IJABER, Vol. 14, No. 5, (2016): 2999-3011

DEVELOPING TASK – BASED WRITING MATERIALS FOR ENGINEERING STUDENTS

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Abstract: *The study aimed to develop task-based writing materials to enhance the writing skills of the engineering students of Ramon Magsaysay Technological University (RMTU). Specifically, it aimed to identify the learning styles and strategies of the students, as well as the frequently used rhetorical pattern found in Engineering textbooks. Compare the evaluation of usefulness between the English and content teachers.*

This is a descriptive research that used survey- questionnaires and checklist for evaluating of writing tasks.

The learning styles of engineering students were visual, auditory and kinesthetic which are very often used. The learning strategies of the student respondents were a combination of five: metacognitive, compensation, cognitive, social and memory that were "sometimes used"; the affective strategy was not used. Common rhetorical patterns found in engineering textbooks were definition, description (process and mechanism), partition and classification. The materials were evaluated as "very useful" by both English and content teachers with no significant difference noted.

Task-based instructional materials are recommended for use to enhance the academic performance of the students. It is important that language teachers employ a wide range of activities in their materials that will result to different experiences and promote learning styles and learning strategies. Likewise, the activities will focus on rhetorical functions that needed in learning paragraph organization basic in engineering and technology. The involvement of the content teachers in the evaluation of the task-based materials is essential in the preparation and construction of such materials. Their inputs and insights are helpful in the improvement of said materials since they are highly technical and focus on their course curriculum.

Keywords*: Developing Task-based materials, Learning Styles, Learning Strategies, Rhetorical Patterns*

INTRODUCTION

In many parts of the world, English is regarded as a language of power, success, and prestige. It is the language of globalization. The global language can be seen to open doors that fuel a demand for English. This claim reflects contemporary

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power balances and the hope that mastery of English will lead to the prosperity and glamorous hedonism that the privileged in this world has access to and is projected in Hollywood films, MTV videos and ads for transnational corporations (Phillipson, 1996).

Globalization has a significant effect on labor practices. The new global distribution of work has led to a reduction of unskilled jobs in richer countries. Workers must turn their hands quickly to a wider variety of activities and regularly retrain. This trend- is arising in all economic sectors that led to decreasing reliance on key communicators and gatekeepers who process specialist language skills.

Trends suggest the growing need for people to various jobs to communicate with each other directly. As a result, more workers in a wider variety of jobs require a greater competence in English.

Another challenge is the Internet communication. Internet is regarded by many as the flagship of global English. A frequently quoted statistics is that English is the medium of 80% of the information stored in the world's computers. Using the same infrastructure as the telephone, the Internet carries English language services into nearly every country, and, private subscription into people's home. The system has its origins in the academic, and in particular, the scientific community. English appears to have extended its domain of use become the preferred lingua franca for many new kinds of user who have come online.

A survey conducted among business executives in the United States (African Management Association International, 1998) found the email has surpassed telephone communication and face-to-face communication as the most frequent form of communication in the business world. Fully 36% find e-mail to be the most frequent means of communication, compared to only 26% who used the telephone most frequently, and 15% who rely most frequently on face-to-face communication. This reflects the fact that 90% of the world's computers connected to the Internet are based in English-speaking countries, as are the computers that host the publicity accessible World Wide Websites. In this light it is perhaps not surprising that the majority of both traffic and Web sites are rooted in English. At present, users in other countries, working in other languages, find that, if they are to communicate through cyberspace, they must do so in English. The big challenge for the academe is how to prepare effectively the students to this reality in the workplace.

Students have writing problems in expressing themselves systematically and logically (Msanjia, 1990). Lack of skills is, of course, one of the most common complaints students have when they encounter a particularly difficult assignment. It has been observed that a majority of students go through their academic years without acquiring much knowledge in performing their writing tasks. This resulting lack of skills accompanies them throughout their academic lives, constantly serving as a cause if dissatisfaction both for them and their teachers.

