The Intersection between Out-of-class Language Learning Strategies and In-class Activities

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Abstract

Studies on out-of-class language learning strategies (OCLLSs) are usually divorced from the activities in class. Thus, this study addresses the connection of the two entities. The participants in this study were nine international postgraduate students who were undergoing their English language proficiency course in an institution in Malaysia. Data were gathered through their weekly online postings on Google + and interview during the course. The data from the students were triangulated with the information found in the pro forma of the modules and interview with the lecturers. Atlas ti was used to manage the data. It was discovered that the type of assessment set by lecturers for the course determined the use of OCLLSs. Findings show that firstly, more OCLLS were used in completing assignments than preparing for quizzes/tests. Thus, from the 3 modules; it was found that students employed more strategies for oral communication and writing rather than for reading. Secondly, the OCLLSs used could form a 'strategy chain or cluster' for the tasks of preparing for oral presentation and completing writing assignments. Lastly, there was evidence of technology dependency on some of the main OCLLSs.

Keywords: assessments, English language proficiency course, Google+, out-of-class language learning strategies, postgraduate international students, qualitative approach

1. Introduction

Language learning strategies are "specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier" (Oxford, 1990, p.8). This definition is just one of the plethora of definitions made by numerous advocators of language learning strategies since 40 years ago. Although different terms have been used, all of the definitions highlight two important aspects about language learning strategies – what learners do and why they do it/them. This suggests that a good strategy can yield a fruitful outcome where learners benefit and progress in their language learning. In fact, employing a good strategy is a criterion that expedites the rate of success in language learning (Bialsytok, 1981; Gu, 2010; Kamarul Shukri et al, 2009; O'Malley et al., 1985; Oxford, 1990).

Studies on English Language Learning Strategies (ELLSs) are in abundance. The area first caught the attention of educators when Joan Rubin produced a list of characteristics for 'Good Language Learners' in 1975. Following that, research on ELLSs was rigourous with studies done all around the world, for example Taiwan (Su & Duo, 2012), Britain (Gao, 2006), Oman (Adel Abu Rahman, 2011), Turkey (Irgin, 2011), Iran (Kashefian-Naeeini & Nooreiny, 2010), Thailand (Pawapatcharaudom, 2007), and New Zealand (Griffiths, 2003). Moreover, with the body of literature on language learning strategies growing very comprehensively, this area has been scrutinized from many angles. One of them is out-of-class language learning strategies (OCLLSs). The possible reason for this area gaining attention is because of the realization that hours spent in English formal classroom is insufficient to enable the learners to acquire knowledge and skills to use the language (Tagashira et al, 2010). Therefore OCLLSs include all activities that are conducted outside of the formal classroom. They include listening to English songs, creating opportunities to practise speaking in English, seeking help to complete English homework and the list goes on.

One of the earliest and the most cited article on OCLLSs is by Pickard in 1996. Concomitantly, more research has been done. Pearson (2004), Hyland (2004), Mukundan et al. (2009), Ihsan (2012) and Eksi and Aydan (2013). In Malaysia,

Mohamed Amin (1996; 2000) introduced OCLLSs as one of the three situations for the use of English Language Learning Strategies in his Strategy Questionnaire (SQ). This sparked studies utilizing his questionnaire, for example Faizahani (2002) and Punithavalli (2003). However, hardly any that looks at OCLLSs per se.

Few studies in the extant literature on OCLLSs address the connection between what happens out-of-class and in-class activities. The connection usually involves teachers – Pickard (1996) reports that learners do not do as advised by the teachers but do what interests them. However, Bunts-Anderson (2004) shows evidence how teachers advise learners to use English outside of class. This echoes in Eksi and Aydan's (2013) study where their participants testify that they do teacher-directed activities out of class. However, discussions on OCLLSs lack in their connection with the classroom activities that the learners are involved in. The classroom activities can include a wide range of activities beginning with classroom interactions, homework, assessments, use of textbooks, just to name a few.

