Language Learning Strategies for English Writing: What Can Be Learned from Syrian University Students

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Abstract
This mixed-methods study attempts to investigate the Syrian students learning strategies with respect to learning English writing. The study enquires into an under-researched, if researched at all, context; that is English-major students and non-English-major students at two universities in Syria. One significant aim for carrying out this research is to help learners at the tertiary level ponder over why a certain strategy can be appropriate, or in fact inappropriate, to use at a certain point of their learning. This is why the research in hand has not confined itself to the mere elicitation of strategies used, but went beyond that to evoke why the reported strategies have or have not worked for the learners. The study has succeeded in extracting 13 strategies which, although context-specific, can be applicable to other contexts. The findings of this study have been related to three main areas often discussed in the literature of *language learning strategies*, i.e. learner autonomy, effective language learner and teacher development.

Key words: language learning strategies, Syrian university students, writing strategies, mixed methods research

1. Introduction

The view of the language learner has become much wider in its scope now than it was in the past. The learner is no longer an inactive performer who is supposed to act in response to the requirements of the teacher or the syllabus. Rather, the learner is "a problem solver and reflective organiser of the knowledge and skills on offer in the language exposure and required for effective language use" (McDonough 1999: 2). Language learning strategies (LLSs) can provide myriad of means to enable the language learner to achieve these ends. It is further believed that LLSs are amongst the most influential factors in the process of learning a foreign language. They can effectively assist foreign/second language learners in mastering different language skills on both levels, receptive and productive (O'Malley & Chamot 1990).

2. Literature Review

2.1. *Language Learning Strategies Definitions in the Literature*

The concept of *strategy* is not easy to define (Ellis 2015; Griffiths & Incecay 2016). In the literature, some view the concept as somewhat "fuzzy" (Ellis 1994: 529), others as "elusive" (Wenden 1991: 7) and another group finds it "fluid" (Gu 2005: 2 cited in Griffiths 2008: 83). However, several attempts have been made to define it (Cohen 2007; Cohen 2011; Davies 1995; Griffiths 2008; Jones 1988; Oxford 1990; Schmeck 1988; Weinsten & Mayer 1986 to name just a few). Ellis (1994: 532-533), nonetheless, realises the difficulty of phrasing a complete definition of the term. Therefore, he opts for listing the characteristics of *strategies* in a way considered one of the most comprehensive approaches to define learning strategies; the present study adopts this view of strategies:

1. Strategies refer to both general approaches and specific actions or techniques used to learn an L2.
2. Strategies are problem-oriented – the learner deploys a strategy to overcome some particular learning problem.
3. Learners are generally aware of the strategies they use and can identify what they consist of if they are asked to pay attention to what they are doing/thinking.
4. Strategies involve linguistic behaviour (such as requesting the name of an object) and non-linguistic (such as pointing at an object so as to be told its name).
5. Linguistic strategies can be performed in the L1 and in the L2.
6. Some strategies are behavioural while others are mental, thus some strategies are directly observable, while others are not.
7. In the main, strategies contribute indirectly to learning by providing learners with data about the L2 which they can then process. However, some strategies may also contribute directly (for example, memorisation strategies directed at specific lexical items or grammatical rules).
8. Strategy use varies considerably as a result of both the kind of task the learner is engaged in and individual learner preferences.

In fact, Ellis (1994) is not the only researcher to avoid defining the term "strategies". Macaro (2006) also gave up trying to define it in favour of listing its main characteristics.

2.2.   *Effective Language Learners and the Use of LLSs*

Studies which were conducted in the 1980s and 1990s in addition to some conducted more recently have shed light on the significance of using learning strategies in the context of learning a foreign language. Rubin (1987) and Green & Oxford (1995) come to the conclusion that effective learners implement particular sets of strategies that help them in maximising their achievement in second language learning. In fact, a number of studies (e.g. Chamot & El-Dinary 1999; Griffiths 2013; Macaro 2001; Nunan 1997; Oxford & Burry-Stock 1995) emphasise that there is a positive correlation between the use of strategies and foreign/second language learning achievement and motivation. One factor that can help explain this positive correlation is that learning strategies help extend the process of learning well beyond the confines of language classes in formal or informal education; the underlying belief here is that, alone, classrooms are not enough to enable achievement of fluency and competency in a foreign language. To this end, Fedderholdt (1998) argues that language learners who are able to implement a wide variety of LLSs can better improve their language skills than those who are not.

