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An Inventory of Arabic Learners' Writing Strategies: A Sri Lankan Case Study

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Abstract

Studies on writing in Arabic language are still in the early stages. This study investigated the writing strategies used by Sri Lankan learners of Arabic as a foreign language. The purposes of this study were to identify the writing strategies employed by these learners in composing Arabic essays and to propose an inventory of writing strategies for Arabic writing. This research employed a qualitative method. Participants were instructed to write an essay in Arabic, and data were elicited using a think-aloud protocol, observation, and retrospective interview. Eighteen pre-university Arabic language learners from the Fathih Institute of Sri Lanka participated in this investigation. They represent proficient, average, and less proficient writers and were selected based on a preliminary writing test and recommendation of the instructor. Data were then coded and rated by three experts. The Cohen's Kappa inter-rater agreement value was 0.86. Findings showed that the learners used all five rhetorical, metacognitive, cognitive, communicative, and social/affective writing strategies. In using these strategies, the learners differed in how and why they used particular strategies. This study acknowledged thirty-six writing strategies used by persons learning Arabic as a foreign language in composing essays: an Arabic as a Foreign Language-Writing Strategies (AFL-WS) inventory. The findings suggest that Arabic writing instructors need to train learners in using these strategies effectively and productively. Then the learners would know their true ability to manage the language task.

Keywords: Arabic language, Sri Lanka, cognitive, metacognitive, writing strategies

Introduction

Language is considered one of the most important characteristics that differentiate human beings from other living creatures on earth. It is also the primary tool that helps people to communicate their thoughts, feelings, and opinions. The term Language Learning Strategies (LLS) is defined as techniques, language processing strategies, and problem-solving processes (Oxford 1990). The strategies are usually associated with the needs and interests of students to enhance learning and are based on numerous different types of learning styles. Additionally, LLS are the specific actions, behaviors, steps, or techniques (e.g., seeking out conversation partners or giving oneself encouragement to tackle a difficult language task) used by students to enhance their own learning (Scarcella & Oxford, 1992). Language Strategies (LS) are the actions that students use to complete learning tasks. These strategies determine the approach for achieving learning objectives. Slahshour (2013) defines LS as

the key factors in language learning; thus, it is important to understand how LS and their dynamics affect learners' strategy choices.

Background of the Study

Learning to write effectively in a second language (L2) is a difficulty for many students, considered not only a challenging practice, but a complex process as well (Wolfersberger, 2003). Therefore, proper training in writing skills is an important part of a school's curriculum (Lidvall, 2008). However, most students worry about writing tasks, while writing instruction remains of low interest for those students. To solve this problem, Lipstein and Renninger (2007) recommend that students use a variety of strategies and regularly seek opinions regarding their writing skills. A number of researchers indicate that personal success in disciplines is strongly related to a person's writing talent and skills (Yu, 2011; Cho & Schunn, 2007).

Meanwhile, Arabic as a foreign language (AFL) learners struggle with their language skills, because they fail to consider learning strategies. In his error analytical study of the Arabic phrase, Jassem (1999) indicates that one of the causes for error includes incomplete mastery of language-learning techniques. Hence, the researcher opines that, if learners desire to master the Arabic language, they must employ good language learning strategies in writing, as well as in reading, listening, and speaking. In addition, the issues of how and why writing strategies are used often go unnoticed in previous L2 studies. Most studies focus on general issues, such as strategy types in general and also on the relationship between strategy uses in second language performance. However, the subjects of how and why these strategies are applied have received little attention (Vandergrift, 2003). This might be due to the many challenges of qualitative research design, which is commonly used in such investigations. Therefore, the present study focuses attention on what, how, and why writing strategies are used by Sri Lankan AFL learners in writing tasks to present an inventory of writing strategies for AFL learners.

Literature Review

Studying L2 writing, Silva (1990) claims that writing strategies are divided into four stages that are marked by four major approaches: the controlled or guided approach, the current-traditional rhetoric approach, the process approach, and, finally, the social approach.

