The Impact of Strategy Use on Learners' Proficiency Level on Arabic, French, and English Writing: The Case of First Year EFL LMD Students-Tlemcen University

Abi-Ayad Maliha, Aboubakr Belkaid University, Algeria
abi_maliha2007@yahoo.fr

Abstract

As a large number of Algerian EFL learners display important deficiencies in writing in English, the present work aims to shed light on the use of effective language learning strategies by successful learners through an instrumental case study involving seven first-year EFL learners. While the study aims at comparing the strategies employed by good achievers in writing in L1, FL1, and FL2, it also attempts to state whether achievement in FL2 writing implies achievement in L1 and FL1, making use of triangulation methodology: task-production, think-aloud technique, and semi-structured interviews conducted with first-year EFL students and CWE teachers. The qualitative analysis revealed the following results: while the informants employed similar metacognitive, cognitive and affective strategies, they appeared to use more of these strategies yet with a higher frequency of cognitive ones in FL1 and FL2. The quantitative analysis of learners' task production revealed that learners had the best proficiency level in L1 writing, FL2 coming in the second position, and lastly FL1. As a result of the research findings, it proves essential to reconsider the teaching of EFL writing, emphasizing the writing process through explicit strategy instruction and more training at an early stage for a more efficient writing pedagogy.

1. introduction

Writing, which is undoubtedly one of the most difficult skills learners encounter when learning a language (be it second or foreign), plays a significant role in the educational life of Algerian learners since it is the skill upon which most of students' tasks and examinations are tested. Yet, it has been observed over the last few years that it is the skill in which learners, and more particularly first-year EFL university students, exhibit important writing deficiencies which obviously affect negatively their written performance, making an important number of teachers, namely comprehension and written production ones, complain about such a growing problem. However, such a problem is not limited to the target language only, but to the other two languages as well, i.e. Arabic and French. Regarding such a disheartening outcome of a quite lengthy experience of foreign language teaching/learning (at least seven years, i.e. four years at the middle school and three years at the secondary school), one has to question the suitability of the current instructional practices and writing pedagogies.

The present study is concerned with both the theoretical and practical aspects of writing in the foreign language, promoting and monitoring writing at first-year university level, and evaluating the efficiency of the use of specific writing strategies in the classroom. Considering the fact that writing strategies play a significant role in composing and writing efficiently requires investigation into the cognitive processes and writing strategies that Algerian university learners employ when composing. Thus, the ultimate aim of this research is to uncover successful learners' composing strategies, while attempting to provide a plan of action for learners' writing proficiency enhancement as well as development of effective instructional practices.

The main objective of this research is to closely examine learners' writing process, through highlighting the contextual variables that have shaped first-year EFL LMD students' writing behaviour and offer suggestions to help unsuccessful learners overcome the difficulties they experience in developing clear, effective writing in English. For this purpose, a case study of seven first-year EFL LMD students was undertaken to verify the hypotheses. Thanks to this small sampling, the present study allowed the researcher to examine in depth the writing process of each learner in L1, FL1, and FL2. For this purpose, three research instruments were used: paragraph writing as a production task to investigate learners' writing strategies, the think-aloud protocol, and a semi-structured interview conducted with both learners and comprehension and written production teachers to inquire about the way learners' composing process is undertaken, the content and the way the writing lesson takes place, and learners' proficiency level in writing.

2. Writing as a Language Skill

Whether first, second or foreign language through which new ideas and concepts are transmitted, writing is an integral and important skill in any academic environment. Writing is the transformation and representation of human

thoughts and information through written language (visual form). It is generally argued that writing is not only difficult but also a challenging mental recursive process during which writers have to undergo and manage other subprocesses (planning, constructing, organizing, evaluating, reviewing, reconsidering and refining their style) in order to transmit their message (Saddler et al. 2004: 3 qtd. in Westwood: 2008: 57). As a matter of fact, writing is believed to be "the most difficult skill to acquire because its development involves the effective coordination of many different cognitive, linguistic and psychomotor[1] processes'' (Westwood 2008: 56).

