Role and Application of Study Skills for Tertiary-Level English Courses: Teacher and Student Perspectives

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ABSTRACT

Even though Malaysian students attend 11 years of formal English language classes in primary and secondary school and continue to learn English at tertiary level, for many undergraduates, using the English language competently is still a challenge. This may be attributed to the lack of study skills among students; using the right study skills is synonymous with autonomous learning. This paper draws on findings of a university research project and aims to report on an investigation into the role and application of study skills in tertiary-level English courses. Lecturers/teachers and students from a Malaysian university formed the study sample and the focus was on their perception. Purposive sampling was used to select the samples, while data collected via semi-structured interviews were analysed using a grounded theory approach. Classroom observations were also used to support the findings. The findings of this qualitative study revealed a mismatch between the perception of lecturers/teachers and students of study skills due to their differing expectations. Nevertheless, there was general agreement among the lecturers/teachers that should study skills be taught in tertiary-level English courses, it should be embedded within the course content and not exist as a separate, stand-alone entity. The study concludes with recommendations to direct future research.

Keywords: Autonomous learning, English classrooms, perception, study skills, teaching practices

INTRODUCTION

The use and importance of the English language in Malaysia has undergone many phases. Contrary to the idealistic intentions and efforts envisioned by the Ministry of Education, the actual scenario with regards to the mastery of the English language

among students is not very encouraging (Che Musa, Koo, & Azman, 2012). Even though students attend 11 years of formal English language classes in primary and secondary school and continue to learn English at tertiary level, an alarming number of Malaysian undergraduates remain weak in their command of the English language (Che Musa et al., 2012).

Although the Malaysian Education Blueprint 2013-2025 (2013) highlights the use of Autonomous Language Learning (ALL) in the teaching and learning process, ALL remains a crucial element that is missing from English language classrooms because of the exam-orientated system as well as the traditional teacher-centred approach that is resorted to in Malaysia (Yunus & Arshad, 2014). It is fairly common to see students assuming a passive role in the process of their own learning, waiting for their teachers to provide them with examination tips. The ramification is students in this context become devout rote learners, memorising for examinations and not for long-term knowledge or skills gain. This is supported by a study by Lowe and Cook (2003), which showed that learners often continue using study skills and learning strategies shaped by teaching styles and evaluation systems in secondary school in higher education institutions. However, these skills might not be suitable for autonomous learning, which is synonymous with higher education, and students may find themselves struggling to cope with their studies in university (Lowe & Cook, 2003).

In many ways, the factors mentioned above have directly or indirectly contributed towards students' lackadaisical attitude towards English learning and low English language proficiency. Gill (2004) highlighted that Malaysian undergraduates' limited English language proficiency is one of the lead causes of unemployment. This is a cause of concern and calls for more research into English courses at the tertiary level, which supposedly exist to help students to improve their communicative competence in the language. Some aspects that need to be examined are teaching practices of English lecturers/teachers as well as the perception of students of study skills or learning strategies employed at tertiary level. The following section presents the research questions that guided this study.

Research Questions

This paper sought to address the following questions:

1) What is the perception of English lecturers/teachers and students of study skills in English courses at tertiary level?

2) What are the current teaching practices employed by lecturers/teachers at tertiary level to integrate study skills in English courses?

LITERATURE REVIEW

What Are Study Skills?

Study skills refer to strategies or techniques that allow an individual to utilise time, resources and academic potential to their maximum capacity (O'Donoghue, 2005). Gettinger and Seibert (2002) described study skills as "academic enablers," or tools crucial for learning. On the other hand, ineffective study skills have been shown to lead to poor academic achievement. It was found that students who do not perform well in their studies are mostly passive in their learning and tend to possess a limited number of study skills (Gettinger & Seibert, 2002). Over the years, study skills have more or less remained the same, covering skills such as creating mind maps, skimming, note-taking, searching for information, listening and reading in order to learn (Richardson, Robnolt, & Rhodes, 2010).

