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EFL Students' Writing Strategies in Saudi Arabian ESP Writing Classes: Perspectives on Learning Strategies in Self-access Language Learning.

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Abstract

This study was part of a PhD research to explore the writing strategies of 121 second-year undergraduate Saudi student writers who are studying English as a foreign language and for specific purposes in one of the Saudi industrial colleges: Jubail Industrial College (JIC). The writing strategies under investigation had been classified into two categories (process-oriented writing strategies and product-oriented writing strategies) based on their instructional philosophies. A strategy questionnaire was designed to collect data. Although JIC writing classes were assumed to be product-oriented as reported by the majority of the participants' description of their teachers' writing approach, the results showed that almost all of the participants (95.9%) were mixing the two kinds of strategies. More surprisingly, the top five writing strategies used by the participants were process-oriented.

Keywords: EFL writing strategies, process writing approaches, product writing approaches, ESP writing in Saudi Arabia.

One might argue that writing should be always instructed simply because the ability to write a text that is error free is not a naturally acquired skill but is formally learned in formal instructional settings (Banda, 2003). However, this argument seems to limit the dimensions of writing skill, in particular, and language in general because it only values the linguistic side of the skill and overlooks the strategic side. In fact, learning to write seems to be a typical example where the components of communicative competence (Canale & Swain, 1980) can meet, interact, and develop.

In this introduction, we will consider two of the dominant camps of writing instruction: the process group and product group, and their associated writing strategies. Next, we will investigate through a strategy questionnaire the type of writing strategies used in an EFL writing context, where the assumed writing approach is product-based.

The first camp of writing instruction adopts product approaches, which share the idea of accuracy, linearity, and prescriptivism in the way they deal with teaching writing. They deal with writing as a straightforward action, as marks on a page, as related words, as clauses, and as structured sentences (Hyland, 2003). According to this perspective, "writing development is considered to be the result of [structurally or rhetorically] imitating and manipulating models provided by the teacher" (Hyland, 2003, p.3). Teaching product-based writing involves such aspects as guidance, control and

assistance with questions to answer, a model to follow, an outline to expand, an incomplete piece of writing to complete, or an incorrect text to correct (see Brown, 2001, p. 335; Pincas, 1982; Pincas, 2001, p. 2). The aim here is to introduce students to structures accepted by the native speakers. L2 students need to be guided systematically to avoid any L1 interference (*ibid.*). In the light of this teaching, writing might include such strategies as following teachers' rules and feedback, writing without collecting information, writing without planning, following outlines, focusing on organization, neatness and layout, constant editing of grammar, vocabulary use and punctuation, avoiding writing sentence fragments, etc.

The second camp of writing instruction is process orientated. The basic idea of writing here is explained briefly by Zamel (1983, p. 165) as a creative process by which writers "discover and reformulate their ideas as they attempt to approximate meaning". Writing, she argues, is "a nonlinear, exploratory, and generative process" (*ibid.*). In the so-called process school, there are two groups: the expressivists and the cognitivists (Faigley, 1986). The expressivist movement (e.g. Donald Murray, Peter Elbow, and others (see Johns, 1990), encourages students to take power over their writing. The expressivists focus on the writer's voice, self-discovery and expression. They emphasize the importance of fluency over accuracy and argue that ideas emerge from learners rather than textbooks. Free-writing technique, for example, is a distinctive writing strategy that "leads quite naturally to a process classroom" (Reid, 1993, p. 260). The cognitivists, on the other hand, see learning (and learning to write) as a mental process and learners as active recipients of that process (see O'Malley and Chamot, 1990). They emphasize the role of internal mental processes rather than external behaviors (Ellis, 1990). For them, writing instruction should explicitly teach students to understand their own writing processes and to build up their own strategies for the over-lapping writing stages. From the cognitive perspective, writing is viewed as a complex cognitive skill, as a decision-making and a problem-solving activity (Flower & Hayes, 1981). In contrast to the product school, the two major process approaches share their dislike of emphasis on grammar correction. They do not look at writing as a simple activity with a model to follow or a product to shape. They encourage meaning over form and fluency over accuracy (Tribble, 1996). In the light of these perspectives, writing strategies might include strategies of free writing, planning, creating ideas, discovering meaning, group or pair work, considering audience, purpose, and context of writing (Connor, 1987), revising, drafting, and proofreading.

