An Investigation of the Cognitive and Social Processing of Pre-Writing Activities: A Qualitative Case Study of Three English as Foreign Language (EFL) Learners in a Facebook Group

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Abstract: - This paper, as part of an ongoing study, reports a qualitative case study in investigating pre-writing activities among three English as Foreign language (EFL) learners in an online community via a facebook group. The data were collected from the learners’ interactional exchanges, observation notes of their interaction and responses to online written interview questions. Based on a qualitative analysis of the three sources of data, the findings showed that the EFL learners followed four major cognitive procedural steps: topic selection, idea generation, reflection on the ideas produced by them and outlining the persuasive essay. The cognitive strategies at the micro-level used by the learners are interpretative strategies which reflect their interpretation of the task and procedural strategies which were used to pursue the pre-writing activities. Based on the observation notes, the social processing of the learners’ interaction in the four steps tended to be more collaborative and interactive than individualistic. This made the pre-writing activities more interesting for the EFL learners. Such findings imply that Social Networks (SNSs) such as Facebook groups can be an interactive learning environment for EFL learners in pre-writing activities.

Key-Words: - Process Writing; Pre-Writing; Cognitive; Social; Social Networks

1 Introduction
Process writing has been one of the most well known approaches to teaching writing in English as a second language (ESL) and English as a foreign language (EFL). Being first introduced by [19], it was argued that learners’ writing process should be the focus of writing instruction [7]. Learners are involved in three writing stages: pre-writing, writing/composing and revising [20]. The initial stage of the process writing, pre-writing stage, is important since learners need to generate ideas for the topic of their writing [6 & 14].

More recently, although the process writing approach has served as an umbrella for students’ engagement in pre-writing, writing/composing and revising [7], the focus of investigation is not balanced among the three writing stages as the last stage has received most of the attention over years. While the pre-writing stage is considered as the most laboring and influential stage among the three stages and it consumes almost 85% of writing time [10], it has not been investigated as intensively as the other two stages.

In the EFL context, starting to write is seen as a challenging step in writing classes, especially for young EFL learners. This is because the pre-writing stage is the most overlooked stage in the EFL context [2 & 15]. Therefore, this paper, as part of an ongoing study on collaborative process writing, focuses on EFL learners’ collaborative pre-writing stage using a Facebook group from the cognitive and social perspectives of writing.

2 Literature Review
This section presents a review of previous theoretical perspectives of the pre-writing stage and empirical studies on collaboration and interaction in the pre-writing stage.

2.1 The Cognitive and Social Views of Pre-Writing Stage
According to [10], the pre-writing stage involves searching and collecting or gathering information (either by recalling stored information from our
minds or even discussing with other people), generating ideas and outlining these ideas which will be drafted in the writing stage. While previous research considered the pre-writing stage as a cognitive activity, more recent research investigating the pre-writing stage has underlined the social perspective of this stage. Regarding this, it was argued by [8] that based on the theory of constructivism [16], pre-writing discussions can be conducted among students as a community where they can generate more ideas and construct better knowledge about the topic of their writing.

2.2 Collaborating and Interaction in the Pre-Writing Stage

Recently, there have been more concerns over the role of collaboration and social interaction in students’ cognitive development. Collaboration and interaction in pre-writing activities are recognized as useful for ESL/ EFL learners’ writing [12]. For those students who have limited vocabulary and find it difficult to express their ideas clearly, collaborative discussions enable them to pool and discuss these ideas collaboratively [12; 13; 17].

Recent studies exploring the applications of technological tools such as online conferences, boards, blogs and social networks (SNs) to the pre-writing stage have highlighted the potential of technologies in facilitating learners’ collaboration and interaction. In a study by [5], online pre-writing discussions resulted in generating more and better ideas than face-to-face collaboration. Similar findings were supported by [8] who found that whereas face-to-face collaboration produced more in depth ideas, online collaboration led to more varied and creative ideas. It was also indicated that online collaboration in the pre-writing stage assisted learners to generate better ideas that were used and developed in their drafts in the writing stage [1].

3 The Study

The present study aimed to investigate EFL learners’ cognitive and social processing in pre-writing activities via a Facebook group.

3.1 Method

This study is a qualitative case study which was intended to provide an in-depth investigation of EFL learners’ pre-writing activities using a facebook group. The qualitative case study design was selected for this study because the investigation was bounded by participating learners, time, and activity [4].

3.1.1 Setting & Participants

The Only for English Learning Community as shown in Fig.1 is a Facebook group which was developed as a joint effort between three EFL lecturers and the researchers in June 2011. It was developed to provide EFL Arab learners with an out-of-classroom space where they can use and practice English beyond classroom setting. It has attracted many EFL university learners from different Arabic countries through the useful posts and activities in listening, reading, grammar, vocabulary and writing provided by the instructors daily. The number of the members reached 22,947 members by March 15, 2013.

