

A Study of Metacognitive Strategy Knowledge in Writing of University Students

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Abstract:

Various studies about metacognitive strategies yield significant findings about the importance of the ability to regulate one's knowledge in writing. This qualitative study may contribute to show how students perceive writing in English and to ascertain their knowledge of metacognitive strategies. The data were collected through a writing task and a semi-structured interview of twenty-two English specialized University students who are in their final semester. The data were interpreted using the thematic analysis approach. The result revealed that most of the participants have showed that metacognitive strategies employed in planning and monitoring stages are aside from few different techniques. It was also evident that more strategies were utilized by proficient writers compared to their counterparts especially in planning. While in evaluating stage, all participants expressed similar strategies.

Keywords: writing- metacognitive strategy- monitoring- planning- evaluating- Libyan students.

دراسة معرفة استراتيجيات الادراك المعرفي في مهارة الكتابة لطلبة كلية التربية بجامعة مصراتة

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الملخص:

الكثير من الدراسات التي أجريت عن استراتيجيات الادراك المعرفي أظهرت نتائج مهمة عن أهمية قدرة تعديل ماهية الكتابة. في هذه الدراسة النوعية قد تساهم في إظهار إدراك الطلبة في الكتابة باللغة الإنجليزية والتحقق من معرفتهم لاستراتيجيات الادراك المعرفي. المعلومات التي تم جمعها في هذه الدراسة

كانت من خلال تمارين كتابية ومقابلات شبه منظمة لعدد اثنان وعشرون من الطلبة في قسم اللغة الإنجليزية بكلية التربية وهم في فصول الدراسية المتقدمة. طريقة تحليل البيانات كانت طريقة تحليلية موضوعية. النتائج لهذا البحث بينت أن معظم المشاركين في الدراسة ربط استراتيجيات العقلية والادراكية في التخطيط والمراقبة بتقنيات أخرى مختلفة. وكان أيضاً واضحاً بأن أكثر استراتيجيات استخدمت من قبل المعلمين الماهرين مقارنة بأولئك لأقرانهم الأقل مهارة خصوصاً في التخطيط للكتابة بينما في مرحلة التقييم كل المشاركين استخدموا استراتيجيات مشابهة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: كتابة- استراتيجيات ما وراء المعرفة- رصد- تخطيط- تقييم- الطلبة الليبيين.

I. Introduction

1.1 Background of the Study

Writing is a multifaceted process that requires both intellect and experience. It is true that the pressure for second/foreign language students is immense when it comes to writing due to the fact that they have to be well-equipped with linguistic knowledge and understanding to be able to write (Flavell, 1979). According to Weigle (2002), unlike the first language writing in which students' linguistic knowledge are already established, second language writing is based upon the needs and situations of the learners.

Most Libyan college students struggle to start writing a composition and feel even more difficult to develop it. Factors like limited background about rhetorical conventions in writing, inadequate vocabulary, grammar confusion, paragraph inconsistency and the absence of cohesive links may contribute to this problem. As Alsied and Ibrahim (2017) mentioned that Libyan students lack the ability to express their ideas in writing. Given the fact that writing teachers seldom return the written compositions of the students, there is little opportunity for students to recognize their mistakes resulting into incompetence to develop their own writing skills. Teaching strategies used by writing teachers such as the product and the process approach can be effective (Weigle, 2002), but other means of developing students' own writing skills may be more helpful.

One way to address this concern is to develop and maximize students' own mental knowledge and ability. Various studies have been carried out on

how to help students develop their full potentials in writing especially the use of metacognition.

Metacognition is generally defined as the activity of monitoring and controlling one's cognition (Young & Fry, 2008). Similarly, Nelson (1996) described metacognition as a construct that refers to thinking about one's thinking or the human ability to be conscious of one's mental processes. That is why, learners who are knowledgeable about their cognitive development can comprehend and develop their learning well, so that they are expected to plan, monitor, analyze problems, and assess their own work (Zhang & Goh, 2006). With this concept applied, students may not entirely depend on the teachers' evaluation to improve their writing skills when they learn how to understand their learning processes in order to become independent writers.