According to Piper (1989, p. 212), "there is no doubt that instruction does have an effect on how the learners write both in terms of written output, writing behaviours and attitudes to writing". This study, therefore, attempted to investigate the instructional type of writing strategies used by EFL college students in Saudi Arabia.

Research Questions

There is little research investigating writing strategies according to instructional philosophies. Thus, the research questions of this study are:

- 1- Based on the process-product types of writing instruction, what is the instructional type of *writing strategies* used by EFL college students in a Saudi Arabian context?
- 2- What are the five most used writing strategies?
- 3- What are the five least used writing strategies?

Subjects and Research Setting

The population for the research were second-year undergraduate Saudi student writers who are studying English as a foreign language in one of the Saudi industrial colleges: Jubail Industrial College (JIC). The total number of the research population was approximately 400 students, and the total number of the participants who took part in the survey was 121 participants. The population can be described as intermediate¹ non-native speakers and writers of English who speak and write English for specific purposes: technical and business. The selection was on a voluntary basis from 4 writing classes taught by 4 different teachers: two natives and two non-native speakers. In JIC writing classes, teaching materials are designed according to the principles of the product approaches.

Developing a Strategy Questionnaire

In investigating writing strategies and processes, previous ESL/EFL studies used either introspective data, i.e. think-aloud protocols (Arndt, 1987; Jones, 1982; Jones & Tetroe, 1987; Raimes, 1985) or retrospective data, i.e. interviews (Silva, 1992; Zamil, 1983) and questionnaires (Angelova, 1999; Sasaki & Hirose, 1996). Other studies (Abdel Latif, 2009; Alhaysony, 2008; Chaaban, 2010; El-Aswad, 2002; Raimes, 1987; Wang and Wen, 2002) combined the two kinds of data sources. The current study investigated the participants' writing strategies through a questionnaire. Surveying a large number of subjects, a benefit of adopting quantitative questionnaire as a research approach, would allow us to establish a process-product catalogue of writing strategies. Furthermore, "such an instrument would enable researchers to compare findings in different contexts. At the same time, it could also have pedagogical applications in two ways: as a needs analysis or diagnostic tool for teachers and an

¹ In the intermediate level, students can generally meet the specifications of B1+ level in the Common European Framework.

awareness-raising tool for learners” (Petric & Czarl, 2003, p. 188). This research, therefore, does not deal with individual writers’ profiles of writing strategies. Instead, the current research considers writing strategies defined as ‘the [conscious] behaviors and techniques that can be taught and instructed [in writing]’ (Grenfell and Harris, 1999, p. 39). The word ‘*conscious*’ excludes the controversial debates around the consciousness and unconsciousness of strategy use. ‘*That can be taught and instructed in writing*’ refers to the focus of the research on the process-type and product-type writing strategies, i.e. strategies that reflect the principles of process and product approaches to writing teaching. Therefore, the strategy questionnaire items are divided into two categories or ‘clusters’: process-oriented items and product-oriented items.

The product-process philosophical dichotomy of those strategy items is based on two things. First, if a strategy is related to the ‘form’ feature of writing, then we consider it a product-oriented strategy. If a strategy is related to the ‘content’ feature of writing, then we call it a process-oriented strategy. The process-oriented writing strategies, therefore, focused on the strategies of flexibility, recursiveness, creating ideas, discovering meaning, considering audience, purpose, and context of writing, revising, and collaborating. The product-oriented writing strategies, on the other hand, would generally focus on the strategies of accuracy, linearity, prescriptivism, imitation and dependence on teacher’s assistance. Second, if a strategy is not evidently related to one of those features, its classification as a product-or-process strategy is taken from our own understanding of literature on writing approaches. The product-typed writing strategies are the items written in bold in part B of the questionnaire; the others are the process-typed strategies (see Appendix A).