The first stage is dominated by the Controlled Approach, which is influenced by structural linguistics and behaviorist psychology. This approach perceives learning to write as an

exercise in practice form. Students are trained to write sentence patterns and vocabulary by means of writing. The second stage of L2 writing instruction is the Current-Traditional Rhetoric Approach influenced by Contrastive Rhetoric, which is explained in this chapter. It concerns learning to write to identify and internalize organizational patterns. The third stage of L2 writing is the Process Approach. This approach of learning to write is developed for competent and efficient writing strategies. The fourth stage, the Social Approach, involves learning to write as part of becoming socialized to the discourse community, finding out what is expected, and trying to approximate it.

In actual fact, the four approaches in these four stages of L2 writing instruction are supported by four important theories related to L2 writing. These theories are: (a) the Contrastive Rhetoric Theory, (b) the Cognitive Development Theory, (c) the Communication Theory, and (d) the Social Constructionist Theory (Mu, 2005). It is clear that the Contrastive Rhetoric Theory, Cognitive Developmental Theory, and the Social Constructionist Theory inform the Current Rhetoric Approach, the Process Approach, and the Social Approach, respectively, in L2 writing instruction. In addition, L2 writing as a means of communication is naturally influenced by Communication Theory. Hence, the Communication Theory is reflected in all these four stages of L2 writing instruction. The researcher identifies these four theories in the field of L2 writing, because they are closely associated with the four approaches in AFL composition and can provide a theoretical framework for the following classification of writing strategies.

Research Methodology

The present study was carried out through a qualitative research method to investigate the types of writing strategies used by three groups of AFL learners enrolled in an Arabic language course at the Fathih Institute of Sri Lanka before entering the university. Eighteen students were selected according to their proficiency in Arabic as proficient, average, and less proficient. A think-aloud protocol, observation, and retrospective interview were employed as instruments for data collection. The findings of the current study lead to several significant conclusions.

Results and Discussion

This study found a total of 36 Writing Strategies (WS), used by the Sri Lankan Arabic Proficient Learners (PRL), Average Learners (AVL), and Less Proficient Learners (LPL), that can be added to an inventory under five categories of WSs. The proposed inventory in

this study is entitled AFL-WS. Table 1 indicates the AFL learners' writing strategies inventory.

Table 1		
<i>Writing Strategies Inventory for AFL Learners (AFL-WS)</i>		
No	Strategy	Operational Definition
Rhetorical		
1)	Using L1	Using L1 for writing or drafting
2)		Translating generated idea into L2
3)	Using L2	Using the Arabic language directly
Meta Cognitive		
4)	Associating	Associating previous essay writing experience
5)	Brainstorming	Writing ideas or listing out ideas based on the given task
6)	Planning	Global planning: detailed planning of overall organization
7)		Local planning: planning what to write next
8)		Thematic planning: less detailed planning of overall organization
9)	Monitoring	Checking and identifying problems
10)	Evaluating	Evaluating own strengths and weaknesses after writing
11)		Evaluating own writing performance by identifying the way to write
12)		Stating the success/failure after completing writing task
13)		Stating encountered problem after completing writing task
14)	Rewriting	Rewriting the task again and again
15)	Keeping aware	Keeping awareness of own condition
16)		Keeping awareness of writing task
17)		Keeping awareness of language aspects

Cognitive		
18)	Generating ideas	Generating ideas
19)	Revising	Making changes in plan, written text
20)	Memorizing	Remembering the memorized word/sentences
21)	Repeating	Repeating the key words and phrases written by them
22)	Elaborating	Extending the contents of writing
23)	Clarifying	Dispelling confusions
24)	Retrieval	Writing until the idea comes
25)	Note-taking	Note-taking from previous exercises
26)	Mixing	Mixing Arabic and Tamil/English words
27)	Imitation	Looking for models to write
28)	Comparing	Comparing the writing task with others
29)	Drafting	Writing a draft before writing
30)	Editing	Editing the task
31)	Copying	Copying from a friend's work
32)	Identifying	Identifying the phrases and idioms
Communicative		
33)	Reducing	Reducing the written work
Social/Affective		
34)	Resourcing	Referring to library, dictionaries, collected vocabulary notebook, etc.
35)	Consulting	Consulting teacher or friend
36)	Getting support	Getting support from friend or others to verify words or sentences provided

Rhetorical category strategies are used fairly by the PRLS, AVLs, and LPLs in writing an essay in the Arabic language, because they are identified as a means that participants use to organize and present their ideas in writing conventions that are acceptable to native speakers of the language. Thus, they used their native language (L1) to organize the ideas of the essay by writing sentences in the Tamil language and then translated them into the Arabic language. The findings of Mu (2005) and Scollon (1991) specify that it is common for L1 writing conventions to be brought into L2 writing.

