SELF-REGULATED STUDY SKILLS AMONG MALAYSIAN STUDENTS IN TRANSITION TO HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract
Asian students in general are used to having their teacher as their learning director and merely respond to the teacher’s directions. Guided, didactic teacher-centered approach is generally an accepted practice of teaching and learning among students from South East and East Asia. Students seem to expect teachers to provide complete notes for the class, and have tutorials to help them answer questions. The students place no expectations on themselves to participate in the learning process. The culture and tradition of the people too has not encouraged independence and autonomy among students. As such students are overly teacher dependent and have to be spoon fed with information. The fact that the Malaysian education system is exam oriented does not provide much room for learner autonomy either. However the quality of the student’s self-regulated learning skills has a great influence on the student’s degree performance. The Ministry of Education, Malaysia has also stressed the importance of gaining self-regulated learning skills. This case study is looking at the development of self-regulated learning skills among Malaysian students enrolled in the foundation programmes of a foreign branch university in Malaysia. The objective of the study is to establish the level of self-regulated study skills among Malaysian students after completion of secondary school and identifying specific areas of study skills that the students need help with. Data was collected using the diagnostic tool, Learning and Study Strategies Inventory (LASSI). The ten scales in LASSI are related to three components of strategic learning skill, will and self-regulation. Results showed that students got a mean percentile of below 50 for all the components tested with the lowest being in motivation. The results showed that the students do indeed need help with gaining self-regulated learning skills and the information gathered can be used as a prescriptive measure by the university to help students enrolling in its foundation programme.

Keywords: Self-regulated learning, Study skills, Malaysian students.

1 INTRODUCTION
Every year students insists that teachers are not giving them enough notes or assistance to help with their learning. It is a struggle for students to cope with a new learning environment especially when they enter the first semester of their tertiary education, as secondary school experience often does not prepare them adequately for tertiary education ([7]). This is not surprising considering that Asian students in general are used to having the teacher as the learning director and merely respond the teacher’s directions. The teacher tells the learner what, how and what is to be learned ([52]). [49] discovered that, a guided, didactic teacher-centred approach is generally an accepted practice of teaching and learning among students from South East and East Asia. Students seem to expect teachers to provide complete notes for the class, and have more tutorials to help them answer questions. The students place no expectations on themselves to participate in the learning process. This is because traditionally the education system in Malaysia has not provided much room for learner autonomy. The culture and tradition of the people too has not encouraged independence and autonomy among students. As such students are overly teacher dependent and have to be spoon fed with information ([48]). Students are also obsessed with gaining access to past year questions and working on them, almost as if they wanted to study pass the exams and not really gain knowledge from the subjects taught. Again this is not surprising as this culture has long existed in the Malaysian education system that is examination oriented ([59]) and teachers are being caught up in ‘teaching to the test’ ([37]). In most secondary schools, rather intensive preparation for external examinations may induce a form of reproductive learning, which is contrary to what is required in most areas of higher education ([15]). As a result most students adapt an achieving approach in learning where the learning itself is only focused on the product, which is obtaining high grades and winning prizes ([8]).

The generally accepted role pattern wherein teachers convey declarative and procedural knowledge leads to a situation in which students lack sufficient opportunity to organize and regulate their own learning ([10]). This lack of exposure to self-regulated learning (SRL) could possibly be the cause for
the poor performance of the students in an independent learning environment. As a result, students are often confused and passive in the face of new demands and many are unable to achieve the maximum academic performance ([54]) when they move into university study.

The desire to develop more effective ways of helping pre-university students acquire the skills needed for successful transition to tertiary education and become self-regulated learners is the main motivation for this study. SRL is an important area of research in higher education learning and teaching ([35]) and has gained more attention in higher educational research. But there is limited literature on the use of learning strategies or SRL among pre-university or foundation students in private universities. Perhaps it is assumed that the pattern of the use of SRL observed in undergraduate students in local public universities could be applied on or generalized to different groups of students as well. Foundation students though still lack some metacognitive knowledge such as monitoring, evaluating and correcting that degrade some of their self-regulation processes as compared to university students ([50]).

