Socio-cognitive Dynamics of English as Foreign Language (EFL) Learners' Interaction in Pre-Writing Stage via a Facebook Group

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Abstract: - This qualitative case study aimed to identify the socio-cognitive dynamics of interaction in pre-writing stage via a facebook group. The participants are three English as Foreign language (EFL) university learners. A qualitative analysis of the learners' interactions, observation notes of their discussions and their reflective responses to online written interview questions was used in this study. Based on the findings, it was found that this pre-writing stage was operated by the learners in four linear cognitive procedural phases: selecting the topic of their essay, producing ideas, reflecting on the ideas produced and making an outline of the essay. The learners were also involved at two types of cognitive dynamics: interpretative or exploratory strategies showing their exploration of the task and procedural or operational strategies showing their pursuit of the task. The findings indicated that the learners' social modes of participation were more collaborative than being individualistic, which indicates the potential of facebook groups as interactive learning environments conducive to better learning especially in pre-writing.

1 Introduction

Teaching and learning how to write in English as a second language (ESL) and English as a foreign language (EFL) have undergone changes in the approaches used including process writing as one of the most popular approaches. Initially offered by [25], process writing approach aimed to shift the focus from the product to the process among ESL learners [8]. Based on this approach, when writing a piece of writing, learners are assumed to engage themselves in three major stages known as pre-writing, writing/composing and revising [21]. Concerning the first stage of the process writing, pre-writing, it is essential for learners to be involved in this stage as they need to produce ideas and details for their written task [6 & 15].

Recent research has emphasized the application of the process writing approach to ESL and EFL contexts as an umbrella for students' involvement in these three stages [7]. However, investigating this either in the traditional classroom setting or online environment has not achieved a balance among these three stages because the revision stage has been investigated more intensively by researchers

than the other two stages. In other words, the pre-writing stage has received inadequate attention though studies examining this stage showed that pre-writing is considered as considered as the most laboring and influential stage among the three stages and it consumes almost 85% of writing time [11].

In the EFL context, the majority of university learners find it challenging to start writing in most writing. This becomes more challenging particularly for these EFL young learners who have not been exposed to practicing pre-writing activities at school. One reason behind this can be the negligence of this pre-writing stage in the early education years and also at university level in the EFL context [2; 17; 24]. 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 Socio-Cognitive Perspectives of Pre-Writing Stage

According to the cognitive view of writing [11], pre-writing stage is more cognitively oriented in that the learners engage themselves in cognitive dynamics including information searching or collecting strategies (either by recalling stored information from our minds or even discussing with other people), producing ideas and details for the topic of their written task and making outlines of their initial drafts which will be written in the writing stage.

Whereas such theoretical perspective limited pre-writing to the learners' cognition, the social perspective of writing places an emphasis on the social nature of writing in general including pre-writing. In this regard writing is defined as a social process by where the production of texts reflects methodologies, arguments and rhetorical strategies constructed to engage colleagues and persuade them of the claims that are made [14]. More recent research investigating the pre-writing stage has underlined the social perspective of this stage. Regarding this, it was argued by [9] that based on the theory of constructivism [17], 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 The Role of Interaction in Pre-Writing Stage

Within the social perspective of writing that emphasizes the social nature of writing, recent research has been concerned with the role learners' interaction plays in developing their cognition. Interaction especially in pre-writing activities is regarded as a valuable means of enhancing learners' cognitive strategies [13]. There are learners who find it challenging to express their ideas and produce them for their writing due to their limited vocabulary. Therefore, interaction with other peers in pre-writing activities or discussions assists such learners to pool and discuss these ideas collaboratively [13; 14; 18].

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 [9] 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].

Regarding the role of Facebook in the writing process, only a few studies conducted by [6; 11; 16;23] have revealed that Facebook facilitates learners' writing process since it provides them with a learning environment in which they can interact, share, discuss and scaffold one another in their writing. Yet, these studies have not reflected on learner-learner interactional exchanges in writing and provided results based on statistic analysis of the participants' scores in writing and perception of learning through surveys.

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 paper reports a qualitative case study that could deeply investigate EFL learners' interaction in pre-writing activities via a facebook group. This design of qualitative research was selected for this study because the investigation was bounded by participating learners, time, and activity [4].

3.1.1 Research Setting & Participants

The *Only for English Learning Community* as shown in Fig.1 is a Facebook group developed as a joint effort between three EFL lecturers and the researchers in June 2011. The aim of creating this group was to offer EFL Arab learners the opportunity to use English beyond the university classroom context. Since its development, it has been attracting a wide number of 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

For the selection of the participants in this study, the researchers used a purposive sampling which aimed to seek for certain criteria which are pre-informed by certain theories [3 & 12]. The notion of scaffolding underlies the importance of variation among the learners. Some previous empirical studies on ESL collaborative writing [10; 9; 22] were carried out among ESL learners as heterogeneous groups with different levels in English. This entire study was based on nine EFL learners as participants 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

ID	College Year	Country
S1	4th Year	Sudan
S2	3rd Year	Algeria
S3	2nd Year	Algeria

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 Dynamics of Interaction
The findings of this study showed that the learners engaged in several cognitive dynamics at the macro-level when carrying out their pre-writing activities. These are labeled as 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 Selection of Topic
The qualitative interaction analysis of the three EFL learners' 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).

1. Social Networks like Facebook have changed the way we socialize and communicate.

2. Social Networks like Facebook groups have become good online learning communities for many learners

3. The increasing problem of cheating on examination should be a criminal offense.

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).

S1 I think that N. 1 would be a good topic to discuss and write about, as we are spending much time on Facebook, I can see we all have noticed the effects this has on our life and our way to communicate with others. But please, dear friends, i wanna hear from you as soon as u can.. This's only a suggestion and wanna know what you'd like to talk about.

S3 hi to all of u my lovely friend here and my opinion in the 1st or 2nd. This's a great activity and i see how well-organized it is. God bless you ...

S1 Thanks a lot dear Maria.

S2 Though I like NO 6 as hate cheating, be it number 1 if the rest of the girls like it too. If not, any topic will be good because all of them are interesting.

S3 I agree with Tasnim and Iman, I think we can go for the first one

S2 so ok friends we fixed our topic selection number 1.

4.1.2 Generation of Ideas

Following the first 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.

Only For English Learning So start thinking of your topic And please never ever copy and paste even one sentence as it will be easily revealed. ok? Thank u.

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.

4.1.3 Reflection on the Produced 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).

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).

> S1 See i think all are relevant but there are these that were little bit far: *Social networking sits can create a false feeling of friendship……..networking sites are not real.>>>> Still, i think we can use them if we try to put them in another way that helps our topic.

4.1.4 Essay Outlining

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 etch..)
>
> 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

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

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

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

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).

"*Explore ideas of others*" (S3).

"*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 [25; 21; 11; 15; 7] and social processing [14; 9; 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
Based on these findings, it can be concluded that the findings showed 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.

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