

An Investigation into First Year Students' Learning Strategies in Writing at the Department of English in Batna 2 University: Present Issues and Future Implications

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Abstract

This paper aims at providing a survey of the development and types of language learning strategies (LLS) with a special emphasis on their usage in the writing skill. Besides, it investigates their use by Algerian EFL (English as a Foreign Language) first year students at the department of English language and literature at Batna 2 University. The study determines if the students are aware of the LLS that are used in writing and whether they are employing them. Data was collected during the academic year 2016–2017 from 63 students by means of a questionnaire designed by the author¹. The results of the questionnaire revealed that the majority of the sample, i.e. (71.43%) is not aware of the strategies used in writing.

Key words: language learning strategies (LLS), cognitive strategies, metacognitive strategies, social strategies, affective strategies, writing strategies, writing skill

Abstract in Arabic

المخلص

سننترق من خلال هذا المقال لمختلف أنواع استراتيجيات التعلم اللغوي وتطورها، وهذا من خلال التركيز على توظيفها في المهارة المتعلقة بالكتابة. هذا إضافة إلى البحث في استعمال هذه الاستراتيجيات من قبل طلبة اللغة الانجليزية كلغة أجنبية في الجزائر، ولهذا الغرض قمنا بدراسة ميدانية مع طلبة السنة الأولى بقسم اللغة الإنجليزية وأدائها بجامعة باتنة 2.

يهدف من خلال هذه الدراسة إلى معرفة ما إذا كان الطلبة على وعي بهذه الإستراتيجيات

وإن كانوا يوظفونها خلال عملية الكتابة.

جمعنا جل البيانات خلال العام الدراسي 2016/2017 من خلال تقديم لائحة من الأسئلة لثلاثة وستون طالبا 63. وبينت النتائج المتحصل عليها (من خلال الأجوبة المقدمة) أن معظم طلبة العينة المدروسة (71.43) ليسوا على وعي بالاستراتيجيات خلال عملية الكتابة.

¹ See appendix

1. Introduction

There are many factors which affect the writing skill, among which knowledge about the writing task, language proficiency, L1 writing competence, use of cohesive devices, writing strategies and the writer's personal characteristics¹. Our goal is to concentrate on the learning strategies since this is the aim of our study.

We think that exploring the theoretical aspect of the repertoire of the writing strategies would be of great benefit for our work since these strategies help learners to improve their writing. So, the first part of this paper will be devoted to LLS.

Research has shown that there are two kinds of language learners: successful language learners and unsuccessful language learners. Successful language learners use a wide range of strategies that show their active involvement in learning². Moreover, Wallace³ argues that "...successful learners do apply specific strategies to the task of learning".

The word 'strategy' comes from the ancient Greek word 'strategia', which means steps or actions taken for the purpose of winning a war.

Many researchers tried to define LLS, among them were Maftoon and Seyyedrezaei⁴, who believe that "learning strategies are the conscious

¹ M., Angelova (1999). *An exploratory study of factors affecting the process and product of writing in English as a foreign language*. Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, State University of New York, Buffalo.

² W., Littlewood (1984). *Foreign and second language learning*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. p. 67.

³ M., J., Wallace, (1998). Action research for language teachers: Learner strategies and learner interviews. *ELT Journal*, Vol. 42/3. Eloise Pearson. Cambridge University Press. p. 157.

⁴ P. Maftoon, S.H. Seyyedrezaei (2012). Good Language Learner: A Case Study of Writing Strategies. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, Vol. 2, No. 8, pp. 1597-1602. ACADEMY PUBLISHER Manufactured in Finland. p. 1597
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thoughts and actions that learners take in order to achieve a learning goal.” They further argue that language teachers should regard both the learners' strategies and motivation as “integral elements in the design and implementation of effective language instruction”.

The second part of this paper will deal with the writing skill. Indeed, writing is a difficult skill to master since it involves the mastery of a variety of other sub-skills, such as the development of an idea, the mastery of mental representations of knowledge and the experience with subjects¹.

