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The Role of Cognitive Strategy Use in Second Language Writing

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Abstract

Writing is a cognitive skill that demands the learners to employ various strategies to complete the task effectively. The researchers in the field of language learning strategy relate the factors such as gender, motivation, learning styles, proficiency, previous learning experiences and achievement with learners' strategy use. In this regard, this paper aims to explore the role of cognitive strategies in promoting effective English writing of Indian ESL Learners. The paper further investigates whether pertinent factors like gender and medium of instruction influence the learners' use of cognitive strategies. The findings of the study reveal that efficient use of cognitive strategy enables the learners to perform better in all contexts.

Keywords: Second Language Writing, Cognition, Cognitive Strategy Use, Gender Differences, Medium of Instruction.

Introduction

Writing is an integrated skill that demands the writer to retrieve the appropriate content from his/her repertoire related to the topic and apply the strategies that help in retrieving the knowledge. Writing comprehensively is a cognitive challenge that demands the writer to get back the domain specific content from long term memory (Kellogg, 2001). Writing effectively depends on the ability to think clearly about substantive matters (Nickerson, Perkins, & Smith, 1985). It is a recursive process, in which the learner deploys various strategies throughout the writing process (Flower and Hayes, 1981). Strategies are the specific behaviours the learners use to enhance their learning. Learning strategies facilitate learners to comprehend and retain knowledge of the target language. This paper aims to explore the role of cognitive strategies in promoting effective English Writing of Indian ESL Learners. Cognitive strategy refers to the learners' cognitive actions that are performed in order to attain a particular goal or to accomplish a learning task (Mayer 1988).

Language Learning Strategies

Researchers define language learning strategies according to their personal belief and perception (Ellis, 1994). The following chronological organization of the definitions reveal how language learning strategy has developed and how the researchers perceive the concept of strategy.

Rubin (1975), pioneer in strategy research defines language learning strategy as 'the techniques or devices which learner may use to acquire knowledge'. Stern (1983) includes consciousness in the strategy use. He describes that strategies are observable learning behavior, more or less consciously employed by the learner. Similarly, Bialystok (1985) describes learning strategies as 'activities undertaken by learners whether consciously or not, that have the effect of promoting the learners' ability either to analyse the linguistic knowledge relevant to the language under study, or to improve the control of procedures for selecting and applying the knowledge under specific contextual conditions. In the same way, Weinstein and Mayer (1986) explain language learning strategy as 'behaviours and thoughts that a learner engages in the learning process that influence the learners encoding process'. Likewise, Wenden (1987) interprets learning strategy as 'actions or techniques whether observable and unobservable that can be learned and changed. He further states that the strategies used by the learner contribute to learning either directly or indirectly.

Schemeck (1988) states that learning strategies are 'combinations of cognitive (thinking) skills implemented when a situation is perceived as one demanding learning'. Oxford (1989) claims that learning strategies are specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective and more transferrable to new situations. O'Malley and Chamot (1990) define leaning strategy as special thoughts or behaviours that individuals use to help them comprehend, learn, or retain new information. MacIntyre (1994) explains that learning strategies are the techniques and tricks that learners use to make language easier to master. Ellis (1997) proposes that language learning strategies are particular approaches or techniques that learners employ to try to learn the second language; they can be behavioural or mental. Graham (1997) demonstrates learning strategies as 'thoughts or behaviours that help students to understand, learn or retain new information'. Cohen (1998) defines learning strategies as 'learning processes which are consciously selected by the learner.

Even though the researchers contribute different definitions, they shared two common points: characteristics of learners and the techniques used by the learner. In the same way, Stevek (1990) observes that no matter how different the definitions, the first is to do with general characteristics of learners and the second is to do with techniques. From the above quoted definitions, it is inferred that the researchers recognize learning strategies as observable behaviours, unobservable behaviours or both. Some researchers perceive learning strategies as conscious (Stern, 1983; MacIntrye, 1994; Cohen, 1998) or subconscious process. Apart from that, they have used different words to refer strategies such as 'behaviours', 'techniques', 'device', 'thoughts', 'tricks' and 'procedures'.

