

Thinking about Thinking: Exploring ESL Learners' Attitudes and Beliefs Regarding Metacognitive Strategies in Writing

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Abstract:

The study highlights the importance of metacognitive strategies to attain English writing proficiency. It aims to explore the attitudes and beliefs of tertiary students towards using metacognitive learning strategies to improve their English writing in Baluchistan, Pakistan.. The research employed a qualitative method based on semi-structured interview from the students who had been through the metacognitive strategic intervention. The qualitative data was analysed using Flowers' and Hayes (1980) theory as a guide, by making themes.

The qualitative results indicated that the students have a positive attitude towards learning strategies and belief that it is supportive for students to focus more on metacognitive strategies which help them to write efficiently. This poses an argument that the teachers can use this metacognitive strategy in teaching to help students improve their writing skills.

Introduction:

Learning to write in a first or second language is one of the most difficult challenges a student faces (Richard, 1990, p.100). It is equally challenging for native English speakers to learn English writing as a foreign or second language (Esmeralda, 2013).

The study explores the deeper meaning behind the concept that metacognitive learning strategies can improve writing skills of students. Metacognition, as "thinking about thinking" as defined by Flavell (1979, p.909), is refers to, "cognition about cognitive phenomena". Many psychologists percieve this concept as an administrative process that serves the role of governing the functioning of other cognitive processes (Borkowski et al., 1990). Whereas, educational psychologists have interpreted the concept as the ability of an individual to monitor, assess and make plans for one's learning in everyday learning contexts (Brown, 1980; Flavell, 1979).

The first model in context of metacognitive process was offered by Flower and Hayes (1980). This model contained three components: *task environment*; the outside factors that influenced the writing task, which included social factors, such as the writing assignment, and the translating, and the physical factors, such as text written so far, the cognitive process: planning, translating, and reviewing, and the writer's *long-term memory*.

Metacognitive techniques, which can allow students to monitor their cognition and coordinate the learning process through functions, such as centering, organizing, scheduling and assessing (Oxford, 1990), can prove to be useful for all language skills, such as reading, writing, speaking and listening. Metacognitive strategies therefore go beyond cognition, and provide students with opportunities to organize their learning process (Riazi et al., 2020).

Along with the attitudes and believes of the students, this study intends to bridge the gap between, the educators/scholars to implement the strategies after realizing its importance to

improve their writing. The students could be independent and more confident once they learn the strategies, and be able to monitor their academic achievement. The study may help them improve their scores and produce better research in future.

Research Objective & Research Question:

The research objective and question were as follows:

- To explore the attitudes and beliefs of ESL students towards using metacognitive learning strategies in their English writing.
- What are the attitudes and beliefs of ESL students towards using metacognitive learning strategies in their English writing?

Literature Review:

Students' academic life usually depends on writing, which is one of the most important skills towards achieving competence in the language. Writing is considered to be the most significant language ability in a lecturer's and student's academic life. It helps him/her complete assignments, classwork, notes, essays, stories, written responses, documents, theses, papers, etc. A special place in the curriculum is therefore granted to writing skills (Sawalmeh, 2013). When writing is avoided, the incidence of errors in L1/L2/FL is expected (Corder, 1975). For these reasons, students need to give importance to academic writing.

Goctu (2017) conducted a quantitative study on the effectiveness of metacognitive strategies on academic writing skills and found that most of the students are using writing strategies but they were not aware of it. The study recommends that metacognitive strategies can improve writing and increase students' satisfaction.

Fajaryani et al. (2021) found that the students and teachers need to improve their writing skills to support their professional lives. To this end, different strategies such as metacognitive strategies, cognitive strategies, and social strategies were used. The study was quantitative with a survey design using a questionnaire as a tool to collect the data. The sample involved 88 students. The results presented that male and female students used different strategies, like male preferred social strategies and the female preferred metacognitive and cognitive strategies.

It has been observed that writing in a second language is a challenging task for students at all levels of education. It has been noted that most of the errors committed by Pakistani EFF/ESL learners are due to intra-lingual factors that could be minimized after the implementation of pedagogical strategies. These intra-lingual mistakes that Pakistani EFL learners are making are due to a lack of language training, lack of motivation, lack of positive feedback and lack of care (Sarfranz, 2011).

Al Moqbali et al. (2020) investigated the relationship between metacognitive strategies and language performance. The sample involved 263 Omani EFL twelve grade students. A metacognitive writing survey and semi-structured interview were used to collect data. The results authenticated that the students commonly use three metacognitive strategies i.e. planning monitoring and evaluating strategy at high frequencies. It was also observed that female students apply strategies as compared to male students.

