Self-monitoring based on agreed-on assessment criteria in EFL writing

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1. Introduction

Fostering learner autonomy has become more important than ever before and, as a result, the relevance of language learning strategy training is widely acknowledged. Strategies-based instruction is a learner-focused approach to teaching that emphasizes explicit integration of learning strategies in the classroom, which may assist students in learning the target language more effectively. Despite the importance of metacognitive strategies, Lam (2009) argues that there is need for further research in English as a second and foreign language. Besides, some studies show that learners use strategies only sporadically. In fact, investigations of second and foreign language learning have revealed that students use crucial metacognitive strategies, such as self-monitoring, less often than cognitive and social affective ones.

2. Writing assessment

Many EFL students face difficulties in passing writing examinations since they are unfamiliar with different forms of assessment and the criteria used to evaluate their writing. This reveals the importance of developing writing assessment practices that enhance the teaching and learning process. Among these practices, teachers need to make choices as regards assessment types and criteria.

When it comes to types of assessment, a distinction is made between *formative* and *summative* assessment (Goodman & Swann, 2003; Hyland, 2003). The former is not normally graded so it has a teaching function. On the other hand, the latter is formally graded. According to Brown (2007), formative assessment may serve a useful function since it can familiarize students with the demands of writing in a non-threatening way. Because formative assessment is a teaching tool, it should be closely tied in with adequate feedback. Apart from teachers' feedback, there are ways in which students themselves may contribute to assessment. These may involve peer feedback, through which students evaluate the work of other students, and self-assessment, through which they evaluate their own work.

As to assessment criteria, teachers may use criteria without showing them to students but we take the view that such criteria should be transparent. Therefore, these should be discussed with students to make the teachers' interpretation of the criteria explicit and to achieve a joint understanding of what is valued in writing. An important decision teachers have to make when establishing assessment criteria is whether to break down the grade to identify strengths and weaknesses or simply award an overall grade. The former is referred to as *analytic evaluation* and the latter as *holistic evaluation*. In this study, teachers prepared guidelines for self-monitoring based on their assessment criteria turning a holistic scoring scale used for final exams into a set of questions intended to make students reflect on the content, organization and language use of their essays for the purposes of formative evaluation.

3. Language learning strategies

Language learning strategies are the ways in which students learn how to improve their skills in a second or foreign language (Oxford, 1990). Taxonomies of language learning strategies have been published by various authors (Rubin in Weaver & Cohen, 1997; O'Malley & Chamot, 1994; Oxford, 1990). According to Oxford (1990), strategies can be classified into direct and indirect. Direct strategies deal directly with the language (e.g. cognitive strategies). Indirect strategies deal with the general management of learning. In this class, we find metacognitive strategies. These strategies, which help learners regulate their learning, include three strategy sets: centering learning (e.g. overviewing), arranging and planning learning (e.g. setting goals) and evaluating learning (e.g. self-monitoring). Their role is to oversee the learning process by enabling learners to think ahead of the task, plan for it, and assess how well they have done it.

Research reveals that learning strategies influence proficiency in a second or foreign language. In fact, researchers have found that the use of strategies typifies good language learners (Oxford, 1990; Green & Oxford, 1995; Weaver & Cohen, 1997). In spite of the support that the strategy movement has received, the emphasis has primarily been on the teaching process. More recently, however, language teaching has

become more learner-focused with an emphasis on helping students become less dependent on the teacher. As a result, no longer does the teacher act as the source of instruction. Instead, learners are sharing the responsibility and becoming more autonomous (Benson, 2001).

Learner autonomy has been defined as "the capacity to control one's own learning" (Benson, 2001, p. 291) and as "a process that enables learners to recognise and assess their own needs, to choose and apply their own learning strategies or styles eventually leading to the effective management of learning" (Peñaflorida, 2002, p. 346). In fact, successful mastery of a foreign language depends to a great extent on learners' autonomous ability to take initiative and make progress beyond the classroom and the teacher (Brown, 2007).

4. Research review

Metacognition has been of interest to language researchers since the mid-1970s as it enables learners to become aware of what they learn (Brown in Wong Mei Ha & Storey, 2006). In fact, since the 1990s, self-reflection has been considered a meaningful process in learning. The methodology of assessing learning has shifted from the teacher to the student. In fact, students' self-monitoring has become an essential element to raise language learners' awareness and promote their autonomy. The usefulness of self-assessment as a tool for assisting learners is widely accepted by researchers. Indeed, Moritz (in Kato, 2009) regards self-assessment as a component of learner-centered and self-directed foreign language learning.

