

EFL Students' Attitude Toward Using Metacognitive Strategies in Writing

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Abstract

Metacognitive learning strategies are higher-order executive skills that help learners become more independent, autonomous, and capable of planning, monitoring and evaluating learning process. This research was aimed at investigating EFL students' attitude towards the use of metacognitive strategies in writing. Data were generated through in-depth interviews with 10 EFL students purposively selected from Irbid secondary school, Jordan. Only students from experimental group, who received the intervention, were interviewed. The data obtained were analyzed using ATLAS.TI version 8. The findings indicate that the majority of students acknowledged the usefulness of metacognitive strategies in improving their writing performance, but some experience difficulties in implementing the strategies. The majority of students reported positive attitudes toward metacognitive strategies as they help them to improve their English writing and cultivate learning autonomy. This paper recommends that metacognitive instruction should be incorporated in writing classrooms as it helps students to become more self-regulated.

Keywords: metacognitive strategies, writing performance, brainstorming, planning writing, monitoring writing, evaluating writing

1. Introduction

The main purpose of strategic writing instruction is to integrate mental procedures to produce writing and to control the production of writing (Graham & Harris, 2006). Writers have a purpose for their writing and they adjust that purpose for each task; this unique attribute is what makes writers effective. Strategic writers use a variety of strategies and skills as they construct paragraphs (Grabe & Kaplan, 2014). These strategies are deliberate plans selected by the writer to accomplish a particular goal or to complete a task. Using writing strategies effectively help students become expert writers and achieve autonomy in writing, the goal of all writing instruction (Allison & Kaye, 2011).

EFL students usually find writing challenging, while teachers find it hard to assist students in producing pieces of quality academic writing (Okasha & Hamdi, 2014). Limited knowledge of students about the topic, insufficient practice, and inadequate feedback are some of the underlying reasons hindering production of quality academic writing (Chang, 2012). In addition, accuracy and correctness of grammar and writing mechanics tend to be the main focus on studies of language teaching (Ahmed, 2010). It is also assumed that second language writers have negative attitudes and apprehension toward writing than first language writers. Feedback to students' writings was seldom given in English language, and in most cases, correction is mainly centred on grammatical errors, while the teacher serves as the sole audience for students' writing. According to Ambrose et al. (2010), the cause of weak writing skills includes poor attitudes that students exhibit toward writing, lack of

confidence, and feeling of incompetence (Chohan, 2011).

Assessment of students' performance in all phases of education is ultimately conducted through writing, especially for transition, grading or entrance examinations. Through it, students can best demonstrate their grasp of mastery and control of language. Poor writing skills are the major factors causing students' failure in English language examinations; this is identified in previous research in SL/FL (Al-Hazmi & Scholfield, 2007). Poor writing skill is not only affecting students' performance in language but also in other subjects they are studying (Pappamihiel, 2002). Students' failure or poor performance in writing has attracted much interest of second language investigators. Over year's many researchers indicated that acquiring writing proficiency is a difficult, intricate, and complex task that requires rigorous practices and explicit learning (Aliyu, Fung, Abdullah, & Hoon, 2016; Al-Hazmi & Scholfield, 2007).

Investigators concentrate on finding out how writing affects the performance of students, factors responsible for errors in students' compositions, and how to get rid of them (Ahmad, 2010). It is argued that the lack of competence in written English results more from the lack of composing competence than from the lack of linguistic competence (Harris et al., 2010). Prominent reasons pointed out by Graham et al. (2012) for the inability in writing include: mechanical problems with the script of English; problems of accuracy of English grammar and lexis; problems relating to the style of writing required for a particular situation; and problems of developing ease and comfort in expressing what needs to be said. Metacognitive strategies approach to teaching students is one of the contributing methods employed to help students overcome writing problems. Thus, the development of cognitive psychology and metacognition has drawn more and more researchers' attention and provides a new perspective for EFL/ESL writing (e.g. Mohamed & Rashid, 2017a; Mohamed & Rashid, 2017b; Goh, 2008).

