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Investigating the L2 Writing Strategies Used by Skillful English Students

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Abstract

Several studies have been conducted to investigate the writing strategies used by skilled and less-skilled English writers, particularly in the EFL context but only a few have attempted to observe the strategies employed by skillful/proficient English students, predominantly in the Indonesian context. Therefore, the interest of this research was to discover the types of writing strategies applied by three skillful English students while writing in English (L2) and evaluate their substantial effects. The participants were three graduate students majoring in English Education. Moreover, the data obtained from Think-Aloud Protocols, semi-structured interviews, and written drafts were analyzed and evaluated and the results showed the writing process of the students varied. On the whole, the disparities presented a more understanding of students' writing process. It was also discovered that the three students applied similar strategies but the major inconsistency was in the manner with each was implemented.

Keywords: *Writing strategies; proficient students; argumentative writing*

Introduction

Writing in L1 (native language) and L2 (learned language) are believed to be a strenuous cognitive activity requiring certain specific strategies (Nunan, 1989). Writing in (L2) is even more intricate and demanding than in L1 (Bailey, 2003; Shukri, 2014) and this is associated with the proficiency it requires in several areas such as L1 and L2 language skills, writing strategies, writers' character, and experience as well as insufficient training and reading (Raofi, Chan, Mukundan, & Rashid, 2014). However, writing strategies play significant roles in the development of L2 writing and differentiating between skilled and less-skilled writers (Abdullah et al., 2011; Chien, 2012). They are also important factors influencing the quality of students' writing (Asmari, 2013). These, therefore, mean they provide great benefits to language learners (Plonsky, 2011).

There are, however, only a few studies on L2 writing strategies implemented by skillful English learners. It has been reported that the teaching of writing in the Indonesian context is focused predominantly on the product-based approach (Alwasilah, 2006) rather than on the process. This involves the teachers providing a topic and asking the students to write a paragraph on it after which their work would be assessed (Lestari, 2006). They both believe in improving students' writing by producing sentences in correct grammar with

appropriate vocabulary (Ariyanti, 2016). It is possible for the learners to learn from the use of grammar and vocabulary in writing activities but only a few pieces of evidence have shown regular marking of errors by teachers improves students' ability to produce good writing with deeper ideas (Bailey, 2003). Moreover, applying traditional teaching neglects the process of writing and this is believed to be the main reason it is a difficult skill for Indonesian students in addition to the use of appropriate strategies required to write and generate a language (Hsiao & Oxford, 2002). Teachers have, however, been discovered to rarely explain how to use appropriate writing strategies explicitly. The observation and analysis of the strategies used by students during the process of writing can provide teachers and writing researchers the opportunity to disclose factors making one student more skillful than others and also to help the less-skilled ones (Oxford, 2003).

Limited research has been conducted on L2 writing strategies applied by Indonesian learners by indigenous researchers with most mainly focused on skillful and less-skillful writers and comparative studies on writing in L1 and L2 (Arifin, 2017; Budiharso, 2014; Maharani, Fauziati, & Supriyadi, 2018; Rahmawati, Fauziati, & Marmanto, 2019). There has been a rare focus on investigating the writing strategies employed by advanced or skillful English students.

This research was, therefore, intended to examine L2 writing strategies used by three skillful English students due to the observation of diverse quality in their writings. In reality, the students showed good comprehension of language usage and fluency in writing, implemented different vocabularies, and were able to write comprehensive texts. Nonetheless, two were observed not to have meaningful contents and this presumes being skillful English students does not necessarily guarantee to be skillful writers.

Writing process and Writing Strategies

Process and strategy are unclear terms in the writing field. They are necessary because writers have to deal with enormous complexities while producing texts (Dewi, Nurkamto, & Drajati, 2019). This involves deciding their purposes, defining topics, and planning how to convey messages (Mu & Carrington, 2007). According to (Blanchard & Root, 1994; Flower & Hayes, 1981; Harmer, 2007) three stages are involved in the writing process and they include planning, writing, and reviewing/editing.

In every stage, writers employed certain strategies to cope with the difficulty of arrangement and solve problems required to reach a goal during the writing process (Kieft, Rijlaarsdam, & Van Bergh, 2006; Shapira & Hertz-Lazarowitz, 2005). Therefore, every

writer has individual strategies, for example, some read and reread a topic more than once to evaluate and comprehend the writing task. Moreover, after the problems have been recognized, some directly note down the ideas for known categories while others brainstorm comprehensively to obtain ideas and plan globally and systematically on what to write next. Meanwhile, some others only note down a few key points before writing.