In the Philippines, English proficiency among Filipinos is rather alarming. Results of board examinations show a decline in the English aptitude of the examinees and industries find that applicants who are not spontaneous with their speech are growing in number. These are just a few of the problems being faced by educators. Sunstar (2005) published that the dominance of the Filipinos in English language is now on the brink of becoming a myth. Neighboring Asian countries, which have wilfully adopted no-nonsense measures to learn the English language are now catching up and have even overtaken the Philippines. It was also mentioned that the quality of education the students receive depends largely upon the skill and competence of the teachers (Chadyiwa & Mgutshini, 2015; Blar, Jafar & Monawir, 2015). Hence, any attempt to solve the English proficiency crisis in the Philippines must start with the teachers.

Every year in the United States, large numbers of adolescents who graduate from high school are unable to write at the basic levels required by colleges or employers and several young people drop out of high school because they lack the literacy to meet the growing demands of the high school curriculum (Kamil, 2003; Snow &Bianca Rosa, 2003). Similarly, the 2002 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) writing examination which measured the writing skills of 4^{th}, 8^{th}, and 12^{th} graders in the United States found that only 22% to 26% of students scored at the proficient level across the three grades and very few were found to write at the advanced level. Worse, alarmingly high proportion of students were found to be below the basic level (Persky *et al.*, 2003).

Meanwhile, studies on writing reveal the student's limited knowledge in the types of text (essay, paraphrase, recount and explanation of a process). Back weakness of many beginning writing students in US colleges and universities. Most beginning composition courses there are even for native English speaking students, organization of ideas within essays is problematic because different cultural backgrounds require different organizational patterns.

The above cited researchers have inspired the researcher to develop task-based writing tasks to enhance writing skills of engineering students; to focus on their language strategies; learning styles and common rhetorical patterns in answer to the writing needs of the students. Tasked-based instructions enable the learners to do real-world target tasks using language. It uses authentic data for classroom activities like identifying the parts and classification of tools and engines, describing the construction of an extension cord and describing the mechanism of a standard Bumper Jack.

Task-based materials have three important principles in describing, analyzing and creating task: (1) authenticity principle, (2) form and function principle, and (3) task dependency principle. Authentic data are samples spoken and written communications that have been particularly written for the purpose of teaching

language. The advantage of using authentic data is that learners encounter target language items in the kinds of contexts where they naturally occur, rather that the contexts that have been concocted by a textbook writer. This will ultimately benefit learners because they will experience the language item in interaction with other closely related grammatical discourse elements.

With the variation of the learning styles and strategies of the respondents, the writing tasks to be developed would greatly help the teachers to monitor their student's activities to become more beneficial to them. Likewise, it would help them enhance the writing techniques of their students.

Students who will have adequate exposure to the various writing tasks, using authentic texts would enable them to cope with their technical writing need and to communicate effectively not only in the classroom, but likewise to their future jobs.

Moreover, the findings of this study would enlighten the administrators and the teaching staff some knowledge on how to handle effective classroom activities on writing skills. Further, it would help them plan and modify the writing curricula and syllabi of the school to fit the learning styles and strategies of the students according to their writing needs.

Lastly, the researcher finds it useful for future researchers to engage in developing writing tasks and to determine the relationship between the learning strategies of the students and their learning styles. It is also the hope of the researcher to have future researcher explore other fields of alternative writing to improve the writing skills of their students.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The descriptive survey was used in determining the learning strategies and learning styles of the students in performing the different tasks in Technical Writing.

Population and Locale of the Study

Two sets of respondents were involved in the study. The first set consisted of the third year engineering students enrolled at the Ramon Magsaysay Technological University (RMTU) Iba Campus during the first semester school year 2013-2014 in all major fields – civil, mechanical, and electrical. The stratified random sampling was used to determine the number of respondents as per major field of study.

The second set consisted of English and content teachers who evaluated the usefulness of the task-based materials. The teacher were five English teachers from the five campuses of the University, with at least five years of teaching

experience and five content teachers (engineering faculty members) teaching at the Iba campus at RMTU, with at least five years of experience teaching engineering subjects.

Data Collection Instruments

A survey questionnaire developed by Oxford (1990) (Appendix A) with some modifications was used to determine the learning styles of the students. The survey material focuses in determining how a student uses his/her physical senses to study. It consisted of thirty (30) statements with the following rating scale: 5 – Always, 4 – Almost, 3 – Very often, 2 – Sometimes, and 1 – Never.

