notice that the students generally do not necessarily ask help from English speakers regarding the use of English and that they do not always ask questions in English. This could somehow point some possible implications such as: many
students still do not find ease in asking help from English speakers perhaps because they fear that they would lack words to ask or they may not be understood; many students do not find ease in asking questions perhaps for the same fear of committing error or of lack of words to say their ideas in English; and this may also somehow bring out a Filipino culture of “false humility” in which some students think that asking is a manifestation of being a braggart; (e) The social LLS least utilized by the students is ‘trying to learn about the culture of English speakers.’ Although it ranked last, the students still claimed that they sometimes use it like in the case of ‘letting English speakers to correct me when I talk, asking questions in English, and asking help from English speakers.’ This needs consideration because aside from communicative competence, one of the goals of language teaching and learning is cultural competence or awareness of the culture of others.

Table 3
Respondents’ Social Language Learning Strategies (N= 24)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social Strategies</th>
<th>Minimum</th>
<th>Maximum</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Qualitative Description</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Asking the other person to slow down.</td>
<td>2.00</td>
<td>5.00</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>Usually true of me</td>
<td>1.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Letting English speakers to correct me when I talk</td>
<td>2.00</td>
<td>5.00</td>
<td>3.42</td>
<td>Somewhat true of me</td>
<td>.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Practicing English with other students</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>5.00</td>
<td>3.92</td>
<td>Usually true of me</td>
<td>.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Asking help from English speakers</td>
<td>2.00</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>3.25</td>
<td>Somewhat true of me</td>
<td>.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Asking questions in English</td>
<td>2.00</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>3.42</td>
<td>Somewhat true of me</td>
<td>.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Trying to learn about the culture of English speakers</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>2.79</td>
<td>Somewhat true of me</td>
<td>.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average rate</td>
<td>2.33</td>
<td>4.33</td>
<td>3.47</td>
<td>Somewhat true of me</td>
<td>.53</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The two other LLS mentioned in the questionnaire by two of the respondents were: texting (or sending text message) in English and interviewing those who speak in English.

Table 4 indicates the relationship between the students’ ALLS and SLLS. The data indicate that affective LLS and social LLS are positively correlated. In other words, as the affective LLS are utilized so are the social LLS. Both affective LLS and social LLS are therefore expected to be observed together as supported by O’ Malley and Chamot’s (1990) taxonomy of LLS that classifies affective and social LLS as one.

Table 4
Correlation between ALLS and SLLS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables Correlated</th>
<th>Pearson r</th>
<th>Significance Level (p-value)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Affective language learning strategies and social LLS</td>
<td>.504</td>
<td>.012</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The results in Table 4 also imply that the students have not maximized the use of the ALLS and the SLLS. This finding is similar to the present writer’s study in 2009 which found that the learners use LLS in science and technology only to a minimum extent. Hence, it is recommended that strategies be integrated as part of the skills to be developed in language classes.

Strategies are important means for dynamic, self-directed involvement required for enhancing L2 communicative ability (O’Malley & Chamot, 1990). Hence, a wide array of strategies must be explicitly taught to language learners. Oxford (1994) believes that “Research has repeatedly shown that the conscious, tailored use of such strategies is related to language achievement and proficiency” (¶ 1). Oxford also underscores that L2 training carefully designed to fit the requirements of the language tasks, the learners' goals, and the learners' style of learning should be conducted across year levels. Such training, if possible, should be explicitly integrated into regular and meaningful L2 activities that must be conducted over long period...
of time rather than taught as a separate, short intervention. Tasks using authentic materials should provide ample practice for the learners in the strategy training. It should also address affective issues such as anxiety, motivation, beliefs and interests that affect the student preferences of language learning strategies. Finally, such strategy training should offer opportunities for the students to become autonomous learners as they are trained to assess their learning progress and the value of the strategies in their learning. Further investigation should be made to verify the positive effects of language learning strategies in relation to variables regarding students' attitudes, beliefs, and stated needs.

Learning strategies are instrumental for raising awareness of second language or foreign language learners in the four macroskills - listening, speaking, writing and reading (Lessard-Clouston, 1997 as cited in Ogeyik, 2009). Since this study found that the subjects utilize ALLS and SLLS only to a minimum extent, it is imperative that even other strategies used by learners be assessed in different ways such e.g. observations, interviews, verbal reports, strategy diaries, strategy questionnaires, surveys, anecdotal reports and so on (Oxford, 2002). Through this, a database of strategy use will be generated. This database can be treated as guidepost in designing language programs and classroom activities that would propel learners to employ varied learning strategies in various communicative situations. Oxford (2003) underscores that “The more that teachers know about their students' style preferences, the more effectively they can orient their L2 instruction, as well as the strategy teaching that can be interwoven into language instruction, matched to those style preferences” (p.16). Ogeyik (2009) also believes that “…learners who have a range of stylistic and strategic preferences in language learning process can be directed to use all those strategies consciously” (p.336). If learners can independently choose the strategies that work best for them, it is possible that their overall proficiency in the language will significantly improve.

The most potent strategy instruction according to Oxford (2003) “appears to include demonstrating when a given strategy might be useful, as well as how to use and evaluate it, and how to transfer it to other related tasks and situations” (p.11). Hence, teachers must be able to regularly and effectively demonstrate the use
of language learning strategies themselves. Moreover, “Teachers also need to assess their styles and strategies, so that they will be aware of their preferences and of possible biases” (Oxford, 2003, p.16). They serve as the best model to emulate. If teachers are successful in doing this, then learners will find the easiest way to engage in meaningful situations that require discharge of the language.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Effective use of strategies result in better language learning. Thus, students should be properly trained to make good use of these strategies to develop successful learning processes. If students are found incapable of using strategies in their attempt to participate in meaningful communication or if they are found to be minimally using them, effective means to popularize not only affective and social language learning strategies is necessary.

Further investigations can also be undertaken to obtain a clearer picture of the students’ strategy use. Involving a larger population of students and comparing strategy use across disciplines is also advised since it may lead to field-specific language instruction. The present study involved only one class in the study locale. Thus, it is suggested that the present crop of language learners in the university be involved in parallel investigations. Other taxonomies of language learning strategies may also be considered in future studies so that a more comprehensive language learning strategy use database will be generated.

References


Min-hsun, M.S. (2005). A study of EFL technological and vocational college students' language learning strategies and their self-


Appendix
Questionnaire

I. BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Please answer the questions honestly.
1. What did you enjoy in your previous literature classes? Explain.

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

2. What did you not enjoy or did not like in your previous literature classes? Explain.

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

II. STRATEGY INVENTORY FOR LANGUAGE LEARNING (SILL) Version for Speakers of Other Languages Learning English (Adapted from Oxford, 1990)

Directions: This form of the STRATEGY INVENTORY FOR LANGUAGE LEARNING (SILL) is for students of English as a second 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. Somewhat true of me
4. Usually true of me
5. Always or almost always true of me

(1) NEVER OR ALMOST NEVER TRUE OF ME means that the statement is very rarely true of you.
(2) USUALLY NOT TRUE OF ME means that the statement is true less than half the time.
(3) SOMEWHAT TRUE OF ME means that the statement is true of you about half the time.
(4) USUALLY TRUE OF ME means that the statement is true more than half the time.
(5) 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.

Read the item and choose a response (1 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.

Part A

_____ 1. I try to relax whenever I feel afraid of using English.
_____ 2. I encourage myself to speak English even if I am afraid of making a mistake.
_____ 3. I give myself a reward or treat when I do well in English.
_____ 4. I notice if I am tense or nervous when I am studying or using English.
_____ 5. I write down my feelings in a language learning diary.
_____ 6. I talk to someone else about how I feel when I am learning English.
Part B

1. If I do not understand something in English, I ask the other person to slow down or say it again.
2. I ask English speakers to correct me when I talk.
3. I practice English with other students.
4. I ask for help from English speakers.
5. I ask questions in English.
6. I try to learn about the culture of English speakers.

Part C

Answer the following honestly and sincerely.
1. If you feel afraid of using or studying English (e.g. When you are asked to speak in front of people), what do you do? If you’re not afraid, state so and explain.

2. Aside from those listed in B, what other things do you do that make you socialize or relate with others while practicing your English?

III. REVISED SHYNESS SCALE

INSTRUCTIONS: Please read each item carefully and decide to what extent it is characteristic of your feelings and behavior. Fill in the blank before each item by choosing a number from the scale printed below.

1 = very uncharacteristic or untrue, strongly disagree
2 = uncharacteristic
3 = neutral
4 = characteristic
5 = very characteristic or true, strongly agree
1. I feel tense when I'm with people I don't know well.
2. I am socially somewhat awkward.
3. I do not find it difficult to ask other people for information. (R)
4. I am often uncomfortable at parties and other social functions.
5. When in a group of people, I have trouble thinking of the right things to talk about.
6. It does not take me long to overcome my shyness in new situations. (R)
7. It is hard for me to act natural when I am meeting with new people.
8. I feel nervous when speaking to someone in authority.
9. I have no doubts about my social competence. (R)
10. I have trouble looking someone in the eye.
11. I feel inhibited in social situations.
12. I do not find it hard to talk to strangers. (R)
13. I am more shy with members of the opposite sex.


About the Author
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Evaluating Students’ Reactions and Responses to Teachers’ Written Feedbacks

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University of Santo Tomas, Manila, Philippines

Abstract

This paper is a replication of Canilao’s (2004) study which discusses the reactions and responses that students have with regard to teacher written feedback. This study used the descriptive and analytical methods in gathering data. The instruments which have been utilized in the inquiry are survey questionnaire and student composition. The results of a survey given to a group of students at the Faculty of Arts and Letters of the University of Santo Tomas show that the students generally believe that teacher comments help them enhance their writing skills. It also reveals that praise comments encourage students to improve their written work. Students read teacher comments to know their strong and weak points. Furthermore, students prefer feedback in the area of content in the form of advice or suggestion. This paper also reveals significant insights on Filipino ESL learners who are learning to write.

Key words: English as a Second Language (ESL), Multiple Interactive Processes, academic training, rhetorical pattern, teacher written feedback

Introduction

Writing is a major focus in teaching any English language course. English language teachers hope to help students write better, develop useful revision strategies, and think more systematically. Responding to students’ written work is a means of achieving these goals. Teacher’s comments are essential if not indispensable to a student revising and rewriting his/her composition. For teacher feedback to be effective, there is a need to discover whether the students will disregard the comments or think deeper about their writing and make revisions. As Sommers (1982) explains, teacher
feedback should motivate students to revisit their texts with curiosity and involvement: “The challenge we face as teachers is to develop comments which will provide an inherent reason for students to revise; it is a sense of revision as discovery, as a repeated process of beginning again, as starting out new, that our students have not learned” (p.156).

Over the past two decades, researchers involved in the field of composition writing have continuously sought to shape and refine more effective methods of written feedback on student papers and also to investigate what kind of written feedback students receive and how they react to the comments given. Connors and Lunsford (1993) provide a history of the use of teacher comments on student papers. Early in the 20th century a number of grading scales by which teachers rated student writing were proposed. Subsequently, many teachers only deemed it necessary to assign a letter grade to those papers, a grade scrawled out in ominous red ink. The grade does not explain what the teacher thinks of the content, the mechanics, the style, or even the organization of the paper. The student is left to understand the reasoning behind the grade on his/her own, hoping to find an answer by the time the next paper is due. However, by the 1950s, the manner in which the teachers approached the checking of papers began to change. Connors (1993) asserts that teachers became aware that letter grades alone do not aid students in sharpening their writing skills. Teachers realized that rating scales were only serving “as instruments for administrative judgment rather than for student improvement,” (p. 204) thus, they gradually abandoned them. Teachers began addressing students’ papers with more care and viewed essays as “real audiences” and regarded marginal and end comments as the most effective ways of explaining to students what needed attention in their writing (Connors, 1993).

Sommers (1982) addresses the purpose of teacher comments on student papers. She states that “commenting on student writing is the most widely used method for responding to student papers...” (p.148). Comments communicate to the students what needs to be revised or changed in their writing for the next draft or paper. Sommers believes that the absence of comments sends the message to students that they do not need to revise their text because their meaning has been communicated effectively to the audience.
In general, research in this field usually refers to two main issues a) teachers’ mechanisms and attitudes when giving their written comments, and the main focus of this paper, b) students’ responses and reactions to the given written feedback (Ferris & Hedgcock, 1998; Radecki & Swales, 1988; Hyland, 1998).

According to Ferris and Roberts (2001), knowing about students’ attitudes, reactions and preferences to teacher written feedback and assessment of their own weaknesses in writing is important. They also have noted that students’ attitudes and preferences have been neglected in many previous error correction studies and reviews.

Needless to say, writing is one of the most important skills that students need to learn as an essential component of their academic training and later on in their professional life. The need for well-organized, skillful writing can be found in everyday situations – a formal letter to a company president, a casual letter to a friend, a poem, a story or a novel, or even a short memo are all examples of writing. Another fact is that teaching/learning how to write gets even more complicated and challenging when it comes to ESL environments where learners have to focus on multiple interactive processes that go well beyond basic writing rules usually meant for native student writers. In conjunction with this intricacy, little research concerning teachers’ feedback on L2 writing situations has been carried out. These factors then may well justify the choice of this research topic and also give a genuine reason why this paper is an important study to read.

Taking into consideration Ferris and Roberts’ (2001) observation and viewed in the light of relative research as students’ perspectives apparently have not received the attention they deserve even if proven to have enormous effect on the whole process of teaching/learning, this paper, therefore, focuses on the students’ attitudes and perceptions on the teachers’ written feedback. Specifically, the researcher wanted to find out:

1. What reasons do the students have for reading the written comments of their teacher on their papers?
2. Do the comments help the students understand how to improve their writing? How or in what way?
3. What type of comments do the students find helpful to them? What type of comments do students suggest their teachers give them?
4. In what areas would the students like to receive feedback from their teachers?
5. In what form do the students prefer feedback on their papers?

**Method**

The participants for this study were 141 students enrolled in second year English 102 (Expository Writing) at the Faculty of Arts and Letters of the University of Santo Tomas. A total of 70 (18, 16, 15 and 21) compositions were taken from four writing classes handled by three English teachers. These compositions were written using *comparison and contrast* as the rhetorical pattern.

The survey questionnaire items pertaining to the students’ evaluation of their teachers’ written feedback on their papers and the student composition were used for data collection.

The questionnaire, a replication of Canilao’s (2004) in her study that involved De la Salle University Students has been modified and piloted, and is composed of five questions. The survey forms were then distributed to the students during one of their regular English 102 classes towards the end of the semester. The subjects were given 20 minutes to fill out the survey. Descriptive statistics was used to analyze the data gathered from the questionnaire to enable her to get the frequency and mean of the subjects’ responses.

The student composition was used to analyze the teachers’ feedback in improving the writing skills of the students. Compositions written by students that contained the teachers’ handwritten commentary – body, margin, and endnotes were obtained from the three English teachers. These students’ compositions were photocopied and were returned to the respective teachers.

Although student perspectives were the researcher’s focus, she had her own perception of the feedback. She needed to examine it *in situ* – to see, for example, whether there were more feedback on grammar and mechanics than content or organization. Prior to the survey, therefore, she had extracted, coded, and recoded all feedback.
on students’ compositions. The changes in her categories reflect the fact that on different readings, she interpreted the same feedback differently - in some instances, as interested comment, and in some occasions, as blatant instructions. This observation matches the viewpoint of Zamel (1985) when he underscored that feedback is often vague, cryptic, and inconsistent. Nevertheless, the researcher devised a number of categories based on her perception of the teachers’ intentions which included the following as “requesting clarification of meaning”, “suggesting comment to be included”, “correction of surface grammar, punctuation or vocabulary “ as well as “phrasing suggestions as questions”.

Results

This part is organized in relation to the five research questions cited earlier. In view of the fact that this study endeavored to determine the students’ perceptions on the role and influence of the teacher written feedback on the students’ written work, the congruence of current thoughts with the students’ stated attitudes and preferences are investigated.

The following tables summarize the results of the tabulated data on the questions raised in the study.

Problem 1. What reasons do students have for reading the written comments of their teachers in their papers?

Table 1
Reasons for Reading Teacher Comments

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reasons</th>
<th>High</th>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Moderate</th>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Low</th>
<th>Rank</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. I want to know my strong and weak points.</td>
<td>107</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. I want a justification of my grade.</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. I am expected to.</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>113</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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From these figures that run parallel to Canilao’s (2004) study which discusses the reactions and responses that students have with regard to teacher written feedback, the high percentage (76%) gives the strong impression that UST and De la Salle University (DLSU) students profoundly maintain the belief of previous studies made that the primary reason for reading teacher comments is to gain awareness of the various points they are good at and what they must work on more in writing. The students see value in having both strengths and weaknesses being pointed out in their work. This finding also supports the research findings that written feedback help students improve their written work (Ferris, 1995; Chandler, 2003). More than half of the students find the second reason, justification of a grade, moderately important. These findings uphold what has been widely held by many researchers that the main purpose of comments is to justify the teacher’s grade or to point out problems that need to be fixed.

Problem 2: Do the comments help them understand how to improve their writing? How or in what way?

Table 2
Usefulness of Teacher Comments on Student Writing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Uses of Teacher Comments</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Always</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It helps improve my writing</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It helps when the teacher praises what I wrote.</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It helps when errors are shown.</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The results in Table 2 clearly gives ample evidence that UST students find teacher praises most useful in helping them improve their written work. Only very few students do not find any value in their work being praised. This findings support the previous research findings in ESL writing environments that praise comments motivate the students. On the other hand, DLSU students (Canilao, 2004) find teacher comments the most helpful in improving their writing task. This distinction may be caused by the difference in the writing abilities, levels of intrinsic motivation, and personality traits between the students of UST and DLSU. It is interesting to note that although many students find praise useful, a large number of students also find it helpful to have errors pointed in their papers. This finding is congruent to previous studies: Hull (1985) states that “research is beginning to focus on error as a cognitive process” (p.165). Written praise has a positive effect on students but was considerably more effective when accompanied by specific comments on errors. Knowing the students’ attitudes and preferences about error feedback and their own assessment of their weaknesses in writing is important (Ferris & Roberts, 2001). Errors can help the teacher identify the cognitive strategies that the learner is using to process information. “It is through analyzing learner errors that we elevate the status of errors from undesirability to that of a guide to the inner working of the language learning process” (Ellis, 1985, p.53).

**Problem 3: What type of comments do the students find helpful?**

Table 3
*Types of Comments That Students Find Helpful in Improving Their Writing*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Comments</th>
<th>Rank</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>f</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Telegraphic (e.g. vf, t, sp, ew, etc.)</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conversational (e.g., Why do you like it?)</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Both telegraphic and conversational</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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While the figures in Table 3 indicate that majority of the UST students find telegraphic and conversational comments most helpful in improving their writing, the DLSU students (Canilao, 2004) find conversational comments most useful in improving their written work. This slight difference may be explained by the fact that UST and DLSU students have diverse textual issues, such as rhetorical and cultural preferences for organizing information and structuring arguments, knowledge of appropriate genres, and distinct cultural and instructional socialization. Most students from De La Salle University come from rich and prominent families, whose first language is English making them more articulate and responsive to conversational comments. However, a good number of students from the University of Santo Tomas also find conversational comments helpful on a moderate level. This finding corroborates previous studies. Dunn et al., (1989) and Hyland (1990) contend that teachers should not just tell students what to do, instead provide a platform from which students themselves can reassess and redraft their work. Such long comments, almost conversational in nature would respond more to the students themselves and not just to their writing.

**Problem 4:** What type of comments do students prefer to receive from their teachers?

**Table 4**

*Suggested Types of Commenting*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Comments</th>
<th>Rank</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>f</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Telegraphic</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conversational</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Both telegraphic and conversational</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The figures presented in Table 4 are congruent with those shown in Table 3. The comments that the students found helpful are the ones that they want their teachers to use most of the time. Thus, the most useful and highly preferred types of comments are first, a combination of both telegraphic and conversational comments and second, conversational comments.

Problem 5: In what areas do students prefer to receive feedback?

Table 5
Areas the Students Prefer to Receive Feedback from Their Teachers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Areas of Feedback</th>
<th>Rank</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vocabulary</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language use/grammar</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Content/Organization</td>
<td>104</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These figures in Table 5 reveal that majority of the students prefer feedback from their writing teachers in the area of content/organization. This finding echoes previous studies: Connors and Lunsford (1993) case study on content analysis claim that in addition to comments on grammar and mechanics, the ideas of the writer are the necessary components to a good essay; Cohen and Cavalcanti (1990) aver that students want to have some kind of feedback pertaining to the content of their writing while Sommers (1982) believe that teachers should not comment with the intention of fixing a student’s writing, but rather with the goal of helping the student clarify his own ideas and convey these ideas in a coherent manner.
Problem 5: What form of feedback do students prefer on their paper?

