

The Effect of Gender and Proficiency Level on Writing Strategy Use among Iraqi High School Students

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Abstract

This study aims to 1) explore the extent Iraqi high school students' use of writing strategies; 2) identify the contribution of proficiency level to writing strategy use; and 3) compare male and female students' writing strategy use. This study employed a quantitative approach, whereby a total of 132 high school students were randomly selected from the Karkh's district of Baghdad to constitute the sample of the study. A 30-item 3-point Likert scale questionnaire on writing strategy use that was adapted from Petrić&Czár's (2003) writing strategy questionnaire served as the instrument of the study. The results of the study reveal that the frequency of strategy use was low among the participants. In addition, no significant difference was found between high and low proficiency students' strategy use. Finally, it was found that there is significant difference between female and male students' strategy use. Female students were found to use writing strategies more than males. The paper concludes with a discussion on the implications of the findings.

Keywords: gender, Iraqi EFL learners, language proficiency, writing strategy

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1. Introduction

English nowadays is the lingua franca of the world; it is the language worldwide used in different communities and walks of life (Pakir, 1999). Thus, students aspire to master English with its different skills so as to be able to find job opportunities among other reasons (Flanegin & Rudd, 2000). However, learning English is not an easy task for many learners. Communicative skills both oral and written are difficult. Writing is one of the key skills of the English language, and it is of paramount importance in achieving academic success. It is an active, productive skill that students need to learn. Out of the four main skills in English, writing is considered one of the most difficult and challenging skills to acquire (Erkan & Saban, 2011; Fatemi, 2008; Mourtaga, 2010). Such difficulty may be ascribed to many factors. Richards and Renandya (2002) state that difficulty in writing arises from the difficulty in generating and organizing ideas, and translating these ideas into readable texts. Ferris and Hedgcock (2005) and Milton (2006) explain that problems in writing may be caused by grammatical inaccuracy. In total, the literature reveals that English as a foreign language (EFL) students from different proficiency levels suffer from serious problems in writing (Kurt & Atay, 2007; Latif, 2007).

In relation to the above, some researchers suggested different strategies to reduce writing errors and to overcome writing challenges. Ferris (1994), for example, suggests an editing approach, whereby learners edit their own work. Similarly, Bates, Lane, and Lange (1993) recommend that students be taught how to find out their errors by themselves. They should be independent and critical self-editors. In relation to this, Raimes (1985) states that the second language (L2) learners make less planning before writing as well as during writing; they also pay less attention to revising and editing. Polio, Fleck and Leder (1998) declared that students underscore the importance of revision and editing so as to produce good quality piece of writing. Thus, there are certain strategies that can be followed to minimize errors in writing and to enable students to write efficiently. In addition, using writing strategies has been proved to be effective in improving even the most basic students' performance (e.g. García & de Caso, 2004; García-Sánchez & Fidalgo-Redondo, 2006; Graham, Harris, & Mason, 2005).

This study is expected to contribute to literature theoretically and practically. Theoretically, this study will be a reference for the future researchers who desire to conduct studies on one of the most challenging skills in the field of second language acquisition. Practically, this study will also raise the awareness of learners as well as educators of the writing strategies used by second language learners, especially Iraqi high school students. This will also help policy makers design curricula that cover such strategies to overcome the problems encountered by students in their writing process. Thus, this study aims to investigate the writing strategies used among the Iraqi high school students, and the effect of gender and proficiency level on writing strategy use.

1.1 Research objectives

This study explores the extent the writing strategies are used among high school students in Iraq, and the contribution of proficiency and gender to writing strategy use. This study specifically seeks to:

1. Explore the extent Iraqi high school students' use writing strategies;
2. Identify the contribution of proficiency level to writing strategy use among Iraqi high school students; and

3. Compare male and female students' writing strategy use.

1.2 Research questions

Based on the research objectives, the following research questions were formulated:

1. To what extent do Iraqi high school students use writing strategies?
2. What is the contribution of proficiency level to writing strategy use among Iraqi high school students?
3. To what extent does gender affect writing strategy use among Iraqi high school students?