There are many elements towards learning strategies, this study however focused on meta-cognitive approach. Metacognitive strategies are significant and viable for improving students' learning skills (Chutichaiwirath & Sitthitikul, 2017; Novak, 2010; Kauffman, & Chen, 2008). According to O'Malley and Chamot (1990) and Oxford (1990), learners can be better in terms of proper planning, monitoring, and evaluation and practice of learning skills with the application of metacognitive strategies. Metacognitive strategies involve mental operations or procedures that learners use to regulate their learning. They are directly responsible for the execution of a writing task and include three main kinds: planning, evaluating and monitoring (Rubin, & Chisnell, 2008). Cognitive strategies are mental operations or steps used by learners to gain new information and apply it to specific learning tasks and are used to deal with the obstacles encountered along the way. They are auxiliary strategies that help in the implementation of the metacognitive strategies. In contrast to the metacognitive strategies, the function of cognitive strategies is narrower in scope. Cognitive strategies are used to solve problems, whereas metacognitive strategies are employed in order to plan, monitor, evaluate, control and understand these strategies (Aleven, & Koedinger, 2002).

1.1 Literature Review

Learning strategies involve specifications, behaviours, steps, or techniques, such as seeking out conversation partners or giving oneself encouragement to tackle a difficult language task used by students to enhance their own learning (Scarcella & Oxford, 1992). According to Oxford, (2003), learning strategies are divided into six groups: cognitive, metacognitive, memory-related, compensatory, affective, and social. When a student consciously picks up the strategies that are appropriate for his or her learning style and the L2 task at hand, these strategies become a useful toolkit for active, conscious, and purposeful self-regulated learning.

1.2 Metacognitive Strategies

Studies involving EFL learners in various countries reveal evidence that metacognitive strategies are often strong predictors of L2 proficiency (Oxford, 1996). Metacognitive strategies in academic writing are first introduced by Flavell (1979). It consists of metacognitive knowledge and metacognitive experience. Metacognitive strategies are mental executive skills that serve to "control cognitive activities and to ensure a cognitive goal is achieved" (De La Paz, & Felton, 2010). Different classifications of metacognitive writing strategies have been created, however, in this research, the model pursued involves the Planning, Monitoring and Evaluating taxonomies as proposed by Papeleontiou-louca (2003). Metacognitive writing strategies, correspondingly, involve thinking about writing process: planning, monitoring, and self-evaluating of what has been written. More explicitly, via the skills of planning, monitoring, and evaluating, the writer manages, directs, regulates and guides his/her writing production.

Metacognition deals with how students understand their own writing processes, and how they adapt their processes to evolving demands (Pappamihiel, 2002). This paper also intends to promote the integration of

metacognition into academic writing instruction to benefit writing instruction by laying emphasis on both approaches to writing instruction (i.e., process and product approaches).

1.3 Planning

The process of planning involves finding focus concerning purpose, audience, ideas, and strategies to be used. This often takes place before writing, but some writers also plan their compositions even while writing their composition. Planning writing is more efficiently done via whole-class or small group brainstorming. If done in a group, each student is recommended to have his/her function: idea generator, writer, or criticizer. However, planning can be done individually, too. The draft plan is made up, later, in the process of writing, it may be reviewed and undergo changes concerning constituent parts (adding or omitting) and their order. Planning may also involve brainstorming some keywords and choose the basic tense for the writing piece.

1.4 Monitoring

This involves checking and verifying progress in terms of global features, such as content and organization, and also in terms of local aspects such as grammar and mechanics. It can be more effectively done by individual writers. Controlling the writing process while writing the text, is also another vital aspect of monitoring involved in the writing process.

1.5 Evaluating

Evaluating comes at the end of the writing process, and consists of reconsidering the written text in terms of both global and local writing features, and also concerning the strategies used to complete the writing tasks. Evaluating is more effectively done in pairs (peer assessment): two writers exchange their papers and, having viewed them, discuss the improvements to be made. Self-editing and correction are tasks that student supposed to conduct on their own. They need to develop a strategy for it (what to check first: contents, the structure of language, as it is confusing, especially for less experienced writers to do all three simultaneously).

1.6 Teaching Metacognition

The approaches in teaching students the metacognitive strategies include direct instruction, teacher modelling, and application. Like many other processes, metacognition can be taught to students, teachers should give a clear explanation about the strategies to be taught, why they are important and when students will need to use them. Teachers also present a number of examples to illustrate their instruction (Armbruster, 2010). Other than giving a direct explanation, teachers can model the strategies by using the technique “thinking out loud” to show “when and how” the metacognitive strategies should be used. The important point in this approach is that teachers would provide a model of the thinking process by saying out loud what is going on inside their heads.

