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Writing Strategies Use: Arabic as a Foreign Language in Sri Lankan Context

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Abstract: Research on writing strategy use in Arabic as a foreign language is still in starting point. Few studies have contracted on essay written in Arabic, as a final product and illustrated deficiencies that surfaced. This study investigated the writing strategies employed by 6 learners in Fathih Institute of Sri Lanka (FISL). Qualitative research conducted through the think aloud protocol, observation and retrospective interview for provide the facts. Performance results on pilot study revealed that proficient learner employed varieties of writing strategies rather than average learner and less proficient learners on their essay writing task. The findings revealed that there is still a lot to be done to improve the Arabic writing skill of Sri Lankan learners. The implications of the results are that teachers need to rethink about the problems that average and less proficient students were encountered and then try to figure out a way to help them. Also, need to help them how to make their place and organize their opinions more reasonably in writing activities.

Key words: Arabic language, cognitive, essay, writing strategy, foreign language

INTRODUCTION

Language learning strategies, exacted as specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective and more transferable to new situations (Oxford, 1990). Many studies (Flower and Hayes, 1981; Bereiter and Scardamalia, 1987; Grabe and Kaplan, 1996; Rao, 2007) distinguished writing as essentially a cognitive process and expose that writers employed a variety of cognitive strategies, such as planning, reviewing, monitoring and generating ideas, as well as revising. This cognitive approach claimed that writing strategies were internal cognitive processes within the margins of the brain and their relationship with perspective was dichotomous. One of the main worries of L2 teachers and researchers have been writing strategies of L2 learners. In the last few decades, a great contract of research has been carried out in this part in an effort to determine the dealings and behaviors L2 learners engage in while generating written texts. Some of the earlier researches were cognitively-oriented (Bosher, 1998; Cumming, 1989; Cumming *et al*., 1989; Kraples, 1990; Sasaki, 2002; Sasaki and Hirose, 1996) while some others focused more on the socio-cognitive points of L2 writing (Leki, 1995; Spack, 1997; Riazi, 1997; Yang *et al*., 2004). With the topical rise of socio-cultural theory in SLA (Second Language Acquisition), efforts have been made to understand L2 writers' uses of diverse resources in writing, based on their cultural, historical and institutional backgrounds (Block, 2003; Prior, 2006; Lantolf and Thorne, 2006).

The learning occurrence of strategy use is essential to investigate as strategies are linked with successful learning (Grenfell and Macaro, 2007). However, research of foreign language learning, purposely language learning strategy use, have mostly paid attention on learning English as a foreign or second language (Shmais, 2003; Peacock and Ho, 2003; Poole, 2005; Yongqi, 2005). Currently, there is a lack of research on strategy use in learning Arabic as a Foreign Language (AFL). This study of six AFL Sri Lankan Learners provides valuable findings and suggestions which add to the existing knowledge of the Arabic language teaching and learning field.

Theoretical framework: Language learning strategies are positioned by Ellis (1994) as having the mediating role between learner factors and learning products (p. 529). Ellis (1994) describes strategy as a mental or behavioral activity related to some specific stage in the overall process of language acquisition or language use (p. 529). He explains that differences of individual learner together with different social factors, influence learners' strategy apply. For instance, individual learner factors, such as second Language (L2) learners' motivation in learning the target language with social factors, such as teaching instruction received may affect the learners' use of

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strategy. Ellis (1994) points out that learner' choices of strategies affect the degree of success in language learning in terms of the rate of acquisition and the level of reaching. For example, certain strategy use in a given language task may effect in higher L2 performance while certain strategy use may not be as proficient in the same type of language task. This study focused on the last piece of Ellis (1994) framework in which learners' choice of language learning strategies in relation to their writing were investigated.

Taxonomy of strategies: Researchers in the second language acquisition field have attempted to identify learners' strategy use and categorized them into different types of strategies. For example Oxford (1990), suggests 6 categories of strategies: Cognitive, metacognitive, memory, compensation, affective and social strategies and explains how each category aids the development of communicative competence. Oxford (1990) explains that the 6 categories of strategies are grouped into two different types as direct and indirect. The memory, cognitive and compensation strategies are direct strategies which are applied by learners for immediate response to language tasks. They are considered direct strategies because all 3 categories require mental processing of the language (p. 37). Each of the three types does the processing in different ways for different purposes. For example Oxford (1990), defines memory strategies as having the function of helping learners group comprehensible input and retrieve information. Memory strategies, such as using flash cards or grouping words of similar functions help learners remember newly learned vocabulary. Then, the cognitive strategies, clarified as manipulation or transformation of the target language by the learner (Oxford, 1990) have the function of helping learners to understand and produce L2. For example, learners use the cognitive strategy of skimming to establish the main idea in content. Last, the compensation strategies, intended as to make up for an inadequate repertoire of grammar and especially of vocabulary (Oxford, 1990) allow learners to use evidences for guessing, leading to more comprehension.