Thus, to raise the understanding of Libyan college students on the importance of metacognitive strategies in writing as well as their knowledge about metacognition, this study intends to determine the students' perception of writing and the metacognitive strategies they used.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Writing is a skill that requires rational thinking most students struggle to develop with because they need to utilize their intelligence in order to write. Unfortunately, most of them are unable to create a composition that is expected from college students. They are often discouraged when it comes to writing because of the inability to express themselves. It is either they are taught in a poor manner, or writing as a skill is neglected while they are studying. Although that is true in many cases, students may have developed the idea but only unaware of their metacognitive skills in which they are certainly capable of cultivating and regulating. Hence, they should be acquainted about the significance of these strategies in order to develop their abilities to become proficient writers.

1.3 Research Questions

1. How do English specialized students at the college of Education perceive writing in English?
2. Do metacognitive strategies used in writing differ between the proficient and less proficient students?

1.4 Significance of the Study

The results of the study may pave the way for the students to be conscious of the application of metacognitive strategies when writing. This may encourage students to be cognizant of their own strategies as well as to develop autonomy. Moreover, this research may also help teachers develop the potentials of their students in writing by teaching them how to use these metacognitive strategies independently. This may also gauge the effectiveness of the current teaching strategies of teachers in teaching writing especially in the tertiary level. Lastly, this research may guide other researchers to focus on other aspects of metacognitive awareness in order to help Libyan students become more self-reliant and independent in their studies.

II. Review of Related Literature

2.1 The Concept of Metacognition

Metacognition is the consciousness of an individual whether to repudiate or control one's intellectual undertakings (Flavell, 1979). It refers to the recognition of understanding as well the management of cognition (Kuhn & Dean, 2004; Pintrich, 2002). This means that students can reflect on their abilities to understand their own thoughts. In the same vein, Rahimi and Katal (2011) mentioned that metacognition is a concept of individual thoughts and the skill to comprehend one's intellectual development. As explained by Papaleontiou-Louca (2003) that because cognition and metacognition are interconnected, cognitive skills such as observation, comprehension, retention, among others, are also similar to the skills possessed individually.

2.2 Metacognitive Strategies

Metacognitive strategies are formed when students reflect about the strategies they will use in order to perform a task. According to Goctu (2017), students use metacognitive strategies to control their thoughts and ability to learn which include techniques, capabilities, mental activities, and actions. In writing, metacognitive strategy involves thinking about the task and how to plan, monitor, and evaluate it.

There are various taxonomies of metacognitive writing strategies developed by several proponents, but the specific model used in this research is planning, monitoring and evaluating taxonomy (Mu, 2005). A number of descriptions established by several articles about planning in writing. As Farahian (2015) cited, planning are strategies that transpire initially before the writer starts the writing activity, and assist the writer to establish the processes before writing. Schraw and Moshman (1995) equally described it as the stage that involves choosing suitable strategies and resources that enhance performance. Furthermore, strategies such as setting objectives, building prior knowledge as well as time management should be identified and chosen properly during planning (Schraw, et al., 2006). The study of Goctu (2017) showed that the emphasis of planning includes aims of writing activity, topic, audience, as well as the techniques to be applied. It can be done before writing which may involve brainstorming among students in groups which deemed effective, although, it can be individual.

During the monitoring phase, learners implement their plan and monitor the progress they are making towards their learning goal. Schraw et al. (2006) stated that, "monitoring or regulating involves attending to and being aware of comprehension and task performance and can include self-testing." As highlighted by Farahian (2015), it is important that students review the strategies used and adjust them when required. Students should involve consciousness or understanding of the task performance, as pointed out by Schraw and Moshman (1995) that periodic self-testing is necessary while learning.

