On the Relationship between Iranian EFL Students’ Writing Strategies and Writing Ability

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ABSTRACT
This study aimed at investigating the relationship between writing strategies, and writing ability of Iranian EFL students. The participants were 120 students learning English in the Iranian EFL context. Data were gathered by means of a writing strategies questionnaire and an IELTS writing task. The results of Pearson correlation test revealed that there was a statistically significant relationship between writing strategies, and writing abilities of the participants. The results have some implications for teaching writing in the EFL context.

Keywords:
Writing strategy
Writing ability
EFL students

1. Introduction

Writing is one of the most important skills in learning English as a foreign language. In some researchers’ opinion, there is a relationship between learners’ success and their writing abilities (Lerstorm, 1990). In writing a passage in English, learners utilize writing strategies to write a text better. These strategies are different in different students. For example, proficient students have more awareness of writing process than novice ones. Lipstein and Renninger (2007) mentioned that successful learners develop a better understanding of writing skill, set writing goals, and use diverse writing strategies.

Writing Strategies are cognitive and meta-cognitive procedures that writers use to control the production of writing (Richards & Schmidt, 2002). It can be defined as a sequence of engaging a writer in planning, composing, and revising activities in a writing task (Torrance, Thomas & Robinson, 2000).

Today one can find some university EFL students who cannot write even a simple coherent English sentence after four years of study at the university level and the grades they get in the norm-referenced assessment culture of Iran do not have accountability. This problem might be due to their unfamiliarity with strategies involved in writing process. Therefore, this study intends to investigate the relationship between Iranian EFL students’ use of writing strategies and their writing ability. Therefore, the following research question was formulated:

Is there any statistically significant relationship...

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between Iranian EFL students’ writing strategies and their writing ability?

Accordingly, the following null hypothesis could be presented:

There is no statistically significant relationship between Iranian EFL students’ writing strategies and their writing ability.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Writing

Richards and Schmidt (2002)\[13\] defined writing as strategies, procedures, and decision making processes which are utilized when the authors write about a topic. They mentioned that writing included planning, drafting, reviewing and revising processes.

Heaton (1975)\[6\] explains that a writer needs four fundamental skills to write about a topic. The first skill is grammatical skill which helps the writer to write grammatically correct sentences. The second skill is stylistic skill which is about the ability to manipulate the sentences and use the language efficiently. Mechanical skill is the third necessary skill in writing process. Writers should use conventions peculiar to written language. Judgment skill is the last skill which is related to appropriate manner of writing according to the purpose of writing.

Writing is a complex process which is considered as one of the most essential skills in language learning. Shopping lists, letters and academic texts are some forms of writing. Each of these forms have a variety of features regarding their levels of grammar or structure. Nunan (1999)\[11\] stated that writing is productive skill and shares some functional characteristics with spoken discourse. Halliday (as cited in Nunan, 1999)\[11\] described three purposes for writing. Action, information, and entertainment are the main purposes of writing a text. Action includes public signs, product labels, and so on. Information is related to the newspapers and magazines, and entertainment includes comic strips, novels, and newspaper features. Emig (1977)\[4\] defines writing as a unique mode of learning and in this process both sides of brain should be used. Emig believed that writing a text increases thinking skills, it also helps the author to analyze and synthesize ideas better.

Students in EFL classes have lots of problems with writing. Lack of skills to write is the first problem that students may face. Students do not write in their L1, and this issue impacts their confidence and experience, so learners avoid writing which compounds the problem. Another factor which affects writing is previous learning experience. It impacts the learners’ views about their capabilities, and this prevents them from experimenting writing skills. Nunan (1999)\[11\] said that written discourse is not an important problem, and, linguistically, written language tends to consist of clauses that are complex internally. Students also need to master new vocabulary, format and register conventions.