In short, this part has parsimoniously and deductively introduced the focus of this paper. Beginning from the big picture of Language Learning Strategies which then moved to the studies concentrating on English language learning strategies. The attention was then on out-of-class language learning strategies (OCLLSs). The area of OCLLSs was uncovered to show the lack of emphasis on the connection between OCLLSs and in-class activities. Thus, this becomes the focus of this paper which will be discussed by looking at a study exploring the intersection between OCLLSs and a class-related activity.

2. Research Objectives And Questions

The purpose of the study is to understand the connection between out-of-class language learning strategies (OCLLSs) that are employed by the learners and their in-class activities. In order to achieve the purpose, this study sets two research objectives which are then fulfilled by answering the corresponding research questions as seen in Table 1.

Table 1. Research objectives and the corresponding research questions

Research Objectives	Research Questions
1. To discover the type of in-class activity that is related to OCLLSs.	1. What type of in-class activity that is related to the employment of OCLLSs? 1.1 What is the nature of this activity for each module?
2. To investigate how the learners used OCLLSs to tackle the in-class activity.	2. How did the learners use OCLLSs to tackle the in-class activity?

3. Research Methodology And Procedures

Many studies look at the aerial picture of learners' language learning strategies by using the highly used Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) by Oxford 1990. The questionnaire has been translated into more than 20 languages and used in dozens of published studies (Oxford, 2003). There are also studies that utilize the mixed methods approach by firstly administering the questionnaires to the learners and then inviting a number of them for an interview to further understand the learners' strategies. However, this study, which is a part of a bigger project, has taken a full qualitative approach on the issue. It employed the interview and document analysis methods. The interviews were conducted with the student participants as well as with the three lecturers teaching them. As for the document analysis method; the data came from the weekly online postings on topics given and the participants' reflections on their English language learning for the week, and the pro forma of the three modules.

The process of data collection was done for one semester (twelve weeks) in conjunction with an English language proficiency course at a Language Centre at a public institution in Malaysia. The data analysis was managed by the use of a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software – Atlas ti. In order to make sense of the data and answer the stipulated research questions, the six-step in the thematic analysis as suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006) was utilized.

The student participants were nine international postgraduate students who underwent the earlier mentioned English language proficiency course. They are from Iraq (3), Iran (1), Indonesia (1), Bahrain (1), Libya (1), Algeria (1) and Palestine (1). Their ages range from 22 to 39. They are in Malaysia to either pursue their master's degree (5) or doctorate studies (4). Six are from the sciences whereas three are from the Islamic Studies. Two of them stayed on campus while the rest were off campus. Four of those who stayed off campus had their family members staying together. The details of the participants are in Table 2.

Table 2. Profiles of the student participants

Pseudonym/ Gender (M – male; F – female)	Country of Origin	Age	Faculty	Level of Education	Place of stay/ Marital Status (m–married; s – single)	Results for the course (Oral-Rdg-Wtg)
Basri / M	Algeria	38	Islamic	PhD	Gombak / m	5-3-4

FatinMalik / F	Iraq	39	Mathematics	PhD	Kajang / m	5-4-4
Faizah / F	Indonesia	25	Islamic	PhD	Kajang / s	4-3-4
Fairus / F	Libya	27	Computer	Master	Kajang / m	5-5-4
Imran / M	Palestine	24	Islamic	Master	Kajang / s	4-4-3
Mohsin / M	Iran	23	Computer	Master	Serdang / s	4-5-4
Nabil / M	Bahrain	22	Computer	Master	Za'ba / s	5-4-4
Faizal / M	Iraq	23	Engineering	Master	Za'ba / s	5-5-4
ShamsulWahab / M	Iraq	32	Engineering	PhD	Serdang / m	5-5-4

The English Language Proficiency course ran for twelve weeks. It comprised three modules; Reading, Oral Communication and Writing Modules. The lecturers for the modules were Dr Farah, Dr Kaseh and Dr Salleh, respectively. Reading and Oral Communication Modules were conducted for two hours each weekly, while Writing Module was for four hours. The course is compulsory for post graduate students who do not meet the English language requirement set by the institution.

