

The effect of writing strategy instruction on ESL intermediate proficiency learners' writing performance

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Abstract. The use of effective writing strategies has been shown to assist learners, especially ESL or EFL learners, in their writing skills. However, many learners and teachers are still unaware of the various writing strategies that can facilitate students' writing. Thus, this study examined the effect of writing strategy instruction on ESL learners' writing performance. The participants of the study were 36 intermediate proficiency level ESL students from two intact classes. One class was randomly assigned to the instruction group and the other to the control group. During an eight-week treatment period, the instruction group was exposed to the Self-Regulated Strategy Development (SRSD) approach focusing on metacognitive and cognitive writing strategies. The results of the study show that the strategy instruction group had outperformed the control group with a statistically significant increase in scores from pretest to posttest ($M = 41.11$, $SD = 6.80$, $t(17) = -14.66$, $p < .000$ two-way analysis). An important implication of this study is that the explicit instruction of writing strategies has a positive effect on ESL students' writing performance and thus should be made an essential part of ESL writing pedagogy.

Keywords: writing strategies, Malaysian ESL learners, strategy instruction.

INTRODUCTION

Writing in one's first language / mother tongue or in a second or foreign language is a very challenging skill to master, either by school children or professionals, because of the intricate cognitive processes involved in the process of writing. As writing is both a social and cultural process (Graham, 2006; Prior, 2006; Lavelle and Bushrow, 2007), the differences in writing in L1 or L2 need to be distinguished and understood to overcome the problems commonly faced by writers in writing in the L2. Among the common problems faced by writers of English as a Second Language include the inability to generate ideas in the L2 (Hyland, 1996), inaccurate use of grammar (Khan, 2005; Marlyna *et al.*, 2007; Nor *et al.*, 2008; Ghabool *et al.*, 2012), insufficient vocabulary (Stapa and Abdul, 2006), as well as lack of exposure to the wide arrays of effective writing strategies (Mohd and Abdullah, 2009). Studies have shown that with

continuous use of appropriate writing strategies, learners can eventually overcome their problems in writing and learn to write effectively and independently (Creswell, 2000; Sengupta, 2000; Sasaki, 2004; Manchon, 2011; Arjmand, 2012; Shafiee *et al.*, 2013).

However, research conducted in Malaysia where English is learnt as a second/foreign language shows that most learners are moderate users of writing strategies (Nooreiny and Mazlin, 2013). Among reasons for this include learners' limited exposure to writing strategy instruction, teachers' unawareness of the wide choices of writing strategies, and the nature of the education system which relies heavily on exam results rather than on learners' development of creative thinking skills (Koo, 2008). The exam-oriented focus of the Malaysian education system leaves most teachers with little choice, but to religiously prepare students for the examinations

(e.g. learners practice copying and memorizing specific types or genres of writing instead of experiencing the actual process of writing because the process undoubtedly requires much effort and time both for the learners and the teachers). Thus, burdened with the demand and dilemma of producing good results in the examinations, most teachers normally opt to employ the easiest strategy in teaching writing, for instance, by providing learners with model essays to be copied and memorized (Tan, 2008; Lim, 2013).

The use of writing strategies, though some of which are familiar to the teachers, are avoided or neglected due to the time constraints related to the school curriculum. However, studies on the use of ESL/EFL writing strategies provide support for the use of various types of effective writing strategies to assist ESL learners to become autonomous writers who are in control of their own writing (Chen, 2011). In addition, writing strategies also enable learners to produce better writing pieces (Nadzrah *et al.*, 2011; Arjmand, 2012). In light of these positive findings, this study thus examined the effect of writing strategy instruction on Malaysian secondary school ESL learners' writing performance. There is an urgent need for ESL learners to be taught the various strategies of writing as the skill is crucial both in the academic world as well as in the professional field (Nur and Saadiyah, 2011; Graham and Perin, 2007). The need to teach writing strategies to ESL learners is therefore important as recent studies also show that the use of strategy-based instruction could help decrease learners' anxiety level (Tsiriatakis *et al.*, 2017) and reduce dependency on teacher-centred lectures in teaching writing (Webb, 2015). The use of technology and ICT tools (Cole and Feng, 2014; Abdul *et al.*, 2015) need also be incorporated into the teaching of writing strategies as they provide learners with a wider range of literacy practices and help promote independent learning beyond the classroom. The hypothesis of the study is that learners exposed to writing strategy instruction will have better writing performance compared to the non-strategy instruction group. The practical implications of the study include the need to approach the teaching of writing with a more process-based rather than on a solely product-based approach. Furthermore, explicit teaching of writing strategies may help teachers to realize that introducing and teaching learners specific writing strategies can result in positive outcomes for both learners and teachers. It is also hoped that the outcome of the strategy instruction can be maintained over a longer period and that learners will continue to employ the strategies in their writing tasks within and beyond the writing classroom.