2.2 Writing Strategies

Writing Strategies include cognitive and metacognitive procedures that writers use to control the production of writing. There are eight categories of writing strategies. “Planning” is the first category in which the writer chooses what to write about. “Global planning” is about organizing the whole text. In “Rehearsing” the writer tries out ideas and in “Repeating” phase, they provide impetus to continue writing. Writers review what had already been written down in “Re-reading”, and in “Questioning”, ideas are classified and evaluated. “Revising” and “Editing” are the last categories which are related to making some changes to clarify meaning and correct syntax and spelling (Arndt, 1987).\[1\] She proposed the following table for describing her own categories of writing strategies.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category of strategies</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Planning</td>
<td>Finding a focus, deciding what to write about</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Global planning</td>
<td>Deciding how to organize the text as a whole</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rehearsing</td>
<td>Trying out ideas and the language in which to express them</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Repeating</td>
<td>Of key words and phrases- an activity which often seemed to provide impetus to continue composing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Re-reading</td>
<td>Of what had already been written down</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questioning</td>
<td>As a means of classifying ideas, or evaluating what had been written</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Revising</td>
<td>Making changes to the written text in order to clarify meaning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Editing</td>
<td>Making changes to the written text in order to correct the syntax or spelling</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Wenden (1991)\[16\] asked eight students to write a text at the computer and investigated how metacognitive strategies impacted students’ writing. She classified writing strategies into two sections. The first section includes metacognitive strategies such as planning, evaluation, and monitoring. Cognitive strategies are in the second part which include clarification, retrieval, resourcing, deferral, avoidance, and verification. Metacognitive strategies are mental operations that students use to regulate their learning process. They are used for execution of a writing task. Cognitive strategies are used for learning new information and using it in a particular task or situation. They are used to solve the problems during writing and help the implementation of the metacognitive strategies.

Victori (1995)\[15\] classified writing strategies into seven types. They included planning strategies, monitoring strategies, evaluating strategies, resourcing strategies, repeating strategies, reduction strategies, and the use of L1 strategies. In planning strategies, the writers decide about their ideas and state their aims for writing. The strategies which writers use for checking and identifying
the problems are called monitoring strategies. Evaluating strategies include strategies that are used for changing the text and used after reconsidering the text and learners’ objectives. Resourcing strategies mean using external referencing sources of information. When writers are reviewing the text, they can apply repeating chunks of language. Reduction strategies involve removing some phrases in a text, trying to solve the problem, and paraphrasing. A writer can use L1 to generate new ideas and evaluate L2 or foreign language written text.

Riazi (1997)\cite{12} asserted that some categories can be added to previous categories of writing strategies. He believed that the students can use these strategies for mental representations of writing task and social activities. He said that cognitive strategies include note taking, inferencing, elaboration, L1 use, and revising and editing multiple drafts of writing. He stated that students use their previous knowledge and called this a dynamic and interactive process. Metacognitive strategies lead to the control of writing tasks and the decrease of the levels of stress and anxiety. Social strategies included interaction with teachers and students for clarifying the task, problem solving, and discussing about comments in writing process. The last category of strategies i.e. search strategies deal with searching and using supporting sources. The composing strategies are displayed in table 2 below.

Table 2. Composing strategies (adapted from Riazi, 1997)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Constituents</th>
<th>Phases of composing process</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cognitive strategies</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interacting with the materials to be used in writing by manipulating them mentally or physically</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metacognitive strategies</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Executive processes used to plan, monitor, and evaluate a writing task.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social strategies</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Search strategies</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2.3 Empirical Studies
Gahungu (2007)\cite{3} conducted a study to find the interrelationship among strategy use, self-efficacy, and language ability in foreign language learners in Northern Arizona University. Participants of this research were 37 students studying French. One of the researchers asked the students to fill out a forty-item questionnaire which was strategy inventory for language learning (SILL). They were also asked to complete a forty-item questionnaire about their levels of self-efficacy. Learners’ levels and their abilities in French language were measured by a cloze test. Open-ended questions, interviews, and class observation were used in this research, too. He found that there was a positive and significant relationship between these three variables.

Yilmaz (2010)\cite{38} aimed at investigating the relationship between language learning strategies, gender, proficiency and self-efficacy beliefs. The results showed that there was a statistically significant difference for the strategies in favor of good learners. Also, it was shown that the highest and lowest ranks were for compensation strategies and affective strategies respectively.

Assadi Aidinlou and Massomi Far (2014)\cite{33} investigated the relationship between self-efficacy beliefs, writing strategies, and correct use of conjunctions by Iranian EFL learners. The participants of this study were 67 EFL learners who studied English in a language school in Iran. They asked participants to fill out two questionnaires including self-efficacy beliefs questionnaire and a writing strategy questionnaire. They also used a writing task in which they asked students to complete it by using appropriate conjunctions. The findings showed that there was a statistically significant relationship between students’ self-efficacy beliefs and writing strategies but there was not any statistically significant relationship between writing strategies and appropriate use of conjunctions.