The ability to write and the simple creation of text according to Berninger et al. (2002, qtd. in Westwood 2008: 58) involve ''on the one hand lower-order transcription skills such as handwriting, punctuation and spelling, and, on the other hand, higher-order self-regulated thinking processes involved in planning, sequencing and expressing the content''. Differently stated, writing is not just a graphic representation of speech; more than this, it is goal-directed and the act of communicating ideas through a purposeful selection and organization of thoughts.

3. Learning Strategies Defined

Learning strategies are considered as techniques, instruments, and processes learners employ in their learning process so as to alleviate the acquisition, retention and utilization of

knowledge for functional, self-regulated participation that is compulsory for language acquisition and second language communicative-ability development (Rubin, 1975; Wenden and Rubin, 1987; O'Malley and Chamot, 1990). Therefore, since LLS imply thinking, monitoring, and evaluation of the learning process, they are believed to have an important role in language learning in the sense that they influence the learning process and are directly involved to improve language learning (Weinstein and Mayer, 1986; Mayer, 1988).

4. Classification of Learning Strategies

Several studies have been conducted by different scholars and researchers to categorize the multiple language learning strategies. Such strategies are classified by O'Malley and Chamot (1990) into three groups: metacognitive, cognitive, and socioaffective.

4.1 Metacognitive Strategies

Metacognitive strategies are mental actions or procedures employed by learners in the learning process to observe and manage their learning (Wenden, 1991). Metacognitive strategies may include making plans to learn, observing and considering the learning process while taking place, detecting one's understanding and controlling performance, spotting, evaluating and then rectifying errors and mistakes, also assessing the learning process after chore completion

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[1]Psychomotor represents the relationship between cognitive functions (mental activities) and physical movements of the body.

(O'Malley et al., 1985 qtd. in Harden, 2013). Differently stated, metacognitive strategies make learners active participants in their learning process by perceiving and considering their own learning, being aware of their own mental actions, and then directing and adjusting their learning (O'Malley and Chamot, 1990). Regarding writing, metacognitive strategies are considered as processes learners go through to design their writing, organize and structure it, also observe and assess it (Wenden, 1991 qtd. in Congjun, 2005).

4.2 Cognitive Strategies

Cognitive strategies are mental procedures learners go through to obtain knowledge and use it in actual learning situations to perform specific tasks (Dickinson, 1996 qtd. in Gimeno, 2003). Cognitive strategies permit learners' direct participation and involvement in the learning process by being aware of their strengths and weaknesses, also making them (learners) capable to develop notions and skills to foster learning (Gimeno, 2003; Brown, 2007). Cognitive strategies facilitate the implementation of the metacognitive strategies and help learners gain and enlarge confidence to overcome the different problems and obstacles encountered in the learning process. In so doing, learners become able to identify the different ways conducting to educational achievement and success (Gimeno, 2003; Brown, 2007).

4.3 Affective Strategies

Affective strategies are techniques learners use to help them manage feelings, attitudes, and motivation when doing their chores (Oxford, 2003; Harden, 2013). Affective strategies prove to be of great importance in language learning in that they help learners reduce or overcome stress, anxiety and other obstacles hindering the learning process. Taking into account one's feelings and considering them, managing emotions, also spotting stress and anxiety level appear to play a significant role in the learning process (Oxford, 2003). Yet, it is argued that it is only gradually as learners become older, reach higher levels of instruction, and then become more proficient that they (learners) no more feel it necessary to employ affective strategies (Oxford, 2003).

4.4 Social Strategies

Social strategies, according to Oxford (2003) and Brown (2007), are techniques and approaches learners use to facilitate the learning process. In so doing, learners become active participants in the learning process by communicating with each other and working collaboratively. Social strategies may be in the form of inquiries learners make when they require assistance, explanation, or confirmation to do their language chores (Oxford, 2003; Brown, 2007).

5. Strategies Used by Successful Language Learners

Studies in the field of second and foreign language learning stress the importance of learning strategies and the significant role learners have in the process of language learning. As a result, both learners and the strategies employed in language learning have received more attention and a more

prominent place in research over the past decades (Zare, 2012).

