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INVESTIGATING ENGLISH MAJORS' DIRECT LANGUAGE LEARNING STRATEGIES FOR RESEARCH PAPER WRITING SKILL AT SAIGON UNIVERSITY

Khảo sát các chiến lược học ngôn ngữ trực tiếp cho kỹ năng viết bài nghiên cứu của sinh viên chuyên ngữ tiếng Anh Trường Đại học Sài Gòn

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ABSTRACT

This study was conducted to investigate direct language learning strategies used for second language research paper writing skill of 33 English majors at Saigon University from October to December, 2021. The current study adopted the "explanatory sequential mixed-methods design" to collect both quantitative and qualitative data using Questionnaire and Students interview. The findings show that all three groups of Oxford's direct language learning strategies (1990) were employed when English majors learned second language research paper writing skill. However, the manner in which direct language learning strategies were used and the reasons underlying their usage varied greatly among the students questioned. The data collected also suggested that the English majors used the direct language learning strategies with purposes different from their intended ones.

Keywords: *direct language learning strategies, English majors, L2 research paper writing skill*

TÓM TẮT

Bài nghiên cứu điều tra các chiến lược học ngôn ngữ trực tiếp được 33 sinh viên chuyên ngữ tiếng Anh tại Đại học Sài Gòn sử dụng khi học kỹ năng viết bài nghiên cứu từ tháng 10 đến tháng 12 năm 2021. Bài viết sử dụng phương pháp nghiên cứu "thiết kế giải thích" để thu thập cả dữ liệu định lượng và định tính thông qua Bảng hỏi và Phỏng vấn sinh viên. Kết quả thu được thể hiện rằng cả 3 nhóm chiến lược học ngôn ngữ trực tiếp của Oxford (1990) đều được sinh viên sử dụng khi học kỹ năng viết bài nghiên cứu bằng tiếng Anh. Tuy nhiên, có sự khác biệt giữa cách sinh viên sử dụng các chiến lược này và lý do chúng được sử dụng. Dữ liệu thu thập còn cho thấy rằng sinh viên đã sử dụng các chiến lược với mục đích khác so với mục đích được họ đặt ra trước đó.

Từ khóa: *chiến lược học ngôn ngữ trực tiếp, sinh viên chuyên ngữ tiếng Anh, kỹ năng viết bài nghiên cứu tiếng Anh*

1. Introduction

Vietnam has been witnessing reforms in higher education in recent years. As stated in Vietnam Education Law in 2019, higher education ought to focus on training undergraduates to do science and technology research to create knowledge and new products serving socio-economic development (The National Assembly of Vietnam, 2019). Therefore, modules

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training undergraduates in research conducting and research paper writing are being held at various universities in Ho Chi Minh city. Conforming to the new education expectations, modules in Research writing are being held across departments at Saigon University (SGU). At the Department of Foreign Language of SGU, the students are demanded to conduct the Research writing sessions and write up a research paper in English. However, writing a research paper in a second language (L2), proved itself challenging for undergraduates. It was discovered that Vietnamese English majors struggled with vocabulary selection, idea generation, introduction-writing, and the requirement to think and write critically for research (Evans, 2019). In order to support English majors' research paper writing skill learning, educators must first examine how these English majors learn the skill.

As synthesized by Lee (2010), many researchers have tried to identify what makes learners successful at learning something, and why some people are more effective at learning than others. This can only be answered by investigating learning strategies (Williams & Burden, 1997, as cited in Lee, 2010). Various researches have been conducted to examine language learning strategies (LLSs) used in learning English writing skill. However, it is worth noticing that studies on the topic of LLSs used to learn L2 research paper writing skill are scarce. Therefore, in the present study, English majors' LLSs used in learning L2 research paper writing skill at Saigon University were investigated. The focus of this study is oriented toward the LLSs used for directly dealing with the L2 research paper writing tasks known as *direct language learning strategies* (DLLSs). Moreover, it is worth remembering that this study's focus is on research paper writing skill which is only one aspect of research conducting. In short, the aim of this study is to investigate the English majors' DLLSs for L2 research paper writing skill at Saigon University. More specifically, the study aims to answer the following question:

What are English majors' direct language learning strategies for L2 research paper writing skill at Saigon University?