Fig 1: The Only For English Learning Community

In selecting the EFL learners as participants in this study, the researchers used a purposive sampling seeking for certain criteria being pre-informed by certain theories [3 & 11]. The notion of scaffolding implies the importance of variation among the learners. Some previous empirical studies on ESL collaborative writing [9 & 81] were carried out among ESL learners as heterogeneous groups with different levels in English. The number of the participants was 9 students who were divided into three groups in the pre-writing and writing stages and each group produced a persuasive essay on a topic selected by the members of that group.

However, as part of an ongoing study, this paper reports the findings of only one group of 3 EFL learners who worked together in the pre-writing stage. As a group, the three EFL learners started their pre-writing activities on 23 April and completed them on 30 April 2013. Thus, the three participants in the present study as seen in Table 1 represent a heterogeneous group of EFL learners.
with different levels of English and different backgrounds.

Table 1: Participants’ Profile

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ID</th>
<th>College Year</th>
<th>Country</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>S1</td>
<td>4th Year</td>
<td>Sudan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S2</td>
<td>3rd Year</td>
<td>Algeria</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S3</td>
<td>2nd Year</td>
<td>Algeria</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3.1.2 Data Collection & Analysis
The study used three types of instruments for data collection: the learners’ interactional exchanges, observation notes of their discussions and their responses to the online written interview questions. For analyzing the data, the study used a qualitative analysis of these three sources of data and the categories and sub-categories of themes emerging from the data were accurately represented by one or even tow samples of the learners’ interactional exchanges and or responses to the interviews.

4 Findings and Discussion
4.1 Cognitive Processing of Interaction
At the macro-level, the findings of the present study revealed that the group engaged in the pre-writing activities following four cognitive procedural steps which are discussed along with excerpts of the groups’ interactional exchanges illustrating what the three learners actually did in the pre-writing stage as follows:

4.1.1 Topic Selection
The qualitative interaction analysis of the three groups’ interactional exchanges showed that topic selection was the first step used by the EFL learners in planning writing their essay. This was initiated by the post by S1 containing several topics offered by the CoP instructor as shown in Excerpt (1).

S1 provided an evaluative judgment of topic (1) regarding how social networks such as Facebook have changed the way we socialize and communicate. In a response to this, other two members stated their views of the topics. Yet, they seemed to agree with S1’s selected topic and the last comment by S2 shows the group’s last decision on this topic (Excerpt 2).

4.1.2 Idea Generating
Following this step was the idea generation step in which they had to produce ideas for the topic of their essay. The instructor initiated this step as shown in Excerpt (3) by giving the group’s members a hint that they should start thinking of ideas for their topic and requesting them not copy and paste ideas from the Net.

The group members responded to the instructor by generating ideas in the form of sentences. Excerpt (3) illustrates a sample of the ideas generated by the three members. It is evident the members just generated ideas without having to organize them in terms of argument-for and
counterargument as the three comments posted by them show that these ideas seemed to support their argument for the topic that they would take when writing the essay.

4.1.3 Reflection on the Generated Ideas
After generating many ideas for the topic, each member in the group read and reflected on the ideas generated by the other two members. This step was initiated by S2 who posted a comment notifying the other two members of her intention to reflect on the ideas generated in the previous procedural step (Excerpt 4).

S1 social networks help people who lack the ability to build strong relationships with their relatives and friends (unsociable/introvert). Through these sites, they can try the feeling of having sort of contact with others.

S2 Social networking is a good and efficient method to remain in touch with our friends, relatives and colleagues.

S3 Social networking sites allow people to communicate and remain in contact with friends as well as meet new people.

S2 Well guys will try to write down ideas I think they are irrelevant

S2 Hi Maria (Social networking is said to increase a person's quality of life, and can reduce health risks.) >>>>>>>>>> I can say this idea not about the socialization and communication role of social networking, just about the other negative effect of them

S3 (Students use slang words….writing skills.) hi Iman Faith irrelevant.

S1 I am sorry i was the last to comment but now checking the relevant ideas.

She also posted comments identifying a few irrelevant ideas along with reasons explaining why such ideas were irrelevant to the topic of the essay. S3 also did the same. Both learners continued posting their and their friends’ irrelevant ideas in threads of comments till S1 commented expressing an apology for being late and informing the other two members that she would start checking all comments on the relevant ideas and commenting on those relevant ideas. Thus, they pursued identifying the ideas that sounded somehow irrelevant, but they agreed that they would re-phrase them in a way that they become well focused (Excerpt 5).

4.1.4 Outlining the Essay
The last procedural step in the pre-writing stage was outlining the essay. As shown in Excerpt (6), S2 initiated this step by suggesting that they could follow the instruction in terms of the essay’s structure: introduction, argument-for and counterargument. Following this, each member posted a partial outline in which the relevant ideas and details generated by them were clustered according to the structure of the essay.

S2 ok sister, and we can also follow the instructions (introduction, body of the essay ect..)

S1 Wonderful, Iman. I agree with all ideas organized by you except for the last one.