The Ministry of Education Malaysia in its National Education Blueprint (2013-2025) ([28]) had also stressed the importance of self-regulated learning or rather the importance of gaining self-regulated skills. The blueprint states that in order to produce skilled students in the future, students need to master three important cognitive skills; creative thinking and innovation, critical thinking and reasoning and the ability to learn or develop self-learning skill.

This case study is looking at the self-regulated learning (SRL) skills among Malaysian students enrolled in the foundation programme of a foreign branch university. Although there has been various studies already done on learning and study strategies among Malaysian students ([21], [22], [55], [60]), very few SRL studies have been focused on students enrolled in foreign branch universities. When motivational and learning theories are transported to new cultural and social settings, there might be a mismatch ([26]) and with Malaysia now being home to the largest number of leading foreign university branch campuses in Asia ([29]), it is indeed timely that more studies are done with this group of students.

2 METHODOLOGY

2.1 Instrument used

Self-report questionnaires are the most frequently used protocol for measuring self-regulated learning (SRL), simply because they are relatively easy to design, administer and score. The Learning and Study Strategies Inventory (LASSI) ([56]) was used for this study as the objective was to diagnose/measure the use of learning and study strategies among foundation students. LASSI is a 60-item assessment of students’ awareness about and use of learning and study strategies related to skill, will and self-regulation components of strategic learning.

Its diagnostic measures, will help me identify areas in which students could benefit most from educational interventions. There are ten scales of LASSI. These scales are Anxiety, Attitude, Concentration, Information Processing, Motivation, Selecting Main Ideas, Self-Testing, Test Strategies, Time Management, and Using Academic Resources. There are six items on each of the ten scales of LASSI. These scales are Anxiety, Attitude, Concentration, Information Processing, Motivation, Selecting Main Ideas, Self-Testing, Test Strategies, Time Management, and Using Academic Resources.

Each item is rated with a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (not at all typical of me) to 5 (very much typical of me). Some of the items are worded positively and some are worded negatively. Each scale contains 6 items and possible scores for each scale range from 8 to 40. Results are presented in terms of where the student is placed on the percentile. If students are placed low, (<50) on the percentile, it indicates a student is weak in that scale, and if a student is placed higher in the percentile, (>75) it shows the student’s strength in that scale.

2.2 Data collection

This study was done with Malaysian students from two foundation programmes at a private higher institution of learning. The LASSI questionnaires were given to the students in the first week upon enrollment into the foundation programme. This was done to obtain information on how much the students have acquired in terms of self-regulated learning skills upon completion of secondary school
and without any influence from the higher learning institution. The data obtained was compared with the scale norms, which comes with the LASSI questionnaire. The average is calculated to determine where the students in this study stand in each of the scales tested.

3 RESULTS

Students from both the Foundation programme were given access to the questionnaire and 65 students responded. Table 1 shows the average calculated from the rankings the students received.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1. Average percentile of students in the different scales.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Scale</td>
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<td>Average Percentile</td>
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ANX: Anxiety  
ATT: Attention  
CON: Concentration  
INP: Information Processing  
MOT: Motivation  
SMI: Selecting Main Ideas  
SFT: Self-Testing  
TST: Test Strategies  
TMT: Time Management  
UAR: Using Academic Resources

The results in Table 1 show that the students ranked below the 50th percentile in all the 10 scales. There was no significant difference between the scales except for Motivation where the students ranked below the 40th percentile.

3.1 Dependent Malaysian Students

The fact that the students on average were placed below the 50th percentile in all ten scales does not come as a surprise. Most Malaysian secondary school students have also adopted this ‘rote-learning’ style due to pressure by parents, peers and schools to excel academically in an examination-based education system ([11]). After the normal school hours, students are also sent to tuition classes, extra classes and examination workshops to better prepare them for the various upcoming examinations ([42]). With this culture in Malaysian schools, students have little or no responsibility of their own learning ([45]). Although the educational system is able to produce students with good results ([33]), the current education system has been criticized for fashioning mindless memorization and regurgitation of facts, which they do not know how to apply ([45]). The importance placed on examination has resulted in students only focusing on how many A’s they achieve, which prevents the development of an inquisitive mind and analytical skills. Even though attempts have been made by the Malaysian Ministry of Education (MOE) over the years to move students away from teacher dependence towards greater independence, it has not been successful and as a result, students entering tertiary education have not acquired autonomy and independence ([51]).