Some writers also read and reread what they have written several times for different reasons such as determining how to link current text with the next as well as joining recent ideas with new ones. However, several other strategies are applied by other students. Moreover, students occasionally have difficulties with spelling and finding appropriate words while writing and this makes them check dictionaries for meanings and some others prefer using different words with similar meanings. Some students frequently pause to reformulate or plan what to write next while others seldom implement this strategy and some never apply it. This, therefore, means actions such as reading, rereading, stopping a while (pausing), and using dictionary are types of writing strategies.

L2 Writing Research

Some research has been conducted to investigate the strategies used by skillful and less-skillful writers (Abdullah et al., 2011; Budiharso, 2014; Silva, 1993) by comparing those applied while writing in L1 and L2 to identify the similarities, disparities, and transferability. Other studies primarily concentrated on the use of L1 strategies during L2 writing (van Weijen, van den Bergh, Rijlaarsdam, & Sanders, 2009; Wang & Wen, 2002) while some others are focused more on L2 strategies employed by skilled and less-skilled writers in relation to those applied by the students (Kim & Yoon, 2014; Wang & Wen, 2002). However, only a little research has attempted to explore the types of strategies used by skillful English learners and their connection to writing quality (Pennington & So, 1993; Sasaki & Hirose, 1996; Zamel, 1983) with different results produced by the researchers.

Zamel's (1983) findings showed students' language skills or proficiency did not really indicate their ability to write effectively. This means students' writing quality is predominantly due to the application of effective strategies rather than proficiency but other researchers showed different results (Pennington & So, 1993; Sasaki & Hirose, 1996). In these studies, students' L2 skills or proficiency were significant to differentiating skilled and unskilled writers. The conclusion was, however, that skilled English students are not always skilled L2 or English writers.

A researcher that taught Academic Speaking and Approaches and Methods in Tesol noticed some skillful English students produce different quality in L2 writing. According to the writing assignments, tests, and performance in argumentative essays, the students showed excellent knowledge of English and fluency in writing and speaking, employed suitable vocabularies, and were able to generate detailed text but the contents were incoherent and shallow. Therefore, due to the absence of previous studies on L2 writing strategies used by skilled English students in the Indonesian context, this study was conducted to fill this gap by discovering the strategies applied by proficient English students while they write in English (L2) and to assess their relationship with the quality of the students' writings.

Materials and Methods

The research was conducted as a qualitative case study to examine a particular fact. This involved the selection of three Indonesian postgraduate students, Rina, Lily, and Tom (pseudonyms) skillful English learners majoring in English Education as participants. The indication of their skillfulness was based on their portfolios. The researcher, which was their academic speaking and Approaches and Methods in Tesol lecturer, noticed the students carefully during the presentation of their topics in front of the class and observed they are excellent presenters due to their ability to present fluently and accurately. They also always outperform other students in any elective lectures and the scores of their academic writings such as quizzes, assignments, mid-term and final tests proved Rina to be a very skillful writer while Lily and Tom are on the average. Meanwhile, judging from their English skills, both Lily and Tom could write better and this led to the eagerness of the researcher to investigate the reasons they were unable to perform effectively while writing. An argumentative essay was selected because it makes higher education students think critically with the selection of the theme titled "Graduates of Famous University Usually Get a Better Start in Their Life".

The writings generated during the think-aloud protocol assignment were score by two raters including the researcher and the students' academic writing lecturer using the rubric created by (Jacobs, et al. 1981 and the results presented in Table 1 show Rina had the highest score.

Table 1. The students' scores

Components	Rater 1			Rater 2		
	Rina	Tom	Lily	Rina	Tom	Lily
Content	26	17	17	24	16	17
Organization	17	14	14	17	14	14
Vocabulary	18	19	17	19	17	16
Languages	19	17	16	17	15	15
Mechanics	7	7	6	7	6	7

The three main instruments used were Think Aloud Protocols (TAPs), semi-structured, and retrospective interviews. The data collected from verbalizations and the text generated by the writers are called Think Aloud Protocols and are used to determine the writing strategies applied after they have been evaluated using coding taxonomy. Previous researchers have created and developed some coding taxonomies and this means none is generally acceptable because each researcher has their criteria for the category (Hsiao & Oxford, 2002).

