Strategy Use and Writing Success

Fahimeh Marefat

Allameh Tabatabaii University

Abstract

With the advent of process-oriented research, the strategy studies have found their place in L2 composition pedagogy. One such issue is investigation into the impact of writing strategy use on increasing the quality of writing product. The present study investigates the potential relationship between writers' proficiency level and strategy use, the nature of such strategies, if any, and whether any of them predicts good writing.

The participants, 23 Iranian EFL graduates and undergraduates taking their essay writing course, were requested to write an essay of controlled length on a given topic. Based on their scores on a standardized test of language proficiency, the students were assigned to the elementary, intermediate, and advanced levels. Next, they attended an interview with the researcher, reading their essays and reporting what processes they underwent and what strategies they used as they produced the text. The students were provided with a strategies checklist to identify theirs, or to add new ones, if any. The think-aloud protocols were tape-recorded. Data analysis aimed to identify writing strategies as implemented by each student at the specified level. Surprisingly, lack of similarity in writing behavior among members of supposedly homogeneous and across different groups was observed. Moreover, increasing free voluntary reading and writing, decreasing writing apprehension,

and of course practice were characterized as predictors of writing success.

1. Introduction

Following the observation made by Jones (1983: 135) that "good ESL writers did more of everything: more planning, rehearsing, rescanning, revising, and editing" and that by Khalideh (2000) that successful learners use a variety of learning strategies, the researcher initiated the present research. Indeed, Armengol-Castells (2001) asserts that students benefit from an awareness of the processes and strategies involved in writing, or from describing their own observations. If the strategies employed by successful learners could be identified, the chances are that the teacher can assist the writing process by promoting awareness and encouraging the use of such strategies in less successful learners. It is the purpose of this paper to delve into the nature of the strategies employed by learner writers across different proficiency levels, and whether any predictions can be made regarding good writing.

2: Background:

2.1.1. What is a strategy?

Learning strategies, according to Oxford *et al* (1989: 291), are "steps taken or operations used by learners to aid acquisition, storage, and retrieval of information." Good language learners use a variety of learning strategies..Use of appropriate learning

strategies enables students to take responsibility for their learning by enhancing learner autonomy, independence, and self- direction.

2.1.2. Why try it?

Interestingly, it is Corder's (1967, cited in Zamel, 1983) conviction that we will never be able to improve our ability to help our students unless we learn more about how and what they learn. Researchers have highlighted familiarity with learning processes (Baker & Boonki 2004, Takeuchi 2003). Studies that shed light on strategies employed by learners would certainly, to quote Takeuchi (2003: 85), " facilitate our understanding of the learning process". This is no less true for the teaching writing. In order to describe writing processes and to obtain information on individual variation in the use of strategies, there seems to be obvious need to gain insight into the learners' thoughts, i.e., their cognition and metacognition.

2.2.1. What does research say?

McDonough and McDonough (2001) conducted a case study, with a particular emphasis on the awareness processes rather than the details of the language being used, reporting on the strategies used by a writer learning Greek. To them, writing is a three-move process: prewriting, text production, and closing. Armengol's (2001) work aimed at comparing the text-generating strategies of three multilinguals across different languages in a protocol-based study. Interestingly, the subjects

in his study were consistent in using strategies across the languages. Yet, each subject used his own individual approach. To transcribe the protocols, Armongol used Raimes' (1987) coding categories, making only trivial changes. The list of categories includes assessing comments, counting, editing, planning structure or strategy, questioning, reading a sentence wholly or in part, repeating a word, rehearsing, reading the assigned topic, silence, scanning, speaking whilst writing, and researcher's intervention. Quantitatively, similarities were observed in approaches to text generation. Quality-wise, however, "the three individuals with different attitudes and needs in relation to writing" manifested their own individual uniqueness (Armengol-Castells, 2001: 100).

Lee and Krashen (2002) suggested that predictors of success in writing in English as a foreign language were reading, revision behavior, apprehension, and writing practice. Their findings may be summarized as:

      a. Free voluntary reading improves writing.

      b. Excessively focusing on grammar and word choice upon revision prevents students from attending matters of content and organization. They accordingly miss the opportunity for new learning and new insights.

c. Writing apprehension and writing success negatively correlate.

d. The amount of writing done remains a strong predictor of grades.