2. Literature review

This study is based on the cognitive approach of writing theories. The theoretical framework adopted in this study is Flower and Hayes' (1981) cognitive theory. This theory postulates that writing involves a set of distinctive hierarchical thinking processes which writers follow during the act of composing. This theory was used because it is the theory that inspired the adapted questionnaire. In addition, the research questions of the study fit it into such paradigm, i.e. the cognitive approach of writing. The study hypothesizes that students use a set of hierarchical thinking processes during the writing process. Thus, according to this theory writing involves three main stages: planning, composing, and reviewing. During writing process, a writer serves as a writing strategist. He/She decides when to move from one process to the next (Flower & Hayes, 1981). This theory views writing as a recursive than linear process.

Peng (2011) conducted a study to examine the effectiveness of writing strategies' use in enhancing 13-15-year-old Chinese ESL learners' writing performance. Peng selected Two categories of strategies based on Hayes and Flower's (1989) theory of writing. The first category of writing strategies was Julia's (in James, 2000) 8-step writing strategy and the second category originated from Englert's (1991) POWER strategy. Two questionnaires and two writing tests served as the instrument of the study. Fifteen Chinese students, who were selected randomly from middle school. Pre-test was used to evaluate these students' primary level of English writing. Later on, a posttest was conducted. In the posttest, students were divided into three groups: the first two groups received treatment on a separate category of the two writing strategies while the last one was a control group. Then, the scores of the two tests were compared. The findings revealed the effectiveness of the given writing strategies.

Alnufaie and Grenfell (2012) explored the writing strategies of 121 second-year EFL undergraduate Saudi student writers. They were studying English as a foreign language and for English specific purposes. They investigated two types of writing strategies, that is, process-oriented writing strategies and product-oriented writing strategies. A self-designed questionnaire was employed as the instrument of the study. Their findings revealed that almost all of the participants (95.9%) used both types of strategies. It was also found that the students used the process-oriented writing strategies more than the product-oriented strategies.

Raofi et al. (2014) investigated the writing strategies of Malaysian university students learning English as a second language (ESL). Twenty undergraduate university students aged 19 to 21 served as the qualitative sample of the study. For the purpose of data collection, interviews were conducted. The research findings revealed that all of the participants reported doing some pre-writing activities, and having awareness of their own writing problems. It was also found that

the highly proficient student writers reported the use of more metacognitive strategies, such as organizing ideas and revising content in comparison to the less skilled student writers.

Sadik (2014) explored the relationship between cognitive writing strategies and students' writing performance. Thirty-seven students at intermediate level were selected systematically from population of 80 students at the English department of Hasanuddin University in the Academic year of 2008 - 2009. The participants were asked to sit an achievement test, whereby they were asked to write about approximately 300 words in 60 minutes. The participants were also asked to answer strategy questionnaire. The findings of the study revealed that there was insignificant relationship between the achievement test scores and writing strategy scores.

3. Method

3.1 Research design

Recapitulating the objectives of this study, it aimed at identifying the strategy use among Iraqi learners, and the contribution of proficiency level and gender to any significant difference in strategy use among these learners. Thus, a quantitative research design was deemed appropriate. This study, in particular, had a cross-sectional design and followed survey method to collect data.

3.2 Sampling of the study

This study employs probability sampling. There are two main types of sampling: probability and purposive sampling. Purposive sampling is mostly used in qualitative studies. On the other hand, probability sampling is utilized in quantitative studies. This kind of sampling requires large numbers of respondents (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998). One of the subtypes of probability sampling is the stratified random sampling (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998). It is the most well-known of all sampling strategies. In stratified random sampling, the sampling frame (i.e. the list of available target population) is divided into homogenous and non-overlapping groups or strata (Bhattacharjee, 2012). The sampling frame in the current study was the 4th preparatory students from the Karkh's district of Baghdad. They were then divided into groups based on their proficiency level. The students who scored from 50-65% were considered low proficiency students, while those who scored above 90% were considered high proficiency students. Then, within each proficiency level, 33 female students were selected and 33 male students were selected to make up a total of 132 students. The participants had been learning English for five years. Their mean age was 15. They were selected from four high schools at Karkh's district of Baghdad. They were divided into low and high proficiency groups, based on their final exam score at the final year middle school stage. This standardized high-stakes exam is centralized at a national level. The students who obtained from 90-100% were considered high proficiency level students, while the students who achieved 65-50 were grouped as low proficiency level students. This classification is based on the Iraqi educational system which identifies 90% and above as excellent while students who obtain from 50 % to 65% are regarded as satisfactory level students (pass grade). This number of students (132) was chosen because such kind of survey research requires large sampling, and thus 132 is considered large sampling in regards to the target population, which is estimated to be around 4000 students.

