Rhetorical Strategies for Teaching Essay Writing: A Case Study Involving Saudi ESL Students

Haytham Bakri
English Language Department,
College of Language Sciences, King Saud University
Riyadh, Saudi Arabia
Email: hbakri@ksu.edu.sa

Received: 02/03/2023   Accepted: 05/25/2023   Published: 06/24/2023

Abstract
The use of rhetorical strategy in teaching writing has been a topic of discussion in ESL training programs since most teaching methodologies do not give the mother tongue a substantial role. This article presents findings from research on the rhetorical techniques pre-service teachers employ in writing both before and after receiving process-based writing instruction. The study focused on determining the writing techniques student teachers employ to complete an argumentative essay, and finding out how much pre-service teachers' usage of writing methods is improved by using a rhetorical process approach to writing. The significance of the present study lies in the fact that it examines the writing abilities of Saudi students with different levels of language abilities and evaluates how rhetorical strategies help them in writing English easily and with little or no flaws. The fundamental question to be probed through this study is to what extent rhetorical strategies can help teach successful writing to Saudi ESL learners. The data was obtained via the performance of an essay task utilizing two think-aloud protocols and based on a sample of 98 student teachers from Saudi Arabia. The findings of this study show rhetorical strategies such as generating ideas and rewriting are very essential in writing final essays by students. It is clear from the results that after students have mastered the choosing ideas process, they may include concepts that are relevant to the text. Professors should spend time, particularly teaching this kind of approach to help students become competent method users and writers generally, regardless of their audience. In concluding writing an article, it seemed like the strategy of translating from the native tongue to a foreign language was being utilized.

Keywords: rhetorical strategies, Saudi ESL students, teaching essay writing, think-aloud protocol, writing strategies

DOI: https://dx.doi.org/10.24093/awej/vol14no2.9
Introduction

Because of its essential and numerous distinctive features, writing appears to be the most demanding of all the language skills in English as it is true, perhaps, for other languages. The ability to clearly and cogently express ideas through written words involves appropriate mechanics and grammatically correct, plausibly expressed, written content which delivers meaning correctly and comprehensively. It has always remained the most challenging skill for language learners, more so for second language learners, as compared with the other skills, such as listening, reading, and speaking (Thonus, 2020).

It has been observed that essay writing as a subject is one of the abilities that pre-service teachers of English as a Second Language (ESL) have the lowest proficiency in. They often lament their lack of knowledge about how to pursue this talent (Bui, Nguyen, & Viet, 2023). Making the right decisions to transmit meaning, reacting to a communicative aim, and considering the readership are all parts of learning to write. Writing requires a particular kind of mental activity, one that includes planning, pondering, preparing, practicing, making errors, and coming up with other answers (Sinaga, Hutabarat, Panjaitan, & Saragih, 2022).

Writing is thought of as a circular process since the author must spend time reviewing and thinking back on his or her work. Recursive writing enables one to reconsider all writing phases. The model developed by Coffin et al. (2005) provides proof that the sociocultural component is important while writing. According to a sociocultural viewpoint, writing is not merely a cognitive activity but also a skill that involves intricate and interconnected linguistic, social, cultural, and cognitive processes. A paradigm shift that sees writing as a process of building an organization that involves strategies, numerous revisions, and formative feedback is known as a process-based approach.

This study takes a process-oriented approach to writing, which includes many steps such as prewriting, planning, drafting, reflection, feedback from peers or the instructor, proofreading, and editing. The process approach views all writing as a creative endeavor that needs time and encourages criticism to be completed successfully. While teaching process writing, the instructor veers away from assigning topics to students and receiving their final drafts for review without participating in the writing process. Process writing studies have provided insight into various approaches to writing instruction as well as the creation of tools and resources to support students in overcoming their writing challenges (Jensen & Dean, 2022). Researching writing issues is consequently a difficult task that has to be addressed with care.

These results undoubtedly shift the emphasis of writing instruction from what we write to how we write. This study adds to the body of knowledge on writing tactics in a university setting for English language learners.

