A Think-aloud Protocol Investigation of Two EFL Students' Essay Planning Strategies at Sétif 2 University, Algeria

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Abstract

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This article summarises the results of a case study conducted to compare the planning processes and strategies of two EFL undergraduate student writers at the Setif University English Department. The study participants were selected and categorized as high-and low-intermediate achieving writers according to pre-test scores. The data were collected from the participants' think-aloud protocols and their written products to evaluate their writing quality. After the transcription and coding of the think-aloud protocols, the results were analysed qualitatively, and a comparison was made between the planning processes and strategies used by both participants. The results demonstrated that although both participants followed the fundamental stages of the writing process, the high-achieving writer planned more strategically and purposefully, at the local as well as the global level, than did the low-achiever. In addition, the written product of the former was of a better quality than that of the latter, mainly at the level of content and organization.

Key words: Expository writing, high-/ low- achieving writer, planning (processes/ strategies), think-aloud procedure/ protocols, writing performance.

Résumé

Une Étude à travers des Protocoles Verbaux des Stratégies de Planification d'un Essai chez Deux Étudiants de Langue Anglaise au Niveau de l'Université de Sétif 2, Algérie

Cet article résume les résultats d'une étude de cas qui a pour but de comparer les processus et les stratégies qui ont été utilisés par deux étudiants de langue anglaise langue étrangère, au sein du département d'anglais à l'Université de Sétif 2. Les participants de cette étude ont été sélectionnés et catégorisés en tant que scripteur ayant un haut ou bas niveau (de performance écrite) à l'aide des résultats d'un pré-test. Les données de cette étude ont été collectées à travers les protocoles verbaux des deux participants ainsi que leurs productions écrites qui ont servies à évaluer leur performance écrite. Après la transcription et le codage des protocoles verbaux, les résultats ont été analysés qualitativement, et une comparaison a été établie entre les stratégies utilisées par les deux participants. Les résultats ont montré, et cela malgré le fait que les deux participants ont respecté les étapes fondamentales du processus de l'écriture, que le scripteur ayant un haut niveau a planifié son essai d'une façon plus stratégique et avec des objectifs précis, au niveau global et local, comparé au participant ayant un bas niveau. De plus, la production écrite du premier était d'une qualité meilleure que celle du dernier, notamment au niveau du contenu et l'organisation.

Mots clés: Ecriture expositive, scripteur ayant un haut/ bas niveau, processus/ stratégies de planification, techniques/ protocoles verbaux, performance écrite.

Introduction

Writing in English as a foreign language (EFL) requires a thorough understanding of the writing skills and conventions. However, the mastery and the effective use of the writing

strategies require further skills and practice at the various stages of the writing process (pre-writing, drafting, revising and editing).

This study aims at examining and comparing the planning processes and strategies used by high-intermediate and low-intermediate achieving (HAW and LAW) EFL student writers in processing their essays. It also examines the effect of planning strategy use on their writing performance.

The Planning Processes and Strategies

Planning is considered to be a highly cognitive process that requires a significant mental effort. It consists of a set of strategies that guide the writer through various steps that are purposeful and self-regulated to build an organized, meaningful and coherent piece.

There are two approaches to the planning process that are referred to as the top-down' and the 'bottom-up' approaches. The former consists of an "advanced planning" that takes place at the pre-writing stage, by using "concept maps and outlining", and the latter involves a "discovery" of ideas through free writing, which is followed by a recursive process of revision and organisation (Alamargot and Chanquoy, 2001; Deane et al., 2008; Elbow, 1973; in Graham MacArthur, and Fitzgerald, 2013, p. 193). According to Graham et al., advanced planning (or the top-down approach) is more beneficial for the writers who find difficulties in handling various cognitive processes at the same time. Therefore, they think that it is important for writing instructors to explain, explicitly, to their students the advanced planning strategies because the latter have considerable effects on the organization of their writing. They consider that "even skilled writers can be limited by working-memory capacity so that they cannot handle all the aspects of the writing task simultaneously" (Deane et al., 2008, p. 36; in Graham et al., 2013, p. 194).