The items of both types of writing strategies were randomly sequenced to avoid the bias of choice and being evident to the participants. The total number of strategy items before amendment was 50 items: 25 process strategies and 25 product strategies. After reliability amendment, 5 items were deleted from both groups of strategies. Having equal items in both groups would help in classifying the participants into process-oriented strategy users or product-oriented strategy users. The scoring formula (adapted from Daly and Miller’s formula for Writing Apprehension Test (1975), thus, is: $(120 + \text{the scores of the process strategies} - \text{the scores of the product strategies})$. Scores may range from a low of 40 to a high of 200, with a range of 160 scores total. Scores were, therefore, divided equally: 53 scores were given for each main category (process and product) and 54 scores for the category of the equally mixed kinds of writing strategies. Classifying strategies rigidly with a cutting edge is impossible, so having a zone where mixed strategies can be classified is sensible. Scores from 40 to 93 reflect a more process-oriented strategy user; scores from 148 to 200 reflect a more product-oriented strategy user. Scores from 94 to 147 reflect users of more equally mixed kinds of writing strategies.

The rating scale of the self-report writing strategy questionnaire followed the Likert-scale of five

responses: always=1, often=2, sometimes=3, rarely=4 and never=5. The scores were not written for the participants to avoid confusion. Instead, it had been decided to use the percentage so that the participants can clearly understand the differences between the five responses. Percentages were added in light of criticism (see Dörnyei, 2005; Tseng, Dörnyei, & Schmitt, 2006) and so that computing means scores would be more justifiable.

Validity and Reliability

The first version of the questionnaire contained 50 strategy items. Those items were either written by the researcher or borrowed and modified from two other writing-strategy questionnaires: (1) Petric's & Czarl's (2003); and (2) Alhaysony's (2008). After piloting the first version of the questionnaire, the Cronbach's alpha of the 50 items was .85. This means reliability is high. However, the split-half method (to measure consistency of responses across two randomly divided sets of items) and the test-retest method (to measure consistency of the over-all scores of the participants from time to time) showed a very low reliability. The Spearman-Brown Coefficient was .41, and the test-retest reliability was .350. These statistical results forced us to reconsider the 50 items and to think about the validity checkers' comments on the contrasting strategies. 10 items (equally divided into process and product strategies), therefore, were deleted including those items suggested to be deleted by the validity checkers in the pilot study and other items that can be combined in one item instead of two. Consequently, both split-half and test-retest reliabilities of the remaining 40 items increased significantly. After this amendment, the split-half reliability became .80 and the test-retest reliability became .64. The Cronbach's alpha also increased to .857. As noted by many SPSS analysts (DeVellis, 1991; George & Mallery, 2003; Pallant, 2005) the Cronbach's alpha of .80 to .89 is very good and .70 is the cut-off value for being acceptable. The 40-item strategy questionnaire (see the Appendix), therefore, was used instead of the 50-item one.

Data analysis

Due to the quantitative nature of the research questions, data was analyzed using the SPSS program for descriptive statistics. Two methods of descriptive analysis, therefore, were used (frequency tables and measures of central tendency and dispersion) to be able to summarize the frequency and mean of data for writing strategies used by the participants and understand the variability of their scores through the standard deviation.

Results and Discussion

As far as question one is concerned (**What is the instructional type of *writing strategies* used**

by EFL college students in Saudi Arabia?), the participants were classified (based on their scores) into three groups: (1) more process-strategy users, (2) users of more equally mixed process-and-product strategies, and (3) more product-strategy users. Table 1 below shows that almost all of the participants (95.9%) were mixing the two types of strategies. This seems to be different from other studies that indicated the dominance of product-oriented writing strategies in Arab students' ESL/EFL writing (Al-Semari, 1993; El-Aswad, 2002; El-Mortaji, 2001; Fageeh, 2003; Krapels, 1990). In addition, measures of central tendency and dispersion were computed to summarize the data and understand the variability of scores for both *the instructional type* of writing strategies used by the participants and *the over-all writing strategies used*. The following are the results of the analysis for the instructional types: ($N = 121, M=1.99, SD=.20$). When you look at the mean, it shows that the participants' writing strategies tended to be in the middle and not to be oriented by a particular type of instructional principles. This was supported by a low variation in the scores as the standard deviation indicates.

