Can Learning Strategies Promote EFL Academic Writing in SLA?

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ABSTRACT

This paper firstly has a review about the theories in learning strategies in SLA (second language acquisition). Then, it pays attention to the relationship between learning strategies and academic writing proficiency in SLA. Finally, it attempts to emphasis the importance of teaching learning strategies academic wiring process in EFL classroom.

INTRODUCTION

Currently, research in second language acquisition (SLA) has shed light on learning strategies. It is generally recognized that many second language learners have difficulties with academic writing in English. Can learning strategies help learners to write their academic articles? This paper tries to answer this question. It first reviews the literature and research of learning strategies in SLA. It also addresses how learning strategies affect academic writing proficiency in SLA and attempts to pinpoint the significance of teaching learning strategies explicitly in academic writing process.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The Historical Background of Learning Strategies

Before the 1980s, research on individual differences was popular to make predictions about the success of L2 learners (Ellis, 2003, p. 526). The successful explanations of L2 learners had quite important connection and guided research on learning strategies. For example, Robin (1975, cited in Oxford, 2002, p. 125) points out six traits or habits of good language learners: (a) willingly and accurately guess, (b) want to communicate, (c) are uninhibited about mistakes, (d) focus on both structure and meaning, (e) take advantage of all practice opportunities, and (f) monitor their own speech and that of others. In other words, successful L2 learners are capable of using the target language and have a persisting high level of willingness in learning the target.
language. Therefore, it seems that good L2 learners have their own learning strategies to focus their SLA.

Moreover, in 1987, Wenden and Rubin (cited in Dornyei & Skehan, 2005, p. 608) claimed that learner strategies play an important role in SLA. O’Malley and Chamot (1990), Oxford (1990) and Wenden (1991) (cited in Dornyei & Skehan, 2005, p. 607) suggest that language learning strategies not only reflect the contribution, effect and success that learners have made, but also has become the chief “mainstream recognition” in L2. Therefore, learning strategies can be defined as “specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferable to new situations” (Oxford, 1990, p. 8). In other words, people who are good at language learning may handle a series of strategies which can work efficiently. Research in the new century also indicated that those who not only possess an earnest attitude and motivation but also join in the learning process actively and independently can achieve best proficiency in SLA (Dornyei & Skehan, 2005, pp. 607-608).

The Classifications of Learning Strategies

According to O’Malley and Chamot (1995, p. 8), there are three types of learning strategies: metacognitive, cognitive and social/affective strategies. Metacognitive strategies deal with planning of learning, self-monitoring of comprehension and evaluating when complications arise (O’Malley & Chamot, 1995, p. 8). In other words, it can be defined as planning and pondering over their language learning, such as self-planning, self-monitoring and evaluating one’s study (Cook, 1996, p. 105). Cognitive strategies are more directly related to individual learning tasks and entail direct manipulation or transformation of the learning materials (Brown & Palincsar 1982, cited in O’Malley & Chamot, 1995, p. 8). To be more specific, cognitive strategies are methods in dealing with more specific aspect of language learning, for example note-taking when listening to lectures (Cook, 1996, p. 105). Social/affective strategies identify that language learning is influenced by social and affective processes. Affective strategies are represented in the exercise of ‘self-talk’, the positive or negative thinking about one’s L2 learning to make sure and keep going with their learning (O’Malley & Chamot, 1995, p. 8).

Another researcher, Oxford (1990, p. 14) classifies learning strategies into two major items: direct and indirect. There are six groups under these two classes. For dealing with the new language, direct strategies seem to be the “performer” who directly works out specific language learning tasks (Oxford, 1990, pp. 14-15). Therefore, among direct strategies, memory strategies include “remembering and retrieving new information, cognitive strategies”, “understanding and producing the language”, and compensation strategies, “using the language despite knowledge gaps” (Oxford, 1990, pp. 14-15). In contrast, indirect strategies assist learners to be “the director” to manage their own L2 learning processes (Oxford, 1990, p.15). To be more specific, among indirect strategies, metacognitive strategies involve “coordinating the learning process”; affective strategies means “regulating emotions”; and social strategies, are “organizing, guiding, checking, correcting, coaching, encouraging, and cheering the performer, as well as ensuring that the performer works cooperatively with other actors in the play” (Oxford, 1990, p. 15).