Oxford's (1990) Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) (Appendix B) was used to determine the learning strategies frequently used by the students. The strategy inventory categorized the students' frequency of use of strategies as "High", "Medium" and "Low". The survey material consisted of fifty (50) statements with the following rating scale: 5 – Always or almost always true, 4 – Usually true, 3 – Somewhat true, 2 – Usually not true, and 1 – Never or almost never true.

The SILL determined the kind of strategies a student uses in learning English. It covers six strategies, namely: memory, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, affective, and social.

A checklist for evaluating the writing tasks developed by Nunan (1989) was used by the English and content teachers to evaluate the usefulness of the writing tasks. This covers the following: (a) Goals and Rationale, (b) Input, (c) Activities, and (d) General Evaluation. The rating scale used was as follows: 4 – Very Useful 3 – Useful 2 – Fairly Useful and 1 – Not Useful (Appendix C).

Treatment of the Data

The data were tabulated and analyzed using Microsoft Excel and Prentice Hall Stat version 2 (PHStat 2). Specifically, the statistical tools used were as follows:

In Problem No. 1 and Problem No. 2, the weighted mean was used to determine the learning styles and the learning strategies of the engineering students. This was utilized to identify the average of the responses.

The Microsoft Excel was used in computing the arithmetic mean using the AVERAGE function. The syntax is =AVERAGE (array).

The Likert Scale was employed to get the responses from the engineering students. The Dedekind Cut was applied to describe qualitatively the computed mean based on statistical limits.

In Problem No. 3, a simple frequency count was used.

In Problem No. 5, weighted mean was used to evaluate the learning tasks for the engineering students in terms of their usefulness that was based on the average of the responses. The Dedekind Cut also was applied based on statistical limits.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Learning Styles of Engineering Students

Language learning style is one factor that helps determine how- and how well students learn a second or foreign language. These are personal qualities that influence the way they interact with their learning environment, peers, and to others (Alkhasane, Yourself *et al.* 2008).

The sensory learning styles of the engineering students of the Ramon Magsaysay Technological University are described as "very often" with a grand weighted mean of 3.00. As per sensory preference, visual is the highest with a grand mean of 3.13, followed by auditory with 3.02 and kinesthetic at 2.86.

Table 1
Summary of the Sensory Preferences of Respondents

Sensory Preference Learning Style	*Weighted Mean*	*Descriptive Equivalent*	*Rank*
Visual	3.13	Very Often	1
Auditory	3.02	Very Often	2
Kinesthetic/Tactile	2.86	Very Often	3
GWM	3.00	Very Often	

The table shows that Engineering students vary in their sensory preferences. Hence the hypothesis that one student may possess several learning styles is accepted. Some students may have a combination of two, sometimes three or even all of the learning styles, as proposed by Ehrman (1996). Learning styles operate on a continuum or multiple intersecting continua. For example, a person might be visual or auditory but with lesser kinesthetic.

2. Learning Strategies of Engineering Students

The learning strategies of engineering students have an overall average of 2.75, described as "sometimes used". As to the hierarchy of use of the six languages learning strategies, metacognitive is the highest with a weighted mean of 3.10, described as "sometimes used". Followed by compensation (sometimes used) with a weighted mean of 2.77. Cognitive strategies are described as sometimes used with a weighted mean of 2.75 while Social described as "sometimes used" with a weighted mean of 2.71. Memory described as "sometimes used" with a weighted mean of 2.66. On the other hand, Affective strategy is considered "generally not used" with the weighted mean of 2.39.

Percentage of Use of Learning Strategies

Also shown in Table 2 is the used of different learning strategies of the engineering students.

Table 2
Summary of Student Learning Strategies

Likert Scale and other Particulars	*Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL)*						
	Memory	*Cognitive*	*Compen Sation*	*Meta-cognitive*	*Affect-ive*	*Social*	*Overall Average*
Always or AlmostUsed (5)	0	0	0	0	0	14%	0
UsuallyUsed (4)	14%	28%	312%	624%	28%	28%	0
Sometimes Used (3)	1560%	1872%	1456%	1560%	832%	1144%	2080%
Generally not Used (2)	936%	520%	832%	416%	1560%	1144%	520%
Never or Almost NeverUsed (1)	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total	25100%	25100%	25100%	25100%	25100%	25100%	25100%
Weighted Mean	2.66	2.75	2.77	3.10	2.39	2.71	2.75
Descriptive Interpretation	*Some times Used*	*Some times Used*	*Some times Used*	*Some times Used*	*Gene-rally Not Used*	*Some times Used*	*Some times Used*

Legend: 1-2- Generally not Used; 3 – Sometimes Used; 4-5 Always/ Almost Used

In summary, results convey that engineering students used a combination of all the six learning strategies. Thus, the hypothesis that the learning strategies of engineering students vary is accepted. These support and manage language learning without directly involving the target language.