Bai, Hu, and Gu (2014)\cite{31} found that there was a relationship between language proficiency and the choice of strategies in Singapore primary schools. As they said, a wide range of writing strategies is available to young writers. However, their reliance on and use of certain writing strategies might be different in different stages of proficiency development.

Kao and Reynolds (2017)\cite{7} investigated the relationship between strategy use and perceived writing ability of Taiwanese university students. They found a statistically significant positive relationship between the use of cognitive/preparation strategies and students’ self-rated writing ability.

It could be said that there have been contradictory findings in the literature with regard to the relationship between strategy use and language learning skills and sub-
skills. Due to the paucity of research in the Iranian EFL context, the present study delved in to the issue of writing strategies to find out if there exists a positive relationship between Iranian EFL students’ writing strategies and writing abilities.

3. Methodology

The study is of a correlational nature. The aim of the study was to investigate the relationship between Iranian EFL students’ writing strategies and writing abilities. Data were obtained through the Persian version of writing strategies questionnaire (Assadi Aidinlou & Masoomi Far, 2014)[2] and an IELTS writing task.

3.1 Participants

The participants were 120 randomly selected intermediate EFL students at Iran Language Institute. The students had learned English formally at school for more than five years and they participated in English language classes in this institute.

3.2 Instrumentation

The following instruments were used to obtain valid and reliable data: Writing strategies questionnaire and an IELTS writing task. They are explained below:

3.2.1 Writing Strategies Questionnaire

The writing strategies questionnaire was taken from Language Strategy Use Inventory by Cohen, Oxford and Chi (2002). [21] Yoong (2010)[19] mentioned that this questionnaire has a high level of reliability as the Cronbach’s alpha coefficient is 0.91. The original questionnaire included ninety questions. It was divided into six parts based on six language skills of listening, speaking, vocabulary strategy, speaking strategy, reading strategy, writing strategy, and translation strategy.

The second version of Language Strategy Use Questionnaire included 40 statements concerning four main English language skills, namely listening, speaking, reading, and writing. The adapted version used in this study includes ten statements for writing skill. This questionnaire is in the form of 5-point likert scale ranging from 1 to 5. It was validated by Assadi and Massoumi Far (2014)[2] in Iran (See appendices A & B).

3.2.2 IELTS Writing Task

Task 1 of an IELTS writing test was used to assess the learners’ writing ability. The writing task was chosen from the book entitled Academic Writing Practice for IELTS (McCarter, 2002).[10] The students were supposed to write 150 words in 20 minutes to describe a graph. The writing samples were rated by two raters and the inter-rater reliability was found to be .95.

3.3 Data collection procedures

The students were asked to fill out the writing strategies questionnaires. They were informed that the items were about their personal views and there were no right or wrong answers. Also, they were given an IELTS writing test to elicit their writing samples.

3.4 Design

The design of the study was ex-post facto design. The variables of the study were writing strategies and writing abilities. Students’ writing strategies and writing abilities were measured by giving them a writing strategies questionnaire and an IELTS writing task respectively. The minimum and maximum scores students could get on the writing strategies test were 10 and 50 respectively. To rate students’ writing samples, public band descriptors of Cambridge University were used. Four main criteria including “Task achievement”, “Coherence and cohesion”, “Lexical Resource” and “Grammatical Range and accuracy” were used to assess writing samples. The minimum and maximum scores they could get on the test were 0 and 36 respectively.

3.5 Data analysis

As for data analysis, descriptive and inferential statistics were used. The purpose of descriptive statistics was checking the underlying assumptions of the statistical procedures used in the study. As for the inferential statistics Pearson correlation test was used to check the hypothesis.