Students must be given ample opportunities to perform the same task under the guidance of teachers in order to internalize them until they become automatic. This application of the strategies serves as independent practice accompanied by teachers’ feedback. Recognizing and practice in applying metacognitive strategies will help students successfully solve problems not only in their subject areas but also throughout their lives as well (Luttenegger, 2012).

1.7 Research on the Application of Metacognitive Strategies for Teaching Writing

There are several recent studies on the application of metacognitive strategies for the development of writing skills. Surat et al. (2014) conducted a study involving 18 secondary school students in Malaysia, in which they were asked to do metacognitive reflection on the essays they wrote. The results revealed that students practically had no idea how the writing process should be organized. On the other hand, Goctu (2017) found that participants in her study who are 21 Malaysian undergraduates possessed well-developed writing strategies. The results seem contradictory, but the little number of participants makes the study results non-generalizable in both cases. Tierney et al. (2015) conducted a study involving 795 Canadian undergraduate students. The results revealed that the application of metacognitive strategies for the development of writing skills increased self-confidence and decrease anxiety. Graham and Hebert (2011) carried out a study involving 86 vocational college students in China, the results of the study showed that teaching writing strategies to the experimental group has a positive impact on students’ writing skills. Although not numerous, the analyzed research showed that many students (and probably teachers) are not aware of the advantages of writing strategies, however, when these strategies are applied, they have a positive impact on the development of writing skills.

2. Methodology

2.1 Research Design

Data for this study were qualitatively collected through interviews, and the information obtained was transcribed

and interpreted through a thematic analysis approach. The participants for this study included 10 students from a secondary school in Irbid Jordan. Nine questions were used in the interview for data collection. This study was conducted in the Fall semester of the academic year 2016/2017 and involved an action and reflective approach. Permission was obtained from the school administration before the commencement of the study. Before the implementation of metacognitive strategies in academic writing, the teacher/researcher initially asked the students whether they know anything about the aforementioned strategies. Some of them had limited knowledge about the strategies, while, the majority were not aware of writing metacognitive strategies. Then, students were assigned to collect information about the topic and provide some background knowledge. The teacher dedicated a special class to dealing with metacognitive writing strategies: presenting theoretical explanations with practical examples and involved students in discussion. Then, students began to write various types of composition implementing the metacognitive writing strategies. During the process of writing, the teacher managed, directed, regulated and guided their writing production, and afterwards, students did it independently.

2.2 Findings

A set of interview questions was prepared in order to find out students' opinions and to explore whether the implementation of metacognitive writing strategies was beneficial for them. The interview questions involved the process of writing as well as students' views on the metacognitive writing strategies.

Planning strategy is the initial segment of metacognitive strategies; therefore it is used as the central theme in this study. There are seven sub-codes identified including brainstorming, advanced organization, organizational planning, functional planning, self-management, selective attention, and directed attention.

Participants indicated what they normally did before starting writing in English as a preparation which entailed their free writing abilities:

I must ask myself before starting of writing task, am I understand the question well? And, are the main points have a relationship to the subject? And then precede the process of writing.

[Participant 1]

Before starting writing task I read 'ayato alkorsi', reading the question slowly to understand it well. Then I write the suitable title for the given question.

[Participant 5]

In the above excerpts the participants revealed the activities they engaged in before putting pen on the paper. They read questions to understand it. Reading supplication (doua) shows how they are trained spiritually. The students need to be trained further on how to use brainstorming technique.

So, I put the main points in my mind that must be addressed and help me to reach the goal that I want

[Participant 1]

Then, setting my main points to plan besides the writing paper what need to write to reach my target of writing performance.

[Participant 3]

Yes, I set my own criteria such as related and connected the paragraphs with each other to cover the topic

[Participant 3]

In the above excerpts, the participants indicated that they used to identify main points before writing a composition, as in the case of participant 1 who perceived that he is putting the main idea in his mind, though this can be also be associated with brainstorming. In the subsequent quotations taken from participant 3 indicated that the participant used to take notes of the main ideas by outlining them inside or separate paper before writing the full text.

underlines under the main words of the topic increase me more about the main points of the question

[Participant 4]

I underline the main words to build up the suitable ideas. After this, constructing the main ideas that be related to the topic to avoid far from the topic

[Participant 8]

The participants revealed how they organize their work and identified the helpful techniques in terms of organizational planning. They consider underlining the main idea as helpful in organizing the text. As participant

four believed that metacognitive strategies help him know how to organize his writing, and claimed in another instance that before the metacognitive training session, he did not know how to arrange his work. Thus, the ability to identify the main idea helps him not to go astray from the topic as revealed by participant eight. Concerning self-management, one of the participants said that he is following some techniques to avoid time loss
This step helps me to know what should I write on the task to avoid the obstacles and time loss

[Participant 2]

He further enumerated some of these techniques as he said:

“I ask myself, am I writing the introductory sentences has a relationship to the introduction?”

