

Incorporating Metacognitive Strategy Training in ESP Writing Instruction: English for Lawyers

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Abstract

Despite the vast research on learning strategies and their application to receptive skills, relatively little has been written on the effect of learning strategies on productive skills, writing in particular, and even less has been written about the effect of metacognitive strategy training and how it might be implemented into the classroom. This paper sets out to review what little literature is available regarding the effect of metacognitive strategy training on writing instruction and set down a framework from which metacognitive strategy training can be implemented into ESP writing instruction, in this case into an English for Lawyers course.

Keywords: Metacognitive Strategy Training, ESP, Process-genre writing

Background

Kaplan, in his essay on cultural thought patterns and rhetoric, brought to light that L2 students need instruction in writing beyond the traditional focus on grammar and syntax (1966). He stressed that “the teaching of reading and composition to foreign students does differ from the teaching of reading and composition to American students, and cultural differences in the nature of rhetoric supply the key to the difference in teaching approach” (p. 1). Kaplan pointed out that it is a fallacy to assume that “because a student can write an adequate essay in his native language, he can necessarily write an adequate one in his second language” (p. 3) as rhetorical structures differ among cultures. Kaplan goes on to suggest several activities which are meant to raise the students' awareness of the rhetorical patterns of English compositions. Such awareness is essential if L2 writers are to be successful with their writing tasks.p

More recently, studies have shown that texts produced by L2 authors “vary from those produced by native speakers across almost every imaginable dimension (e.g. lexical variety, syntactical choices, cohesion and coherence, global rhetorical structure, etc)” (Silva, 1993, as cited in Ferris, 2001, p. 299); in short, L2 writers simply need “more of everything” (Raimes, 1985, as cited in Ferris, 2001, p. 299), (e.g. instruction in rhetorical patterns, grammar, cohesive devices, etc).

Giving L2 writers “more of everything” poses several problems for the instructor given the task of systematically exposing L2 students to the facets of writing an effective text in English, most notably that there is not enough time in a typical course, IEP or otherwise, to cover every aspect of writing. Furthermore, doubts have been cast on whether such a “one-size-fits-all” approach to writing instruction actually provides individual learners with the information needed to complete writing tasks successfully (Devine et al., 1993). In recent years, it has come to be understood that “writing is a process guided by strategic knowledge—the goals writers set, the strategies they invoke, and their awareness of these processes” (Chien, 2004, Abstract). But what exactly is a learning strategy? How might these strategies be used by L2 students to improve the quality of their writing? What strategic knowledge does a student need in order to be a successful writer? How can we promote general awareness of the processes of writing? These questions will be explored further in this review.

Strategies

Learning strategies can best be defined as “specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective and more transferable to new situations” (Oxford, 1990, as cited in Baker & Boonkit, 2004, p. 300). A further defining quality of a learning strategy is that it has to be employed deliberately by the learner in order to achieve a goal (Wellman, 1988, as cited in Carrell et al., 1998, p. 97). In regards to writing, Baker and Boonkit (2004) set forth that strategies involve the “particular techniques or methods by the writer to improve the success of their writing” (p. 301) and go on to list six sets of learning strategies: memory strategies, cognitive strategies, compensation strategies, metacognitive strategies, affective strategies and social strategies.

It is important, however, to note that a high level of declarative (what it is) and procedural (how to use it) knowledge

of learning strategies does not necessarily correspond with a high rate of task success; simply knowing a strategy and how to put it into practice does not mean that a learner will enjoy success with that strategy. A study by Anderson (1991, as cited in Carrell, 1998) highlights that “the use of certain reading strategies does not always lead to successful reading comprehension, while the use of other strategies does not always result in unsuccessful reading comprehension.” What was indicative of the success of the reader, however, was when the reader had an array of strategies at his disposal. Even then, comprehension isn't simply “a matter of knowing what strategy to use, but the reader must also know how to use it successfully and orchestrate its use with other strategies” (p. 99).

Before reviewing how metacognitive strategies have been used in writing instruction, I'd like to narrow my focus into order to distinguish between cognitive and metacognitive strategies.

