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The effects of strategy instruction on writing strategy use for students of different proficiency levels



Radhika De Silva ¹, Suzanne Graham ^{*}

Institute of Education, University of Reading, Reading, UK

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ABSTRACT

Learners' strategy use has been widely researched over the past few decades. However, studies which focus on the impact of strategy instruction on strategy use, and how far learners of different proficiency levels are able to use the strategies taught in an effective manner, are somewhat rare. The focus of this paper is the impact of writing strategy instruction on writing strategy use of a group of 12 s language learners learning to write in English for Academic Purposes classes. Stimulated recall was used to explore whether this impact differed according to the proficiency level of the students, and revealed that for both high and low proficiency learners' strategy use developed as a result of the instruction. The implications of these findings for strategy instruction design are discussed.

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1. Introduction

In the history of over thirty years of language learner strategy research, a key area of debate has been whether instruction in strategy use leads to improved outcomes for learners, for example, improved scores on tests for the skill in question. Less widely researched is whether and how such instruction also leads to changes in strategy use, and whether such changes occur regardless of learners' proficiency level? Furthermore, if we accept a recent argument that strategies are largely 'mental activity' (Macaro, 2006, p. 328) and hence unobservable, how can information about strategy use be elicited from research participants across the proficiency range? This article seeks to contribute to this debate in one specific area of language learner strategy research, namely writing. It explores the impact of an intervention on the strategy use of lower and higher proficiency learners, with data gathered through stimulated recall interviews.

We begin by giving an overview of some of the central questions raised in L2 writing research in general and in L2 writing strategy research in particular. At the same time we present the methodological issues that arise in the investigation of these questions. We then present ways of addressing these questions and issues within a specific study of writing strategy development involving writers of both low and high proficiency.

^{*} Corresponding author. Institute of Education, University of Reading, London Road Campus, 4, Redlands Road, Reading, RG1 5 EX, UK. Tel.: +44 (0) 118 378 2684.

E-mail addresses: krsil@ou.ac.lk (R. De Silva), s.j.graham@reading.ac.uk (S. Graham).

¹ Department of Language Studies, Open University of Sri Lanka, Nawala, Nugegoda, Sri Lanka. Tel.: +94 (0) 112881624.

2. Background: models of writing and strategy use

In a review of writing strategy research, [Manchón, Roca de Larios, and Murphy \(2007\)](#) discuss the importance of theoretical and methodological refinements in order to take this research field forward. According to them, future research on writing strategies needs to be ‘theoretically-grounded and methodologically principled’ (p.248).

If we consider the theoretical underpinnings of writing research in general, we observe that a considerable number of writing models have evolved over the last two decades. A key element in many of these models is working memory capacity. [Kellogg \(1996\)](#) for example presents successful writing as involving the effective retrieval and application of relevant procedures, schemas, facts and episodes through working memory, with formulation (planning of ideas and their translation into sentences) and monitoring placing higher demands on working memory than execution. Similarly, within [Macaro's \(2003\)](#) model, working memory plays a central role in several aspects of writing, including planning, formulation and monitoring.

Finding solutions to composing problems relates closely to the concerns of writing strategy research. Reviewing research in that field, [Manchón et al \(2007, p. 235\)](#) identify a strand of such research that sees ‘writing strategies as problem-solving devices’ and which, they suggest, fits in with [Flower and Hayes' \(1980\)](#) view of composing strategies as ‘decisions taken to cope with the problems (both linguistic and rhetorical) posed by the writing task as perceived by the writer’ ([Manchón et al., 2007, p. 23, citing Wong, 2005, 31](#)). Once again, working memory is central to the implementation of such strategies; writing within the broader literature on language learner strategies, [Macaro \(2006\)](#) argues that the effective use of clusters of strategies may enhance the working memory functions of ‘perceiving, holding, processing, and encoding’ ([Macaro, 2006, p. 327](#)), which may result in more successful writing.

