Fostering self-regulated learning in an online writing course: Challenges and solutions

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ABSTRACT

In this day and age, self-regulated learning (SRL), as a predictor of students' academic success, has been dedicatedly fostered through online classrooms since virtual learning situationally dominated in the wake of the global pandemic. Given the prominence of implementing instructional practices to foster SRL and the possible challenges that emerged during its adaptation to the online learning platforms, the study aims to shed light on the hindrance in promoting SRL during online writing classes at Van Lang University. With the participation of 35 experienced EFL teachers at Van Lang University, quantitative data was collected from a questionnaire, and qualitative one was collected from a semi-structured interview. Quantitative results showed that developing a critical learner, a learning community, and promoting self–peer evaluation presented the most challenges to teachers. In addition, the practical suggestions gained from qualitative findings were useful for those aspiring to lay the groundwork for SRL during an online writing class. In essence, online learning could offer a chance to instill SRL in EFL learners with the right touch on appropriate instructional practices.

Introduction

In the 21st century, it is critical for students to cultivate the essential skills for independently constructing their own knowledge. In this light, self-regulated learning (SRL) has been perceived as the key to nurturing a generation of lifelong learners who can take autonomy over their knowledge acquisition (Bai & Wang, 2023; Kosimov, 2021; Oxford & Schramm, 2007; Pintrich, 2000; Raoofi, Tan, & Chan, 2012; Zimmerman, 1989, 2000). By definition, SRL refers to the learners' ability to actively self-monitor their own learning progress by taking advantage of effective metacognitive strategies such as monitoring, planning, regulating, and reflecting (Zimmerman, 1990). Additionally, during the process of knowledge acquisition, self-regulated learners are intrinsically motivated and purposefully tailor their environment to achieve the best possible learning outcome. (Zimmerman, 1990)

Although SRL is not a brand-new subject of research, the recent shift in the global educational

landscape may require a change in instructional practices to foster the growth of the SRL mindset. For years, SRL had been nurtured in traditional brick and mortal classrooms until learning worldwide predominantly transitioned to online platforms in the wake of the pandemic. This change in the learning environment would inevitably lead to a number of adjustments in the way SRL is promoted. The call for attention to SRL also lends itself to the researcher's own curiosity about how fostering SRL virtually could possibly make a long-lasting impact on the learners, especially regarding the study of writing skills. In my personal teaching experience, most students in writing classes still place much of the academic progress on teachers' shoulders due to the predominance of instructors' feedback over peers and self-assessment. Furthermore, despite a number of research into the effective instructional practices for fostering SRL in writing classes (Abd Majid, 2007; Mak & Wong, 2018; My, Hong, Vu, & Linh, 2022; Rosalia, 2014), most of them were conducted at the brick-mortal classrooms, leaving a gap for more research into fostering SRL on virtual writing classes to fill in. In all consideration, the study aims to shed light on the possible challenges that EFL teachers may encounter in promoting SRL during an online writing course. Besides, in the hope of making more useful contributions, presenting feasible solutions to overcome such challenges is also the main interest of the study.

Research Questions

To fulfill the purpose of the study, two research questions were employed :

1. What are the challenges of fostering SRL in an online writing course?

2. What are solutions suggested by teachers to foster SRL in an online writing course?

Literature review

Definition of self-regulated learning

Theoretically, SLR lends itself to the socio-cognitive approach to learning that essentially frame learning in a dynamic interaction between the outer learning environment and the inner cognitive process of the learners (Atkinson, 2002). Viewed in this light, self-regulated learning emerges through interaction among three interdependent components: personal, environmental and behavioral processes (Zimmerman, 1989). On the ground of this social-cognitive view, Pintrich (2000, p. 453) similarly defines SLR through a multifaceted lens, highlighting its nature as a reciprocally dynamic process "whereby learners set goals for their learning and then attempt to monitor, regulate, and control their cognition, motivation, and behavior, guided and constrained by their goals and their contextual features in the environment". In this sense, learners are perceived as self-regulated only when they are metacognitively, motivationally, and behaviorally adapting their learning toward a well-established goal (Zimmerman, 1989). Elaborating on the definition of self-regulated learning, Zimmerman emphasized two distinctive features of self-regulated learning: self-oriented feedback and the purpose for selecting a particular learning strategy (1990). While the former refers to how self-regulated learners see feedback as a useful resource for learning improvement, the latter essentially sets them apart from passive learners who are less

intrinsically motivated to proactively use selective metacognitive strategies for the attainment of personal learning goals.