Metacognitive evaluation according to Farahian (2015) signified the effectiveness of an action according to its outcome. Similarly, for Schraw and Moshman (1995) evaluation is the assessment of the processes and results of learning. In the evaluation stage, the students gauge the effectiveness of the strategies employed in accomplishing their aims in learning (n.d). The study of Goctu (2017) concluded that peer assessment is more efficient, that is, seeking the view of others in order to deliberate the changes needed, although, it is also encouraged to develop students' self-editing and corrections.

2.3 The Effects of Metacognitive Strategies on Writing

Metacognitive strategies, as discussed above, concern with the knowledge of individual's mental processes that result to self-regulation. According to Goctu (2017), metacognition in writing helps students comprehend and adjust their development in order to meet the expected strains in writing. As mentioned by Chaterdon (2019), writing intellectuals insisted that to produce good writers, it is vital to nurture metacognitive awareness in writing process. Farahian and Avarzamani (2018) accentuated that competent writers and less-skilled ones can be distinguished through metacognition which can also be improved as writers mature and progress.

Several studies have been investigated how metacognitive strategies knowledge affect writing. Some scholars such as, Raofi, Chan, Mukundan, & Rashid, (2014) conducted studies that approved how metacognitive knowledge could positively affect the students' writing ability. In their study, the results showed that students who are proficient in writing employed more metacognitive writing strategies compared to those who are low skilled. They also mentioned that proficient writers focused more on the organization of ideas and revision in comparison to their counterparts. Baker (2011) also stated that skilled writers were distinguished from less skilled writers through their knowledge of the writing process. She described that adept writers were highly conscious of their processes in writing, that is, they were able to set a plan on how to carry out their writing tasks unlike the less skilled writers who focused more on simple features such as grammar and writing mechanics. A point echoed by Weigle (2002) in which expert writers, in comparison to neophyte writers, considered preparation and revision an essential phase in writing.

The result of the study of Aziz, Nemati, & Estahbanati (2017) showed that a positive relationship was found between the students' metacognitive writing strategy and their writing skills. They also stated that compared to others students, those who were successful in learning utilized meta-cognitive learning strategies more. Moreover, efficacious students who were perceptive of their tasks also utilized diverse strategies (Rahimi & Katal, 2011). Similarly, the study of Negretti (2012) also indicated that as

students' knowledge of metacognitive strategies increased, they became aware on how to regulate their knowledge in order to adjust with the requirements of the task given to them.

2.4 Libyan Students Writing Skills as Foreign Language Learners

The Libyan educational curriculum has tremendous positive changes in recent years. The introduction of English as one of the subjects in the first grade is a commendable development. The use of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) as well as the Total Physical Response (TPR) methods in textbooks is used clearly in the schools. But despite of these positive improvements, students who studied prior to this time had to learn English in the later stage of schooling. These students who are now in the final stage of their tertiary level had little exposure in order to develop their language skills. Moreover, most English teachers in schools in the past focused more on grammar, vocabulary, and reading rather than speaking and writing. According to Alhmali (2007), Libyan education aims only to help students excel academically at school at the expense of their personal development and ingenuity. Moreover, he stated that teachers' lack the knowledge of the approaches that may develop the intellectual aspect of students as well as emotional and psychological. Elgadal (2017) also said that most Libyan students struggle to compose texts in English independently and consider writing as one of the most difficult skills to master. When students were asked what they found most difficult about writing, many said that they were unsure on how to start, what to include, and how to improve.

III. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This qualitative study aimed to determine the perception about writing as well as the metacognitive strategies of English specialized students in the English Department at the Faculty of Education in Misurata through thematic analysis approach. According to McMillan and Schumacher (2006) "qualitative research is inquiry in which researchers collect data in face-to-face situations by interacting with selected persons in their settings. [It] describes and analyzes people's individual and collective social actions, beliefs, thoughts, and perceptions."

3.2 Participants and Setting

The respondents of this study were twenty-two English specialized students who are currently registered in the English Department at the Faculty of Education for academic year 2021-2022. Initially, there were 27 students who accomplished the writing task including 11 proficient and 16 less proficient writers (according to a tests scores). However, 5 of less proficient writers were unwilling to participate in the interview. Therefore, there were 11 proficient as well as 11 less proficient writers included in this study.