The present study aims to investigate two main problems, a) teaching mechanisms adopted by ESL writing instructors which is the core concern of this paper, and b) students’ preferences and treatments of given written feedback. Ferris and Roberts (2001) lay great stress on error feedback and the teachers’ awareness of the attitudes and preferences of ESL students. They also observed that the attitudes and preferences of ESL learners have been mostly overlooked in many earlier studies. The researcher in this paper looks into ESL students’ beliefs and preferences concerning the feedback on their writing performances and how they manage them in their subsequent writings. Besides, the outcome of the feedback will be analyzed with emphasis on various methods that are generally believed to be indirect feedback with a focus on their clarity and their usefulness in making students retain the suggestions given and improve their writing.
engage with this problem convincingly and analytically, some Saudi university-level ESL students have been selected and investigated through a structured questionnaire. Based on the aim of the study, the research question is: How do ESL writing instructors' teaching mechanisms impact Saudi university-level ESL students' preferences and treatment of written feedback, and how does this affect their writing performance and retention of feedback suggestions?

**Literature Review**

**Writing Strategies**

These days, learning and teaching to write are thought of as a work that proceeds via a process with many phases (Sarzhoska-Georgievska, 2016), as shown in Figure one.

![Figure 1. The process of writing (Díaz, Ramos, & Ortiz, 2017, p. 88)](image)

In addition to refining and amending this content, these steps often entail preparing and drafting a written draft, as seen in Figure one. As this procedure is cyclical, a shift back for review and editing must constantly occur. Yang (2019) asserted that for students to write well, they must express their previous knowledge of the linguistic contents (conceptual knowledge) and the general application of different actions to address several writing challenges. Several writing methods are used by transferring these two sorts of information (Huh, 2022).

The employment of writing methods by students is another significant factor examined in this research. According to Sinaga et al. (2022), a strategy is any tool, particular action, or behavior used to address a problem. As a result, when authors write, we presume they are using strategies to complete their work (Huh, 2022; Khairuddin, Rahmat, Noor, & Khairuddin, 2021). Connor (2011) stated that good writers use rhetorical techniques in their writing. Rhetorical strategies deal with text types and their structures, while metacognitive strategies are connected to writers' self-regulation related to cognitive procedures when producing a text (Huh, 2022; Sarzhoska-Georgievska, 2016)

**Rhetorical Strategies**

According to Jensen and Dean (2022), rhetorical techniques are "the methods the writer arranges to express his thoughts acceptably. The arrangement of an essay, using the home tongue to order paragraphs and sentences, and presenting ideas using writing norms that are acceptable to
native speakers of that language are all examples of rhetorical tactics, according to the author (Hosseini, 2016; Jensen & Dean, 2022; Sarzhoska-Georgievksa, 2016). Rhetorical techniques are "tools that authors employ to organize and express their thoughts in writing norms acceptable to native speakers of that language. In the context of language learners, Moon (2012) argued for various essay-writing techniques. This research largely revealed that language learners utilized distinct writing methods, classed into different categories except for Hosseini (2016), who categorized the different writing strategies from a theoretical standpoint. Nonetheless, Connor (2011) suggests that the numerous classifications might extremely likely be confusing, especially for language learners. Connor (2011) also proposes that successful writers apply the taxonomy of ESL writing methods: rhetorical, meta-cognitive, cognitive, communicative and social/affective strategies. To emphasize, students must grasp appropriate writing skills fit for varied types of writing (Connor 2011; Hosseini, 2016).

Rhetorical techniques are connected to Aristotelian conceptions of Logos, Ethos and Pathos. These three parts often concentrate on how a speech should be done (Berger, 2020). According to Aristotle's notion of Logos, Ethos and Pathos in a speech, Logos focuses on the message that speakers would want to communicate. Speakers need to ensure that the message is clear and simple to grasp by the audience. Ethos plays the same crucial part when speakers make their speeches as they need to establish their role and credibility in providing the information or knowledge. Speakers need to guarantee that the audiences believe in what they say. They need to develop trust and connection with the audience. Finally, Pathos plays a crucial role for presenters since they need to attract the audience’s attention to understand the content provided (Berger, 2020).

Four sub-strategies for rhetorical devices are put out by Huh (2022): organization, use of an L1, formatting/modelling, and comparison. L1 is described as “translating produced concept into ESL,” by Mu (2005, p. 4). He characterizes an organization as being in several stages of growth. Modelling is therefore described as 'genre consideration,' and 'various rhetorical norms' is the notion of comparison. The sub-strategies of organizing ideas, code-switching, and translating are also included by Larenas et al. (2017). Also, they discovered that study participants used various tactics both before and after a process-based writing intervention (thinking aloud protocol). Again, the three rhetorical devices of Logos, Ethos, and Pathos may be employed while writing argumentative essays. According to Yang (2019), Pathos is an emotional appeal, Ethos is an ethical appeal, and Logos is a logical argument. The interconnectedness of the triangle's three primary components, Logos, Ethos, and Pathos, suggests that if one is absent, the triangle may not be whole.