As regards metacognition and the writing skill, evaluating is essential. Nevertheless, even if research has explored the criteria teachers use to evaluate foreign language writing, little attention has been paid to the factors that students value when assessing their own writing (Edstrom, 2006). Students' perspectives, however, are an important source of information for teachers and should play a central role in shaping the teaching and learning processes. In fact, a review of writing research found that teacher feedback was most effective if it was focused on student self-assessment (Hillocks in Cohen & Cavalcanti, 1990).

A study by Xiang (2004) investigated the use of self-assessment in Chinese students' writing and revealed that it is effective to improve the organisation of their compositions. Along similar lines, Kasper (in Wong Mei Ha & Storey, 2006) incorporated self-reflection into ESL writing and found it useful in giving learners control over their writing as they engage in goal-directed behaviour and increase their competence. Wong Mei Ha and Storey (2006) studied the relationship between metacognition and the performance in writing of a group of ESL learners at university who were put in self-editing groups. The findings suggested that both awareness of and ability in writing were enhanced.

This review of studies indicates the paucity of work on the impact of metacognitive strategy instruction on writing and provides a justification for more research.

5. The current study

The metacognitive strategy of self-monitoring used in this study consists in checking one's written production while it is taking place by identifying and trying to eliminate mistakes. This strategy was selected from Oxford's (1990) and O'Malley and Chamot's (1994) taxonomies of language learning strategies.

6. Materials and methods

The context of this study is the School of Languages, National University of Córdoba. The sample consisted of 33 students belonging to two intact classes enrolled in English Language II, an upper-intermediate course belonging to the second year of English Language Teaching, Translation Studies and Licentiate programmes. Two EFL teachers that received training in how to conduct strategies-based instruction also participated in this study.

A multi-method approach to assessing the effects of strategy instruction was used. The following strategy assessment tools were employed: writing tasks to measure changes in observable strategy use, and written surveys to help students reflect on their strategy use before and after instruction.

The students received metacognitive strategy instruction in self-monitoring for one month. The instructional approach adopted was explicit strategy instruction, which consisted of the two components suggested by Weaver and Cohen (1996): strategy training and strategy integration.

During strategy training, the teacher raised the students' awareness of metacognitive strategies for the writing skill modelling and providing examples of the strategy of self-monitoring. The students made annotations on the margins of their writing tasks to self-monitor their production. Guidelines for self-monitoring on the basis of agreed-on assessment criteria were used to help students become aware of such

criteria and reflect on the types of comments they made while self-monitoring their essays. These guidelines included questions about content, organisation and language use (i.e. lexis, syntax, punctuation).

After strategy training, self-monitoring was integrated into writing tasks to provide contextualised strategy practice. These tasks were analyzed to assess the effects of strategy instruction by measuring the changes in observable strategy use in students' essays after instruction. The annotations made by the subjects while self-monitoring were classified into three categories: content, organisation and language use. This information was used to determine the impact of strategy training in students self-monitoring and their awareness of assessment criteria.

The data obtained from the written surveys were analyzed to determine the students' perceptions of their use of self-monitoring before and after instruction, and their awareness of the teachers' assessment criteria.

7. Results and discussion

The analysis of observable strategy use after strategy training reveals that 91% of the students who participated in this study applied the strategy, which led to improvements in content, overall organisation and language use. These results show that most students considered that they needed feedback regarding language use and the organisation of their essays. These are some representative examples of self-monitoring from the data:

- *I´m not sure about the use of the article here. I assumed that the reader would have a reference and I decided to keep it, but I´m still not 100% sure.*
- *Personal confession: I really dislike using these transition signals. Sometimes, they come out naturally and I feel comfortable with them -like the one that connects the second supporting sentence or the one that introduces the conclusion- but most of the times I have to force myself to use them!*
- *I found it quite hard to avoid repeating the information from body paragraph I. I tried to focus on "training" rather than "qualifications" and I even had to adjust the outline.*

These findings seem to indicate that self-monitoring may be conducive to language learning, especially to greater learner autonomy, which, as research suggests, contributes to improved performance in the editing stages of the writing process (Peñaflorida, 2002).

The results of the pre-study survey showed that the majority of the students was not familiar with self-monitoring techniques and that they did not apply them to the writing skill prior to their participation in this study. Indeed, only 9% of the students said that they knew the strategy of self-monitoring; however, only one of them explained how to apply the technique. This student stated that it consists in reflection on the topic of the composition that leads to some adjustment of the conclusion in the revision stage, which reveals an incomplete understanding of the strategy.