Table 6

*Forms of Feedback the Students Prefer on Their Papers*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Forms of Feedback</th>
<th>Rank</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>f</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questions</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suggestions</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corrections:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indirect</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Direct</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The figures shown in Table 6 indicate that a number of students prefer feedback in the form of suggestions. This finding is a solid evidence of Straub’s (1997) research which shows that students need direction in their writing, but only take heed of the teacher’s suggestions if they are worded as just that – suggestions and not commands. Research sheds light on what “good” or “well-designed” advice may be and teachers should understand what “good advice” entails when commenting on student papers. When advice is worded in an “appealing” way and is thorough, students acknowledge that “feedback and revision are valuable pedagogical tools” and that the improvement of their drafts is a result of these tools (Ferris, 1997, p. 316).

Others prefer it in the form of direct corrections. This finding still confirms Straub’s (1997) research which shows that students prefer teacher comments be explicitly expressed. Students do not want to question what the teacher is actually saying and therefore, clarity in commenting is preferred. It has been demonstrated through various studies that students do not find “traditional teacher
responses” (p. 94) such as editing symbols, abbreviations, cryptic marks and comments (“frag,” “not clear,” “tighten”) helpful in their writing. Students want comments to be clear and specific. Clarity and specificity are more important to students, as was the impression that the comments were offered as help and not as directions.

Discussion

The results of the survey of the students’ reaction to teachers’ written feedback have several implications on the teaching of English 101b and English 102 in the Department of Languages of the University of Santo Tomas. First, students find teachers’ written feedback beneficial. They read teachers’ comments because they want to develop their writing skills by getting feedback on their strengths and weaknesses as writers. Clearly, such desire is of utmost importance to a teacher of English as a second language for it is only through this realization that students can achieve greater confidence in improving their writing abilities.

Students who are motivated to write pay attention to teacher’s feedback; for students who are not motivated ignore written comments but nonetheless are still concerned about grades. Such concern has implications on how teachers can enhance student interest in writing skills development. One effective method is to shift the emphasis in the classroom and on the returned papers from teacher comments to student comments on their own writing and learning. By asking them to examine their feelings and thoughts about themselves as writers and the effects of comments on their written work, students can better understand the process of revision and the purpose of their writing. Also, students can come to regard their written output as something within their control and for which they are responsible. Comments that provide strategies for improving future drafts, rather than justifying grades, will allow students to set goals for themselves and can make learning efficient.

Second, students believe that praise comments help them improve their writing skills and abilities. English teachers need to identify strengths in student’s writing. Since praise encourages students to overcome writing apprehension and offers “the psychology of positive reinforcement” (Daiker, 1989), students
develop a more positive attitude about their writing. Also, praising student writing will make the students realize that they are doing things well. However, students deserve to know why they have earned such praise remarks. A simple “good” may please the student, but the reason for the “good” can teach something.

A third implication that can be deduced from this study is that students find a combination of telegraphic and conversational comments the most helpful type for them. This finding confirms what most composition experts assert about the value of written feedback – that it is a way for the students to view writing as a means of learning (Flower & Hayes, 1981; Frodesan & Holton, 2003).

Although UST students have expressed their preference for telegraphic comments, teachers should direct them away from the traditional practice of commenting. They should be taught that rewriting and revision are integral to writing, and that editing is an ongoing, multi-level process, not merely a hasty check for correct grammar. Instead of keeping an ideal standard, teachers may adopt a flexible standard that takes into account student level and ability. Feedback on writing would also be more meaningful if it can also blend with the oral. Such will stimulate the students’ minds to reconstruct their thoughts and ideas.

The result of this survey also shows that students want to receive teacher comments on content rather than on form. This finding supports previous researches that students will improve their written performance if teachers shift their concern for errors on the written product to concern for the evaluation of ideas in their texts (Flower & Hayes, 1981). If writing teachers aim at really giving effective feedback, they must go beyond the traditional emphasis on the correction of grammar, sentence development, spelling, punctuation marks and other concerns of form. The response that a teacher gives to written compositions must encourage the students to find new ways of elaborating their thoughts. Such feedback will provide the student writers with a direction on how to revise their work to deepen their meaning.

Lastly, this survey discloses that students prefer suggestions on their written work. “Giving an assignment involves more than selecting a topic for the students to write on. It means giving suggestions as to how to go about writing it” (Raimes, 1985, p. 243).
Writing teachers should be reminded that it is a mark of intellectual respect for the students and the paper to refrain from giving arbitrary comments on its content or substance. Teachers should write their comments in such a way as to avoid imposing their own visions or purposes on the written composition. Instead, the focus should be on guiding the students’ ideas and allowing them to make modifications with confidence and competence.

Conclusion

With the new concepts in teaching composition emerging, new attitudes of teacher response to student writing have been generated. No doubt, one of the most important criteria in ensuring effective writing among students is the quality of feedback given to them. Writing teachers need to revisit their commenting behavior and respond to the students’ insights, attitudes, and preferences on how they can be helped. Feedback should be used as tool to develop students’ writing skills. Making comments should be part of the teaching and learning process, not something for learning to fight against. It is very important to note that different situations and certain kinds of students call for distinctive types of feedback.

Creating different types of opportunities for students to respond to teachers’ feedback on different types of writing tasks may help students become more actively engaged in their writing and change their perceptions of their role in the writing process. With the appropriate structure and modeling, multiple draft assignments along with the invitation to students to respond to teacher feedback can help students gain control over their writing and become more conscious of the choices they make in their writing.

Students writing in a second language environment are also faced with social and cognitive challenges related to second language acquisition. L1 models of writing instruction and research on composing processes have been the theoretical basis for using the process approach in L2 writing pedagogy. However, language proficiency and competence underlies the ability to write in the L2 in a fundamental way. Therefore, L2 writing teachers should take into account both strategy development and language skill development when working with students. Focus on the writing process as a
pedagogical tool is only appropriate for second language learners if attention is given to linguistic development, and if learners are able to get sufficient and effective feedback from their teachers.

By asking students to respond to teachers’ comments and by the teachers listening to students’ responses, a more meaningful second language teaching and learning may be expected.

References


# Appendix

## Questionnaire on Teachers’ Written Feedback

### I. Check the best answer for you:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A. Teachers comments help me understand how to improve writing.</th>
<th>Always</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>Hardly</th>
<th>Never</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>B. It helps me improve my writing when the teacher praises what I wrote on my paper.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. It helps me improve my writing when the teacher points out only the errors in the paper.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### II. Rank each item according to your level of priority:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Priority</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A. I read the teacher’s comments because

1. I am expected to ___
2. I want a justification of my grade ___
3. I want to know my strong and weak points in writing ___

1. The type of comments I find helpful are telegraphic comments e.g., sp (spelling) agr (agreement) t (tense) frag (fragment) vf (verb form) pro (pronoun) ___

2. conversational comments e.g. Tell me more about the distressing experience ___

What would happen if you move sentences 2 and 3 to paragraph 3?

3. both telegraphic and conversational comments ___

B. My suggestion to improve teacher commenting is

1. Use telegraphic comments ___
2. Use conversational comments ___
3. Use both conversational and telegraphic comments

C. In which of the following areas would you like to receive feedback from your writing teacher?
1. Vocabulary
2. Language use/grammar
3. Content/Organization

D. How do you prefer the feedback on your paper?

1. In the form of
   a. Questions
   b. Suggestions
   c. Corrections

   1) Indirect

   (indicating only the location of a error) e.g., His father is an eminent governor in our province.

   2) Direct

   (indicating not only the location of a error, but also provide the correct answer) e.g., His father is an eminent governor in our province

2. Please give the reason for your preference.

__________________________________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________________________________
About the Author

Ma. Melvyn P. Alamis teaches English at the University of Santo Tomas. She finished her degree in Bachelor of Science in Education major in English with co-major in Religion and minor in History at the University of Santo Tomas (Cum Laude). She earned her Master degree in English from the University of Santo Tomas and is currently writing her dissertation paper on Contrastive Rhetoric for her Ph. D in English Language Studies in the same university. She has read papers, “The Linguistic Cohesiveness of Philippine and Singaporean Editorials” in the International Association for World Englishes (IAWE) International Conference and “Current Perspectives on World Englishes and its Implication for Second Language Teaching and Learning” in the Language Society of the Philippines (LSP) International Conference. She has authored papers such as “Current Perspectives on World Englishes and its Implication for Second Language Teaching and Learning” published in Philippine Journal of Linguistics (LSP). She wrote a paper, titled, “Exploring how Computational Tools and Techniques Contribute to Linguistic Research: A Preliminary Study” when she was granted sabbatical leave by the University. She is active in various professional organizations: elected as Regional Coordinator for National Capital Region (NCR) of the Alliance of Language and Literature Teachers, Inc (ALLT), board member of the Council for Department Chairpersons in English (CDCE) and College English Teachers’ Association (CETA), member of the British Council English Club and American Studies Association of the Philippines (ASAP) among others. She has authored and co-authored books and instructional materials for use of UST students. She has also served as coordinator for the UST Languages Department of the Faculty of Engineering.
Promoting the Reading Comprehension of Freshmen Engineering Students Through an Interactive Approach to Content-Based Materials

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Abstract

One of the main concerns of reading education is to develop appropriate pedagogies that will suit the needs and promote abilities of second language learners today. Instead of promoting traditional approaches, reading should be taught in a more interactive and communicative manner. In this light, this study sought to test the effectiveness of a content-based interactive reading pedagogy to enable first year engineering students develop significant levels of reading comprehension of science texts and develop compensatory strategies to help in improving their attitude and motivation towards reading. The quasi-experimental approach was used in the study. The reading comprehension test results of the experimental group were tested against the scores of the 40 students in the control group who underwent treatment using the traditional approach to reading. In addition, a researcher-designed reading attitudinal survey was administered to both groups to describe the students’ reading orientation and attitude towards the use of compensatory strategies in reading. The reading attitudinal survey revealed that the experimental group gave a more positive response in using compensatory strategies while reading. The results of the paired sample t-test or hypothesis testing revealed that there is no significant difference between the pre-test and post test scores of the control group. On the other hand, there is a significant difference between the pre-test and post test scores of the experimental group, which means that the interactive pedagogy was effective in developing the experimental group’s reading comprehension of content-based materials.

Key words: Interactive Approach to Reading, compensatory strategies, attitude and motivation towards reading, content-based materials, reading orientation
Introduction

One of the determinants to be able to survive in the society and the globalized world is for one to be able to know how to read. Almost all information in the globe today can be acquired from printed materials. According to Wallace (1992), reading is a tool for survival, a medium for social interaction, and a means to access general knowledge of the world. Hence, it is understandable that a primary concern of educators today is to train students to become better readers and language users to be able to survive in the industry and in the society as well.

To address concerns in reading education, it is important to review the existing practices of reading instruction in the country. The behaviorist psychologists believe that learning takes place through stimulus, response and reinforcement (May, 1996). When applied to reading, it is believed that graphic representations like letters and words in a text are considered as stimuli used by the students to create response. Hence, reading in the past decades was considered as a process of recognizing letters to form words and words to form sentences. In turn, this process is considered to guide students in comprehension (Donaldson & Reid, 1985). However, since the introduction of the Psycholinguistic Theory by Goodman (1975), the reading process has been taken into a different light.

The Psycholinguistic Theory purports that successful comprehension is not based on the number of words recognized in a text, but is based on the implementation of effective reading strategies. Reading is a selective process in which a reader only chooses to use the most important graphic cues to assist him/her in comprehending. Thus, the reader is considered as an active participant in meaning-getting process in contrary to the behaviorist view that readers are just passive identifiers of letters and words. The reading process is, therefore, universal and applies to all languages. But though this has been considered a general reading theory, reading in the second language still has to be viewed differently from reading in the first language.

In 1979, Coady introduced a revolutionary view of the reading process through his Basic Psycholinguistic Modes of ESL Reading where he recognizes the important role of the second language reader in the creation of meaning, and not just the meaning that resides in
the text. In his model, he emphasizes the importance of three components: processing strategies (include linguistic ability), conceptual abilities (general intellectual capacity), and background knowledge. The third component is better explained by the Schema Theory.

Schema Theory emphasizes the importance of background knowledge or previously acquired knowledge of the reader in the process of comprehension. According to Coady (1979), a text can only provide clues and directions, but the construction of meaning is done by the readers according to their own past experiences and knowledge. In second language reading, background knowledge is the factor that makes L1 readers different from L2 readers, since the prior experiences that affect readers’ interpretation vary according to culture.

Since the recognition of schema as an integral contributor in the reading comprehension, researchers suggest that activating and using prior knowledge can help compensate for language difficulties of L2 readers (Devine, 1984; Hudson, 1982). However, it should also be noted that L2 readers are still susceptible to comprehension breakdown due to lack of appropriate background knowledge about the topic of the text. Carell (1988) suggests that while readers can freely use their schema in reading comprehension, their interpretation should not deviate from the intended meaning of the text. Moreover, researchers also believe that linguistic proficiency of L2 readers is still necessary (Cummins, 2003; Pulido, 2001; Lee, 1998; Cohen et al., 1988 & Eskey, 1988).

Hence, reading is now better viewed as a combination of bottom-up and top-down processing, which starts from the reader to the text. The Interactive Approach to Reading provides that a reader has a variety of knowledge sources he can use in the process (Rumelhart, 1977). In effect, if a reader has difficulty processing a text because of lack of linguistic skills, it can be compensated by background knowledge about the content and vice versa (Stanovich, 1980).

Eskey and Grabe (1988) argue that both bottom-up processing and top-down processing have important implications to the interactive approach to reading. Since second language (L2) readers are susceptible to both language and content problems of a text, there is a need for classroom instruction to include both bottom-up and
top-down processes of reading to assist students in the comprehension process.

This study therefore examines how the Interactive Approach to Reading can help improve reading instruction in higher education. The proficiency of students in reading does not only give them a tool to survive in the industry in the future, but it also serves as a means for them to acquire knowledge in the content areas. According to Hernandez (2003), “The ability of English language learners to succeed in the content learning has to do with how well they can infer meaning, draw conclusion, learn terminology, analyze problems, and synthesize information from various sources” (p. 126). Therefore, it is an important question whether these skills can be addressed by an Interactive Approach to Reading.

Furthermore, it is also a present need to test the effectiveness of the Interactive Approach in reading content-based materials. This is especially important since the expository nature of content texts and their complex vocabulary and structure pose more comprehension problems among second language readers. In the tertiary level especially in specialized courses in Science and Technology, it is not only important for students to learn how to read, but it is also of utmost importance that they read to learn. Content-based materials are keys to their mastery of the content of their fields. Proper understanding of these materials can therefore assist them in attaining this mastery.

The present study investigated the effectiveness of Interactive Reading Pedagogy to the reading comprehension of selected freshmen engineering students to content-based texts. In addition, it also sought to determine the effectiveness of the approach to the development of reading motivation among the students. With these objectives, this study further contributes to the development of reading comprehension performance of the students specializing in the field of engineering, since their reading prowess will not only contribute to their language proficiency, but also to their achievement in the content areas.

Specifically, the study sought to answer the following:
1. Is there a significant difference in the reading comprehension test scores of the subjects
   1.1 who did not undergo training on the interactive approach to content-based materials?
1.2 who received training on the interactive approach to reading content-based materials?
2. Does the interactive reading pedagogy enable the students to develop compensatory reading strategies in coping with content-based materials?
3. Is the motivation to reading content-based materials of the subjects promoted by an interactive reading instruction?

Method

Participants

This quasi-experimental study involved 80 first year engineering students who were placed in two groups in the experiment. The total number of 80 subjects comfortably met the required statistics for the quasi-experimental nature of the study. There were 40 subjects in the experimental group and 40 subjects in the control group. The participants obtained above average, average and below average scores in the University Entrance Examination in English. Their high school grade ranged from 80 to 90. Also, all the subjects considered English as their second language.

Instruments

A 55-point researcher-designed reading comprehension test with content area texts in science was constructed. The test included a multiple-choice test and a short-answer test. Part I includes the three types of multiple-choice comprehension questions by Johnson (cited in Alderson, 2000): textually explicit questions which question and answer are both found in the same sentence of the text, textually implicit questions which require readers to combine information across sentences, and script-based questions which answers cannot be directly found in the text and which requires readers to combine textual information with background knowledge. To ensure the reliability of the reading comprehension test, it was pilot-tested using two other regular first-year engineering classes from the same University which did not officially participate in the study.

In addition to the reading comprehension test, a researcher-designed attitudinal survey form was also administered after the treatment period. It aimed to provide insights into the subjects’ reading orientation, use of compensatory reading strategies, and
motivation towards reading content-based materials. Simple ranking method or scale method was used to analyze the results. The survey was given to both experimental and control groups as data source of retrospection necessary in validating the t-test reading comprehension results.

Procedure

The Interactive Approach to reading was introduced to the students in the experimental group to address both language and content problems to reading technical and content-based materials. According to Wallace (1992), effective reading involves access to content and culture which can be achieved through the use of the following reading stages: pre-reading tasks, while reading tasks, and post reading tasks. Therefore, the lessons conducted during the treatment period for the experimental group included the three stages.

The treatment for the control group was the Traditional Approach or Bottom-up Approach to Reading. Unlike the experimental group, the students in the control group did not use purely content-based reading materials. Instead, they used their English course book which partially included content-based texts.

The treatment period of three months was observed within one college semester. Thirteen interactive lessons, reading activities, and quizzes were given to the experimental group while traditional lessons and activities were given to the control group.

The administration of the tests and handling of classes were done by two female college instructors for the experimental and control groups. Both were oriented regarding the objectives of the research, and the two reading approaches vital to the study, the Interactive Approach to reading, and the traditional method. Both instructors had formal training on reading education and second language teaching in their graduate studies. The researcher ensured that they were comparable in abilities and professional training as well as experience. Interviews with the two instructors were also conducted during and after the experiment to gather their insights and feedback on the effectiveness of the treatment designed for the participants.
Results and Discussion

1. Is there a significant difference in the reading comprehension test scores of the subjects in the control group who did not undergo training on the interactive approach to content-based materials?

Table 1 shows the control group’s pre-test and post test difference.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student</th>
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As can be seen in Table 1, only 13 out of 40 students or 32.5% in the control group increased their scores from pre-test to post test, the highest increase range being 14. Furthermore, there are a number of students who did not have any significant difference in their pre-test and post-test scores. For instance, there are seven students who
have 0 differences and more students with a difference of only 1, 2 or -1, -2. Further, 20 obtained lower scores in the post test with -8 being the highest difference.

The computed mean or difference in the control group was .05, while the computed standard deviation of the differences is 4.73909. The standard deviation of the mean (Sx) is .749316 and the control group obtained a t-value of .066728 which signifies that there is no significant improvement in their scores. It can be deduced from the statistical results that the traditional approach did not have significant effects on the reading comprehension of the control group when it comes to content-based science texts.

2. Is there a significant difference in the reading comprehension test scores of the subjects before and after receiving training on interactive approach to reading content-based materials?

The same statistical tool, paired sample t-test, was used to analyze the pre-test and post test results of the experimental group. The experimental group, unlike the control group, was not trained using the traditional approach to reading. Instead, their training was based on the principles of Interactive Approach to reading content-based materials. The following table shows the pre-test and post test difference of the experimental group.

As can be seen in Table 2, there were more students who improved their scores from pre-test to post test. Compared to the 39.059% of students in the control group who increased their scores, the increase in the experimental group was relatively higher. Twenty-five (62.5%) increased their test scores after the treatment in which three of them increased by the highest difference of 11. Only two students did not increase their scores at all, while more students in the control group obtained minimal difference or no difference at all. On the other end, 13 out of 40 students obtained lower scores in the post test.
Table 2  
*Experimental group Pre Test and Post Test Difference*

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Student</th>
<th>Post test</th>
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The mean (d) of difference or average of all the scores is 2.425 while the computed standard deviation of the difference is 4.908849. The computed $s_x$ is .776157. Since the t-value for the experimental group is 3.124367, it shows that there is a significant difference between the pre-test and post test scores and that the post test scores are significantly higher than the pre-test scores. This means that the reading comprehension significantly improved after the treatment period as revealed by their mean gain score. Hence, it can be said that the interactive reading pedagogy was effective in improving the experimental group’s performance in reading content materials in science.
3. Does the interactive reading pedagogy enable the students to develop compensatory reading strategies in coping with content-based materials?

Control Group Reading Orientation

Table 3 shows the summary of the reading orientation of the control group. Questions #2 and #4 in the table determine if the reader is word-oriented. A word-oriented reader gives much attention to vocabulary recognition and reading all words in the text. In question #2, students mostly answered ‘agree’ (35%) when asked if they believe that they need to read all words in a text to understand it. However, the percentage of those who answered ‘disagree’ closely follows at 33%. Furthermore, when asked if they give particular focus on vocabulary to understand the text (question #4), most of them still agreed (65%).