Problems in ESL writing in Malaysian schools

Basturkmen and Lewis (2002) state that ESL learners usually face difficulties with academic writing as they find

it formidable to clearly express themselves, to write according to the flow of ideas, and to enjoy the process of writing. In addition, the various components of writing which comprise choice of writing strategies, subject, organization, mechanics of writing, vocabulary, grammar, syntax and the targeted audience (Raimes, 1984) and the cognitive demand of writing further restrict ESL learners' ability to think of suitable ideas to write, to maintain relevancy to the main idea of the topic, to discard irrelevant ideas, and to organize these ideas (Al-Sawalha and Chow, 2012). However, these problems are not exclusive to ESL learners in Malaysia for the challenges are also shared by EFL learners in other countries, for example in Jordan (Khuwaileh and Al-Shoumali, 2000; Rababah, 2002), among other countries.

Objectives of the study

This study aims to examine the writing strategies employed by secondary school ESL learners of intermediate English proficiency level in their expository writing task. Past studies have shown that ESL learners in Malaysia are moderate users of writing strategies (Nooreiny and Mazlin, 2013; Ridhuan and Abdullah, 2009). The main focus of the study is to investigate the effectiveness of writing strategy instruction on ESL learners' writing performance. One of the reasons for the moderate use of writing strategies among ESL learners in Malaysia is the lack of exposure on the use of writing strategies. Learners are often asked to write with general approaches to writing, but are not clearly guided on how to write effectively and to use the various types of writing strategies. Although most teachers are fairly aware of the writing strategies that could be used in the writing classrooms, employability of the strategies in teaching and learning writing are restricted due to the overemphasis on examination performance, especially among low proficiency level ESL learners. ESL learners with limited language proficiency require more time to overcome their writing problems and to use the writing strategies taught. Through this study, it is hoped that ESL learners and teachers would be aware of the advantages of using writing strategies which could facilitate the acquisition of writing skills among learners and to eventually help transform writing tasks into less of a challenging and terrifying experience for all in the writing classrooms.

Research questions

The research questions posited for the study are as the following:

i) What are the types of writing strategies employed by ESL learners of intermediate proficiency level?

ii) Is there any effect of writing strategy instruction on ESL learners' writing performance?

LITERATURE REVIEW

ESL writing strategies

In general, ESL writing strategies are categorized based on varied standards of classification as conceived by different researchers, making it challenging to identify a taxonomy of ESL writing strategies accepted by all (Hsiao and Oxford, 2002). For example, Riazi (1997) categorized composing strategies into three main strategies: cognitive, metacognitive and social strategies. Sasaki (2000) further classified writing strategies into eight main categories, namely: strategies on planning, retrieving, generating ideas, verbalizing, translating, rereading, evaluating and others. Mu (2005) outlined 5 categories of ESL writing strategies: rhetorical, metacognitive, cognitive, communicative and social/affective strategies. Regardless of how the writing strategies are categorized, a common feature that is prevalent in the three taxonomies is the metacognitive strategies. Metacognitive strategies are behaviours that seek to center, arrange, plan and evaluate one's learning. Shorey (1999) observed that metacognitive strategies were used most frequently and that learners with high proficiency in English used functional practice strategies more frequently than low proficiency learners. However, Kato (2005) found that students' use of strategies was not related to their proficiency levels. In a study investigating the relationships among the use of language learning strategies, proficiency, gender and nationality, Hon-Nam and Leavell (2006) found that students used metacognitive strategies the most, and affective and memory strategies the least. ESL students from Japan, Korea and other countries (Brazil, Germany, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand and Togo) used metacognitive strategies the most. In Radwan's (2011) study on the effect of gender and English language proficiency on the use of language learning strategies, metacognitive strategy was the most frequently used, whereas memory strategies was the least used. In terms of proficiency level, students with a high level of English proficiency used cognitive, metacognitive, and affective strategies more than students with low levels of language proficiency.