Many universities offer study skills as separate courses students can take as part of learning support programmes but Wingate (2006) suggested that when study skills are taught independent of subject content and the learning process, they are ineffective. It is often recommended that study skills be taught according to context to make it easier for students to apply them in the learning process (Kiewra, 2002; Petersen, Lavelle, & Guarino, 2006).

Types of Study Skill

Gettinger and Seibert (2002) categorised study skills into four clusters namely, repetition-based skills, procedural study skills, cognitive-based study skills and metacognitive skills. Each cluster of skills is briefly explained below.

Repetition-Based skills

As the name suggests, this type of study skill involves rereading or rehearsal of information. One common example would be language drills.

Procedural skills

Procedural skills help students by structuring their study materials and study routines in order to optimise their study time. Students are better able to study and complete their work on time with effective implementation of these skills. Examples of procedural skills include varying the types of study tasks and prioritising tasks when one is most alert.

Cognitive-Based study skills

Cognitive-based study skills enhance the learning experience of students by assisting them to process information. These skills are designed to help learners activate prior knowledge before studying new material, form connections between new concepts or

information and what learners already know and develop new schemata so that learning becomes meaningful. An example of a tool used for cognitive-based study skills is the mind map.

Metacognitive skills

Metacognitive skills help students to learn better by facilitating them in choosing, monitoring and deploying study skills. Reflection and self-questioning techniques are some examples of metacognitive skills.

Study Skills vs Learning Strategies: Same or Different?

'Study skills' and 'learning strategies' are sometimes used interchangeably to mean the same thing i.e. learning how to learn. According to a review of the literature, however, few researchers have attempted to make the distinction between learning strategies and study skills. Nisbet and Stucksmith (1986) argued that strategies are more advanced than skills, and that they are processes that are required to manage and apply skills. On the other hand, Ellis and Sinclair (1989) differentiated between study skills and learning strategies by suggesting that study skills are more often than not product-orientated whereas learning strategies are process-orientated. For example, study skills are seen as a means to an end because people relate these skills as a way for students to pass examinations. Learning strategies, in contrast, are seen as ways for individuals to exert more control over their own learning.

Despite the slight differences between study skills and learning strategies, these two terms will be used interchangeably in this paper. This is because although the motivation behind the two may be different, the ultimate aim of both is to equip learners with skills to become autonomous in their learning.

Study Skills and Autonomous Learning

Be it in terms of language learning or language use, Little (2007) claimed that the aim of learning is to create autonomous learners. An autonomous learner can be described as an individual who is able to manage and take responsibility for his or her own learning (Holec, 1981; Little, 1991). Nevertheless, this does not mean that the role of the teacher is relinquished. Instead of being the 'sage on the stage', in autonomous learning, the teacher's primary role is to develop autonomous learners by facilitating students to make learning happen.

The concept of learner autonomy is not new in Malaysia. It was introduced as 'Self Access Learning' (SAC) in 1990 in primary schools, and later in 1995, in secondary schools for English courses (Yunus & Arshad, 2014). Since then, a number of studies on learner autonomy have been done based on the Malaysian context. Thang (2005) found that undergraduates learning English as a Second Language (ESL) in Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia lacked the qualities of autonomous learners and heavily depended on their teachers during the learning process. Another study by Thang and Alias (2007) on readiness

for autonomy revealed that students from three separate Malaysian public universities namely, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM) and Open University Malaysia (OUM) favoured the teacher-centred approach to learning. This is echoed by the findings by Januin (2007), which indicated that students were not ready to engage in autonomous learning as most of them relied heavily on their teachers and were not confident of their own language learning ability. In another study, Yunus and Arshad (2014) showed that English language teachers in Malaysia have a positive opinion of the implementation of autonomous language learning (ALL) although the attainment of ALL among students remains discouraging.

One of the skills needed to produce autonomous learners in a tertiary setting is study skills or learning strategies. This is because autonomous learning is widely considered to be facilitated by suitable study skills or learning strategies used by learners (Hurd, 2005). It is crucial for students to know how to learn and manage their own learning so that they can achieve the desired level of competence in communication. While the studies mentioned in the review above paint a picture of the current state of autonomous learning in Malaysia, it is evident that more should be done to examine the perception of teachers and students of study skills as well as teaching practices employed by teachers to better understand the need for study skills for tertiary-level English courses.