Table 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>QUESTIONS</th>
<th>RANKING SCALE</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. When I read, I usually skip unimportant words and only focus on the more important details of the text.</td>
<td>2  5%  9 23% 18 45% 11 28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. When I read an article, I make sure that I read all the words because I believe that to be able to understand a text one should understand all the words in it.</td>
<td>1  3% 13 33% 14 35% 12 30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. I can understand a text more when I read aloud rather than when I read silently.</td>
<td>10 25% 20 50% 6 15% 4 10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. I give particular focus on unfamiliar vocabulary in the text to be able to understand the topic more</td>
<td>0 0% 7 18% 26 65% 7 18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. I can always understand a text even if I don’t know the meaning to some unfamiliar words.</td>
<td>2 5% 20 50% 14 35% 2 5%</td>
</tr>
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</table>
Question #3 aimed to determine if the reader is sound-oriented. Sound-oriented readers are those who give particular importance to sounds of letters and pronunciation of words in a text. Most of the students (50%) disagreed while 25% the strongly disagreed. This means that students in the control group were not very much open to sound-oriented reading.

Finally, questions #1 and #5 focused on meaning-oriented reading which gives more emphasis on the meaning of the text. In question #1, most students (45%) answered ‘agree’ when asked if they usually skip unimportant words. However, when asked if they can always understand a text even if they do not know the meaning of some words (question #5), most of them (50%) answered ‘disagree’. This may mean that while the students do not give attention to less important words in the text, they exert more effort understanding the more important ones.

In sum, the answers of the control group to the reading orientation survey reveal that word-oriented reading is most acceptable to them. This was shown by the importance they give to vocabulary processing as a means to comprehension. This attitude may be attributed to the Traditional Approach in Reading in which students are trained to give importance only to vocabulary building and syntax.

**Experimental Group Reading Orientation**

Table 4 provides the results of the reading orientation survey conducted after the treatment period. In questions #2 and #4, the survey determined if the reader is word-oriented. Students mostly answered ‘agree’ (48%) when asked if they believe that they need to read all words in a text to understand it, and when asked if they give particular focus on vocabulary to understand the text, most of them (43%) answered ‘agree’.

Question #3 focused on determining sound-oriented students. When asked if they understand more when they read aloud, 38% of the respondents answered ‘disagree’, while 18% strongly disagreed. Further, 30% agreed while 18% strongly agreed. The results show an equal number of students who responded positively and negatively. This difference in opinion may be attributed to students’ use of compensatory reading strategies. When faced with difficult reading
situations, an active reader resorts to different strategies and chooses which one is effective for a particular reading situation.

Table 4

*Experimental Group Reading Orientation Survey*

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<th>QUESTIONS</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. When I read, I usually skip unimportant words and only focus on the more important details of the text.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. When I read an article, I make sure that I read all the words because I believe that to be able to understand a text one should understand all the words in it.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. I can understand a text more when I read aloud rather than when I read silently.</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. I give particular focus on unfamiliar vocabulary in the text to be able to understand the topic more</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. I can always understand a text even if I don’t know the meaning to some unfamiliar words.</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Finally, questions #1 and #5 determined meaning-oriented readers. According to Devine (1998), unlike the first two reading orientations in which readers focus more on the text, meaning-oriented readers focus more on background knowledge. In question #1, most students (53%) answered ‘agree’ signifying that they do not have to read all words and that they can skip words in a text and still understand them. A positive answer to the first question negates word-centered orientations and accepts meaning-oriented one. When
asked if they can still understand the text even if they are unfamiliar with some words, most students (65%) answered ‘agree’.

The responses of the experimental group to the post survey suggest that most students, after undergoing an interactive approach to reading, accept meaning-oriented reading and have positive response to sound-oriented reading. In addition, the survey shows that they also have positive attitude towards word-oriented reading. This attitude may be attributed to their openness in using varied reading strategies after the interactive reading lessons where compensatory reading strategies were taught.

Reading orientations provide readers ideas on how they execute the reading process. It guides them as to what reading strategies to use as dictated by the principle of the reading model (Devine, 1998). The students’ preference of a reading model or orientation may be attributed to the reading approach they were exposed to. The control group was more open to word-oriented reading since the Bottom-Up Approach instruction given them emphasized the importance of vocabulary recognition and grammatical knowledge, while the experimental group found meaning-oriented reading more acceptable because of the emphasis of the Interactive Approach on the role of both the reader and the text as important meaning contributors in the process of reading (Carell, 1988).

**Control Group Use of Compensatory Strategies**

Table 5 summarizes the responses of the control group with regard to their use of compensatory strategies while reading. In question #1, they were asked if they apply pre-reading strategies like looking at the title and illustrations. Most of the students (53%) answered ‘agree’, while 10 (23%) answered ‘strongly agree’. Like question 1, question #3 aimed to describe students’ use of pre-reading techniques. When asked if they make predictions as to what the text is about after previewing, 73% answered that they ‘agree’, while only 9% ‘strongly agreed’. Responses to questions #1 and #2 reveal that the students have been using pre-reading strategies.
Table 5
Control Group Use of Compensatory Strategies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>QUESTIONS</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Before reading a text, I usually preview it first by looking at the title, illustration and other parts that would give me an idea on what the text is about.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. While reading, I constantly ask myself questions on the things I read about.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. After reading the title or the first few parts of a text, I usually make predictions of what the text is really about.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>73%</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. I always find connection between the information I find in a text to the knowledge I have already learned in the past, or situations I have observed in my surroundings.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. While reading, I usually find myself sometimes agreeing and sometimes disagreeing with the author/writer.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Questions #2 and #5 focused on determining students’ use of while reading strategies. When asked if they constantly ask themselves questions, 60% answered ‘agree’, while 28% ‘strongly agreed’. Meanwhile, when asked if they find themselves agreeing or disagreeing with the author (question #5), 60% answered ‘agree’, while 33% also responded ‘strongly agree’. Only one respondent (3%) claimed that he/she does not use the said strategy while reading. Lastly, question #4 sought to find out if the subjects related currently retrieved information to those they have acquired before. The data reveal that 65% agree in using this strategy. The students’ positive
response to the use of compensatory strategies in reading reveals that these strategies are not foreign to them, and that they have been using them in their reading activities.

**Experimental Group Use of Compensatory Strategies**

The following table summarizes the experimental group’s use of compensatory strategies after the treatment period. As can be seen, a majority (65%) agreed that they use ‘previewing the text’ as a strategy. When asked if they constantly question themselves while reading, 60% agreed while 18% strongly agreed. Based on the responses for both groups, the experimental group finds previewing the text more acceptable probably because of direct training they received on this type of strategy. However, when asked if the students constantly ask themselves questions, the control group gave a slightly higher positive response having more ‘strongly agree’ answers. This may be caused by the variety of questions that students may ask during the reading process. Since the reading orientation survey revealed that the control group pays much attention to vocabulary processing, the range of questions they may ask when reading a particular text may not only be questions regarding content, but also questions on vocabulary meaning.

When asked if they make predictions while reading (question #3), a more positive response was given by the subjects. Most of them (68%) responded ‘agreed’, while 23% ‘strongly agreed’. Although the control group had more ‘agree’ responses, the ‘strongly agree’ responses in the experimental group is more noteworthy. The high percentage of those who answered ‘strongly agree’ suggests a more positive attitude.
Table 6

Experimental Group Use of Compensatory Strategies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>QUESTIONS</th>
<th>RANKING SCALE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Before reading a text, I usually preview it first by looking at the title, illustration and other parts that would give me an idea on what the text is about.</td>
<td>0 0% 4 10% 26 65% 10 25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. While reading, I constantly ask myself questions on the things I read about.</td>
<td>0 0% 9 23% 24 60% 7 18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. After reading the title or the first few parts of a text, I usually make predictions of what the text is really about.</td>
<td>0 0% 4 10% 27 68% 9 23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. I always find connection between the information I find in a text to the knowledge I have already learned in the past, or situations I have observed in my surroundings.</td>
<td>0 0% 4 10% 21 53% 15 38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. While reading, I usually find myself sometimes agreeing and sometimes disagreeing with the author/writer.</td>
<td>1 3% 4 10% 24 60% 11 28%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When the subjects were asked if they connect previously acquired information to recently acquired information (question #4), most of the students gave a positive response. In addition, the percentage of those who answered ‘strongly agree’ in the experimental group (38%) is relatively higher than of the control group (20%). Among the five questions, question #4 displays the most positive response which means that the Interactive Approach successfully trained students in using top-down processing skills and critical reading skills.
Lastly, when asked if they usually find themselves agreeing or disagreeing with the author, most of them still gave positive responses, but there are more ‘strongly agree’ answers for the control group. This may be attributed to the fact that the experimental group has been exposed more to science texts which are more factual and logical than opinionated.

The experimental group’s positive response to the use of compensatory strategies in reading reveals that they use varied reading strategies in the different stages of the reading process. Though the control group was also able to display a positive attitude, overall the experimental group showed a more positive use of the strategies. Again, this may be attributed to the emphasis of the Interactive Approach on exposing students to varied reading compensatory strategies that can help them overcome reading difficulties in all levels. However, aside from the strategies asked in the survey, more compensatory strategies were included in the reading lessons.

Effective readers select from a variety of strategies according to the nature of the text, the purpose for reading, and the context of the situation to arrive at comprehension (Wallace, 1992). In addition, wide knowledge on varied reading strategies help students know what to use in order to compensate for a reading difficulty whether in structure or content. This students’ awareness of reading difficulties and their ability to overcome them pertains to their metacognitive awareness which is also developed by the Interactive Approach. According to Alderson (2000), metacognitive skills also contribute to effective reading. Hence, the experimental group’s reading comprehension improvement may be attributed to the compensatory reading strategies and metacognitive skills acquired through the Interactive Approach to reading as treatment.

4. Is the motivation to reading content-based materials of the subjects promoted by an interactive approach to reading instruction?

The final part of the results discusses if the experimental group’s motivation towards content-based texts increased after the treatment period. The data were gathered through a reflection/assessment journal activity. In this journal writing activity,
the subjects in the experimental group were given a chance to express
their opinions regarding the interactive approach to content-based
materials. They were asked questions that required them to answer
freely and to further support the responses they gave in the survey
and their performance in the reading tests.

When they were asked how they found the reading lessons
and classroom and individual activities given to them, their answers
can be summarized into three main points: first, that the reading
lessons and activities were informative and helped them gain
knowledge; second, that the lessons and activities were manageable,
fun and interesting; and third, that the lessons and activities helped
them improve their skills in reading.

Here are some of the specific answers the respondents gave:
(Other responses which share similar thoughts and ideas are not
repeated.)

Informative/Helped gain knowledge

(1) …texts and reading lessons are quite long but they bring
    new knowledge
(2) …informing (informative) to the subject and (improves)
    general knowledge.
(3) … enhanced my knowledge.
(4) I learned new ideas from it (text)
(5) … It is also information giving texts which gives new ideas
    and knowledge about different things.
(6) … texts are science-based so we are assured that those are
    factual information.
(7) I think the lessons given us not only provide us better
    understanding of the subject matter but also enhance our
    skills in reading.
(8) I found it (activities) useful because it tested my knowledge
    about the topic…
(9) The teacher would give us activities which can help us
    encounter problems regarding texts and reading lessons
    that can help us correct simple mistakes.
Manageable, Fun and Interesting

(10) ...having different texts and reading lessons is easier and more fun
(11) ... good and interesting science texts
(12) ... fun because most of the texts are very interesting and new to us.
(13) I find it very interesting because I learned many words that are not familiar to me.
(14) It was somehow fun and enjoyable like the robot and people comparison
(15) They are fun... but at the same time we are learning.
(16) Participation of class were fully enjoyable and the activities done were very much educational.

Helped Improve Skills

(17) ...texts helped greatly in making us understand reading skills taught
(18) ...you can learn more reading skills and strategies
(19) I think the lessons given us not only provide us better understanding of the subject matter but also enhance our skills in reading.
(20) ... cooperation and teamwork will be (was) developed.
(21) .... Helped improve our thinking and analytic skills as well as comprehension in reading a text.

The reactions of the subjects in the experimental group explained for their motivation to learn and gain knowledge in their areas of study. The interactive approach to content materials was able to expose them to these content-based texts and actually discuss science content in class. Top down processing and its emphasis on schema encouraged students to bring into the discussion the information that they acquired in the past. At the same time, the emphasis on bottom-up processing helped students overcome difficulties regarding the structure and vocabulary of science texts.

In addition, the subjects in the experimental group were trained to integrate strategies in the stages of the reading process to overcome reading difficulties whether due to lack of background knowledge of the content or lack of linguistic knowledge of the text.
Since a student’s difficulty may not be another student’s own, exposing them to varied reading strategies using the Interactive Approach opened up many opportunities for them to repair comprehension breakdown. In their journal activity, the students in the experimental group were able to share the strategies they learned that helped them most. The following strategies were highlighted: scanning and skimming skills, better vocabulary, faster reading rate/speed, making predictions and hypothesis, understanding sentence structure, using context clues, better interpretation skills, and setting purpose for reading.

The lesson on scanning and skimming was the most notable for the subjects in the experimental group. The list given shows that the subjects learned both bottom-up skills, like improving vocabulary, using context clues and understanding sentence structures, and at the same time learned top-down skills, like making predictions and hypothesis and setting purpose for reading.

With regard to the attitude and motivation towards content materials, the journal writing activity showed that the subjects in the experimental group were motivated to read to gain knowledge in their area of specialization though they found science texts difficult to understand. Most of the subjects’ opinions were positive, that is they thought that their ability to understand science texts significantly improved after the treatment period. Also, most students wrote that they were more motivated reading science texts after the treatment period. Here are some of their insights gathered verbatim from the journal writing activities.

(1) Before teaching the class, I am very much interested by Science texts. But now, I think I can understand science texts better.

(2) …we are learning reading and reading comprehension, and at the same time, we are learning facts about Science.

(3) … we learned new words and proper use of terms/phrases.

(4) I improved a lot because I now know the approach I would make in reading these kinds of texts.

(5) I do improved some skills or lessons that are explained to us helped us a lot in Science courses. It made us do
our note-taking easier and helped us to understand the
texts in our book very well.
(6) Somehow I became more interested in Science texts.
(7) …the lessons presented different types of structures of
text and now, I have already got some ideas in what
reading strategies should be used.
(8) …because of the different activities and exercise. It
developed my reading skills or well my vocabulary.
(9) I think even for a little bit it helped me improve my
reading skills and comprehension towards science texts.
(10) I think my reading skills and comprehension
towards science texts have improved because of the new
skills and strategies I’ve learned.

The Interactive Approach to reading content-based materials
enabled the students in the experimental group to develop
appropriate motivation in reading science texts. Although it was
found out that both groups had positive attitude towards reading
content-based materials, the experimental group showed a higher
motivation since they engaged in more interactive discussions and
used more content-based texts than the control group.

It can be deduced from the findings that the experimental
group’s motivation to read was caused by the opportunity to learn
how to read and learn content at the same time. Hernandez (2003)
explains that content-based instruction not only give students the
opportunity to communicate in the target language, but also gives
them the chance to communicate about the subject as well. Also, the
experimental group’s motivation may be attributed to the emphasis
of the Interactive Approach on providing opportunities for
participation in dynamic classroom interaction, and overcoming
reading difficulties through the use of varied reading strategies.

Conclusions and Pedagogical Implications

The Interactive Approach to reading content-based materials is
effective in improving the freshmen engineering students’ reading
comprehension skills because of the appropriate emphasis on bottom-
up and top-down processing skills. This interaction gave the students
in the experimental group the opportunity to address difficulties in content processing and language processing due to lack of knowledge in skill and subject matter of the text. In second language reading, both processes are important in assisting students in language and content processing (Eskey & Grabbe, 1998; Carell, 1988).

Also, the Interactive Approach helped the experimental group acquire compensatory skills which assisted them in overcoming reading difficulties arising from lack of knowledge about the content or the subject matter of the text. Hence, the interactive process provided the students skills and strategies in compensating their own weaknesses with their own background knowledge (Stanovich, 1980). Furthermore, the Interactive Approach as treatment was successful because the experimental group found the lessons informative and relevant to their area of specialization, and dynamic as it encouraged exchange of ideas and feedback in the classroom.

It is therefore recommended that reading be taught in a more interactive and communicative manner. This interaction does not only refer to the interaction of bottom-up and top-down processing skills, but also the active participation of students in critical thinking, interactive activities, and discussions. Aside from individual, silent, and independent reading activities in which more time is usually spent, more collaborative reading and discussions should be offered to provide students opportunities to assess and evaluate meaning from a text, confirm with others predictions and assumptions, and share background knowledge with each other.

The purpose and strategy relationship in reading should be further emphasized. The purpose for reading dictates the kind of strategies to be used, hence, students should be exposed to different reading purposes as well as tasks, and to identify the appropriate strategies for a specific task and purpose. Moreover, second language reading education should recognize that second language students of reading may find a variety of difficulties when reading foreign texts. These difficulties may arise because the context is unknown or the language of the text is unfamiliar to them. For instance, the complex sentence structure and vocabulary may be a dilemma for them especially when most of the texts they use in research are international publications. Language teachers should recognize these reading difficulties. Thus, reading lessons should take into
consideration teaching students the language of texts from different areas of knowledge.

Furthermore, second language reading education should not only emphasize general reading abilities but also prepare students for real-life tasks in the future. For instance, exposing the students to texts that they encounter in their area of specialization would not only help them acquire more knowledge that they need but also help them be familiar with the language of their profession. In addition, exposing students to content-based materials would enable them to apply appropriate strategies in approaching these materials to enhance research skills. For future undertakings, it is suggested that the role of motivation to students’ reading performance should be further considered. The relation of motivation and their use of compensatory strategies can be tested if they correlate with student’s reading performance. Also, it is suggested that the reading attitudinal survey be further refined to include more questions on specific compensatory strategies.

References

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About the Author

Katrina Ninfa S. Morales is currently teaching English at the Faculty of Engineering, University of Santo Tomas. She earned her Master’s Degree in English Language Studies and Bachelor’s Degree in Secondary Education from the same university. Aside from her research in reading education which she has completed as a requirement for her graduate studies, she also co-authored a research in discourse analysis.
Standards and Assessment in the 2010 English Curriculum for High School: A Philippine Case Study

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De La Salle University, Manila, Philippines

Abstract

This study was conducted in order to analyze the alignment of standards in the 2010 English curriculum with the overall goal of the reform and to analyze the authenticity of the assessment tasks. In addition, this research also asked English teachers to choose what proficiency standards to include in a new English curriculum for Filipino high school students. Policy documents were analyzed and focus-group discussion was used to collect data from selected English teachers. The results showed that most of the standards targeted literature rather than language use. In addition, only few performance tasks were related to authentic use of language. Finally, the teachers chose standards that integrate language for academic, for social, and for literary response.

Key words: curriculum and standards, curriculum reform, curriculum and assessment

Introduction

There seems to be an increasing interest in revising educational standards because the demands have changed with the explosion of information and because of the shift from industrial to knowledge economy. At present, nations want their citizens to be knowledge workers not just knowledge consumers. Knowledge workers design new products, solve existing problems, and evaluate current practices. They have to be effective in writing their findings, in describing their solutions, and in defining their products. They also need effective oral communication skills to inform and persuade.
anyone around the globe for their solutions, research, and products to be acceptable.

Educational standards “articulate binding requirements for school-based teaching and learning...Educational standards express the essential goals of pedagogical work in precise, comprehensible, and focused terms as desired learning outcomes for students” (Klieme, Avenarius, Blum, Dobrich et al., 2004, p. 5). Further, the functions of these standards include providing guidance for implementation in schools, for assessing educational outcomes, and for individual diagnosis and monitoring. Stites (1999) defines the three types of standards: content standards (desirable knowledge and skills within a subject area) performance standards (how much the students should know and be able to do benchmarks), and opportunity-to-learn (specifies number of hours and quality of instruction).

In the field of English language arts, there seems to be a complication with regard to the standards. For example, English Language Arts is a subject that combines language and literature. The complication happens in setting standards for both language and literature. Singapore is able to combine both in their genre-based syllabus which states the following goals: language for information, language for interaction, and language for literary response and appreciation. However, for other countries, standards for language and literature are still being debated on. In addition, standards in other fields like math aim for balance of standards by categorizing the list into three components (Curriculum Development and Supplemental Materials Commission, 2000). These three components for math, for example, include proficiency in basic computational and procedural skills, develop conceptual understanding, and become adept in problem-solving. These components serve as guide to check the balance of any math program.

Curriculum reform is also complicated because assessment has to align with standards and instruction. In the field of English Language Teaching (ELT), communicative competence standards are assessed using tasks that reflect real-life situations where English will be used (Richards, 2006).

Task-based language assessment (TBLA) grows from the observation that mastering the grammar and lexicon of a
language is not sufficient for using a language to achieve ends in social situations. Language use is observed in settings that are more realistic and complex than in discrete skills assessments, and typically require the integration of topical, social, and/or pragmatic knowledge along with knowledge of the formal elements of language (Mislevy, Steinberg, & Almond, 2001, p. 1)

The features above exemplify authenticity of tasks. According to Richards (2001) natural use of language activities have the following characteristics: “reflect natural use of language, focus on achieving communication, require meaningful use of language, require the use of communication strategies, produce language that may not be predictable, and seek to link language in context” (p.14).