The findings indicate that the development of instructional materials should offer sufficient task and activities for students to fully utilize the six or a maximum combination of these learning strategies. To elaborate further, teachers could employ not only a particular strategy but to maximize the different strategies to fit the challenges of the learning situations. This confirms the findings of Andreau et.al (2004) who show that successful students used more combination of learning strategies compared to others. Likewise, Elis (1994) point out that learners' choice of strategies affects the degree of success in language learning in terms of the rate of acquisition and level of achievement.

3. Common Rhetorical Patterns Found in Engineering Textbooks

To many, the terms rhetoric and discourse are synonymous. However Trimble (1985) used the term rhetoric to refer to one important part of the broad

communication note called discourse. Rhetoric here is the process a writer uses to produce a desired piece of text. This process is one of choosing and organizing information for a specific set of purposes and a particular set of readers.

4. Basic Rhetorical Function in Engineering Textbooks

The primary rhetorical patterns found commonly in English for Science and Technology discourse are the fundamental part of the organization of scientific and technical information. This rhetorical patterns and related grammatical elements are capable of being isolated and studied separately as well as in the total context of a piece of discourse. Each rhetorical pattern provides readers with different kinds and different amounts of information. As a result, each function is clearly separable and identifiable. (Trimble, 1985).

5. Rhetorical Patterns Analyzed in Engineering Books

There were 14 books studied; namely five (5) mechanical engineering (ME); five (5) for civil (CE) and four (4) for electrical (EE). Each book shows the number of occurrence of the rhetorical patterns used by the authors. This could be due to the nature of engineering activities.

Definition has a weighted mean of 1.5, same with description 1.5. Partition is 3, and the least is classification with 4. Most of the articles in the lessons of engineering textbook are introduced through definition since these are technical and unfamiliar words.

Table 3
Summary of Rhetorical Functions Found in Engineering Books

	Definition (WM)	*Partition (WM)*	*Classification (WM)*	*Description*	
				Process (WM)	*Mechanism (WM)*
Mechanical Engineering	5	4.4	3.4	5	5
Civil Engineering	5	2.6	1.6	5	5
Electrical Engineering	5	3	2	5	5
TOTAL	5	3.33	2.33	5	
OVERALL RANK	1.5	3	4	1.5	

Legend: WM – Weighted Mean

Definition is a vital component of an article. Description on the other hand, both for mechanism and process is functions which engineering students are exposed to. Again, since engineering students are exposed to machines, it is accompanied by visual presentation such as drawing, tables or graphs.

The several types of definition found most commonly in written EST discourse lend themselves well to teaching both reading and writing through the application of the rhetorical approach. The types of definition discussed in this study are simple definitions (also called single-sentence definitions), consisting of 1. Formal definition, 2. Informal definition and 3. Extended definition; and are compound definition, most of which have special functions such as the stipulation, operation, and explication, and which are expansions of simple definitions. This expansion is as a rule in one paragraph, although it can take up an entire text.

6. Task-Based Materials to Address Student Writing Needs

The materials were developed based on Nunan's (1988) and Willis (1996) task – based models with some modifications to suit current settings. It also included Oxford's (1989) classification of learning styles and strategies and the common rhetorical patterns found in engineering textbooks to address students' needs. The materials also integrated both language and content structures giving opportunities for learners to acquire target language skills through their academic discipline.

A five - unit material with an average of fifteen tasks was developed. Every unit presents a rhetorical pattern such as definition, partition, classification, description of mechanism and description of a process. Grammatical structures used in every rhetorical pattern were integrated in every unit. Explanations were supported by sample illustrations.