Review of Studies on Strategy Approach to Writing

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the researchers in the field of second language learning have shifted their attention from teachers and teaching methods to learners and learning outcomes. This shift has taken place because the teacher centered approach or the method focused approach fails to answer why some learners learn effectively than others. So, the researchers started to focus on the learners and learner behaviours to explain the reasons for why some learners learn better than others. In relation to that, Rubin (1975) demonstrates the good language learner characteristics and the strategies in the learning process. Her article 'what the "Good Language Learner" can teach us' is acknowledged by Cohen, as a birth of learner strategy research. In the same year, Stern (1975) also published an article on the strategies used by the learners. Rubin suggests that "if we knew more about what the 'Successful learners' did, we might be able to teach those strategies to poor learners to enhance their success record". She constructs a list of strategies used by the good language learners:

- Willing and able to use clues in order to guess meaning
- Use a variety of techniques in order to communicate or learn from communication
- Manage inhibitions
- Attend to form
- Practice the language they are trying to learn
- Monitor their own and others speech
- Attend to meaning. (Cited in Griffiths, 2007).

Rubin (2008) has given evidence for moving the focus from teaching methods to learners and learning methods by indicating the titles of the books. For Example, Nunan (1988) in his book on *Learner Centered Curriculum* stresses the need for a different curriculum for different learners; the books of Cook and Cook (2001) *Second Language Learning and Teaching* and Brown (2000) *Principles of Language Learning and Teaching*, the researchers placed "learning" before "teaching" in the title that signifies the shift towards learners' needs and characteristics.

In addition, researchers have started to publish books and research papers in journals to explain the language learner strategies. For instance: Willing (1989) *Teaching How to Learn;* Oxford (1990) Language Learner Strategies: What Every Teacher Should Know; Wenden (1991) Learner Strategies for Learner Autonomy; Chamot, Barnhardt, El-Dinary and Robbins, J (1999) *The Learning Strategies Handbook* deal with the learners use of strategies and show the difference between skilled and unskilled writers, not the teaching methods and teaching materials.

The research studies then move on to classify the learner strategies. (O'Malley and Chamot 1990; Oxford 1990; Wenden 1991; Chamot 1994). Oxford (1990) classifies language learning strategies into two main categories as direct (Memory, cognitive and compensation strategies) and indirect strategies (Metacognitive, affective and social strategies). In this regard, O'Malley and Chamot (1990) also classify learning strategies into three general categories as metacognitive strategies, cognitive strategies and social/affective strategies. Within the framework of language learning strategy research, researchers investigate the variables such as gender, level of language proficiency, age, motivation, previous learning experiences and class size. With these insights, the study also investigates the relationship between gender and medium of instruction on the use of cognitive strategies in the writing task.

Role of Cognitive Strategies in Promoting Effective Writing

The term Cognition refers to the domain of processing information, applying knowledge and changing preferences. The linguistic perspective of human cognition encompasses the mental processes such as attention, memory, producing and understanding language learning, reasoning, problem solving and decision making. During the 1980's, the second language writing researchers concentrate on the cognitive functions in writing. They attempt to explain the strategies used by the learner throughout the writing process. Cognitive strategies have been investigated in contexts of writing by many researchers (Graham and Harris, 1994; Harris and Graham, 1996; Scardamalia and Bereiter, 1986). In relation to that, they introduce various cognitive process models of writing. According to Flower and Hayes (1981), the process of writing is a set of distinctive processes, which are hierarchically, and highly organized thinking process rather than a series of discrete stages. Their cognitive process theory lies on four key points:

1. The Process of writing is best understood as a set of distinctive thinking processes which writers orchestrate or organize during the act of composing.
2. These processes have a hierarchical, highly embedded organization in which any given process can be embedded within any other.
3. The act of composing itself is a goal-directed thinking process, guided by the writers, own growing network of goals.
4. Writers create their own goals in two key ways: by generating both high-level goals and supporting sub-goals which embody the writer's developing sense of purpose, and then, at times, by changing major goals or even establishing entirely new ones based on what has been learned in the act of writing.