As English continues to play a significant role in academic achievement (Gottlieb, 2006) and job security, countries where English is a second language or a foreign language would like to ensure that their citizens are able to competently communicate in English. One such country is the Philippines. The Philippines boasts of its position as the only English-speaking country in Southeast Asia. The English proficiency of its citizens is one of the reasons why the Philippines is now a destination for business process outsourcing. It is also one of the reasons why Filipinos are hired as nurses, teachers, mariners, and laborers in different parts of the world. However, the dismal performance of Filipino students in the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMMS) as well as the dismal performance in business process outsourcing (BPO) examinations of applicants, and the results of the National Secondary Assessment Tests (NSAT) are signals that there is a problem with the Philippine educational system. Cruz (2008) points out that:

The competitiveness of the Philippines has slid down from 47 in 2001 to 77 in 2007 out of 117 countries that were evaluated. This can be attributed to problems in the country’s basic education sector, which critics have described as being in an alarming state... ENGLISH AND SCIENCE: In her excellent presentation at a recent COMSTE conference, Merle C. Tan of UP’s National Institute for Science and Mathematics Education Development (UP
NISMED) showed a slide about the National Secondary Assessment Tests (NSAT). The scores in NSAT in 1999 were: math 47.47, science 44.53, English 47.22. In 2000, math 50.17, science 44.50, English 48.75. In 2004, math 46.20, science 36.80, English 50.08. In 2005, math 50.70, science 39.49, English 51.33 (p. 2).

As nations strive to develop their workforce as knowledge workers, education stakeholders revise their curricula to meet the new demands. To prepare young people as future workforce and future leaders, there is an increasing attention given to secondary education. In fact, The World Bank Report (Cuadra & Moreno, 2005) states that:

Secondary education is the highway between primary schooling, tertiary education, and the labor market. Its ability to connect the different destinations and to take young people where they want to go in life...can act as a bottleneck, constricting the expansion of educational attainment and opportunity—or it can open up pathways for students’ advancement (p. 17).

There is also an increasing attention to secondary education because young people need to acquire the skills and thinking ability to make correct decisions.

Corollary to this is the increasing attention to adolescent literacy. Meltzer and Hamann (2002) claim that “adolescents who are literate can use reading, writing, speaking, listening, and thinking to learn what they want/need to learn AND can communicate/demonstrate that learning to others who need/want to know” (p.2). Adolescent literacy ensures that the future workforce will make informed decisions about themselves, their community, and their country. Adolescent literacy in English is also related to academic achievement particularly in countries where English is the medium of instruction (Gottlieb, 2006). Bautista, Bernardo, and Ocampo (2008) also claim that Filipinos need to possess the literacy skills needed to become productive and transformative citizens of the country.
The Philippines, an Asian country where English is the medium of instruction in mathematics and science, has revised its high school English curriculum to ensure that high school students achieve functional literacy. Another reason is the dismal performance in international exams in science and math. There were also studies that showed that the 2002 Revised Basic Education Curriculum did not meet most of its standards. For example, “The Monitoring and Evaluation of the Implementation of the 2002 Secondary Education Curriculum: Findings and Recommendations” (2009) found that:

There are gross inconsistencies between means and ends....There are gross inconsistencies between the kind of learner/graduate that the schools desire to produce and the strategies they employ. For example, instruction is still predominantly authoritative and textbook-based, learning is recipient and reproductive, supervision is commonly prescriptive and directive, and assessment is basically focused more on judging rather than improving performance... Students are having difficulties using English as learning medium.

BEC advocates the development of creative, critical thinkers, and problem solvers. Teachers find this difficult to achieve in English medium classes where students have poor oral-aural reading and writing skills. In these classes, teachers are prone to resort to simple recall, recognition and leading questions and to minimize questions that demand complex reasoning, explanations, elaborations, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation which students find frustrating and exasperating (p.3).

Plata (2007) also found that in the 2002 Revised Basic Education Curriculum (RBEC), some standards were too low compared to those standards in other countries where English is also the medium of instruction. She also found that despite the policy to shift to performance assessment, the Department of Education still adheres to traditional forms of testing and does not provide for mechanism for student self-assessment and self-monitoring. In addition, Bautista, Bernardo, and Ocampo (2008) pointed out that:
The key competency that should be targeted by all school systems is subsumed under the expanded definition of functional literacy. For example, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development or OECD defines functional literacy as “the capacity to access, integrate, evaluate and manage information and knowledge. It provides learners a window to the world and the linguistic, textual and symbolic tools to engage with the world as acting and autonomous individuals interacting with various groups…on paper, the various DepED and CHED curricular statements make reference to such goals and aspirations. But what we find in these national curricula are still isolated bits of knowledge and skills which are clearly inadequate compared to the expanded concepts of functional literacy and transformational citizenship (p.69).

Hence, the implementation of the 2010 English curriculum in school year 2010-2011 and the findings of previous research necessitate a study that will answer the following questions: (1) How do the standards in the 2010 English Curriculum support functional literacy and communicative competence? (2) How authentic are the performance tasks? and (3) What categories for content standards do selected English teachers choose for secondary English curriculum?

Background of the 2010 Secondary Education Curriculum

Reasons for the reform of the curriculum. According to the Curriculum Document in English (CDE) (2009), the revision of the RBEC was fueled by the need to achieve the goals of Education for all 2015, to streamline the content, and to assure functional literacy. In addition, it also reports that the results of national and international assessments were used in revising the standards and in conceptualizing the curriculum as well as the teaching and learning process. Finally, the proponents of the 2010 curriculum also considered the results of the case studies of the 2002 curriculum implementation in order to solve the problems reported in the implementation.
**Understanding by Design Framework.** The curriculum is anchored on Understanding by Design or UbD. Understanding by design is a framework that ensures deepening of student understanding by aligning standards, assessment, and instruction. However, the Department of Education modified this framework. Table 1 compares the original stages and the stages adopted by the Department of Education.

Table 1
*Comparison of UbD and Department of Education’s Framework*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stages</th>
<th>Understanding by Design (Wiggins and McTighe, 2005)</th>
<th>DepEd Facets of Understanding</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Stage 1</td>
<td>Identify desired results:</td>
<td>Results and Outcome:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Established goals</td>
<td>Content/Performance Standards</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Essential questions</td>
<td>Essential Understandings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Enduring understandings</td>
<td>Objectives (KSA)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Knowledge and skills</td>
<td>Essential Questions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stage 2</td>
<td>Determine acceptable evidence:</td>
<td>Assessment:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Performance tasks</td>
<td>Products/Performances</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Other evidence: tests, quizzes, prompts, work</td>
<td>Assessment criteria and tools</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>samples, observations, student self-assessment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>and reflection</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stage 3</td>
<td>Plan learning experience:</td>
<td>Learning plan:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Learning activities</td>
<td>Instructional activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Materials</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Description of the English Program**

The overall goal of the 2010 Secondary Education program is to develop a functionally literate Filipino who can function in various communicative situations. A functionally literate individual demonstrates the following critical competencies: to express clearly one’s ideas and feelings orally, in writing, and non-verbally; the ability to learn on his own; the ability to read, comprehend and respond in turn to ideas presented; the ability to write clearly one’s ideas an feelings, and the ability to access,
process, and utilize available basic and multimedia information (CDE, 2009, p. 2).

The 2010 English Curriculum points out that the goal of communicative competence includes development of linguistic, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic competence with emphasis on cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP).

Learning program focuses on content-based instruction (integration of math and science content), CALLA or cognitive academic language learning approach, problem-based, task-based, competency-based learning approach (PTCBL) and text analysis, text-based, and content-based, genre-based approaches to reading literature and literary appreciation (CDE, 2009, p. 2)

**Method**

This study is a policy research that attempts to understand standards and assessment policies in order to provide input in the ongoing discourse about curriculum reform. Relevant policy documents such as curriculum guides and actual 2010 curriculum were analyzed to find out if the content standards met the overall goal of developing communicative competence and functional literacy. The standards were classified according to the components of functional literacy in the 2010 Curriculum. These are “to express clearly one’s ideas and feelings orally, in writing, and non-verbally; the ability to learn on his own; the ability to read, comprehend and respond in turn to ideas presented; the ability to write clearly ones ideas an feelings, and the ability to access, process, and utilize available basic and multimedia information” (p.2). In addition, the standards in the 2010 English curriculum were also classified into the components of communicative competence which include the “development of linguistic, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic competence with emphasis on cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP)” (p.2).

Moreover, the tasks in the curriculum were also evaluated to find out whether they were authentic using Richards’ (2006) criteria such as they “reflect natural use of language, focus on achieving
communication, require meaningful use of language, require the use of communication strategies, produce language that may not be predictable, and seek to link language in context” (p.14).

Selected English teachers were asked to choose standards after a conference on proficiency standards. Fifty teachers from various private and public high schools and universities participated in the study. These teachers attended the First English Proficiency Assessment Summit held on December 4-5, 2009. This summit was organized by the Network of English Language Teachers/Testers, Inc. to bring together representatives from business, from professional organizations of English teachers, and English teachers from private and public schools in order to discuss the communicative needs of Filipino workforce and students. The teachers in this summit worked in groups of eight members as they compared the TESOL ESL Standards, Singapore English Standards, and the Philippine standards or list of competencies in English. The first two documents were chosen because they were able to categorize standards. The teachers were asked to select which categories they wanted to use to classify content standards for high school English curriculum.

Findings and Discussion

1. How do the standards in the 2010 English Curriculum support functional literacy and communicative competence?

Table 2 summarizes the content standards and performance standards of fourth year high school based on the 2010 Performance Matrix document from the Department of Education.
Table 2  
**Sample Content Standards from the 2010 English Curriculum**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Standard</th>
<th>Performance Standard</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>1st year</strong></td>
<td>The learner understands key concepts and demonstrates communicative competence for effective interaction, as well as literary competence for better appreciation of his/her culture and those of others through the study of Philippine Literature.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| **Quarter 1 Narrative** | a. The learner understands that the interplay of the basic features and elements and objectives of a narrative leads to a better understanding and deeper appreciation of a narrative.  
| | b. The learner understands that the correct form of past tense time markers, subject-verb-agreement, direct and indirect discourse leads to effective and meaningful communication of ideas. |
| **Quarter 2 Drama** | The learner understands the features of drama which distinguish it from narrative, its elements, the conventions and varied types through the intensity of techniques employed by the teacher to produce a drama presentation of an excerpt. |
| **Quarter 3 Poetry** | The learner demonstrates understanding of the distinct features of narrative, lyric, and dramatic poetry, their elements and the poetic devices using the appropriate language forms and functions.  
| | *Language focus:* basal adjectives, phrase modifiers, s-v agreement |
| **Quarter 4 Essay** | The learner demonstrates understanding of the basic features, parts, structure, and pattern of development that make tone and style of Philippine essays effective. |
| **4th year** | The learner understands key concepts and demonstrates communicative competence for effective interaction, as well as literary competence for better appreciation of his/her culture and those of others through the study of World Literature. |
| Quarter 1 Narrative | a. The learner demonstrates understanding and appreciation of how narratives affect humanity through a ten-minute movie trailer.  
  
b. The learner understands the importance of using appropriate language structures in demonstrating his/her understanding and appreciation of narratives (adjective phrases and clauses, single word intensifiers, if clause and adverb clauses).  
  
| Quarter 2 Drama | a. The learner demonstrates understanding and appreciation of how drama affects humanity through creative presentation of a modern adaptation of a classic play.  
  
b. The learner uses the language to address a variety of meaningful contexts to enrich drama presentation.  
  
| Quarter 3 Poetry | a. The learner understands that poetry provides a magical experience conveying a meaningful message about life that inspires him/her to create fresh ways of viewing the world through writing lyrics which highlight and compress emotions, sound, ideas, rhythm, and language in a carefully chosen word.  
  
b. The learner uses the correct modifiers, moods of verbs, and conditional clauses to help in the effective communication of feelings, thoughts, and ideas in writing lyric poetry.  
  
| Quarter 4 Essay | a. The learner understands that the knowledge of the features, content, structures, and other specific and standards for evaluating a literary work addresses a well-developed and meaningful critical essay.  
  
b. The learner uses parallel and balanced structure in sentences to effectively express ideas in writing a critical response.  

Table 2 shows that content standards primarily focus on literature whereas language standards refer to grammar. If the overall goal of the 2010 English Curriculum for Filipino high school students
is communicative competence and functional literacy, then it seems that the standards for language need to be reviewed. There are several reasons for this. Firstly, the definition of functional literacy in CDE (2009) includes the ability of the learners to learn on their own, and yet the standards do not include learning how to learn. Secondly, communicative competence includes communicating orally to achieve communicative goals in appropriate contexts. However, it seems that some of the content standards in Table 2 do not reflect this. For example, for first year, telling a story and presenting a drama seem to focus on platform techniques rather than on authentic communication needs. This has implications to preparing Filipino students for the workplace. Despite the increasing work opportunities in call centers in the Philippines, only five out of 100 pass the examinations that require listening and speaking. If the new curriculum focuses on platform techniques rather than on authentic listening and speaking performance, then the number of applicants failing the call center exams will continue to increase.

Finally, the content standards do not include those that are important to reading, writing, listening, and speaking in academic context. Despite the document’s description that the learning program focuses on content-based instruction (CBI) and cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP), it seems that there are no standards that support them.

2. How authentic are the performance tasks?

Table 3 shows the performance matrix for year 1-4 and quarter 1-4. As can be seen in the table, most of them do not “reflect natural use of language, focus on achieving communication, require meaningful use of language, require the use of communication strategies, produce language that may not be predictable, and seek to link language in context” (Richards, 2006, p.14). For example, first year and second year quarter 1 and quarter 2 performance tasks do not focus on achieving communicative purpose because they are intended to display their ability to use platform techniques such as voice projection, audience contact, and delivery. Moreover, these tasks do not link language in context as they are not authentic tasks that people have to do in real life. In addition, year 1-4 quarter 4 tasks
of choral reading, writing a haiku or tanka, poetry slam/performance poetry, and writing lyric to a given melody do not seem to be authentic tasks because they are creative tasks that do not require communication strategies. It appears that these tasks do not develop the “capacity to access, integrate, evaluate, and manage information and knowledge” (Bautista, Bernardo, & Ocampo, 2009, p.8). It could be the reason why “Andrew King, country director of IDP Education Philippines, a group accredited by the Australian government to administer the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) exam to Filipinos who seek to enter Australia as workers, migrants or students in its universities, had earlier reported a decline in the English proficiency of Filipinos based on the results of IELTS examinations taken by Filipinos in 2008” (Sy, 2009, ¶ 9). This examination requires test-takers to communicate with an interviewer to test their ability to communicate their opinion and to analyze issues. It seems that the performance tasks in the 2010 English Curriculum for Filipino students will not prepare students for actual communication.

The fact that the 2010 Curriculum was created because of poor performance in international science and math examination and because of the below average performance in mastery test in English suggests that the performance tasks should assess and hone those skills that matter in the real world of work and in academic achievement. However, Table 3 shows that these tasks will not help Filipino students to improve their performance in tests that require critical reading, critical thinking, and effective communication skills.
Table 3
Performance Matrix from the Department of Education

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Quarter</th>
<th>First Year</th>
<th>Second Year</th>
<th>Third Year</th>
<th>Fourth Year</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Storytelling</td>
<td>Interactive storytelling/reading</td>
<td>Short story writing</td>
<td>One-minute film/movie poster presentation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Drama presentation</td>
<td>Playlet presentation from an original script</td>
<td>Theatrical presentation of an existing drama</td>
<td>Presentation of a modern adaptation of a classic play</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Choral reading</td>
<td>Writing a haiku/tanka</td>
<td>Poetry slam/ performance poetry</td>
<td>Writing lyric to a given melody</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Writing a personal/reflective essay</td>
<td>Descriptive essay writing</td>
<td>Writing a persuasive essay</td>
<td>Writing a critical analysis of a film</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3. What content standards do selected English teachers choose for secondary English curriculum?

The results of the focus group discussion showed that the teachers wanted to use both the TESOL standards and the Singapore English Curriculum goals. The following shows that in the TESOL standards there are three goals, and there are three standards under each goal. The participants in the focus group discussion wanted to use the standards as guide because the TESOL standards reflect the social, academic, and functional aspects of language use.
TESOL ESL Standards (n.d.)

Goal 1: To use English to communicate in social settings

Standards for Goal 1
Students will:

1. use English to participate in social interaction;
2. interact in, through, and with spoken and written English for personal expression and enjoyment;
3. use learning strategies to extend their communicative competence

Goal 2: To use English to achieve academically in all content areas

Standards for Goal 2
Students will:

1. use English to interact in the classroom;
2. use English to obtain, process, construct, and provide subject matter information in spoken and written form;
3. use appropriate learning strategies to construct and apply academic knowledge

Goal 3: To use English in socially and culturally appropriate ways

Standards for Goal 3
Students will:

1. use the appropriate language variety, register, and genre according to audience, purpose, and setting;
2. use nonverbal communication appropriate to audience, purpose, and setting;
3. use appropriate learning strategies to extend their sociolinguistic and sociocultural competence

Source: TESOL ESL Standards (1997)

Two of the seven groups chose the Singaporean framework. They reported that the three categories namely language for information, language for literary response and expression,
language for social interaction seemed appropriate in the Philippine setting where language and literature are combined in English classes. Below are the Singapore standards.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language for Information</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>As speaker, writer, reader, listener and viewer, the learner will access, retrieve, evaluate, apply and present information derived from print, non-print and electronic sources.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language for Literary Response and Expression</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>As speaker, writer, reader, listener and viewer, the learner will respond creatively and critically to literary texts, relate them to personal experience, culture and society, and use language creatively to express self and identity.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language for Social Interaction</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>As speaker, writer, reader, listener and viewer, the learner will use English effectively, both in its spoken and written form, to establish and maintain positive interpersonal relationships, taking into account purpose, audience, context, and culture (Ministry of Education, 2001).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Conclusions and Recommendations**

This case study was conducted in order to analyze the content standards and the authenticity of the assessment tasks because the 2010 English Curriculum intends to develop high school students’ functional literacy. The results showed that the content standards did not include important aspects of functional literacy such as learning strategies, reading/writing strategies, and other aspects of communicative competence. The teachers also felt that there should be standards that specify the use of language for academic and social purposes. This case study opens a discussion on what Filipino high school students should know and be able to do given the available opportunity for those who are proficient in English. It also opens discussions about proficiency standards that will help teachers, parents, and other stakeholders to make decisions about teaching and assessment.

Case studies of schools that piloted the new curriculum can include teacher beliefs about the curriculum, the standards that they followed, and the assessment tasks that helped them measure student
progress. Further research that consults teachers and professional organizations regarding proficiency standards would help policymakers make decisions about what Filipino high school students should know and be able to do to become better students and better leaders, and better citizens.

References


About the Author

Dr. Sterling M. Plata helps teachers, administrators, and educational institutions to evaluate their assessment practices and to develop essential tools and processes that will deeply impact on student learning and deeper understanding. She has a Specialist Certificate in Language Testing and Assessment from SEAMEO-RELC, Singapore. She is a full-time faculty member of the Department of English and Applied Linguistics, De La Salle University-Manila. She is the President of the Network of Language Teachers/Testers, Inc, and a member of the International Language Testing Association. Dr. Plata is also an individual affiliate of the Association of Language Testers in Europe.
Item Learning and System Learning: Contextualizing the Blend of a Structure-based and Notional-Functional ESL Syllabus

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Bulacan State University, City of Malolos, Philippines

Abstract

Of the several disciplines, many aspiring language teachers still find linguistics as one of the most formidable. Such condition is brought about by the scarcity of instructional materials and a limited number of well-trained teachers who can handle one of its allied fields, especially Systemic Functional Grammar. If this problem remains unattended, producing ill-equipped language teachers shall most likely become a vicious cycle. In this context, this paper discusses the observed inadequacies of the structure-based ESL syllabus, and it considers the use of a functional model in keeping with the recent issues, trends, and development in SLA research. To show the differences between item learning and system learning, this study analyzes and explains how errors, lapses, and artificially correct lexico-syntactic formal structures manifest in the preferred uses of tertiary ESL students. These observed difficulties—the verbal structures in particular—appear to be systemic in nature and cannot be fully attributed only to poor modeling or interference of the first language. In applying some principles regarding the meaning and use of selected English structures, this paper will apply some principles of Systemic Functional Grammar.

Key words: item learning, system learning, and Notional Functional Grammar
Introduction

A language is not just a collection of words. It is not only a system of structures, but it is also a system of systems. To teach a language, one has to remember that language learning is far more than just memorizing vocabulary words and grammar rules. In teaching English as a second language (ESL), the teacher should have sufficient working knowledge of the language to be learned, the learners’ language, learning difficulties, structural ambiguities, and interpretation ambivalence.