The bottom-up approach, however, can be explained through the recursive nature of the planning process, as it is the

case with the whole process of writing. Thus, as students continue to generate ideas throughout the writing process, they often make decisions on which ideas to maintain and which ones to delete through further reflection and reading. Some writers would simply read through what they have written so far and decide on what to revise in their original plans; others consider the planning process recursively as they change ideas and thoughts, "visualize, and reenvision the structure and content of a written composition" (Graham et al., 2013, p. 200).

In this study, the researcher refers to the type of strategies that writers employ in the process of generating, outlining, and organizing their ideas for the purpose of facilitating the production of a coherent and meaningful essay. Examples of strategies that facilitate the planning of writing include setting a goal for writing (also referred to as 'local planning'), analysing a topic, evaluating information, 'referring to audience, genre, or purpose', and word choice.

The Planning Strategies of Skilled and Unskilled Writers

In examining the differences and the features that characterise skilled and unskilled writers, it is important to explain the concepts 'skilled' versus 'unskilled'. Researchers, like Sasaki (2000), Graham et al. (2013), and Saddler, et al. (2004) use other terms to refer to these two categories of writers, such as 'expert versus novice', 'proficient' versus 'non-proficient', 'good' versus 'poor', or 'professional' versus 'reluctant' or 'struggling' writers. These, and other terms, may fit into any context of language learning. In the context of writing, the terms 'skilled' and 'unskilled' may relate to various aspects, including the overall performance of a student, with its different components. By the latter, the author means aspects like language proficiency (i.e., the appropriate use of the various aspects of the target language for a particular purpose and in a particular context), the use of the rhetorical skills and strategies, as well as the general conventions of good writing.

As far as the relationship between writing performance and language proficiency is concerned, studies (Graham et al.,

2013; Leki, Cumming, and Silva, 2008) found that the latter is not the main aspect of weakness in writing among unskilled writers; rather, the weakness may generally be attributed to their unskilful use of the writing strategies, mainly planning and revision. They consider that language proficiency generally facilitates writing development in terms of the amount of content, vocabulary and grammar use rather than the overall writing performance. Sasaki (2000), on the other hand, claims that language proficiency is partially an aspect of difference in strategy use between the 'experts' and the 'novices'. Other studies (Akyel, 1994; in Leki, Cumming, and Silva, 2008) have yielded that both skilled and unskilled writers can produce organized compositions, with varying levels, regardless of their language proficiency level. This can explain the fact that planning strategy use may help struggling writers organize and produce coherent pieces, regardless of the amount of content and the variety and quality of the vocabulary generated. This can also entail the importance of planning recursively whereby the writers plan and reorganise their ideas as they write.

From the perspective of planning and strategy use, it is argued that some student writers tend to write freely, then add or delete as needed later because they think that there is no need for a structured outline or plan as the latter takes more time and mental effort, or because they already have a clear idea in mind, so for them, a plan is unnecessary. Thus, unlike skilled writers, developing or struggling writers tend to make minimal conceptual (mind-maps, conceptual maps) planning because they have a resistance towards taking an extra mental effort and the time required for planning, or simply because they ignore the importance of planning (McCutchen, 2006, in Graham et al., 2013). However, skilled writers plan more purposefully and strategically. They "put a great deal of thought" and effort into their text before and during writing. They may choose to use a "graphic organizer, a semantic map (for expository text), or an outline", or, simply, try "free writing" before drafting their essays. Regardless of how much time it takes them, they

consider spending an effort for a given planning strategy and write with a plan (Graham et al., p. 200).

The Effect of Planning Strategy Use on the Writing Performance

Studies related to EFL writing show that although much research has been done on EFL students' writing processes, little research shows the effect of planning strategies on the writing performance.

An examination of what has been said so far about the importance of planning in the creation and organization of a coherent piece of writing entails that the actions of planning that writers engage in may affect positively their writing, whether these actions occur at the pre-writing stage (advance planning) or throughout the whole process of writing (in a recursive way) (Yousun, 2008). In this respect, it is argued that "planning eases the processing load during task completion and enables [student writers] to produce a high-quality written text" (p.35). This explains the fact that planning facilitates, not only the mental and behavioural multi-tasks that a writer engages in while writing, but also leads to a better written product at the level of text quality and organization.