1.1. Statement of the problem

Writing is a challenging activity for both experienced and novice writers. It is a difficult task to undertake for native speakers as well as for second and/or foreign language users. The idea of the present study has emerged from our experience as a teacher of written expression for over ten years. We have noticed that first year students at the department of English in Batna 2 University fail to write a satisfactory piece of writing at the end of the year even if they are trained well in the different steps of the writing process and the writing genres, i.e. narration, description, exposition and argumentation. We believe that the reason behind such a handicap may lie in their ignorance of the use of effective writing strategies.

1.2. Aims of the study:

To offer a theoretical synthesis of the language learning strategies and the writing skill

To explore first-year students' learning strategies in writing (at the department of English, university of Batna 2, Algeria)

¹ J. Horvath (2001). Advanced writing in English as a foreign language: A Corpus-Based Study of Processes and Products. *Lingua Franca Csoport*. http://www.geocities.com/writing_site/thesis

1.3. Research questions

Question 1: Do first year students of English as a foreign language at the department of English in Batna 2 University use learning strategies in their writing?

Question 2: If the students use learning strategies in their writing, what are these strategies?

2. Literature review

2.1. Learning strategies

Language learning strategies (LLS) have been given many definitions. For Oxford¹ learning strategies are the steps or behaviours that are used by learners to facilitate the acquisition, memorization, retrieval and use of new data.

On the other hand, O'Malley and Chamot² defined learning strategies as "... complex procedures that individuals apply to tasks". However, Williams and Burden³ consider strategies as "the executive processes which manage and coordinate the skills". These strategies should be purposeful and goal-oriented.

According to the above-mentioned authors learners use many types of strategies to learn a second or foreign language. Some of these strategies are cognitive or metacognitive, others are social or affective.

Types of Learning Strategies

Rubin⁴, one of the earliest researchers in the field of learning strategies, defined learning strategies as "the techniques or devices

¹ R., Oxford (1989). *The role of styles and strategies in second language learning*. Washington, D.C.: Eric Digest.

² J. M., O'Malley & A. U. Chamot (1990). *Learning strategies in second language acquisition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. p 52.

³ M., Williams & R. L., Burden (1997). *Psychology for language teachers: A social constructivist approach*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. p. 145.

⁴ J., Rubin (1975). What the "good language learner" can teach us. *TESOL Quarterly*, Vol. 9, pp. 41-51. p. 43.

which a learner may use to acquire knowledge”. In 1981, however, she identified two types of learning strategies: those which contribute directly to learning, and those which contribute indirectly to learning. She subdivided the direct learning strategies into six subgroups: clarification/verification, monitoring, memorization, guessing/inductive inferencing, deductive reasoning and practice, and the indirect learning strategies into two types: creating opportunities for practice and production tricks.

We can divide language learning strategies into four types: cognitive, metacognitive, social and affective.

Cognitive Strategies

Cognitive strategies “operate directly on incoming information, manipulating it in ways that enhance learning”¹. They include rehearsal, organization and elaboration processes. Elaboration processes are influencing, summarizing, deduction, imagery and transfer.

Williams and Burden² define cognitive strategies as “mental processes directly concerned with the processing of information in order to learn, that is for obtaining, storage, retrieval or use of information”.

Cognitive strategies include inferencing (guessing meaning from context) and elaboration (relating new information to other concepts in memory).

As mentioned above, Rubin³ identified six main cognitive strategies contributing directly to language learning: clarification/verification, guessing/inductive inferencing, deductive reasoning, practice, memorization and monitoring.

¹J. M., O'Malley & A. U. Chamot (1990). *Learning strategies in second language acquisition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. p. 44.

²M. Williams & R. L. Burden (1997). *Psychology for language teachers: A social constructivist approach*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. p. 148.

³ Rubin (1981, 1987) (in O'Malley and Chamot: 1990, p. 149).

1. Clarification/verification refers to the strategies that are used by learners to check their understanding of a rule or language item.
2. Guessing/inductive inferencing refers to the strategies that deal with making hypotheses about how the language works. In order to make hypotheses, learners need to choose relevant information, concentrate on what is important, memorize and use information as well as samples of the language.
3. Deductive reasoning is the strategy in which the learners use their knowledge of general rules in order to produce or understand language.
4. Practice means the memorization and use of language. This includes strategies such as representation and rehearsal.
5. Memorization is the storage and retrieval of information. Such strategies include mnemonic strategies and using lexical groupings.
6. Monitoring means checking one's performance, including noticing errors and observing how a message is received.