3.3 Instrument

A 30-item Likert scale questionnaire on writing strategy use was adapted from Petrić and Czárľ's (2003) writing strategy questionnaire. It was a three-point Likert scale instrument with 1 signifying 'always', 2 'sometimes', and 3 'never'. The questionnaire is divided into three parts, preceded by an introduction about the research. The first part handles the before-writing strategies, and it consists of seven items. The second part is about the strategies used during writing, and it comprises 11 items. The last section is about revision strategies, and it includes 12 items. This questionnaire was adapted as the instrument of this study for a number of reasons. First, the questionnaire has been designed for nonnative speakers of English, as the case in the current study. Second, the questionnaire is about writing strategies, and not like some other questionnaires (e.g. Oxford, 1990; O'Malley & Chamot, 1990), which discuss learning strategies in general. Third, the questionnaire was validated qualitatively and quantitatively, and was published in a prestigious high impact journal, that is, *System*. For all the aforementioned reasons, the questionnaire designed by Petrić and Czárľ (2003) was chosen as instrument of this study. In relation to the grading scale, Likert 3-point scale is followed in the questionnaire. The numbers in a Likert scale are the indicators of opinion strength. The scale was reduced for this study to 3-point scale (instead of 5-point Likert scale as in the original questionnaire) to make it more comprehensible for the participants. The students may not have been able to differentiate between the slight differences used in the questionnaire, and thus it was reduced to a 3-point scale.

3.4 Data collection

Data were collected through a questionnaire which was distributed to a random sample of students within the classification mentioned in the sampling section. Students were asked to write the score of their middle school final year exam, a standardized national test. The questionnaires were collected, coded and then computed and analyzed. Questionnaires have many positives which are established in literature like offering an objective means of collecting information about people's knowledge, beliefs, attitudes, and behavior (Boynton & Greenhalgh, 2004). Questionnaires can extend and quantify the findings of an initial exploratory phase. As established in the literature, using a previously validated and published questionnaire saves time and resources; it makes it easy to compare one's own findings with those from other studies. That is why the researchers used Petrić and Czárľ's (2003) questionnaire. For reliability purpose, Cronbach alpha was used to test the internal consistency of the questionnaire. In addition, the questionnaire has been used previously (e.g., Maarof & Murat, 2013; Sadi & Othman, 2012) and been validated by the designers of the questionnaires. All such factors make the questionnaire valid and reliable for the study. The instrument was piloted on 15th April 2016, on a sample size of 20 Iraqi high school students. The purpose of conducting the pilot study is to detect any problems that cause the main research project to fail, and to ensure the appropriacy of the instruments used (Baker, 2006). Cronbach's Alpha offers a measure of the internal consistency of a test or scale (Tavakol & Dennick, 2011). The accepted range of Cronbach's Alpha value is from 0.70 to 0.95 (Tavakol & Dennick, 2011). The result of the reliability analysis test showed acceptable internal reliability of the questionnaire items, as Cronbach's alpha value was found to be .718. Additionally, the participants' final scores in the English exam of the academic year 2014/2015 were retrieved from the Iraqi Ministry of Education. These scores represent the results of a national standardized exam. Written consents were obtained from the participants

before collecting the data. They were reassured that their information will be used for research purpose only.

3.5 Data analysis

The statistical package for the social sciences (SPSS, version 20.0) was used to analyze the data. Descriptive and inferential statistics methods were performed.

4. Results

4.1 Students' writing strategy use

Descriptive statistics was run to identify the mean and standard deviation values for the strategy use among the participants. The following table summarizes the results.