Each unit defines the pattern accompanied by examples and models with outline analysis. Every input is followed by a task. The tasks were specific to develop and enhance the learning needs of the students through the rhetorical pattern, integrating rhetorical forms and features. This varies from comprehension check, completion of tables and graphs, writing paragraphs that correspond to the defined rhetorical pattern.

7. Evaluation of the Usefulness of the Task-Based Material by English and Content Teachers

The t-test shows that the English and content teachers showed no significant differences in their evaluation of the usefulness of the task-based materials. Statistically, difference of 0.001 has no significance at all. This means that the evaluation of the Content (3.756) and English teachers (3.755) are totally the same. Thus, the hypothesis that there are significant differences in the evaluation of the materials between the Content and English teachers is rejected.

This evaluation is indicative of the Content and English teachers 'idea of the importance of the writing tasks that contain all the requisite activities needed in the development of students' writing skills. The finding is justified by the evaluation of materials made by the study of Tullay (2010), in her instructional material aimed

Table 4
Summary of Evaluation on the Usefulness of the Material by English and Content Teachers

Factors	*English WM*	*Description*	*Content WM*	*Description*
Goals and Rational	3.76	Very Useful	3.72	Very Useful
Input	3.7	Very Useful	4	Very Useful
Activities	3.76	Very Useful	3.56	Very Useful
General Evaluation	3.8	Very Useful	3.75	Very Useful
Overall WM	3.755	Very Useful	3.756	Very Useful

to address the multiple intelligence of the students. The usefulness of the materials was also rated as extremely useful by the student respondents. Likewise, Ligawen's (2008) study on content based materials for nursing students revealed that the students' evaluation is very useful. It indicated that students recognized that most activities in the tasks are practices in the workplace. The students found that the tasks were very useful in terms of its goals and rationale made them realize the importance of learning the target language in the content area. The tasks were also evaluated very useful to English teachers and content teachers. In general the instructional materials were rated very useful by group evaluators.

CONCLUSIONS

Based on the findings of the study, the following conclusions are derived.

1. Knowledge of teachers on how students learn is necessary to direct the learning processes of the students.
2. Learners' employ combination of several learning strategies, however, the exercise of each learning must not neglect the affective strategies.
3. Basic rhetorical patterns of discourse with basic technical information are necessary ingredients in materials development.
4. Task-based materials are fundamental tools in strengthening writing skills of students to foster language learning in their discipline.
5. Evaluation of the task-based materials is a significant tool to reconcile ideas of both the content and English teachers as a guide to enhance student writing.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the results and conclusion of the study, the following are hereby recommended:

1. Learning styles describe an individuals' natural or habitual pattern of information in learning situations; hence, it is important to identify the learning styles to be able to suit teaching strategies and teaching materials

to be used. Moreover, it would be useful for the teacher to determine students' learning style at the beginning of every semester.

2. Understanding of students' learning strategies would give them the opportunity to develop their cognitive, metacognitive, and other strategies to have full grasps of all the procedures and techniques the language teachers use in class. On the other hand, there is a need for teachers to develop their affective strategy for better group interaction and to develop and enhance confidence in their association with their classmates. On the other hand, knowing the preferred learning strategies of the students would make the teacher adapt her teaching strategies in favor of students' for more effective teaching-learning process.
3. Task-based material is a unique tool to enhance the academic performance of the students. It is recommended that language teachers employ an extensive range of activities in their materials that will result in different experiences and promote learning styles and learning strategies. Likewise, the activities will focus on rhetorical functions that are needed for learning paragraph organization that are basic in engineering and technology.
4. The involvement of the content teachers in the evaluation of the task-based materials is essential in the preparation and construction of such materials. Their inputs and insights are helpful in the enhancement of said materials since they are highly technical and focus on their course curriculum that is the basis of task-based material. It is imperative that language teachers coordinate with them to acquire basic knowledge of rhetorical patterns that are essential in paragraph development in their discipline.
5. Although the evaluation of usefulness of task-based materials by the English teachers is "Very Useful", it is recommended that they continue to construct task-based materials based on the students learning styles and strategies and other pertinent linguistic needs.
6. Further research be conducted on other areas of language learning that were not included in the study correlating learners' grammatical needs and teaching strategies and evaluation of the usefulness of the materials by the students'.
7. This study could be conducted to other engineering schools to validate the findings of this study.

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