

THE WRITING PROCESS OF EFL UNIVERSITY STUDENTS:
INSIGHTS FOR TEACHERS AND RESEARCHERS

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ملخص

إن تدريس القدرات الإنشائية يعتمد في الأساس على فهم طلبتنا للتحديات التي تنجم عن الفعل الإنشائي والمشكلات التي تحول دون تحقيق ذلك. ولهذا الغرض يقوم بحثنا بالكشف عن الميكانيزمات التي تشكل أي فعل إنشائي يقوم به طالب في اللغة الأجنبية.

تبين النتائج المتحصل عليها أن الأخطاء الإنشائية لا تعود فقط إلى عجز لغوي، بل إلى عجز الطالب عن استعمال استراتيجيات الكتابة أيضا.

Introduction

To teach writing effectively in a second or foreign language teachers need awareness and understanding of the processes learners are involved in when completing a writing task. Thus, it is important to shed light on the strategies they use, i.e. behaviours, tactics or techniques they employ to carry out the task and overcome their difficulties when writing and discover the source./ sources of their difficulties.

In effect, many research works have established a correlation between achievement in writing and the strategies used. Jones' results (1982), for example, showed that writing strategies affected writer's rhetorical structures and that lack of competence in composing rather than lack in L2 linguistic competence created difficulty in L2 writing. Likewise, Jacobs (1982) and Zamel (1982) found that competence in the composing process was more important than linguistic competence i.e. the ability to write proficiently in English. Many other studies which investigated the effect of the instruction of learning strategies on writing achievement found that equipping learners with appropriate writing strategies led to the improvement of their writing (Kasper 1997, Juan and Silveira 1998, Nasr and Samadi 1995).

Then it seems necessary to uncover the processes our students undertake to complete a writing task in order to understand the challenges they face when writing and be able to help them. For this purpose a research work exploring the strategies used by EFL students to write an essay in English, was undertaken at the University of Tlemcen. Two main questions were investigated:

1. What are the writing strategies used by EFL Students to write a narrative essay in English?
2. Is there a correlation between student strategy use and achievement in writing?

Description of the Study

Subjects

The subjects of this study are university students enrolled during the academic year (1999-2000) in the English degree course offered by the Foreign Language Department of the Faculty of Arts, Human and Social Sciences at Abou Bakr Belkaid University of Tlemcen. This research was a case study involving four students randomly selected from each level of instruction (1st, 2nd, 3rd and 4th year). Sixteen students in all participated in this study.

Instruments

Three instruments were used: a production task, the think-aloud procedure and an interview.

The production task consisted in writing a narrative essay in English not exceeding 150 words within a period of time of 30 minutes (see appendix). The aim behind using the essay writing task was to elicit students' use of writing strategies. Then, thanks to the second instrument, the think-aloud technique, (i.e. subjects complete a task or solve a problem while speaking about their thought processes at the same time), these strategies were detected and recorded. In effect, the participants were required to verbalise all their thoughts while writing their essays. This verbal report was recorded on a tape, then transcribed and represents the data used by the researcher to gain insights into the learner's thoughts and writing strategies used. After treatment of the think-aloud data, another data collection tool, the interview, was used to investigate the perceptions of subject students about their writing behaviour and processes because the perceptions of participants however subjective, are a crucial means to understand their writing behaviour. Then, a semi-structured interview involving the same participants was used to ask about the writing strategies used and how they were used.