5.1 Studies on Successful Language Learners

Thinking, reflecting, monitoring and even evaluating the learning process prove to be important procedures to understand the behaviour of successful learners because several studies demonstrate that the strategies employed by good or expert language learners differ from those of unsuccessful and novices. One of the most important aspects of such studies also demonstrates that good, proficient or expert learners employ a larger number, wider range, and more appropriate strategies than poor, less proficient ones or novices (Naiman et al. 1978; O'Malley et al., 1985; Wenden and Rubin, 1987; O'Malley and Chamot, 1990; Hamzaoui, 2006).

Unlike unsuccessful learners who lack metacognitive awareness of what strategies to use and how to employ them to complete their tasks, successful ones are aware and tend to select the most appropriate and useful strategies that best fit their learning situation, and know why and how to employ them depending on the context, combining and adapting them to the requirements of the language task being learned or performed (Chamot and Kupper 1989; O'Malley and Chamot, 1990; Vann and Abraham, 1990 qtd. in Lessard-Clouston, 1997). Said differently, successful learners possess declarative, procedural and conditional knowledge of language learning strategies. Accordingly successful learners tend to plan, organise, control or monitor their work and reflect on it. They are aware of the knowledge and skills they possess and use the appropriate strategies to acquire or implement such skills.

5.2 Characteristics of the Good Language Learner

Different studies explain how and what good language learners do to acquire the target language. Good language learners are categorized with reference to their individual attributes, learning styles and adopted strategies in the learning process (Rubin 1975; Stern 1975; Rubin and Thompson 1994). Good language learners are believed to:

- Be autonomous learners, having personal learning techniques,

- Categorize, arrange, and structure knowledge of the item being learned,

- Innovate by using the language and employing in concrete situations the previously received linguistic knowledge,

- Look for and create situations, also devote actual sessions to employ the language even out of classroom settings

- Employ recollection strategies such as reminders to reintroduce the previously received knowledge and learned items,

- Always rely on and learn from their former learning experience,

- Rely on their former experience in language learning to learn another language,

- Rely on context and surrounding signs for understanding,

- Formulate hypotheses and reach conclusions,

- Employ specific devices to avoid comprehension problems and then maintain oral communication

- Have sound knowledge of the language productive skills and be able to employ and modify language considerably in accordance with the given situation,

(Rubin 1975; Stern 1975; Rubin and Thompson 1994, qtd. in Zare 2012: 162,163)

5.3 Composing Strategies Used by Successful Language Learners

With regard to writing, several studies have investigated the composing processes and strategies of second language successful learners (writers). Consequently, researchers conclude that learners have almost the same composing process and that the same taxonomy of writing strategies is identified among these learners. In addition, several factors seem to influence good writing. Such factors are language proficiency, L1 writing competence, use of cohesive devices, metacognitive knowledge about the writing task, writing strategies and writers' personal characteristics (Arndt, 1987; Victori, 1995; Angelova, 1999). Strategies have a significant role in the writing process in the sense that they help

learners gain more autonomy, self-regulation and then proficiency (Hsiao and Oxford, 2002).

Many educationalists agree that successful learners tend to use several strategies that help them monitor, direct and achieve the task at hand. These strategies involve setting and resetting goals, planning, generating ideas, exploring their relationships, and relating them in some kind of analytic framework to reach a specific reader (audience). Second language successful writers spend more time thinking and planning. In this respect, Raimes (1985), and Sasaki (2000 qtd. in Congjun, 2005) state that successful writers do more global planning and are able to adjust it throughout the whole composing process. Said differently, the plan or outline learners prepare at the beginning of their writing process changes; that is, the more learners advance in their writing the more they modify their planning and adapt it according to these modifications. Cumming (1989: 23) states that: "poor writers spend less time thinking and planning and work in small planning units, writing a phrase at a time and asking themselves what to do next". Cumming explains that unlike successful learners, unsuccessful ones spend shorter time making a less global planning.