Similarly, in a study conducted on the effect of outlining on the writing performance, Kellog (1990) states that planning enhances the writing performance, considerably, at the level of writing quality and fluency, and that the effect is greater on the generation and organization of the texts. Planning can, hence, affect on the process as well as the product of writing, which is referred to, in this study, as the writing performance.

Therefore, Graham et al., (2013), believe that it is important for writing instructors to teach, explicitly, the planning strategies to students, mainly those with a limited experience in writing because when student writers plan purposefully and strategically, they, consequently, develop organized and coherent pieces. Thus, the effective use of the planning strategies facilitates the processing and organization of ideas.

The Use of the Think-aloud Method to Uncover the Writing Processes

The think-aloud is a method of research that has been used by researchers to collect data about the participants' cognitive processes. Researchers investigating the writing processes have used this method extensively in the last few decades as it provides "a valid source of data about participant thinking, especially during language based activities" (Charters, 2003, p. 68).

The think-aloud technique is introspective (Mebarki, 2008) in the sense that it allows the researcher to obtain information about the informant's thinking processes and behaviours while performing a cognitive task that cannot be observed through other methods. The procedure requires from the participant to "verbalize everything that comes to their minds while performing the writing task" (Abdel Latif, 2009, p. 1). In doing so, they are "prompted to talk when a long period of silence occurs" without "try [ing]… to plan out what they say or try to explain what they are saying" (Mebarki, 2008, p.119). The verbalized data are recorded, transcribed, coded, and then analysed. These data, combined with the written text generated from these verbalizations, are referred to as verbal protocols (Abdel Latif, 2009). They can be analysed quantitatively or qualitatively, depending on the researcher's aims (Charter, 2003).

In this study, the researcher used the think-aloud method to infer the writing processes and strategies used by two writers while composing an expository essay in an academic setting.

Methodology Design

Method

This study is an attempt to investigate the writing processes and strategies of two undergraduate students at the Setif University English Department, Algeria. It is qualitative in nature and is based on introspection, a research technique used to

collect data on the cognitive processes that learners make while performing some mental activities like reading or writing. More precisely, the focus of this study is on the planning processes and strategies of two student writers (high- and low-achievers) and the effect of planning strategy use on their writing performance.

Research Questions

In conducting this study, the researcher seeks to answer three questions, embracing a comparison between the strategies used by the two participants, the quality of their written products and the effect of planning strategy use on the writing performance. The following are the questions posed by the researcher:

Do high- and low-achieving writers use similar or different planning strategies in expository essay writing?

What differences and similarities do they demonstrate in essay production?

What is the effect of planning strategy use on the writing performance?

Study Participants

The participants of this study were two undergraduate students who received an academic writing course on essay writing, embracing different types and genres. They had had a sufficient background on essay writing conventions, techniques, processes, and genres. They were categorised as high- and low-intermediate achieving writers as a result of a pre-test that they took prior to the study. They are referred to, in this study, as high-achieving writer (HAW) and low-achieving writer (LAW) respectively.

The pre-test was part of a doctoral research that was conducted by the author of the present article. It consisted of writing an expository essay on one of the topics that were suggested by the researcher. The written products of the essay were evaluated in terms of four criteria: content (of the essay), organization (essay, paragraph, and sentence organization),

language (accuracy and appropriateness), and mechanics (spelling, punctuation and capitalization, as well as the format of the essay).

Research Instrument

The researcher used the think-aloud procedure to collect recorded data on the participants' verbalized thoughts and processes as they wrote an expository essay. The task of the participants was to think-aloud for a period of time (limited to 120 minutes) to complete all the stages of the process: pre-writing, drafting, and revising) while they were writing. They were encouraged to use as many drafts as they needed.

Beside the verbalized data, the written drafts of the essay were also used to evaluate the written products at the level of: content, organization, language accuracy and fluency, and mechanics.