The Results

The present study instruments revealed that when writing the narrative essay, the subjects used a set of strategies to solve their

composing and linguistic problems. These strategies were recorded and grouped under three categories: metacognitive, cognitive and social/ affective strategies according to the classification scheme proposed by O'Malley and Chamot (1990).

a. Metacognitive strategies: they involve thinking about the writing task, planning how to deal with it within the time allowed, monitoring the language produced, and evaluating how well one has realised the writing task. The recorded strategies that fall under this category are as follows:

1. *Topic reading:* The student reads the topic either once or many times to understand the subject and to preview the organisation of his written work. (This seems to correspond to O'Malley and Chamot's, 1990, "advance organization").
2. *Finding key words:* the learner either underlines or writes down on his draft the key words of the topic to determine the most important things he should speak about in the essay. (This strategy is referred to by O'Malley and Chamot, 1990, as «problem identification » through key word finding).
3. *Brainstorming/Generation of ideas:* the learner starts saying or writing any words/ideas that seem to be in connection with the topic without any organisation.
4. *Planning:* the learner organises in advance how to deal with the topic. He generates a plan for the completion of the task outlining paragraphs (introduction, development, conclusion), and thinking about the sequence of ideas to be used in his writing (a strategy recorded by O'Malley and Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1985 and Graham, 1997).
5. *Oral construction* of the text: the learner translates his thought into speech in order to preview the necessary vocabulary to write his essay. Therefore he starts speaking to himself and constructs parts of his text orally before he writes them.
6. *Topic consultation:* while writing the learner reads the topic again either to check what he has written and see whether it corresponds to what is asked from him, or to continue writing within the boundaries drawn by the topic.

7. **Revision:** During this phase the learner revises what he has written in order to correct and improve the overall text taking into consideration both form and content. This revision occurred at different times with different subjects: on the draft, while copying down/ transferring from the draft to the exam paper, and on the exam paper. (This seems to correspond to O'Malley and Chamot's, 1990, «self evaluation»).

8. **Self-monitoring:** checking, verifying, or correcting one's comprehension or performance while writing (these strategies have been identified by O'Malley and Chamot, 1990; and Graham, 1997). Four types of self-monitoring were recorded.

Comprehension monitoring: checking, verifying, or correcting one's understanding of a word or a sentence.

Production monitoring: checking, verifying, or correcting one's language production.

Auditory monitoring: using one's ear for the language (trying to hear how a word sounds) to make decisions about spelling for example.

Visual monitoring: using one's eye for the language to make decisions about how a word should be written. For example, the learner writes «receive» and «recieve» to decide which spelling is correct.

9- **Time-saving strategies:** these are strategies used by students to save them time and permit the completion of the writing assignment in the allowed period of time. These strategies are metacognitive because they are part of planning as they involve taking decision to write a draft, for example, or not before the actual writing task begins. This type of strategies is referred to by Oxford (1985) and Graham (1997) as «scheduling» or «organization» strategies. Within this class one strategy was recorded:

No draft: in order to save time the learner decides not to use a draft and to write directly on the exam paper.

It is worth noting that *topic reading*, *finding key words*, *brainstorming*, *planning* and *oral construction of the text* can also be described as pre-writing strategies.

b. Cognitive Strategies: they involve applying techniques/ strategies to accomplish the writing task (that is use strategies that help in the production of ideas and language).

1- Writing in two languages: this is a strategy used by learners to overcome the obstacle of an unknown piece of language. When the student cannot write an idea in English, for example, he switches to Arabic or French writes the idea then continues in English. Later on, he goes back to this part of the sentence and tries to translate it or modify it.

2- Generating sentences in Arabic/ French while writing in English: some students used Arabic or French to generate ideas, then translation was done into English to construct the sentence/ sentences.

3- Re-reading: repeating a chunk of language i.e. a word, a phrase, or a paragraph while writing. This is done to continue writing following the same flow of ideas, but it happens that the writer corrects what was written while re-reading. (O'Malley and Chamot, 1990, refer to this strategy as «repetition»).

4- Translation: rendering ideas from one language to another in a relatively verbatim manner (O'Malley and Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1985; and Graham, 1997). Two types of translation were recorded:

Direct translation: when the writer translates from one language to the language used in writing such as translating from French to English:

e.g. ça sort de l'ordinaire _____ it exits from the ordinary.