For the purpose of this research, Raimes (1987) taxonomy was adapted due to its similarity with the ten strategies used by the students as shown in the following Table 2.

Table 2. Adapted Raimes' (1987) coding scheme

1 Global planning	<i>Pg</i>	<i>Determining how to plan the whole text</i>
2 Local Planning	<i>Pl</i>	<i>Deciding what to write next</i>
3 Rehearsing	<i>Rh</i>	<i>Developing what writers want to say and attempting to produce or regain information on the topic.</i>
4 Repeating	<i>Re</i>	<i>Engaging in a mental search for words and ideas the writers wanted to write next.</i>
5 Re-reading the previous sentences	<i>Rrs</i>	<i>Reading and rereading some sentences to connect what students are going to write next with the previous sentence (s) and maintaining the coherence and the flow between the recent sentence(s) and the following sentence (s).</i>
6 Reading/ rereading the draft	<i>Rrd</i>	<i>revising and editing the text while reading the whole paragraphs</i>
7 Reading the assigned topic	<i>Rra</i>	<i>Analyzing and identifying the assigned problems, and proceeding to jot down the points for the categories identified.</i>
8 Pausing	<i>Pa</i>	<i>reformulating ideas, planning what to do next, having problem in expressing ideas</i>
9 Revising	<i>Rv</i>	<i>making changes to texts affecting meanings such as deletion or addition of a sentence(s), reorganizing the paragraph, deleting a word/phrases/sentence(s)</i>
10 Editing	<i>Ed</i>	<i>Making changes to texts, but the changes do not affect meanings such as editing spelling errors, punctuation, and tenses.</i>

A retrospective interview was conducted to triangulate the reliability of the data gathered from Think-Aloud Protocols. This involved the researcher and the students checking each sentence from the protocols and the researcher asking some questions to ensure clarity immediately the students finished writing to make sure they remember what they had written. Moreover, the semi-structured interview was administered for 30 minutes to congregate more insight into students' writing processes. This involves the exploration of students' previous experience, conceptions, and attitudes towards writing in English using Think Aloud Protocols (TAPs). The interview was tape-recorded and later transcribed for each individual.

Results and Discussion

1. L2 writing strategies applied by skillful English students

The protocols data showed the strategies used by each student as well as the occurrence of each from the beginning up to when they completed writing after which they were calculated by the researcher and academic writing lecturer and the results presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Writing strategies applied by each student in each stage

Strategy	Rina			Lily			Tom		
	Planning	Writing/ Drafting	Reviewing	Planning	Writing/ Drafting	Reviewing	Planning	Writing / Drafting	Reviewing
Plg	1	-		1	-		1	-	
Pl		-			3			4	
Rh	2	2		5	6		3	8	
Re	2	2	1	3	5	3	3	4	2
Rrs	6	14		2	5		3	5	
Rd	2	2	3	0	-	2	-		2
Rra	3	3		2	1		2	2	
Pa	2	6		1	3	2	1	3	2
Rv	2	6	2	-	1	1	1	1	1
Ed	2	6	1	1	1	6	1	2	5
Total	22	41	7	15	25	14	15	29	12

Source: Research proces

The Video and Audio observations:

Once Rina was assigned topic, she reread it (Rra) to obtain ideas on what to write next after which she started to plan globally (Pg) by predominantly using rereading (Rrs) in a high frequency and rehearsing (Rh) at any stage to ensure coherence. The next strategy which was also frequently used was pausing (Pa) to determine the next step to take while encountering difficulties in formulating and developing ideas. Moreover, the retrospective interview showed she used revising (Rv) and editing (Ed) strategies at any stage.

Another student, Lily, applied different strategies to develop and generate ideas by depending mostly on rehearsing (Rh) and repeating (Re). Unlike Rina's use of rereading (Rrs) in high frequency, this strategy was used by Lily in low frequency and was also observed to have rarely applied revising (Rv) and Editing (Ed) in planning and drafting stages but mostly in the reviewing stage.

The other student, Tom, had similar writing patterns with Lily. Both of them planned for less than three minutes while Rina spent more than seven. They also relied on rehearsing (Rh) and repeating (Re) to obtain ideas and applied rereading (Rrs) at a low frequency.