The Think-aloud Procedure and Training

Before the participants took the think-aloud, they were trained by the researcher during four sessions, of two hours each, in order to understand the nature of the think-aloud technique and use it effectively. During the training, the participants were set to write about different topics and verbalize their thoughts (think-aloud) as they wrote. They were recorded and feedback was provided, by the researcher, along each of the processes and the steps they went through. The procedure was repeated during every session so that the participants familiarize with the technique.

After the participants grasped the think-aloud technique, the researcher set them to write an essay on one of the new topics that she suggested. They were asked to verbalize their thoughts and processes as they went through the three phases of writing (planning, drafting, and revising). The verbalized data were recorded by means of professional recorders and were transcribed for analysis at a later stage.

The Procedure of Data Treatment

The recorded data was first transcribed, and then coded for analysis. In addition to the verbal protocols, the hand-written drafts of the participants were also evaluated qualitatively to examine the effect of planning strategy use on the writing performance.

Transcription of the Think-aloud Protocols

The transcription of the verbal protocols consisted of writing down (typing) all the verbalized sentences, phrases, and words. The researcher also considered the short (1-5 secs.) and long (+ 5 secs.) pauses that were made by the verbalizers. The short pauses were transcribed using ellipsis (…) while the long ones were written between brackets as 'long/ longer pause'. Sounds like 'cough, sneeze, sigh, hesitation, or murmuring/ whispering' were written between brackets. The repeated words, expressions, or parts of/ full sentences were written according to the number of times they were verbalized, that is, in words. The researcher also considered utterances that referred to the use of another language (s), mainly French, but that was very rare.

Coding of the Planning Strategies

With reference to some strategy coding schemes used by Perl (1979), Raimes (1985), Akyel & Kamisli (1996), Mahfoudi (2003), and Wong (2005), the researcher adopted a scheme that is appropriate to the aims of the study, the focus of which was on the planning processes and strategies of the participants. She also considered some modified and new labels that were added after the transcription, coding and analysis of the strategies used by the participants.

In this study, the researcher was not interested in the amount (quantity), but rather in the type of strategies used by both writers. The type of strategies refer to the variety of strategies that a writer employs to generate, organize, and plan his/ her ideas during the pre-writing phase of the writing process. The list of the planning strategies, their definitions, and examples are given in the appendix.

Qualitative Analysis of the Think-aloud Protocols

In this study, the frequency and percentages of the planning strategies are not considered; rather, the focus is given to the type of strategies used by both participants in planning their essays. The analysis mainly considers a number of aspects that are explained in some detail in the following.

Deep verses surface level planning

It is clear from the verbal protocols that the high-achieving writer showed more skills and used more and varied strategies while planning, focusing more on the deep level analysis of the topic and the ideas while generating them, while the low-achiever went briefly through surface levels of idea generation and outlining. The latter gave little importance to the analysis of the topics that were suggested during the selection, which is an important aspect in goal-setting and decision-making in writing. The high-achiever, on the other hand, analysed the topics carefully before deciding on which one to write about. The decision was based, not on the writer's personal preference only, but was much more on the organizational pattern and the amount of information and knowledge the writer had about the topic.

In addition, in the process of outlining, the low-achiever used the listing strategy and then moved to mapping. The writer was repeating the same process twice, with minor modifications at the level of organization. However, the high-achiever used the listing strategy, taking into consideration the pattern of organization (cause-effect), and explaining the purpose behind each choice or decision he made. Decision-making was rarely considered by the low-achiever. The following is an extract from the HAW's analysis of the brainstorming strategy he selected and the purpose behind his decision. Thus, he explains:

… it helps me too much in I think in … in planning also in generating the ideas … and even I can tick the ideas and the phrases and even the expressions or the words that I think they are appropriate and even it helps me too much in planning and in the organization of ideas as well.

Moreover, while, generating ideas, the high-achiever was more analytical and a good manipulator of the knowledge he had about the topic. His analysis of each idea he generated was based on a close understanding he had of the topic. He evaluated his ideas as he generated them, and he also made an effective use of his short-term memory as he proceeded throughout the pre-writing stage of writing. In doing so, he often referred to the ideas he generated previously and connected them cohesively with those he had in mind while thinking aloud. The low-achiever, on the other hand, seemed to have interesting ideas about the topic, but lacked in the analytical skills, so, she made long pauses, hesitations while thinking, and questioning about information or structure. The following is an extract from the brainstorming and planning stage of the LAW.

