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L2 Writer's Attitudes to Outlines in a First-Year University Writing Course in the UAE

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Abstract

This paper will discuss research findings that examine second language writers' (L2) attitudes towards producing outlines to prepare for an essay task. A mixed-method study was conducted with 49 undergraduate students in three different classes taking an English Composition 2 course at a university in the UAE. To establish a baseline measurement, participants completed surveys and participated in focus group interviews asking them their opinions about doing outlines at the beginning of the course. After the initial survey and interviews, Group 1 was asked to complete a traditional print-based outline to prepare for an essay. Group 2 were asked to produce a multimodal (text, image, and video) outline on an app to help them prepare for the same essay. After completing their respective outlines, both groups responded to questionnaires and took part in focus-group interviews asking them their opinions about doing outlines. Although there wasn't a significant difference in attitudes between the traditional outline group and the multimodal group, both groups responded that outlining helped them better develop and organize their essays. These findings suggest L2 writers may believe there is a correlation between outlining and successful essay writing. Participants who completed multimodal outlines also responded favourably to learning new technology—implications that suggest technology can increase engagement in the learning process.

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1. Introduction

It is common practice in the English writing classroom to assign students prewriting tasks such as outlining. This is reflected in the many academic writing books, for both first language writers (L1) and second language writers (L2), which present outlining (along with freewriting, concept maps, etc.) as a strategy for planning a written essay

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assignment. Oshima and Hogue (1997) state that outlining is a key step in the writing process because it can help organization of a text. Although outlines can be helpful for generating ideas and organizing information for writing, do second language writers enjoy doing outlines, and find them useful?

Like most writing that occurs in the academic classroom, outlines are usually produced on traditional mediums such as paper or a word processor. Throughout the writing process, from initial brainstorming to completing a final draft for an essay, students are asked to write on these standard mediums. However, the world that students (and writing teachers) inhabit is increasingly multimodal, as Bezemer and Kress (2008) state that image is challenging written text as the primary means of representing meaning, and more learning is being done on the screen instead of on the page of the textbook. If our world is increasingly multimodal, should students in the writing classroom mirror this new world by producing texts that incorporate multiple modes of communication such as print, image, video, audio, and animation?

Takayoshi and Selfe (2007) stated that the use of multi-modality in the learning process was absent in many English composition classrooms as students were primarily producing alphabetic assignments through print media. However, in more recent years since Takayoshi and Selfe's claim, multimodal composition appears to have become more common in writing classes. Lutkewitte (2014) states that multimodal composition has increased in popularity in the English writing classrooms as new technologies have made it more necessary to communicate using multiple modes of communication. Despite the increased use of multimodal composition, students may not be integrating multimodality throughout all stages of the writing process—including outlining. This paper will not only examine student attitudes towards traditional print-based outlines, but also how students feel about producing multimodal outlines on apps using print, images, and video. Additionally, this paper will investigate student attitudes towards learning new apps, and whether students believe that producing texts on newer forms of technology (e.g. apps) benefits their learning more than producing texts on traditional forms of technology (e.g. paper or Microsoft Word).

2. Literature Review

The writing process involves three main steps—planning, sentence-generation, and revising (Hayes & Flower, 1986). This first step, planning, is concerned with generating ideas and organizing them into a writing plan. As part of this writing plan, students may incorporate different strategies ranging from hurried and spontaneous brainstorming to more structured and linear outlining (Reid, 1984). Outlines can be categorized into two different types—rough outlines and formal outlines (Hacker & Sommers, 2012). The advantages of rough outlines is that they are a list of ideas quickly made that can be changed later, whereas formal outlines are beneficial for more complex tasks because they allow the writer to see how the different parts of a composition fit logically together (Hacker & Sommers, 2012).

There have been a few studies examining the impact of outlining on writing. Kellogg's study (1988) found that outlines, in comparison with not doing outlines, lead to better quality written documents. Another study by Kellogg (1990) revealed that outlining improved style and content, especially with written tasks that required generation of ideas and organization of ideas. In a more recent study, de Smet, Broekkamp, Brand-Gruwel, & Kirschner (2011) suggest that electronic outlining helped improve the quality of Dutch high school students' argumentative essays.

Although some literature exists about the benefits of outlines on written production, there are less studies about writers' attitudes towards outlines. Victori conducted a study (1999) examining the effect metacognitive knowledge has on the writing processes of four Spanish university students taking an EFL course (2 good writers, and 2 poorer writers). All participants in the study agreed that outlines were beneficial for planning ideas and organizing writing, but only one student actually did an outline. The reasons why the other students didn't do outlines were because one student thought it was restrictive, one student preferred to just write as ideas came to her, and another student admitted to being too lazy to do them. Although a small sample size, Victori's study can provide insight into some of the attitudes writers have concerning outlines.