Further, metacognitive, social and affective strategies are indirect strategies learners use to prepare for language tasks and help learners increase more control of their learning. Metacognitive strategies are those used to organize learning, so that learners may more easily direct the second language acquisition process. For example, learners set goals and classify the purpose of a language task. Then, the affective strategies defined as strategies which assist learners be more active in language learning include strategies, such as giving oneself a valuable reward for a good language performance and writing a diary to carry on track of one's personal experience in the language learning process. Social strategies are used to learn the target language through communication with others. Together these strategies support the development of communicative competence. Among the many categorizations of strategies created by scholars, Oxford (1990)'s taxonomy of strategies is considered the most comprehensive by Ellis (1994). Hence, Ellis (1994) language learning strategy framework and Oxford (1990)'s taxonomy of strategies were utilized to guide the study in investigating language learners' strategy use and its relation to their writing achievements.

Arabic as foreign language learning strategies: Investigation on writing in Arabic as L2 is still in its starting point. Few studies have contracted with essays written in Arabic as a final work and described deficiencies that surfaced. For example, studies concerning cohesion and coherence (Shakir and Obeidat, 1992) in AFL texts show that incoherent texts suffer from lack of contextualization and inappropriate use or lack of cohesive devices. These studies dealt with descriptive writing tasks. Examination of the actual processes and strategies used in writing is still lacking, in part because the act of writing in the L2 is viewed as a means of practicing grammar (Leki, 1999). Khaldieh (2000) investigated the learning strategies and writing processes of proficient and less-Proficient 43 American learners of Arabic as foreign language. The findings demonstrate that the less-proficient writers experienced a high level of concern and frustration, assumed an unconstructive attitude toward writing and did not prove mastery of the language structures of AFL. As result, their writing samples reveal a low level of writing aptitude. Investigation on proficient, average learner and less proficient learners' strategies into writing as processes in Arabic as L2 has not been given much attention. The focus of this study is an attempt to explore method and strategies learners of Arabic use as they compose essays in a class.

Research questions:

- What strategies do students use in completing Arabic writing?
- How proficient, average and less proficient writers can be differentiated in terms of writing strategies?

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research sites: This study involves 2nd year Arabic class students in Fathih Institute of Sri Lanka which is

one of the non state's fastest-growing private school, with >45 students in diploma programs in 2013. Starting college of language at Fathih Institute developed an elementary Arabic language course in response to increasing student needs for learning Arabic language skills. The demand from students for learning Arabic is evident, as the Arabic language course expanded from diploma to advanced diploma in 2013/2014 academic year.

Participants: In order to eradicate the difference on the measurement of writing strategies, this study intended to look for proficient learners, average learner and less proficient in Arabic writing. The participants involved in the study were 2nd year Arabic language students in their second semester of study which represented with backgrounds in the 1st year Arabic classrooms. The six participants included two from commerce stream and others from arts stream who are preparing stage for sit the university entrance exam of Sri Lanka in 2014.

Data collection: Data for this study were collected on August, 2013. Several data collection methods were used to investigate strategy use. In particular, think aloud protocol used to elicit their thinking mind on their Arabic writing task and to recognize the strategies. Observation conducted to identify the infinite level of witting strategies use and retrospective were carried out after the observation to verify the strategies they implemented on their composition. The learners requested to choose and write one essay in given two topics. The collected data transcribed and return to participant for verification. The verified data coded according to previous writing strategy coded list and submitted to three experts for validity checking. The validated data confirm as 8.5 valuations through Kappa calculating procedure.

RESULTS

Think-aloud protocol data: The think-aloud protocol data uncovered how the students monitor and focus their attention of strategy in different areas during their writing processes. The strategies were employed by the students from starting to read the writing on time until completing their writings were counted. The 20 different sub-strategies that came out in the data were grouped into 3 main strategy groups: Metacognitive, cognitive and social strategies.