One language model that can be used in ESL teaching is Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL). It is a framework for describing and modeling language as a resource for making meaning and a system of choices (Matthiessen, 1995). Hence, this language model transcends the formal structures of language. It treats language beyond its formal structures and takes the context of culture and the context of situation in language use (Halliday, 1994; Martin & Rose, 2003) which are crucial in ESL. Michael Halliday’s Systemic Functional Grammar pioneered SFL in the 1960’s and was updated in 1985, 1994, and 2004 (the latter co-written by Matthiessen), and was further developed by Eggins (1994), Thompson (1996), and Martin, et al. (1997). Because this language view is very much identified with MAK Halliday, it is also called Hallidayan linguistics (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004; Martin, 1992). One of the many countries that have adopted this model as part of language pedagogy is Australia (Education, 1995).

Item Learning and System Learning

Any grammar, traditional or contemporary, is very complicated. Traditional grammar teaching like what Fries (in Lado, 1957, p. 51) described some decades back would mean “giving traditional definitions to elements of speech, definitions that do not account for the facts of language.” This observation is still perceived to be true by many teachers because they view language primarily as a set of formal structures, with much emphasis on language input and less on language intake. This
traditional practice is contrary to active learning in which learners enthusiastically involve in the process (Wilson, 1981; Ramsden, 1992). To Ellis (1997) language development can be explained only in part by external factors like input. His language view implies that there is a need to consider internal factors like the learner’s intake, interlanguage, and errors. Language teaching requires knowledge of, but not limited to, structural analysis of the target language. He also noted that second language acquisition (SLA) should attend to how learners develop the target language. For this reason, Ellis differentiates ‘item learning’ and ‘system learning’. To him, while item learning is a process that deals with learning separate and discrete items, system learning deals with the learning of the abstract rules that underlie the use of linguistic items.

**Structural Syllabus and Notional-Functional Syllabus**

A syllabus is a specific and detailed document that usually contains the scope of coverage and the skills to be learned and reinforced. The most common type of syllabus in the Philippine setting is the structural syllabus (Gonzalez & Romero, 1991). This syllabus is largely based on traditional grammar (TG) which stresses that language is a system of structures. The structural syllabus is rooted on traditional or Latin grammar which to Herndon (1976) is flawed because it is based on assumptions and precepts that whatever is true in one language is also true in other languages. The main problem in using the traditional grammar lies in the premise that one model fits the grammars of all languages.

A notional-functional syllabus (NFS), on the contrary, views language in terms of the communicative functions that allow the realization of the meaning potentials of language. NFS deals with what should be learned in terms of how things are done with words: stating, promising, declaring, asserting, questioning, asking, requesting, and commenting. Weber (1989) traces in part the roots of the notional-functional syllabus to Austin’s Speech Act Theory and MAK Halliday’s Systemic-
Functional Grammar (SFG), specifically the three metafunctions: textual, interpersonal, and ideational.

Finocchiaro and Brumfit (1983) and Brown (2000) have categorized NFS under the communicative approach by assigning grammatical structures secondary to language notions. It also stresses a means of organizing a language syllabus, with emphasis on breaking down the global concept of language into units of analysis in terms of communicative situations in which they are used. It largely developed from the works of Van Ek & Alexander (1975), Wilkins (1976), and Widdowson (1978). Notional categories, Baker (1994) adds, can be taught along with notions of time, quantity, space, motion, sequence, location, and communicative functions like persuasion, inquiry, relaying emotions, and establishing relationships. To Bachman (1997), NFS can be contextualized according to the four different language functions: ideational, manipulative, heuristic, and imaginative.

**Comparison of Traditional Grammar and Systemic Functional Grammar**

While TG is limited to the sentential and subsentential dimensions of language, SFG concerns with its sentential and suprasentential features. TG deals with syntax, but SFG does not give much distinction between lexis and grammar because SFG is meaning-focused. On the one hand, to show the meaning potentials and semiotic nature of language, Halliday distinguishes field, tenor, and mode (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 2008). Field is the social activity in which the language is being used and what is being talked about. Tenor refers to the roles and relationships of interlocutors or language users. Mode is the channel of communication (written or spoken, face to face or remote). On the other hand, TG takes into account grammatical roles, as SFG with the semantic roles. Also, Halliday introduces the language metafunctions: ideational, interpersonal, and textual. The ideational metafunction refers to the expression of content like promising, narrating, requesting, regretting, among others. The interpersonal metafunction is the expression of commitment that manifests the language user’s sense of certainty and
accountability. The textual metafunction serves as the link between the utterance and the extra-linguistic situation, that organizes a text into a thread of unified whole. These sensitive aspects of grammar are not usually given consideration in using traditional approaches.

Statement of Purpose

As an abstract system of systems, a language is realized through strings of words in invisible relations that are subject to different layers of interpretation. These abstract relations are not made available through structural analysis only. ESL learners may find these relations indistinct and confusing. To demonstrate these troublesome aspects of ESL learning, this study was conducted to answer the following questions:

a) How may the ability of the student-respondents (SRs) in disambiguating grammatical structures be described in terms of verb category, verb structure, noun modification, intensifier, sentence coherence, transitivity, voice of verb, sentence focus, tense-aspect relationship, and transitivity?

b) How may the scores of the SRs be compared in relation to their curricular groups?

c) What syllabus may be designed to assist students in disambiguating ambiguous selected grammatical structures?

Method

Subjects

One hundred tertiary students participated in this study. These student-respondents (SRs) were taking Bachelor in Secondary Education, major in English, in a state university. Twenty-five students were randomly selected from each of the four curriculum levels. The subjects were grouped according to their curriculum levels: freshmen (G1), sophomores (G2), juniors (G3), and seniors (G4). The sample population was primarily composed of female students (Nf = 76) and a minority of male students (Nm = 24), with 18.5 years as the mean age. The mean age
of G₁ was higher than the mean age of G₂ because there were some older, regular students enrolled in the college of education for their second course. Table 1 shows the distribution of the 100 SRs.

Table 1
*Distribution of the Student Respondents (SRs) by Group, Sex, and Age*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Group Mean Age</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>G₁</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>17.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G₂</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>17.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G₃</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>18.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G₄</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>20.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>Overall Mean Age: 18.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Data Collection**

This study used a three-part locally constructed instrument. Part I (completion-type, five items) consists of verb category (items 1, 2, & 3), intensifier (item 4), and sentence coherence (item 5). Part II (multiple-choice type of test, nine items) includes transitivity (items 6 & 8), verb category (items 7 & 14), verb structure (items 9 & 13), voice of verb (item 10), noun modification (item 11), and sentence focus (item 12). Part III (modified multiple-choice type of test, six items) covers voice (item 15), tense-aspect (items 16, 17, & 18), verb category (item 19) and transitivity (item 20). The items were chosen based on the most frequent lapses in the quizzes and occasional essays of the SRs. The items included in the instrument were taken from examples found in the works of Halliday (1997), Trask (1993), Lyons (2001), Kroeger (2004), Nida and Taber (1969), and Elson and Pickett (1964).

The questionnaire was used to measure the SRs’ consistency in using the learned grammar items and to contrast their scores with how much they have acquired with the systems of the given items. The 100 SRs supplied the missing structures and passed judgment on the acceptability of usage. The SRs were divided into lower (G₁ & G₂) and upper (G₃ & G₄) groups for
comparison scores. Percentages were used to show the scores of the four groups of the SRs, giving the participants equal representation.

Results

Verb Category

Table 1 shows how the SRs answered items 1, 2, 3, 7, 14, & 19. Choosing between the –s and the –ing inflections appears to be very ambiguous to the SRs. For example, to complete The baby ______ because he/she has got a bad cold (item 1), the SRs chose between coughs and is coughing. The lower groups favored the -s form as the upper group did with the -ing form. While the SRs could hardly differentiate one from the other, native speakers of English would prefer is coughing to coughs. The ambivalence cannot be accounted only for the form of the verb but for its category. In SFG, Halliday (1997) categorizes processes like cough as behavioral in which the subject is not an actor but an experiencer of a process. The difficulty of SRs can be attributed to their inability to identify the category of the processes because they were more particular with its form.

In multicultural and multilingual contexts of ESL, it is very important to acknowledge the role of the learners’ first language (L1). Carl and Garrett (1991), and Fairclough (1992a; 1992b) recognize that critical language awareness is very important in language teaching. In relation to this, ESL teachers should consider the role of the students’ L1 for it is a potential source of problems. Since the SRs’ L1, Tagalog/Filipino, does not provide them the opportunity to differentiate the –s and the –ing forms, the SRs were ambivalent about it and they find it confusing especially those who belong to the upper groups.

As regards the use of verb be (item 2), the SRs chose between we and us. For the sentence Our cousins are more fortunate than ______, majority of the respondents chose the second option us even if this usage is contrary to what they read in traditional grammar books, in which the use of it is us runs counter to the traditional usage. According to TG, sentences like It is me should
be discouraged because the verbs be should be followed by pronouns in the nominative case. This grammar prescription, however, is opposed to Halliday’s (1994) idea that “the clause It is I is simply a ‘bad grammar’” (p.126) because native speakers do not use it. This prescription is one of the grammar rules that do not account for facts of language, as cited in the work of Lado (1957). SFG does not categorize be as a linking verb but as a relational process. The SRs’ choice was the same as that of the native speakers’. Their choice can be accounted for some other factors, not with their familiarity with TG.

Table 2
Percentage Distribution in Disambiguating Verb Category

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Items: 1, 2, 3, 7, 14, &amp; 19</th>
<th>Preferred Answer</th>
<th>SR Group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. The baby _____ because he/she has got a bad cold. <em>What is the missing word/phrase?</em> (coughs, is coughing)</td>
<td>is coughing</td>
<td>56 64 48 44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Our cousins are more fortunate than _______ because their parents are very successful in doing business. <em>What is the missing word?</em> (we, us)</td>
<td>us</td>
<td>84 92 92 96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. The incident _______ before anyone knew what was happening. <em>What is the missing word?</em> (occurred, was occurred)</td>
<td>occurred</td>
<td>36 72 76 92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. The gift pleases her. <em>Which question can probe the given statement?</em> Does she like the gift? Does the gift please her? Is she pleased by the gift?</td>
<td>Does she like the gift?</td>
<td>40 60 36 60</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
14. The books were quickly disposed of because… What is the missing phrase? 
…the books sold quickly. 
…they sold the books quickly. 
…the books were sold quickly.

19. My uncle is doing business. 
Is business the direct object of is doing? 
(Yes, Uncertain, No) 
No 12 04 08 16

Is my uncle a doer /actor? 
(Yes, Uncertain, No) 
No 16 00 04 04

Is the sentence the same as my uncle is a businessman? (Yes, Uncertain, No) 
Yes 96 76 68 56

For conditions involving ergativity, the SRs were asked to choose between two verb structures: one in the active and another in the passive form. The verb/process occur was used. In sentences using this verb/process type, the subject is not an actor but an existent. In item 3, the SRs favored occurred more than was occurred relative to their group levels. G₁ preferred to use was occurred indicating that they were unlocking structural ambiguities on the basis of the item learned, not on the system that governs its use. They must have thought that the verb should be in the passive voice.

In probing The gift pleases her (item 7), the SRs preferred Does she like the gift more than the other two: Does the gift please her and Is she pleased by the gift. G₃ appeared to be the most ambivalent with their answers. To Halliday (1994), sentences like The gift pleases her and She likes the gift could be representations of the same state of affairs. Based on their answers, G₁ and G₃ could not seem to see such condition.

Clauses like The books sold quickly (item14) do not in fact show actions. The phrase indicates that the books are good. In the books were quickly disposed of, the SRs could have mistaken that it is in the passive form (given the assumption that the subject is acted upon by a covert actor). The sentence, if read closely, would require the phrase the books sold quickly to mean the books were good.
Asked why the books were quickly disposed of, the SRs answered the books were sold quickly, an expression that is action-oriented and not form-driven. The SRs must have been thinking of the action performed, not of the semantic role of the subject. The data suggest that the SRs were structure-driven in disambiguating the meaning of the sentence.

To the question What does your uncle do for a living? (item 19), a possible answer could be My uncle is doing business, which means My uncle is a businessman. Here, the subject is not an actor; instead, it is identified by giving one of its attributes. Majority of the SRs thought that business is the direct object of is doing. They were uncertain if the argument my uncle is the actor. Also, most of them failed to interpret that the sentence is the same as My uncle is a businessman. These data support the earlier observation that the SRs disambiguate sentence structures primarily on the structure level.

**Verb Structure**

Table 3 presents the SRs’ scores in disambiguating verb structure. For the sentence My friend and I used to write each other (item 9), majority of the SRs indicated write as the main verb. The rest of the SRs, specifically G1 and G2, thought that the main verb is used and to write as an infinitive complement, which is superficial because used to is a modal expression indicating that the sentence is in habitual past perfective aspect.

The SRs were asked to complete We’re late, let’s go to the gym … (item 13) by choosing between has started and has been started. Majority of them, except G1, chose the program has started. The responses indicate that G1 found this item problematic and confusing. They assumed that the verb/process should be in the passive voice probably because the subject the program is inanimate and incapable of acting/doing and it is acted upon by an implied actor/doer.
Table 3
Percentage Distribution in Disambiguating Verb Structure

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Items: 9 &amp; 13</th>
<th>Preferred Answer</th>
<th>SR Group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>9. My friend and I used to write each other. Which is the main verb? (write, used)</td>
<td>write</td>
<td>G1 72 G2 48 G3 52 G4 72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. We’re late. Let’s go to the gym. I think the program... The missing phrase is... (has started, has been started)</td>
<td>has started</td>
<td>G1 44 G2 56 G3 56 G4 80</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Noun Modification

Table 4 shows the SRs scores in disambiguating noun modification. Using the idiomatic expression Paul wrote an angry letter (item 11), the SRs were asked which argument is described by the adjective angry. Many in G1 chose Paul, while the rest chose letter for their answer. Those who chose letter must be generalizing that an adjective precedes the noun it describes. In this sentence, such condition is not possible because letter is inanimate and incapable of feeling. The SRs failed to understand that the sentence does not have to be literally taken. Again, those who picked letter heavily relied on the syntactic structure, not on the meaning of the sentence. This item shows that the SRs need to attend to metalanguage in ESL. To Schleppegrell (2004), the metalanguage of SFL provides the means for contextualizing the role of language in the educational process that is vital in language pedagogy. Metalanguage helps the students explicitly understand meaning as used in the registers.

Halliday (1999) underscores that language is developed in three forms in schooling: in learning language (first language or second language development), in learning through language (content matter), and in learning about language (metalanguage). He adds that while the first two of these may develop to some degree without conscious attention to language itself, learning about language, and becoming conscious of the power of different
ways of using language, requires conscious attention by teachers, and requires that teachers develop their own knowledge about language.

Table 4
Percentage Distribution in Disambiguating Noun Modification

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item 11</th>
<th>Preferred Answer</th>
<th>SR Group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>G₁</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Paul wrote an angry letter. Which is described by angry? (Paul, letter, and either Paul or letter)</td>
<td>Paul</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Intensifier

Table 5 shows the scores of the SRs in disambiguating intensifiers. The intensifiers *so* and *too* have opposite connotations: the former is positive and the latter is negative. Most ESL learners are confused as regards the uses of *so* and *too* especially if their first language does not give them the opportunity to differentiate one from the other. The SRs were asked to contrast *so* and *too* in the sentence *The professor is ________ good that he can easily explain the lesson even if it seems ________ difficult* (item 4). Those in G₂ showed homogeneity with their answers, and they did not find this item problematic. However, there were still few of them, especially G₁ and G₂, who had relative difficulty with this item.

Table 5
Percentage Distribution in Disambiguating Intensifier

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item 4</th>
<th>Preferred Answer</th>
<th>SR Group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>G₁</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. The professor is ________ good that he can easily explain the lesson even if it seems ________ difficult. <em>The missing intensifiers are . . .</em> (so . . . too, too . . . so, so . . . so, and too . . . too)</td>
<td>so . . . too</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Sentence Coherence

Table 6 presents the SRs scores in using sentence coherence. The SRs were asked to complete the short dialog:

Man: Will you marry me?
Woman: Yes, I _______.

The responses varied, but majority of the SRs chose *will* showing that this short dialog appears to be less confusing. Nevertheless, there were few who chose *do* and *am*. Also, this item was found less ambiguous by the SRs.

Table 6
Percentage Distribution in Disambiguating Sentence Coherence

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item 5</th>
<th>Preferred Answer</th>
<th>SR Group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 5. Man: Will you marry me? Woman: Yes, I _______. | will | G₁ 68  
| | | G₂ 80  
| | | G₃ 76  
| | | G₄ 84  

Transitivity

Table 7 presents how the SRs analyzed sentences involving transitivity. Trask (1993) defines transitivity as a condition denoting a verb or a clause containing such a verb that subcategorizes for a *direct object* that is either a *goal* or a *patient*. To Lyons (2001), transitivity suggests that the effects of the action expressed by the verb pass over from the *actor/agent* to *patient/goal*. *Direct object*, to Trask, is an obligatory argument that undergoes the action of the verb. To analyze transitivity, the SRs were asked to contrast *The dean had the documents signed* and *The documents had been signed by the dean* (item 6). They were asked which of the two means *The dean signed the documents*. Most of the SRs answered this item correctly. What appears to be anomalous, however, is that Group1 scored better than G₄.

Also, they were asked which of the two sentences makes sense: *I sent a letter to Baguio* and *I sent Baguio a letter* (item 8).
These structures appear parallel to *I sent a letter to John* and *I sent John a letter*. Most of the SRs chose the first item because in the second *Baguio* is a *locative*, not *goal/patient*.

Table 7

**Percentage Distribution in Disambiguating Transitivity**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Items 6 &amp; 8</th>
<th>Preferred Answer</th>
<th>SR Group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6. Which of the two sentences means <em>The dean signed the documents</em>?</td>
<td>The documents had been signed by the dean.</td>
<td>G₁  G₂  G₃  G₄</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>88  80  82  68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Which of the two sentences makes sense?</td>
<td>I sent a letter to Baguio.</td>
<td>G₁  G₂  G₃  G₄</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I sent Baguio a letter.</td>
<td>96  96  92  100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Voice of Verb**

Table 8 presents the scores of the SRs in analyzing voice of verb. Kroeger (2004) defines voice as a property of verb denoting change in semantic roles. Voice in structural grammar is either active or passive. To test how the SRs determined voice, they compared *Mary was born in Manila* and *The glass is broken*. Based on the data, the SRs could not clearly decide which of the two is in the passive voice. G₁, G₂, and G₃ chose the first sentence. No one in G₄ chose the second sentence; they favored both the first and second sentences. All the four groups, most especially G₄ showed interpretation ambivalence.

To Lyons (2001), the first sentence is *agentless* and an example of an absolute passive because it has no active transformation. In addition, the second sentence is considered neither passive nor active—it is in the middle voice. To Halliday (1994), “the middle voice has no feature of agency” (p.168). That
means broken is not part of the verb phrase, but it is an attribute of the subject.

The SRs analyzed the voice of My spirit is dampened (item 15). Most of those in lower groups agreed that the sentence is in the passive voice. However, the SRs in upper groups thought that the sentence is not, and the rest could not decide at all. Sentences like this one are neither in the active or passive voice. My spirit is dampened is in the middle voice.

Table 8

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Preferred Answer</th>
<th>SR Group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Which of the two is in the passive voice?</td>
<td>G₁  G₂  G₃  G₄</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The first sentence</td>
<td>36  28  28  20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The second sentence</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The first and second sentences</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neither of the two sentences</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sentence Focus

Table 9 presents the scores of the SRs in determining sentence focus. Nida and Taber (1969) define focus as “the center of attention in a discourse or portion of a discourse” (p. 201). To test how the SRs identify the sentence focus, they were given John ran away (item 12). Based on the given sentence, the SRs were asked what would they answer if somebody would ask them Who ran away? Most of them answered John did. Very few of them chose either He did or He ran away.
Table 9
Percentage Distribution in Disambiguating Sentence Focus

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item 12</th>
<th>Preferred Answer</th>
<th>SR Group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>12. John ran away. Who ran away?</td>
<td>John did.</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John did.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>He ran away.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Tense-aspect

Table 10 reflects the ability of the SRs in analyzing the tense-aspects of verbs. Trask (1993) defines tense as “a grammatical category which correlates most directly with distinctions with time” (p. 276). Aspect is not always easy to distinguish from tense. Aspect shows contrast in meaning of the following: “action at a point in time, over a period of time, complete or incomplete, one time or repeated, begun or finished, etc.” (Elson & Pickett, 1964, p. 23).

Whether English has a distinctive future tense has been a controversy. Trask (1993) stresses that English has two tenses only: past and non-past. This observation was reported much earlier by Lyons (2001). The latter explains that the persistence in using future tense was brought about by the 18th century scholars who used the grammatical principles of Greek and Latin as the bases of the English prescriptive grammar. Such parallel prescriptions were based on the faulty premise that whatever was true in Latin can also be true in English. Lyons furthers that will and shall do not, in most cases, indicate futurity but modality.