Indirect translation: the writer translates from one language to a median language, then to the language used in writing. When the learner cannot find his word/ words through a direct translation, he uses a median language to facilitate translation into the language used in writing such as translating from Arabic to French to reach English:

e.g. البستان _____ le jardin _____ the garden

5- Transfer: while translation is premeditated transfer is not. It happens when the learner uses previously acquired linguistic knowledge to facilitate writing. The student may transfer vocabulary, a grammar rule or a spelling rule (O'Malley and Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1985; and Graham, 1997).

e.g. A bomb exploded: transfer of the verb «exploser» from French to English and addition of an English past inflection.

6- Language switch: the learner uses an Arabic or a French term while writing in English without translating (Tarone, 1977).

e.g. efficace ___ for ___ efficient in the sentence: He proved to be very efficace

7- Approximation: use of a single vocabulary item, or structure which the learner knows is not correct, but which shares enough semantic features in common with the desired item (Tarone, 1977).

e.g. pipe ___ for ___ water-pipe the garden ___ for ___ the yard

8- Circumlocution: the learner describes the characteristics or elements of the objects or action instead of using the appropriate item or structure (Tarone, 1977).

e.g. I want my house to be in a place where everything is available.

In this example, the learner meant 'the market', but couldn't find the word. Then he used a whole phrase describing the market.

c. Social/ Affective strategies: they involve interacting with another person or using affective control to assist completion of the writing task. In fact when writing their essays, students were isolated in a room where no interaction with other persons was possible. This is why we were not able to report any social strategy, only affective strategies were recorded and we shall use «affective strategies» thereafter.

1- Avoidance: Avoiding a task or experience that makes one feel anxious or discouraged (Graham, 1997). Two types of avoidance were detected.

Word/phrase avoidance: the learner simply tries not to write unknown or uncertain words, structures, forms or items.

Sentence abandonment: the learner starts writing a sentence but is unable to continue. Then, he stops in the middle and abandons the sentence and sometimes the whole idea after some unsuccessful trials.

2- Risk taking: this strategy is the reverse of the preceding one. When the learner wants to express a word or sentence and is uncertain about the vocabulary or the structure, he nevertheless uses it (Graham, 1997).

3- Making false starts: when the learner doesn't know how to start writing, to break his phobia of writing, he starts writing anything and crosses it out, then writes something else. If still invalid, he crosses it out until he finds the right words.

The following table provides the frequency of students who used each of the recorded strategies when writing the narrative essay in English.

STRATEGIES		N.E. ENGLISH A.F. R.F.	
META-COGNITIVE	Topic reading	10 62.50 %	
	Key words	01 06.25 %	
	Brainstorming	04 18.75 %	
	Planning	01 06.25 %	
	Oral construction	01 06.25 %	
	Topic consultation	01 06.25 %	
	Revision	on draft	04 25.00 %
		while transferring	13 81.25 %
		on exam paper	03 18.75 %
	Time-saving	No draft	01 06.25 %
	Self-monitoring	Comprehension	04 25.00 %
		Production	03 18.75 %
		Auditory	03 18.75 %
Visual		03 18.75 %	
Total		52 19.11 %	
COGNITIVE	Writing 2 languages	01 06.25 %	
	Approximation	01 06.25 %	
	Circumlocution	03 18.75 %	
	Language switch	03 18.75 %	

	Translation	09 56.25 %
	Transfer	04 25.00 %
	Generating sentences in Arabic/French	02 12.50 %
	Re-reading	09 56.25 %
Total		31 24.21%
AFFECTIVE	False starts	04 25.00 %
	Avoidance	05 31.25 %
	Risk taking	02 12.50 %
Total		11 22.91 %
Total of all the strategies used		93 20.75%