Table 1. The Instructional Type of EFL Writing Strategies

| | | Frequency | Valid Per cent | Mean | Std. Deviation |
|-------|---|-----------|----------------|-------|----------------|
| Valid | 1) More process-oriented strategy users | 3 | 2.5 | 1.991 | .2039 |
| | 2) Users of more equally mixed strategies | 116 | 95.9 | | |
| | 3) More product-oriented strategy users | 2 | 1.7 | | |
| | Total | 121 | 100.0 | | |

Similarly, as shown in table 2 below, the results of the analysis for the five Likert-scale responses of the over-all writing strategies across the questionnaire show the following: ($N= 121, M= 2.98, SD= .43$). When we look at the mean, it also points to the general tendency for a middle position. The participants were tending to use all kinds of strategies sometimes (50% to 79%). This tendency does not seem to vary a lot across responses.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics

| | N | Minimum | Maximum | Mean | Std. Deviation |
|----------------|-----|---------|---------|--------|----------------|
| All strategies | 121 | 1.80 | 4.08 | 2.9826 | .43843 |

On the other hand, the results of the second question (**What are the five most used writing strategies by EFL Saudi students?**) seem to contradict the previous interpretation of the participants being more users of more equally mixed kinds of writing strategies. As shown in table 3, the majority of the participants tended to use five process-oriented writing strategies more than the rest of the strategies.

This was unexpected. The JIC writing classes are assumed to be product-oriented for two reasons. First, the teaching materials are designed to be taught according to the principles of the product approaches. Second, after coding and analyzing the participants' answers to an open-ended question asking them to explain *how they are taught English writing in the college*, the majority of the valid² answers (71%) reported receiving product-oriented writing instruction. The top five used writing strategies, therefore, were expected to be product-typed. One of the numerous explanations for this might be writing experience and previous writing instructions. As confirmed by other studies (Aljamhour, 1996; Chaaban, 2010; El-Mortaji, 2001; Fageeh, 2003), writing strategies are controlled and directed by writing experience and/or previous writing instruction. The current results, however, cannot accurately relate those 5 process-oriented writing strategies to a previous writing instruction simply because 70.2 % of the respondents reported that they did not attend a course in English writing before coming to college, 66.4% of them said that they had not received any sort of training on writing strategies, and, as said above, 70.5% of the valid answers explained that they had received product-oriented writing instruction. On the other hand, the majority of the participants (66.9%) were studying English for 7 years or more. Still, this could not confirm the above studies' findings regarding writing experience or previous instruction, but there might be an indication to learners' writing schemata. This might take us to another explanation that could be related to the participants' writing competence. They might have received and developed their own process-typed writing strategies as a result of being more competent. They could also inherit those kinds of strategies as part of their normal way of learning to write or they might have transferred them from their Arabic writing strategic competence. This taxonomy of writing strategies according to their instructional philosophies has left the door widely open for more inquiries and more explanations.

Table 3. The Five Most Used Writing Strategies

| | Process Strategy (If I do not know the exact word in English, I use a similar English word that I know.) | Process Strategy (When I write, I think about the purpose of my writing.) | Process Strategy (When I do not know how to express my thoughts in English, I simplify what I want to write.) | Process Strategy (When I write, I think about the reader of my writing.) | Process Strategy (I stop after each sentence or paragraph to relate ideas together and get more new ideas.) |
|----------------|---|--|--|---|---|
| Mean | 1.5620 | 1.9917 | 1.9669 | 2.3471 | 2.1736 |
| Std. Deviation | .82556 | 1.00412 | .99108 | 1.26300 | 1.10059 |
| Frequency | 72 | 47 | 46 | 41 | 40 |
| % | 59.5% | 38.8% | 38% | 33.9% | 33.1% |

² There were 38 valid responses; 33 were irrelevant, and 50 did not respond.