No… to practise eh …another ski… eh different … practise … practise different… different skills, such as having eh… eh… practise sport or... having eh… how to say? Having… examinations…and …eh…having… How to say it? That…eh… many schools… eh em … do… do…eh…do… How to say it? How? I want to say eh having school eh… make an opportunity to have …to have eh… How to say it … in English? How to say it in English?

The extract shows that while the writer was generating ideas, she often made hesitations and was often questioning about the way to express an idea, expression, or word, and this happened more often during the whole stage of planning.

In brief, although both writers used a few strategies in common, such as brainstorming techniques (listing), repetition, and goal-setting (in differing ways), the way they manipulated them and the way they proceeded through the planning stage differed considerably, mainly at the level of analysis, thinking, and the evaluation of ideas as well as strategy awareness and self-regulation.

Local verses general planning

General planning refers to the organization of thoughts and the decisions a writer makes to proceed; whereas local planning refers to the decisions he/ she makes about what to write next. Local planning is also known as goal setting. Examples about the latter include, but are not limited to: goal setting related to content (generation of ideas), structure, word choice, strategy use, and pattern of organization.

As far as local and general planning are concerned, the student writers planned in slightly different ways. The High-achieving writer (HAW) planned more strategically at both levels (general and local) and was more aware of how to proceed to the next step (s), using appropriate strategies. He was also aware of the benefits of each strategy he used. For instance, in referring to the next step he proceeded through, he explained clearly the purpose as well as the benefits of the listing technique in brainstorming as he states:

So I would like to mention here the listing technique in the brainstorming… since it helps me too much in I think in in planning also in generating the ideas and even I can tick the ideas and the phrases and even the expressions or the words that I think they are appropriate and even it helps me too much in planning and in the organization of ideas as well.

Likewise, the Low-achieving Writer (LAW) used local planning and, compared to the HAW, she demonstrated a limited level of awareness about the strategies she used. She also proceeded through the next steps smoothly, but in a slow manner, with a lot of hesitations and long pauses. She set the goal (s) for content generation and strategy use, but she rarely did for word choice, structure, and organization (sentence, paragraph, or overall essay organization). The following is a sample of the writer's local planning as she referred to the technique of brainstorming she used, and, then, proceeded to the next step (s) that consisted of rereading the generated sentences, and later, writing, or in her words "choose[ing]", a thesis statement for the introduction.

... I wrote my brainstorming as sentences… I will read… I will reread them… people go to school for several reasons for many years all over the world… first, what I'm going to say in my introduction and … I will choose a thesis statement…then in my body…in the body….I'm going to write …I'm …I'm…How to say… Three paragraphs… three paragraphs are going to be about the causes … the reasons why people attending school… So, I'm going to focus on the causes… So, I will mention three causes of… three causes of why people attend school…

The student writer referred to the overall organization of the essay in the sense that she planned to devote 'three paragraphs' for the body of the essay, with a focus on the 'causes' or 'reasons' in a cause-effect essay genre. She referred to paragraph division in a logical way, whereby she would discuss one main reason in each single paragraph.

Although both writers used varied strategies and approached the planning multi-tasks in differing ways, at the local level of planning, they seemed to have proceeded through the major steps and set goals for the overall paragraph and essay organization in quite similar ways, at the global level.

Organization and awareness about organizational skills

As far as organization is concerned, various aspects of similarity between both participants were observed, but with varying levels and ways of approaching and manipulating the tasks. Thus, both writers seemed to have respected the layout of the essay, with its different parts (introduction, body, and conclusion), the structure and components of each paragraph, but they demonstrated some differences at the level of awareness, analysis, and manipulation of the strategies they used.

To illustrate, the HAW showed more awareness regarding the essay organization pattern that is appropriate to the purpose and genre of writing. He expressed this explicitly as he showed concern about the structure and content of the thesis statement, which is an important part of the introduction that constitutes the purpose of writing.