Cognition versus Metacognition

While it is a fine line between cognition and metacognition, particularly in terms of strategy training, the distinguishing factor between the two is how the strategy is used (Flavell, 1978; Chien, 2006; Schraw, 1998). In short, cognitive strategies are strategies which are used to solve problems, whereas metacognitive strategies are employed in order to monitor, evaluate, control and understand these strategies (Chien, 2006). Metacognition is defined by Weinert (1987) as “second-order cognitions: thoughts about thoughts, knowledge about knowledge, or reflections about actions (1987, as cited in Hartman, 1998, p. 1) and is differentiated from cognition “in that cognitive skills are necessary to perform a task, while metacognition is necessary to understand how the task was performed (Garner, 1987, as cited in Schraw, 1998, p. 113). Or, in short, “metacognition is the regulation of cognition. That is, learners need to link these metacognitive awareness with their strategic knowledge about what they know (declarative), how they will use the knowledge (procedural), and when and why they can use the knowledge (conditional)” (Tapinta, 2006, p. 14). To illustrate this concept, Flavell (1979) describes a study in which preschool and elementary children studied a set of items until they felt they would be able to recall them perfectly. Older children, once they had indicated that they were ready, showed “perfect recall”, while the younger children usually did not. These results suggest that “young children are quite limited in their knowledge and cognition about cognitive phenomena, or in their *metacognition*” (p. 906, Italics in original).

The benefits of metacognitive knowledge are not in dispute. Rubin (1975) identified self-monitoring as a strategy employed by good language learners. Flavell himself postulated that “metacognitive knowledge can have a number of concrete and important effects on the cognitive enterprises of children and adults. It can lead you to select, evaluate, revise, and abandon cognitive tasks, goals and strategies in light of their relationships with one another and with your own abilities and interests with respect to that enterprise” (1979, p. 908), and others (Carrell et al. (1998); O'Malley et. al. (1985); Schraw (1998) have pointed that metacognitive knowledge is essential not only for being aware when comprehension is breaking down, but also for a greater understanding of the demands of the task and one's own personal limitations; or, as Carrell explains, “if a reader is aware of what is needed to perform efficiently, then it is possible to take steps to meet the demands of a reading situation more effectively” (p. 100). Hartman (2001) claims that metacognition can “make or break student academic success (as cited in Wong & Storey, 2006, p. 283). Other benefits of metacognitive knowledge include compensation “for low ability or lack of relevant prior knowledge...and contributes to successful problem solving over and beyond the contribution of IQ and task-relevant strategies” (Schraw, 1998, p.117), as well as strengthening learners' procedural knowledge of strategy application (Tapinta, 2006).

While great efforts have been made to illustrate the disparities between cognitive and metacognitive strategies, it's important to note that these strategies are not in opposition to each other; they are, in fact, related (Schraw, 1998, 113). To sum up, the difference between a cognitive and metacognitive strategy lies in the focus of the immediate activity: a cognitive approach is focused on the completion of the task at hand and prepares learners to tackle similar problems in a similar manner in the future. A metacognitive strategy is focused on how the task was completed, how effective this strategy was, what might the learner do differently the next time when confronted with a similar task.

Application of Metacognitive Strategies to Writing Instruction

All writers enter the writing process with some metacognitive knowledge in place. Studies by Devine et al. (1993) have shown that “all writers (L1 and L2) could be characterized as having a metacognitive knowledge base which contributed to their cognitive model of the writing process (p. 213) and which subsequently had implications on the performance of the writers on the written tasks. Several studies (Kasper, 1997; Chien, 2004) have found correlations between the extent to which students employed metacognitive strategies and their writing performance. How, then, do we go about increasing metacognitive awareness and knowledge among our students?

Both Wenden (1998) and Schraw (1998) recommend that students need strategies, both cognitive and metacognitive, modeled for them by a teacher as well as knowledge related to the types of strategies available, the “conditions

under which these strategy [sic] are most useful, and a brief rationale for why one might wish to use them as one method which can be used to promote metacognitive knowledge” (Schraw, p. 119). Another method is to give the students extended practice and reflection, which together “play important roles in the construction of metacognitive knowledge and regulatory skills” (p. 118). Although research into the use of metacognitive strategy training in L2 writing is limited, what research has been conducted seems to support Wenden's and Schraw's recommendations. A number of studies looked at the use of learning diaries and/or journals as a means of measuring metacognitive knowledge. A study by Chien (2006), though limited in sample size, found a strong correlation between metacognitive reflection and achievement among Chinese ESL students. In the study, students with high task achievement attended more in review, editing and evaluation (i.e. in metacognitive processes) than students with low achievement. Wong & Storey (2006) found that the use of reflective journals before and after actual writing is “useful for arousing and increasing students' awareness of effective writing skills and is significantly related to writing performance” (p. 297). Further studies have indicated the value of reflective tasks in sensitizing students to the demands of writing for specific discourse communities (Hirvela, 1997). A wealth of studies, reviewed by Winograd and Hare (1998, as cited in Carrell et. al), reported significant gains in the specific use of the cognitive strategy taught (Adams, Carmine & Gersten, 1982; Alexander & White, 1984; Baumann, 1984; Garner, Hare, Alexander, Haynes & Winograd, 1984; Hare & Borchardt, 1984; Patching, Kameenui, Carmine, Gersten & Colvin, 1983). Overall, these studies support Mayer's (1998) sweeping statement: “Students who receive writing strategy training show improvements in the quality of what they write” (p. 55).