As shown in Table 1, the three group of the learners concentrating on 3 main strategies. The proficient learners intend planning, monitoring, evaluating, rewriting and keeping awareness, as well as brainstorming, under the metacognitive strategies rather than average learner and less proficient. They do not concentrate on monitoring and keep awareness strategies while less proficient learners do not on concentrate on planning. This entails that the proficient learners did not need to do these and could progress towards the other strategies while average learner and less proficient had to go back to reread the writing prompt and to do planning, monitoring and keep awareness on writing task. The repeating, revising, note-taking and using the L1 are under the cognitive strategies employed favorably by three groups.

Table 1: Sri Lankan AFL learners writing strategy use

Main strategy	Sub-strategy	Proficient learner (2)	Average learner (2)	Less proficient learner (2)
Metacognitive	Planning	2	2	1
	Monitoring	2	1	1
	Evaluating	2	2	2
	Rewriting	2	2	2
	Keeping awareness	2	1	1
	Brainstorming	2	2	2
Cognitive				
	Repeating	2	2	2
	Revising	2	2	2
	Elaborating	2	1	2
	Clarifying	2	1	1
	Retrieval	2	2	1
	Rehearsing	2	2	1
	Summarizing	1	1	2
	Note-taking	2	2	2
	Mixing languages	-	2	2
	Looking for model	-	2	1
	Using L1	2	2	2
Social	Resourcing	2	2	2

However, the proficient learner did not exploit the mixing language strategy and looking for model whiles the average learners and less proficient employed. The way indicates that the average learner and less proficient learner need to more attention to apply the cognitive strategies. As stated by Flower and Hayes (1981) and Hayes (1996), going back to read what has been written is a conscious effort that writers make in order to make judgments of their own written texts.

Observation and interviews with learners: In the present study, the entire participant reported that the essay they had written was as good as they could generate in timed settings. They reflected that forty minutes was enough to write an essay. They also found the topic practically easy because it was something close to their daily life. However in their perspectives, there were major differences between their performance in writing task and their approach to other conditions: In the daily life, they have a longer time to think about the writing topic, gather ideas and formulate their own viewpoints before writing, once on completion of their first draft of their essays, usually they have time to leave it sometime before coming

back to review it and make changes and on doing the think-aloud writing task, they thought a bit tired because they had to keep speaking out their own views. They thought that they approached writing task in the similar way as they had done under other situation. The explanations they gave with regard to what their normal writing processes were very close to their real behavior on writing task. It also, seems that the students could condense their writing processes into the time on hand for this writing task rather than change their behaviors.

Proficient learners: They developed a global plan for their writings. There seemed to following stages. First, after reading the essay writing topic they made the reaction it reminded in them. This reaction to the topic became the main point of their writing and was developed into the theme later. Next, analysis of the essay writing topic: Having read the essay writing topic at the beginning, they analyzed the demands of the topic. After the problem identification, they tended immediately proceed to write down the points for the categories identified. Final, organizing the essay: They organized their essay, attending to both the structure and presentation of content. The act of organizing appeared in effect to be a practice to validate the planned thinking, organization and content of their essay, as well as the way that they would like to articulate their ideas more clearly.

Average and less proficient: Their planning stage could be divided into 2 sub-stages: First, reaction to the writing topic: After reading the essay writing topic, they started to generate the ideas but did not seem to plan to make effort to organize these ideas. The next brainstorming: They carried out on generating ideas on the essay topic they had primarily identified. Their planning behavior did not come into view to go beyond. After each idea, they revisited to the essay writing topic, however this was only a strategy to generate ideas and did not result in any development of their writing. Unlike high achieving students as the large amount of time spent at this stage, they made no clear effort to plan the clear structure in the argument in their tasks.

DISCUSSION

With the aim of contributing to AFL writing, the findings of current study suggest that average learner and less proficient students did not indicate their position clearly, exerted less efforts in generate texts and reviewed their work less. In differences, proficient learners determined more on clearly stating their spot in planning, generating and revising and editing during reviewing. First in terms of planning, proficient learners in the present study, planned less but they verified a more concern for the part of global planning, such as organization and style and devised clear goal formation strategies to resolve their problems while average and less proficient learners did not have this strategic familiarity for establishing clear writing plans and were blurred in their mind through writing. It may be that proficient learners already had a lot in place before the writing and were able to tackle the writing on time correctly. Average and less proficient learners may not have had as much background knowledge which could account for their lack of clear position declaration.

CONCLUSION

In terms of implications for coaching, teachers may need to rethink about the problems that average and less proficient students were encountered and then try to figure out a way to help them. The lack of clear global-level planning processing activities indicates among this average and less proficient learners that a call for instruction in which strategies to hoist attentiveness in writing. The teachers may need to help students how to make their place declaration clearly and organize their opinions more reasonably in the teaching writing activities.

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