4. Findings And Discussions

The findings and discussions are discussed according to the research questions.

RQ 1. What type of in-class activity that is related to the employment of OCLLSs?

Based on the online postings and interviews with the nine student participants, it was discovered that the in-class activity which is related to the employment of OCLLSs is the assessment. In other words, the participants used OCLLSs to handle the assessments in all the three modules. This is as depicted in Appendix 1- the network view which is a visual output from Atlas ti. Information from Appendix 1 is transferred into Table 3 for easy viewing. It also includes the corresponding number of times that each OCLLS is reported in the student participants' interviews and online postings.

Almost all of the reported OCLLSs are connected to both their preparation to do tests/quizzes and oral presentations, and also completion of their assignments. The Writing Module boasts the highest number (12) of various strategies used, whereas the Reading Module has the least (4). As for the number of reported OCLLSs; Writing, Oral Communication and Reading Modules list 55, 39 and 9 cases respectively. The two highest reported OCLLSs by the participants for each module are highlighted in Table 3. They again strengthen the link between OCLLSs and the assessments that the participants had to do for each module. This finding is an addition to the existing literature. As mentioned earlier, research that touches on the connection between these two entities has highlighted only on the role of the teachers in advising learners to do out-of-class activities (Bunts-Anderson, 2004; Eksi & Aydan, 2013).

Although the connection between the use of OCLLSs and assessments has been established; there are differences in the variety and reported cases of OCLLSs. This is due to the nature of the assessment for each module which is discussed by the subsequent research question.

Table 3. OCLLSs and their corresponding number of times reported by the student participants

READING MODULE	WRITING MODULE	ORAL COMMUNICATION MODULE
Doing revision – 2	Translating – 6	Choosing own words – 1
Discussing – 1	Translating and checking – 1	Practising speaking – 4
Doing homework – 5	Choosing own words – 3	Translating – 3
Matching - 1	Doing corrections – 4	Reading aloud – 1
	Being corrected – 6	Practising speaking (outline) - 4
	Searching for points – 3	Rephrasing – 4
	Finding meanings – 2	Memorizing – 1
	Rephrasing – 2	**Doing mental picture – 5**
	Getting help – 1	**Writing up – 5**
	Keeping Vocabulary – 1	**Searching for points - 10**
	Following a template – 14	
	Seeking opportunity to write - 13	

RQ 1.1 What is the nature of this activity (assessment) for each module?

The assessments for the Reading Module are the tests and quizzes while for the Writing and Oral Communication Modules, the assessments are in the form of assignments and oral presentations. Naturally the tests and quizzes are conducted in

class whereas the assignments and the preparation for oral presentations are done outside of class. This might be the main justification for the difference in the variety and the number of reported OCLLSs made where Reading Module shows the least number in both areas as its assessments are all tests and quizzes. Triangulating the data gathered from the student participants through their interviews and online postings with the interviews conducted with the lecturers and the pro-forma for each module, all the assessments are formative in nature. Table 4 elucidates the type of assessments with their weighting for each module.