Studies have shown that multimodality can benefit communication. Jewitt (2005) states that the interaction of image and written word can reinforce meaning and show coherence. Similarly, The National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) state that the different mediums of communication can work together to increase rhetorical impact (2005). This reinforcement of meaning and increased rhetorical impact can especially benefit language learners who might need every available resource to communicate effectively. Nelson (2006, p. 71) states that writers can use non-linguistic modes like image to compensate for any lack of proficiency in English, which provides a "leveling effect."

Nelson also states that the use of multimodality can enhance the quality of their authorial voice. Shin and Cimasko (2008) emphasize the importance of second language learners developing both linguistic and non-linguistic forms of communication because multimodal composition can equip students with tools for expressing themselves and sharing knowledge. Despite existent studies which reveal the benefits of multimodal composition for L2 learners, no known research has been done on the benefits of using multimodality for outlining.

3. Research Questions

This research project examines L2 writers' attitudes towards doing both print-based outlines on traditional mediums like Microsoft Word and multimodal outlines on apps such as iBooks Author. More specifically this project asks the following research questions:

1. Do students enjoy doing outlines and find them useful?
2. Is there a difference in enjoyment and perceived usefulness between multimodal outlines and traditional outlines?
3. Do students believe that using new forms of technology for projects enhances their learning?
4. Do students enjoy learning new apps and believe that they will be useful for their future studies and career?

4. Methods

A mixed-method study was conducted with 49 undergraduate students spread over three sections taking an English Composition 2 course at a university in the UAE. As part of their English Composition 1 course, students were asked to do prewriting tasks like outlining to prepare them for essay tasks on traditional print-based mediums like Microsoft Word or paper. Upon entering their English Composition 2 course the following semester (when this study took place), participants were asked to fill out questionnaires and take part in semi-structured focus group interviews asking them if they enjoyed doing outlines and found them useful for developing content and organizing information for essays. This data served as a baseline measurement, and will be referred to as the 'pre-study' questionnaire in the results section below. Data from participants who had not done outlines was removed during analysis of the 'pre-study' questionnaire.

Next, participants were divided into different groups based on their section:

- Group 1 (Section 001) did print-based outlines to prepare them for an 800 word persuasive essay assignment on a problematic commodity. The students received a teacher-designed template on Microsoft Word, and filled in the relevant sections (e.g. 'Topic Sentence, Supporting Point', etc.). There were 16 respondents in Group 1.
- Group 2 (Section 002 and Section 003) did a multimodal outline to prepare them for the same 800 word essay assignment. The students were asked to make their outlines multimodal by using images and video to go along with the text. Students could use the app 'Creative Book Builder' on an iPad, or 'iBooks Author' on a MacBook to complete the multimodal outline. An example was shown to them using both apps. There were 23 respondents in Group 2.

Both the traditional and multimodal outlines were marked using a rubric that analysed 'content' and 'organization'.

After completing their respective outlines, both groups were asked to fill out questionnaires, and a few participated in focus group interviews, asking them whether they enjoyed the activity and found it useful for such areas as organizing and developing content for essays. Ten participants who took part in the original 'pre-study' questionnaire did not take part in the follow up questionnaire after the outlining tasks. 49 participants began the study, and 39 participants finished with the post-outline questionnaire.

The data from these questionnaires was compared between Group 1 (print-based outlines) and Group 2 (multimodal outlines) to see which outline reported more favourable responses from participants in areas related to enjoyment and perceived usefulness. For the multimodal group, extra items were added on the questionnaire asking about participant attitudes towards using technology in the classroom and learning new apps.

5. Results and Discussion

5.1 Attitudes towards outlines—pre-study questionnaire

Participants were given a survey about their attitudes towards outlining in the beginning of the course, which served as a baseline measurement for the study. Table 1 shows results from this pre-study questionnaire, which suggests participants may not have enjoyed outlining in their courses prior to their English Composition 2 class when this study took place. However, participants did find outlines useful for developing content and organizing information. Over 90% of participants ‘strongly agreed’ and ‘agreed’ that outlines were useful for developing and organizing ideas.

Table 1. Pre-study questions about outlining (n=49)

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I enjoy outlines	0%	37%	60%	3%
Outlines help me develop information	37%	53%	10%	0%
Outlines help me organize information	50%	47%	3%	0%
Outlines are necessary to write a good essay	13%	60%	23%	3%

As part of this pre-study questionnaire, participants were asked if they didn’t do outlines, what they would do to prepare for writing an essay. Table 2 shows the themes that emerged in the comment box on the questionnaire.