Regarding the last question (**What are the five least used writing strategies by EFL Saudi students?**), table 4 below reveals that the least used writing strategies were a mixture of product-oriented and process-oriented strategies. Similar to the results of the previous question, the majority of the participants who almost never used those five strategies reported that they had received product-oriented writing instruction. However, they had not received any sort of instruction on writing strategies. This would indicate that students might develop their own sense of proper strategies to use or not to use in writing English. When we look at the first and the fifth least used writing strategies below, we can get a good example of this. Although the two strategies are of two kinds (one process-oriented and one product-oriented), they both refer to the use of the mother tongue in EFL writing. The results for the two show that the vast majority of the participants tended not to use Arabic, their native language, neither as a process nor as a product strategy of writing. 57.9% of them informed that they almost never use the product strategy of translating literally into English. In addition, 41.3% reported that they also never use the process strategy of writing bits of the text in Arabic and then translate into English. In fact, “the idea of abandoning the native tongue is too stressful to many learners, who need a sense of security in the experience of learning a foreign language” (Galina, 2009, p.1). Learners, therefore, are supposed to develop their own learning strategies to establish that sense of security, but sometimes they do not. Perhaps students are not fully aware of the usefulness of using their native language as a strategy of learning to write, which has been supported by a number of studies (Alam, 1993; El-Aswad, 2002; Fageeh, 2003). Or perhaps, students might be influenced by the social, cultural and occupational preferences for native-like language norms; therefore, constant use of the target writing language might be a benchmark of good writing for Saudi EFL learners. In addition, it could be that students have responded to the instruction of their teachers who did not allow using Arabic in class as directed by the strategy of the school³. Using the mother tongue is highly prohibited in JIC writing classes. Students, therefore, are discouraged about using or expressing their actual use of their native language in writing. Whatever the explanation is, it seems quite indicative that students would develop their own sense of strategies to use or not to use in writing English. This might be based on personal, cultural, social, or instructional purposes.

Table 4. The 5 Least Used Writing Strategies

| | | | | |
|--|--|--|---|---|
| Product Strategy (I write sentences in Arabic and then literally translate into English.) | Product Strategy (When I finish writing my paper, I hand it in without rereading it.) | Process Strategy (When revising, I change my initial ideas and write new ideas.) | Process Strategy (I write more than one draft before handing in the final draft of the essay.) | Process Strategy (I write bits of the text in Arabic and then translate them |
|--|--|--|---|---|

³ Mr. Alnufaie is a teacher there for more than 8 years and knows this fact very well.

| | | | | | into English.) |
|----------------|---------|---------|---------|---------|----------------|
| Mean | 4.0248 | 3.9917 | 4.1157 | 3.9669 | 3.6942 |
| Std. Deviation | 1.35070 | 1.13648 | 1.00158 | 1.11006 | 1.39549 |
| Frequency | 70 | 55 | 53 | 51 | 50 |
| % | 57.9% | 45.5% | 43.8% | 42.1% | 41.3% |

