

Writing Strategy Use: AFL Learners in Sri Lanka

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Abstract: Study on writing strategy used in Arabic as a foreign language is a new emerging concept. Few studies have contracted on essay written in Arabic as a final product and illustrated deficiencies that surfaced. This study investigates the writing strategies employed by 6 learners in Fathih Institute of Sri Lanka (FISL). A Qualitative research was conducted using the think aloud protocol; observation and retrospective interview to provide the facts. Results of a pilot study revealed that a proficient learner employ varieties of writing strategies better than an average learner and less proficient learners on their essay writing tasks. The findings also revealed that there is a lot to be done to improve the Arabic writing skills of Sri Lankan learners. The implications of the results are that, teachers need to rethink about the problems that average and less proficient students encounter and figure out ways to help them achieve proficiency. Also, there is the need to help these learners how to make their place and organize their opinions more reasonably in writing activities.

Keywords: Arabic, foreign language, learners, Sri Lankan, writing strategy

INTRODUCTION

Learning Language strategies, exacted as “specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective and more transferable to new situations” (Oxford, 1990). Many studies (Flower and Hayes, 1981; Bereiter and Scadamalia, 1987; Grabe and Kaplan, 1996; Rao, 2007) distinguished writing as essentially a cognitive process and expose that writers employed a variety of cognitive strategies such as planning, reviewing, monitoring and generating ideas as well as revising. This cognitive approach claimed that writing strategies were internal cognitive processes within the margins of the brain and their relationship with perspective was dichotomous. One of the main worries of L2 teachers and researchers has been Writing strategies of L2 learners. In the last few decades, a great contract of research has been carried out in this part in an effort to determine the dealings and behaviors of L2 learners engage in while generating written texts. Some of the earlier researches were cognitively-oriented (Bosher, 1998; Cuming, 1989; Cuming *et al.*, 1989; Krapels, 1990; Sasaki, 2002; Sasaki and Hirose, 1996) while some others focused more on the socio-cognitive points of L2 writing (Leki, 1995; Spack, 1997; Riazi, 1997; Yang *et al.*, 2004). With the topical rise of socio-cultural theory in SLA (Second Language Acquisition), efforts have been made to understand L2 writers’ uses

of diverse resources in writing, based on their cultural, historical and institutional backgrounds (Block, 2003; Prior, 2006; Lantolf and Thorne, 2006).

The learning occurrence of strategy use is essential to investigate as strategies are linked with successful learning (Grenfell and Macaro, 2007). However, Research of foreign language learning, purposely language learning strategy use, have mostly paid attention on learning English as a foreign or second language (Shmais, 2003; Peacock and Ho, 2003; Poole, 2005; Yongqi, 2005). Currently, there is a lack of research on strategy use in learning Arabic as a Foreign Language (AFL). This study of six AFL Sri Lankan Learners provides valuable findings and suggestions which add to the existing knowledge of the Arabic language teaching and learning field.

Theoretical framework: Language learning strategies are positioned by Ellis (1994) as having the “mediating role” between learner factors and learning products. Ellis (1994) describes strategy as “a mental or behavioral activity related to some specific stage in the overall process of language acquisition or language use”. He explains that differences of individual learner together with different social factors, influence learners’ strategy apply. For instance, individual learner factors such as Second Language (L2) learners’ motivation in learning the target language with social factors such as received teaching instructions received,

may have affect the learners' use of strategy. Ellis (1994) points out that learner' choices of strategies affect the degree of success in language learning in terms of the rate of acquisition and the level of reaching. For example, certain strategy used in a given language task may effect in higher L2 performance while certain strategy used may not be as proficient in the same type of language task. This study focuses on the last piece of Ellis (1994) framework in which learners' choice of language learning strategies in relation to their writing were investigated.

Taxonomy of strategies: Researchers in the second language acquisition field have attempted to identify learners' strategy use and categorized them into different types of strategies. For example, Oxford (1990) suggests six categories of strategies: cognitive, meta-cognitive, memory, compensation, affective and social strategies and explains how each category aids the development of communicative competence. Oxford (1990) explains that the six categories of strategies are grouped into two different types as direct and indirect. The Memory, cognitive and compensation strategies are direct strategies which are applied by learners for immediate response to language tasks. They are considered direct strategies because all three categories require "mental processing of the language". Each of the three types does the processing in different ways for different purposes. For example, Oxford (1990) defines memory strategies as having the function of helping learners group comprehensible input and retrieve information. Memory strategies such as using flash cards or grouping words of similar functions help learners remember newly learned vocabulary. Then, the cognitive strategies, clarified as "manipulation or transformation of the target language by the learner" (Oxford, 1990) have the function of helping learners to understand and produce L2. For example, learners use the cognitive strategy of skimming to establish the main idea in content. Lastly, the compensation strategies, intended as "to make up for an inadequate repertoire of grammar and especially of vocabulary" (Oxford, 1990) allowing learners to use evidences for guessing, leading to more comprehension.