Table 4. Assessments and their weighting for each module

Module	Type of Assessment	Weighting (%)
Reading Module	Assessment 1 (main ideas)	15%
	Assessment 2 (outline)	15%
	Assessment 3 (mock test)	30%
	Final test 4	40%
Writing Module	Paragraph Writing I	20%
	Paragraph Writing II	20%
	Essay Writing	20%
	Online postings	10%
	Proposal Writing	30%
Oral Communication Module	Reading Aloud	10%
	Group Discussion	20%
	Informative Presentation	30%
	Informative Speech Product	20%
	Impromptu Speech	20%

For the Reading Module, Assessments 1 and 2 are like quizzes where they test specific skills like finding main ideas and outlining. However, Assessment 3 is a mock for Final Test 4. This gave the students chance to do revision and practise, hence the highest two reported strategies of 'doing revision' and 'doing homework'. Both are highlighted in Table 3. In fact 'doing homework' is actually revising as described by ShamsulWahab in the interview (int):

Interviewer :	***You do exercise***
Interviewee :	*Yeah, some exercises and examples about this test. Sometimes the teacher*
	give me somewhere exercise to do
	Do at home
	Yeah. Near the test.
	I see. Same idea. Same style
	Yeah. Same style, this test and this exercise same
	You do it at home as homework
	Yes. (ShamsulWahab, int)

For the Writing Module, Paragraph Writing I is a one-paragraph writing while Paragraph Writing II is a two-paragraph writing. The former was done in class but the latter and also essay writing were done as assignments and thus were taken home. This gave them opportunities to apply OCLLSs. However, no strategy was linked directly to the two assignments. On the other hand, a few strategies spun from the online postings activity which was done throughout the semester. Every week they had to do two tasks - respond to the topic posted and write their weekly reflections on their English Language Learning Experiences. Since this activity was done on Google+ which has similar features like Facebook, participants were free to 'like' and make comments about their friends' postings. Hence the OCLLS of 'seeking opportunity to write'; as penned by FatinMalik "*we enjoyed when we write online and share our friends in English group their opinions and ideas about the subjects*" (FatinMalik, online posting_topic (op_top)).

The biggest portion of the assessment for writing is Proposal Writing. It was a process writing where they had to send drafts before the final submission. This opened up opportunities for the participants to utilize the OCLLSs like 'being corrected' and 'doing corrections': *then I give this draft to Dr. for corrections then I correct the assignment and write the final copy*" (ShamsulWahab, op_top). In fact, the OCLLS of 'following a template' is an idiosyncrasy of Proposal Writing because the writing lecturer admitted that he gave "*them template to follow*" (Dr. Salleh, int).

As for the Oral Communication module, there are five assessments as shown in Table 4. Dr. Kaseh, the lecturer for the module allowed time for preparation for all (Dr. Kaseh, int). This gave the participants chance to 'search for points', 'write the points' and 'do a mental picture' in preparing and practising for the oral presentations. Below are data extracts of the main reported OCLLSs.

> *I read several articles online about each topic for collecting information* (Fairus, op_top)

> *On the subject of talk in a general topic, I put in each subject the main points and I write a*
>   *small paragraph on the topic I have selected* (Nabil, int)

> *[W]hen I want to prepare I imagine my self out side and I try to talk about that topic* (Faizal, op_top).

All in all, it is axiomatic that only take-home work would open opportunities for the employment of OCLLSs by the participants. That is the reason why there are more reported cases and variety for the Writing and Oral Communication Modules compared to the Reading Module. Besides that, the nature of the assignments given also played a role in promoting OCLLSs among the participants. This is evident in the Writing Module where the assignments required different ways of completing them; there was online postings activity that involved not only the participants' own postings but also opportunity for them to write in terms of responding to their friends' postings. Moreover, writing a proposal required the participants to produce drafts and when submitted, marked and then returned to them, they would have to do corrections before the final submission.

RQ 2. How did the learners use OCLLSs to tackle the in-class activity (assessments)?

This question is answered by scrutinizing the patterns of OCLLSs that were employed in only the Writing and Oral Communication modules because their assessments are in the form of assignments where participants had to prepare and complete them out of class. For Reading module, however, the OCLLSs utilized were minimum due to the nature of the assessments which was test-based, and thus dropped from this discussion. The OCLLSs reported by the participants in the Writing and Oral Communication Modules revealed three findings that illustrated the answer to the above question – three-basic steps, variations in the steps and the use of technology.