METHODOLOGY

The aim of the current study was not to generalise findings on study skills and teaching practices, but to obtain insight into the experiences of teachers and students; "broad and general so that the participants can construct the meaning of a situation" (Creswell, 2014, p. 8). Thus, this study adopted a grounded theory approach to analyse the data collected by means of individual interviews (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). A grounded theory approach is defined as a qualitative research method using a systematic set of processes to develop an inductively derived grounded theory about a phenomenon (Charmaz, 2006; Strauss and Corbin, 1990). The rationale for using the term 'grounded theory approach' and not 'grounded theory' is that no actual theory was expected to be generated from this study; however, the use of constant comparison of data to obtain the findings is a typical characteristic of grounded theory.

Instruments

The instruments used for the purpose of data collection in this study were the semi-structured interview with teachers and students and classroom observation. The utilisation of these two instruments helped in triangulating the data and obtaining validity. The use of the semi-structured interview allowed some flexibility to probe deeper than initially intended, providing additional data that was interesting and

situational for a more complete finding (Patton, 2002). The interview questions were developed based on the objectives of the study and revolved around lecturers'/ teachers' understanding of study skills and perception of study skills and teaching practices with regards to the integration of study skills in English classrooms. The students, on the other hand, were asked questions regarding their perception of study skills and actual application of study skills in English courses. The questions were reviewed and refereed by the co-researchers to check that they matched the direction of the research questions and could produce substantial data. In addition, a total of 15 hours of classroom observation was carried out to substantiate and cross-reference the interview data.

Participants

Five lecturers/teachers teaching English courses were chosen for the interview via purposive sampling as this sampling method allows for the intentional selection of samples who possess certain qualities in accordance with the research objectives (Koerber & McMichael, 2008). These teachers were selected through convenience sampling strategy due to its practicality (Dornyei, 2007) in accounting for feasibility in terms of time and respondent availability. The teachers were selected based on diversity of age, education and teaching experience as part of the purposive sampling. They possessed a Bachelor's degree, a Master's degree or a PhD; their age ranged from 28 to 46 years old and they had 47 years of

experience among them. They are addressed as T1, T2, T3, T4 and T5 in the results and findings. Details of the teachers' profile are shown in Table 1.

Table 1
Teachers' profile

Teacher	Qualification	Experience (years)
T1	PhD	20
T2	Master's	14
T3	Master's	6
T4	Master's	4
T5	Bachelor's Degree	3

In addition, 10 students were randomly chosen consisting of two from each of the five English courses taught by the respective lecturers/teachers, using the homogenous sampling strategy as they shared a common learning experience, which allows for in-depth analysis to identify common patterns among the learners (Dornyei, 2007). Thus, the students' age, grade or other influential factors were not taken into account but willingness to participate was considered. These students were interviewed separately to obtain representative overviews of the class as a whole from the student perspective and are labelled as S1, S2, S3, S4, S5, S6, S7, S8, S9 and S10 in the findings section.

Data Collection and Analysis

The interviews were audio recorded, transcribed using TRANSANA v.2.61, a qualitative video analysis software, coded and finally, categorised according to theme. Field notes of classroom observation of

each course were recorded by the researcher to verify the data obtained through the interviews. Classroom observation of each course was recorded by the researcher in the form of field notes and was guided by a checklist, where any teaching practice or classroom activity related to study skills was described in detail and later categorised.

The nature of the qualitative grounded theory approach employed allowed the researcher to continue collecting data during the data analysis stage. Analysis was ongoing and emerging data were examined according to an iterative process that served both to inform the interview and observation and establish concepts for subsequent analysis. The interview procedure helped the researcher to collect supporting data while analysing and describing the results.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings are divided into several sections. The first part focusses on lecturers/teachers and students' understanding of study skills. Next, the need for study skills at tertiary level and current teaching practices are explored through examining the perspective of both educators and students as well as studying the classroom observation to reveal the reality of the role and application of study skills in English classrooms. Finally, some suggestions are given on how to improve the current situation.