[Participant 2]

As presented below Participant one described the stages he followed when writing a composition, which included linking, and coordinating the ideas in sentences, and then built them into paragraphs:

Participant one after writing the main points that must be included in the writing topic, I coordinate them during of writing topic, I build the main sentences and linked them to each other in a sequential and arranged to obtain the nice form and the best representative of the writing at the end.

[Participant 1]

Meanwhile, Participant two mentioned another functional stage that is deleting irrelevant lines from the text:

To avoid duplication of sentences or writing about one idea, I delete these words to avoid repeated sentence

[Participant 2]

Directive attention is a technique employed by writers in which they use some points that can lead them to achieve their target and remind them about what they will do in the next stage after finishing the other. Excerpts below show how participants used this particular cognitive strategy.

I mean to put star or stars around the main sentences in the question to care about them more during writing task.

[Participant 10]

Before started writing, I read Sorat Alfateha, then I read the question slowly to write some symbol about the main words in the question

[Participant 3]

Selective attention is a fundamental component of cognitive development that characterized the developmental changes on how information can be gathered for further processing or use. The excerpts below present how participants use such technique when they are writing composition.

the main points that must be followed, such as writing about specific points related to the topic and how to link these points and adding appropriate words to the topic to be written about it

[Participant 1]

Yes, I put the plan by focusing on the main points about the topic, the reason behind this plan is to get a suitable and neat topic

[Participant 1]

The participants' responses categorized under this theme depict planning strategy and their' preparation and readiness to writing tasks. The interviews were conducted immediately at the end of the intervention program in which all the subjects are involved as an experimental group. Therefore, prompt effects of the training can be elicited. As described above the planning strategy comprises items which are interrelated such as brainstorming, advanced organization, organizational planning, functional planning, self-management, selective attention, and directed attention.

Monitoring strategy involves the processes applied to supervise the progress during composing of the text. As posited by Zimmerman and Schunk (2011), monitoring can help learners understand their challenges and how they can tackle them effectively. Monitoring strategies have powerful effects on learning outcomes.

Self-monitoring included the processes of self-observation and self-control guided by situational cues to the social appropriateness of expressive behaviour and self-presentation. The main aims of self-monitoring are to supervise one's ability to communicate accurately and to control and measure ones' performance by independent learning.

The excerpt below presents the explanation of Participant one on how he monitors his writing composition.

I try to find out the strong points to strengthen them in the next times of the writing and I also find out weaknesses points to develop them to become strong points

[Participant 1]

Participant two claimed that he used self-questioning and focusing on the outcome of his writing based on the audience, as shown in the excerpt below.

Is the title covered in the form required, and ask myself whether the reader will find the meaning of the task, or there are some points will distract the mind of the reader and make him not enjoying the topic

[Participant 2]

Monitoring production is the technique used by writers to monitor and control their composition by supervising the quality of their writing and the processes they follow during the composition.

The excerpt below presents an explanation of participant two two on how he monitors the production of his composition.

When I finish reviewing the task, I seek to find the relevance of ideas and the validity of task in the final form of the topic.”

[Participant 2]

Participant three postulated that following metacognitive strategies allowed him to develop monitoring production techniques, as shown in the excerpt below.

The metacognitive strategy allows me to organize sentences during writing the task .on the contrary before I practised this strategy my writing was randomly and without arranging sentences.

[Participant 3]

Monitoring comprehension involves the strategies used by the learners to check their composition during writing. Learners employed different monitoring techniques or to check their comprehension of their writing. Hence, this helps them to evaluate how their writing makes senses to themselves and how the text is the accurate appropriate to communicate meaning to the readers.

The excerpts below present what the participants do to monitor comprehension of their written composition. Participant one said he monitors his comprehension by a revision to sentences and the links between them.

During the writing task and follow up the ideas, I have to read the sentences so perhaps some sentences are not clear or not complete.

