

## Language Learning Strategies Use in Teaching the Writing Skill for EFL Algerian Learners

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### Abstract

Language learning strategies (LLSs) have been the focus of an enormous number of foreign language studies. However, many researches in this field have not been thoroughly examined especially in relation to the writing skill. For this reason, the current study investigates Strategy Based Instruction (SBI) implementation in the writing skill, particularly for students of English at the Intensive Language Teaching Center of Mostaganem University, Algeria , to enable them find out which strategies that best suit them, and most importantly, to employ cooperative learning strategies so as to enhance their writing. It aims also at raising students 'awareness of the strategies use, identifying them and providing opportunities for practice and self-assessment. More importantly, the research is an attempt to investigate whether there is any significant difference in students' writing achievement after the implementation of SBI. Students are, then, tested before and after applying SBI that encompasses Oxford's six kinds of LLSs, cooperative learning strategies and POWER strategy which is an acronym for plan, organize, write, edit and revise. To collect data, students' writing paragraph samples are analysed based on five checklist assessment rubrics: focus, content, organization, style and conventions. The results showed that there was a significant difference in all students' writings after integrating SBI. Therefore, more practice should be allotted to writing instruction so as to pave the way of facilitating the development of more confident, more strategic, and in particular, more autonomous and successful language learners.

*Keywords:* cooperative learning, language learning strategies, POWER strategy, SBI, writing

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## 1. Introduction

For decades, the field of applied linguistics and language education have witnessed a drastic change in the teaching and learning processes. A shift from the teacher-centred to more learner-centred approach is remarkable. In this respect, numerous researchers have emphasised how different learners manage to learn by using different kinds of language learning strategies (LLSs). It is worth stressing that studies of LLSs have proliferated to such an extent that it has been proved that successful learners make use of various types of LLSs in an orchestrated way than do less successful learners.

The term language learning strategy has been differently highlighted and defined by a number of researchers. Rubin and Stern (1975) are considered as the pioneering researchers in the field of LLSs during the mid 1970s. Rubin states that learning strategies are “techniques or devices which a learner can use to acquire knowledge.” (Griffiths, 2004:2) According to O’Malley et.al., (1990) “language learning strategies have been broadly defined as any set of operations or steps used by a learner that will facilitate the acquisition, storage, retrieval or use of information.” (p. 23) Pouring in the same vessel, Chamot (1987) gives that definition of LLSs as: “techniques, approaches, or deliberate actions that students take in order to facilitate the learning and recall of both linguistic and content area of information.” (Ching-Yi, C.; Shu-Chen, L.; Yi-Nian, L. 2007: 239)

Congruent with this, Oxford claims that, “LLSs are steps taken by students to enhance their own learning.” (1990: 1) More importantly, she expands her definition to “specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective and more transferrable to new situations.” (1990: 8) Since 1970s, various theorists have contributed to giving different definitions of LLSs. Such outstanding theorists have proposed different models to classify and create a hierarchy of strategies on the basis of how they are related to the learners and the task they employ in the learning process.

However, among all these different categorisations of LLSs, Oxford’s classification has been referred to in many studies. She defined direct strategies as “language learning strategies that directly involve the target language which include memory, cognitive and compensation strategies.” (1990: 37) Indirect strategies, for her, “are for general management of learning.” (1990: 15) Therefore, the direct strategies are employed for learning the language; whereas, indirect strategies are for using the language. Notwithstanding, Oxford’s classification remains the most comprehensive, systematic and detailed one. That is why, I have purposefully adopted it as a theoretical framework for this study.

According to Graham (2012), “a strategy is a series of actions (mental, physical or both) that writers undertake to achieve their goals.” (p.16) Oxford (1989), in her Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL), orchestrates six categories of LLSs, namely, memory strategy (e.g., grouping, representing); cognitive strategy (e.g., repeating, analysing, etc); compensation strategy (e.g., switching to the mother tongue); metacognitive strategy (e.g., linking new information with already known one); affective strategy (e.g., lowering anxiety by listening to music, motivating oneself) and social strategy (e.g., working collegially). Relating learning strategies to the writing skill, Grenfell and Harris (1999) put forward the following definition:

“writing strategies are the conscious behaviour and techniques that can be taught and instructed in writing.” ( Alnufaie, M.; Grenfell, M. 2012:410)