Component of self-regulated learning

In regard to components, SRL is seen as the triadic interaction among three interdependent factors: person, behavior, and environment (Zimmerman, 1989). These components reciprocally influence each other so as for self-regulated learners to achieve their pre-determined goals.

As a key contributor driving intrinsically toward their academic achievement, personal influences manifested itself through self-efficacy, goal setting, learners' knowledge, metacognitive process, and affect (Zimmerman, 1989). Among these influential factors, self-efficacy is perceived to be of more importance than the others since "those who have a high sense of self-efficacy set themselves more challenging goals to accomplish" (Bandura, 1986, p. 348). It is also worth noticing that learners' perception of their own competency doesn't appear out of thin air yet rather a positive outcome resulting from the reciprocal interaction of the other factors pertained to personal influences.

Similar to personal influences, behavior influences comprise three reciprocal practices: self-observation, self-judgment and self-response. In essence, self-observation refers to the learners' active engagement in regulating their own academic performance, while self-judgment is observable through learners' self-evaluation of their own performance against a specific standard or criteria (Zimmerman, 1989). Self-response focuses on how students react to self-judgment. Noticeably, not all reactions appear positive, and the negative ones can hinder progress in learning. In contrast, a well-received self-judgment can prompt positive changes in goal setting, perception of self-efficacy, metacognitive planning, and behavioral outcome.

The environmental component wields its influence on self-regulated learning through modeling, seeking social support, and structuring the learning context. According to Schunk (1984), effective modeling can significantly enhance learners' perception of self-efficacy. Regarding social assistance, teacher feedback can facilitate self-regulated learning (Nicol & Macfarlane‑Dick, 2006). Compared with general feedback, which often takes the form of appraisal, specific comments on learners' linguistic performance are theoretically more constructive to self-regulated (Nicol & Macfarlane‑Dick, 2006). Empirically, Whipp and Chiarelli (2004)'s study showed that with teacher feedback, learners could reflect constructively on their learning, therefore playing a crucial role in fostering productive self-judgment. Additionally, peer feedback is an indispensable "means for internalization and development" for knowledge acquisition (Vygotsky, 1978).

Studies on instructional strategies to foster self-regulated learning in the context of second-language acquisition

The attempts to nurture a generation of self-regulated learners have been well-documented in the literature. Notable instructional strategies to develop self-regulated learning include scaffolding, social support, and reflective practice.

Direct instruction and modeling

On the journey to becoming self-regulated learners, modeling plays a crucial role in improving the self-efficacy of learners, especially those who are academically lagging behind (Zimmerman, 1990). Furthermore, when direct instruction is accompanied by peer assessment and cognitive behavior modification, learners are more likely to internalize effective writing strategies (Levy, 1996). This is due to the observation that peer critiquing triggers the need for restructuring newly-acquired knowledge through constructive discussion of strategies with peers, which gradually leads to the capacity to evaluate the appropriateness of strategies employed for a particular task (Levy, 1996). This view on the importance of modeling in self-regulated learning is aligned with the Zone Proximal Development (ZPD) proposed by (Vygotsky, 1978), which strongly emphasizes scaffolding.