In terms of reviewing and revising, Raimes (1987) and Victori (1995) state that good or successful writers seem to review more often and more thoroughly and hence devote more time to this stage. When reviewing, good writers not only pay attention to linguistic concerns and accuracy but also consider change of focus or meaning (Victori, 1995). For his part, Porte (1996: 107)

explains that: "learners make revisions that affect the global aspects" of their writing. Poor or unskilled writers usually devote and restrict their reviewing strategies to the surface level, editing at word level, focusing on individual words and phrases (Porte, 1996; Hamzaoui, 2006).

6. Results and Discussion

The seven informants displayed similar writing processes and variety in strategy use across the three languages: English, French, and Arabic. As far as strategy use in EFL composition is concerned, the results obtained revealed that the seven informants had the same writing behaviour: going through the three stages of the composing process. All the informants used major metacognitive strategies such as topic reading, key words identification, planning, brainstorming, self-monitoring and revision for the conception, organization and evaluation of their writing, as well as cognitive ones such as approximation, circumlocution, translation, rereading and elaboration to help them (learners) overcome the obstacles and language barriers. Affective strategies such as avoidance and risk-taking helped learners lower anxiety, and enhance motivation to overcome their difficulties and become more confident. Besides, both teachers' and learners' interview revealed that collaborative work made learners employ social strategies such as teacher/peer questioning (e.g. for clarification) when needed.

The obtained results showed that although learners employed the same metacognitive,

cognitive, and affective strategies to compose in L1, FL1, and FL2, they nonetheless employed more strategies and needed more cognitive ones in the two foreign languages. Such a fact is mainly due to learners' linguistic competence in FL1 and FL2. They employed fewer cognitive strategies in the Arabic paragraph and concentrated more on metacognitive ones to construct, organize and evaluate their paragraphs, making learners use revision and self-monitoring more effectively.

With regard to achievement in the three languages, the obtained results revealed that while learners appeared to be proficient in L1, the two foreign languages seemed to pose problems to the informants. Although learners employed the same writing strategies when composing in the three languages, learners' linguistic competence differed from one language to the other, making them rely too much on cognitive strategies to overcome their language barriers. Consequently, such learners appeared to be more proficient when writing in Arabic and English compared to French.

Since strategies prove to be of vital importance in the composing process, also because they might be taught and transferred from one task to another and from one language to the other, it would be advisable to integrate explicit strategy instruction at an early level to raise learners' awareness concerning such strategies, their use, role and usefulness in the writing process. It would also be helpful provided that the teacher devises different tasks in which learners would have regular training related to paragraph writing and strategy use.

To conclude, since EFL writing is a challenging and demanding task for a large number of EFL learners, it is indispensable to equip them with the necessary strategies and skills which may help them (learners) better control their own learning and improve their writing performance. As a matter of fact, one important way to achieve such a goal is through explicit strategy instruction and effect to raise learners' awareness of such strategies (declarative knowledge), why, when (procedural knowledge) and how to use them in other new written tasks (conditional knowledge). Other features such as rhetorical structures, discourse markers, the relation between the writer-reader, purpose of writing, voice, topic expectations also prove necessary for the production of a good piece of writing.

7. Conclusion

While the present research explored the writing process of successful first-year EFL LMD students with reference to the strategies employed by these same learners in the composing process in the three concerned languages, the main concern was to show that writing is a recursive dynamic process requiring both linguistic and strategic competences. The findings obtained from this study provide a better understanding of the ways EFL learners approach writing and the strategies (why and how strategies are used) they employ in their composing process. It also exemplifies why some strategies are used successfully while others are not, that is, the differences between successful and less successful strategy use. A comparison of successful and less successful strategies is hoped to

make possible the teaching of effective strategies and avoidance of those that impede progress. As a matter of fact, the teaching of the writing skill with a focus on the writing process needs to be reassessed. For this reason, it is recommended to gain more insights into the student's learning experience so as to promote teaching because mastering a language is mastering learning. Such understanding by EFL teachers in general and comprehension and written production teachers in particular would enable educators to integrate strategy instruction into formal teaching and help learners learn more effectively. It is a valuable resource to help less successful ones enhance their writing performance.

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