It is hoped that this study would shed light on DLLSs used in learning L2 research paper writing skill. Theoretically, the study seeks to contribute to the existing literature on the learning and teaching of L2 research paper writing skill. This is expected to help researchers improve their learning and educators develop appropriate teaching methods for the subject.

2. Literature review

2.1. Direct language learning strategies (DLLSs)

In order to define "language learning strategies", the term "learning strategies" should first be examined. As stated by Oxford (1990) and Williams & Burden (1997), learning strategies are a specific set of actions taken by the learner to solve learning tasks and to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferable to new situations.

Various definitions have been given to the term "language learning strategies" by prominent authors. Significantly, they were seen as specific actions or techniques that

students use, often intentionally, to improve their knowledge and skills about the target language (Green & Oxford, 1995; Cohen, 1998). Based on the definition of learning strategies, the present study adopts the term "language learning strategies" as a specific set of actions consciously taken by the language learner to solve language learning tasks and improve their knowledge and skills about the target language.

Along with various attempts to define "language learning strategies", there are numerous models of LLSs from different authors (i.e., Rubin (1987), O'Maley & Chamot (1990). Nevertheless, the present study adopts Oxford (1990)'s model of LLSs because it is more specific compared to the others. Ruminingsih (2007) has also commented that this taxonomy of LLSs is comprehensible, practical, and consistent with the condition of the learners in dealing with language tasks.

LLSs classification of Oxford (1990) includes 2 major classes: *Direct* and *Indirect*. In the scope of the present study, only the Direct class would be examined deeper. As defined by Oxford (1990), DLLSs are strategies that directly involve the target language. It was further elaborated that DLLSs are the strategies that work with the language itself in a variety of specific tasks and situations (Oxford, 1990). In Oxford's classification, the DLLSs include 3 strategy groups: memory, cognitive, and compensation.

As described by Oxford (1990), Memory strategies help students store and retrieve new information. Meanwhile, Cognitive strategies enable learners to understand and produce new language by different means. Finally, Compensation strategies allow learners to use the language despite knowledge gaps.

2.2. Research paper writing skill

Discussing research paper writing, Day & Gastel (2012) emphasized that it focuses mainly on the provision of new scientific findings. A research paper is thought of as a "complexly distanced reconstruction of research activities" which provides readers with new scientific information in an appropriate format (Swales, 1990). Derntl (2014) also emphasized that research papers are written for readers and peers who are expecting a standard form, language, and style when reading research papers. Even though research papers are not constrained to a specific structure, the students at Saigon University adopt the model of Weissberge & Buker (1990). This model describes a research paper to include 5 sections, namely, Abstract, Introduction, Methods, Results and Discussion or Conclusion. Each of these sections serves a different purpose and is written in different conventions. As can be noted, research paper writing is challenging in itself as it sets certain rules which the writers must follow. However, this challenge is heightened for L2 speakers as they may struggle simultaneously in several domains (Paltridge & Starfield, 2020).

2.3. Direct language learning strategies for L2 research paper writing skill

As mentioned by Oxford (1990), the process of learning language writing skill does not require all DLLSs. She further proposed a list of DLLSs for L2 writing skill. Nevertheless, she also noted that

LLSs are problem-oriented which means different writing tasks require different strategy sets. In the context of this study, even though L2 research paper writing is a department of L2 writing skill, the strategies applicable for it are not yet proposed. Hence, it is necessary to examine DLLSs based on the process of learning L2 research paper writing skill and the format of a research paper.