3.3 Data-Gathering Instrument

The current study utilized two basic instruments. The first instrument was a 3-paragraph writing task that was accomplished by the students within an hour. An evaluation criteria based on Jacobs et al. scale (Weigle, 2002) was used for a uniform rating. The second instrument was a semi-structured interview adapted and modified from Farahian's study (2017) about the students' perceptions of writing and the metacognitive strategies used in writing compositions. This interview includes students' planning, monitoring and evaluating strategies in writing. The interview was recorded after the permission was taken.

3.4 Procedures

3.4.1 Data Gathering

Initially, students involved were informed about their role in the study to secure their voluntary participation. They were asked to write a 3-paragraph composition within an hour with the topic provided by the researchers. A number was assigned for each participant for easy identification. After that, an interview was conducted individually for 15-20 minutes also according to students' availability and convenience.

3.4.2 Ethical Considerations

The researchers sought the willingness of the participants to join this study. The participants were also informed of the purpose of the study through written consent. Confidentiality of the information especially personal as well as individual responses were considered significant.

3.4.3 Data Analysis

Regarding the writing proficiency of the selected participants, a writing rubric was used to evaluate the compositions to identify the proficient participants from the less proficient ones. The data gathered from the interview were transcribed and interpreted using the thematic analysis approach to show the emerging themes from students' insights about writing in English and the metacognitive strategies they used.

IV. Results and Data Interpretation

Twenty-two participants who participated in the interview explained their views pertaining to writing and the metacognitive strategies they applied. The interview data analysis is divided into two main categories: Students' Perceptions of Writing in English and Metacognitive Strategies employed by of Proficient and Less Proficient Students. The second category includes three headings: planning, monitoring, and evaluating.

4.1 Students' Perceptions of Writing in English

The findings reveal the participants' perceptions towards writing. Most of them acknowledged that writing is essential although it is difficult. Their views are all similar claiming that writing needs great attention to be developed. The following is a selection of their responses.

'I can see it [writing] as important and significant for the person who loves to write. It's important because it is considered as a tool of communication.' (S1)

'I really don't like writing very much although it is very important. I find writing [a] very difficult skill to learn and improve.' (S5)

'I am always worried about writing. I think of how I can join sentences. Other skills are easier than this skill.' (S9)

'Writing is difficult. I find vocabulary and unfamiliar topics challenging.' (S14)

'It is difficult, but students have to focus on it.' (S16)

'I don't have enough vocabulary and background about the topic.' (S18)

'I don't have wide knowledge about the topic. I have problem[s] using punctuation, spelling and vocabulary.' (S23)

4.2. Metacognitive Strategies employed by Proficient and Less Proficient Students

4.2.1 Planning

Planning is the initial stage of writing where students set their own purpose of writing. Several plans may include consolidating ideas, preparing outline, and establishing strategies for unity and cohesion (Thamraksa, n.d.). In this study, both proficient and less proficient students share similar strategies in terms of type of audience, creating a plan or an outline, and the organization of ideas.

'... in my own opinion, I should pay attention on all of these factors: audience, teacher and the idea. I just think what I'm going to write. It's just like [I] take time for one minute. I take a plan.' (S1)

'I focus on the idea in [a] way that the reader can understand.' (S4)

'... I will make an outline that I will follow to start writing my first draft.' (S5)

'If the topic is unfamiliar, I search for some background ideas. Then I organize my ideas.' (S12)

'I concentrate on how my teacher receives and views my writing.' (S16)

'I try think about the subject, collect information, and organize my ideas before I write. I focus on the audience. I hope that the reader gets my message and be satisfied with my writing.' (S17)

'I have to organize my ideas, I make an outline.' (S25)

'I think of the topic. I try to write everything I know that is related to the topic, then I organize my ideas.' (S27)

However, proficient writers use other strategies such as thinking of appropriate vocabulary words before writing, and determining the purpose of the composition.