Social support

Peer feedback, along with teacher feedback, are two salient forms of social support for self-regulated learning. Noticeably, with the assistance of teacher feedback, learners could reflect constructively on their learning, therefore playing a crucial role in fostering productive self-judgment (Whipp & Chiarelli, 2004); constructive feedback from peers has empirically shown a greater impact on fostering self-regulated learning. Rosalia (2014) 's study focused on the role of online peer comment in developing self-regulation in academic writing. With 21 participants undergoing an empirical study and semi-structured interview, the result indicated that online feedback could encourage students to self-evaluate and adopt more of self-reglated strategies, namely organizing and transforming, seeking information, and social assistance (2014). Similar finding was observed by Li and Zhang (2021) on the interplay of three crucial self-regulating sources: peer, teacher feedback, and revision goals. Data obtained from the qualitative research on the online writing assignment of 70 Chinese EFL students highly supported the greater impact of peer feedback and revision goals in triggering "self-regulated revision on language issues such as grammar, wording, spelling, and sentence skills" (p.12).

In addition to relying on peer assessment, fostering a learning community is crucial. According to Beishuizen (2008), a learning community offers two features conducive to developing self-regulated strategies: "the culture of scientific research and the emphasis on reflection" (p.185). With inquiry learning at the lesson's core, students work collaboratively in their community to solve an issue by researching, searching for information, and exchanging ideas. Firstly, toward the end of a course, students gradually acquire useful self-regulated strategies, including monitoring, planning, seeking information, and self-regulation. Secondly, the ample opportunity for reflection enables students to sharpen their cognitive and metacognitive strategies (Beishuizen, 2008). In practice, the role of this instructional strategy was studied in the research for fostering self-regulated learning through instructional intervention by Sinclair and Watson (2004). The interview at the end of the course revealed that group work allowed students to reflect on and modify their learning strategies through discussion with peers (Sinclair & Watson, 2004).

Self-reflective practice

Self-reflective practices are tailored to fostering the mindset and habit of self-evaluation among students. In this regard, asking students to set goals and self-evaluate their assignments are commonly employed as an instructional intervention. Regarding goal setting, several research studies have shown its importance in improving students' writing performance. Silver (2013) claimed that asking learners to set specific goals during a self-edit stage can improve their writing performance in terms of quality, quantity, and self-efficacy. More specifically, learning goals designed according to writing rubrics are proven to be more effective in improving students' writing performance (Bogolin, Harris, & Norris, 2003). In promoting self-evaluation in writing classes, a portfolio has been perceived as a useful instructional strategy to develop students' capacity to monitor their progress. In their study, Doig, Illsley, McLuckie, and Parsons (2006) investigated the role of e-portfolio in facilitating reflective writing skills. The results evaluated using questionnaires and focus groups showed that e-portfolio could encourage self-evaluation among students. Similarly, the finding from Mak and Wong (2018) in the portfolio also proved its positive impact on developing self-regulated learners. Data was collected through interviews with teachers and students, classroom observation, and field notes. It is worth mentioning that the study provided useful suggestions on how to facilitate self-evaluation, including sharing the assessment criteria prior to the writing task, keeping track of errors using an error log, and using coded feedback instead of an explicit one.

Methods

Pedagogical Setting & Participants

The study was conducted at Van Lang University with the participation of 35 conveniently-selected teachers, most of which have at least three years of experience teaching English at the tertiary level. In particular, all participants have gained hands-on experience teaching writing skills online via MS Teams and LMS Moodle.

Design of the Study

With the purpose of gaining the breadth and depth of the research problem, the study employed a mixed research method of both quantitative and qualitative research. The collection and analysis of qualitative data were conducted after those of quantitative data to provide insight into the underlying causes and solutions to notable challenges.

Data Collection & Analysis

In terms of quantitative data, a Google-form questionnaire consisting of two main parts was used to gather the participants' background information and their perception of the challenges of implementing self-regulated learning. The first part elicited the participants' teaching experience, particularly their online teaching in writing skills. For the participants to express their viewpoints about the challenges, a 5-point Likert scale was employed.