As in all learning processes, learning L2 research paper writing skill demands memorizing. As previously stated, a research paper is composed of many sections which demand different writing conventions. Hence, it is necessary that learners identify, remember and retrieve the structure and conventions of a research paper. As discovered by Matsumoto (1995) and Okamura (2006), research writers tended to read extensively to collect writing patterns and useful expressions, and review them for future use. Angelova & Riazantseva (1999) also found that research writers made lists of words and phrases to use in their papers (as cited in Paltridge & Starfield, 2020). In other words, the research writers employed "*Recognizing and using formulas and patterns*", "*Using mechanical techniques*" and "*Structured reviewing*" strategies to remember the patterns and conventions. Moreover, research paper writing required scientific or academic language which demands research writers to continually expand their vocabulary to understand the materials and produce appropriate writings. In fact, the vocabulary and grammatical structures used in a research paper ought to be clear, precise, concise and accurate (American Psychological Association, 2019; Winkler & Metherell, 2011; Bottomley, 2014). In such situations, learners tend to "*use resources for receiving and sending messages*" to support their language use. Shaw (1991) confirmed that nearly every respondent he investigated used a dictionary, thesauruses, and grammar usage books when they wrote their research paper. In some cases, research writers may also need to "*coin words*" to communicate their ideas if they fail to locate the language needed. Alternatively, they may "*adjust or approximate the message*" to make sure their ideas can be expressed. Even professional research writers pointed out that their plans, being so tentative, never fail to be changed once they begin to write, often leading them to alter the original plan completely during the composing process (Matsumo, 1995).

In addition, as a research paper is the outcome of the exploration of an idea or an argument made in relation to what others have done (Gibaldi, 2009), the research writers ought to "*take notes*" of evidence from the literature (Torrance & Thomas, 1994) and "*reason deductively*" to argue for their points of view with this evidence (Paltridge & Starfield, 2020).

Moreover, the research writers may be demanded to "*summarize*" the materials read or their own writings to produce certain sections in the research paper. In fact, summarizing strategy is necessary to produce some sections of the paper such as the Abstract which reflects all the content of the paper in a single paragraph (Winkler & Metherell, 2011). Some sections of the paper are written with conventions which can be found in other types of texts. The

Results section of the paper often presents the findings of the study in both figures (i.e., graphs, tables, and diagrams) and accompanying texts which interpret the figures (Weissberg & Buker, 1990), which resembles the Writing task 1 of the IELTS exam. Thus, writers should be able to "*transfer*" writing skills of other types of text to assist their research paper writing. The process of research paper writing also requires a constant "*repeating*" strategy to refine the drafts as reviewing and rewriting is always necessary (Gibaldi, 2009). A research writer described his writing process as writing a rough draft as completely as he could, reading it through and correcting the English, leaving it for a day or two, and re-writing a second draft (Shaw, 1991).

A detailed synthesis of DLLSs proposed for L2 research paper writing skill is presented in table 2.3.

Table 2.3: Direct language learning strategies proposed for L2 research paper writing skill

Strategy group	**Strategy set**	**Strategy**
Memory	Reviewing well	1. Structured reviewing
	Employing action	2. Using mechanical techniques
Cognitive	Practicing	3. Repeating 4. Recognizing and using formulas and patterns
	Receiving and sending messages	5. Using resources for receiving and sending messages
	Analyzing and reasoning	6. Reasoning deductively 7. Transferring
	Creating structure for input and output	8. Taking notes 9. Summarizing
Compensation	Overcoming limitations in speaking and writing	10. Adjusting or approximating the message 11. Coining words

3. Methodology

The research was conducted at Saigon University, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam from October to December, 2021. Simple random sampling technique was employed to produce a sample of 33 English majors attending the Research writing module at Saigon University from October 6th to 29th December, 2021. The current study adopted the "explanatory sequential mixed-methods design" because it provides the refinement, extension, or explanation of the

general picture of the research problem (Creswell, 2012).