Regardless of two types of classifications of learning strategies, the overall conclusion is that there are plenty of learning strategies which L2 learners can apply in
their SLA. Moreover, different language tasks require different types of learning strategies. In addition, it is noted that the higher the level learners are at, the more learning strategies they apply (O’Malley & Chamot, 1995, p. 8).

**The Significance of Learning Strategies**

Good language learners can apply appropriate learning strategies to guide their effective learning. Oxford (1990, p. 1) argues that strategies are important for two reasons: in the first place, strategies not only manage and direct learning but also develop communicative competence; secondly, good language learners can apply appropriate learning strategies to guide their effective learning. Moreover, Chamot (2005, p. 112) identifies that learning strategies are essential in second language learning and teaching for another two major reasons. To begin with, guided by examining the strategies in the second language learning process, learners can be aware of the metacognitive, cognitive, social, and affective processes when they are learning a second language (Chamot, 2005, p. 112). In addition, research shows that learning strategies can help less successful language to study better (Grenfell & Harris, 1999, cited in Chamot, 2005, p. 112).

Apart from the significance of learning strategies, Oxford (1999, pp. 8-9) also claims that effective learning strategies can help learners to make progress on communicative competence. For instance, Oxford (1990, p. 8-9) suggests that some cognitive strategies (analyzing) and some memory strategies (like the keyword technique) are vital for understanding and competence in the new language; metacognitive strategies can teach learners to regulate, plan and evaluate their study; affective strategies can give learners confidence and persistence in language study; and social strategies can increase the interaction of language study. Thus, all these strategies help communicative competence to blossom. To sum up, learning strategies can make contribution to communicative progress in SLA.

**ACADEMIC WRITING**

**The Definition**

Academic writing has several characteristics, such as being: “formal in wording and structure; tentative in tone; objective and factual, with evidence from theory or research to support statements; written in the third person to give the material objectivity; clearly structured with a well developed theme or central idea running by specific connecting words and repetition of words between sentences and paragraphs” (Butler, 2005, p. 49).

In other words, academic writing should have the formal style of writing structures, academic style of presentation and critical thinking of ideas. Therefore, academic writing is used to communicate ideas and it should be more formal and objective to have a clear idea about presenting one specific area (Johnson, 2003, p. 31).

**The Academic Writing Processes and Systems**

Generally speaking, academic writing contains six processes: understanding the task, gathering data, invention, drafting and editing (Behrens, Rosen & Beedles, 2005,
Moreover, Raime (1993, cited in Nunan, 1999, p. 273) claims that writing maybe undertaken in different circumstances such as for learning “with prewriting, drafts, revisions, and editing” and for display “i.e., examination writing”. Therefore, White and Arndt (1991, cited in Nunan, 1999, p. 273) suggest writing is a “complex” and “cognitive process” which contains considerations of both processes and occasions.

In Kellog’s (1996, cited in Ellis & Yuan, 2004, p. 62) model, there are three basic systems involved in writing product: formulation, execution and monitoring. Each system has underpinning processes. During the formulation, planning means that the writer should consider the purpose of the topic, the vocabulary and the grammar of the whole article (Ellis & Yuan, 2004, p. 62). In execution, programming consists of activating the previous background knowledge and transferring it to appropriate sentence level to compose the whole passage (Ellis & Yuan, 2004, p. 63). Lastly, in monitoring, writers should always read, revise and edit their written text time after time, checking for errors or organizational weakness.

THE APPLICATION OF LEARNING STRATEGIES IN ACADEMIC WRITING

Undoubtedly, writing is the most difficult skill to achieve a high level of proficiency in SLA (Chamot, 2005, p. 121). For example, learners will struggle with selecting lexical words grammatically, linking ideas coherently and writing appropriately in their second language. Metacognitive strategies can help learners to “regulate their own cognition” and plan, monitor and evaluate their learning processes in SLA (Oxford, 1990, p. 8). Thus, a vast demand of writing strategies should be beneficent for introduction to this stage.