Table 1: Frequency of students using the recorded strategies

As displayed in table 1, students used few writing strategies, whether metacognitive, cognitive, or affective. In the category of metacognitive strategies only two strategies were used by most students: *topic reading and revision*. However, a qualitative consideration of these two major strategies illustrates the importance of the manner in which students use strategies. Regarding *topic reading*, students divided into those who read the topic only fleetingly and started immediately writing, those who translated the topic to better understand it, and those who read the topic many times and concentrated on it to understand it. It should be noted that the first group of students did not take time to examine the topic and the main points to be considered in their narration prior to embarking in the writing task. Then, the ineffective use of the strategy *topic reading* led them to find the topic difficult and use some other strategies such as *treat the topic superficially* or *substitute the topic* to overcome this difficulty. However, these strategies were not most appropriate. As a result, these students failed in answering the essay question.

The second major metacognitive strategy, *revision*, was mainly used when students copied their texts from the draft to the exam paper. However, this type of *revision* was not very effective as the writer had to pay attention not only to text revision, but to writing mechanics as well (e.g. hand writing, punctuation and capitalisation). This is why the analysis of some students' products revealed the existence of some mistakes on the exam paper which did not appear on the draft. For example a student wrote in the draft:

My grand father take his gun and go to the mountain ... He made artisanal bomb ...

Then, he revised his text while transferring from the draft to the exam paper and corrected the tense used in the exam paper, yet he did it only for the first verb. In addition, he made two spelling mistakes:

*My **grand fathe** took his gun and go to the mountain ... He **mad** artisanal bomb ...*

Another example of ineffective *revision* is found in another student's writing. The student wrote in the draft:

*..... he make all his efforts and try to put the bomb in the **caff**e. When he arrived and before putting it it exploded ...*

Then, she revised while transferring from the draft to the exam paper and wrote:

*... he make all his efforts and try to **put the bomb in the **caff**e** when he arrived to the **caff**e and before **putting the bomb** it exploded ...*

The above repetitions could have been avoided if effective *revision on exam paper* was done.

These examples show that revision while transferring the text from the draft to the exam paper cannot be reliable and definitive because the writer is pre-occupied by other writing matters such as mechanics, which prevent him from adequate revision of the text.

Moreover, some students (namely those of the 1st and 2nd year) seemed to restrict *revision* to surface errors such as spelling, whereas sentences where the meaning was unclear due to inappropriate syntax or vocabulary choice were not revised by students. In fact, we noted that the effectiveness of this strategy was related to students'

language proficiency. Indeed, 3rd and 4th year students revised more effectively their English essays than 1st and 2nd year students. In effect, when students' ability in one language was low, their *revision* did not result in any correction or text improvement as highlighted by some researchers (Graham 1997, Faigley and Witte 1981, McDonough 1995) who found that even if they revised their essays, poor writers in a language did not enhance their texts. Likewise the use of other strategies was more effective in the hands of language proficient learners than in the hands of less proficient ones. *Self-monitoring* in English writing, for example, was less effectively used by 1st and 2nd year students than by 3rd and 4th year students as they had an incomplete linguistic knowledge of English and used inappropriate rules of grammar or spelling. The ineffective use of these strategies led to poor expression and affected students' writing performance.

The interview reports also confirm the misuse of *revision* as only one student reported in the interview that he usually paid attention to both form and content. The remaining students explained that *revision* of form should be given priority over content because teachers pay more attention to form and penalise more grammar and spelling mistakes. In addition, students claimed that *revision* was systematic in their writing and some of them were surprised to discover that they did not revise their essays (when listening to the recordings) relating this to lack of attention. A few other students who revised their essays, but did not make any change or made very few changes, explained that they did not find any errors in these essays (actually their texts were full of mistakes). This shows that poor writers in one language cannot improve their texts even if they revise them many times as explained above. These reports indicate that these students used a successful strategy (*revision*) but with little result since lack of language proficiency or lack of consideration of overall content led students to inadequate *revision* and resulted in poor expression. Other metacognitive strategies were also misused by students. A student, for example, extracted the *key words* from the topic but did not construct his essay around all these key words. He concentrated on the first one and forgot about the others, thus failing to answer the essay question. Similarly, another student drew a plan but did not follow

it, then she found herself going astray in the middle of the essay. This kind of behaviour suggests that these students had accumulated a discrete set of strategies concerned with essay writing almost completely divorced from their actual application. This was reflected in their essays as some of them lacked organisation, relevance of content, or coherence. Moreover, students were found to employ a set of useful strategies. However, they failed in their writing task.