The instruments used in this study include Questionnaire and Semi-structured interview. The Questionnaire was divided into 3 parts: the background questions, the quantitative part with the 6-point Likert scale, and the qualitative part with open-ended questions. The quantitative part includes 17 items involving the use of DLLSs in the process of learning L2 research paper writing skill. These items were designed using references from several questionnaires investigating LLSs (i.e., Oxford's SILL) and LLSs for L2 writing skill (i.e., Rumingsih (2007) and Petric´ & Czárl (2003). Nevertheless, the items were constructed to specifically target the frequency with which the DLLSs were used for L2 research paper writing skill and their popularity in the sample. The qualitative part includes 5 open-ended questions collecting emerging data about the activities students took to store and retrieve L2 research paper writing information; understand L2 research paper writing knowledge; construct ideas and produce texts for their research papers, and compensate for their lack of knowledge in L2 research paper writing. With the consent of the Dean of Faculty, the Questionnaire was distributed to the students via Google Form. All 33 responses were collected 14 days after the distribution.

The researcher also collected qualitative data using Semi-structured interviews. The interview includes 14 pre-determined questions and several probing questions seeking to explore why the LLSs were used and how they were used. The interview sessions took place after the Questionnaire responses had been collected. 9 students were interviewed one-on-one via online platforms before saturation was reached. The interview sessions were recorded with their consent and later transcribed for analysis.

Data collected from the quantitative part of the Questionnaire were analyzed using SPSS. In addition, thematic analysis was employed to analyze qualitative data collected from the open-ended questions in the Questionnaire and the Student interviews.

4. Results

The quantitative data collected from the questionnaire yielded a high level of reliability as its Cronbach's Alpha reached 0.77. The range of scores and mean scores of each item from the second part of the Questionnaire were later drawn to answer the research question. The mean scores are categorized into 6 ranges according to the frequency of students' use, namely:

1 – 1.49: Never or almost never used

1.5 – 2.49: Rarely used

2.5 – 3.49: Sometimes used

3.5 – 4.49: Often used

4.5 – 5.49: Usually used

5.5 – 6: Always or almost always used

The data collected were analyzed and displayed corresponding to the three DLLS groups: Memory, Cognitive, and Compensation. The detailed analysis of the data is presented as follows.

4.1. Memory strategies used by English majors

Table 4.1: English majors' Memory strategies for L2 research paper writing skill

	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Interpretation
2.1. I review the research writing lessons outside the classroom.	3.00	6.00	4.5455	Usually used
2.7. Before I start writing my research paper, I look at the research writing lessons connected to the parts I am about to write.	4.00	6.00	5.3333	Usually used
2.2. I divide the research writing knowledge into different sections in my notebook to remember them better.	2.00	5.00	3.9697	Often used

Table 4.1 displays the frequency with which the English majors employed Memory strategies to learn L2 research paper writing skill.

Specifically, both items of the *Structured reviewing* strategy (i.e., items 2.1 and 2.7) were usually used. More than half of the interviewees explained that reviewing regularly was the most efficient way to remember the L2 research paper writing knowledge (I-S2, I-S3, I-S6, I-S8, I-S9). As mentioned by 4 students, the lessons were also reviewed *"before and after the Research writing classes"* (Q-S2; Q-S15; Q-S16; Q-S27).

Item 2.2 which involves *Using mechanical techniques* (item 2.2) was reported to be "often used". As shared by several interviewees, *note-taking digitally on laptops* (I-S3; I-S4; I-S7) or *directly in the coursebooks* (I-S3; I-S6; I-S8) were employed in place of the traditional note-taking because they provided easier retrieval.

Furthermore, 72% of the respondents mentioned the *highlighting* strategy in their Questionnaire responses as one of the activities taken to remember L2 research paper writing knowledge. Making summaries of the lessons and extensive materials about L2 research paper writing was also listed as one of the memorizing techniques (Q-S32).