Firstly, the analysed data indicated that the participants followed the same basic steps in their strategies employed in each of the two modules. Figure 1 shows the basic steps in each module. For Oral Communication Module where the assessments were oral presentations, there were three basic steps that the participants observed. Firstly they searched for points to be used in their oral presentations, then they wrote them down and lastly they practised. There were variations in the way they performed all these steps. This is to be discussed later. As for writing, there were also three basic steps – searched for points, wrote according to the structure and corrected the work. Similar to the Oral Communication Module, there were some variations to the steps taken.
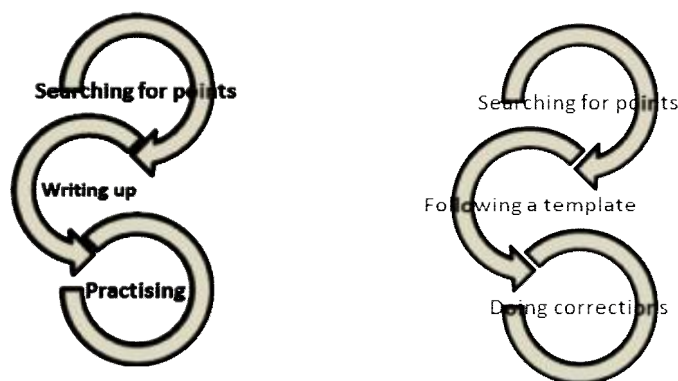

Figure 1. Basic three-step OCLLSs in handling assessments in Oral Communication and Writing Modules.

Secondly, although almost all participants reported following the same three steps, there were variations in the way each step was done. Figure 2 illustrates the variations. For Oral Communication Module, the first step, instead of searching for points, Faizal just "*talk[ed] from [his] heart*" (Faizal, int) because to him, a topic like 'My friend' did not require researching. In the second step, the participants wrote the points for their oral presentations. Most participants reported that the notes were in outline or point form (Basri, int; Faizal, int; ShamsulWahab, op_top; Mohsin, int) but Nabil (int) wrote in full. Basri spoke for most of them when he explained about why he wrote notes in point form:

> *I just clutch the paper and I want to find the word. But if I let it open, just notes, no problem. I can talk. No*
> *problem. So I use it in English. If I write it becomes hard for me because I try to find word…if I lost… cannot find*
> *word…. I stop and I will lose everything. But if just point notes, I talk one point, finish, I go to next point.*

> (Basri, int)

In writing up the speech for oral presentations, whether in full or point form, some participants rephrased (Fairus, op_top; Faizal, int; Imran,op_top) and Imran, for example, was *"trying to use easy words"* (Imran, op_top).   Another OCLLS applied here was translation from their mother-tongue (Basri, op_top; Fairus, int; Faizah, int).   As for the last step before the presentation itself, participants should '*practise, practise, practise*' (int_Dr. Kaseh).   ShamsulWahab and Faizah actually echoed this in their interviews. Besides practising, ShamsulWahab also believed in memorizing the points (ShamsulWahab,int).   On the whole, participants practised in many ways – some actually practised out aloud and usually to his or her own self but some did a mental picture of what to present.   Both are illustrated in the extracts from the interviews with Faizah and Fairus:

> **After that to present, what do you do?**
>
> *To present, I need to practise, practise*
>
> **How?**
>
> *Out aloud in the room*
>
> **Anyone there?**
>
> *No. Alone.*   (Faizah, int)

> *When I know just I try to think about what I should what I will say, just that*   (Fairus, int)

Similar to the Oral Communication Module, there were also variations to the basic three-step OCLLSs in the Writing Module. In step one where most participants searched for points for their writing, Faizal again deviated. He actually imagined what the lecturer wanted**:**

> *Like what he wants like 'why you take the university', for example it is big. So I know he wants us to describe place or something like this.*   (Faizal, int)