2.3.   *Language Learning Strategies and Learner Autonomy*

Shifting the focus of learning from *what to learn* to *how to learn* shows a close link between learning strategies and one of the most sought after aspects of learning in general, and language learning in particular; that is learner autonomy (where learners become self-responsible for their learning). Oxford (2001) argues that the use of learning strategies can well lead to *self-management* and *self-reliance* in language use and in language learning. Put differently, learning strategies are necessary components for learner autonomy. Further, Oxford (2008) explains how the concept of *learning strategies and tactics* overlaps with the concept of *learner autonomy*. She maintains that *learner autonomy* entails, at least partly, decisions made by learners on the use of certain *learning strategies* and *tactics* that pertain to the confronted tasks and to their goals.

3.   Significance of the Study

3.1.   *The Syrian Context as a Research Focus*

The importance of this study lies in the fact that it is conducted in the Syrian tertiary context which no previous research, to the best knowledge of the author, has explored yet. One significant aim for carrying out this research is to help learners at the tertiary level orchestrate their strategy use more effectively and to assist them in calculating why a certain strategy can be appropriate to use at a certain point of their learning. This has been worked on through investigating why the reported strategies have or have not worked for the learners. In other words, the aim here is to show learners how to avoid one characteristic of less proficient language learners, i.e. using strategies desperately without recognising "how to identify the needed strategies" (Oxford 2008: 51).

3.2.   *Alternative Method for Data Collection to Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL)*

It is very uncommon to find a study about LLSs that does not refer to the SILL; this study is no exception. In fact, the SILL, developed by Oxford (1990), has been the most commonly used scale to measure learners' use of LLSs in English as a second language (ESL) and English

as a foreign language (EFL) settings (Dörnyei 2005 LoCastro 1994; White, Schramm & Chamot, 2007). Nonetheless, there are two main issues to relying on the SILL for data collection in the Syrian context. First, some concerns are voiced in the literature about the sensitivity of the SILL to the learners' concerns in EFL contexts as the SILL was developed in an ESL context (Locastro 1994; Locastro 1995). Second, although the SILL is capable of producing standardised data, which can be very helpful in providing group summaries, quantitative data or statistical treatment, it does not allow space for learners' creative responses (Oxford 1993) which are much sought after in this study.

4. Research Methodology
4.1. Research Methods in LLSs

Researchers studying LLSs normally list seven research methods: oral interviews, written questionnaires, observation, verbal reports, diaries and journals, and recollection studies (Cohen 2011; White, Schramm & Chamot, 2007; McDonough 1999). It is important to keep in mind when carrying out a research in this field that it is a real challenge to design a study investigating the use of LLSs with a good level of accuracy (Cohen 2011). In fact, an analysis of the aforementioned methods shows advantages and disadvantages to the use of each method (Cohen 2011; Cohen & Scott 1996; Oxford 2011). This has led the researcher to consider a mixed-methods approach in order to minimise such real challenges. To this end, McDonough (1999), after listing the research methods in LLSs, puts forth that, individually, each method has its own problems. He continues to say that using only one of the methods can be dangerous as it can predetermine the kind of results the researcher would obtain. Therefore, McDonough (1999) and Oxford (2011) suggest a way out through triangulating a mixture of qualitative and quantitative data in order to stabilise the data and interpret it more credibly; this is why a mixed-methods approach is adopted for the purpose of this research.

4.2. Research Design

As the mixed methods approach is adopted in the present study, semi-structured interviews are combined with a self-administered questionnaire to seek answers for each of the following research questions:

1. What strategies do Syrian English-major students and non-English-major students believe were/have been: 1) useful and 2) not useful (if any) for them in developing their English writing, during their university years, inside and outside the classroom?
2. What strategies do Syrian English-major students and non-English-major students believe were/have been or would be/would have been useful in developing their English writing during their university years, inside and outside the classroom?

4.3. Interviews

Because of their flexibility and fluidity, the interviews were semi-structured guided by the following questions:

RQ1:
●   Which good strategies help/helped you improve your writing?
●   Had you tried using strategies in the past and then realised they were not useful? If yes can you tell me about them?

RQ2:
●   What problems do/did you want to overcome in writing?
●   Can you now think of strategies you could have used to help you overcome these problems?
●   What advice would you give Syrian learners to overcome similar problems?