Therefore, using LLSs helps learners cope with new bewildering situations, evaluate their own work and learn how to learn from their own success and failure in such a way that helps them be more efficient learners in the future. Furthermore, working together facilitates solving problems and develops proficiency in the English language writing. In this way, a great need for a workable strategy to develop writing competence is needed. Admittedly, to be effective writers, instructional strategies become a necessity to make students understand the purpose and process involved in writing. Hence, to promote learner autonomy, SBI is implemented in the writing skill so as to help learners become better language learners and writers as well

In this connection, Cohen and Weaver (2005) define SBI as: “A learner-centered approach to teaching that focuses on explicit and implicit inclusion of language learning and language use strategies in second language classroom.” ( MC Mullen, 2009: 420) The underpinning of the strategies based method is that learners should be given the chance not only to learn the language but also to know how to learn that language proficiently and successfully. Therefore, to meet students’ needs, research seems to focus on a wide variety of LLSs. SBI, then, helps learners become more aware of the kinds of available strategies to them, understand how to gear and use them systematically and eventually learn how and when these strategies can be transferred to other new language contexts.

As also suggested by O’Malley and Chamot (1990), SBI may help learners achieve some prominent features any good language learner has, namely, to be self-reliant, self-confident, but most importantly, to be motivated as they comprehend the intricate relationship between LLSs use and their success in learning the target language. Working together as a team may also improve students’ writing proficiency, cooperative learning strategies, then, involve inquiry and discussion with peer and small groups through sharing ideas and communicating as well. Concisely put, Suhair (2013) explained: “whilst working in groups, learners have the opportunity to improve their writing skills by means of exchanging ideas, sharing experiences, as well as enriching knowledge.” (Suhair, 2013:139)

Concomitantly, interactive structures help students think and write effectively. Students work cooperatively in asking questions, clarifying, making choices or being for or against a particular concept or point of view in order to develop arguments for writing paragraphs. Students are expected to assist each other, discuss and assess each other’s current knowledge. As contended by Adeyemi, “cooperative learning is the instructional use of small groups in which students work together to maximize and gain from each other.” (Adeyemi, 2008:696)

It is noteworthy that students’ poor writing stems from their poor thinking that is why, a problem-solving strategy for writing is a recommended approach through which successful writers pass by different stages, some of these are analyzing the task, clarifying thinking as one draft, moving to revision and then editing for correctness. What is eminent is that students must be encouraged to work together, to draft and redraft their writing and have their peers edit their work. Thus, working cooperatively is a favoured method that enables learners to enhance their writing. Slavin (1991) stated that “cooperative learning is the structured, systematic, instructional

technique in which small groups work together to achieve a common goal.” (Adams, A. 2013:7) More importantly, according to Mandal (2009),

Cooperative learning is a successful teaching strategy in which small teams, each with students of different levels of ability, use a variety of learning abilities to improve their understanding of a subject. Each member of a team is responsible not only for learning what is taught but also for helping teammates learn, thus, creating atmosphere of achievement. (p. 97)

Within cooperative learning strategies, another strategy, adopted from Englert et.al., (1991) is labeled POWER strategy through which some of Oxford’s six strategies are integrated. POWER strategy is an acronym for planning, organizing, writing, editing and revising. It is presented to help students organize their ideas and the target language when writing a paragraph. This strategy is composed of three stages. The first stage is the prewriting stage, it is before what you actually start writing, it includes planning and organizing. The second step is writing. The third stage is post-writing which embraces editing and revising steps.

The following questions, then, were addressed in this study:

1. How can SBI be integrated in teaching paragraph writing?
2. Is there any significant difference in students’ writing achievements after implementing SBI?

## 2. Method

To conduct this study, the sample was a class of forty students that include 26 females and 14 males. Data from two sources were collected. Students’ writing samples before SBI constituted one source, and students writing paragraphs after SBI was the other source. Each individual student submitted a writing paragraph in November before SBI was implemented and other paragraph samples of forty students were collected at the end of the investigation in April, that is, after teaching and integrating SBI within writing. Students’ writing paragraphs were scored on a five point-scale for focus, content, organization, style and conventions, an assessment of 3 to 4 was considered as acceptable; whereas, scores of 1 to 2 were unacceptable. The data obtained from investigating students’ papers was analysed by using percentage.