Writing strategies and English proficiency

The effect of proficiency level on EFL and ESL students' writing has been the focus of much research (Bai *et al.*, 2014; Stevenson *et al.*, 2006). A majority of the studies show that learners of different English language proficiency levels differ in the number and range of writing strategies used, in how the strategies are applied to the task, and in the appropriateness of the strategies used for

the tasks (Mu and Carrington, 2007; Ridhuan, 2009; Chien, 2010). Studies on the similarities and differences between L1 and L2 writing process revealed that there is no clear link between proficiency and L2 writing proficiency as some researchers have argued that students with a generally lower level of language proficiency were not inhibited in their writing (Raimes, 1985). However, other researchers reported that language proficiency in L2 is somehow linked to writing competence (or ability) in the foreign language (Cummings, 1989; Hirose and Sasaki, 1994; Pennington and So, 1993).

Self-regulated strategy development model

Pioneered by Karen Harris and Steve Graham, the *Self-Regulated Strategy Development (SRSD)* for writing comprises the integration of three components: (a) six stages of explicit writing instruction across a variety of genres; (b) explicit instruction in self-regulation strategies, including goal setting, self-monitoring, and self-instruction; and (c) development of positive student attitudes and self-efficacy about writing (Harris *et al.*, 2006; Santangelo *et al.*, 2007). The SRSD model for writing is an empirically validated model which assists students as they compose text by facilitating the development of relevant cognitive and self-regulation skills. Numerous specific writing strategies have been developed for varied genres including story writing, narrative, expository, persuasive writing, and revising strategies (Harris *et al.*, 2008). Each strategy includes a mnemonic acronym for learning the strategy steps. Expository essays, for instance, uses the acronyms "PLAN" and "WRITE" in which the letters in PLAN represent steps: P = Pick attention to prompts L = List main ideas to develop your essay; A = Add supporting ideas; N = Number the major points, and WRITE represents the steps: W = Work from your plan; R = Remember your goals; I = Include transition words; T = Try to use different kinds of sentences; E = Exciting, Interesting, Million-dollar words. Thus, SRSD for writing can be used across a wide age range of students who struggle with writing (Graham and Harris, 2003). In SRSD, writing is considered a problem-solving task that involves planning, knowledge, and skills (Graham *et al.*, 2007). Self-regulation refers to "self-initiated thoughts, feelings, and actions that writers use to attain various literary goals, which include improving the writing skills and enhancing the quality of the text they create" (Zimmerman and Risemberg, 1997:76).

Writing strategy instruction

The writing strategy instruction in this study focuses only on metacognitive and cognitive writing strategies as studies have shown that these strategies are most crucial

for generating and developing ideas, as well as in helping learners to monitor their own writing task. The teacher assigned to teach the instruction group was trained on writing strategy instruction based on the SRSD model. The selected teacher was provided with adapted materials and suggested lesson plans from the model and discussions were held before and after each teaching lesson between the researcher and the teacher to ascertain the teacher's understanding of the strategy instruction.

METHODOLOGY

Design

This quasi-experimental study was conducted in two parts. The first part employed the quantitative approach whereby an adapted writing survey was distributed among the learners to examine the types of writing strategies they use. In the second part of the study, the two intact classes of ESL learners were randomly assigned to either the instruction group (writing strategy instruction or the control group). The instruction group took part in an eight-week writing strategy instruction based on the SRSD model. The control group was taught the process-based approach of writing.