2.2.2. Good language learners:

Reviewing some inventories of good language learner strategies proposed earlier, Huang and Naerssen (1987, cited in Rubin 1975) suggest that " one of the characteristics of a good language learner is a willingness to take risks" (p. 297). In an attempt to characterize successful Chinese EFL learners, the researchers found that " functional practice" was the strategy that distinguished successful from less successful ones.

In a qualitative study, Takeuchi (2003) analyzed the 67 books on " how I have learned a foreign language". He listed the strategies preferred by good language learners. Among the most frequently cited strategies was immersion. " Strong commitment to learning and careful planning" are two other factors in the list. Based upon this piece of research " extensive reading" provides the ideas for writing. The very act of writing, drafting, and modeling, as Takeuchi (2003) pointed out, accumulated to characterize good writing. All these good language learners have also attached great significance to " conscious knowledge of grammar" (p.389). All in all, the stage of learning affected the strategy use; suggesting, this variable opts for still more consideration and research. From a cultural perspective, the research revealed that Asian foreign language learners and North American second language learners

employ different strategies. Congruently, Woodrow (2005) concluded that from the point of view of Asians and Westerners success and failure have different origins, "with Asians attributing both success and failure to effort while Westerners tend to attribute success and failure to ability" (p. 96).

That learners' familiarity with and awareness of the strategies employed by successful writers is worth the attempt is also reflected by Baker and Boonki (2004). Their study was an attempt to qualitatively and quantitatively investigate the learning strategies in academic writing context. They used questionnaires, learning logs and interviews to collect data from 40 students in the higher group and 67 in the lower group. This study identified the successful and less successful readers and writers based upon their performance in reading and writing. The strategies categorized as negative as employed by those in the lower group were:

> I like to start writing immediately without a plan,
>
> I like to write a draft in Thai (learner's first language) and then translate it into English,
>
> when I have finished my work I don't look at it again, it is finished,
>
> I don't usually remember the feedback I get (Baker and Boonki, 2004: 309).

Most frequently-used strategies in this project were: using a dictionary, having background knowledge, writing in a comfortable, quiet place. This study also revealed that writing in

English, making a plan, editing work, clarifying ideas and revising were the strategies exclusively employed by those in the higher group. In sum, frequency of English use and frequency of editing distinguished the two groups. Both groups, as one can see, emphasize the writing process. This study offers the idea that reading can serve as a leverage for writing as it " provides materials for which learners can generate ideas for writing" (Baker & Boonki, 2004: 320).

According to (Baker & Boonki, 2004), it would seem advantageous to make learners aware of the strategies used by successful writers and those that may obstruct good writing and to take account of this in strategy instruction.

In a research conducted by Bayliss and Raymond (2004), a lengthy review of previous studies is given. They point out that most studies have employed TOEFL as a proficiency test. To these authors, these studies are not highly reliable in that TOEFL is not " a communicatively-based test" (Bayliss & Raymond 2004: 31). They further claim that GPA, too, "hides a multitude of inequalities."

2.3.1. Protocol analysis, how does it work?

To capture learners' cognitive and metacognitive strategies, different report data like interviews, questionnaires and mentalistic data-collecting techniques such as immediate retrospection reports and think-aloud protocols are often employed. Protocols are produced by asking writers to compose

aloud onto tape recorders, verbalizing their thoughts as they write. Khalideh (2000) introduced the following techniques for protocol analysis:

- Self-reports: Learners describe their learning behaviors in general statements: "I try to be an attentive listener," or "I focus on and locate key words."

- Self-observations: Learners are asked to examine their specific language behavior introspectively or retrospectively: "I skim through the text, and I try to relate new information to old."

- Self-revelations: Learners think aloud or write down all mental processes while performing a task.

2.3.2. What are the drawbacks?

It is certainly clear that composing aloud is a difficult, artificial, and at times distracting procedure (Raimes 1987). Verbal protocols require writers to do two things at once: they must write and try to verbalize what they are thinking (Faigley *et al* 1981). In fact, a number of processes are at work: thinking about the process, planning for and monitoring it, and self-evaluating that takes place once this process comes to an end (O'Malley *et al* 1985). The application of such mentalistic data- collecting techniques has raised even more concerns (Alderson 1984). The subjects might fail to report all strategies they have used; or they may even report using strategies they never employed. Similarly, Nassaji (2003) rightly puts that there might be " a discrepancy between the

strategies students use and the ones they report"(p. 666). The question that comes to mind at this point is how trustworthy these reports are. In other words, are these genuine descriptions of the actual processes learners employ? Moreover, learners might attempt to provide information that would satisfy the researcher.