4.2. Cognitive strategies used by English majors

Table 4.2: English majors' Cognitive strategies for L2 research paper writing skill

	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Interpretation
2.6. Before I start writing my research paper, I study some samples of the parts I am about to write.	2.00	6.00	4.6667	Usually used
2.12. I write the same sections in my research paper many times.	1.00	6.00	3.1818	Sometimes used

	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Interpretation
2.3. When I lack ideas, I read materials related to my research to get ideas.	2.00	6.00	4.7576	Usually used
2.10. I employ dictionaries to support my vocabulary when I write my research paper.	3.00	6.00	4.7879	Usually used
2.11. I employ grammar books to support my grammar when I write my research paper.	1.00	4.00	2.3636	Rarely used
2.9. I make deductions from what I have read about my research topic.	2.00	6.00	4.2121	Often used
2.13. I apply the writing conventions of other types of writing in my research paper.	3.00	6.00	4.5758	Usually used
2.4. I take notes on what I read.	1.00	6.00	4.0909	Often used
2.5. I take notes on my own ideas for the research paper.	1.00	6.00	4.3333	Often used
2.8. I make summaries of what I read.	1.00	5.00	3.4051	Sometimes used
2.15. I make summaries of what I wrote in my research paper.	1.00	5.00	3.4848	Sometimes used

Table 4.2 presents English majors' use of Cognitive strategies for L2 research paper writing skill.

In detail, the English majors reported the frequent use of *Recognizing and using patterns* as they usually studied samples of the parts they were about to write. The data collected showed that articles were read most frequently to *"collect useful vocabulary and structures"* (Q-S22) and *"identify the writing style, common expressions, and organization patterns"* (I-S4). However, the *Repeating* strategy was used with a much lower frequency (item 2.12) as the students stated that they tried to refine rather than rewrite the whole text (I-S1, I-S3, I-S4, I-S8, I-S9).

As for *Using resources for receiving and sending messages*, it appears that the English majors usually used resources for support in idea generation and vocabulary (items 2.3 and 2.10). On the other hand, resources for grammar support were rarely used (see item 2.11) because the grammar needed for the paper was *"familiar"* (I-S1, I-S3), *"not challenging"* (I-S6), or *"already included in the lessons"* (I-S3, I-S7).

Reasoning deductively was used quite often (see item 2.9). In fact, the majority of the interviewees reported using this strategy not only to construct ideas for the research papers but also to understand L2 research paper writing knowledge. In

addition, *Transferring* strategy (item 2.13) was usually used when students applied the conventions of other types of writing such as *"IELTS writing task 1", "IELTS writing task 2", "essay writing",* and *"paragraph writing"* when they wrote their research papers. It is worth noticing that one interviewee reported that she had to translate citations from Vietnamese into English to put into her research paper, which indicates that *Translating* strategy was used.

As can be seen, both items of the *note-taking* strategy (items 2.4 and 2.5) were often employed. The reading materials which they often read and took notes on were about *"research writing knowledge"* (Q-S11), *"books on the researching topic"* (Q-S24), and *"articles similar to the research paper"* (Q-S26). On the hand, the *Summarizing* strategy (items 2.8 and 2.15) was done with much less frequency as it was thought to be *"time-consuming"* (I-S3, I-S4, I-S6) and *"redundant"* (I-S5, I-S7). However, I-S2 also put forth that *"I make summaries of some reading materials to put into my paper because it is a requirement in the Literature review section. I also make summaries of my writing because each chapter requires a summary at the end."*

4.3. Compensation strategies used by English majors

Table 4.3: English majors' Compensation strategies for L2 research paper writing skill

	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Interpretation
2.14. I make up new words in my research paper.	1.00	1.00	1.0000	Never or almost never used
2.16. I make changes to ideas when I don't have enough resources to express them in my research paper.	2.00	6.00	3.2424	Sometimes used
2.17. I go back to the previous texts in my research paper to make changes in them to make sure the paper is logical.	2.00	6.00	4.4242	Often used

Table 4.3 shows how often the English majors employed Compensation strategies for L2 research paper writing skill.