Table 1. Strategy use among the participants (n = 132)

Strategy	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Pre-writing	.08	.15	.11	.02
While-writing	.13	.25	.19	.02
Revising	.14	.24	.19	.02
Overall	.34	.61	.50	.05

KEY: 3.5 ($M \geq 3.5$) is a high strategy user, between 2.5 and 3.4 ($2.5 \leq M \leq 3.4$) is a medium strategy user, and below 2.4 ($M \leq 2.4$) is a low strategy user.

As illustrated in Table 1, the overall strategy use ($M = .50$, $SD = .05$) was found to be low among the participants, as based on Oxford's (1990) classification, the student whose mean score is above 3.5 ($M \geq 3.5$) is considered to be a high strategy user, the one whose mean score is between 2.5 and 3.4 ($2.5 \leq M \leq 3.4$) is a medium strategy user, and the one below 2.4 ($M \leq 2.4$) is considered a low strategy user.

As seen in Table 1, while writing strategies ($M = .11$, $SD = .02$) and revising ($M = .25$, $SD = .19$) strategies are the most commonly used strategies by the participants. However, the pre-writing strategies ($M = .24$, $SD = .19$) were far less frequent than the other strategies. Thus, the participants are categorized as low strategy users across the all writing strategies types, based on Oxford's (1990) classification.

4.2 The contribution of proficiency to writing strategy use

To address the second research question, which was related to the contribution of proficiency level to writing strategy use among Iraqi high school students, independent sample t-test was conducted. Table 2 indicates the results of this statistical analysis.

Table 2. Comparison of strategy use between high and low proficiency students

Proficiency	Mean	Std. Deviation	df	t	p
Low	66.01	5.98	130	-.366	.715
High	66.44	7.26			

As shown in Table 2, high proficiency students ($M = 66.44$, $SD = 7.26$) scored almost similar to low proficiency students ($M = 66.01$, $SD = 5.98$). Based on the results of independent samples t-test, $t(130) = -.366$, $p = .715$, since the significant value was greater than alpha at .05 level of significance, it can be concluded that there is no significant difference between high proficiency students and low proficiency students in terms of their strategy use.

4.3 Contribution of gender to writing strategy use among Iraqi high school students

Finally, the significance of difference between male and female students' strategy use was examined. Table 3 presents the results of independent samples t-test.

Table 3. Comparison of male and female students' strategy use

Gender	Mean	Std. Deviation	df	t	p
Male	69.32	5.86	130	6.034	.000
Female	63.14	5.92			

As indicated in Table 3, overall female students ($M = 69.32$, $SD = 5.86$) scored higher than males ($M = 63.14$, $SD = 5.92$). Based on the results of independent samples t-test, $t(130) = 6.034$, $p = .000$, since the significant value was lower than alpha at .05 level of significance, there is significant difference between female and male students' strategy use.

5. Discussion

The findings of the study as presented earlier indicated that Iraqi high school students are low strategy users. However, it was found that low proficiency as well as high proficiency students use writing strategies in a very similar way, and the difference is statistically insignificant. This is consistent with some previous studies. For example, Baker and Boonkit (2004) found that there was no significant difference in the frequency of writing strategies used between high and low achievers. Alkubaidi (2014) also found that 75 Saudi undergraduate students' writing proficiency did not contribute significantly to their strategy use. However, Khalil (2005) in his study of 194 high school students and 184 freshman university EFL learners in Palestine found that proficiency level and gender correlate positively with writing strategy use among the participants. The reason for this lack of consistency could be that Khalil's definition of language proficiency was different from that of our study. He identified language proficiency based on the differences between the participants in their academic levels throughout the number of years the participants were learning English. Unlike the present study, language proficiency in Khalil's (2005) study was not measured based on specific writing tasks.