However, protocol analysis still seems to be a valuable research method for revealing writers' thoughts. Protocol analysis is, to use Arndt's words (1987), "too good a tool not to be used." Indeed one of the strong points about think-aloud is that it has " no impact on controlled written production of the participants," as suggested by Leow and Morgan_Short (2004: 37). Thus, although verbal report data emerge as a useful research tool, their application seems to require certain cautions. To give consistent and accurate picture of the participants' cognitive processes, reporting should come immediately after the completion of the task. What's more, the subjects should not be informed of the subsequent retrospective interview before the completion of the task. This foreknowledge, it is deemed, might affect their performance. Woodrow (2005: 97) proposes that to come up with more meaningful, dependable findings more " sample-specific" studies need to be conducted in the form of "action researches".

3. This study:

3.1. Research questions:

Highly inspired by Lee and Krashen's (2002) research, the attractive prospects of establishing relationship between strategy

use and writing success was the driving force for the present piece of research. Previous studies have employed different data collection techniques like " observation of classrooms behaviors, questionnaires, interview, … and learner reports in diary form" (Huang and Naerssen, 1987: 288). Employing triangulation and using interviews and think-aloud data collection techniques, this study attempted to grapple with the problems associated with think-aloud procedure. Specifically, the current study aims at answering the following questions:

1. Do writers at different proficiency levels use certain types of writing strategies? If yes, what are they?

2. What is the nature of strategies used by students?

3. Are any of the strategies predictors of good writing?

3.2. Method

3.2.1. Participants

23 graduate and undergraduate EFL male and female students participated in the study. They were doing their writing course with the researcher in the first academic year of 1382-3.

3.2.2. Procedure

Based upon their score on a test of language proficiency, the CELT Test, the participants were divided into low and high groups. Descriptive statistics for the scores is presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics for the CELT Test

Group	Female	Male	N	Mean	Minimum	Maximum
High	5	9	14	82	78	100
Low	4	5	9	41	23	70

In order not to make content familiarity still another variable involved, a non-technical topic was assigned. Thus, they were asked to write an essay of no less than 250 words on "Old People." The following week they were invited to voice what strategies they used. Giving precise and specific instruction is deemed so necessary. Leow and Morgan-Short (2004) highlight the significance of clear instruction.

> It is vital that researchers give participants clear instruction that do not lead them to provide speculation on their metalinguistic reasoning. Warm-up period is recommended to accustom participants to thinking aloud while developing the tasks (p. 37).

Comparing introspection and retrospection, the former may be incomplete due to the additional cognitive processing demanded. Retrospection, however, is an effective way to get students to take a second look at their work. As Dewey said, "We don't learn from experience; we learn from reflecting on experience". So, deciding whether to involve students in

introspection or retrospection in the present study, the latter was agreed upon due to its strong points introduced formerly. To that end, the participants were asked to retrospectively describe the processes they went through, as they were being taped. They were provided with their essays in case they needed referencing. Since the task was new to them, the researcher first introduced them to the idea of thinking aloud by providing the rationale for using it. The study and its purposes were explained: "I'm working on a project to learn as much as I can about how EFL students write in English. The study is an attempt to help less skilled students." The researcher prepared all students by playing them her own tapes to demonstrate what retrospection involves. Next, they would demonstrate their own way, with the researcher intervening at times. They were also asked to offer some tips they thought helpful to writers. It's worth mentioning that some students verbalized in Persian, at times shifting to English. This was irrespective of their level of proficiency.

4. Data analysis

In an attempt to give sense and meaning to the bulk of data, the researcher tried to highlight the recurring themes with representative quotes from students.

All in all, data revealed students used numerous and diverse strategies. Although I had anticipated data would reflect the

stages of pre-writing, writing, and revising, such linear stages were nonexistent. In other words, the students' writing behaviors were not entirely amenable to this type of breakdown. The thinking, brainstorming, and outlining that is believed to precede actual composing took place even after the writing began, suggesting that planning is not a unitary stage, but an ongoing process that writers use over and over again during composing:

> I always work with a 5-paragraph map, wrapping it up is the easiest. I try to find thesis sentence and then subtitles. Then I outline for subtopics. Lastly, I go for the motivator.

A pair of students at higher level did *not* complete their drafts in a single session. They felt that it helped to leave a piece of writing and come back to it later. This is reminiscent of what the participants in Takeuchi's (2003) study reported. Let's call such students "multi-drafters", or "over- revisers".