Participants

The participants of this study were learners of upper secondary school level who were of intermediate level of English language proficiency. The proficiency level of the participants was determined from their performance on the English subject in the previous standardized public examination, PMR (*Penilaian Menengah Rendah*) or Lower Secondary Assessment. Students selected for the study are those who scored C and D on the PMR (intermediate level). The ESL teacher selected to participate in the study was trained on the use of writing strategies based on the SRSD model for over two weeks before the intervention began. The researcher video recorded and monitored the teaching of the writing strategies to assist the teacher in successful implementation of the strategies. After each session, the researcher interviewed randomly selected participants in the study and the teacher for their feedback or comments.

Instruments and materials

The main instrument in this study was a Writing Strategies Instruction Module based on the SRSD model and the focus was on expository writing. The topics for the writing tasks were based on current issues and on students' interests. Constructive suggestions and

comments were attained from the English Department as well as other English teachers teaching the upper secondary learners helped to finalize the writing topics. Finally, two writing strategies were chosen for the writing strategy instruction: metacognitive and cognitive strategies, as previous studies suggest that learners of high proficiency level employ more metacognitive and cognitive strategies than less skilled writers (Roca de Larios *et al.*, 2008; Sa'adiyah and Saemah, 2010), and both metacognitive and cognitive strategies are essential in the generation and development of ideas, as well as in helping learners to monitor their own writing tasks.

Research procedure

All the selected learners in the study were requested to write a 350-word expository essay for the pre-test writing session. The pre-test writing (essay) was scored according to the ESL Composition Profile (Jacobs *et al.*, 1981) which clearly defines five components, namely: content, organization, vocabulary, language use and mechanics. The essays were marked by the researcher and another English teacher who was not involved in the study. According to the SRSD model, students would have to go through a few specific steps to be able to understand and employ the strategies successfully. The instruction of the writing strategies took 8 to 12 weeks to complete. As previously mentioned, the teacher involved in teaching the instruction group was given instruction/practice sessions to ensure that the strategy teaching would be conducted correctly as per the SRSD model. The teacher instruction sessions formed a fundamental step in this study as the teacher needed to be clear of the teaching procedures and be able to confidently deliver the writing strategies in the classroom. During the teaching sessions of the strategies in class, the researcher was present as a non-participant observer to record and monitor the writing strategies instruction. At the end of the 12-week instruction sessions, all the research participants from both the instruction and control groups were again requested to write an expository essay for the post-test. The post-test writing scores obtained were compared to the pre-test writing scores. The difference in scores helped to determine whether the writing strategy instruction had a positive or negative impact on the learners' writing performance. After each session of the strategy instruction, the researcher interviewed a few randomly selected students to obtain their feedback on the teaching/learning sessions. The teachers involved in the research were also encouraged to provide their comments or suggestions on the writing strategies instruction sessions.

Data analysis

Data from the writing strategy- use questionnaire were

Table 1. Writing strategies used by intermediate proficiency level learners.

Writing strategies	Mean scores	S.D.	Percentage %	Rank of use	Frequency
Memory	3.00	0.88	16.10	3	Moderate
Cognitive	2.97	0.53	15.94	4	Moderate
Compensation	3.47	0.66	18.63	1	High
Metacognitive	2.88	0.65	15.46	6	Moderate
Affective	2.96	0.64	15.89	5	Moderate
Social	3.35	0.81	17.98	2	Moderate
Overall writing strategies	3.10	2.70			Moderate

Table 2. Frequency ratings for strategy use.

Frequency of use	Responses	Mean scores
High	Always	4.5 - 5.0
	Frequently	3.5 - 4.4
Medium/Moderate	Sometimes	2.5 - 3.4
	Infrequently	1.5 - 2.4
Low	Never	1.0 - 1.4

analysed using descriptive statistics in the form of mean scores and frequencies. As for the effectiveness of the writing strategy instruction, a comparison was conducted between the mean scores from the pre-test and post-test for both the instruction group and the control group.

RESULTS

Writing strategies used by intermediate proficiency level learners

To address the first research question, data on the writing strategy questionnaire were analysed using a software for the Social Sciences (SPSS Version 11) and the results are as in Table 1.

The frequency of strategy use for each strategy in the Writing Strategy Questionnaire was identified by the frequency ratings (Oxford, 1990) as shown in Table 2.