Table 2. If you didn’t do an outline, what would you do to prepare for writing an essay? (n=22)

Number of times themes emerged	
List of points or ideas I’d write about	7
Research / take notes / collect information	6
Brainstorm	6
Start writing	2

These responses suggest that, as an alternative to outlining, some students might prefer a simple list of ideas to plan for their essay writing, what can be described as a rough outline, according to Hacker and Sommers (2012). Similar to a rough outline, many participants responded that they would brainstorm ideas, while others stated that they would simply prefer to research and take notes to gather information. This suggests that participant preferences for pre-writing strategies varied, although most respondents stated they would do some form of pre-writing or research to prepare for writing an essay. Only 2 respondents out of 22 said they would just start writing.

5.2 Attitudes towards outlines—traditional vs. multimodal groups

Questionnaires were administered after the two groups of participants finished doing their outlines—Group 1 did a traditional outline on Microsoft Word, and Group 2 did a multimodal outline on iBooks Author. Table 3 shows the results of this post-task questionnaire. Although 5 out of 23 respondents stated they did not enjoy doing the multimodal outlines, there was not a significant difference in the percentage of respondents who enjoyed doing the outlines: 87% of the traditional group agreed or strongly agreed that they enjoyed the task, and 78% of the multimodal group agreed or strongly agreed.

Table 3: Comparison of traditional and multimodal groups (post-outline task)

	Traditional (n=16)				Multimodal (n=23)			
	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I enjoyed the outline	31%	56%	6%	6%	30%	48%	17%	4%
My outline helped me develop information	56%	44%	0%	0%	48%	43%	9%	0%
My outline helped me organize information	60%	40%	0%	0%	52%	35%	13%	0%
Outlines are necessary to write a good essay	50%	37.5%	12.5%	0%	48%	39%	13%	0%

Table 3 also shows that there was not a significant difference between the traditional and multimodal groups in areas related to perceived usefulness. In both groups, approximately 90% of respondents strongly agreed or agreed that outlines helped them develop content and organize information. This data suggests that the medium through which the outline was constructed (print-based Microsoft Word or multimodal iBooks Author) had no significant effect on learner attitudes towards outlining. However, participants from both groups clearly valued outlines as being beneficial for developing content and organizing information in the pre-writing process of an essay assignment. This suggests that the task of doing an outline is more important than through which medium it is completed—whether on an app with images and video, or on a Microsoft Word page with only print.

Table 4 shows themes from the comment boxes of the questionnaire asking participants why they enjoyed doing their traditional or their multimodal outlines. Organization was the most popular theme that emerged for both groups who did outlines on either Microsoft Word or iBooks Author. Again, this suggests that, when it comes to pre-writing strategies, the medium isn't as important as the task of doing an outline. Four participants from the multimodal group stated that they enjoyed doing the multimodal outline on iBooks Author because it was something fun or new. This suggests that although the two tasks are similar, the benefits of doing a multimodal outline on an app versus a traditional outline on Microsoft Word could be increased engagement with the task that results from doing something new and interesting in the writing classroom—in this case using images and video on an app to make an outline.

Table 4. Why did you enjoy the outlines? (number of times themes emerged)

Traditional		Multimodal	
Organized	7	Organized	7
Saves time / easier to write essay	2	Fun / new	4
		Saves time / easier to write essay	2

The questionnaire also provided participants an opportunity for stating why they didn't enjoy doing the outlines. Four participants in the multimodal group said that they didn't enjoy doing the outline on an app with images, video, and text because it was either a hassle or too time consuming. Two more participants said that they didn't enjoy the multimodal outline because they didn't have enough time to complete the project. This suggests that some participants might find the multimodal outline a burden that involves too much effort and extra time. In fact, one participant responded by saying that "I didn't enjoy [the multimodal outline] because we were wasting time. Making the outline pretty will not help me in writing."

The multimodal group were also asked if doing an outline on an app (with images, video, etc.) helped them more than doing a standard print-based outline on Microsoft Word, and 76% of participants agreed or strongly agree. Some of those who agreed said:

- “Using images and videos helps us get more information out. We can quote videos and get information out of them instead of just articles. Pictures also help us show the impacts of commodities.”
- “Microsoft Word gets boring due to the constant use of it. An app, especially for a multimodal outline is more fun and it brings a kind of change to what you’re used to doing.”
- “It helps me a lot. Personally, I’m a visual [learner] so when I use pictures and videos my mind become more attention and the ideas become better understood.”
- “It helps bringing the feeling and the outline becomes brighter and it gives the energy to write.”

The responses above suggest that multimodality helped certain learners communicate their ideas because of visual aids, and also inspired some participants because the task was something new, which brought “feeling”.