4.3.1. Participants in the Interviews

A total of eight Syrian EFL learners from Damascus University and Aleppo University were interviewed for the qualitative part of the study. These eight learners were three English-major students: two males and one female (all graduates) and five non-English-major students: two males and three females (three graduates and two students in their last two years of their academic study). They were a convenience sample not easily found because of the volatile situation and the difficult time Syrians were experiencing inside and outside Syria. Their ages range from 21 to 29 years old.

4.4. Survey Questionnaires

The data generated from 14 interviews have not been seen to provide a satisfactory level of understanding of the research inquiry. Therefore, it has been necessary to complement and verify the findings of the interviews through administering a questionnaire. The questionnaire is designed utilising the data generated from the interviews, as an analysis of the interviews preceded the formation of the questionnaire. Through this analysis, the researcher has been able to extract the strategies reported to be used by the learners and their views about the effectiveness of using them. Next, the researcher listed the strategies in a logical, easy-to-follow order, asking the respondents to rate the level of usefulness of each strategy for first and second year Syrian university students, and to add any comments they want about each strategy (optional). At the end of the list of strategies for each skill, the respondents have been given the opportunity to add any other strategy they wanted to add, with how useful they think these strategies are.

4.4.1 Participants in the Questionnaire

A total of 72 EFL learners from Damascus University and Aleppo University participated in the quantitative part of the study. These 72 learners were 40 English-major students (24 males and 16 females) and 32 non-English-major students (19 males and 13 females who major/majored in different academic fields of study e.g. chemistry, bioengineering, computer engineering, economics, Islamic law, psychology and sociology). Using an online survey has enabled me to reach out to Syrian learners who are disseminated around the globe, e.g. in Syria, the United Kingdom, the United States, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, India and South Korea. The age range of the participants was between 20 and 31.

5. Findings

In this section, the strategies reported to be used by the Syrian learners are listed in groups. This is followed by the students' views about each strategy (negative or positive) as expressed in the interviews. After that, the data collected through the interviews will be triangulated with the questionnaire findings. When I present the findings obtained from the questionnaire below, for ease of reading, I will only present what the majority (over 50%) of the respondents said. Also, when I state that the majority of respondents found a certain strategy useful, 'useful' will include 'very useful' as well; similarly, 'not useful' will include 'not that useful' as well as 'not useful at all'. Moreover, when a sequence of the questionnaire results confirms (or disconfirms) the findings of the interviews, I will comment on them as a group rather than separately.

5.1. Writing Learning Strategies

5.1.1. Meaningful Practice

Table 1 *Meaningful practice in writing*

No.	Strategy	Mentioned by
1.	Keep practising writing on a regular basis.	Abeer, Lina, Faez
2.	Write a diary in English, even if you do not write much.	Maha, Kamal

- **Interviews:**

Lina said she could not emphasise enough the significance of practice in improving writing **(no. 1)**: "Practice is what makes the difference between a novice and an expert writer. Being regular is also a key. I used to practise writing before exams and felt it was getting better but, alas, I did not practise regularly". When talking about **strategy 2**, Kamal found out that keeping a diary in English had a beneficial impact on his writing, even though he started with writing "only one sentence, like a wisdom or saying of the day".

- **Questionnaire:**

89.5% of the 38 respondents agreed that **strategy 1** was useful: (60.5% very useful; 29% useful). A total of 79% praised **strategy 2** as effective: (21.1% very useful; 57.9% useful). The findings in the interviews and questionnaire were consistent in relation to these strategies in that they were in favour of using them.

5.1.2. Cooperation
Table 2 *Cooperation in writing*

No.	Strategy	Mentioned by
3.	Find a good book that teaches English writing and study it with a friend or a group of friends.	Subhi, Lina
4.	Correspond online with friends in writing.	Laila, Mubeen
5.	Share what you write with friends especially those who are more experienced English writers.	Maha, Abeer and Subhi

- **Interviews:**

Subhi stressed the importance of studying a good guide to English writing with a friend or a group of friends **(no. 3)**; students who learn writing following this method benefit immensely from exchange of knowledge, styles and comments. More importantly to Subhi, studying with a friend can "keep you from getting bored and considerably reduce the pain of learning writing". Laila corresponded with non-Arab friends via e-mail **(no. 4)**. She found that very productive in terms of improving her style and avoiding. Also, by virtue of learning from the e-mails of the non-Arab friends, she found that she could avoid awkward writing structures resulting from thinking in Arabic when she wrote. Moving to **strategy 5**, Maha believed that sharing what she wrote with a friend was a highly effective strategy: "I had a-one-year-ahead friend. […] She used to read what I write and correct me or present new ideas".