The SRs were asked if will in Will you please hand me that book (item 16) indicates the tense of the verb. A greater majority, except G₄, agreed that will indicates tense. G₄ did not consider will as tense marker and the rest were undecided. Further, when asked if the action or event happens at the time of speaking, majority of the SRs agreed that it does. Even those who earlier considered will as a carrier of tense believed that the sentence happens at the time...
of speaking. This item shows that the SRs were uncertain with their choices.

In another sentence, *I have to go now* (item 17), most of the SRs thought that *to go* constitutes an infinitive. Also, most of them, especially $G_1$ thought that *have* indicates ownership. On the contrary, $G_4$ perceived that *have* does not mean ownership. Asked which of the two (*go* and *have*) is the main verb, more SRs in $G_1$ chose *go* and those who preferred *have* were fewer. The SRs in $G_4$ were also ambivalent. A little more than half of them thought that the main verb is *have*, while less than half of them thought otherwise.

In *The visitors are about to leave* (item 18), whether *are* is a helping verb or not, the SRs, especially $G_1$, showed conflicting choices. Those who thought that *are* is a helping verb were fewer than those who did not. A similar dilemma was shown by $G_4$. Those who thought that *leave* is the main verb were equal to those who did not. Also, most of the respondents believed that *to leave* constitutes an infinitive. Again, the data show that the SRs were ambivalent in their choices.

### Table 10
**Percentage Distribution in Disambiguating Tense-aspect**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Items 16, 17, &amp; 18</th>
<th>Preferred Answer</th>
<th>SR Group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>$G_1$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. Will you please hand me that book. Does the word ‘will’ show the tense of the verb? (Yes, Uncertain, No) In the sentence, does the event or action happen at the time of speaking? (Yes, Uncertain, No)</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. I have to go now. Does the sentence have an infinitive? (Yes, Uncertain, No)</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. Does the sentence show ownership? (Yes, Uncertain, No) Is go the main verb? (Yes, Uncertain, No) Is have the main verb?</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Transitivity

Table 11 shows how the SRs analyzed transitivity in a sentence. When asked to analyze *I’ll cross the bridge when I get there* (item 20), the SRs showed that *the bridge* receives the verb *will cross*. Regarding this item, $G_4$ showed that they could hardly decide because those who thought otherwise did not differ much in number. When asked whether *the bridge* is affected by the action *will cross*, the majority in $G_1$ agreed, but $G_4$ did not. Further, when asked if the sentence could be changed into passive form *The bridge will be crossed by me*, most of the SRs agreed. Finally, the lower groups interpreted the sentence similar to *I will walk across the bridge* except $G_4$. Again, the upper group interpreted the sentence according to its syntactic structures only.

Table 11
Percentage Distribution in Disambiguating Transitivity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item 20</th>
<th>Preferred Answer</th>
<th>SR Group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>$G_1$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Item 20</td>
<td></td>
<td>$G_2$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>$G_3$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>$G_4$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20. I’ll cross the bridge when I get there. Does the bridge receive will cross? (Yes, Uncertain, No)</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is the bridge affected by will cross? (Yes, Uncertain, No)</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can the sentence be changed into passive form like the bridge will be crossed by me? (Yes, Uncertain, No)</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>04</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Cont. Table 11

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Does the sentence suggest <em>I will walk across the bridge?</em></th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>84</th>
<th>48</th>
<th>72</th>
<th>32</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(Yes, Uncertain, No)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Discussion**

The data show the average of correct scores of the SRs. This suggests how wanting their level of performance was because their overall average scores were below the 50% level. Comparing the scores of SRs, Fig. 1 shows slight differences in the scores of the four groups. Specifically, the figure indicates that the senior (G4) respondents registered the most improved performance. Fig. 1 also suggests that a relative improvement was gained during the third year in the curriculum. It is during this time that the SRs engage more in task-based activities as implied by the checklist of subjects/courses taken shown in Table 12. The figure may also suggest that system learning is reinforced by doing authentic language activities. This observation conforms to the observation of Widdowson (1978) that when one learns a language he or she learns at the same time how language works.

The summary of scores in Fig. 1 suggests that the SRs’ abilities to disambiguate grammatical structures do not differ much according to their curriculum level, but a relative gain is observed when the students get more exposure to some more task-based activities. Also, given that G3 and G4 students start to have their field studies, class observation, and participation, they are given the opportunities to use and practice the language in authentic teaching-learning situations. Table 12 presents the major subjects taken by the SRs.
Figure 1
Comparison of the Average Scores of the Student Respondents in Disambiguating the Ten Different Grammar Structures

Table 12
Checklist of English Subjects for Bachelor in Secondary Education (English Major)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Curriculum Year</th>
<th>No. of Units</th>
<th>Course Title</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Communication Arts I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Structure of English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Communication Arts II</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Introduction to Linguistics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Speech &amp; Stage Arts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(15 units)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Campus Journalism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Teaching of Speaking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>English for Special Purposes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Remedial Instruction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Introduction to Literature and Philippine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Literature</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Language Curriculum for Secondary School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(21 units)</td>
<td>Creative Writing</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Summary of Scores in Disambiguating Ten Grammar Points

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Average Scores</th>
<th>G1</th>
<th>G2</th>
<th>G3</th>
<th>G4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>46.50</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>46.75</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>47.31</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>49.88</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>44.00</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
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<td>45.00</td>
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<td>46.00</td>
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<td>47.00</td>
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<td>48.00</td>
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<td>49.00</td>
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<tr>
<td>50.00</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>51.00</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Groups of Student-Respondents
While the summary of scores does not represent the overall English proficiency of the respondents, these data can be used in comparing the abilities of the SRs as regards their ambivalence in disambiguating grammatical structures. The overall scores show that the lower and the upper groups did not differ at all. Overall, the mean scores of SRs were below 50.00%. The mean scores with relatively greater difference lie between the mean scores of $G_3$ and $G_4$.

The data indicate that while the SRs rely mostly on the formal features of the language items on the one hand, they downplay the semiotics components on the other hand. The works of Matthiessen (1995), Martin (1992), Halliday & Matthiessen (1999), and Caffarel et al. (2004) are good sources in exploring the semiotic dimensions of TESL particularly along SFL. The works of these forerunners of SFL primarily consider language as a resource for making meaning rather than mere set of rules. In particular, Halliday (1978) sees language as a social semiotic. According to Eggins (1994), SFL makes four theoretical claims about language: (a) that language use is functional, (b) its function is to make meanings, (c) meanings are influenced by social and cultural context, and (d) the process of using language is a semiotic process in which people make meanings by making linguistic choices. Also, Halliday and Matthiessen have
contributed to the development of the two general descriptions of the grammar of English in systemic-functional terms: Halliday (1994) presents the grammar from the structural angle, while Matthiessen (1995) presents it in the form of systems and system networks.

The semiotic dimensions of SFL, notably stratification, instantiation, and metafunction are explained in Caffarel et al. (2004). Stratification refers to the context of culture and of situation which is a way of expressing how the function of language determines its formal structures. Instantiation has to do with the transition from the semantic potential (both contextual and linguistic) available to speakers, to the actualization of that potential, i.e., transition from system to text. Metafunction refers to the three complementary modes of meaning: ideational metafunction (or expression of content), interpersonal metafunction (expression of commitment and social relations), and textual metafunction (expression of link between the utter and the extra-linguistic situation together with the organization of the flow of information). These concepts provide for understanding field (the nature of what is happening), tenor (nature, statuses, and roles of participants in the discourse or text), and mode (organization, role, and channel of language), respectively.

Since SFL accounts for the social dimensions of language, its functions and formal structures are determined by context, both of culture and of situation. To explain these dimensions, Martin (1992) states that “texts are social processes and need to be analyzed as manifestations of the culture they in large measure construct” (p. 493). In TESL, written texts and discourses should be viewed as constituents of culture.

Based on the gathered data in the present study, the scores of G₁ and G₂ in disambiguating the 10 grammatical structures did not show much difference at all. Among other factors, over dependence on structures does not favorably help in solving semantic ambiguities. Instead, it leads to interpretation ambivalence. In light of this observation, it may be argued that language development should be considered in terms of how the learner discovers the meaning potential of language by participating in communication (Ellis, 1985). It is most likely for
this reason that those SRs who engaged more in task-based activities scored better in unlocking and disambiguating grammatical structures. To this condition, Hatch (1978) commented:

In second language learning the basic assumption has been... that one first learns how to manipulate structures, that one gradually builds up a repertoire of structures and then, somehow, learns how to put up the structures to use in discourse. We would like to consider the possibility that just the reverse happens. One learns how to do conversation, one learns to interact verbally, and out of this interaction syntactic structures are developed. (p. 404)

Based on this perspective, language function should be given equal importance with, if not priority over, formal structures. Several studies have been supporting the efficacy of the functional approach for the past few decades (Christie, 1989; Cope & Kalantzis, 1993; Martin & Christie, 1997).

Research studies on the functional approaches to language teaching shows that there is a need to adopt a constructivist framework. These studies recognize that the abstract, formal, explicit, and quite logical formalization of language alone fails to account for the much deeper functional aspects of language which are better understood through social interaction (Brown, 2000). Hence, there is a need to blend structural and functional approaches to help learners achieve ‘grammar consciousness raising’ (Ellis, 1997).

In this context, language learners are given not only the chance to practice the target language but also to understand how that language relates to the ‘beliefs, behavior, and values’ of its culture (Omaggio, 2001; Brooks, 1975). These extralinguistic aspects of the target language can be attained through communicative means given that linguistic forms are acquired better when doing a communicative task than when doing drills. This position is consistent with that of Berns (1984) who advocates task-based approach. While traditional approach to language teaching “sees language as a body of content to be mastered”, task-based language teaching is “an approach to pedagogy based
on an analysis of things that people do with language rather than an inventory of grammatical and lexical items” (Nunan, 2009, p.10).

**Conclusion and Recommendations**

This study supports the earlier observations that learners exposed to traditional and structural syllabus get acquainted with English through item learning, and those who are exposed to functional syllabus through task-based activities learn the language through system learning. This study puts forward that exposure to the traditional and structural syllabus alone does not contribute much to the acquisition of the system of English. Furthermore, some empirical data provide a context for blending traditional structural syllabus and notional functional syllabus.

In light of the findings, it is suggested that notional-functional aspect be incorporated in the language syllabus through the use of functional categories suggested by Finocchiaro & Brumfit (1983, p.65-66) in Table 13. Specifically, these functional categories can be taught by creating classroom opportunities so that the students will have the chance to use them for accomplishing communicative tasks.

Table 13
*Scope of a Notional-functional Syllabus*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Personal</td>
<td>Clarifying or arranging one’s ideas</td>
<td>Clarifying or arranging one’s ideas; Expressing one’s thoughts or feelings: love, joy, pleasure, happiness, surprise, likes, satisfaction, dislikes, disappointment, distress, pain, anger, anguish, fear, anxiety, sorrow, frustration, annoyance at missed opportunities, moral, intellectual and social concerns; Expressing everyday feelings: hunger, thirst, fatigue, sleepiness, cold, or warmth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cont. Table 13</td>
<td>Establishing and maintaining social and working relationships</td>
<td>Greetings and leave takings;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Introducing people to others;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Identifying oneself to others;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Expressing joy at another’s success;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Expressing concern for other people’s welfare;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Extending and accepting invitations;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Refusing invitations politely or making alternative arrangements;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Indicating agreement or disagreement;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Changing an embarrassing subject;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Offering food or drinks and accepting or declining politely;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Sharing wishes, hopes, desires, problems, making promises;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Committing oneself to some action;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Expressing and acknowledging gratitude;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Directive | Attempting to influence the actions of others | Making suggestions in which the speaker is included; |
| | | Making requests; making suggestions; |
| | | Refusing to accept a suggestion or a request but offering an alternative; |
| | | Persuading someone to change his point of view; |
| | | Requesting and granting permission; |
| | | Asking for help and responding to a plea for help; |
| | | Forbidding someone to do something; issuing a command; |
| | | Giving and responding to instructions; |
| | | Warning someone; |
| | | Discouraging someone from pursuing a course of action; |
| | | Establishing guidelines and deadlines for the completion of actions; |
| | | Asking for directions or instructions |

| Referential | Talking or reporting about things, actions, events, or people, and about language | Identifying items or people in the classroom, the school the home, the community; |
| | | Asking for a description of someone or something; |
| | | Defining something or a language item or asking for a definition; |
Paraphrasing, summarizing, or translating (L1 to L2 or vice versa);
Explaining or asking for explanations of how something works;
Comparing or contrasting things;
Discussing possibilities, probabilities, or capabilities of doing something;
Requesting or reporting facts about events or actions;
Evaluating the results of an action or event;

Imaginative Discussions involving elements of creativity and artistic expression

Discussing a poem, a story, a piece of music, a play, a painting, a film, a TV program, etc;
Expanding ideas suggested by other or by a piece of literature or reading material;
Creating rhymes, poetry, stories or plays;
Recombining familiar dialogs or passages creatively;
Suggesting original beginnings or endings to dialogs or stories;
Solving problems or mysteries

In the adapted notional-functional syllabus, the five functional categories are presented from the least to the most challenging tasks in which the teacher has to be COOL or ‘creator of opportunities for learning’. In adapting the syllabus, the notions and functions of the target language are prioritized with learning the formal structures for carrying out these tasks both in spoken discourses or written texts as the corollary.

As a result, grammar teaching shall become implicit and incidental, that is, inputting of the desired formal structures shall be made only as the needs arise. With this approach, the context of culture and the context of situation shall be considered along the authentic needs of the learners. Hence, the learning process becomes realistic, relevant, and meaningful.
References


Appendix
Questionnaire

Name of Student: __________________ Sex: __________________
Age: ______

A. Complete the sentences by supplying the missing parts. Circle a letter for an answer.

1. The baby ____________ because he/she has got a bad cold.
   a. coughs  b. is coughing
2. Our cousins are more fortunate than ____________ because their parents are very successful in doing business.
   a. we  b. us
3. The incident ____________ before anyone knew what was happening.
   a. occurred  b. was occurred
4. The professor is ____________ good that he can easily explain the lesson even if it seems ____________ difficult.
   a. so . . too  b. so . . so  c. too . . so  d. too . . too
5. Complete the short dialog. Man: Will you marry me? Woman: Yes, I ____________.
   a. do  b. will  c. am

B. Read and answer the following items by giving your best choice. Circle a letter for an answer.

6. Which of the two sentences means The dean signed the documents?
   a. The dean had the documents signed.
   b. The documents had been signed by the dean.
7. Which question probes the sentence The gift pleases her?
   a. Does the gift please her?
   b. Does she like the gift?
   c. Is she pleased by the gift?
8. Which of the two sentences makes sense?
   a. I sent a letter to Baguio.
   b. I sent Baguio a letter.
9. My friend and I used to write each other. In the sentence, the verb is . . .
   a. used  b. write
10. Compare the two sentences.
    Mary was born in Manila.
    The glass is broken.
    Which of the sentences is in the passive voice?
    a. the first sentence  c. both the first and second sentences
    b. the second sentence  d. neither of the two sentences
12. If you know that John ran away, and somebody asks you, “Who ran away”? Your answer will be . . .
   a. He did.  b. John did  c. He ran away

13. We’re late. Let’s go to the gym. I think the program . . .
   a. has started.  b. has been started.

14. That the books were quickly disposed of was true because . . .
   a. the books sold quickly.  b. they sold the books quickly.  c. the books were sold quickly.

C. Read the following sentences and give your opinion whether you agree or not to the subsequent items. Mark a column with a check (✓) for an answer.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>Uncertain</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>15. My spirit is dampened.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The verb is in the passive voice.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. Will you please hand me that book.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The word will shows the tense of the verb.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In the sentence, the event or action happens at the time of speaking.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. I have to go now.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The sentence contains an infinitive.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The sentence shows ownership.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The main verb is go.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The main verb is have.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. The visitors are about to leave.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are is a linking verb.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The main verb is leave.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To leave constitutes an infinitive.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19. My uncle is doing business.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business is the direct object of is doing.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My uncle is a doer or actor in the sentence.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The sentence means My uncle is a businessman.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20. I’ll cross the bridge when I get there.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In the sentence, the bridge receives the verb will cross.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The bridge is affected by the verb will cross.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The sentence can be changed into passive form like The bridge will be crossed by me.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The sentence means I will walk across the bridge.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
About the Author

Bonifacio T. Cunanan teaches linguistics and literature subjects in the College of Education and Graduate School at the Bulacan State University, Malolos City, Philippines. He earned his Ph.D. in Linguistics from the Philippine Normal University, Manila in 2002. His research interests include second language acquisition and text linguistics.
Hybrid Rhetoric in Professional Writing: The Case of American and Filipino Parents’ Letters of Excuse from School

Alejandro S. Bernardo
University of Santo Tomas, Manila, Philippines

Abstract

In much of second language writing, ‘non-native’ speakers of English are assumed to ‘digress’ from traditionally promulgated writing norms. This can be seen as negative, because they allegedly do not conform to the standard of writing; or positive, because their digressions are culturally relevant or appropriate. On that note, this study compares and contrasts letters of excuse from school written by 30 American and 30 Filipino parents. It contrasively examines the linguistic characteristics, moves, and rhetoric of Filipino and American excuse letters, with the goal of specifying the rhetorical preferences that are defining features of each corpus. More specifically, this paper examines the text layout, organizational patterns and special features of content like goodwill close and commonly recurring expressions used in stating requests in the two corpora. This paper argues that nonnative speakers of English are not the only ones that employ distinctive writing patterns which ‘digress’ from traditional writing models, but also the native speakers as well. The two discourses investigated demonstrate ‘hybrid’ rhetoric which cannot simply be described as ‘native’ or ‘non-native’. This study also proposes that a ‘discourse space’ be given to any writing community which allows its members to employ rhetorical strategies they prefer.

Key words: Contrastive Rhetoric, discourse space, hybrid rhetoric, rhetorical strategies, rhetorical rights
Background and Purpose

Contrastive Rhetoric (CR) has a very potent impact on ESL and EFL instruction (Connor, Nagelhout & Rozycki, 2008). From a simple beginning, it has become a very appealing field of research. In fact, Gonzales (2002) views CR “not simply an act of linguistic description, but more as linguistic explanation, attempting to answer the question why do members of specific discourse communities write the way they do?” (p.19). To Moreno (2008) CR now “…has been more interested in finding out how writers from different cultures organize their texts into coherent meaningful units to accomplish their communicative purposes” (p.27). Thus, it is not surprising that, at present, new trends have emerged in CR research and methods. These developments according to Connor, Nagelhout & Rozycki (2008) are caused by two key factors - the acknowledgment of more genres with specific textual requirements and heightened awareness of the social contexts of writing.

Kachru (1995) defines contrastive rhetoric as the “comparison of the writing conventions of various languages and cultures as they differ from the perceived norms of writing in American or British English” (p.21). This definition, however, was challenged by Kachru herself by emphasizing that one must question the assumption that there are well-defined writing patterns in English. Liebman (1988), on the other hand, defines CR most concisely as “the study of how rhetorical expectations and conventions differ among cultures” (p.6). Hence, contrasting stylistic choices of writing communities should not operate under the native speakers’ model as the only and valid reference point. To date, CR provides substantial insights into problems with adjusting to English rhetoric by providing information about the rhetorics used by non-English cultures (Panetta, 2001). Further, it promotes inquiry into a variety of levels of discourse and text, carefully examining the conventions and rhetorical structures of L1 and their influence on the use of another language (Kassabgy, Ibrahim & Aydelott, 2004).

Interestingly, the texts or corpora used in CR studies abound, are electronically accessible, and loaded sources of cultural and textual information. These are large databases that sample ‘real world’ text required in any CR investigation. It must be appreciated
that, at present, apart from study corpus like academic research articles, research reports, and grant proposals, writing for professional purposes has been regarded a “legitimate type of second language writing and worthy of research and teaching” (Connor, Nagelhout, & Rozycki, 2008, p.3). As a result, written correspondences like letters of request and letters of complaint have caught the attention of researchers to compare how a culture would write them with how another culture would do it.

In the Philippines alone, a great deal of research e.g. Gonzales (2002), Bautista and Madrunio (2004) and Madrunio (2004) have spurred the interest of many to conduct CR investigations. Findings of these studies have shown that Filipinos employ rhetorical conventions that are ‘uniquely Filipino’ despite the influence of American English as their second language. One may therefore argue that now, Filipino writers do not completely adhere to the exonormative or native speakers’ models of writing. These peculiarities in rhetorical patterns of language are said to be shaped by exposure to language (Magistro, 2007), language instruction (Smith, 2005), cultural thought patterns (Kaplan, 1966; Benda, 1999), and social practices (Kramsch, 1998).