Metacognitive Strategies

Metacognitive strategies are “higher order executive skills that may entail planning for, monitoring or evaluating the success of a learning activity”¹. Examples of metacognitive strategies include planning the organization of written discourse, selective attention, and monitoring, i.e. to select a best guess of the message's meaning based on available information. Metacognitive strategies originated from the term “metacognition” (knowing about knowing), which means “knowledge about cognition or the regulation of cognition”².

¹ (Brown et al; 1983) (in O'Malley and Chamot: 1990, p. 44)

² (O'Malley and Chamot: 1990).

Knowledge about cognition involves applying the thoughts about our cognitive operations of or others', whereas the regulation of cognition involves planning, monitoring and evaluating a learning or problem-solving activity consciously. Among the metacognitive strategies cited by the above-mentioned authors, we find: directed attention, i.e. directing one's own attention to the learning task, and self-evaluation, i.e. appraising the success and difficulties in one's own learning efforts.

Robin considers metacognitive strategies as strategies used to "oversee, regulate and self-direct language learning". These involve: planning, prioritizing, setting goals and self-management.

Social Strategies

Social strategies are used by learners to maximize their exposure to the target language, such as reading books, watching films and imitating conversations in the foreign language. They also include the behaviours that learners do to interact with their peers and with native speakers (e.g. asking questions for clarification and cooperating with others).

In 1990, Oxford¹ developed a language learning strategy system, which includes two main classifications: direct strategies and indirect strategies, and six groups: cognitive, metacognitive, memory-related, compensatory, affective and social.

Affective Strategies

Affective strategies serve to regulate emotions, motivation and attitudes. They include the following: identifying one's need and anxiety level, talking about feelings, rewarding oneself for good performance and using deep breathing or positive self-talk. Now, we move to the teaching of LLS.

Teaching LLS can aid language teachers in helping students attain the goals of improving their mastery of the target language and of learning about the target culture. The aim of teaching LLS is to help students to

¹ R. Oxford (1990). *Language learning strategies: What every teacher should know*. New York: Newbury House.

consciously control how they learn so that they can be efficient, motivated and independent language learners.

2.2. Writing skill

Definition of writing:

The Griffith Institute for Higher Education¹ defines written communication as follows:

Written communication is the ability to use the conventions of disciplinary discourse to communicate effectively in writing with a range of audiences, in a variety of modes (e.g., persuasion, argument, exposition), as context requires, using a number of different means (e.g., graphical, statistical, audio-visual and technological)

Moreover, Barkaoui² writes the following about ESL writing:

Writing is one of the most difficult skills that second-language (L2) learners are expected to acquire, requiring the mastery of a variety of linguistic, cognitive, and sociocultural competencies. As many teachers attest, teaching L2 writing is a challenging task as well

Approaches to Teaching Writing

Since the eighties, product and process approaches have dominated the teaching of ESL/EFL writing. However, since the nineties, genre approaches have taken the lead. And then the strategy approach has overrun the preceding approaches to teaching writing.

The product approach

In the product approach, writing has four steps: familiarization, controlled writing, guided writing, and free writing. The first stage gives the learners information about some features of a particular type of text. In the second and third stages, the students freely practice the

¹⁹ Griffith Institute for Higher Education, Griffith University, Nathan, Brisbane, Australia, 2004. Retrieved from: http://www.griffith.edu.au/centre/gihe/griffith_graduate, p. 1.

² K., Barkaoui (2007) Teaching Writing to Second Language Learners: Insights from Theory and Research. TESL Reporter 40, 1 (2007), pp. 35-48, p. 35.

writing skills till they come to the final stage in which they perform writing a letter, a story or an essay.

The process approach

All process approaches to writing have the same characteristics, which are to move the “learners from the generation of ideas and the collection of data through to the ‘publication’ of a finished text”¹.

In the process approach, writing is seen as a linguistic skill requiring such skills as planning and drafting; besides, it requires some linguistic knowledge, such as knowledge about both grammar and text structure.

Generally, the process of writing is divided into four stages: prewriting, composing/drafting, revising, and editing.