Defining Study Skills

In order to find out whether or not study skills are important in the context of English teaching and learning, it was crucial to examine what teachers and students understand about study skills. The following segment presents definitions and examples of study skills from the perspective of lecturers/teachers and students.

Teachers' perspective

Despite having taught English courses for a considerable period of time, not all the lecturers/teachers had a clear idea of what study skills are. "Study skills? I'm not sure."(T5). Other interviewees however, gave a fairly clear depiction of study skills. T1 described study skills as "it also involves them taking notes… searching for information," whereas T4 explained that study skills is about "how to study efficiently, to understand better". T3, on the other hand, gave a rather interesting definition of study skills: "Study skills…when we say skills, it will lead to habit. They (students) will have study habits". He explained that how students learn becomes a habit that is formed over time. Having a clear understanding of study skills is important as it helps educators to be aware of the different types as well as the application of study skills.

Students' Perspective

Based on the interviews, eight out of the 10 students interviewed did not really understand the term 'study skills' nor had they come across the term before. When asked, their responses were: "What is study skill? What does it mean? (S3); "If you're talking about study tips I know a bit, study

skills...I'm not sure which aspect you are referring to" (S1). S2, on the other hand, described study skills as "make a note, make a homework." Others who were not so sure about the term gave responses such as: "Example of study skill, ermm make practice?"(S4). Others shared that they tend to associate study skills with passing examinations. For instance, S9 shared that study skills were simply for her to just "to pass and get a degree," whereas S10 expressed that study skills were "for exams only."

Even though the students were found to have a limited understanding of study skills from the way they defined the term, it did not mean that they did not usually apply study skills in their English courses. Further probing and dropping the term 'study skills' and asking instead the question, "What do you do to learn better?" managed to draw quite a number of responses from the students.

Need for Study Skills at Tertiary Level: Perception of Teachers and Students Conflicting views

From the interviews, it was found that there were conflicting views in terms of the need for study skills at tertiary level among lecturers/teachers themselves as well as between the lecturers/teachers and their students. Most of the lecturers/teachers felt that there was no need to teach or embed study skills in English courses because they expect that students can easily learn the skills themselves using resources from the Internet, access to which is widely available in the campus area. "There are so many sources that they can get the information about the study skills…Why not they just Google (study skills) if they don't get it from us, the lecturers?" (T3). In addition, T2 expressed that there was no necessity to teach study skills because students nowadays only need to "follow patterns," in other words, to go through drills or routine to accomplish a certain task. However, the students, when interviewed, expressed that study skills at tertiary level were important for them to improve their language competency. "I think it's (study skills) very helpful" (S2).

The beliefs held by the lecturers/ teachers who felt that study skills were not necessary were reflected in their teaching practices, as students from those classes acknowledged during the interview that their lecturer/teacher did not focus on study skills in class. S2 and S3 mentioned that their English lecturers/teachers had the tendency to emphasise on course content. "They (lecturers/teachers) don't teach you how to study, they just teach you what is their subject" (S2). This finding is in line the observation that educators seem to be successful when it comes to teaching students content, but fail when it comes to teaching students how to learn or how to master subject matter (Kiewra, 2002).

S7 added that another reason why educators at tertiary level did not stress on study skills could be due to assumptions that students should have already been equipped with the necessary study skills at primary or secondary school level. Therefore, they

expected students to handle academic tasks independently at tertiary level. "I think they have thought that we have already grown up and then we already learn the skills during school so they didn't really focus on it. They er...they assume that we already know about it and then we can think by ourself" (S7).

