Independent learner strategies to improve second language academic writing in an online course

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Abstract. This article explores how 40 first-year students in a compulsory English for Academic Purposes (EAP) course undertook written tasks during a semester suddenly undertaken online. The university in Japan described here provided on-demand lessons via the Learning Management System (LMS) during the first COVID-19 pandemic lockdown. Students prepared three-minute reflective videos as part of their course work describing their strategies to improve their second language (L2) academic writing and their perceptions of how these strategies affected their learning. These videos were transcribed, coded, and analysed. The use of Machine Translation (MT) to proofread work before submission was used by 58% of the participants, of whom 45% report improved assignment grades and higher levels of confidence in their L2 writing skills. Results suggest that learners should be encouraged to use MT for this step in the L2 academic writing process.

Keywords: L2 academic writing, writing strategies, machine translation, proofreading, self-reflective videos.

1.   Introduction

In early 2020, learners across the globe found themselves suddenly taking courses online as the first lockdowns to contain the spread of COVID-19 shuttered campuses. While some institutions provided lessons in real time, the university in Western Japan described here uploaded on-demand lessons to the LMS. This action research article explores the ways that 40 first-year students in an EAP course undertook the written tasks assigned to them. Participants were able to identify appropriate tools and were found to be using a variety of such resources in

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their writing processes including MT to proofread L2 writing before submission. Surveying a similar university population in Korea, Briggs (2018) found 48.8% to believe that MT had value for language learning. In a study designed by Lee (2020), a group of 34 university English as a foreign language learners were taught to compare their own L2 translations of their L1 compositions with an MT version. Both the participants of this study and those observed by Lee reported higher levels of efficacy and efficiency after adopting this practice.

2.   Participants and setting

The 40 participants are Japanese, with an average TOEIC score of 570, equating to approximately B1 on the CEFR[2] scale. This compares well to the national average of 520 points (Educational Testing Service TOEIC, 2018). Participant levels of both autonomy and motivation are also high, as evidenced by 12 (33%) having spent a year of independent study before matriculation due to the difficulty of the admission examinations and their desire to enter this specific highly ranked university.

The course followed the same structure online as previous in-person course iterations. Students first learned to write a well-structured paragraph, then a problem-solution essay, and finally a five-paragraph essay. Their tasks followed the same pattern each week: to read a news article and answer multiple-choice comprehension questions, to write sentences practising vocabulary from the article, and finally to write a paragraph or essay related to the topic. Formative assessment was delivered in two-week cycles, with the instructor collecting, commenting on, and returning student work covering an expanding list of proficiencies, which included constructing topic sentences and thesis statements, the use of signposting at the start of and within paragraphs, the formation and ordering of details and examples to support points made, and appropriate citation and referencing.

3.   Method

As part of their coursework, students were asked to submit a three-minute reflective video to the LMS about the specific processes by which they performed writing tasks. Reflective videos have been found to be not only a useful way to gather explorative qualitative data (Gubrium, Hill, & Flicker, 2014) but also to occasion

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2. Common European Framework of Reference for languages

meaningful reflective learning with minimal instruction (Nonaka & Konno, 1998) and were therefore chosen for this project. Participants understood that they could choose for their videos to not be included in this study, and that while their L2 complexity and fluency would be graded for assessment purposes, the strategies or opinions expressed would not.

Videos were first each watched twice to form an overall understanding of the data set. The data were then digitally transcribed using the dictation function in Word (version 16.51) then checked manually for accuracy. A total of 112 minutes of data resulted, with a total word count of 13,248 words. The transcripts were then coded with a three-cycle thematic analysis approach (Otani, 2009), which has its roots in grounded theory. This method was chosen to allow for themes to first emerge organically from the data, and then to be confirmed within the data set. Microsoft Excel was used to chart each participant's writing process, with thematic codes heading each column.

4.   Results and discussion

Themes relating to the process by which participants undertook their assigned writing tasks are outlined here in the order of the writing process and highlighted in bold where possible. Many participants (60%) described using **the same process** every week, with approximately half (47%) approaching their extended writing tasks **first on paper offline**. Four students explained why they did this. One stated that this let him capture and organise his ideas. Another talked about how when using his laptop, he felt distracted by his own inadequacy and sought better ways to express his ideas and sometimes better ideas than his own on the Internet. By writing on paper, he could control these feelings. The remaining two participants talked about the difficulty of staying on task when using an online device.

After this first step on paper, for all but one (98%) of the participants, who submitted photographs of his notebook for assessment, it became the **modus operandi to use online tools**. Most (70%) typed their work into a **Microsoft Word file**, or the **Notes application** (7%), but several (21%) skipped typing by using a **dictation application** to save time. One such student reported feelings of happiness, and another, vindication, upon finding that her English pronunciation could be understood by the technology.

Microsoft Word itself provided the next step for 24 participants, who paid careful attention to the **red/blue underlining** in their compositions and tried to correct

the spelling or grammatical errors that these pointed to. To aid in this, some (30%) reported **purchasing the app** of the paper or electronic dictionary that they had used in high school. Four were surprised by how fast, for example, checking collocations had become using such an app. Others (42%) embraced **online translation websites** to guide them in these corrections. Eleven participants (28%) reported **paraphrasing** the resulting L2 sentences.

Many of the participants (58%) then used **MT to translate their entire essay as the final** step in the writing process. Some (20%) used it to **translate their final L2 composition into L1**, doing so to check content and nuance rather than linguistic accuracy. The remaining 15 participants (38%) used MT to translate either **a draft written in L1**, or their own **L1 approximations** of what they had written directly in L2. This second group of participants described comparing their own writing with the MT-generated text, identifying differences and errors, and exploring the reasons for them using other trusted, often analogue, tools like dictionaries and textbooks kept from high school.

Whereas Lee (2020) reports improvements in both the number of her participants' lexico-grammatical errors, and in their understanding of L2 writing as a process rather than a final goal, the linguistic gains of participants in this project were not specifically assessed because the course aims to teach academic writing skills. Many (45%) following this process described significant **improvements in L2 writing confidence**, stating for example, "I feel much better writing now" and "I know that I can do the assignments correctly". Another reported that "using DeepL shows me that my writing can be understood by native [speakers]". Others (28%) described how their **grades for assignments improved** over the course of the semester. While these participants were not asked whether they felt their method of assignment task completion benefitted their L2 skills, it seems that they view it as having done so. This echoes the findings in Briggs (2018) that learners believe MT to be of significant value in language learning.

5. Conclusions

Many of the learners in this study have harnessed the power of technological tools to improve their L2 academic writing skills, including the use of MT to proofread and check assignments before submission. Participants not only identifying appropriate tools but also developing processes to use them effectively shows that learners are ready to embrace this level of technology usage. While some educators may hesitate to introduce such tools to students, and fear that they will simply be used to

translate passages from L1 to L2, the independent development of these processes by the participants in this project show that technological tools can improve learner efficacy and satisfaction.

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