This was applied for simpler assignments like the paragraph and essay writing. With the points that they had, they moved on to write; they adhered to the structure that they were taught like "*4 paragraphs consisting of the intro, body then concluding paragraph*" (Dr.Salleh, int).   As for the writing of the proposal, *"I write a proposal based on the model which is given to use by Dr"* (Mohsin, op_top).   In writing, they also rephrased and translated. Rephrasing was done to avoid plagiarism as expressed by Faizal in the interview:

> *I must read it online and understand because they say don't copy paste*
>
> **No plagiarism**
>
> *So, must understand and to write it in your language*   (Faizal, int)

In contradiction to the norm among the participants where "[i]*f I want to use some word, but I don't know in English I will go to Google translate"* (Faizal, int), translating was also done in a different manner as admitted by FatinMalik:

> **So you translate only after you finish, to see whether it is the same meaning or not?**
>
> *Yeah.*   (FatinMalik, int)

Completing Proposal Writing could be a breeze for the participants especially PhD students who have *"an existing proposal that they submitted to gain enrolment into [the institution]"* (Dr. Salleh, int) because they could just fit it into the template like what FatinMalik and ShamsulWahab admitted doing in their interviews. Both of them are from the Sciences. However, the other two PhD candidates (Basri and Faizah) who are from the Islamic Studies actually had another step to do; they had to do translation as confessed by Basri:

> **You just translated what you did for your Phd proposal?**
>
> *Yeah. Honest. I just translated*   (Basri, int)

The last strategy in the strategy chain for writing is doing corrections. This strategy is in line with the nature of the writing assignments where the participants had to submit drafts. Most participants just handed in the drafts to Dr Salleh but, ShamsulWahab actually checked his own drafts *"about two or three times before I [gave] to teacher"* (ShamsulWahab, int). Dr Salleh, as the Writing lecturer would mark and make comments so that the participants could amend any mistakes before the final submission. They reported that the types of corrections that they had to do for their proposals were in terms of arrangement of points and typing errors (Faizal, int) and grammar (Mohsin, int). Based on the comments given by Dr.

Salleh, some amended the work themselves while Fairus actually referred to her '*senior's work*' (Fairus, int) to understand her mistakes and then make the necessary amendments.
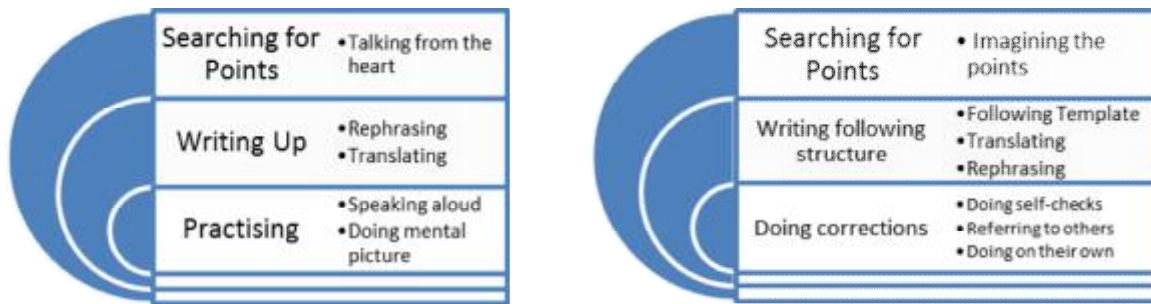

Figure 2. Basic three-step OCLLSs with variations in tackling assessments in Oral Communication and Writing Modules

The three basic strategies and their variations of the OCLLSs for both modules are portrayed in Figure 2. The three main strategies in each module work in sequence. This orchestrated sequence is termed by Oxford (2011) and Macaro (2004; 2006) as the strategy chain and strategy cluster, respectively. Both terms denote a repertoire of language learning strategies taken concurrently or in sequence to complete a language task. The task here refers to the preparation for oral presentations and also the completion of writing assignments. Macaro (2006) mentioned studies discussing strategy clusters on tasks like listening by Laviosa, reading by Graham, and dictionary skills by Neubach and Cohen. When strategies are synchronized well, the outcome would be good. This is evident in the accumulated marks for the participants' final results for the course as seen in Table 1. Everybody passed the English Language Proficiency Course. The overall score for all modules range from band 1 – 5 with 5 being the highest. The passing band is 3 for Islamic Studies whereas for others, it is 4.