Regarding the qualitative data, a semi-structured interview was conducted after the survey. The main purpose was to further explore the hindrances to successfully implementing the

desirable instructional strategies for SRL. More importantly, the interview also set out to elicit feasible, practical solutions for EFL teachers to overcome these hurdles. With the consent of the participants, all of the online interviews were video recorded (Van Lang MS Teams channel), which were transcribed and translated into English for data analysis. The preference for the online interviews was mainly due to the convenience of the data collection in regard to the busy schedules of the interviewees

The quantitative data from the surveys were processed using SPSS descriptive analysis, version 20. Descriptive statistics like Means and Standard Deviations were used to analyze the participant responses.

As for the strengths and limitations of the data collection methods, while the questionnaire solely reveals the surface of the respondents' viewpoints, the results show a certain level of reliability as they are collected from many respondents. About the second method, although the flexible nature of the semi-structured interview may lessen its validity, this data collection method enables the researcher to conduct an in-depth exploration of the participants' viewpoints and experiences in this subject of study.

Results/Findings and Discussion

Questionnaire's results and discussion

Table 1. Teachers' perception of the challenges of modeling and scaffolding

Practices possibly deemed challenging	N	Mean	SD	Percentage (%)				
				Strongly disagree	disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
1. Presenting a variety of model essay	35	2.31	0.63	0%	77.1%	14.3%	8.6%	0%
2. Modelling crucial steps of composing a new essay genre	35	2.54	0.70	0%	57.1%	31.4%	11.4%	0%
3. Analyzing the structural and language features of a new essay genre	35	2.63	0.64	0%	45.7%	45.7%	8.6%	0%

According to Table 1, modeling and scaffolding on online learning platforms seemed attainable on online-learning platforms, with all of the practices receiving relatively low mean scores. Possibly, this is due to the fact that modeling and scaffolding are traditionally teacher-controlled and knowledge-presented stages; hence the switch to a learning platform has little effect on it.

Table 2. Teachers' perception of the challenges of promoting peer and self-evaluation

Practices possibly deemed challenging	N	Mean	SD	Percentage (%)				
				Strongly disagree	disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly disagree
1. Asking for self-evaluation before teacher feedback	35	4.17	0.56	0%	0%	9%	66%	25%
2. Asking for peer feedback before teacher feedback	35	4.26	0.56	0%	0%	5.7%	62.9%	31.4 %

While modeling and scaffolding remained pedagogically achievable in an online classroom, promoting peer and self-evaluation seemed more challenging. In this regard, it was challenging for the teachers to encourage self-evaluation and peer assessment in an online writing class. Table 2 shows that the mean score for both practices was noticeably high (M= 4.17 and 4.26, respectively).

Table 3. Teachers' perception of the challenges of fostering a learning community

Practices possibly deemed challenging	N	Mean	St.D	Percentage (%)				
				Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
1. Encouraging individual learners to share ideas	35	3.34	0.87	0%	22.8%	22.8%	51.4%	3%
2. Encouraging learners to give constructive comments	35	4.03	0.78	0%	9%	2.2%	66%	22.8%
3. Organizing collaborative writing activities	35	2.71	1.01	0%	63%	8.5%	22.8%	5.7%

Interestingly, a mixed result was observed in Table 3. While organizing collaborative writing activities was feasible in online learning classrooms (Mean=2.71), giving constructive feedback ("Feedback" is uncountable.) presented a challenge for the teachers (Mean =4.03). In addition, an average mean score of the first practice (Mean =3.34) implied a split in opinion. Given the result, fostering an online learning community appears promising, yet the community may not be as deeply connected given the fact that sharing ideas and constructive feedback have not been ingrained in our students' mindsets.

Table 4. Teachers' perception on the challenges of developing a critical and reflective learner

Practices possibly deemed challenging	N	Mean	SD	Percentage (%)				
				Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
1. Asking learners to identify their own learning goals	35	4.57	0.50	0%	0%	0%	42.8 %	57.2 %
2. Asking learners to self- monitor their own learning progress	35	4.4	0.49	0%	0%	0%	60 %	40 %

Similar to Table 3, table 4 indicated another major obstacle to fostering self-regulated learners: developing a critical and reflective learner, with mean scores being 4.57 and 4.4, respectively. This hindrance could probably lend itself to the deeply-ingrained mindset of both teachers and students, which considers evaluation and goal setting a part of teachers' responsibilities.