So I think I would like to say… because I should have find … and and even inside the thesis statement I should have a link between the causes and effects.

The writer was referring to the pattern of organization that, he thought, should be embedded in the thesis statement, where the purpose is expressed clearly and with focus.

Moreover, despite the fact that both writers had some aspects in common related to the overall organization, the HAW demonstrated more knowledge and awareness about the deeper aspects of organization. For instance, he explained the focus of his topic in terms of the plan or pattern of organization that is appropriate to the topic and purpose of the essay. To quote the writer:

So I would like to develop it by starting… by focusing much more eh… using block method … where I'm going to focus on on the causes rather than the effects since the effects I think that they… they are …they seem to me less than the causes…

The LAW, however, did not refer to the method/ pattern of organization (block versus point by point method); rather, she focused on the overall organization that she followed in relation to the topic of her essay. This indicates that although she had prior knowledge about essay organizational patterns, she was not aware of its importance; rather, she used the pattern unconsciously without referring to it. The writer also ignored and lacked in the deep level analysis and awareness of other organizational aspects related to paragraph and sentence levels, as well as the cohesive relationships among and between sentences and paragraphs.

Planning based on audience and purpose

Setting a goal for audience and the purpose of writing is considered to be of paramount importance in academic writing. It determines the writer's relationship with the reader as well as his/ her level of awareness about the genre, purpose, as well as the knowledge of the topic. The verbal protocols of the two writers showed that more often during the planning processes,

the high-achiever referred to the writing purpose and audience (i.e., considering the reader's feedback and/ or reaction towards the text) on many occasions, as in:

… because I think as much as … as much as the writer is much sticked to his topic as much as he attracts the readers' attentions and to get fluency from the readers and and eh and at least reading or listening from… from the audience.

The HAW also evaluated and explained the benefits of the topic and concluding sentences in relation to the audience, as he states:

… but I think that as much more as you write the concluding sentence as if you give the points of view or your understanding or you direct the understanding of the readers..

The LAW, on the other hand, referred in no occasion to the audience throughout the planning processes, but she mentioned the purpose and the genre of writing at the beginning of the stage as she selected the topic. This indicates that although the writer was aware of the purpose and genre of writing, she ignored the importance of the reader. The latter is closely related to the decisions a writer makes in relation to other aspects of the writing activity, including, but not limited to, the register (vocabulary choice) and style (academic) of writing.

Length of planning: short verses long time spent on planning

As far as the time devoted for the planning processes is concerned, considerable differences were observed between the two writers. Theses consisted of two main aspects: the amount of time and effort spent in the planning processes as well as the speed of thinking, talk, and writing that each writer demonstrated.

Thus, compared to the LAW, the HAW spent almost the double amount of time (40 minutes) in generating, outlining and organizing his essay, taking into consideration the analysis and evaluation of content generated in relation to the topic, purpose, genre and audience of writing, as well as the strategies used in

relation to the writing activities he was engaged in throughout the planning processes. The writer devoted sufficient time and effort for every step he made, including the explanation and analysis of the strategies he used in completing the multi-tasks of mental and behavioural processes he went through during the planning stage of writing.

Another aspect that was clearly observed among the two writers was the speed of thinking, talk (verbalized), and writing. The HAW was faster than the LAW in many ways, despite the length of time spent in planning. Thus, the former used highly cognitive processes in analysing, evaluating and manipulating the information, the language (especially the choice of vocabulary, sentence structure, and grammar) as well as the organizational skills that are required in expository essay writing. He demonstrated a high level of knowledge about the topic, critical thinking, planning and organizational skills. In performing these tasks, his high speed level did not limit the time he devoted to each step, strategy or task; rather, he showed a deep level of thinking, analysis and manipulation of the writing strategies.

In contrast, the LAW devoted less time and effort for the planning processes and demonstrated lower level skills of analysis and manipulation of the planning strategies, despite the fact that she went through the major steps of planning and performed most of the tasks required in the planning stage of writing. Her slow performance did not hinder the completion of her writing activities, but it showed, through the protocols, that she often lacked in information about the topic and strategies, mainly at the local level of planning, and she sometimes lost focus while thinking or writing.