To add to the growing number of CR research in the Philippines that center on comparing professional letters, this paper endeavors to describe how Filipinos and Americans write letters of excuse from school. Despite the contention that Western mode of writing should not be made as the usual reference point, this paper still used American letters to prove that even native speakers ‘digress’ from their own rhetorical norms. Letters of excuse were selected as the study corpus not only because of their ubiquity in Philippine schools but also because they could be a rich source of information for characterizing Filipinos’ organizational and lexical choices in writing. This study therefore contrastively examines the linguistic characteristics and rhetorical moves of Filipino and American excuse letters, with an attempt of specifying the rhetorical preferences that are defining features of each corpus. More specifically, this paper examines the text layout, organizational patterns, sequence of information presentation, as well as special features of contents like goodwill close and commonly recurring expressions used in stating request for excuse in the two corpora. At the end, this paper
proposes a framework that may be adapted to promote heightened recognition that a writing community has its unique ‘hybrid rhetoric’ which must be appreciated and respected and rhetoric that has unshackled from the influence of ‘western’ models of writing.

**Theoretical and “Textbook” Framework**

This paper follows the approach of Tupas in his 2006 study “Why do my students write the way they write?” The author argues that ‘theoretical’ and ‘textbook’ framework are not incompatible and the fusion of the two can be used to show how rhetorical structures are deemed both on a theoretical and pedagogical level. It must be noted, however, that print textbooks were not actually utilized in this study but only online or electronically available references on writing letters of excuse. The model of writing letters of excuse was culled from [http://www.buzzle.com/](http://www.buzzle.com/), since at the time when this study was conducted, no print sources like writing books were available. Hence, this paper also assumes that letters of excuse are rarely considered in foreign and local books and are given little attention as a form of professional writing.

**Theoretical Framework: Writing Style**

It has been established that “[e]ach language and each culture has a paragraph order unique to itself, and that part of the learning of a particular language is the mastery of its logical system” (Kaplan, 1966, p. 14). Put more succinctly, all written languages contain a variety of and identifiable and specifiable organizational modes. Recent studies have clearly shown that writers' cultural backgrounds influence or shape their organization of writing, what they opt to use as evidence in supporting their main ideas, how they express their main ideas, and how they write in the foreign language (Benda, 1999). These studies have revealed how different rhetorical preferences are mirrored in textual organization in various languages (Grabe & Kaplan, 1989).

To Connor (1996), language and writing are cultural phenomena, and, as a direct consequence, each language has unique rhetorical conventions. Thus far, rhetorical modes which are tagged
‘oriental’ in nature, for example, abound in CR works, related fields, and business correspondence textbooks (Hinds, 1984). Tupas (2006) adds that “[t]hese rhetorical structures tell us that there are supposed to be modes or ways of writing and thinking which are uniquely ‘oriental’ (p.3). Unfortunately, these ‘oriental’ writings, like that of the Philippines, appear to be popularly characterized as ‘indirect’, ‘roundabout’ or ‘circular’ and at times, ‘flawed’, ‘deviant’ and ‘nonstandard’. As an offshoot of this ‘rhetorical labeling’ or ‘rhetorical branding’, and ‘rhetorical discrimination’ the heightened interest to characterize the Asian stylistic conventions is further spurred not to defile the native speakers’ norms but to somehow elevate, promote, and recognize non-native speakers’ rhetorics.

The foregoing assumption propelled the present study to investigate the Filipinos’ formal and stylistic choices when letters of excuse are used as the reference point. The Filipinos’ rhetorical conventions are contrasted to the rhetorical preferences of the American writers using a model for writing letters of excuse as the ‘contrast guidepost’. This was done to substantiate the notion that ‘no two discourse communities write exactly the same’ and to investigate if only the Filipino corpus or both the Filipino and American corpora ‘deviate’ or ‘digress’ from the traditionally promulgated Western excuse letter writing norms. In reference to the Filipino corpus, however, this ‘deviation’ is regarded positive and culturally relevant or appropriate since it promotes recognition that every writing community has its unique ‘hybrid rhetoric’, a term used by and borrowed from Kubota & Lehner (2004). Put more clearly, there is no pure American (native) and pure Filipino (non-native) rhetoric. In the case of the Filipino writers, their stylistic choices are a fusion of the native speakers’ writing conventions and their own unique writing style largely influenced by their identity as Filipinos and cultural experiences. The insertion or omission of a writing move, for example, could be regarded as a ‘nonnative ingredient’ in professional writing while the adherence to the other Anglo-American style could be regarded as a ‘native ingredient that makes the Filipino's professional writing a ‘hybrid’ of native and nonnative writing styles.
Textbook Framework: Writing Letters of Excuse from School

An excuse letter is typically required when one needs to explain a past or future absence at some institution, usually in school or college. It is generally expected that an excuse letter be prepared by someone in authority or control of the student - usually a parent or guardian, in some cases, where the absence is due to a prolonged illness a doctor’s medical certificate also acts as an excuse letter. The following notes retrieved from http://www.buzzle.com/ present how letters of excuse are usually drafted.

1. **Beginning of the note:** The excuse letter begins by inputting the date on the top right or left hand corner. This date should be the date one is writing and handing over the letter, preferably the latter.

2. **Addressing the addressee:** Written below the line where the date is given is the name of the person to whom the letter is addressed. This can be followed with the designation of such person and the address of such person in brief.

3. **Subject:** Below the ‘from’ and ‘to’ information, is the subject of the note beginning with “Subject: …..” or “Re: …..” where the student’s name and the reason for the absence are indicated. The date(s) of absence within must also be mentioned in the subject-title.

4. **Main text:** In the body of the excuse letter, the subject-matter is put down in detail - who, when, and why - for which the excuse letter is being written. The content is brief, crisp, and lucid, stating just the reason for absence (whether past or future), relevant dates and any additional action, if necessary, which should be taken. For example, this could refer to the missed assignment, homework or test, which the student is/was unable to take on account of the absence.

5. **Conclusion:** The letter is closed with the appropriate closing salutations e.g. “yours sincerely”.

The foregoing subsection shows how rhetorical structures in writing letters of excuse are framed. Tupas (2006) claims that “…relevant textbooks in business communication usually provide readers with clearly set or defined structures of writing, giving everyone the impression that certain kinds or forms of writing should be written in particular ways” (p.3). Apparently, it appears that American business communication practices and writing conventions...
are still regarded as the yardstick and the most extensively discussed in textbooks and other local instructional materials.

**Method**

**Study Corpus**

Thirty Filipino and 30 American letters of excuse from school served as the corpus of this study. The Filipino excuse letters written within the academic year 2008-2009 were obtained from five different schools in the Philippines. Taking them from only one institution may be inapplicable since a prototype for writing excuse letters might be prescribed in that school. The sources who provided the sample letters, however, all disclosed otherwise. The 30 American excuse letters were sent via e-mail and shipping service by the researcher’s colleagues presently based in the United States. Seventeen letters came from one middle school in California and 13 were from a middle school in Texas, USA. These letters were also written within the school year 2008-2009. The researchers’ informants were asked to ascertain that the 30 American excuse letters were written by American parents.

One expressed limitation in relation to the corpus used is that the researcher was unable to gather additional pertinent background information about the parents who wrote the letters.

**Method of Analysis**

This paper conducted a systematic analysis of differences between American and Filipino letters of excuse on a formal and stylistic level. The approach of analyzing and producing the results heavily relied on qualitative bases. The Filipino and American letters were compared using the western model of writing letters of excuse from school as the contrast guidepost. The letters were assigned numbers and the essential parts were analyzed and compared. The results are presented in tables with the areas of comparison as headings. The names of the addressees, parents, and students were omitted for purposes of confidentiality.
The physical analysis of the main text of the sample letters consisted of a simple count of the number of words. This was employed to find out which corpus is comparatively lengthy or more direct and concise. The analysis of form was limited to the analysis of the text layout and three letter parts. This step, however, was deemed necessary since “The layout of a text type can indicate the communicative intention of a text and can therefore guide the readers’ interpretation” (Rentel, 2005, p.1). In the analysis, the focus was on the following: letter styles, From-To-Subject information, salutations, and closing salutations.

Since the central point of the investigation is the stylistic analysis, the writing moves employed in the two corpora were identified. The moves were labeled for easier classification and categorization. Recurring phrases and expressions were also culled and compared.

**Results**

The following presents the results of the formal and stylistic analyses of the Filipino and American corpora. Taken as points for contrast are the following: (1) Text Layout; (2) From – To – Subject Information as Beginning Note; (3) Salutations; (4) Phrases Used in Stating Request for Excuse; (5) Number of Words in the Main Text; (6) Rhetorical Moves in Writing the Main Text; (7) Goodwill Close and (8) Closing Salutations.

Table 1 shows the letter style used in the American and Filipino letters of excuse. The data show that the American and the Filipino corpora frequently employ the full block style in framing the text layout. Perhaps the American and the Filipino parents are cognizant that full block style makes their writing more ‘professional looking’ and easier because it dispenses with all of the tedious indenting and punctuating. It must be noted, however, that the other typical components of full block letters e.g. inside address or the name and title of the addressee, are not indicated in 59 of the 60 letters examined in this study. Thus, in a majority of the letters, salutations immediately follow the dates when the letters were drafted.
Table 1
Letter Styles Used in the American and Filipino Letters of Excuse

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Letter Styles</th>
<th>American Corpus</th>
<th>Filipino Corpus</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>f</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Block</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Semi-block</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>26.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full Block</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>63.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>30</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 presents the beginning note in the two corpora. The data reveal that only five out of the 30 American letters of excuse bear the From-To-Re preliminary opening. More surprisingly, the structure used differ in sequence and some components like ‘subject’ or ‘re’ are intentionally omitted. Hence, it could be said that American parents infrequently use this structure. Similarly, the Filipino letters of excuse rarely follow the From-To-Re format. Only one letter uses it as a preliminary section and a majority of the samples (29 out of 30 Filipino excuse letters) begin right away with the dates when the letters were written and preferred salutations. Put more simply, From-To-Re structure is not a usual choice in the two corpora.

Table 2
From – To – Subject Information as Beginning Note in the American and Filipino Letters of Excuse

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Beginning Note</th>
<th>American Corpus</th>
<th>Filipino Corpus</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>f</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To-From-Re</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Re-To</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To-Re</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>From-To-Re</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>83.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>30</td>
<td>99.99</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3 presents the salutations used in the American and Filipino letters of excuse. A closer look at the table would lead one to deduce that the Filipino and the American corpora greatly differ in their choice of salutations. It is important to note, however, that there is a preponderance of *To whom it may concern* in the Filipino letters of excuse. Equally worth noting is that there are Filipino letters which do not capitalize the first letter of each word of this salutation.

Table 3 also shows that the American corpus uses less formal salutations like *Greeting + Formal Address and Surname* while the Filipino corpus uses more formal salutations like *Sir* and *Madam*. Dropping the salutation could be a valuable option for the two sample groups for two reasons – if they do not know the reader’s name or they know the reader’s name but it is non-gender specific. Hence, they are tempted to start their letter with the trite and ineffective salutation, *To Whom It May Concern* (Angell, 2007). It is possible that this salutation serves as their last resort if they are unsure of the person’s professional identify. They use this neutral replacement with the assumption that gender issues are not serious enough to warrant careful attention (Baude, 2007).

Table 3

*Salutations in the American and Filipino Letters of Excuse*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Salutations</th>
<th>American Corpus</th>
<th>Filipino Corpus</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>f</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To Whom It May Concern</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>13.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greeting + Formal Address and Surname</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>43.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greeting + Professional Title</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To + Professional Title</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Degree + Surname</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Formal Address (Sir/Ma’am/Madame)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greeting + Formal Address (Sir/Ma’am/Madame)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional Title</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 4 presents the usual phrases used in the American and Filipino corpora in requesting for excuse. The comparison shows that both Filipino and American parents have created formulaic expressions when they compose letters of excuse. In the Filipino corpus, a majority (22 out of 30 letters) use *Please excuse* as an introductory phrase in requesting for excuse. Also, some parents opt for *Kindly excuse*. Very polite expressions like *May I respectfully ask* and *I would like to seek your very kind consideration to excuse* are also evident in the Filipino letters. Hence, it is possible that these are used to set a stylish tone to show that the addressees are deserving of respect as well as courtesy with a pragmatic force of receiving positive attention.

**Table 4**

*Phrases Used in Requesting for Excuse in the American and Filipino Letters of Excuse*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phrases Used in Stating Excuse</th>
<th>American Corpus</th>
<th>Filipino Corpus</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>f</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Please excuse</em>…</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>46.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Kindly excuse</em>…</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>43.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Analysis of the results in Table 4 also indicates that the American letters may opt not to use any of the recurring phrases especially when they merely want to state absence during the previous day/s. This makes the letters less explicit in stating the main purpose of communication. A good number of samples show that the American parents may be indirect in stating their purpose for writing. It must be noted that excuse letters are primarily written to ‘excuse’ the subjects from schoolwork or for being absent; however, the American letters seem vague or less overt in indicating purpose. In other words, these letters do not look as if they require specific course
of action from the addressees. It is possible that the writers are assuming that the addressees would understand the implicit statement of request of excusing the subjects from school. To illustrate this, some examples are given below.

(1) I'm sorry to say that [name] hasn't been in school for the past 7 days, because of being at home, sick with the measles. The doctor's note I have attached will verify the illness. [name] was playing X-Box and surfing the net for a lot of the time, but also did some homework so as to keep up with the coursework.

   Thanks for your attention to this matter. If you have any questions, please call me at [phone number].

(2) I would like to apologize for my son's absence on 2nd March. My son had a fever and was home all day. He did not see a doctor, as he still had the medicine given from the last time he was ill.

   If there's any problem or inconvenience caused, you may call the contact number stated above. I hope you will understand. Thank you for your time.

(3) Brendan broke his leg and is in hospital and will be there for the next week, so will not be able to attend school.

   I will make sure he receives any relevant homework.

On the contrary, the Filipino excuse letters are very explicit in stating the purpose of communication. The addressees are given a very clear idea as regards what the writers ask them to do – to excuse the subjects from having been absent or tardy. The Filipino writers are very unambiguous in stating the purpose of writing by saying “Please excuse my daughter/son from being absent”, short but with a pragmatic force of excusing the subject. Examples of these letters are given below.
(1) Please excuse my son, [name] for being absent from your class last Monday because he was sick.

(2) Please excuse my son [name] of IV – Felicity for going to school late. My son is late because of diarrhea.

(3) Kindly excuse my daughter [name] for being late today since we need to follow-up the results of her laboratory tests and administer necessary medicine.

It is also worth noting that the American parents excuse their children ‘from schoolwork’ unlike the Filipino parents who excuse their children ‘for being absent or tardy’. Further, the expression Please excuse [name] for being absent has also become commonplace in Filipino letters of excuse. It is not unusual to see for being absent instead of for having been absent which is the acceptable phrasal expression in Standard English.

Table 5 shows the number of words in the main text or body of the American and Filipino letters of excuse. The average number of words (65.93 for the American corpus and 36.3 for the Filipino corpus) indicates that the American letters of excuse are relatively longer than the Filipino letters of excuse. It has been observed that nonnative speakers of English do not in general construct written texts in the straightforward linear sequence (Murcia, 2006). The results, however, show that Filipino parents when they write excuse letters are more concise, direct, and straight to the point as shown by the fewer number of words in the samples and the frequent use of subject-reason move (Please refer to Table 6).
Table 5
Number of Words in the Main Text of American and Filipino Letters of Excuse

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Letter</th>
<th>American Corpus</th>
<th>Filipino Corpus</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>363</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13.</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14.</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15.</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16.</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17.</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18.</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19.</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20.</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21.</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22.</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23.</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24.</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25.</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26.</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27.</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28.</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29.</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30.</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

65.93  36.3

Average

Further analysis of the data above indicates that the American letters of excuse become longer when students are excused from anticipated absences (See the sample below). The letters provide more background information and indicate justification of the students’
predicted absences e.g. absence due to out of town trips, religious observance, and family affairs. The American letters are shorter when the reason for absence is sickness. In the Philippines, however, it is not common to see letters of excuse for anticipated absences.

Sample letter of excuse for anticipated absence:

Please be advised that [student] will be out of school during the week of [date]. We ask that his absences be excused.

The reason for [student]'s absence is that our family will be out of the state during this week. While we are gone, we will be visiting Walt Disney World. We believe that [student] will be learning many things during this trip and that his education will continue in his absence from school.

Some things [student] will learn about:

* Different cultures of the world, including architecture, language, diet, and dress, by visiting the different countries in the Epcot World Showcase (Japan, China, Germany, Mexico, Norway, Canada, France, etc.) [student] will have the chance to explore the exhibits for each country and speak with natives from each country who work as cast members.

* American history by viewing the Hall of Presidents presentation in the Magic Kingdom and the American Adventure show in Epcot.

* Nature and conservation at Animal Kingdom.

* Science by exploring the Mission: Space ride in Epcot where he will have a chance to see and feel what it would be like to travel by rocket to Mars and by experiencing the Universe of Energy exhibit which teaches about fossil fuels, energy, and conservation.

* Economics by managing his own spending money and making budget decisions on how to spend his money.

[student] will also be learning about map reading by navigating in and to the different theme parks, as well as the resorts and water parks via the Disney bus system, sociological aspects of crowds including patterns and behavior, physics of the different rides, breakthroughs in
technology at the Innovations computer lab in Epcot, art and animation and the history of film, and mathematics.

We believe this will be a wonderful and educational experience for [student] and hope you agree not to charge him with unexcused absences as a result. If it is possible for [student] to take any assignments with him to be turned in when we return or to turn in before we leave any work that will be due while he is gone, please let us know as soon as possible.

Thank you for your attention to this. If you have any questions or need any further information, please feel free to contact me.

The comparison shows that the Filipino parents brief in writing letters of excuse. Hence, as stated earlier, it could be said that they are more direct to the point in stating their purpose and they rarely provide additional or background information. Examples of brief and straightforward Filipino excuse letters are given below.

(1) Please excuse my daughter [name] for being absent today. She is not feeling well. Thanking you in advance for your kind consideration.

(2) Please excuse my son [name] for being late yesterday because he woke up late yesterday morning. Thank you very much and he assured this will never happen again.

Table 6 presents the rhetorical moves employed in writing the main text of the American and Filipino excuse letters. The results show that the two corpora vary in terms of writing moves in composing the body of the letters.
Table 6
Rhetorical Moves in Writing the Main Text of American and Filipino Letters of Excuse

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rhetorical Moves</th>
<th>American Corpus</th>
<th>Filipino Corpus</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>f</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subject-Reason-Additional Action</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>46.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subject-Reason-Justification</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subject-Reason-Justification-Additional Action</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subject-Reason</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>13.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subject-Reason-Additional Information</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subject-Reason-Additional Action-Justification</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The “textbook” framework presented in the previous section purports that when writing the main text of the letter, the subject (who, when and why - for which the excuse letter is being written) is put down in detail first followed by the reason for absence and additional actions deemed necessary. The data indicate that the American letters of excuse usually follow this sequence. Although in some cases, they employ an additional move which this paper refers to as justification move since it can be inferred that these statements justify or rationalize the absence of the subject. Examples of these are the following:

1. We believe that [student] will be learning many things during this trip and that his education will continue in his absence from school.
   
   Some things [student] will learn about:
   
   Different cultures of the world, including architecture, language, diet, and dress, by visiting the different countries in the Epcot World Showcase (Japan, China, Germany, Mexico, Norway, Canada, France, etc.) [student] will have the chance to explore the exhibits for
each country and speak with natives from each country who work as cast members.

(2) It is important that our child join the congregational prayers held on this festive occasion. The Attendance department of the Dade county school board is well aware of this and has officially excused all children from school on this date due to the holiday.

(3) It was recommended by our physician that [Name] stay indoors for at least 7 days, since an individual is able to transmit measles from four days prior and four days after "rash onset".

The results also imply that the additional actions in the American corpus are typically statements that indicate request for favor from the addressee e.g. making phone calls, allowing the subject to take special exams or make up for missed lessons, which are rarely found in the Filipino corpus. Examples of these are the following:

(1) If you have any questions or need any further information, please feel free to contact me.
(2) Kindly allow her to take special quizzes, projects or exams she miss during her absence.
(3) I hope you would kindly allow her to make up for the lessons and exams she missed during her absence.
(4) If it is possible for Jack to take school assignments with him on the trip to be turned in upon his return, please let us know.
(5) Please allow him to make up his homework.
(6) Please e-mail me at [e-mail address] with [student’s name] assignments for the days that she will be absent.
(7) If you have any questions or concerns, please contact [Parents Name] at [phone number]
The data also show that the Filipino letters of excuse follow the prescribed move although they rarely ask for *additional action* from the addresses. Also, they employ an ‘extra move’ this paper calls *additional information*. This move does not really justify one’s nonattendance but it only gives supplementary information e.g. assurance, concern, attempt to catch up, measures to be undertaken, as regards the subject’s absence. Apparently, these are not found in the sample American letters of excuse. Examples of this extra move are given below.

(1) *Her husband is out of the country and can’t come to see you regarding this.*
(2) *Nevertheless, she still opted to come to school to pick up the missed lessons and join the remaining classes today.*
(3) *I already talked to the driver and promised me that the same incident won’t happen again.*
(4) *As her guardian, I am concerned for her condition.*
(5) *After the follow up check up today she will be traveling to Bayombong for her classes.*

Although the Filipino letters of excuse employ an additional move unusually found in American writing, it cannot be regarded as unnatural and wrong. The results seem to show that even the native speakers have modified their own writing model as shown by the *justification* move in the main text of their letters. In addition, American rhetoric dictates that detailed support in writing is excessive and unnecessary. However, a good number of American letters are much longer because of the *justification* move which is not required by their own model of writing. On the other hand, the Filipino letters of excuse become longer only when they provide additional information which seems to be uncalled for. However, this move does not make the letters overloaded. The letters remain brief and straightforward.