- **Questionnaire:**

Sixty point five percent, 60.5%, of the respondents approved of the usefulness of **strategy 3**: (18.4% very useful; 42.1% useful). Seventy eight point nine percent, 78.9%, of the respondents considered **strategy 4** useful: (44.7% very useful; 34.2% useful). **Strategy 5** was favoured amongst 76.3% of the questionnaire respondents: (34.2% very useful; 42.1% useful). These percentages show that these strategies were not only recommended in the interviews but also in the questionnaire.

5.1.3. Organisation and planning

Table 3 *Organisation and planning in writing*

No.	Strategy	Mentioned by
6.	Keep a small notebook beside you whenever you go and write down anything interesting you read or hear in English.	Maha, Abeer and Kamal
7.	Overcome "writer's block" by focusing on the pre-writing stage, where you brainstorm ideas and plan your writing.	Subhi, Faez

- **Interviews:**

Abeer used to keep a small notebook beside her at all times so she could write down anything interesting she read or heard in English **(no. 6)**: "A good part of writing is about inspiration and using powerful expressions. As I wanted to be good at writing, I could not let them go after I was lucky to come across them". On the other hand, Faez discovered, after he finished his study at university, that one reason behind him finding writing problematic was ignoring the pre-writing stage **(no. 7)**. He stressed that: "the pre-writing stage where I would brainstorm ideas, write an outline and put the key words I was going to use could have immensely helped me to overcome writer's block and focus my attention on the writing process and techniques rather than on the ideas and words".

- **Questionnaire:**

The use of **strategy 6** was valued as useful by 71.1% of the respondents: (29% very useful; 42.1% useful). The supporters of **strategy 7** constituted 81.6% of the overall respondents: (29% very useful; 52.6% useful). Consequently, both of these strategies were perceived as effective in the interviews and the questionnaire as well.

5.1.4. Writing Quality Enhancement

Table 4 *Writing quality enhancement*

No.	Strategy	Mentioned by
8.	Use reading to become a better writer. The more you read, the better a writer you will become.	Abeer, Laila and Subhi
9.	Develop your academic writing through reading academic works, e.g. journal articles.	Abeer, Lina, Kamal
10.	Find a book that teaches how to complete the writing tasks in English international tests, learn the strategies and rules it gives and study the good writing samples it presents.	Laila
11.	Join active websites or forums where you can show your writing to other members.	Subhi, Mubeen
12.	Always refer to grammar books to study the rules of writing and structure.	Mubeen (negative)

- **Interviews:**

Abeer emphasised the role of reading in making her writing better **(no. 8)**: "because when I used to read a lot, good parts of the language of the book used to stick in my mind unconsciously. So, I started writing in a better way than I used to, and I could feel I was incorporating stuff from a certain book I have read". Also, Abeer pointed out that her writing used to sound informal. However, by resorting to reading academic writing, she improved in that aspect **(no. 9)**: "I worked on how I structure my sentence to avoid sounding informal […]. What helped me a lot […] was reading more academic works like journal articles". Speaking about **strategy 10**, Laila highlighted the importance of finding books that teaches how to complete the writing tasks in English international tests. These books normally present very practical writing strategies and rules. They also provide many good writing samples that can be imitated. Subhi said that if he was to give an advice to a first-year student concerning developing their writing, he would recommend a strategy that he did not recognise its importance when he was a university student; he would recommend joining active websites or forums where learners can write and show their writing to other members **(no. 11)**; "this is a very good advice because they would not only practise writing but also they would get different types of feedback from different people". When it came to **strategy 12**, Mubeen first thought that the more he referred to grammar books to study the rules of writing and structure and do more grammar exercises, the better his writing would become, "but shortly afterwards I realised that this was not the case because the study of grammar became an end instead of a means to an end, which was improving writing".