Further, meta-cognitive, social and affective strategies are indirect strategies learners use to prepare for language tasks and help learners increase more control of their learning. Meta-cognitive strategies are those used to organize learning so that learners may easily direct the second language acquisition process. For example, learners set goals and classify the purpose of a language task. Then the affective strategies defined as strategies which assist learners to be more active in language learning, include strategies such as giving oneself a valuable reward for a good language performance and writing a diary to carry on track of one's personal experience in the language learning process. Social strategies are used to learn the target

language through communication with others. Together these strategies support the development of communicative competence. Among the many categorizations of strategies created by scholars, Oxford (1990) taxonomy of strategies is considered the most comprehensive (Ellis, 1994). Hence, Ellis (1994) language learning strategy framework and Oxford (1990) taxonomy of strategies were utilized to guide the study in investigating language learners' strategy use and its relation to their writing achievements.

Arabic as foreign language learning strategies:

Investigation on writing in Arabic as L2 is still in its starting point. Few studies have contracted with essays written in Arabic as a final work and described deficiencies that surfaced. For example, studies concerning cohesion and coherence (Shakir and Obeidat, 1992) in AFL texts show that incoherent texts suffer from lack of contextualization and inappropriate use or lack of cohesive devices. These studies dealt with descriptive writing tasks. Examination of the actual processes and strategies used in writing is still lacking, in part because the act of writing in the L2 is viewed as a means of practicing grammar (Leki, 1999). Salim (2000) investigated the learning strategies and writing processes of proficient and less-Proficient 43 American learners of Arabic as foreign language. The findings demonstrate that the less-proficient writers experienced a high level of concern and frustration, assumed an unconstructive attitude toward writing and did not prove mastery of the language structures of AFL. As a result, their writing samples reveal a low level of writing aptitude. Investigation into proficient learner, average learner and less proficient learners' strategies indicates that writing as processes in Arabic as L2 has not been given much attention. The focus of this study is therefore an attempt to explore various methods and strategies learners of Arabic use as they compose essays in a class.

Research questions:

- What strategies do students use in completing Arabic writing?
- How proficient, average and less proficient writers can be differentiated in terms of writing strategies?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research sites: This study involves second-year Arabic class students in Fathih Institute of Sri Lanka which is one of the non state's fastest-growing private school, with more than 45 students in diploma programs in 2013. Starting College of language at Fathih institute developed an elementary Arabic language course in response to the increasing demand by students for learning Arabic language skills. The demanded by students for learning Arabicis evident as the Arabic

Table 1: Sri Lankan AFL learners writing strategy use

Main strategy	Sub strategy	Proficient learner (2)	Average learner (2)	Less proficient learner (2)
Meta-cognitive	Planning	2	2	1
	Monitoring	2	1	1
	Evaluating	2	2	2
	Rewriting	2	2	2
	Keeping awareness	2	1	1
Cognitive	Brainstorming	2	2	2
	Repeating	2	2	2
	Revising	2	2	2
	Elaborating	2	1	2
	Clarifying	2	1	1
	Retrieval	2	2	1
	Rehearsing	2	2	1
	Summarizing	1	1	2
	Note-taking	2	2	2
	Mixing languages	-	2	2
	Looking for model	-	2	1
	Using L1	2	2	2
	Social strategy	Resourcing	2	2

language course expanded from diploma to advanced diploma in 2013/2014 academic year.

Participants: In order to eradicate the difference in the accessing writing strategies, this study intended to look for proficient learners, average learner and less proficient in Arabic writing. The participants (six students) involved in the study were second-year Arabic language students in their second semester of study which represented with backgrounds in the first year Arabic classrooms. The six participants includes two from commerce stream and others from Arts stream who are preparing their stage for sit the university entrance exam of Sri Lanka in 2014.

Data collection: Data for this study were collected between 15/08/2013 and 12/09/2013. Several data collection methods were used to investigate the strategy used. In particular, think aloud protocol used to elicit their thinking mind on their Arabic writing tasks and to recognize the strategies. Observation conducted to identify the infinite level of witting strategies used and retrospective were carried out after the observation to verify the strategies they implemented on their composition. The learners requested to choose and write one essay out of two given topics. The collected data transcribed and return to participants for verification. The verified data coded according to previous writing strategy coded list and submitted to three experts for validity check. The validated data confirm as 0.85 valuations through Kappa calculation procedure.