Furthermore, within language learner strategy research more broadly considered, the importance of metacognitive control over strategy use, successful orchestration and combinations of different strategies, and flexibility in strategy use, has been increasingly emphasised (see, for example, [Anderson, 2003](#); [Graham, 1997](#); [Macaro, 2006](#)). [Macaro \(2006\)](#) comments in particular on the centrality of strategy combinations for the effective execution of a learning activity, arguing that ‘effective learners deploy strategies in clusters appropriate to contexts and tasks’ (p. 327).

Thus effective strategy use may be viewed as central to effective L2 writing. Whether such effective strategy use is teachable is a question that has been explored in a variety of contexts since the 1990s. In reviews of interventions undertaken, e.g. [Hassan et al. \(2005\)](#), [Plonsky \(2011\)](#), the consensus view seems to be that strategy instruction can have a positive impact on L2 learning. Yet how we judge the effectiveness of strategy instruction is not always clearly defined. [Manchón \(2008\)](#) argues that it might be useful to ‘conceptualize effective use of strategies in terms of whether learners are able to orchestrate their strategy deployment in such a way that their (...) language learning/use goals are achieved’ (p. 239).

Hence, one area of importance in strategy intervention studies seems to be the evaluation of the extent to which the strategy instruction has led to more effective use of the strategies taught, and whether they helped learners achieve their goals. This more effective strategy use would most likely entail greater control over strategy deployment, greater flexibility in strategy use and perhaps also greater persistence in engaging in ‘problem-solving rather than problem-avoiding behaviour’ ([Manchón, 2008, p. 239](#)).

Another important factor regarding strategy intervention studies concerns whether learners of different proficiency levels benefit equally from the intervention in question. There is some evidence, largely from reading and listening studies, that strategy instruction does not help higher and lower proficiency learners equally. Interestingly, while some studies have found that only higher proficiency learners benefited (e.g. [Ikeda & Takeuchi, 2003](#), in a reading strategy intervention), others have found the opposite, i.e. only lower proficiency students benefiting (e.g. [Vandergrift & Tafaghodtari, 2010](#), in a listening intervention). Furthermore, in both studies, the authors comment that the intervention in question might have benefited both groups of learners had a certain type of strategy been included (in both cases, bottom-up strategy use for text decoding). The key issue here seems to be that for strategy instruction to help all learners regardless of proficiency level, it has to be needs-based and individualised to a degree, i.e. allow learners to move forward from their current base of strategy use by teaching them strategies that are either new to them, or which they currently do not use very effectively. In both cases, some pre-intervention assessment of current strategy use is required. In addition, individualisation can occur by offering learners a selection of strategies to choose from in different combinations for different types of task, and through teacher or peer feedback on strategy use. This might allow learners of different proficiency levels to select strategies that suit their particular needs and way of working, as well as including the ‘metacognitive dimension’ that many researchers view as essential to effective strategy instruction ([Macaro, 2010, p. 294](#)).

Finally, student evaluation of which strategies and in which combinations were the most effective for which tasks is essential to ensure uptake of the strategies presented and for further development of metacognition. An example of a study in which all these elements were combined is [Graham and Macaro \(2008\)](#), looking at listening strategy instruction.

To our knowledge, explorations of the impact of writing strategy instruction on learners of different proficiency levels have been few in number. One study by [Sasaki \(2002\)](#) explored the impact of writing instruction on lower intermediate learners of English in Japan (as assessed through the SLEP test – Secondary Level English Proficiency). As only lower proficiency learners were involved, the study did not, therefore, consider whether the instruction had a different impact on learners of different proficiency levels. It did however show that the instruction influenced lower proficiency learners’ use of local planning, reducing it and helping them to plan more globally before writing, although it had no impact on how frequently learners translated directly from the L1 to the L2. Sasaki sees the latter as impeding the fluency of these learners’ L2 writing and attributes it to their more limited L2 proficiency.

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