Maarof and Murat (2013) mentioned that the quantity of strategies used by students does not reflect their appropriate use of such strategies. Some learners use writing strategies significantly high. However, they do not use such strategies effectively. For example, planning as a strategy may be used frequently among high proficiency language users (Mu & Carrington, 2007; Ridhuan & Abdullah, 2009), while low proficient users tend not to use planning strategies less (Chien, 2010); they do not often plan their writing and frequently begin writing immediately (Ridhuan & Abdullah, 2009). Hu and Chen (2007) noted that proficient ESL writers care more about what to write and on how to proceed; they care about the quality of planning over time spent during planning. In contrast, low proficiency language users tend to spend their time inefficiently, and thus they fail to generate ideas. Therefore, highly frequent use of writing

strategies does not necessarily indicate that the language user will be more efficient in writing. One important study that supports the idea that the amount of strategy use does not necessarily reflect language or writing proficiency is what has been found by Indra (2004) who observed the writing behaviors of four writers who came from different cultural backgrounds. The findings of the study revealed that proficient Chinese writers tended to plan their ideas using outlines while the proficient Indian writers tended to plan their ideas through putting down visual representations. In contrast, low proficiency student writers spent a longer time on planning, which was done mentally; however, their effort seemed to be ineffective in helping them to develop ideas for their writing task.

The findings of the current study are consistent with those of some other previous studies. Nisbet, Tindall and Arroyo (2005) found a minimal correlation between learning strategies and proficiency (using TOEFL scores). They reported that only metacognitive strategies were significantly correlated with TOEFL scores. In the same vein, Shmais (2003) and Feng (1995) reported no significant difference in terms of the frequency of strategy use between high proficiency and low proficiency students. They only found differences in the use of cognitive strategies, which were more used by high proficiency users than low proficiency users. Likewise, Baker and Boonkit (2004) reported that high and low achievers did not differ significantly in their use of writing strategies, but still there were some variations in using some strategies. Their results seemed to suggest that low achievers did not follow any plans when they started writing and habitually used the strategy of translation throughout the writing process. Likewise, Mahlobo (2003) and Halbach (2000) reported that there could be no claims of causality between strategy use and proficiency.

In respect of contribution of gender to differences in writing strategy use, Guobing (2015) found that female students significantly obtained higher writing strategy use scores than males. In his study, female students utilized various writing strategies' types in English writing. These findings are similar to Bremner's (1999) who found that female students used compensation and affective strategies significantly more often than male students did.

Some researchers (e.g. Bremner, 2009; Brooks & Grundy 2008) mentioned that language strategies help learners improve their language proficiency. However, it may be argued that the quality and the proper use of writing strategies matter more than the frequency of writing strategy use.

6. Conclusion

This study aimed at identifying the extent the Iraqi high school students' use writing strategies, the contribution of proficiency level and gender to writing strategy use among these students. For this purpose, 132 Iraqi high school students were randomly selected and requested to fill out a writing strategies' questionnaire. Thus, a quantitative approach was adopted in this study.

Based on the results of the study, strategy use was found to be low among the participants. This may be attributed to the fact that the participants were not mature enough to be able to use writing strategies. In relation to the contribution of proficiency level to writing strategy use, it was found there is no significant difference between high proficiency students and low proficiency students in terms of their strategy use. It was also found that there was a

significant difference between female and male students' strategy use. Female students used writing strategies more frequently than males.

It has been proposed that writing should not be looked at from a single sided perspective (Reid, 2001). Put simply, it should not be viewed as either product-oriented or process oriented. It should be rather looked at as both a product and a process. Writing is a complex skill that involves different factors together. This has been highlighted by Ferris and Hedgcock (2005) who mentioned that writing “fundamentally depends on writers purposeful interactions with print, with fellow readers and writers, and with literate communities of practice” (p. 31). Thus, there should be no such kind of dichotomy between the process-oriented approach and the product-oriented approach. In Iraq, the focus is on writing as a product rather than a process, which justifies the insufficient use of writing strategies, as indicated by our results. Thus, focus should be driven to writing as a process to help students develop writing strategies that help them perform better in their writing. This has been also suggested by Alnufaie and Alnufaie (2012) that writing as a process should be given more attention, as this can help learners compare findings in different contexts, and help teachers diagnose learners' needs of specific writing strategies. This also can help raise the awareness of learners about their strategy-use (Petrić&Czár, 2003). When adult and undergraduate writers tend to expand 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.

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