Table 7 presents the usual goodwill close used in the American and Filipino corpora. The analysis shows that the American and Filipino letters frequently use “*Thank you for your consideration*” as
their goodwill close. It is also evident that the American writers may not put any goodwill close at the end of the letter. This, however, is not true to Filipino parents who would normally express their gratitude for the favor of excusing the subjects from their absence or overtly anticipate a favorable response from the addressees by saying, for example, “Hoping for your kind consideration”. Goodwill close expressions found in the Filipino letters of excuse probably serve as buffers used to express sincere thanks and appreciation for receiving something or favor or to subtly oblige action from the addressees. The Thank you for your kind consideration at the end of the letter has a pragmatic force of making the addressee act on the request. This makes the writers assume that the addressees would undoubtedly do the favor. It seems that it has become a generic goodwill close for many Filipino letters of excuse.

Table 7
Goodwill Close in American and Filipino Letters of Excuse

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Goodwill Close</th>
<th>American Corpus</th>
<th>Filipino Corpus</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Thank you for your attention to this.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thank you for your consideration.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thank you for your cooperation.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thank you for your consideration on the matter.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thank you for your attention to this matter.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thank you.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thank you for your kind consideration.</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hoping for your kind consideration.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 8 presents the usual closing salutations found in the sample American and Filipino letters of excuse. It can be deduced that the two corpora greatly differ in terms of the closing salutations used in ending the letters. It must be noted, however, that the
American corpus may not have any complimentary close at all which is an unusual writing practice in the Filipino corpus. Furthermore, it appears that Respectfully yours, and its variants have become a popular choice of the Filipino writers. This closing salutation is often used to imply high regard to school officials to whom the letters are addressed.

Table 8
Closing Salutations Used in the American and Filipino Letters of Excuse

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Closing Salutations</th>
<th>American Corpus</th>
<th>Filipino Corpus</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sincerely,</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thanks,</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respectfully yours,</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Best Regards,</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sincerely yours,</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Truly yours,</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yours sincerely,</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very truly yours,</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>30</strong></td>
<td><strong>30</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Discussion

The foregoing results indicate that Filipinos have developed a rhetoric that does not entirely draw bases from the native speakers’ writing model. The data show that Filipino excuse letters ‘deviate’ from the norm and employ rhetorical moves not found in the ‘exonormative’ framework. In other words, they make discourse choices that do not necessarily meet the native readers’ expectations. This deviation, however, may be regarded positive since Filipinos have developed their own discourse styles that have gradually unshackled from the influence of the West. Further, they employ a fusion of native and nonnative writing styles which make their rhetoric a ‘hybrid’ or a ‘blend’ of two stylistic preferences. It could be said therefore, that the Filipinos’ excuse letter writing style is ‘half
Filipino’ and ‘half American’, or ‘Filipino-American’. This marks a gradual process of developing and maintaining writing patterns that break free from the native speakers’ influence. The writing style employed in the Filipino letters of excuse is a positive sign that non-native discourse styles that break away from the conventional norms continuously emerge. Their deviation from and modification of the writing model presented in the previous section attests to Graddol’s (2006) claim that, “Native speakers’ reference books may be developing as better guides to native-speaker usage, but are less useful as models for all learners” (p.115). Thus, imposing strict adherence to the traditionally promulgated professional writing paradigms might result in ‘infringement of rhetorical rights’ of the Filipinos to write the way they want to write.

A closer look at the results seems to show that the native speakers’ model gradually loses its potency or influence as the prototype or standard for writing letters of excuse. Even the native speakers themselves seem to deviate from their own rhetorical blueprint. Hence, it appears that the model which conventionally belongs to them has weakened and might not be in existence at all. The constant deviation from the traditionally promulgated writing norm of composing excuse letters might result in its uselessness since complete adherence to it is no longer evident in the samples perused in the present study.

It is therefore necessary that every writing community be given a discourse space which allows them to employ rhetorical strategies they prefer. This discourse space provides writers from other cultures opportunities to advertently modify, deviate, or digress from the Anglo-American way of framing professional and even non-professional correspondences. It also bestows some sort of rhetorical rights upon ESL or EFL writers that would enable them to convey their communicative intents the way they want textual presentations to be framed and not necessarily by following exonormative paradigms.

The discourse space proposed in this study is deemed to result in linguistic creativity of the Filipino writers, for example, for the following reasons: (1) they become eclectic in their choices of rhetorical strategies, (2) they fashion texts by employing hybrid rhetoric which is not bad at all since they will ‘get the best of both
worlds’, (3) they become free from rhetorical restraints perpetuated by the longtime adherence to outside norms and (4) they are able to infuse their cultural identity in their writing that allows them to disclose a part of themselves to others.

Tupas (2006) underscores that writing is influenced or shaped by various dimensions of social life such as (1) the globalizing and localizing business ethos; (2) local culture and philosophies; (3) state policies on education and academic achievement; (3) literacy work and rhetorical traditions; (5) media and technology; (6) religious and gender practices; and (7) linguistic transformations. Hence, the Filipinos’ modifications, deviations, and digressions from the traditional writing norms which makes their rhetoric a ‘hybrid’ should be welcomed and appreciated since they are manifestations of multiple identities, behaviors, personalities, and stylistic conventions.

Conclusion

The contrastive analysis of the American and Filipino letters of excuse shows that both corpora have rhetorical conventions that do and do not adhere to the native speakers’ model. The analysis also surfaced rhetorical features unique to the American and Filipino way of framing excuse letters from school. Further, the two writing cultures are found to have shared features and glaring differences i.e. one employs writing conventions that are of course, not evident in the other.

The present study found that the Filipino corpus ‘partly’ adheres to the traditional model of writing letters of excuse. ‘Partly’ because it introduces different writing moves that make the Filipino writers’ stylistic choices a hybrid of different rhetorical styles. This study also found that the Americans also modify their own writing paradigm by employing additional moves making their own writing a hybrid as well. The results from a pilot study with only 60 letters, however, are not readily generalizable. This study is limited by the sample size of the dataset, which is not large enough to draw valid generalizations about the writing of all Filipino and American parents. However, this study raises some important questions that are worth exploring.
The results seem to have created another puzzle to be solved—why do American excuse letters employ stylistic moves that are not found in their own writing model? This assertion may sound intriguing, but it seems that their way of writing excuse letters makes their rhetoric ‘half American’ and ‘half something else’. Their deviation from their own model makes their own rhetoric a hybrid of different writing styles as well. Further investigations, however, are imperative to explore how and why this occurs.

The present study is limited to textual analysis thus, probing deeper by conducting more sophisticated intercultural research methods is also recommended. Tracing the demographic background of writers from the two cultures would help generate more reliable findings since this pertinent information may have influence over the way they construct professional communications.

References


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Reflections on Using the Digital Portfolio in Academic Writing in a Philippine University: Problems and Possibilities

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Abstract

This case study reports the use of social networking sites as a means to create digital portfolios for an academic reading and writing class in a tertiary level institution in the Philippines. Three aspects are highlighted in this case study. First, the use of digital portfolios documents the growth of students as writers, working for a particular audience and purpose. Second, since the institution in which the study was conducted advocates the use of technology in teaching and learning, this case study imparts reflections in improving the teaching of writing as seen in the context of a transformative form of education. Third, the case study also shares the upcoming projects to be pursued by the department wherein the author is part of. The data from the digital portfolios are rich areas for exploration in different strands in applied linguistics and technology which can be used for future research.

Key words: digital portfolio, virtual learning environments

Introduction

Similar to other countries, educational institutions in the Philippines have acknowledged the potentials of using technology in the classroom. For instance, universities have used virtual learning environments (VLE) as a supplemental means in course delivery. Since technology’s application cuts across the curriculum, language teachers are empowered to take advantage of benefits. For instance, aside from integrating process approaches to teaching writing, language teachers can use the internet as a means to publish students’ work (Williams, 2003). As Alexander (2002) points out: [M]any composition instructors have begun taking advantage of the publication possibilities of the Internet to provide students with a
greater sense of audience by constructing web sites showcasing student writing. And because the Web is also a very public forum and anyone with access can read and potentially respond to the writing they encounter in their searches or surfing, students writing for Web publication may be able to reach the kinds of engaged and active audiences that we often have them envision. (p. 388)

Hence, composition teachers should not only concentrate on developing tasks for idea generation, organization and mechanics but also for expanding the role of student writers to meet the demands of different audiences that they may encounter when they publish their work in the internet.

Context of the Project

This case study was conducted at De La Salle University-Manila (DLSU), Philippines. Established in 1911, De La Salle University offers different courses in the graduate and undergraduate level and has emerged as one of the top institutions in the Philippines with its level of accreditation and numerous awards in academics, research and extension programs. The university’s goal is to develop students that are not only academically excellent, but socially responsive as well. Guided by the Transformative Learning (TL) framework, the teacher’s role has shifted from a source of information to a facilitator of learning. Following the principles of the learner centered curriculum (Richards, 2005), teachers prepare students to engage in tasks that foster critical thinking in the hope that the skills learned can be applied in real life situations to promote progress and social transformation in their respective communities.

In the case of English language teaching in the university, ENGLCOM is a 6-unit academic reading and writing course offered to all first year students. Due to the diverse reading and writing tasks given in other courses, ENGLCOM’s thrust is that students are tasked to engage in meaningful reading and writing tasks in order to cope with the demands of academic coursework. Specifically, teachers are empowered to use varying approaches in teaching the different reading strategies and rhetorical patterns needed for writing different essays. As earlier mentioned, ENGLCOM espouses the process approach to teaching writing. Therefore, stages such as pre-writing,
drafting, revising, editing and publication are observed (Hinkel, 2002).

A final requirement for this course is a portfolio containing several pieces of their work. Following Hyland’s typology of writing portfolios, the one required for ENGLCOM is a genre portfolio that contains the following:
1. Six essays using different rhetorical patterns namely;
   1.1 Static Description
   1.2 Process Description
   1.3 Cause and Effect
   1.4 Comparison and Contrast
   1.5 Extended Definition
   1.6 Argumentative
2. One revised essay (Students may choose among the six.)
3. Reflective essays (before taking the course and after taking the course)
4. Process Requirements (drafts, outlines and other outputs)

However, there are two problems commonly voiced out by faculty and students regarding these portfolios. First, the essays and portfolios do not seem to have a particular audience where meaningful and authentic feedback can be solicited since their classmates and teacher are the only ones who read their work. Though the second problem may be a minor one, teacher often complain that portfolios have become voluminous that each term ends with several piles of papers and compilations that have no use once these portfolios are graded.

**Rationale of the Project/Teaching and Learning Aims of the Project**

This case study investigates the use of digital portfolios in academic writing at De La Salle University-Manila. Since the case study is exploratory in nature, it initially examines the procedures employed in developing digital portfolios and proceeds with examining particular benefits and advantages and difficulties encountered in implementing such practice in teaching ENGLCOM.
Respondents and Sources of Data

The project was conducted during the 1st (May-September) and 2nd (September-December) terms of school year 2009-2010 at DLSU-Manila. The participants in the study are 24 first year Biology majors and 19 accountancy majors with ages ranging from 16-18. Most come from middle-upper class families and have acquired their secondary education from private schools. Due to the rigid entry requirements of their course, the students seem to have excellent written and oral communication skills. However, since their inclination to the sciences seems to have made them view learning as a mechanical process in which they are expected to read, memorize and write texts since these are required of them.

Preliminary interviews with the respondents suggest that the students simply view ENGLCOM as a required course in order to complete the academic requirements of the particular term. Most of them stated that the subject appears to be an important course in order for them read and write effectively. Such views may seem to be problematic since the students appear to view language learning devoid of social connections.

As regards sources of data, the digital portfolios were examined and personal and online interviews were conducted with selected students. Students’ reflection papers were also analyzed.

The researcher assumed a double identity in implementing the use of digital portfolios in his class and in documenting the benefits, advantages and limitations of such practice.

Procedures/ Technology Infrastructure

In order to understand the development of digital portfolios in ENGLCOM classes, there is a need to describe the procedures employed in implementing such practice. First, students are tasked to write six different essays observing the different rhetorical patterns in academic writing. Since the process approach is implemented, the following steps are observed:

1. Reading of Texts/Discussion of Rhetorical Patterns
2. Assigning of Prompts/Idea Generation/Outlining
3. Drafting
4. Conferencing/Revising

The different essays and process requirements are compiled which leads to the second phase of the project-portfolio preparation. Taking Yancey’s (1996) definition, the digital portfolio is a collection of works selected by the student that reflects his/her development as a writer. In addition, the writer is free to include different pieces of works integral to the overall concept of his/her portfolio. In terms of technology integration in developing the digital portfolio, two options were given. First, the students were tasked to transfer softcopies of their finalized essays and other process requirements using CDs. Similar to digital storybooks, the students are also encouraged to present their works using different programs such as powerpoint, multimedia flash and others.

Another option is that they were allowed to use social networking sites to develop their portfolios. Social networking sites such as Blogspot and Multiply were the suggested sites since these have the blog feature where they can upload their work. Lamy and Hampel (2007) emphasize that in composition pedagogy, using blogs provides a rich avenue for learners to interact with a wider audience (usually friends who are part of their network) and other users. Also, the use of these social networking sites provides a venue for students to integrate other forms of media enriching the presentation of their digital portfolio. For example, Multiply has options for uploading pictures, podcasts or music, videos and even comments for other users.

Evaluation and Assessment Criteria Used

With regard to assessment of the portfolios, a teacher-developed rubric was devised (See Appendix A for the instrument and guidelines) in consultation with other teachers of ENGLCOM and the researcher’s students. Since the digital portfolio requirement had several components, allotment of points were given based on:
1. completeness of the digital portfolio in terms of works included;
2. logical presentation of the pieces;
3. inclusion of revised essay and;
4. integration of other media to enhance presentation of the digital portfolio.

Results and Discussion

A. Benefits/Advantages of Using Digital Portfolio

Documentation of Growth as Writers. As evidenced in their digital portfolios, the students were able to document their growth as writers as they progressed in the course. Specifically, the students’ growth as writers was seen in terms of the range of topics covered in the different essays, their adjustment in terms of dealing with feedback and revision and approximating the needs of the potential audience for their papers.

In terms of the range of topics for writing papers, the students departed from personal preferences to issues that concern them and society. As one student emphasizes, “since the essays will be read by other people, I might as well choose topics which may attract more readers and stimulate interaction with my audience”. Also, the range of tasks given to the students influenced them in terms of adjusting their role as writers. This was done by carefully structuring their outlines, selecting sources for supporting points for their thesis and selecting appropriate language to fit their purposes.

On the other hand, the use of social networking sites has allowed students to widen their scope of interaction since readers of their work are not only confined to their peers and teacher. Rather, other people’s comments have been posted in the students’ blogs. As reported by the students, two apparent benefits are experienced. First, the students receive ‘authentic’ feedback such that much of the focus of comments is regarding issues related to the topics of the blogs. For instance, dealing with university students organizations, other readers would comment on the pros and cons of restructuring the student government; hence, real-life interaction ensues. Instead of focusing on writing conventions such as writing style, grammar and mechanics, the students are able to adjust their styles based on the task and feedback given to them by the readers of their work.

Second, the use of the digital portfolio affords the students a sense of anonymity in terms of avoiding face threatening situations.
In the Philippines, computer mediated interaction appears to be a viable option for people to directly express strong opinion. This may be attributed to the Filipino’s high regard to self-image or face; therefore, avoidance to criticism may be mitigated through the use of technology in expressing thoughts and opinion (Pertierra, 2001). Since the social networking sites allow private and public posting of comments, the writers and readers are allowed to interact regarding the different blog posts without direct confrontation; minimizing frustration on the part of the learners.

More importantly, the varying writing prompts given to the students have allowed them to be conscious of their writing style to approximate the needs of the audience. Since different topics may be covered in their essays, a potential influence on their choice of language, organization and presentation is the audience since these are the main consumers of their work.

**Fusion of Different Media.** Unlike a paper-based portfolio, the digital portfolio allows the learners to use different forms of media to enhance the presentation of their essays. Though a regular portfolio permits variety in terms of including different items to document the writer’s growth in the process, the digital portfolio’s inclusion of video streaming from actual interviews, podcasts of lectures/insights from experts and even pictures/art pieces done by the students can be interpreted as a multimedia experience on the part of the viewers of the blog. This is supported by the notion that the essays are not mere products of students’ academic work but is also shaped by the contexts and history surrounding the production of texts.

**B. Difficulties Encountered**

**Resistance to Use Digital Portfolios.** One problem encountered in implementing the project is the apparent resistance of students to use digital portfolios. Students have expressed reservations as regards using social networking sites in uploading their work for the course. Several explanations may be attributed to the students’ non-acceptance of the practice. First, students have pointed out that preparing a digital portfolio takes time and
additional effort but has minimal impact on their grades. One student mentioned:

“I really don’t need to do a lot because I’ve already done the output and simply compiling them in digital format isn’t my thing considering the small percentage it contributes to grades.”

Since the syllabus stipulates that the portfolio amounts to twenty percent of the total grade, some students have expressed reservations as to exerting great effort in coming up with a digital portfolio.

Another source of resistance among students is their notion of ownership in their work. All of the respondents have admitted of having an account in social networking sites such as friendster, multiply and facebook. However, when asked about their willingness to integrate their outputs in ENGLCOM in their personal sites, students have opted to establish new accounts in these social networking sites for their digital portfolio. This may be attributed to Herrington’s (2009) belief that students feel strongly about their inherent copyright as owners of their work. Also, it has been observed that there is a need for students to separate their online persona in terms of their personal activities online and accomplishments at school. Another possible reason why students hesitate to use their existing accounts as a platform for their digital portfolio is privacy issues since most of their contacts are friends and family members which may critique their work differently. Hence, creating a new account for their digital portfolio allows them to choose their contacts closely.

Problems with Technology

Perhaps one debilitating problem faced in the implementation of the project is the problems encountered with regard to technology. As mentioned earlier, students who participated in the case study come from financially capable families. However, their access to computers and online connection has been problematic due to several reasons such as weak internet connection at home, limited availability of computer terminals at school and competing requirements in other courses. Though majority of them have laptops and desktop computers, their capacity to use social networking sites also vary
depending on their familiarity of these sites. Students have expressed problems as regards using the different social networking sites to its full potential.

**Implications of the Findings**

**Department Initiatives.** The concerned department intends to encourage teachers to employ a paperless practice of developing portfolios through a digital format. Though the department believes that using technology will help minimize the workload, some teachers have expressed resistance as regards the use of the digital portfolio due to training and equipment issues. For instance, the limited number of computer slots available for use by teachers and students remains to be a pressing concern. Also, the familiarity of teachers and students with the use social-networking sites is a primary concern of the department in the implementation of such practice. The department aims to prioritize the training of teachers with the use of technology and social networking in order to provide a viable option for teachers to implement the portfolio assessment system through another means.

**Institutional Initiatives.** Though the project remains to be confined to selected faculty under the department, the university has also provided potential opportunities for teachers to enhance their skills in using technology to improve teaching and learning. For instance the university’s ASIST (Academic Support for Instructional Services and Technology) regularly provides training sessions on web-page design, design and assessment of online courses and the use of IVLE. Also, the institution has invested on expanding its virtual learning environment by providing faculty members particular web-page to develop and to customize their own web pages for teaching and learning.

**Conclusions and Reflections**

Amidst problems on teacher resistance on the use of online modes of teaching and limitations in technology, this case study/project demonstrated the potential of the use of social networking sites in
developing a digital portfolio in an academic reading and writing course for college students. The use of social networking sites as digital portfolios has clearly shown that similar to traditional process approaches to writing, it has documented the students’ growth as writers. However, two strengths are realized in this practice. First, the use of the digital portfolio has provided more options for students to use other forms of media such as visual and audio media to enhance their presentations, giving greater control/autonomy on the part of the students’ choice of portfolio pieces.

Second, the greatest strength of using digital portfolios is actualizing the sense of audience among the student writers. Considering the vast virtual environment of the internet, students receive authentic feedback from different members of the online community. This is in turn maximizes opportunities for interaction, improvement and growth of students as writers.

This project has also yielded several interesting avenues for research and development. First, with regard to teacher training, the use of social networking needs to be integrated in course design for teacher preparation to provide ample opportunities for teachers to explore the internet as a potential resource for teaching and learning. Second, since process approaches to writing continue to dominate in language classrooms, other issues such as writer identity, feedback and learner autonomy need to be re-examined when these approaches are applied in the context of an online environment.

Finally, this project has created more space for further explorations in terms of the role of technology in reshaping the teaching of writing in the Philippine context.

References


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