> Some times I compare my first and last draft. Big change, I see. I may be write 5 times for a complete essay.

Beautifully, a student from the high group comments how her piece gradually takes shape.

I evolve a paper out of the mist. It comes in pieces. And so it isn't a linear thing starting at the beginning and going to the end, but rather clusters.

Or the following learner states:

My first draft is an enormous, lengthy, amorphous mass... I found myself crossing out... I do a tremendous amount of pruning.

Adopting a linear approach, the student below, coming from the low group, writes:

> I never work ahead of myself. I start with the first sentence - usually I start with the title; I write that on one page, then I turn the page and write the first sentence. Then I write the second sentence. It's very linear.

Least skilled writers were determined not to commit errors.

> I read after each sentence and correct my grammar; I know my grammar is not good.

I wish like free writing we had no grammar.

The student above is a reviser, as she read over what she had already produced. She was concerned about grammar, simply proofreading and making surface-level changes. Such students feel insecure and even embarrassed about their surface-level mistakes. That is indeed their most impeding problem and the one that they handle with greatest care and tact. A student of a higher level of language proficiency, however, may find it easier to perform the task of writing since he/she considers it mentally less demanding.

One reason for this startling difference might be that unskilled writers see errors so stigmatizing that they write with extreme caution. For instance, a student writes:

> After every word, or words, I stop, see it has grammar.

In general, writers developed their own individual strategies for getting into the topic that may not necessarily involve prewriting.

The following student has no need for planning or outlining; he is innately a "planner," to borrow the word from (Arndt 1987).

> First I think about the title. The words I might use I check in *Activator*, you know. For instance, for "Old People" I checked پیرشدن/ پا به سن گذ اشتن I need no outline. My outline is in my head.

Interestingly, one student began composing only after he had finished what he thought would make a good conclusion, not following that sequential string of introduction, body, and conclusion.

> I began composing only after I have what I thought would make a good conclusion.

For the "lister" (Ardnt 1987) student below, writing was more a process of listing ideas, which resulted in an incoherent rambling text. She is at the low level.

> I am writing brainstorming, I like. I jot down ideas, thinks, many, many. I order them. I cannot write paragraph. I have a few time.

The proficient student below found writing painless, spontaneous, and seemingly without effort; she produced fluent and coherent text in huge quantities.

I just love writing. I pick up my pen, boy I never stop, ideas just rush in. I need no planning; I might add some support later at some points, as you like them, I know.

Or another student comments:

> While I talk, drive, cook and exercise I am thinking, planning, writing. I think about the

introduction, what examples to use, how to develop the main idea, and what kind of conclusion to use. I write, revise, agonize, despair, give up, only to start all over again, and all of this before I ever begin to put words on paper... Writing is not a process of discovery for me... The writing process takes place in my mind. Once that process is complete the product emerges. Often I can write pages without pause and with very little, if any, revision or even minor changes.

Very often, over-planning and over-strict adherence to precise rules for writing was more of a hindrance than a help in the actual generation of the text. Preoccupied with what she thought she ought to be doing, she may be called a careful writer.

For the following student, the process of writing was particularly painful. As "a struggler," she was constantly wrestling with words, rules, grammar, and questions. Not surprisingly, though, this student comes from the low level:

I like writing. I write well in school. I write Persian compositions for classmates. But for you I can't. I

remember rules. They do not help me. I am slow. I

forget words.

Quite a few of the students reported discussing the topic with family members or friends to come up with content.

My roommates in the dorm wait for me to discuss with them the topics each week.

As for the revision, two of the advanced level students mentioned that:

My first draft is my last draft

Remember the learners in the LOW group in the study reported by Baker and Boonki (2004) showed little interest in planning?

On the contrary, another student describes his work like this:

No clear procedure. I just write down, maybe not coherent, no logical order, after writing a bulk of stuff, I'll order them. When I'm finished, I try to sort them, change them. Rules usually escape me. My best writings are written in different intervals. I keep changing; my final drat is completely different from the first one.

5. Discussion

What might be learned from all these qualitative data? The present study did not support Jones' view (1983: 135) that "Good ESL writers did more of everything: more planning, rehearsing, rescanning, revising, and editing." Its limited scope, however, allows only tentative suggestions and not generalizable conclusions. Different learners bring varying strategies to the task. Writers, whether proficient or less proficient, use a great diversity of strategies. However, lack of similarity in writing behavior among members of the same group was quite obvious. So the answer to the first question, whether writers at different proficiency levels use certain types

of writing strategies, is a big "No". As for the predictors of success, students reported three important notions, including free voluntary reading, which is in agreement with previous research. According to Lee and Krashen's (2002) research, there is evidence that free voluntary reading improves writing. A student mentions the very point likewise:

> I read a lot, in English, even in Farsi. I'm always at it. Friends call me a bookworm. I am, that brings success, believe me.