These studies have shown the benefits of metacognitive strategy training on writing instruction. Before we turn our attention to how metacognitive strategies can be employed in the ESP classroom (more specifically in an English for Lawyers course), I'd like to briefly review the major approaches to writing instruction, and suggest that an integrated approach would be the most conducive to the implementation of metacognitive strategy training in the classroom.

Approaches in Writing Instruction: Product, Process, Genre

Over the past 30 years, product and process approaches have been the chief methods of writing instruction in EFL classrooms (Badger & White, 2000). The product-oriented writing approach is typified by establishing a context, modeling, noticing, analysis of the features (moves, functions, etc) of these models, information transfer, followed by comparisons between the texts. From this point the students can be given controlled practice activities, which would ultimately lead to the learners producing drafts independently. (Reid, 1988, as cited in Flowerdew and Peacock, 2001). Badger and White (2000) provide a more concrete example of a typical sequence of the product-approach

a typical writing class might involve the learners familiarizing themselves with a set of description of houses, possibly written especially for teaching purposes, by identifying, say, the prepositions and the names of rooms used in a description of a house...they might produce some simple sentences about houses from a substitution table. The learners might then produce a piece of guided writing based on a picture of a house and, finally... a description of their own home. (p. 153).

A process-oriented writing cycle, on the other hand, typically contains the following steps: taking preliminary decisions, composing a rough draft, revising the rough draft, preparing a second draft, further revisions and reworking of drafts, further evaluation and writing the final draft. (Flowerdew and Peacock, 2001, pg. 188).

Or, as Badger and White again express more concretely

A typical prewriting activity in the process approach would be for learners to brainstorm on the topic of houses...they would select and structure...to provide a plan of a description of a house. This would guide the first draft of a description of a particular house. After discussion, learners might revise the first draft working individually or in groups. Finally, the learners would edit or proof-read the text. (pg. 154).

For a time, the process approach gained much popularity in ESL writing classroom, prompting both criticism of its shortcomings, most commonly that the process approach fails to account for “the many forces outsider of an individual writer's control which define, shape, and ultimately judge a piece of writing (Horowitz, 1986, p.446) as well as a general recognition of the virtues of a product approach: most notably its explicit instruction in structure and the opportunities it provides the students to improve the basic, mechanical skills needed to write effectively (Rodriguez, 1985).

More recently, the genre approach, focusing much of its attention on the situation and purpose of writing, has gained popularity in writing instruction (Badger and White, 2000). Typically, a genre-approach will begin with an analysis of authentic examples of the target text. This analysis focuses on the macrostructures of the text (i.e. identifying both the obligatory and optional elements and how these are ordered), identifying the cohesive devices employed in the

text as well as an analysis of how the register is encoded in the writer's choice of grammar and vocabulary (Thornbury, 2005).

While a genre approach does share many features with a product-cycle, the fundamental difference is in the genre approach's explicit focus on the purpose of the writing, which includes both the author and the author's purpose for writing the text, as well as the reader and why he/she is reading the text. Badger and White provide a clearer example of what differentiates the genre from the product approach:

Learners...carry out an analysis of the text...consider the social context, including the fact that the text is, hopefully, based on a visit to the house, that its purpose is selling a house, that the audience is made up of potential buyers...With varying degrees of help, learners would then produce partial texts. Finally, working on their own, they would produce complete texts reflecting the social context and the language of the original description of a house. (2000, p. 156).

As one can see, a genre-approach differs from the product approach largely through its use of authentic materials, most notably the use of a concordancer to analyze both the vocabulary and grammatical structures in the text. This fact alone, in my point of view, is undoubtedly an improvement over the product model: if we're going to ask students to imitate texts, then the use of authentic texts is of the utmost importance. Critics of the genre-approach, however, typically focus on a different feature, or, in this case, the lack thereof: while a genre-approach does provide the structure and scaffolding for the learner to ultimately achieve the task at hand, it does not account for the skills needed in the process of editing, reformulating, and improving written work (Badger White, 2000, p. 157). In other words, it is found lacking in that which the process-approach emphasizes: the actual processes involved in the composition of a text.