Table 1 shows that the ESL learners of intermediate proficiency level preferred using compensation strategy ($M = 3.47$; $SD = 0.66$) and social strategy ($M = 3.35$; $SD = 0.81$) in their writing tasks. The table also indicates that the learners employed metacognitive strategies the least ($M = 2.88$; $SD = 0.65$). The findings of the study are similar to the studies conducted by Jiang (2003) and Chen (2011) which found that Chinese EFL learners frequently used compensation strategies in their writing.

The effective use of compensation strategies could help learners with meaningful communication which in turn helps to increase learners' self-confidence and self-efficacy (Kim and Margolis, 2000), however in writing, learners also need to be taught and to be exposed to

more critical writing strategies (for example, metacognitive and cognitive strategies) that could help them retrieve and use stored information from their long-term memory as well as to plan their ideas mentally and in writing.

Effect of the writing strategy instruction on ESL learners writing performance

In addressing the second research question, essays written before and after the writing strategy instruction were marked using the ESL Composition Profile (Jacobs *et al.*, 1981). The results are as shown in Table 3.

As can be seen in Table 3, there is a significant difference on the organization element for the intermediate proficiency level learners ($M = 8.33$, $SD = 1.65$) [Put in the t-test statistics] in the pre-test scores and in the post-test scores ($M = 13.44$, $SD = 1.04$). Other components in the writing skills (content, vocabulary, language use and mechanics) also showed a significant difference both in the pre-test and post-test scores.

The findings suggest that the SRSD writing strategy instruction has helped to improve the writing performance of the ESL learners of intermediate proficiency level. This is evident in the post-test essays whereby learners were able to write longer and more meaningful sentences using the appropriate transition words taught in the writing strategy instruction. They were also able to develop topic sentences and provide supporting details which were not present before in the pre-test essays. The findings also support results of other studies that found learners who were exposed to explicit strategy instruction

Table 3. Writing skills score for learners of intermediate proficiency level groups.

Writing skill	Prof level	N	Pre-test		Post-test		p
			Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
Content	Inter	18	14.33	1.78	21.17	.51	.000
Organization	Inter	18	8.33	1.65	13.44	1.04	.000
Vocabulary	inter	18	8.00	1.46	11.61	1.09	.003
Language use	Inter	18	7.78	2.49	13.89	1.97	.017
Mechanics	Inter	18	3.22	.55	3.56	.51	.000

producing better writing compared to learners without such intervention (Shafiee *et al.*, 2013; Chow, 2007; Englert *et al.*, 1991; Graham *et al.*, 1991).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study has a few limitations. For instance, the number of subjects in this quasi-experimental study is limited, and to increase the number of learners, future research needs to include all upper secondary school learners in the school (students in Form 4 and Form 5). Another alternative is to examine the lower secondary school learners (Forms 1 to 3), which has a larger pool of participants. Introducing writing strategies to the lower secondary school learners could also benefit them as they would have more time to practice and adapt the strategies taught in writing essays later at the upper secondary school level. Another limitation of the study relates to the instruments. Although the Writing Strategy Questionnaire (WSQ) was prepared bilingually (in Bahasa Malaysia and in English), certain items in the questionnaire could be simplified to ensure that all the learners could fully understand the items. The questionnaire should also include a few items on the use of technology or digital tools as one of the strategies learners use in their writing tasks.

As the post-test scores of the ESL intermediate proficiency learners indicate that their essays showed improvements after the writing strategy instructions, future research should consider including ESL learners from the low proficiency level as well. With some modifications to the SRSD model to suit their proficiency level and writing skill, learners of low proficiency level could also be taught and encouraged to use effective writing strategies in the class. Writing plays a very important role in the academic and educational settings (Alexander, 2008; Graham and Perin, 2007) as well as in the professional world (Vahid and Samian, 2011). Equipping learners with a wide array of effective writing strategies that could assist them in both the academic and professional world may not seem impossible if most teachers are made aware of the benefits of writing strategies. To develop independent writers, writing instruction needs to begin at an early age, and the writing instruction should include effective writing strategies

(Williams, 2011).

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