Pre-writing Stage (Planning)

First of all, learning strategies (comprehension strategies) can assist learners to compose L2 expression regardless of the whole background information (Oxford, 1990, p. 48). For example, it can be utilized in selecting a topic. It is logical for writers to choose the topic which they are familiar with and have already got enough vocabulary and grammatical knowledge about (Oxford, 1990, p. 50). Secondly, learners should have clear ideas about their purpose of writing, thus they can utilize different strategies to fulfill the task. By not only passing writing exams, but also mastering second language writing skills, they should be expected to handle writing as a tool which can focus on academic purpose or daily lives (Raime, 1993, cited in Nunan, 1999, p. 273). In addition, according to Hedge (2002, p. 305), planning should consider the purpose of writing according to different writing tasks and individual writing styles. In other words, writers should spend time think critically and organize effectively when they plan before writing.

The role of planning should be related to other composing processes in writing. There are two types of planning: one is for helping writers to think and identify ideas of the task smoothly when they are writing; the other is assisting writers to write smoothly about the academic forms (Ellis & Yuan, 2004, p. 61). Moreover, planning determines the quality and fluency of written texts because it can provide writers more time to have the overview of their written article (Ellis & Yuan, 2004, p. 65). It is acknowledged that
the better and more considerable planning writers do; the more effective and accurate they are focused on the topic (Friedlander, 1990, cited in Ellis & Yuan, 2004, p. 65).

To sum up, the planning process plays a decisive part of role in the output of a written task in SLA. If learners want to write an essay fluently, quickly and freely, they should always remind themselves of planning their essay by applying learning strategies.

Writing Stage (Monitoring)

To begin with, learners should monitor what they have written and consider accurate expression, logical thinking and rearranging some parts (Hedge, 2002, p. 306). In other words, learners should always look back and think about meeting criteria and genres. Moreover, the extent to which a writer has the time to adopt a polished draft strategy or is engaged in pressured text production, as in Elbow’s (1981) free-writing (Ellis & Yuan, 2004, p. 63). Therefore, it is essential for writers to keep monitoring themselves constantly. For example, it is better for writers to keep their readers in mind (Hedge, 2002, p. 307). Self-monitoring can assist writers to have an overview about their written work. Writers should always read what they have written and always ask themselves a question: is it what readers want to know when they are reading this article?

Post-writing Stage (Evaluating)

Evaluation is essential and important for learners to have a good overview what they have already written. When finish writing, learners should look back and check the content and organization and evaluate if they have already included the planning in the first stage (Diller, 1996, p. 10). One of the evaluating ways at the post-writing stage is using a checklist. It is a good idea to make a checklist to evaluate the written article from vocabulary, sentences, paragraphs, content and organization. Moreover, learners can use the checklist to evaluate the content of the article, to examine the organization to form the whole article. The checklist can be helpful, essential and pivotal in editing the written text. In addition, metacognitive knowledge can help writers to compensate for their insufficiency of knowledge in the language area, therefore, metacognition is important for writers to revise and edit their written articles (Celce-Murcia & Olshtain, 2000, p. 143). To sum up, one can benefit by evaluating one’s written text when composing academic writings.

However, due to learners’ level of proficiency, although they may learn a lot about learning strategies, less proficient L2 writers may have pressure on their writing experience. For example, if writers lack of L2 linguistic knowledge or ware difficulties in “accessing” writing resources, they may have troubles in translating their ideas to a written format (Ellis & Yuan, 2004, p. 64). In other words, writing is not an isolated skill that can be improved by just understanding some sorts of writing strategies; the higher the level of proficiency in the second language, the better the performance in completion of the written task.
RECENT RESEARCH

To begin with, a recent study (Yuan, 1999) reports that language learner’s self-efficacy beliefs about learning English were strongly related to their use of all types of learning strategies, especially functional practice strategies. Moreover, the research (Brian, 2004, p. 88) shows that differences occur in second language learners and native English speaker students when they are writing the same article. Differences are choices of vocabulary, sentence patterns, argumentation structures, use of reading texts and the consideration of potential readers. In other words, there are many factors that influence decisions writers make when they are composing an academic text.