As well as making a decision as to which approach would best integrate with Wenden's and Schraw's recommendations regarding how to raise general metacognitive awareness, in particular the use of reflective journals, I'd like to take a closer look at the constraints of teaching a particular ESP course, in this case an English for Lawyers course, and, more specifically, the constraints in providing instruction in the writing of memoranda. It should be noted that I've chosen an English for Lawyers course as it's simply the area of ESP in which I've had the most experience, and the writing of memoranda solely on the basis that it's one of the two mandatory writings tested on the Cambridge ILEC exam (ILEC Handbook, 2008). Although I will focus my attention on applying metacognition strategy training to a particular writing which is relevant only to a particular ESP course, I believe my recommendations to be fully applicable to other ESP contexts.

Context: English for Lawyers

For instructors who lack a legal background, teaching English for Lawyers course is often a daunting task; teachers often believe that they will be expected to have expert knowledge of the Anglo-American legal system. The teaching of writing in a legal course is further complicated both by the lack of authentic materials available for analysis due to the sensitive nature of attorney-client relationships and the fact that a "misspelled word or a misplaced comma may dangerously change the meaning of a legal document" (Day, 2006, 10). Recognizing this fact, most textbooks on legal English offer explicit instruction in the norms of legal writing and provide sample memoranda to be used as models for student writing thus allowing the instructor to fulfill the role of language, rather than legal, expert.

Considering the highly formulaic nature of both memoranda and legal language in general, the best fit from the three writing models presented earlier would appear to be a genre-approach since, as Thornbury states, it is "well suited for text types that are both fairly formulaic and whose mastery confers social advantages on the user (p. 110). It is worth noting, however, that although the product, process, and genre approaches to writing are often viewed as being in opposition to each other, they are not, in fact, mutually exclusive in regards to their application. Badger and White (2000) call for an integrated approach to writing instruction that incorporates the best features from each approach, stating that it's essential for the class to recognize that "writing involves knowledge about language (as in product and genre approaches), knowledge of the context in which writing happens and especially the purpose for the writing (as in genre approaches), and skills in using language (as in process approaches)" and for the instructors to recognize that "writing development happens by drawing out the learners' potential (as in process approaches) and by providing input to which the learners respond (as in product and genre approaches." (p. 157). Amy Krois-Lindner, the author of a textbook on Legal English, stresses the need for explicit instruction in the 'moves' of a particular genre (2008). Moves are defined as being "a component of a text which is related to the purpose of the text: it serves to carry out a communicative function, and represents a stage in the development of the information structure of a text" (slide 12). The typical moves in a lawyer-client letter are listed as referring to the subject matter, summarizing facts, identifying legal issues, referring to relevant legislation, referring to previous court decisions, drawing conclusions, indicating options, closing (slide 14). Krois-Linder recommends that students receive

instruction not only in the typical moves of a genre, but also in the language which is commonly used to signal them (slide 12).

But what are the typical moves in a memorandum? Both Krois-Lindner (2006) and Haigh (2006) identify the elements which a memorandum should contain: a subject line which accurately reflects the content of the message; an introductory statement regarding the writing's purpose; a brief discussion of the context or relevant background information; a short explanation of the relevant points, which should include what/why/when something is going to happen, how it will affect people, and who in particular will be affected; a concluding remark; an offer to provide further information or assistance if needed. A quick analysis of sample memoranda (Haigh, 2006, p. 187; Krois-Lindner, 2006, p. 70; Day, 2006, p. 90) reveals the following language points are used to signal the moves in a text:

Subject Line:

Typically a noun phrase is employed: In-company seminar on X; Litigation department move; Advice using contract templates and term sheet during contract negotiations.

Introductory statement / brief discussion of the context or relevant background information:

Present perfect is often used: As part of X, we have arranged for Y; You have no doubt heard that, due to X, it has become necessary to do Y; I'd like to share X, concerning Y.

Short explanation of the relevant points:

X consists of Y, followed by Z; X will take place on Saturday; It is imperative / vital / crucial / strongly recommended / stress the importance of X; The members of staff who will be affected by X include John, Jim, and Mark; staff affected by X are asked to do Y; if needed, X can be done.

A concluding remark / an offer to provide further information or assistance if needed:

Please let me know by X by email/phone/fax whether you can attend; if anyone has any questions regarding X, please contact me; if you require any further advice on this matter, please let me know.