In the process approach, the teacher’s primary goal is to help the learners in their writing, which is secondary to provide them with input or stimulus.

The Genre-Oriented Approach

Genre approaches, which are relative newcomers to ELT (English Language Teaching), have many similarities with product approaches and are regarded as extensions of these latter.

Genre approaches consider writing as mostly linguistic; however, they argue that it varies with the social context in which it is produced.

There are different genres to writing, such as research articles, letters and reports. Because the learners do not need to write in all genres, this has affected syllabus design. The most important aspect in writing for genre analysts is purpose as long as we write different texts to carry out different purposes.

The Strategy Approach

This approach is similar with the process approach in that it emphasizes on the writing period and the cognitive processes used in

¹ C. Tribble (1996). *Writing*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 37.

writing, and makes conferences with students to discuss ideas and problems¹. Nevertheless, it is an explicit and supported approach to writing that has helped many writers develop and use more effective writing and self-regulation strategies.

In this approach, students should be committed to use a strategy. After that, they are taught how to use this strategy through discussion and modeling. The next step would be to guide them until they can use it independently.

The strategy approach is successful for the following reasons: it meets the individual needs of the students, it uses explicit instruction, it offers students opportunities to use this strategy, it provides them with feedback, and it helps students self-monitor and self-evaluate their use of the strategy.

3. The study

3.1. Methodology

3.1.1. Population and sampling

Our population is first-year students who are learning English as a foreign language at the department of English language and literature in Batna 2 University. But as it is impossible to work with the whole population, which forms 15 groups ranging from 30 to 35 students, we selected two random groups. One group consists of 30 students whereas the other group is made up of 33 students, so the sample is formed of 63 students.

3.1.2. Research instruments:

We opted for a descriptive study by means of a qualitative questionnaire, which is made of two sections. Section one seeks students' background information and is made up of six (6)

¹ M., H. Adkins (2005). *Self-regulated strategy development and generalization instruction: effects on story writing among second and third grade students with emotional and behavioral disorders*. Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the University of Maryland, College Park in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

questions. The second section is made up of twenty (20) questions and seeks students' cognitive, metacognitive, social, and affective strategies.

Before administering the questionnaire, we piloted it with two colleagues who suggested some changes in the wording. Then, we piloted the questionnaire with five (5) students of the sample to ensure that the questions would be understood well by the respondents. After that, the questionnaire was administered by the researcher in one setting. The students were told that there was no right or wrong answer and were requested to answer the questionnaire honestly. Besides, they were informed that their answers were needed for the purpose of research and that they would be kept confidential.

4. Analysis and discussion

The questionnaire gave the following results: for section one, (Q1), 47 (74.60%) of the respondents are females whereas 16 (25.40%) are males. Their age varies between 17 and 23 (Q2) and their Baccalaureate option ranges from literature and foreign languages (50.79%) to natural or exact sciences (31.75%) to literature and philosophy (12.7%).

For (Q4), how many years have you been studying English? The answers were from 7 to 9 years. Also the majority of the respondents (54 or 85.71%) confirmed that they chose to study English whereas (14.29%) said that it was not their choice and that it was imposed on them (Q5). The reasons behind their choice were the following:

- It is my favourite language; I really love it. Besides, it is the first language in the world.
- I want to know more about English, and I want to enrich my culture.
- Learning English is fun.
- To improve my English and my skills, and to communicate with others.

- I have a great motivation to learn it.
- It is an international language and my dreams will come true by studying it.
- It was my father's choice.
- To become a teacher of English.
- It is easy to learn.
- To travel to foreign countries, such as Great Britain, Switzerland, Korea, the USA, and the Netherlands.
- To improve my writing and spelling skills.
- I didn't have a better choice.
- I am good in speaking English.
- No particular reason.
- To emigrate and to study abroad.