S2 Ah! Yes me too! I think it was a wrong copy and paste from friends’ ideas but deleted it now^_^*

S1 accepted S2’s outline of the essay’s body but she disagreed about one irrelevant idea. In responding to this, S2 deleted this idea reasoning that it was mistakenly copied and pasted from previous friends’ comments. S1 also suggested
adding one more idea that could be used as a counterargument, and S2 accepted it and added it (Excerpt 7).

S1 And can we add "One of the most important effect of these social networks is the fact that their daily users become after a while lost between their real life and their life on the Internet."?? Somewhere?!

S2 yes, I like we can add it too sis

The micro-level analysis of the learners’ interaction in these previous procedural steps of the pre-writing stage showed that the learners were involved in various cognitive interpretative strategies as shown in Table 2. These include evaluating topics, ideas or even details, justifying, making decisions, agreeing with peers’ previous comments, identifying problems such as irrelevant ideas, seeking peers’ opinions and confirming understanding.

Table 2: Learners’ Sample Cognitive Interpretative Strategies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>Sample Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Evaluating</td>
<td>I think that N. 1 would be a good topic to discuss and write about</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Justifying</td>
<td>as we are spending much time on Facebook</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decision making</td>
<td>so ok friends we fixed our topic selection number 1.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Judgmental agreement</td>
<td>I agree with Tasnim and Iman, I think we can go for the first one</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identifying</td>
<td>Hi Maria this idea not about the socialization and communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seeking opinions</td>
<td>Just we think they'd be great as an introduction, what do u say?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confirming</td>
<td>OK, I got the idea</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Regarding the cognitive procedural strategies at the micro-level analysis, the findings showed that the learners used various strategies intended to pursue the task of pre-writing for their essay. As shown in Table 3, these cognitive procedural dynamics are generating or producing ideas, clustering the ideas, modeling the instruction in terms of the persuasive essay’s structure, handling the task and requesting or seeking peers’ collaboration.

Table 3: Learners’ Sample Cognitive Procedural Strategies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>Sample Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Generating idea</td>
<td>Overusing the social networking sites may make individuals antipathetic.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clustering ideas</td>
<td>Okay, can i ask u &amp; myself to re-read my last comment in which I listed all the ideas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modeling instruction</td>
<td>Thesis statement (this sentence introduces argument for and against).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Handling the task</td>
<td>I will just read the drafts and see what I can do or add</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Requesting</td>
<td>Any changes or new ideas? we are sooo opened to them</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Such finding was also supported by the learners’ responses to the online written interview questions as they valued such activities. This recognized value of such online pre-writing activities can be attributed to the opportunity to express their ideas, share them with others, organize them, explore others’ ideas and reflect on them: “Share ur view with others, express ur self, and learn how to organize ur ideas” (S2).

“You got the chance to know other people’s ideas and discuss yours with them” (S1).

4.2 Social Processing of Interaction

In terms of the social processing of learners’ interaction, the qualitative analysis of the observation notes of the learners’ interactional
exchanges indicated that the mode of participation among the three learners was interactive and collaborative in the four procedural steps followed by them in the pre-writing stage except in the idea generation step. This is because in this particular step, each learner kept posting the ideas individually without any sign of interaction. However, in the other three steps, they engaged themselves in a series of comments showing the interactive and collaborative nature of these activities.

The qualitative analysis of the learners’ responses to the online written interviews indicated that their collaboration and interaction in the pre-writing stage made these activities more interesting and enjoyable as this assisted them to share and exchange ideas with others:

“I like it because each one of us gives his ideas and that’s how we interact” (S3).

“The most interesting thing is the existence of the instant interaction and the collaboration which makes the learning process more enjoyable and challenging” (S1).

Thus, the findings of the present study support the theoretical perspectives of writing in general and in particular, pre-writing activities in terms of the learners’ cognitive [19; 20; 10; 14; 6] and social processing [13; 8; 1]. Although these findings have been reported by those previously mentioned researchers, the present study can be the first attempt in investigating the pre-writing stage from the cognitive and social processing and dynamics of the learners’ interaction in the EFL context. Pedagogically, these findings indicate that technologies such as SNSs can be an interactive learning environment for EFL learners to be cognitively and socially involved in pre-writing activities beyond college setting if they are properly utilized by instructors.

5 Conclusion

In conclusion, the current paper, as a part of an ongoing study, reported findings obtained from a qualitative case study in investigating three EFL learners’ pre-writing stage in terms of their cognitive and social processing. The findings revealed that the learners engaged in topic selection, idea generation, reflection and outlining the essay as four main cognitive procedural steps at the macro-level. At the micro-level, the EFL learners used cognitive interpretative and procedural strategies as previously discussed. Regarding the social processing, the mode of participation tended to be more collaborative and interactive than individualistic in these pre-writing activities. However, the findings reported were restricted to a small group of EFL learners, and therefore, further future research is still needed to explore EFL learners’ pre-writing stage based on a larger number of students.

References:


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