Explicit instruction may also be beneficial beyond simply providing useful input; it may, in fact, aid in promoting metacognitive development. Devine (1993) puts forth the idea that explicit writing instruction could assist learners in their understanding of the demands of the task in question, thus increasing their ability to self-monitor their writing more effectively (as cited in Wong & Storey, 2006, p. 284) and Hartman (2006) suggests that explicit instruction along with student reflection should be implemented in order to raise students awareness and control over their writing (as cited in Wong & Storey, 2006, p. 284).

To sum up, there are several methods which can be used to raise students' metacognitive awareness in the classroom. Firstly, teachers should explicitly model both their cognitive and metacognitive thought processes for their students. Secondly, students should be given explicit instruction into the demands of the writing task in question. This in turn will aid the students in their attempts to self-monitor. Finally, students should be given extensive opportunities both to practice these skills and reflect back upon them.

A Model for the application of Metacognitive Strategy Training to ESP Writing Instruction

As with any class, it needs reiterating that "teachers should be willing to adjust teaching activities and materials to the students' needs" (Flowerdew & Peacock, 2001, pg. 181). A limitation in many situations, however, is that the teacher is unable to assess what the students know and are able to do prior to the first class. The model of writing instruction outlined in this discussion (see figure 1) will assume that this is the case and begin with a 'deep-end approach' in which the learners carry out the task, and then compare their task with an expert's (Willis, 1996, as cited in Badger & White, 2000). Following this stage, a reflective task, after Wong & Storey's model, will be used in order for the students to articulate their beliefs about good memo writing (through such questions as how do you think a memorandum should be structured? What do you think the introductory statement of a memo should do? How would you organize this statement? What phrases could you use?, etc). The next stage incorporates language awareness activities based on authentic texts of the genre in question (in this case, memoranda) along with explicit instruction, following Krois-Linder's model, in both the moves used and the language used to accomplish these moves. Day (2006) suggests that a useful in-class activity would be to have students create a "memo-template" using a sample text. I believe that this type of activity would not only raise students awareness of both the structure and formulaic language used in legal writing, but also raise their ability to self-monitor during future writing tasks; i.e. raise their metacognitive knowledge.

The instructor, in this stage, may also wish to demonstrate how he would go about completing the task, along with commentary on "the mental processes that underlie the exercise" (Wong & Storey, 2006, 160) i.e. the instructor can

model his/her metacognition alongside the cognitive processes involved (Schraw, 1998, 119). Following this instruction, the learners would proofread and edit their original writings in pairs or small groups, and could even be given a checklist of the obligatory moves of a memorandum, as per the Wong & Storey model, which they could refer to as they edit and proofread their work, ultimately leading to a final draft. Following the final draft, as per the Wong & Storey model, the students would then complete another reflective task in which they would be asked to review their previous journal and write an entry regarding how their perception of good memorandum writing has changed.

This is in no way a perfect model; there is no doubt room for further input, particularly corpus data. Though advocates of the process approach will no doubt question the use of direct, explicit input in the writing process, I hope I have shown how explicit instruction can aid in students' metacognitive development; moreover, as Vygotsky (1986) has stated, "in order to subject a function to intellectual and volitional control, we must first possess it" (p. 168). Though far from being finished in its development, our understanding of both the writing process and the types of writing instructions which L2 students require have come a long way since Kaplan's seminal essay. By staging the writing process in such a way, I believe that the students would receive benefits both from the process-genre approach to writing as well as from activities which have been shown to promote metacognitive development; the tasks and materials should provide the learners not only with the tools and strategies needed to perform the immediate writing tasks at hand, but also, through its repeated use, guide them in internalizing the good habits which will allow them to become effective writers, no matter the genre. In short, metacognitive strategy training has the potential to not only empower our students, but also to assist them in becoming more autonomous, more reflective, more effective language learners.

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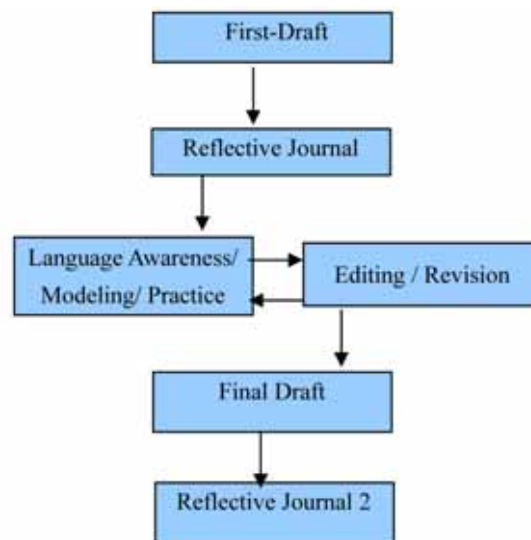


Figure 1. Writing Cycle