The students emphasized more voluntary writing, too. Better writers do more voluntary writing than poor writers. A student put:

> Never forget: practice makes perfect.

6. Implications

The findings of this study may benefit material developers as well as teachers. Instructional approaches that view writing as the sequential completion of separate tasks, beginning with exploring ideas and moving to outlining, topic sentence, thesis statement, etc. need a reorientation. I also learned in actual practice that there are various ways of learning and teaching writing, and that different ways may suit different people.

The researcher may offer the following suggestions. Students need to become more skilled in the articulation of the strategies, and in incorporating them into their writing goals and behaviors and in applying them appropriately to learning

activities. Students do need a good amount of directed help and specifics with clear guidelines and examples before they can get started on their own work. This need is also echoed by Nassaji (2003: 664) when he emphasizes "training learners and helping them use strategies" .So such protocols need to be well guided and structured. The earlier the teacher-student discussions begin, the better. These conclusions, however, are tentative. They await confirmation from more controlled studies.

References

Alderson, J. C. (1984). Reading in a foreign language: A reading problem or a learning problem? In J. C. Alderson & H. Urquhart (Eds.), *Reading in a Foreign Language.* (pp. 1-24). New York: Longman.

Armengol-Castells, L. (2001). Text-generating strategies of three multilingual writers: A protocol-based study. *Language Awareness* 10, 2&3: 91-106.

Arndt,V. (1987). Six writers in search of texts: A protocol-based study on L1 and L2 writing. *ELT Journal* 41, 4: 257-267.

Baker, W. & K. Boonki. (2004). Learning strategies in reading and writing: EAP contexts. *RELC* 35, 3: 299-328.

Bayliss, D. and P. M. Raynomd. (2004). The link between academic and L2 proficiency in the context of two

professional programs. *Canadian Modern Language Review* 61, 1: 29-51.

Cohen, A. (1986). Mentalistic measures in reading strategy research: Some recent findings. *English for Specific Purposes* 5: 131- 45.

Faigley, L., & S. Witte. (1981). Analyzing revision. *College Composition and Com-munication* 32: 400-14.

Huang, X.L. and Naerssen, M. (1987). Learning strategies for oral communication. *Applied Linguistics* 8, 3: 287-307.

Jones, S. (1983). Composing in a second language. *TESOL Quarterly* 17: 135-49.

Khaldieh, S. A. (2000). Learning strategies and writing process of proficient writers vs. less proficient learners of Arabic. *Foreign Language Annals* 33, 5: 522-34.

Lee, S.Y., & S. Krashen. (2002). Predictors of success in writing in English as a foreign language: Reading, revision behavior, apprehension, and writing. *College Student Journal:* December.

Leow, R.P. & K. Morgan-Short. (2004). To think aloud or not to think aloud: The issue of reactivity in SLA research methodology. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition* 26: 35-57.

McDonough, J., & S. McDonough. (2001). Composing in a foreign language: An insider-ousider perspectives. *Language Awareness* 10, 4: 233-48.

Nassaji, H. (2003). L2 vocabulary learning from context: Strategies, knowledge sources, and their relationship with success in L2 lexical inferencing. *TESOL Quarterly* 37, 4: 645-70.

O'Malley, J., A. Chamot, G. Stewner-Manzares, L. Kupper, & P. Russo. (1985). Learning strategies used by beginning and intermediate ESL students. *Language Learning* 35, 1: 21-46.

Oxford, L. M., & M. Nyikos. (1989). Learning strategies *Modern Language Journal* 73, 3: 291-300.

Raimes, A. (1987). Language proficiency, writing ability, and composing strategies: A study of ESL college student writers. *Language Learning* 37, 3: 439-68.

Takeuchi, O. (2003). What can we learn from good foreign language learners? A qualitative study in the Japanese Foreign Language context. *System* 31, 4: 385-92.

Woodrow, L. (2005). The challenge of measuring language learning strategies. *Foreign Language Annals* 38, 1: 90-9.

Zamel, V. (1983). The composing processes of advanced ESL students: Six case studies. *TESOL Quarterly* 17: 165-87.