Regarding cognitive strategies, except for two major strategies (*translation and re-reading*), few students used the remaining strategies. In our analysis we also noted the misuse of *translation*. We noticed that *translation* was used to overcome language difficulties namely the lexical ones. In effect, 1st, 2nd, and some 3rd year students used it frequently to solve their writing problems when not finding the appropriate word or expression. They, therefore, translated from Arabic and sometimes from French to write in English. But as writers acquire more English such strategy use lessens as noted with 4th year students. However, the results of the present qualitative analysis revealed that *translation* could be a double edged weapon, either a facilitating or a debilitating strategy depending on its use. When this strategy was used moderately, it facilitated students' writing by giving them the opportunity to overcome the language obstacle. However, when overused it was time consuming, it hindered writing and it had a negative effect on the overall content of the essay. The reason was that when the student focused on translating all his sentences while writing, he could not keep in mind the essay question and went astray. Friedlander (1990 : 110) explains the dangers of overusing *translation* as follows:

If ESL writers retrieve information about a writing topic from memory in their first language then have to translate into English before writing anything down, this act of translation can lead to an overload of their short-term memory and a diminishment in the quality of the content of their writing.

An example taken from a student's verbal protocol illustrating overuse of *translation* is provided below (the words underlined indicate when the writer was speaking and writing or self-dictating):

And they ...eh...eh... ils ont fait des pieds et des mains ... they made ... hands and feet to they made hands and feet to ...quitter

to leave away the French army and my father, my father said that my his father was a specialist in, was a specialist in ... faire des commissions... in sending and writing commissions but he was very young he was also...so we put since he was very young he was alsocomment dirai-je?eh.....ils lui ont confié...il lui ont confié des missions de..... he was also specialised to do all the all the comment dirai je ..il était spécialisé , on lui a confié de faire tous les achats to do all the shopping yes shopping.

The student's sentences which resulted from this exercise of translating and writing are as follows:

They made hands and feet to leave away the French army, and father said his father was a specialist in sending and writing commissions but since he was very young he was also specialised to do all the shopping...

To summarise, the above examples of inappropriate strategy use illustrate the way in which students used successful writing strategies ineffectively, thus with little result. This was reflected in their compositions as lack of use of pre-writing strategies led to lack of organisation of essays and affected relevance of content. On the other hand, misuse of cognitive strategies such as *translation* led to unstylish and fragmentary compositions. These results seem to confirm the hypothesis that there is a correlation between strategy use and achievement in writing.

CONCLUSION

This study reveals a serious deficiency in students' strategic competence that affects their performance in writing. Therefore, we need to re-assess the way in which writing is taught to students. It is not enough to present them with vocabulary, grammatical structures and tasks to do. More work needs to be done in teaching learners *how* to integrate the skills we expect of them and to raise their awareness of effective writing strategies. Indeed, developing a number of thinking processes and strategies which can be used to solve problems should be given due attention in teaching. Then it seems important to include the teaching of effective strategies in writing instruction, because though teachers may feel the need to establish a firm grammatical base, it is not least important to train students to use some successful writing strategies such as *topic reading, brainstorming, planning* and *revising*.

Appendix

The proposed topic was:

Your grand father/ grand mother was a moudjahid/ moudjahida who took part in the Algerian War of Independence. Narrate one of his/ her exploits during the war.

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