## 3. Findings

Before SBI, students were given an assignment, they wrote a paragraph individually without the help of their classmates. The teacher’s role was just to explain the topic and the type and the elements to be included within paragraph writing. Students, at this level, were unaware of LLSs; thus, they produced poor writing full of errors, disorder, misspelt words, no coherence and the like. However, when integrating SBI, students writing paragraphs changed positively. All participants improved their writing skill especially the structure, the development of the topic sentence and the mechanics of writing. Thus, the questions that one is prompted to ask are: was SBI effective to improve students’ writing? Was there a significance difference in students writing before and after SBI?

**Table 1: Students’ Pre and Post Test Writing Achievements (N= 40)**

Scores	1		2		3		4	
	Nov	Apr	Nov	Apr	Nov	Apr	Nov	Apr
Focus	0	0	8	0	19	2	13	38

<b>Content</b>	1	0	13	2	19	15	7	23
<b>Organisation</b>	14	0	6	9	16	8	4	23
<b>Style</b>	20	4	15	16	5	17	0	3
<b>Conventions</b>	22	3	11	13	6	17	1	7

**Table 2: Pre and Post-test Writing Achievement Statistics**

Scores	1		2		3		4	
	Nov	Apr	Nov	Apr	Nov	Apr	Nov	Apr
<b>Focus</b>	0%	0%	20%	0%	47.5%	5%	32.5%	95%
<b>Content</b>	2.5%	0%	32.5%	5%	47.5%	37.5%	17.5%	57.5%
<b>Organisation</b>	35%	0%	15%	22.5%	40%	20%	10%	27.5%
<b>Style</b>	50%	10%	37.5%	40%	12.5%	42.5%	0%	7.5%
<b>Conventions</b>	55%	7.5%	27.5%	32.5%	15%	42.5%	2.5%	17.5%

Table 1 shows students pre-test and post-test scores from one to four in each of the five rubrics. It was found that students did not have weaknesses within the three first domains, since before the test, they scored higher from three to four in focus, content and organization but still some students did not score well. However, after implementing SBI, the majority of students' scores were good. For instance, in focus domain, none scored from one to two, the results were higher. The same was found within content and organization, only 11 students out of 40 had less scores. Table 2 shows the percentage for each domain before and after the writing test. The scores increased in each of the five domains i.e., focus, content, organization, style and conventions.

#### 4. Discussion

After analyzing students' sample writings, it was found that there was a percentage difference in all five writing domains before and after SBI. This means that the training program was helpful in increasing students' ability to write better coherent and structured paragraphs. More importantly, it was noticed, for example, that after SBI, students began to indent the first sentence in their paragraph as a sign of a well-structured paragraph. They also learnt to take bullet point notes before producing clear and easily understood paragraphs. Moreover, through peer correction, students were able to detect their classmate's mistakes and theirs too; thus, they learnt from each others. Students are also known for the incredible mistakes they make in spelling; hence, it was effective for them to compensate for the lack of spelling knowledge by using the easy-spelt and remembered words.

What is more important was the fact that all participants learnt to listen to each other, to avoid selfishness by working together and thus become active and autonomous learners as they get involved in using strategies already explicitly explained by the teacher for achieving better writing. Connectedly, the conclusion that one may draw from this empirical study is that SBI can really help EFL learners improve their writing skill.

To wrap up the whole discussion, it is worth mentioning that nearly all participants improved their writing skill in English, especially regarding the structure, content and mechanics of

writing. Obviously, participants needed guidance with clearly and explicitly taught strategies on how to structure a paragraph for writing. Therefore, using cooperative learning strategies, sharing and constructing their ideas provided opportunities to boost up writing as they continuously learn from each other. By talking about the writing topics, students were able to share the content of their thoughts, structure their ideas and outstandingly gain knowledge from each other.

Participants did much collaboration and interaction during planning, organizing and revising stages. Thus, they improved their English communication. Notably, to triangulate this study, interviews were conducted. It consists of open-ended verbal questions between the teacher and students. The audio-tape was used to record these conversations. Students were interviewed individually. The interviews were carried out to see students' reaction on the evaluation of SBI, that is, whether working cooperatively helps them write better, how interaction in groups helps develop paragraph writing and whether their writing has improved after SBI.