Section Two: Students' Cognitive, Metacognitive, Social and Affective Strategies (66.67%) students stated the following techniques that their teacher in high school provided them with:

Table 1: Writing techniques from high school

Metacognitive Strategies	Cognitive strategies	Social strategies	Affective strategies
Planning(3)- practice(1)- time- management(1)	Using the dictionary(2)- Organizing the information (introduction, body, conclusion)(12)- summarizing(3)- drafting(1)-use of different models(2)- memorization(1)- grammar(1)- punctuation(4)- capitalization(3)	How to communicate with others and with native speakers(1)	None

The number between parentheses shows the number of times the strategy is mentioned from the respondents. We notice that the affective

strategies were not introduced in high school. Besides, the other types of strategies are taught but with a very little occurrence, except for organizing the information.

The questionnaire focused on certain writing strategies, such as planning (question 9), which is used by (63.49%) of our sample. Besides, it stressed the social strategy of working in groups (question 13), which is employed by only (28.57%) of the students.

Concerning the first question raised in this paper, i.e. whether first year students of English as a foreign language at the department of English in Batna 2 University use learning strategies in their writing, the answer was that 45 students; i.e. (71.43%) are not aware of the strategies that they are using in writing. This will give room to a suggestion at the end of the paper.

The students used the following writing strategies

Table 2: Students' writing strategies

Metacognitive strategies	Cognitive strategies	Social strategies	Affective strategies
Preparing the lesson(1)- Planning(4)- Revising(1)	Organizing ideas (2)- Using previous knowledge (2)- using a draft(1)-grammar(1)- capitalization (2)- punctuation(3)	None	None

Table 2 shows that the students really do not use a lot of writing strategies. They only use some cognitive or metacognitive strategies, with no social or affective ones.

Also, the students reported collecting different models of written texts (66.67%), considering the audience they are writing for (90.48%), asking themselves about the purpose of their writing (85.71%) and revising their compositions (95.24%).

The strategies that they used for their revision are summarized in table 3.

Table 3: Strategies used in revision

Metacognitive Strategies	Cognitive strategies	Social strategies	Affective strategies
Planning (1)	Organizing information (7)- Spelling(9), grammar(24), Capitalization(3), punctuation(18)	Asking teachers and peers(2)	None

Table 3 shows that the students do not use affective strategies at all. However, they revise grammar (24) and punctuation (18).

We also sought for other strategies used by learners to either evaluate their progress in writing (table 4), do a writing activity (table 5), continue with the writing assignment (table 6), overcome their limitations in writing (table 7), or improve their compositions (table 8). The results are summarized in the tables below.

Table 4: Students' strategies to evaluate their progress in writing

Metacognitive Strategies	Cognitive strategies	Social strategies	Affective strategies
Reading(6)- monitoring(17)- Self-evaluation(8)	Using different models(3)	Asking a family Member to read it- Asking the teacher(7) Peer-correction(2)- Asking a well-educated person(5)	Not evaluating one's progress (negative strategy)(1)

The strategy that is most often used by the students is monitoring, i.e. checking their success in writing.

Table 5: Techniques used to do a writing assignment

Metacognitive strategies	Cognitive strategies	Social strategies	Affective strategies
Reading(6)- revising(1)- planning(4)- goal- setting(1)- self-regulation(4)- self-evaluation(3)- monitoring(7)	Using the dictionary(8)-using different models(2)- organizing(1)	Asking for help from teacher and peers(12)	Motivation(1)- Self-talk(2)

Students frequently use the social strategy of asking for help from teacher and peers, followed by the cognitive strategy of using a dictionary.

Table 6: Techniques used to continue with the writing assignment

Metacognitive strategies	Cognitive strategies	Social strategies	Affective strategies
Goal-setting(2)- reading(15)- Planning(2)- practice(3)- Monitoring(3)- self- regulation(4)- time- management(3)	Using past knowledge(2)- Using the dictionary(1)- using different models(2)	Asking one's mother(1) Finding a writing partner(1)- peer- correction(4)- Communicating with British people(1)	Singing(1)- deep- breathing(1)- Self-trust(1)- positive self- talk(8) Motivation(2)- rewarding oneself(1)

The most widely used strategy here is positive self-talk (8) followed by seeking help from others (7).

Table 7: Techniques to overcome the limitations in writing

Metacognitive Strategies	Cognitive Strategies	Social Strategies	Affective strategies
Monitoring(1)- practice(17)- reading (23)-time- management(1)- self-regulation(2)	Making research(5)- Using the dictionary(3)- listening and speaking in English(3)- summarizing(3)- watching English movies(2)	Asking teacher for help(2)- Working with other writers(1)	Entertaining myself(1)

Students use practice (17) as a way to overcome their limitations in writing.