On the other hand, there were other lecturers/teachers who thought that study skills were necessary for students at tertiary level, especially when it concerned skills such as reading, writing and listening. T4 and T1 highlighted the importance of identifying main ideas when reading, a skill which they thought was crucial for students to accomplish language tasks in English courses. "They (students) should be able to... extract main ideas…if they cannot do that, they will have problems with their studies" (T1). "To identify right, main ideas. To take important points from whatever they read and from whatever they write, from whatever they listen to so identifying the main point is very important" (T4). Not only is reading efficiently an important skill for English courses, it is also "directly related to many students' career paths" (Dhieb-Henia, 2006) and will benefit them immensely when they enter the working world.

Reality of English Classrooms: Lack of Study Skills among Students at Tertiary Level

Lecturers/teachers observed that students at tertiary level did not possess sufficient study skills to cope with the demands of the English classroom. They attributed this to the secondary school system, where students were made to do language drills, which required memorisation as the main study technique and students were not trained to think critically. "They don't have that study skills. Perhaps it goes back to school where for languages they just need to do drills" (T2). "In terms of making notes, they… prefer to write everything that they see on the slides…they are not able to put it in point form" (T1).

The influence of study skills from primary and secondary education, which consisted mainly of drills and rote learning, was evident when lecturers/teachers noted that many of their students were unable to apply the skill of identifying main points during note-taking because they tended to write down everything they heard without assessing the information given critically. "Whenever they (students) listen, they simply write anything…It's together note-taking and thinking so you think and then you make notes instead of just simply writing" (T1). According to Richardson et al. (2010), a learner must be able to plan, monitor and evaluate information in order to learn effectively. The act of note-taking itself is not sufficient; educators need to expose their students to the proper techniques of note-taking and guide them through the thinking process, which includes identifying main points.

From the students' perspective, study skills acquired in secondary school education to excel in English exams revolved mainly around memorisation. S1 shared that her teacher in school taught her how to write English essays through memorisation; "I

got an A...the method was memorisation. You take one essay and memorise, after memorising you make adjustments.*" (S1)*. However, it was clear that not all the students enjoyed memorising, as seen in S6's statement: "Back in secondary school there they teach me how to memorise grammar…it was quite terrible, it was so hard to memorise them."

On the other hand, S3 shared how he was taught to make notes for examinations in secondary school: "During secondary school, we got...poem, novel then we got the book...I just read and then I just write down, besides the meaning." They continued to apply the study skills learnt in school such as memorisation and note-taking at tertiary level as they were not familiar with other types of study skill. This observation is consistent with a study by Cook and Leckey (1999), which confirmed that study habits formed in high school tended to persist at tertiary level. This shows that there is a need to bridge the gap between study skills in high school and study skills in tertiary level to assist students in learning efficiently as academic demands are often more challenging at tertiary level.

Current Teaching Practices of Lecturers/Teachers in English Classrooms

Classroom observation performed of all five classes taught by the lecturers/teachers confirmed that study skills were given almost no or minimal emphasis in class. This observation concurred with the perception of the lecturers/teachers on the need to teach study skills in the English classroom. "I don't really emphasise on this (study skills)" (T3), as well as statements by the students that their lecturers/teachers normally focussed on the content of the course, and not on study skills. Nevertheless, T3 justified her stance on study skills, saying, "We didn't really highlight it (study skills) to students but we do ask them questions… we ask do they have any problems… they can share somehow their experience, and can give them tips as well" (T3). Even though she does not focus on study skills in the classroom, she does ask questions frequently in class and tries to find out if students face any problems in their learning. She encourages them to share their learning experiences and tries to tackle the problem from there.

Only one of the language lecturers (T1) was observed asking her students to draw a mind map of details of a progress report using information they searched for online. It should be noted that this particular class took place in a multimedia lab; hence, online information was easily accessible by the learners. The other classrooms were conventional ones fitted with LCD projectors. The lecturer was seen guiding students on how to look for information online and constantly reminded them of the features they should include in the mind map. The students of this particular class mentioned in the interview that their lecturer

did guide them to "try to draw a mind map" (S3) to organise information. S4, on the other hand, expressed that her lecturer taught students how to use mind maps "for writing."