Interview Results and Discussion

Drawing on the interviewees' hand-on experiences in fostering self-regulated learning during an online writing course, the interview provides an insightful interpretation of why online learning creates opportunities and poses challenges for the attempts to nurture self-regulated learners. The discussion on the underlying reasons behind challenges was accompanied by relevant solutions offered by the interviewees.

Modeling and scaffolding

Most of the interviewees addressed the absence of in-person interaction as the major hindrance to this strategy. Given the importance of facial expression in reflecting our thought and feeling, it should not come as a surprise that four out of six interviewees found it challenging to evaluate online learners' comprehension at the modelling and scaffolding stage of a lesson, especially when most of them were unwilling to turn on their cameras for both technical and personal reasons. To make the matter worse, one interviewee also pointed out: "I tended to ask my students open-ended questions to check on their understanding, but only a handful of them responded."

Three interviewees suggested games for strengthening newly-acquired knowledge to overcome this persistent challenge and increase the level of engagement. As one interviewee suggested: "I think games like Kahoot or Quizizz are quite useful in checking students' understanding because these tools are specifically designed for educational purposes, and they also create a sense of competition". This benefit of games in encouraging more class participation was also highlighted in Tu and Luong (2021)'s study. Last but not least, one interviewee also drew attention to the importance of discussing the communicative purpose associated with each linguistic feature so that students will be more purposeful with their choice of grammar and vocabulary for composing.

Promoting peer and self-evaluation

Critical as giving feedback on students' writing for fostering self-regulated learning, it is regarded as one of the most difficult practices to be integrated into online learning.

The interviewees identified a number of problems pertaining to feedback giving. Firstly, the public nature of online feedback can negatively affect feedback receivers, as one interviewee explained:

> The social aspect of the forum on LMS makes peer assessment possible, but as everyone can access it, negative comments may lower the self-esteem of feedback receivers, especially low-leveled students, consequently affecting their self-efficacy.

Secondly, peer feedback or self-evaluation can cause an increased workload for both teachers and students. Most of the interviewees agreed that it would be overwhelming for teachers to keep track of every single self-evaluated form in consideration of the large class size, a typical feature of education at the tertiary level. Furthermore, three of the interviewees pointed out that not all students eagerly spent time assessing their peer writing, and the quality of peer feedback is another unresolved problem dragging itself from offline to online classes. Lastly, the interviewees expressed concern over the possibility of misinterpretation regarding the absence of immediate discussion between feedback receivers and givers, as stated in the interview: "They (students) may interpret feedback from their teachers and peers differently. Unlike online class, confused feedbacks are often discussed immediately during an on-class lesson".

In terms of practical solutions, the interviewees highly recommended designing a checklist including desirable features of an essay due to its dual benefits in reducing workload and resulting (resulting in?) more constructive feedback. As stated by one interviewee, "provided that the criteria are concise, achievable, transparent and well-explained, this would reduce the risk of misunderstanding created by ambiguous comments". Furthermore, the increased workload may no longer hold teachers and students back, as a well-designed checklist can solve this problem. Besides, as teachers take control of the language used in feedback, negative comments could be expressed in more encouraging terms so that the public nature of online feedback hopefully no longer has a negative psychological effect on feedback receivers. This suggestion of using the checklist in peer feedback is similar to the idea of using teacher-prepared questionnaires to facilitate constructive peer feedback in Levy (1996)'s discussion on "Method for teaching analytical writing". This self-regulation questionnaire is given credit for providing "a structure necessary to help them acquire and maintain effective analytical writing skills" (Levy, 1996, p. 100)

Promoting a learning community

While most interviewees said organizing cooperative activities was promising thanks to the social aspect of break-out rooms in Teams meetings, they still faced difficulty in encouraging students to actively share ideas, and the online learning platform seemed to worsen the situation. Reflecting on personal experience in teaching online writing class, two of the interviewees shared that weak learners (or "low achievers") were suddenly given good excuses for their lack of engagement in a discussion, with typical reasons including problems

with internet connectivity or the microphone or the noise at place of study. Consequently, as stated by these interviewees: "this online learning community may exclude academically-struggling learners."