Table 8: Strategies to improve students' writing

Metacognitive strategies	Cognitive strategies	Social strategies	Affective strategies
Reading(14)- practice(9)- Self-regulation(2)- Planning(2)-time- management(1)	Making research (6)- organizing- Listening to the radio(6)	Chatting with others(1)- Peer-correction(1)- Asking others(1)- communicating with British people(1)	None

The students emphasized on reading (14) as a solution to improve their writing.

All in all, the results of the questionnaire showed that over seventy per cent of the students do not know that they are using strategies in their writing. Moreover, when asked about the strategies that they employ,

only few of them cited metacognitive strategies, such as planning, revising, reading, goal-setting, monitoring their success and self-regulation. Others have included social strategies like asking help from teacher or peers. Their affective strategies ranged from taking a deep breath and being passionate to singing, loving what to do (writing), trusting oneself and positive self-talk. The cognitive strategies used by the students were employing the words that they know in their compositions and using ideas from their reading. However, these strategies were only used by a few of the students, not all of them.

5. Suggestions

Since not all the students know that there are many learning strategies used in writing, one way would be to teach them these strategies in an explicit way so that they would improve their writing. The syllabi of writing should include activities which boost students' knowledge of the cognitive, metacognitive, social and affective strategies that help them master the writing skill. Students should be encouraged to become autonomous learners who take responsibility of their own learning. The teacher should be regarded as a facilitator of learning, not as its only source. Students can become better writers and better learners if they are taught appropriate learning strategies.

6. Limitations of the study

The main limitation of this study is the small number of the sample, i.e. (63) for a population which is made up of fifteen (15) groups of first year students, so it is difficult to make generalizations.

7. Conclusion

The study has fulfilled its objective, which was to explore the learning strategies of first-year students of English as a foreign language in Batna 2 University. It has found that the students are not aware of the strategies used in writing except some of them who

use a very few writing strategies, such as planning, organizing, and monitoring.

The study recommends that the students should be taught the learning strategies used in writing in an explicit way. Finally, more research is required to determine the impact of the teaching of learning strategies on students' written performances.

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Appendix: Students' Questionnaire

Dear students,

This questionnaire has been designed to help the researcher identify the strategies you use to write a composition in English.

Please respond to each question, either by ticking the appropriate box or by making full answers where necessary.

Section One : General Information

1. Gender : Male Female
2. Age :
3. What is your Baccaalaureat option ?
 - a. Literature and foreign languages.
 - b. Literary streams.
 - c. Natural or exact sciences.
 - d. Other:
4. How many years have you been studying English?
.....
5. Did you choose to study English?
Yes No
6. If yes, please say why?
.....

Section Two: Students' Cognitive, Metacognitive, Social and Affective Strategies

7. Did your high-school teacher of English provide you with some writing techniques or strategies? If so, what are they?
.....
.....
8. Did you like your teacher's way of teaching writing in high school? Why?
.....
9. Do you have an overall/weekly/ monthly plan to practice your composition?
Yes No
10. Do you plan your writing?
Yes No
11. If yes, do you usually adjust your writing planning?
Yes No
12. Do you evaluate your fulfillment of your plan?
Yes No

13. Do you like to work individually or in groups?

14. Are you aware of the strategies that you are using in writing?
 Yes No
15. If yes, which ones are you using?

16. Before doing a writing assignment, do you collect models of different types of written texts?
 Yes No
17. Do you take into consideration the audience (the readers) you are writing for?
 Yes No
18. Do you ask yourself about the purpose (the aim) of your writing?
 Yes No
19. Do you revise your writing?
 Yes No
20. Which elements do you consider in your revision?

21. How do you evaluate your progress in writing?

22. When you fail to do a writing assignment, what are the techniques that you use?

23. What are the techniques that you use to continue with the writing assignment?

24. How do you overcome your limitations in writing?

25. In your opinion, which strategies can help you to improve your writing?

26. Do you like to be helped with strategies to improve your writing?
 Yes No

Thank you for your cooperation.