Pausing behaviours: long versus short pauses

Unlike the high-achieving writer, the low-achiever used long pauses (of more than 10 seconds) and hesitations more frequently and at various levels during the planning processes. The long pauses were mainly the result of a lack of information, strategy, or an absence of thinking/ lack of focus rather than a

thinking activity. However, the high-achiever demonstrated a more active thinking-aloud rather than silent thinking. This was shown in the reading and rereading of previous ideas/ parts of a sentence while thinking and trying to connect new ideas to the pre-generated pieces of information. The pauses that were made by the latter did not generally exceed five (05) seconds.

Thus, the pauses made by the writers while thinking aloud did not generally show silent thinking; rather, they were due to either a lack of information about the topic (while generating ideas) or a lack of analytical skills. Thus, skills and strategies like analysing and evaluating previous information, linking (between ideas), goal-setting strategies (local planning) (such as, reference to vocabulary choice, sentence structure/ meaning, or cohesion; reference to topic, genre, or audience), as well as an ability to generate more details about a particular idea were rarely used by the LAW. The HAW, on the other hand, showed a higher level of awareness, knowledge, and skills as he was reflecting and thinking, analysing and evaluating throughout the whole process of planning.

Discussion of the Results

The following is a brief discussion of the results obtained through the think-aloud protocols in relation to the questions posed by the researcher.

1. Do high- and low-achieving writers use similar or different planning strategies in expository essay writing?

The analysis of the verbal protocols showed that here was a wide range of planning strategies that were used by both high- and low-achievers, but they differed in type and the way they were employed. The strategies used by the high-achiever were more purposeful and self-regulated, as it was shown through the writer's awareness and skills in selecting appropriate strategies for a specific purpose/ genre and at a specific stage of writing. However, the low-achiever, demonstrated a limited awareness and use of the planning strategies and a lack of analytical skills related, mainly, to content generation and organization.

In more concrete terms, the high-achiever gave more importance to the deep level processes and used a combination of global and local planning strategies, while the low-achiever focused more on the surface level processes and showed a limited level of awareness about the local planning strategies and analytical skills. This can be explained by the fact that the planning strategies used by skilled writers may differ in type and use from those used by less-skilled writers, as it is proven in previous studies (Sasaki, 2000; Graham et al., 2013). Moreover, it was observed that the time allocated for planning processes is an important aspect that writers should consider. Studies (Manchon & De Larios, 2007; Yousun, 2008) have shown that unlike unskilled writers, the skilled ones take more time in planning. This results in more positive effects on their writing performance.

2.   What differences and similarities do they demonstrate in essay production?

The essays were evaluated in terms of content (richness and amount of information, as well as vocabulary choice), organization (internal and external organization, at the sentence, paragraph and essay levels), language use (fluency and accuracy) and mechanics.

Thus, at the external level of organization, the written drafts were moderately short, comprising of two body paragraphs, with varying lengths. In addition, both essays seemed to abide with the general norms of surface organization, layout, and spacing. The differences, however, were shown in the deep level of organization and development, as well as language fluency and vocabulary choice. In other words, the low-achiever demonstrated some weaknesses at the level of internal organization and language use as compared to the high-achiever, who showed a better performance at the deep level organization and the development of ideas. The latter was observed clearly (in the verbal protocols) through strategy use and the way the knowledge of the topic and organization of ideas was manipulated and self-regulated.

3. What is the effect of planning strategy use on the writing performance?

Although both participants showed various differences in the types of planning strategies they used and the ways in which they employed them, their performance demonstrated that there was an effect, of varying degrees, on their writing processes and products. More particularly, the high-achieving writer planned more strategically and effectively, and showed a higher level of awareness and manipulation of the multi-tasks he was engaged in during the planning processes, compared to the low-achiever. His effective use of the planning strategies resulted in a better quality essay, especially at the level of organization and the development of ideas.