[Participant 1]

Another participant construed that he monitored himself before moving to the next stage of his writing.

I am following the sequence of sentences during writing task, asking myself am I writing sentences related to my topic? is the reader will be satisfied ? will I get the good marks at the end of this task? And I monitor myself to know can I move to next step? is the previous paragraph has related to next paragraph?

[Participant 3]

Self-monitoring is the students' ability to monitor their writing processes and progress. This ability can be reflected on how they can monitor their production and comprehension processes in their writing.

Evaluating strategies are the criteria employed to check the ability, performance of a learner after completing the given task. As in the case of the present study, evaluating strategy refers to what the participants do after completing their writing task to check the outcome of their task taking in account the standard criteria. Moreover, during the interview session, the participants were asked to give their opinions and perceptions concerning these techniques. The participants who use these strategies can also judge and reflect on how well they accomplish their writing task. The evaluating strategies involve three main strategies: Self-Assessment and Self-Evaluation.

Self-evaluation refers to what learners used to assess whether they achieve the goals of the task they are given. It can also be seen as a self-decision or self-judging the quality of the task based on the criteria or required standard after finishing the task. Participants' responses after training indicated that they were aware of using self-assessment to assess whether they would meet their goal for the task but still some of them preferred peer and teacher evaluation.

Self-evaluation

Participants one and ten claimed that they used this strategy for revision.

I evaluate myself after finish writing task by check every sentence if was written well or not

[Participant 1]

I evaluate myself after finishing writing task by revising all writing task to note the sequencing and arranging of the sentences in the paragraphs to avoid any mistake in another time of writing

[Participant 10]

The Evaluation of production involves the strategies used to evaluate how well the students apply those strategies to evaluate what they have produced at all stages of written composition, introduction, body and conclusion.

Participant ten claimed that he evaluated his writing production by revising sentence formation and paragraphs arrangement, as shown below.

I evaluate myself after finishing writing task by revising all writing task to note the sequencing and arranging of the sentences in the paragraphs

[Participant 10]

Participant one evaluated his writing production by observing his writing in relation to topic sentence and other internal and external factors.

I evaluate if the sentences are related to the topic and what is the benefits of these sentences to this topic. In addition, I concern with the final view from inside and outside of writing task.

[Participant 1]

The responses were given by participants one and ten indicate that self-evaluation criteria are followed by learners to judge their ability and performance for a given task. This strategy can also be related to other strategies categorized under evaluation. It can be reflected in the evaluation of production where the learners evaluate their productivity and the quality of what they produced and the evaluation of performance where the learners evaluate their overall performance on a given task. Lastly, evaluation ability is used to indicate the ability of the participant to use this strategy and what sort of the evaluation participants preferred or used.

3. Discussion and Conclusion

This study aimed to explore in-depth EFL students' attitudes towards writing based on metacognitive strategies. The findings indicate that students need more training on how to use brainstorming techniques because the information they provided revealed that they poorly utilized brainstorming. This finding is similar to the finding revealed by Al-Wrecker and Abdullah (2010) and Alsenaidi (2012). In term of planning, students take into account some planning strategies, such as underlining the main idea as helpful in organizing the text. They also believed that metacognitive strategies help them be more organized in planning their writing compositions, and claimed in another instance that before this training they do not know how to and arranging their composition in English. Some of the techniques used include: using marks, symbols and keywords, as well as focusing on the main points and how they can be linked together to develop paragraphs. Meanwhile, on monitoring, students showed that they learned to be more self-reliant. Metacognitive strategies increase students' abilities to monitor their writing processes and progress. This finding confirms Muchyidin' (2013) findings. Moreover, this ability is reflected on how they can monitor their production and comprehension processes in their writing through self-questioning and revision technique. On the evaluating techniques, more information is elicited from the participants on three main strategies self-assessment, self-evaluation, and self-reflection.

Moreover, the findings of interviews help to elicit more information on writing difficulties faced by the students and how they struggle to overcome them. It was found that time management is one of the most overwhelming issues faced by students. Other problems reported by the students included spelling and grammatical mistakes which can be related to their linguistic competence.

In addition, the findings revealed mixed reactions from students on the strategies they found to be difficult to learn and apply. Some students perceived difficulties in the planning stage, whereas some perceived difficulties in monitoring stage and s evaluating stage. Participants reported that they need more time to be trained using metacognitive strategies.

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