Conclusion

In conclusion, this quantitative study set out to answer questions concerning Saudi students' EFL writing strategies in Jubail Industrial College. The above findings of the participants' writing strategies confirm the belief (Reid, 2001, p. 29) that writing cannot and should not be isolated as either process or product activity. Writing "fundamentally depends on writers' purposeful interactions with print, with fellow readers and writers, and with literate communities of practice" (Ferris & Hedgcock, 2005, p. 31). Reid (2001) said that the dichotomy between 'process' and 'product' in terms of instruction is false. Similarly, this article confirms that this dichotomy is false in terms of learners' writing strategies. However, by establishing a 'process-product' catalogue of writing strategies and understanding general tendencies, researchers can compare findings in different contexts, teachers can diagnose learners' needs for a particular type of strategy instruction and establish priorities among them, and students can raise their strategy-use awareness (Petric & Czarl, 2003). When EFL college writers tend to diversify the type of writing strategies they use, we could argue that the nature of EFL writing might be more dynamic, complex and probably more sophisticated. As a result, the perspective taken from this study is that teachers should try and adopt a diverse view of EFL writing instruction and allow for constant access to different types of writing strategies. A number of studies had previously reported both reciprocal and diverse relations between teacher teaching approaches and student learning approaches (Martin & Ramsden, 1998; Marton & Booth, 1997; Patrick, 1992; Trigwell, Prosser & Waterhouse, 1999). However, the question that is yet untouched in this study is: What is the nature of correlation between the instructional type of students' writing strategies and the type of writing instruction adopted by their teachers? In other words, can students' writing strategies reflect the knowledge accessed and learned during writing classrooms? For future research, therefore, researchers are recommended to investigate whether EFL writing strategies can or cannot be self-instructed.

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Appendix A

WRITING STRATEGIES QUESTIONNAIRE

Dear Student, thank you very much for participating in this study. All information you will provide will be treated as strictly confidential and no names will be mentioned in the study. This study consists of two parts: A) General background, and B) writing strategies questionnaire.

A) General Information

1) How many years have you been studying English? Years.....Months.....

2) Did you attend a course in English writing before coming to this college? Yes. No.

3) Do you practice English writing at home?

- Always Usually Sometimes Seldom Never

4) Do you practice Arabic writing?

- Always Usually Sometimes Seldom Never

5) Do you like writing in English?

- I like it a lot. I like it. I have no feelings about it. I do not like it. I do not like it at all.

6) Do you like writing in Arabic?

- I like it a lot. I like it. I have no feelings about it. I do not like it. I do not like it at all.

7) Have you received any sort of training on writing strategies? Yes No

If YES, please explain how you are trained.

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8) Could you please explain how you are taught English writing here in the college?

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GLOSSARY

| EXPRESSIONS | ARABIC MEANING |
|-------------------------------|--|
| <u>Outline</u> | يتخللها قد عريضة؛ وعن أوين عامة جمل شكل على وفقراته للمقال مسودة بالكتابه البدء قبل المقال فقرات من فقرة لكل فرعية وعن أوين أمثلة |
| <u>Freewriting</u> | الأفكار من عدد أكبر لجمع توقف بدون الموضوع عن الحرية الكتابة طريقة وقواعدياً لغوياً الكتابة صراحة عن النظر بغض |
| <u>Brainstorming</u> | عام بشكل بالموضوع المتعلقة للأفكار الذهني العصف طريقة |
| <u>Mind mapping</u> | شبكة وعمل الصريحة وسط في العنوان كتابة وهي الذهنية الخارطة أخرى بأفكار مرتبطة عامة أفكار العنكبوت كشبكة المترابطة للأفكار |
| <u>purpose of my writing</u> | من الغرض الاعتبار في أخذ أكتب وأنا بمعنى المقال؛ من والمقصد الغرض الغرض هذا تخدم والجمل الأفكار جميع تكون بحيث المقال هذا |
| <u>reader of my writing</u> | في فأراعي مقالتي سيقرا بمن أفكار أكتب وأنا بمعنى المقال؛ قارئ القارئ مستوى وكتابتني أفكاري |
| <u>Punctuations</u> | وغيرها والصغيرة الكبيرة والأحرف والفاصلة كالنقطة الترقيم علامات |
| <u>Revise</u> | والمعنى الأفكار وتنقيح لمراجعة ماكتبته قراءة إعادة |
| <u>Editing</u> | وتحريها والقواعد والإملاء الكلمات وتصحيح تنقيح |
| <u>layout</u> | وإناقته وترتيبه للمقال العام والإخراج التنسيقي |
| <u>teacher's expectations</u> | وتعليقاته المعلم توقعات |