- **Questionnaire:**

All the questionnaire respondents, 100%, viewed **strategy 8** positively: (79% very useful; 21.1% useful). In relation to **strategy 9**, the questionnaire findings showed that 94.7% of the respondents found it useful: (52% very useful; 42.1% useful). The use of **strategy 10** received the support of 86.9% of the questionnaire respondents: (31.6% very useful; 55.3% useful). Seventy six point three, 76.3%, of the respondents rated **strategy 11** as useful: (34.2%

very useful; 42.1% useful). The questionnaire findings showed 60.5% of the respondents in favour of using **strategy 12**: (26.3% very useful; 34.2% useful). The questionnaire respondents strengthened the recommendations to implement strategies **8**, **9**, **10** and **11** mentioned in the interviews. However, the negative attitude in the interviews towards **strategy 12** was contradicted in the questionnaire.

5.1.5. Maintaining a Positive Attitude

Table 5 *Maintaining a positive attitude in writing*

No.	Strategy	Mentioned by
13.	Just write. Hold the pen. Nobody is going to judge you for what you write.	Maha

- **Interviews:**
Maha strongly suggested that first- and second-year students should "just write" and not worry about what they produce as no one would judge them for what they write **(no. 13)**.

- **Questionnaire:**
The positive view of **strategy 13** in the interviews was not so strongly supported in the questionnaire with 55.3% of the respondents in favour of using it: (21.1% very useful; 34.2% useful).

6. Discussion
6.1. The Potential Impact of LLSs: Learner Autonomy, Effective Language Learning and Teacher Development

Most observers and practitioners in the EFL/ESL context believe that helping language learners learn how to learn is crucial for maximising their achievement and for pursuing lifelong learning. In fact, "[m]any current national curricula point to a need to develop learner autonomy in language learning" (Macaro 2001: 20). Nonetheless, there is little consensus about how autonomy can be promoted and how teacher development can be supported so that this end can be attained (Benson and Voller 1997). The findings of this study, whose sample is taken from students at two Syrian universities, support the LLS literature contending that using LLSs is closely linked to promoting learner autonomy.

In fact, the data has shown that the Syrian learners have implemented certain learning strategies (usually a few) in order to rely on themselves and compensate partly for the shortcomings in the Syrian tertiary education system in relation to learning English writing; this was often expressed in the interviews and comment boxes in the questionnaire. Further, in accordance with Oxford's argument (2001), it is fairly easy to notice that these strategies have led or have the potential of leading learners to more self-management and self-reliance in language learning and in language use; in other words, the use of learning strategies may well help university students function more effectively in their learning of English writing with an adequate level of learner autonomy. Therefore, it may be the case that a purposeful implementation of the learning strategies uncovered throughout the study can be justifiably suggested as a solution to get learners involved actively (O'Malley et al. 1985; Macaro 2001) and self-directedly (Oxford 1990) in the process of learning. This goes to say that, by virtue of

implementing the writing strategies detailed here, productive learning independence can be instilled in learners at the tertiary level who tend to get stereotyped as passive, teacher-dependent in their approach to learning English writing.

A dissection of the root of the problem of the adoption of a passive approach to learning English writing may show that university learners in Syria or in similar learning environments cannot be fully blamed for that as their English teachers are also responsible. English teachers should always think of ways through which they can pass over the learning responsibility to the learners and encourage them to accept it; LLSs are perfect examples of these ways (Macaro 2001; Cohen1998). Cohen (1998: 21) maintains that "language learning and language use strategies can have a major role in helping shift the responsibility for learning off the shoulders of the teachers and onto those of the learners". Therefore, if the policy makers in Syria, or similar EFL context, take into account the results of this study, it can constitute a reference to educators who want to learn more about how to engage their learners more actively in the process of learning English writing.

7. Conclusion
The two main purposes for carrying out this research have been:
1) identifying the strategies, both useful and not useful, used by Syrian English-major students and non-English-major students to improve English writing skills during university years, inside and outside the classroom;
2) investigating the strategies which the same sample of Syrian learners of English believe have been or would have been useful in developing their writing skills during their university years, inside and outside the classroom.

The research data have been collected using semi-structured interviews (a total of 8 interviewees) and an online survey questionnaire (a total of 72 respondents). The qualitative and quantitative data generated have been triangulated and analysed in depth. The outcome achieved has been 13 language learning strategies related to learning English writing.

About the Author
Hazem Abo Helal is a current PhD candidate at the University of Southampton, UK. His PhD project focuses on teachers' beliefs and practices with regard to academic English speaking at a university in the UK. His research interests include language learning strategies, teacher education, and teacher cognition.

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