According to Dunn (2022), learning rhetorical techniques would improve authors' ability to persuade and convince readers. Choosing material for argumentative discourse units, setting up the structure, and phrasing the style are the three components, that authors use to synthesize the text (Dunn, 2022). Despite not employing the elements of Logos, Ethos, and Pathos, Khairuddin et al., (2021) demonstrate the significance of understanding and applying rhetorical techniques in academic research writing because academic research has a structure resembling that of argumentative essays. A writer may lose focus or lose sight of the reason they are writing an argumentative essay if they concentrate too much on one technique (Jensen, 2022; Kuzborska, 2019). As a result, while writing argumentative essays, students must use all three key components and tactics (Fife, 2010; Moon, 2012).
According to Ramage, Bean, and Johnson (2016), when the writer explains their work, the Logos, or the message, has to be consistent and logical. The concepts must also be backed up by substantial evidence; this will allow the concepts to indirectly address the demands of the readers. Aziz and Abdul (2022) indicate that to guarantee that the aim or purpose of writing essays is met, most assertions must be clearly stated, expounded upon, and backed up with reliable evidence. According to Kuzborska (2019), students should use convincing arguments and evidence to support their arguments in their writings. For instance, Cerku (2015) discovered that writers who cite more often use more rhetorical devices than authors who cite less frequently. In other words, authors may be able to convince readers to agree with their views and arguments when they include more citations. In doing so, they may implicitly use the rhetorical device known as logos to appeal to the readers' understanding and agreement with the arguments made. Since authors want readers to be drawn in and agree with the arguments stated, they propose that the rhetorical device logos are utilized in argumentative essay writing (Hussain et al., 2011; Aziz & Abdul., 2022).

Barton (2020) also found that students were unable to employ the notions of coherence and cohesion because they were unable to comprehend the argumentative essays' logical progression. Thus, they recommend that students will require some work, particularly in integrating the ideas to use the notions of coherence and cohesiveness. According to Sinaga et al. (2022), the message is the most significant component of creating an argumentative essay, hence authors should utilize 70% Logos rhetorical technique. They must convey the information logically and through sound thinking techniques.

**Method**

A process-based writing intervention was used as the main writing intervention in this qualitative and descriptive research study, and the goal was to elicit participants' writing techniques at two distinct times. This study's main objective is to utilize the think-aloud methodology to track the tactics teacher candidates use while writing the essay.

**Participants**

The study was conducted during the academic year 2022-2023 in five Saudi universities. The sample for the study was selected using a stratified random sampling technique. The population of interest was pre-service teachers who were enrolled in ESL training programs at the selected universities. The stratification was based on the level of language proficiency, with participants grouped into two categories: intermediate, and high proficiency. From each stratum, a random sample of participants was selected, resulting in a total of 98 student teachers (63 males & 36 females, aged below 25- above 35) who participated in the study (Table one). The participants were evenly distributed across the five universities, ensuring that the sample was representative of the population of pre-service teachers enrolled in ESL training programs in Saudi universities.

**Research Instruments**

A think-aloud approach was utilized to examine students' writing techniques while they created an essay-like piece. The think-aloud methodology was developed by Ericsson and Simon in 1993 as a method to document the Rhetorical processes that participants go through when they complete a task. Using this method, the participants must speak their ideas out loud while creating a text without the researcher's assistance.
Research procedures

Students were exposed to sixteen sessions of an academic writing course that is a component of the curriculum for EFL teacher preparation. Throughout these sessions, they produced four essays using a process-based approach and went through numerous versions. The writings addressed a variety of subjects, including athletics, technology, and campus life. Students composed essays that were audiotaped using the think-aloud methodology before the first session, or before the intervention. Students produced another essay just after session 16, which marked the conclusion of the intervention. The same think-aloud approach was used to assess how the participants used their writing techniques. While the two argumentative essays covered distinct subjects, they adhered to the standard format of an introduction, a body, and a conclusion. Researchers analyzed the number of writing methods that were evident during before and after intervention think-aloud procedures.

Data Analysis

The data collected was analyzed and presented in the form of figures and Tables and the interpretation was made based on the calculated frequencies and percentages.