RESULTS

The think-aloud protocol data: The think-aloud protocol data uncovered how the students monitor and focus their attention on different strategies being adopted during their writing processes. The strategies employed by the students were from starting to read the

writing on time until completing their writings was counted. The 18 different sub-strategies that came out in the data were grouped into three main groups: meta-cognitive, cognitive and social strategies.

As shown in Table 1, the three groups of the learners focuses on three main strategies. The Proficient learners intended plan, monitoring, evaluating, rewriting and keeping awareness as well as brainstorming, under the meta-cognitive strategies rather than average learner and less proficient. They do not concentrate on monitoring and keep awareness strategies while less proficient learners do not concentrate on planning. This entails that the proficient learners did not need to do these and could progress towards the other strategies, while average learner and less proficient had to go back to reread the writing prompt and to do planning, monitoring and keep awareness on writing task. The repeating, revising, note-taking and using the L1 are under the cognitive strategies employed favorably by the three groups.

However, the proficient learner did not exploit the mixing language strategy and looking for model, while the average learners and less proficient learners did employ. This indicates that the average learner and less proficient learner need to pay more attention in applying the cognitive strategies. As stated by Flower and Hayes (1981) and Hayes (1996), going back to read what has been written is a conscious effort that writers make in order to make judgments of their own written texts.

Observation and interviews with learners: In the present study, the entire participants reported that the essay they had written was as good as they could generate in timed settings. They reflected that 40 min was enough to write an essay. They also found that the topic was practically easy because it was something close to their daily life. However, in their perspectives, there were major differences between their performance in writing task and their approach to other conditions:

- In the daily life, they have a longer time to think about the writing topic, gather ideas and formulate their own viewpoints before writing.
- Once on completion of their first draft of their essays, usually they have time to leave it for sometime before coming back to review it and make changes.
- On doing the think-aloud writing task, they thought a bit tired because they had to keep speaking out their own views. They thought that their approached to writing task is similar to the way they had participated, but under other situation. The explanations they gave with regard to what their normal writing processes were is very close to their real behavior on writing tasks. It also seems that the students could condense their writing processes into the time on hand for this writing task rather than change their behaviors.

Proficient learners: They developed a global plan for their writings. There seemed to following stages. First, after reading the essay writing topic they made the reaction it reminded in them. This reaction to the topic became the main point of their writing and was developed into the theme later. Next, analysis of the essay writing topic: Having read the essay writing topic at the beginning, they analyzed the demands of the topic. After the identifying the problem, they immediately proceeded to write down the points for the categories identified. Final organization of the essay: They organized their essays by attending to both the structure and presentation of content. The act of organizing appeared in effect to be a practice to validate the planned thinking, organization and content of their essays as well as the way that they would like to articulate their ideas more clearly.

Average and less proficient: Their planning stages could be divided into two; Reaction to the topic: After reading the essay writing topic, they started to generate the ideas, but did not seem to plan to make effort to organize these ideas. Brainstorming: They carried out generating ideas on the essay topic they had primarily identified. Their planning behavior did not come into view to go beyond. After each idea, they revisited the essay writing topic; however, this was only a strategy to generate ideas and did not result in any development of their writing. Unlike good students, the less proficient students spent a lot of time at this stage without making any clear effort to plan the structure for the tasks before them.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

With the aim of contributing to AFL writing, the findings of the current study suggest that average learner and less proficient students did not indicate their

position clearly, exerted less efforts in generating texts and reviewed their work less. In different circumstances, proficient learners are more determined on clearly stating their ideas in planning, generating, revising and editing during reviewing. First, in terms of planning, proficient learners in the present study, planned less, but they indicated concern for the part of global planning such as organization and style and devised clear goal formation strategies to resolve their problems. Average and less proficient learners did not have this strategic familiarity for establishing clear writing plans and were blurred in their mind through writing. It may be that proficient learners already had a lot in place before the writing and were able to tackle the writing correctly and on time. Average and less proficient learners may not have had as much background knowledge which could account for their lack of clear position declaration.

In conclusion, in terms of implications for coaching, teachers may need to rethink about the problems that average and less proficient students encounter and then try to figure out a way to help them succeed. The lack of clear global-level planning and processing activities indicates that among this average and less proficient learners, there is the urgent need to guide them more of the effective strategies to hoist in writing. Teachers must help weak students how to make their planned declaration clearer and organize their opinions more reasonably in the teaching writing activities.

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