The results of the post-study survey throw light on three main aspects of the writing process: students' use of self-monitoring strategies, their approach to revision, and their awareness of the teachers' assessment criteria. As regards the students' use of self-monitoring, 91% of the participants in this study said that they use the self-monitoring strategy taught in this course. In their opinion, the strategy helps them to engage in a sort of dialogue with the teacher in order to clarify doubts about their writing. They also maintained that self-monitoring facilitates the correction process since they become more aware of their own mistakes. The findings also revealed that, sometimes, students feel they cannot fully rely on their own assessment because they do not consider themselves as an authority to assess their writing or because their corrections do not coincide with those made by the instructor. Moreover, 9% of the participants said that they did not use the strategy because they could not think of any possible errors in their writing tasks. Despite this, in the post-study questionnaire, most students said that self-monitoring was useful since it helped them revise their essays and that they would like to continue using the strategy in future writing tasks.

In relation to the students' approach to revision, the findings revealed that all the participants in this study revise and edit their essays before writing the final draft. According to their self-perceptions, 91% of the participants did not have any difficulty in applying the strategy, whereas 9% of them said that it was sometimes hard to think about possible mistakes in their own written productions. There is an interesting variety of approaches on the part of the students at this stage of the writing process. Twenty-five per cent of the students explain that they begin the revision of their essays by checking their content. For instance, they make sure that paragraphs are clearly connected in terms of meaning and that the main idea is well developed. Then, they center their attention on language issues such as grammar, spelling and punctuation.

Many students, in fact 40% of them, make explicit reference to features pertaining to language use and the organisation of the essay, such as coherence, cohesion, use of connectors, syntax, vocabulary, punctuation, prepositions, spelling and style. Some students merely enumerate these aspects in a seemingly random sequence, whereas others prioritize them by checking the organizational aspects of the essay first and then focusing their attention on aspects of language use and mechanics, such as syntax, vocabulary, spelling and punctuation. Only 13% of these participants say that they take into account the readership. As one of them puts it, *"I reread my essay to check that the reader can follow the thread of ideas."* The remaining 22% of the students use different approaches at the revision stage. The following comments illustrate the various approaches these students use.

- *I always focus my attention on the use of prepositions and collocations. Then, I check if each paragraph makes sense.*
- *I first revise my composition against the outline. Then, I check the word count and make adjustments if it is necessary trying to keep the same ideas. Finally, I check syntax and layout.*

Regarding the students' awareness of the teachers' assessment criteria, the findings of the post-study survey show that 78% of the students knew the aspects that teachers focus their attention on when grading their essays after having agreed on them. They referred to specific aspects such as content and organisation, coherence, following instructions, syntax and lexis. Interestingly, however, 22% of the participants admit that they still are not aware of the correction criteria followed by the teachers.

These findings suggest that metacognitive strategy training encourages learners to take control of their learning processes by evaluating their own writing performance as their observable strategy use and self-perceptions seem to suggest. Even if it is often assumed that students can become autonomous on their own without any kind of scaffolding on the part of the teacher, this is not always the case. As a result, encouraging learners to use metacognitive learning strategies for EFL academic writing may contribute to greater learner autonomy, which may eventually lead to "the effective management of learning" as Peñaflorida, (2002, p. 346) maintains.

8. Conclusion

Unlike previous studies (Gava, González de Gatti & Dalla Costa, 2013; González de Gatti, Dalla Costa, Gava & Kofman, 2012) in which students' self-monitoring was not based on assessment criteria, in this study, metacognitive strategy instruction based on assessment criteria has led to more positive effects on students' strategy use and self-perceptions. Finding out the aspects students notice as they self-monitor their writing has potential as a pedagogical tool since teachers can take informed decisions to tailor a course to students' needs. Besides, the use of this strategy provides opportunities for empowering students to develop autonomous writing skills.

As regards the limitations of this study, the results may not be generalised to a population outside this context. Therefore, the findings should be viewed as hypotheses to test with other groups of students. Moreover, the value of this work should be confirmed by larger studies that trace students' strategy use over a longer period of time.

Further studies could assess whether students' use of metacognitive strategies in leads to higher scores in writing tasks. They could also focus on strategy transfer, on variation in strategy use by proficiency level, and on the roles of teachers and students in strategies-based instruction.

The outcome of this study will be used to outline more comprehensive research that provides training in a wider range of strategies aimed at enhancing writing skills and promoting learner autonomy.

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