Results

Demographic Information

Results concerning key demographic characteristics of the selected respondents are presented in table one:

Table 1. Showing participants’ demographic information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>63.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>36.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age bracket</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Below 25 years</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25-30 years</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>14.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31-35 years</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>46.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Above 35 years</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>29.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years spent teaching</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Below 5 years</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>19.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5-10 years</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>12.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11-15 years</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>38.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Above 15 years</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>29.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note 1. Survey (2023)

The majority of the selected study participants (63.3%) were male, and only 36.7% were female. Most teachers (46.9%) were 31-35 years old, and only 9.2% were below 25 years. The majority of the teachers (38.8%) had spent 11-15 years teaching, and only 19.4% had spent below five years in teaching. This indicates that the participants had a great experience in school and knowledge of the different rhetorical strategies for teaching writing.
Descriptive Analysis

The participants were requested to provide their opinions on the common strategies utilized in writing a draft of an essay and the results are in Figure two:

![Figure 2. Strategies used in writing a draft of an essay](image)

Results in Figure two show that the most used strategy in writing a draft is reasoning (34.7%) followed by organizing (28%), then elaborating ideas (22.7%), code-switching (9.3%) and finally revising (5.3%).

The participants were requested to provide their opinions on the common strategies utilized in finalizing the writing of a complete essay and the results are in Figure three:

![Figure 3. Common strategies utilized in finalizing the writing of a complete essay](image)

Results in Figure three show that the most used rhetorical strategy in finalizing writing an essay is contrasting (42.7%) followed by rereading (22.7%), then expressing opinion (14%), rewriting (12.7%) and then connecting ideas (8%).
The participants were requested to provide their opinions on the major category of rhetorical strategy utilized in writing and the results are in figure four.

![Pie chart showing the distribution of rhetorical strategies: Organizing ideas (56%), Code-switching (26%), Translating (18%).](image)

**Figure 4.** A major category of rhetorical strategy utilized in writing

Participants revealed in figure four that the major category of rhetorical strategy utilized in writing is organizing ideas (56%) followed by Code-switching (26%), and then Translating (18%).

**Discussion**

Based on the research question "How do ESL writing instructors' teaching mechanisms impact Saudi university-level ESL students' preferences and treatment of written feedback, and how does this affect their writing performance and retention of feedback suggestions?" The research findings indicate that in the process of writing a draft, reasoning is the most frequently employed strategy, accounting for 34.7% of the responses, followed by organizing at 28% and elaborating ideas at 22.7%. Code-switching was used by 9.3% of the participants, and only 5.3% reported using revising as a strategy. When finalizing an essay, the dominant rhetorical strategy was contrasting, with 42.7% of the participants employing this technique. Rereading was the second most commonly used strategy at 22.7%, followed by expressing opinion at 14%, rewriting at 12.7%, and connecting ideas at 8%. In terms of the overall usage of rhetorical strategies, organizing ideas was the most commonly used category, accounting for 56% of the responses. Code-switching was the second most commonly used strategy, reported by 26% of the participants while translating was used by 18% of the participants. The results showed that the writing techniques that were most commonly utilized before the intervention were not those that were most frequently employed after it. In other words, although certain writing techniques were used less often after the intervention, others were used more frequently. Good writers spend more time organizing, outlining, and editing their ideas. Conversely, less accomplished authors devote less effort to planning and rewriting (Mu, 2005; Sinaga et al., 2022). Rhetorical writing strategies helped in organizing the essay; however, after participants underwent the process of writing-oriented intervention, they concentrated on actually writing the argumentative essay, connecting ideas, rereading, and rewriting them as they wrote the essay (Larenas, et al, 2017; Hosseini, 2016). After the process of writing intervention, students spent more time completing their essays by using a wider range of tactics, such as linking and comparing their thoughts to generate a quality piece of writing (Connor, 2011; Jensen & Dean., 2022).

Several participants used techniques including summarizing, translating, and reinforcing that had not been noticed before the intervention. This may indicate that students' cognitive activity throughout the essay-writing process became much more fruitful and focused on completing a
high-quality piece of work. Students are likely more conscious of the necessity to apply these new tactics while writing an essay or other academic content if they are employing them. Also, it may be inferred that employing a process-based approach to writing four essays in a row promoted the usage of other strategies that hadn't been previously used. This 16-session intervention subsequently encouraged the use of a wider range of writing methods, as seen in the data analysis section above with the strategies of picking ideas, summarizing, and reinforcing, which participants only began to employ in the post-intervention argumentative essay. This may have been influenced by the fact that respondents had to work on several versions and modify a lot. It's possible that the writing process' two phases of drafting and editing call for a variety of techniques that, in a chain-like effect, prompt participants to apply further techniques (Huh, 2022).