3.2 Student Motivation

The results in Table 1, show that students placed in the 33rd percentile for Motivation. This was the lowest, compared to the other scales and is a cause for concern. This is because the most important assertive skill for independent learning is motivation ([9], [24], [25], [32]). [34] had also concluded that a student’s use of self-regulatory strategies alone was not sufficient for them to learn; instead it needed to include motivation. Studies have shown that students who are motivated have displayed greater progress ([62]), put in more effort to learn a difficult task and displayed a higher level of mastery ([41]) compared to unmotivated students. Motivated students are also more likely to learn on their own ([40]) and experience greater satisfaction when given the opportunity to learn ([62]).
4 CONCLUSIONS

The LASSI results obtained from this study shows that Malaysian students clearly lack the skill, will and self-regulatory strategies needed for excelling in tertiary education. Students had failed to gain these knowledge while in the secondary school system. SRL is regarded as one of the most important competences for traditional learning environments, but due to its lack of use during the teaching and learning process ([33]) students are not able to effectively foster skills on self-regulated learning strategies ([12]). It is possible though to develop self-regulatory competence by personal discovery, but this path is often tedious, frustrating, and limited in its effectiveness ([5]). Hence there is a need to develop SRL skills in students in order for them to adapt into an independent learning environment. [6] argued that, students apply strategies of SRL more effectively when they receive support from other members of the learning community, which ultimately leads to heightened levels of self-efficacy and motivation. Which is why the collaborative effort among the teachers, students and the institutions itself is essential in developing SRL. [36] further establishes that motivation delivers effective practice of self-regulated strategies.

Early intervention in the first year on student-centered learning ([23]) offer teachers an opportunity to provide necessary support to encourage students to remain at university, while enhancing the learning environment. The activities of supportive staff have been shown to enable successful transition ([53]). Engendering a climate where students can actively participate in learning may ease the issues involved in transition to university ([16]). [58] also stressed that, to better help pre-university students make a smooth transition to an independent learning environment, there is a need to gain insight into their beliefs about their intellectual and psychosocial capabilities. Awareness on pre-university students’ self-efficacy and expectancy for success leads to the implementation of more effectual instructional and motivational techniques that foster desired learning outcomes and graduate attributes.

Higher learning institutions can provide support to students on how to become SRL learners by providing scaffolds. It is suggested that both domain-general and domain-specific scaffolds can support the entire process of self-regulated learning since they demonstrated substantial effects on academic performance ([61]). Scaffolds can be tools, strategies, prompts, metacognitive feedback or guides that help students to achieve higher levels of understanding beyond their current abilities ([44]). It has been acknowledged that the use of scaffolds can support SRL processes ([14], [43]). These scaffolds can be embedded in pre-existing modules like maths and science or could be thought explicitly as a study skills module.

To compensate for the limits of classroom time and to counter the passivity, students should develop their own learning strategies so that as far as possible, they become autonomous learners ([17]). However, this is does not happen automatically, most students need to be motivated and trained to be such learners. Therefore development of independent learning to become an autonomous learner involves others such as lecturers, tutors or peers guiding learner towards becoming more independent ([13], [3]).

[58] argued that, to create a positive learning atmosphere, pre-university lecturers need to collectively convey the message that they are capable of modifying students’ behaviors and attitudes. When lecturers unanimously see themselves as capable of helping students, they project a consensual sense of efficacy that pervades the entire program. Only with high self-efficacy lecturers can raise students’ aspirations, interest level, and in the long run, program effectiveness. [58] also added that, to foster expectancy for success among pre-university students, lecturers should help them maintain accurate but high expectations, while avoiding the illusion of incompetence. Feedback should reflect the students’ level of understanding of content and task requirements. Sincere feedback allows students to learn from mistakes.

Essentially institutions should provide students with the guidance on how to become independent learners. [37] added that, if at the pre-university stage, students are not inducted successfully into the culture of reflective learning and reflective practice; it is a fear that at the degree level the task may prove even more difficult if not impossible. Which is why this study will be very useful to the teachers in pre-university or foundation programmes. If they have information about the needs of the students and where the students are excelling, they would be more efficient in helping and motivating students with what they really need and encouraging students in areas they are already good at.
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REFERENCES