From Figure 2, it can be seen that there are similarities between the two modules in one main strategy and a few variations. In tackling the assignments for both modules, participants searched for points. Besides that, the employment of strategies of just imagining and talking from the heart suggests that the participants used their own experience and relied on their existing level of proficiency to tackle the easier parts of the assessments. Nonetheless, these strategies were utilized only when tackling the simpler assignments where the topics were general for example talking about a friend or writing about their reason for choosing to study at an institution. Another strategy that is found in both modules is rephrasing. It was done for two different reasons. Firstly it was to avoid plagiarism as mentioned by Fairus (interview), and secondly was to ensure that the words used are familiar and easier for them too (Imran, op_top).

The third finding is the participants in this study are technology savvy although they are not digital-natives. Most of them utilized the advent of technology where information is just at a click of a button. They browsed the websites, downloaded related articles, and searched the databases to get relevant information for their assignments or oral presentations. The prevalent use of technology in searching for information was also following the advice of the lecturers (Dr. Kaseh, int; Dr. Farah, int). Besides using the internet to search for points for their assignments, they also made use of Google Translate, a feature on Google platform which as the name suggests - translates words, phrases, sentences or even the whole paper. Google Translate was used in many manners; to directly translate from mother-tongue (Fairus, int; Faizal, int; Basri, int) and to just check the meaning after work is done (FatinMalik, int). Being cautious about doing direct translation, Faizah actually checked her translated work:

> **After Google translate has translated for you, what did you do**
>
> *I must read again and I feel is this the word, is it suitable for the sentence, if not I change* (Faizah, int)

In summary, the question of how learners employed OCLLSs to tackle the assessments is answered through three important findings – the strategy chain/cluster, the variations in the strategy chain/cluster, and also the prevalent use of technology as a tool to assist them in completing the tasks.

5. Conclusion And Implications

The purpose to understand the connection between OCLLSs and in-class activity has been fulfilled by answering the three research questions that stem from the research objectives set earlier. The findings show that firstly, formative assessments mainly in a form of oral presentation (Oral Communication Module) and writing assignment (Writing Module) have led the participants in the study to employ OCLLSs. Furthermore, the nature of the assessments that required preparation and completion out of class has also opened up opportunities for the utilization of OCLLSs. Secondly, there is a strategy chain/cluster that the participants followed in completing and preparing for the assessments. Although they adhered to the strategy chain/cluster, there were variations to how each strategy was utilized. And lastly, some of the participants' OCLLSs were linked to the use of technology.

From the findings, it can be surmised that assessments can help promote the use of OCLLSs. Although the participants might have just used OCLLSs to complete the tasks given in this semester, they have actually taken steps towards empowering themselves with strategies that can be utilized throughout their learning process. The lecturers in the study,

like in the previous studies, have played a role in advising students; in the case of this study, they gave advice on the steps to be taken in tackling the assignments. This might have been done to compensate for the low number of hours that the participants spent in formal English language classes. Further, their management of the assignments had also made a positive reflection on the number and variety of OCLLSs used by the participants. Linking the notion of integrating out-of-class learning and in-class activities as promoted by many like Mukundan et al. (2009), Eksi and Aydan (2013) and Bunts-Anderson (2004); well-planned assessments allow for opportunities for learners to utilize strategies, especially OCLLSs that lead them to use and practise the English language outside of the classroom walls. This then promotes success in language learning.

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Appendix 1 – Network view (Output from Atlas ti)