4. Results

As to this study, the writing strategies questionnaire was administered to indicate students’ levels of using writing strategies. Table 3 below provides information about descriptive statistics for writing strategies used by Iranian EFL learners. In this table, the ranks and means of these items are summarized.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item no</th>
<th>rank</th>
<th>Writing strategies</th>
<th>mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Exercising the alphabet and/or new words in the second language</td>
<td>2.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Designing in advance essay writing by preparing an outline for the essay</td>
<td>4.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Writing different types of texts in the target language</td>
<td>3.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Benefiting from notes taken in the classroom in the target language</td>
<td>3.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Finding a different way for expressing the idea when not knowing the correct expression</td>
<td>4.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Reviewing the written text before continuing</td>
<td>3.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Using of reference issues such as a glossary, a dictionary, a thesaurus for finding words in the second or foreign language</td>
<td>4.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Waiting to edit the writing until the ideas are down on paper</td>
<td>3.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Modifying writing several times to change the language and content into a better format</td>
<td>2.97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Getting feedback from others, especially native speakers of language</td>
<td>3.24</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item no</th>
<th>rank</th>
<th>Writing strategies</th>
<th>mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>Getting feedback from others, especially native speakers of language</td>
<td>3.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td>Waiting to edit the writing until the ideas are down on paper</td>
<td>3.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td>Reviewing the written text before continuing</td>
<td>3.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td>Using of reference issues such as a glossary, a dictionary, a thesaurus for finding words in the second or foreign language</td>
<td>4.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
<td>Finding a different way for expressing the idea when not knowing the correct expression</td>
<td>4.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
<td>Benefiting from notes taken in the classroom in the target language</td>
<td>3.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
<td>Writing different types of texts in the target language</td>
<td>3.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td></td>
<td>Designing in advance essay writing by preparing an outline for the essay</td>
<td>4.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td></td>
<td>Exercising the alphabet and/or new words in the second language</td>
<td>2.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td></td>
<td>Getting feedback from others, especially native speakers of language</td>
<td>3.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td></td>
<td>Waiting to edit the writing until the ideas are down on paper</td>
<td>3.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td></td>
<td>Reviewing the written text before continuing</td>
<td>3.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td></td>
<td>Using of reference issues such as a glossary, a dictionary, a thesaurus for finding words in the second or foreign language</td>
<td>4.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td></td>
<td>Finding a different way for expressing the idea when not knowing the correct expression</td>
<td>4.12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4.1 Test of Normality of distribution of data
The normality of distribution for writing strategies and writing scores are summarized in the following table.

Table 4. Tests of Normality

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Writing strategies</th>
<th>Kolmogorov-Smirnov*</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Writing strategies</td>
<td>.157</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>.200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IELTS Writing task1</td>
<td>.114</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>.200</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

a. Lilliefors Significance Correction

As seen in the table above, the sig level for both writing strategies and IELTS writing scores were .20. Therefore, it could be said that the data were normally distributed.

4.2 Analysis of the Research Question
As stated in previous parts, students completed a writing strategies questionnaire to find out about their writing strategies use in foreign language. IELTS writing task 1 was used to elicit students’ writing samples. Students wrote about a diagram to show their ability in foreign language writing. The results of writing strategies questionnaire and the students’ IELTS writing task 1 would provide data and an answer to the research question i.e. whether there is any relationship between the students’ writing strategies use and their writing ability. To find the relationship between writing strategies and writing ability, a Pearson correlation test was done. As shown in table 5 below, the correlation coefficient is .888 which suggests that there was a statistically significant positive relationship between Iranian EFL students’ writing strategies and their writing ability.

Table 5. Pearson Correlation Test for Writing Strategies Use and Writing ability

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Writing ability</th>
<th>IELTS Writing task1</th>
<th>Writing strategies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pearson Correlation</td>
<td>1.000</td>
<td>1.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sig. (2-tailed)</td>
<td>.888</td>
<td>1.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sum of Squares and Cross-products</td>
<td>3502.3</td>
<td>449.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Covariance</td>
<td>29.43</td>
<td>3.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

5. Discussion and Conclusion
The results showed that there was a significant positive relationship between Iranian EFL students’ writing strategies and their writing abilities. The findings echo earlier findings in the literature. For example, the findings are in line with Yilmaz (2010) and Bai, Hu, and Gu (2014) that there is a relationship between language learning strategies and students’ proficiency. Also, findings are in line with Kao and Reynolds (2017) who found a statistically significant positive relationship between Taiwanese EFL students’ use of cognitive/preparation strategies and their self-rated writing ability. However, the results are to some extent in contrast with Assadi Aeidinlou and Massomi Far (2014) who found that there was no statistically significant relationship between writing strategies and correct use of conjunctions. This might necessitate further research to find out more about the nature of the relationship between writing strategies and different components of writing including conjunctions.

Winne (1995) recommended that students will obtain better results and scores in their learning process if they check how well they progress and control the impact and efficacy of their learning methods and strategies.