2. Students' writing strategies and quality

It is obvious all the skillful or proficient English students used writing strategies at any stage but there were discrepancies in the frequency at which each was used as well as the capability of controlling and directing them. A skillful writer, Rina, was found to have used writing strategies effectively by applying rereading in a high frequency which makes her writing recursive. The strategy was also used for different purposes such as developing and generating ideas, maintaining coherence between sentences, and revising and editing the text. Moreover, the planning stage was used as the guidance to develop the paragraphs but Lily and Tom were not consistent with what they planned. They changed their plan once they had new ideas or encountered some difficulties while writing. A little revision and editing were conducted while rereading the text during the planning and drafting stages and mostly at the reviewing stage with a focus on vocabularies, grammar rules, and spellings. It is recommended that Tom and Lily pay more attention to planning, revising, and editing thoroughly because they are the most significant elements of writing required to enhance and develop quality. This is in line with the findings of (Chen, 2011; Cumming, 1989; Sasaki, 2000).

The data obtained from the semi-structured interview showed all the students were aware of the importance of making a plan in their essay but two of them, Rina and Tom, failed to plan effectively.

Here are the excerpts from the students:

Rina said “I always reread the prompt to recognize the demand of the writing... and after I get the main points on what to write, I immediately make an outline... I realize planning is very important... so I always plan my writing comprehensively by spending some time to think about what I am going to write... this helps me develop my paragraph and also when I am writing...”

Lily said “I reread the prompt and... planned my writing but not too detail... but when I write and have better ideas... I do not stick to plan... so when I get a problem while writing... I try to find a way to keep writing...”

Tom said “I plan what to write... but only the main points. If I am quite familiar with the topic... I just plan without writing (Tom sometimes do mental Planning...)”

This shows all the students planned their writing using different ways. For example, Rina, a more successful writer, planned more seriously and extensively than the other two. This is in line with the finding of previous writing researchers (Abdi Tabari, 2019; Shafiee, Koosha, & Afghari, 2013; Victori, 1999) that successful writers require more time to plan their essays. It was also discovered that not all the students followed their plan, for example, Tom and Lily changed their initial plan when encountering problems and obtaining new ideas. They, however, used local planning (PI) to overcome this problem which further leads to shallow content and bad text. This is in agreement with the findings of (van Weijen et al., 2009).

The students spend a lot of time at the initial stage of writing their essays to understand the best way to proceed. The results showed Rina wrote the longest essay with 560 words in eighty minutes while Tom and Lily wrote their essays almost the same length with 490 and 478 respectively. They all used similar strategies but the frequency of using each was different. Moreover, they also realized the recursive nature of writing but there was a discrepancy in its use with Rina observed to have written more recursively compared to the others as recorded in the use of rereading in Table 3. This strategy was applied for different purposes such as generating ideas, upholding coherence, and flow between sentences as well as for revising and editing texts. However, the other two students used the strategy mainly to generate ideas.

Conclusion

This study showed Rina understands the process and effective strategies to use while writing in L2. According to previous researchers (Abdullah et al., 2011; Macaro, 2006; Pennington & So, 1993), there are no good and bad writing strategies but the most significant issue is how to select, control, direct, and use appropriate strategies effectively and at the right moments. Some studies have shown persistent use of strategies has the ability to finally reduce students' problems in writing and help them learn to write effectively (Larios, Manchon, & Murphy, 2006; Sasaki, 2004). It also helps in differentiating skilled and less-skilled writers. Meanwhile, Richards (1990) defined a less-skilled writer as an individual that uses unsuitable writing behaviors and process.

Certain suggestions were found to be useful in increasing students' writing quality. First, strategies are very significant in writing, especially when any problem is encountered, therefore, they should be taught and introduced explicitly in the class. This is important because the students admitted in the semi-structured interview that they do not have adequate knowledge on how to apply strategies to develop their writing quality. Second, writing workshops should be conducted in language classes to promote students' and teachers' consciousness of these strategies. It is expected to allow students to observe and evaluate their strategic behavior during the process of completing their writing assignments and also to help them find their most effective writing strategies through self-reflective tasks in a student-centered learning environment. Moreover, they should also be taught how to focus on overall content issues rather than minor mechanical issues that consume much time but are less effective and produce less-rich results.

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