Prior to the final essay writing process, one of the writing techniques was picking ideas. No matter what language they use, selecting concepts is a difficult method because pupils must learn to disregard unimportant information. Both in the native language and the second language, choosing concepts might be difficult. Students may incorporate concepts that are pertinent to the text after they are adept at using the picking ideas technique. To assist students to become good method users and writers overall, regardless of their audience, professors should spend time specifically teaching this form of approach. In finalizing writing an essay, it looked that the approach of translating from the native tongue to a foreign language was being applied. As most teaching strategies do not give the mother tongue a significant role, the usage of this tactic has been a debate point in ESL training programs. Translating is seen to be a trait of less experienced authors, who often concentrate on single words (Dijk et al., 2022; Roach-Freiman, 2021). Because of this, a lot of the methods and procedures employed in the classroom don't entail speaking in the student's native language (Roach-Freiman, 2021). This suggests that pupils, particularly those with superior English proficiency did not employ this method very often. Translation became a method that students used while engaging in L2 writing for these study participants since the intervention did cause them to employ it when they were finishing their essay.

On the other hand, there may be other reasons for using or not using a technique (Khairuddin et al., 2021). First off, while writing a document in a short amount of time, certain tactics could seem easier to use than others. This might account for why, among other things, why only rhetorical, techniques were identified when the two think-aloud procedures were used. Since the participants had little time to complete the task, there were no indications of communicative or socio-affective strategies (Hussain et al., 2011; Sinaga et al., 2022). Certain writing tactics employed by participants may require more cognitive effort from students when utilized by them, which may eventually cause students to be unwilling to use some of them (Huh, 2022; Jan et al., 2022). For instance, it is obvious that linking concepts while writing an essay requires a larger cognitive load than self-evaluating what is being written. The fact that participants had to speak their opinions openly in a scenario they were unfamiliar with is an essential issue. Also, the need that you voice your thoughts makes a difference since not everyone is able to focus on a job at hand without being distracted (Hussain et al., 2011; Sinaga et al., 2022). Children may employ writing tactics well, but they may not always be able to explain how they are being used. The fact that the circumstance is forced rather than natural or spontaneous adds additional dimension (Khairuddin et al., 2021; Korshunova & Bastrikova, 2019).

It is essential to remember the techniques pupils need to write well, regardless of the audience they may be writing to (Connor 2011; Moon, 2012). This makes it impossible to mandate that students be exposed to predetermined pedagogic sequences of writing methods since the
participants' usage of strategies is a personal and subjective endeavor. Next, it is the responsibility of the instructor to provide language exercises that may improve students' rhetorical writing processes and encourage the use of a broad range of communication styles (Sarzhoska-Georgievskaya, 2016). When students have a variety of writing techniques in their toolbox, they can switch between them when there is a communication breakdown and become effective English writers (Larenas, et al, 2017).

Conclusion
The main aim of this study is to investigate the teaching mechanisms employed by ESL writing instructors and the preferences and treatments of Saudi university-level ESL students towards written feedback. The study found that reasoning, organizing, and elaborating ideas were the most commonly used strategies in writing a draft while contrasting, rereading, and expressing opinions were the most commonly used strategies in finalizing an essay. Organizing ideas was the most commonly used category of rhetorical strategy in writing. This study adds to the body of knowledge on writing tactics in a university setting for English language learners. In this sense, it can be said that the think-aloud protocol enabled the observation of many mental processes that take place while a writer creates a text for an exam. In light of this, it may be said that if the different writing processes are more commonly observed, it may be able to pinpoint how the students approach a writing assignment, particularly when they are greatly under pressure. Based on such information, instructors need to be able to assist students in their writing processes by using various methods and imparting the necessary principles for creating academic texts. Also, this research gave us the chance to see students' writing techniques both before and after an intervention. As a concluding observation, ESL education programs in Saudi Arabia and worldwide need to consider the results of this study. It takes a lot of practice to teach ESL and pre-service teachers need even more experience. Thus, future English teachers of English must develop an understanding of how the teaching and learning of writing are developed as well as which the other writing strategies (such as cognitive ones) other than the rhetorical processes are involved in it. Teachers must then come to see writing as a process involving various stages that result in the use of various writing strategies to become effective.

About the Author:
Haytham Bakri holds a Ph.D. in Applied Linguistics and is a dedicated Faculty Member at the College of Language Sciences, King Saud University. With a fervent enthusiasm for research in language learning, the author's expertise encompasses an extensive array of topics. Key areas of interest include second language writing, corrective feedback, second language acquisition, and the implementation of efficacious language learning and teaching methodologies.
ORCiD ID: https://orcid.org/0009-0001-8727-9790

References