Moreover, Zimmerman and Bandura (1994) mentioned that students should be aware of their abilities and the teachers should teach them to foster their writing strategies and self-efficacy. They believed that students should be aware of the effect of their own writing strategies and their relationship with self-efficacy beliefs.

The findings of this study will be insightful for teachers in that they will help them to find new ways to solve their problems in EFL writing. Most of the students are aware of writing strategies but they do not know how to use them. Teachers should teach them how to use these strategies in a proper context. Teaching these strategies and practicing them in writing classes can help the students to write in a more efficient way.

The study had some limitations. The first one concerned the data collection procedure. The students filled out the questionnaire but it is hard to know if the learners use these strategies in their own writing. The second limitation concerned the selection of participants. The participants were 120 EFL students in one language school. Due to the limitations of the present study, caution needs to be exercised in generalizing the findings to the population of Iranian EFL learners.

Further studies could opt to choose more participants from different institutes across the country. Also, they could other instruments such as interviews to gauge students’ writing strategies. The participants of this study were both males and females. It is suggested that further research deal with males and females separately or take into account the variable of gender which might have affected the results.

References


Appendices

Appendix A - Writing Strategies Questionnaire

1. I practice writing the alphabet and/or new words in target language.
   - Never true of me
   - Usually not true of me
   - Sometimes true of me
   - Usually true of me
   - Always true of me

2. I define an outline of the essay to design the way for writing.
   - Never true of me
   - Usually not true of me
   - Sometimes true of me
   - Usually true of me
   - Always true of me

3. I try to write different kinds of texts in the target language.
   - Never true of me
   - Usually not true of me
   - Sometimes true of me
   - Usually true of me
   - Always true of me

4. I take notes in the class in the target language as much as I’m able.
   - Never true of me
   - Usually not true of me
   - Sometimes true of me
   - Usually true of me
   - Always true of me

5. I try to find different way of expressing the idea when not knowing the correct expression.
   - Never true of me
   - Usually not true of me
   - Sometimes true of me
   - Usually true of me
   - Always true of me
Sometimes true of me    Usually true of me   Always true of me.
6. I review what has already been written before continuing to write more.

Never true of me   Usually not true of me   Sometimes true of me   Usually true of me   Always true of me.
7. I use reference materials such as glossary, a dictionary, or a thesaurus for finding or verifying words in the target language.

Never true of me   Usually not true of me   Sometimes true of me   Usually true of me   Always true of me.
8. I wait to edit my writing until all the ideas are down on the paper.

Never true of me   Usually not true of me   Sometimes true of me   Usually true of me   Always true of me.

Appendix B- Persian Version of Writing Strategies Questionnaire

1- من نوشتن الگوی/یا کلمات جدید را به زبان انگلیسی تعمیم می‌کنم.

همیشه درست است

2- من برای طراحی نوشته‌ام ابتدا طرح و چارچوب کلی تعریف می‌کنم.

عموماً درست نیست

3- من می‌گویم که می‌توانم مختلفاً به انگلیسی نوشتم.

أتی باید برای همه، سعی می‌کنم تا محتوای نوشته‌ام به زبان اصلی آید.

4- من در کلاس زبان انگلیسی تا ناچیزه که بتوانم ایداهایی برداری می‌نمایم.

عموماً درست است

5- وقتی از استحضار صحیح یا من می‌دانم، سعی می‌کنم تا راه‌های متغیری برای بیان ایده‌ام پیام.

عموماً درست است

6- من می‌توانم آموزش پیوسته زبانی را به من می‌دهم.

عموماً درست است

7- من از مبنا مرجع مانند مانه‌نامه‌های, و فرهنگ جامع لغات برای یافتن کلمات مندوب در زبان انگلیسی استفاده می‌کنم.

عموماً درست است

8- من تا زمانیکه همه ایده‌ها و نظرات را به روش کاغذ بی‌پررنگ صورت می‌گیرم و نوشته‌ام را ویرایش می‌کنم.

عموماً درست است

9- من به‌طور معمول زبان و محتوای نوشته‌ام به‌کمک دیگر بیشتر در بررسی درستی می‌کنم.

عموماً درست است

10- من می‌وندیم چک که با بخصوصی محتوای زبان انگلیسی استفاده‌کنیم.

عموماً درست است