During the interview, T1 said that her students required a lot of guidance when it came to study skills and she assisted them by giving them many examples and sometimes even modelled the skill herself. "Sometimes I ask them to do the mind mapping, sometimes I will do it myself on the whiteboard." T1 added that she always strove to give specific and clear-cut instructions to students when drawing mind maps as otherwise, they would simply "write like writing notes."

T5 preferred to give her students grammar drills and post them on Edmodo. However, she did not make it compulsory for students to do them and instead, gave them the freedom to choose what and when to complete the exercises. However, T5 admitted that she lacked confidence in terms of exposing students to study skills as shown in this statement, "I don't think I give enough I mean like, good approach in teaching them (study skills)." This could be due to the lack of information or exposure to study skills during teacher training.

Other examples on how study skills are generally incorporated in English classrooms were discovered during the interview with the students. For instance, S10 shared that the lecturer taught them "how to read in general or how to find specific points." Another student (S3) expressed that their instructor always asked them to "listen to the exercises, ask us to listen to the website and then make notes" when they did listening exercises.

Should Study Skills Be Taught? What and How?

Despite mixed views regarding the need to teach study skills in the context of the English classroom, lecturers/teachers unanimously agreed that the skills should not be taught as a separate component. They thought that study skills should be integrated into lessons and taught in context. "English study skills? No I don't focus…But I put them into the context...put them into the situation" (T2).

In terms of subject-related study skills, T3 recalled that "there was a specific part in the syllabus where we provide them (students) with study skills" for Academic English (AE) about four to five years ago. For instance, there were segments in the AE module teaching students how to make notes. However, she admitted that even so, she did not stress on those skills and focussed instead on the course content. This suggested that including study skills as part of English language modules alone might be futile if teachers themselves failed to emphasise on the development of those skills (Allan & Clarke, 2007). For the integration of study skills in English courses to work, lecturers/teachers have to be made aware of the importance and application of study skills. They should subsequently be able to focus on creating opportunities for students to put those skills into practice.

T1 concurred that there was a real need for English lecturers/teachers to equip students with study skills as that would assist them in dealing with tasks and assignments such as report writing and proposal writing. "We need to equip them with the skills that for example, ok reading? They are able to read academic journals, they are able to read references, and how to get the main idea from there" (T1). T5 mentioned that study skills such as learning how to draw mind maps were crucial because very often, for writing, "the points are actually scattered all over." She believes that it is important for students to be able to organise their points well. Perhaps one of the most crucial aspects of inculcating study skills in the English classroom was pointed out by T3, who believed that if students knew how to apply the right study skills, they would eventually be able to improve their English language proficiency.

For the initial stages to incorporate study skills in English classrooms, lecturers/teachers could begin by conducting a needs analysis for study skills via questionnaires to find out what type of problem their learners faced in the learning process. Alternatively, lecturers/teachers could hold regular discussions with their students to find out what learning strategies or study skills they lacked or found problematic. Furthermore, training courses on raising awareness on the subject of effective study skills as well as workshops on integrating study skills in English classes via classroom activities, assignments or online tasks should be

conducted from time to time in institutions of higher learning to give English lecturers/teachers a clear idea of how to embed strategy instruction through the teaching of content. As T1 mentioned, the idea of embedding study skills may already be present among lecturers/teachers, "but the execution needs to be more strategic." This is supported by T2, who mentioned that "the instructions, the activities and how the students are guided in doing the activities" should be emphasised on in the integration of study skills in ESP classrooms.

CONCLUSION

To sum up, this paper investigated the perception of lecturers/teachers and students of study skills at tertiary level as well as the current teaching practices of English lecturers/teachers. The findings showed that a mismatch exists between the perception of lecturers/teachers and that of students regarding the need for study skills in English courses due to differing expectations. Nevertheless, there was general agreement among the lecturers/teachers that should study skills be taught at tertiary level English courses, it should be embedded within the course content and not exist as a separate, stand-alone entity. Further research should be done to look into how educators can effectively incorporate study skills or learning strategies through English courses and further develop them in order to make students more autonomous in their language learning.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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