To encourage more learners' engagement, it is suggested that tasks for group work should present a problem rather than just a list of questions for discussion. This emphasis on the role of inquiry learning is similarly mentioned in Beishuizen (2008)'s study on the correlation between learning community and self-regulated learning. Moreover, divergent questions are also highly recommended so that every contribution would be given credit, and acknowledgment can incentivize students of all levels to voice their opinions. Another suggestion is to discuss the task's purpose with students in advance. As two interviewees stated, "As far as I am concerned, students tend to participate more in group work when they understand how the task helps them make progress".

Developing critical and reflective learners

Setting goals and encouraging self-evaluation are predominantly addressed by all of the interviewees as challenging to implement online. The former was derived from the learners' attitude toward goal setting, which was "mostly doubtful and confused". This attitude is explained by two interviewees: "In fact, goal setting is not a well-establish habit of our learners, so they may not see the point of doing it, and not all learners are good at setting goals", "Most learners often find online learning stressful, so if their expectation is not fulfilled at the end of the course, they will develop a negative attitude toward goal setting". As for self-observation, learners traditionally hand this responsibility over to teachers. Online learners seem to lean more heavily on their teachers than usual, so asking them for self-evaluation may be wishful thinking.

One possible suggestion shared by four of the interviewees was to design a list of learning goals aligned with the learning outcomes of the writing course. One interviewee shared, "By doing this, these learning goals will be more specific and achievable to most students given their level at the time". Another interviewee also pointed out, "Teachers also find it easier to evaluate students' progress regularly thanks to the list of transparent, measurable objectives every week". Theoretically, the importance of goal setting during the editing stage is enthusiastically supported by many researchers in this area (Bogolin et al., 2003; Silver, 2013).

Conclusion

It is evident that self-regulated learning lays the foundation for nurturing academically-successful learners. Given its significance, the study aims to identify the persistent challenges and propose several practical suggestions for fostering self-regulated learners in an online writing class at Van Lang University. The findings revealed that each practice to nurture self-regulated learning entails its own challenge, but promoting peer feedback, self-evaluation, and self-reflective manners encountered the most obstacles. The hindrances were mainly derived from psychological aspects and the lack of well-defined criteria aligned with the learners' language proficiency. This could encourage more research into the design of criteria for peer

and self-assessment in writing skills, especially under the context of EFL online learning and teaching. Additionally, EFL teachers may find the suggestion section useful for addressing challenges to fostering the other aspects of self-regulated learning incurred by the nature of online learning platforms.

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Biodata

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APPENDIX
QUESTIONAIRE

Part A: Background infromation

Years of teaching writing skills for EFL students.

    a. Less than 3 years

    b. From 3- 5 years

    c. More than 5 years

The number of online writing course you have taught.

    a. Fewer than 3

    b. From 3 to 5

    c. More than 5

Part B: The teachers' perception on the challenges of fostering self-regulated learning

Practices possibly deem challenging	The teacher's perception				
	Totally disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Totally agree
Presenting a variety of model essay					
Modelling crucial steps of composing a new essay genre					
Analyzing the structural and language feature of a new essay genre					
Asking self-evaluation before teacher feedback					
Asking peer feedback before teacher feedback					
Encouraging individual learner to share ideas					
Encouraging learners to give constructive comments					
Organizing collaborative writing activities					
Asking learners to identify their own learning goals					
Asking learners to self- monitor their own learning progress					