Furthermore, Macaro (2001, cited in Chamot, 2005, p. 121-122) did the research on writing strategies instruction about six classes of secondary students of French in English with. This research is called the “Oxford Writing Project”. Classes were randomly named in control or experimental groups. During a French writing task, students would have to answer questionnaires, write an essay, and take think-aloud interviews. Students in the experimental groups had trained for about five months of instruction on a variety of writing strategies that included the metacognitive strategies of advance preparation, monitoring, and evaluating. Experimental groups had achieved success in the grammatical accuracy of their writing at post-tests. In addition, Macaro (2001, cited in Chamot, 2005, p. 122) reported that a change happened in experimental groups that they were becoming “less reliant on the teacher, more selective in their use of the dictionary, and more careful about their written work”.

In addition, recent writing strategies study is about the effects of translation (a learning strategy) from the L1 on the quality of essays written in French by university students of French (Cohen & Brooks-Carson, 2001, cited in Chamot, 2005, p. 122). Students were given permission to either write directly in French or to write the essay first in their L1, then translate it to French. After they had finished their writing of their French essays, they should answer strategy checklists. The results show that students who wrote directly in French reported less thinking in English during than those who had gone through the translation process (Cohen & Brooks-Carson, 2001, cited in Chamot, 2005, p. 122).

Lastly, Okamura (2006, p. 72-73) does the research on the identification of the readership between middle-ranking and established Japanese researchers. He interviewed them separately and found that established researchers are always better aware of their potential readers and had very clear plan in mind when they were writing research articles than middle-ranking researchers. Moreover, Okamura (2006) reports that second language writers feel difficulty in searching for appropriate references when they are writing their academic papers. In addition, all researchers utilized mixed of English and Japanese for thinking and writing (Okamura, 2006).

TEACHING IMPLICATIONS

Learning strategies are so important for second language academic writers; therefore, it is good for teachers to stress metacognitive strategies (such planning, self-monitoring and self-evaluating) when they are teach academic writing classes. First of all, effective learning strategies do improve the performance of second language study (Chamot, 1994, p. 772). For example, in the pre-writing stage, teachers should teach the planning strategy which students would use before they start to write.
When in post-writing stage, teachers can ask students to work in pairs to analyze other’s work because it probably more effective to do prior to revise their own articles.

Moreover, strategy training should be explicit because learners can be aware of why learning strategies are useful for them and what kind of learning strategies they want to handle (Oxford, 2005, p. 126). For example, Hedge (2002, p. 308) suggests that teachers should be able to help and encourage students to question, clarify and select information according to their written topic. In other words, teachers can teach students to brainstorm in order to activate their schema (encourage students to link writing tasks with their background knowledge). Hence, students have plenty of ideas about writing tasks. After brainstorming, it is a better way for teachers to give students some suggestion of planning to activate their individual brainstorming and ideas of self-planning (Hedge, 2002, p. 308). Moreover, Nunan (1999, p. 172) also maintains that explicit teaching is beneficial and effective. Due to lack of the knowledge of research on learning strategies, student may not know which strategies work best for them. Therefore, teaching strategies explicitly can help students to be aware of thinking and practicing different strategies effectively (Nunan, 1999, p. 172).

In addition, it is essential for teachers to inform their students of the definition, value and purpose of different strategies and to encourage them to utilize them actively. The better aware they are of what kinds of learning strategies are available, the more efficiently students can practice and handle (Cohen, 1998, p. 93). Research indicated that explicit teaching of revision strategies had a measurable influence on writing performance (Sengupta, 2000). As White and Arndt point out, the process approach is to help learners to develop their writing skills. Therefore, teachers should have the responsibility to focus not only on product of written texts but also more on processes of writing. In other words, teachers need to consider a both process and product approach in their teaching (White and Arndt, 1991, cited in Nunan, 1999, p. 273).

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, after a brief overview of literature on learning strategies, it is found that metacognitive strategies (including planning, self-monitoring and self-evaluating) can be helpful to academic writing in SLA. Therefore, learning strategies do help and improve the proficiency of academic writing in SLA. Researchers in this area all recognize that the more proficient writers are, the more effective learning strategies they utilize. Moreover, the evidence is that explicitly teaching learning strategies can positively assist language learners to master their appropriate and helpful individual learning strategies in their own writing processes, thus taking on greater responsibility for their learning. Hence, teachers should introduce learning strategy instruction into their language classes in the knowledge that it will help many, if not most, of their students.
REFERENCES