It is obvious from the table that the strategy of *Coining words* (item 2.14) was not used by any of the respondents as it was deemed not necessary and risky.

"I don't need to make up new words, I just go online and look for the vocabulary I need." (I-S2)

"Making up my own words is risky and I have never done that before. There is a high chance I will make a mistake and get a low score." (I-S5)

Strategies for *Adjusting or approximating the message* were used differently. It can be seen that the English majors sometimes changed their original ideas when they could not find enough resources to express them (item 2.16). The lack of *"evidence from other studies"* was stated to be the main reason for this change

(I-S1, I-S2, I-S4, I-S5, I-S7, I-S9). In addition, the English majors also reported that they often make changes to already written sections in their writing process (item 2.17). The Literature Review was reported to be modified most often by the interviewees because the students *"had to make sure the theories in the Literature Review aligned with the content written in the Discussion and Conclusion."* (I-S6). It is noteworthy that *"simplifying ideas"*, *"making simpler sentences", "asking peers"* and *"asking for help"* were listed as strategies to compensate for the lack of knowledge by the majority of respondents.

5. Discussion and conclusion

This study has explored through Questionnaire and Student interview some DLLSs used by English majors in their process of learning L2 research paper writing skill. The results of this study have provided insight into the DLLSs used and how they were used in L2 research paper writing learning. It confirmed that all three groups of Oxford's DLLSs (1990) were employed when English majors learn L2 research paper writing. Nevertheless, how the DLLSs were used and the purposes underlying their usage varied greatly among the students investigated. In addition, there exists some unexpected DLLSs usage in the present study.

Results from the study show that Memory strategies were used quite often. In detail, both *Structured reviewing* and *Using mechanical techniques* were reported to be used frequently to remember L2 research paper writing knowledge better. This is in agreement with Shaw (1991) who reported the use of mechanical techniques in research paper writing to memorize vocabulary and genre structure. It was also discovered that *Highlighting* and *Summarizing* strategies might be used for more purposes than the ones they are intended to.

Regarding Cognitive strategies, strategies concerning *Receiving and sending messages; Practicing; Analyzing and reasoning*; and *Creating structure for input and output* were used repeatedly. Similarly, Matsumoto (1995), Torrance & Thomas (1994), Okamura (2006) and Shaw (1991) also found that these strategies were often employed with the aim to collect useful vocabulary, obtain background knowledge, compile literature, store ideas, and construct a strong argument. Nevertheless, *Repeating* and *Summarizing* strategies were not popular as they were deemed time-consuming. This contradicts Matsumoto's finding which states that professional research writers rather delete and rewrite already composed texts than add new information through multiple revisions (Matsumo, 1995). It is worth noticing that the English majors also reported using *Translating* strategy in their research writing process.

As for Compensation strategies, it is worth highlighting that *Coining words* was never used in the process of learning L2 research paper writing skill. However, making changes to ideas and to previously composed texts was reported to be used with moderate and high frequency respectively. This finding is in line with Matsumoto's findings which suggested that professional research writers often revise their writing multiple times and even make changes to their original plan completely during the composing process (Matsumo, 1995).

Nevertheless, the small sample size of

the research did not allow the study's findings to be generalized. Hence, research on a larger scale should be undertaken to investigate the DLLSs used by English majors in L2 research paper writing skill. Moreover, it would be constructive to explore how DLLSs use varied among English majors with different writing proficiency. This would allow educators to develop more beneficial DLLSs for their students. In addition, the study only focuses on the research paper writing skill of English majors; so, the DLLSs use cannot be generalized to research writers of other scientific fields. Therefore, it would be valuable to investigate the DLLSs use for L2 research paper writing by students of other majors.

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