A great number of participants in the three groups used the associating strategy, relating previous essay writing experiences with the present task. Before the learners planned for the entire essay, the majority clarified to themselves the purpose of writing the essay and for whom to write it. Then they associated, brainstormed, and drew an outline, listing what to write, how to write, and how to organize their ideas. In line with this outcome, Roca de Larios et al. (2008), Wang & Wen (2002), and Arslan & Şahin Kizil (2010) are determined in their findings. Based on this outline, the students translated their ideas and thoughts into the Arabic language. During this process, they tried their best to achieve coherence, both within the language and between paragraphs, to make good use of punctuation, and to use words and phrases appropriately.

The cognitive category strategies are mostly used during the essay writing task in Arabic, because the participants' cognitive strategies led them to work with the think about and manipulate materials strategies to complete the task. They included such specific strategies as generating ideas, note taking, elaboration, imitating and revising, copying, identifying, clarifying the confusion, comparing, drafting, and editing their tasks. In addition, the metacognitive strategies are mostly preferred by the PRLs, AVLs, and LPLs in writing essays in the Arabic language due to their direct consideration for completing the task. In reality, the metacognitive strategies are mental operations or procedures that learners use to regulate their learning. They are directly responsible for the completing of a writing task, and they include planning, evaluating, and monitoring strategies. This is in line with Aliakbari & Hayatzadah (2008), Hong (2006), Riazi (1997), Riazi & Rahimi (2005), Shmais (2003), and Wenden (1991), who detailed that metacognitive strategies are most preferred by EFL or ESL learners as self-regulatory strategies which helped the participants exercise control over their performance of the writing tasks, thus reducing their worry over not knowing what to do.

Native and non-native speakers of a specific language struggle to find the suitable phrase or grammatical structure when they try to get their meaning across. The ways in which a writer attempts to bridge this gap between what he means to communicate and his immediately available linguistic resources are identified as communication strategies (Faucette, 2001). This strategy is used by the three groups of participants when they intended to write an essay in the Arabic language to find suitable phrases or grammatical structure and to get their meaning across. They used the reducing strategy to communicate what they had written in

paragraphs by deleting or adding verbs, adjectives, prepositions, and demonstrative pronouns, according to Arabic language linguistics. The PRLs, AVLs, and LPLs preferred the social, or affective, strategy to interact with others by asking questions for clarification and resourcing the materials for their writing purposes, or adjusting emotions to clarify the taxonomy of writing strategies identified.

Greatest of the AFL learners' strategy usage indicated that they used resourcing, consulting, and getting support due to their challenges in writing the essay. The challenges in writing the essay were mainly limited vocabulary, having difficulty finding relevant evidence, lacking resources, facing difficulty selecting suitable words and phrases, being unable to relate a model to the essay to make it more convincing, being unskilled at using the words and phrases, and facing difficulty in constructing a sentence. To deal with these challenges, the AFL learners employed the following strategies: (a) trying to find as many models as possible and then choosing the best; (b) checking an Arabic-English dictionary; (c) discussing with classmates; (d) turning to the library for more related information; and, (e) asking the teacher or researcher for advice.

Conclusion

It is exciting to indicate that even learners with a low level of proficiency still use a high number of writing strategies in writing an essay in the Arabic language. This indicates that participants, who are LPLs, are also capable of using writing strategies, and this group of learners could be identified as the active strategy users, as labelled by Vann & Abraham (1990) for EFL low-level learners. This finding contradicts the earlier claim of less proficiency in attitude towards WSs and did not show complete control and mastery of the language structures of AFL. However, it should be noted that the ability of the LPLs in strategy use is only limited to the kinds and quantity of the strategies used. They lacked the skill to use strategies effectively in the writing task. In conclusion, it can be said that the participants are active strategy users, even though the LPLs lacked the skills to use the strategies effectively.

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