Moreover, it was observed that the high-achieving writer made an effective use of the planning strategies that facilitated the demanding mental multi-tasks as he planned (Graham et al., 2013). His high level of awareness was mainly observed through the way he evaluated the importance of the strategies he employed and the way (s) in which these strategies eased his planning processes. He, also, referred more frequently, to the steps and stages of planning, as well as drafting (the next stage after planning) that he was going to proceed through and how the strategies he used in advance would facilitate the (immediate as well as the upcoming) writing tasks for him. This can be interpreted by the fact that the writer was aware of the positive effects that the planning strategies have on the process of as well as the product of his writing.

As far as the product of writing is concerned, the effect of planning strategy use was clearly observed in the high-achiever's essay, which was generally organized, coherent, cohesive, and clear. It also demonstrated a logical organization, based on the purpose, topic, and the type of the essay. These aspects were relatively present in the low-achiever's essay, but with some

deficiencies in the internal organization and connectedness between ideas and sentences.

Implications for EFL Writing Instruction

This study brought about important findings that have contributed to a clear understanding and a body of knowledge on the planning processes and strategies used by High- and Low-achieving writers in an EFL undergraduate level.

The results of the study showed clearly that there is a tight relationship between planning and the writing performance. In other words, using effective planning strategies has a positive effect on producing an organized, clear and coherent essay. It is therefore, important for writing instructors to adopt effective techniques of teaching the writing strategies at the different levels of the writing process, and to emphasize the importance of planning through explicit teaching (Graham and Harris, 2005; Graham et al, 2013).

Moreover, and as part of the writing course, setting goals for a course based on regular practice of strategy use among different levels of learners and for different purposes of the writing program is the key for success in developing autonomous writers, who would implement the learned knowledge and skills on how to use the writing strategies more effectively and with ease. Writing instructors need to understand clearly the difficulties that struggling learners face as they approach writing tasks of differing purposes and demands. Therefore, dealing with these learners independently would guide them through to improve their skills and develop a sense of autonomy over time.

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Appendix: The List of the Planning Strategies, their Definitions and Examples

Planning Strategies	Code	Definition	Example
Assessing/ Evaluating/ analysing content or strategy	As.	Judging one's writing either positively or negatively	As I said before the concluding sentence is of paramount importance since it directs meaning and it provides some ideas about what is… about … about what was discussed
General planning	GP	Organizing thoughts and deciding how to proceed	In this plan I have mentioned two paragraphs for the causes… because … I think that they are divided into two sections …
Goal setting/ decision making based on purpose/ genre or topic	GS	Making decisions related to the purpose/ genre, or the topic of writing.	So here I would like to write the concluding sentence…
Idea generation	IG	Generating a new/ completing an idea	And then also people would have a dissatisfied attitude ... attitude towards their … their government … towards the policy of the country…
Local planning/ goal setting	LP/ GS	Deciding what to write next	So here I would like to write the concluding sentence…
Periods of silence (pause)	PS	No action (writing/ thinking aloud) is taking place	(...)
Questioning about content/ structure/ other aspects of writing	Q	Asking questions related to content/ structure/ or other aspects of writing	And here is the problem or here is the question…How can I find the link between the causes and the effects in the thesis statement itself?

Reading/ rereading/ repetition	R	Reading/ rereading/ Repeating (a generated) word/ or part/complete sentence (s) while writing	So I… I think there is joblessness… poverty… unethical practices… the economy suffers from the underground of the eco… the economy suffers from the underground of the economy …
Reference to audience, purpose/ genre, or topic	Ref.	Relating audience, purpose, or genre/ topic to the activity of writing	I think as much as … the writer… [sticks] to his topic as much as he attracts the readers' attention…
Reference to cohesion/ coherence	Coh.	Establishing a link between sentences/ paragraphs	… and even inside the thesis statement I should have a link between the causes and effects
Reference to strategy use	SU	Mentioning the strategy used/ its importance	So I would like to mention here the listing technique in the brainstorming… since it helps me too much in … planning also in generating the ideas
Editing	Ed.	Adding or deleting a word/ expression/ or an idea	I would like to …. to omit this one ... and… and leave just joblessness…poverty… unethical practices…