'I usually try to understand very well what I am going to write about.' (S5)

'I write down some ideas [about the topic]. My goal is to teach it [writing] in the future.' (S6)

'I improve my vocabulary by getting new vocabulary from bilingual dictionary.' (S10)

'I think about the requirements given by the teacher [about the writing task].' (S18)

'I focus on vocabulary, spelling and grammar.' (S22)

'I concentrate on vocabulary.' (S23)

On the other hand, less proficient writers determine the objectives of the writing activity.

'I focus on [my] goals in writing.' (S8)

'In writing, I have to set aims. Yes, I set goals as the first part ...' (S13)

'It depends on the kind of writing.' (S15)

4.2.2 Monitoring

Monitoring is a regular observation of writing and it takes place during the writing process which involves modifying the strategies used. As Goctu (2017) pointed out, testing and substantiating progress in terms of content and organization in general, as well as the aspects of grammar and mechanics in particular are part of monitoring stage. The results below show that both proficient and less proficient writers develop the strategy of rechecking and reorganizing ideas.

'I reorganize my thoughts and ideas [whether] to change the topic or not.' (S6)

'... I check my writing and ask myself, is my writing good or not?' (S13)

'I usually pause and check my work by reading it.' (S14)

'I stop [and] I see my writing if it is good or not. I sometimes ask my friends [for] help.' (S16)

'I always try to see and reread my writing if it is good and if my message was [carried] or not.' (S17)

Nonetheless, there are different strategies used by proficient writers such as taking time to think when writing, as well as remembering ideas used in the past.

'Well, when I face a problem, I just take a little time, and relax then I come back to write.' (S1)

'First, I take my writing to play [in] my mind then I try to get some help to continue or I try to simplify the ideas I have so [that] I can continue writing.' (S5)

'I try to take time and think wisely about my problem ... then I start writing.' (S17)

'Yes, I stop and think about ideas that I have done before and apply it in my writing.' (S23)

On the other hand, less proficient writers commonly apply the strategy of seeking help from teachers or friends, and checking online.

'[My] strategies to solve [writing] problems include going to the internet and asking the teacher.' (S8)

'When I have problems, I try to solve them such as asking teachers or professionals or sometimes I use the internet.' (S13)

'If I can't go on, I usually check online about additional ideas.' (S14)

'I will read and check the dictionary or check online.' (S25)

'I ask my friend to help me discuss ideas.' (S26)

4.2.3 Evaluating

The strategies used by proficient and less proficient in the evaluating stage are similar. One of them is self-review. According to Brown (as cited in Khikmah, 2018), self-evaluation is one of the classifications of metacognitive strategies which means to examine one's knowledge of language and compare it to the precision and entirety of the process. Other strategies include asking teachers, friends and others for suggestions, and comparing works with others.

'I revise my work to correct any mistake. If there's someone better than me to correct my work, I allow her.' (S6)

'After I have finished my work, I try to check my written tasks, if there is something I can change.' (S9)

'I summarize my ideas. If I make mistakes, I correct them. I sometimes ask my teacher or friends, but I don't have any criteria.' (S22)

'I evaluate my writing if there is any spelling or grammatical mistakes.' (S13)

'I read my work again and sometimes I compare with other writings.'
(S15)

'I go [and] ask the teacher to see my writing if it is right or not.' (S19)

V. Conclusion

This study investigated the students' perceptions about writing and their consciousness of the metacognitive strategies. The findings showed that students considered writing as challenging, but at the same time a significant skill to develop. Proficient and less proficient students shared similar strategies in planning such as thinking about the audience, making a plan or outline and organizing ideas, as well as the strategies in monitoring stage like rechecking and reorganizing ideas. However, there were also several other different strategies employed by each group in both stages, although more strategies were utilized by proficient writers particularly in planning. In evaluating stage, both groups used the same strategies including self-assessment, asking for suggestions, and comparing one's work with others.

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