However, almost one quarter of participants did not agree that doing an outline on an app helped them more than on a traditional medium. Some participants thought multimodality made little difference to improving outlining:

- “The app is just another tool that arranges ideas in a nicer looking way but for the content I think it does not make a difference.”
- “An outline is an outline. I think it doesn’t matter if it is done on Microsoft Word or on an app. In both ways, it is helpful.”

These comments from the questionnaire show that although most respondents stated that the multimodal outline made on an app had advantages that a word processor did not have, some respondents stated that it made no difference. This suggests that some learners may respond to technology differently than others, and that technology may benefit some students more than others, depending on individual learning styles and preferences.

5.3 Attitudes towards learning new apps

This study also aimed to investigate student attitudes towards learning new apps in the classroom. Participants from the multimodal group were asked whether they enjoyed learning new apps, and found them useful for future academic and professional contexts, as can be seen in Table 5.

Table 5. Attitudes towards learning apps (n=23)

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I enjoy learning new apps in class	35%	39%	26%	0%
Learning new apps is useful for my future studies at university	50%	27%	23%	0%
Learning new apps is useful for my future job	48%	35%	13%	4%
In general, using technology to do projects helps me learn more than MS Word or paper	48%	26%	17%	9%

Most participants in this study agree that they enjoyed learning new apps and found them useful. Some comments from the questionnaire support this idea:

- “I get bored doing things on paper and Microsoft Word. When using technology I believe I can enhance my skills.”
- “I discover new programs which will help me in the future to use it.”

However, around one quarter of participants didn't enjoy learning new apps, didn't find them useful for future studies, and didn't think that technology helped them more than traditional forms of technology like word processors and paper. Again, this seems to suggest that although many participants in this study believe they are benefitting from learning with technology, a significant portion either do not agree with this, or believe that there is not much of a difference. One participant summed up the lack of difference new or higher forms of technology make by saying:

“It doesn't make a difference if you use Microsoft or technology as long as what you are doing is helpful. There are people who are creative with paper and know how to turn papers into something really useful. It depends on the person really and not on what he/she uses.”

6. Conclusions

Participant attitudes towards outlines in this study were very positive—particularly in regards to the perceived usefulness of using outlines to develop content and organize information for an essay writing task. Most students who participated in the research believe that there is a correlation between successful essay writing and using an outline to prepare for writing. Even if outlining has no significant impact on the quality of essay writing, learners who believe that outlining helps them write better essays may find added confidence when faced with a daunting task like producing a lengthy argumentative essay. Thus, the results from this study can encourage writing instructors to teach outlining as a strategy to help second language writers overcome any anxiety they may have for producing long writing assignments.

In regards to the benefits that multimodal outlines may have over traditional print-based outlines, the data did not show any significant difference in respondent attitudes between the two different mediums. It seems likely that any advantages multimodality may have for outlining depends on the learner. Certain learners may benefit more from multimodal outlines because they respond well to technology and are more visual learners, while other learners may believe the use of images and video to compliment traditional prewriting tasks is unnecessary and time-consuming.

There does seem to be, however, some motivational benefits of using new forms of technology in the classroom for many learners because new apps or new technologies represent something novel and exciting. Students may become more engaged with learning when they accomplish a task with a new tool. Learners may also value learning new technologies because they believe it will benefit their future studies and professional career. The majority of respondents who completed the multimodal outlines stated that they enjoyed learning new apps and found them useful for future academic and professional contexts. Graduates who are more familiar and comfortable with using different kinds of technology may find themselves better equipped for the workplace. In addition, learning skills such as effectively designing a multimodal text may benefit some students professionally more than learning how to write an argumentative essay.

7. Further Research

This study only analyzed attitudes towards traditional print-based outlines and multimodal outlines. A future study could examine the impact outlines have on essay writing to see whether the study aligns with Kellogg's (1988, 1990) and de Smet et al.'s (2011) findings that outlining leads to better quality written documents. This future study can also compare the impact that both traditional print-based outlines and multimodal outlines have on essay writing to examine if the medium of outlining plays a significant role in successful essay writing.

In addition, studies that explore the benefits of not just prewriting, but essay drafting, could offer some insight into possible benefits of using multimodal composition. Research could be done to see whether producing a multimodal

essay on an app with images and video (along with print-based text) could improve motivation for essay writing tasks, and improve the rhetorical impact of an argumentative essay in comparison with a print-based essay.

Finally, this study aimed to examine learner attitudes towards learning new apps and investigate if students believe technology is enhancing learning. More studies could be done where learners perform a task on a new technological tool, and the effects of this new tool are compared with a standard tool which has traditionally been used to perform the same task.

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