Some students said *"learning cooperatively helped a lot, as well as, interacting in English with my classmates helped me think in English"* others saw that interaction with other students and working together helped them write better. Many students said: *"before we write as if we are speaking but when learning strategy instruction, we know now how to organize our thoughts."* Moreover, others commented on the first step of POWER strategy –plan step– where they have to take as much notes as possible about the topic as being effective. One student's comment was: *"The more we talk about the topic, the more we generate ideas. We have learnt a lot from each other and we are still learning."* Another student remark was about the second step –organize step– as: *"I liked the second step where in we wrote an outline for our paragraph. It helped me a lot, through it, we respected the ideas to be included within the paragraph, without adding or skipping over other ideas. This is good."*

All students favoured the usefulness of LLSs in improving their writing skill. Most of them said that they loved these instructions in writing. They learnt how to write coherent sentences, how to write correct grammar, how to discuss their ideas with their friends and get from them other ideas. For them, this method was great, what was given to them as strategy instruction was excellent. They also stated that thanks to SBI, they could write better. They especially learnt to use a dictionary each time for spelling words correctly, and that sharing paragraphs for editing was good. More importantly, they were able to correct their own paragraphs before giving them to the teacher.

According to other participants, their English has improved in writing and speaking too. They used to hate writing but after SBI, they found interesting. By allowing their friends to read their paragraphs aloud, they learnt to see their mistake, especially punctuation. They used to write long sentences, all their supporting sentences were written in one sentence. However, their friends helped them separate each new idea by a full stop so that to have another sentence. Their classmates' feedback encouraged them to write without forgetting anything related to paragraph writing, as they also reported that they made fewer mistakes than before.

It is, then, worth stressing that SBI is very helpful to enhance learners' writing skill. Thus, educators should integrate SBI within students' learning course content programs to help them

refine their writing skill. To sum up, it was found interesting to end up with Griffith's quotation on LLSs: "The effective use of LLSs might contribute to successful language learning is exciting." (Griffiths, 2003:381) Therefore, educators should be biased towards teaching SBI to achieve an enormous impact on EFL writing classes, and other language learning skills.

It is worth stressing that teachers should take a step forward for teaching LLSs to their students to help them improve their language skills, especially writing. For this reason, it was found interesting to implement SBI for learners of English who have shortcomings in paragraph writing. To carry out this investigation, students were firstly taught Oxford's LLSs to raise their awareness of the importance of using LLSs in learning better. Students had also the opportunity to practise cooperative learning strategies within which POWER strategy was integrated.

The results have shown that working collegially by using POWER strategy especially its four stages i.e., plan, organize, edit and revise helped learners think properly and write correctly. Students were evaluated before and after SBI using five rubrics, namely, focus, content, organization, style and conventions. Therefore, significant difference was found from November and April. Interacting together, sharing ideas, outlining, checking each peer mistakes and revising their paragraphs helped students improve their writing abilities.

It is noteworthy that the results obtained have demonstrated the practicability of SBI in enhancing students' writing abilities. Besides, when being interviewed, students were also satisfied by the effectiveness of the programme and their writing improvements. Students should be given the opportunity to transfer these strategies to other contexts, they should also be offered enough time to practise them aptly. Hence, it seems to be admitted that SBI really works in boosting students abilities to write well organized, correct, meaningful and coherent paragraphs.

## 5- Conclusion

For the last two decades, Oxford called for more research in that field in all over the world. For this reason, Algerian EFL research communities should take a step in doing further research in looking into deeper insights on the use of LLSs; Algerian EFL students should be differentiated from other EFL international students. Thus, the results of this study have been far reaching. They support the effectiveness of SBI in promoting positive growth in all writing domains, namely, focus, content, organisation, style and conventions.

It should be noted that the goal of SBI is to assist students to become effective and autonomous learners. Accordingly, language learners should go far beyond the transmission of knowledge by helping students acquire the knowledge, skills and strategies needed to take responsibility for their own learning. Creating a writing community based on expressing thoughts coherently and unambiguously is all that any teacher should make his/her learners achieve by adhering to the practices of SBI. Therefore, more time and practice should be allotted to writing instructions. Students need a great reinforcement of strategies in writing with explicit training, scaffolding and modelling. They need the opportunity to think about writing in different contexts, instead of merely being asked to complete writing assignments.

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Ould Si Bouziane Sabria is a teacher of English at the Intensive Language Teaching Center of Mostaganem University, Algeria. I am a current PhD candidate at Abi Bakr Belkaid University of Tlemcen. My PhD project focuses on the use of strategies to improve the writing skill for EFL learners. My scope of interests includes language learning strategies, the writing skill, and English for Specific Purposes.

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