According to Flower and Hayes (1981), the act of writing involves three major elements which are reflected in the three units of the model: the task environment (the rhetorical problem), the Writer's long term memory (stored knowledge not only of the topic, but of the audience and various writing plans) and the writing process (planning, translating and reviewing).

In 1996, Hayes updated his and Flower's original cognitive process model (1981) to describe the advances in writing research and cognitive psychology. For example, he changed the process of translation as text generation and the other components such as task environment, motivation/affect, long-term memory, working memory and planning. In the revised model, the component task

environment includes the social and physical aspects involved in the writing process. In addition to that, he adds the motivation/affect component to show how the writers' goals, beliefs and attitudes influence throughout the writing process. Hayes also modified the component long-term memory, to include the task schemes, knowledge of audience and the impact of extended practice. Further, he includes the working memory component in the revised model (1996) to explain the relationship between cognitive processes, motivation, and long-term memory. Finally, planning was included in the revised model which included problem-solving, inferencing and decision making (Hayes, 1996). It reveals that skilled writers continuously engage in goal oriented planning and revision throughout the writing process.

Similarly, Bereiter and Scardamalia (1987) explain two models, Knowledge telling and knowledge transforming model to differentiate the writing processes of novice and skilled writers. When the learners engage in knowledge telling process, their writing is shorter, less complete and lower in quality (Graham and Harris, 2000). In the knowledge transforming model, the learners start with a mental representation of the task, then they plan their ideas, set goals using relevant content and analyse information. It is a cognitively complex task that develops writers thinking.

Cognitive strategies instruction facilitates the writer to attempt task effectively. It enables the learners to understand and to produce the new language. Cohen (2012) states "cognitive strategies involve the awareness, perception, reasoning and conceptualizing process that learners undertake in both learning the target language (identification, grouping, retention, and storage of language material) and in activating their knowledge (retrieval of language material, rehearsal and comprehension or production of words, phrases and other elements of the target language) ". Scragges and Mastrapieri (1992), Miller and Mercer (1993), Biehler and snowman (1993), Weinstein and Hume (1998), Ebrahimi Ghavamabadi (1998), and Saif and Mesrabadi (2003) reveal the effects of cognitive strategy instruction on learning. Myles (2002) indicates that students' writing in second language is faced with social and cognitive challenges. Ur (2002) states that writing process is an initial step for developing students writing abilities: "You learn to write through writing… One of our main tasks then, as teachers, is to get our students to write a lot, thinking, as they do so and learning from their own writing experience.

Influence of Gender and Medium of Instruction in Cognitive Strategy Use

Medium of instruction is one of the factors that influence the learners' use of cognitive strategies. It is believed that English medium students were likely to use high level cognitive strategies than the regional medium students as they have high proficiency in second language. Higher levels of language proficiency have also been associated with less anxiety and increase the confidence level (Khaldieh, 2000). Similarly, Gender has a profound influence on the choice of using strategies (Oxford & Nyikos 1989). Some studies have found that females effectively employ the strategies than males. The study of Wharton (2000) reveals that males use more strategies than females. Others have found no differences in the employment of strategy use between males and females. Male and female learners are supposed to exhibit some differences in using language learning strategies. Rahimi, Riazi and Saif (2008) conducted a study with Persian EFL learners. In their research, there is no relationship between strategy use and gender. In the same way Lee & Oxford (2008), Peng (2001), Chou (2002), Shmais

(2003) also state that male and female are similar in terms of using cognitive and metacognitive strategies. The similar result was obtained by Nisbet, Tindall and Arroyo (2005). So it cannot be clearly stated from the instructional perspective whether female or male learners apply the strategies effectively.

Conclusion

Language learning strategies are considered as an effective means of learning to write fluently. Writing fluently is a cognitively demanding task for L2 learners. The prime aim of any learning system is making students familiar with certain strategies which they can apply to the learning of any skills. If the students are instructed and motivated to use the strategies, it is applied more or less at the same level by the learners from different educational background. However controversies can be seen in the findings of gender and strategy use.

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