Teaching-learning English has remained an important topic of discussion in Pakistan among policymakers, language teachers and psychologists. English is a global lingua franca. The education policy in Pakistan encourages the people to learn the language.

Therefore, the current study focuses on the perceptions of ESL learners, i.e., ESL undergraduate students of Sardar Bahadur Khan Women's University (SBKWU) in Pakistan, regarding implementation of metacognitive strategies to improve their writing.

3. Methodology:

The research uses qualitative techniques, focusing on Flower and Hayes (1980) model to explore the attitudes and beliefs of students regarding metacognitive learning strategies for better writing. For this purpose, semi-structured interview was prepared for the students consuming interview techniques i.e., interview protocol. The interview questions were planned ahead of time to aid in answering the research questions, and the follow-up questions requested clarification on topics, themes, concepts, or events introduced by the interviewee (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). The focus of the interview is the particular strategies as follows: "Prewriting stage" as stage one, "planning" and "during writing stage" as stage two, "organizing" and "monitoring" after writing stage, "revising" and attitude and beliefs. It is proposed to investigate the students' feelings about interventional training and their improvement due to the learning strategies during writing.

The interview protocol for this study is used to confirm the attitudes and beliefs of students about the treatment of metacognitive strategies. The interview protocol was adapted from Al-Zankawi's (2018) study involving the set of questions to be answered by the students of the research. The interview questions for the students comprised of ten items reviewed and accepted by two experts, both of them are senior linguists. This was to increase the validity and reliability of the interview questions and to check whether they are appropriate to answer the fifth research question of the present study. Example: "Do you plan before writing? If yes, do you plan your ideas outlining them in detail before you started writing?" The qualitative data was analyzed through thematic analysis because the thematic analysis is the widely used qualitative method for interview analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The participants were selected purposefully from experimental group who had been trained through the metacognitive strategic intervention. Moreover, they signed the consent to participate for the interview. They were informed about the time and venue for the interviews, which lasted about 30 minutes for each interview, depending upon the topic discussed and questions asked. The interview was conducted individually and was recorded on Samsung Note 4 mobile.

4. Findings:

This section of reporting qualitative data is divided further into three stages (Prewriting Stage, During Writing Stage, and After Writing Stage) followed by different themes in each section in order to explore the attitudes and beliefs of the participants: The divisions are as follows:

1. Prewriting Stage (1)

According to the literature review, the wide acceptance of Pre-Writing has helped improve the teaching of composition by calling attention to planning and discovery as legitimate parts of the writing process. "Pre-Writing" is the stage before words emerge on paper (Flower & Hayes, 2004).

As for the current study, the interviewees were asked what according to them were the things that troubled them in writing. This question was asked to know about the problems that the students face before they start writing. And the researcher wanted to know whether the metacognitive strategic intervention can improve these areas or not. To answer this question, different informants answered differently. For example, the informant (1) explained that:

While writing something, I am out of ideas and that troubles me a lot. I mean to say that....um I don't usually find, where to start and what to write (Shaneela-Interview).

Informant (4) revealed that:

Brainstorming and rearrangement, Ummm I believe that this had always been a problem during writing. As I had never practiced it earlier and was always troubled by this (Misbah Naz-Interview).

Informant (10) stated that:

According to me the thing that troubles me is an idea because collecting proper and fine ideas related to the topics is very important.

In essence, the interviewees are saying the same thing in different ways which explain a common problem of students. This common problem is about the content and its arrangement. It can be said that the students are usually not certain of what to write and how to write. In other words, from forgoing discussion it can be said that the problem of content and its arrangement troubles informants in writing. Maybe they are unaware of the preparation that one is supposed to practice before writing or they are short of words when they start writing. The very question is helpful in concluding that the planning strategy is needed by the students. Therefore, this can be inferred that the students need metacognitive strategic training so that they can take help from the prewriting stage of the training. Similarly,

Informant (2) stated that:

The thing that troubles me is....., Grammatical mistakes. I don't know where I make mistakes. um..... I probably make grammar mistakes.

Informant (3) indicated that:

I'm aa..... short of vocabulary whenever I plan to write something. So..... this vocabulary troubles me a lot while writing (Manisa Gichki-Interview).

Informant (5) stated that:

Vocabulary problem, in any English writing I mostly forgot vocabulary (Masooda Qasim-Interview).

Informant (6) explained that:

Noisy surrounding and difficult vocabulary in the topic when we have no dictionary facility we will face some trouble and in a noisy surrounding, we can't give our 100% response to our writing (Mahnoor-Interview).

The answer of informant (8) is:

Few things trouble me while writing; um.....vocabulary, and conclusion these are the things that troubled me..... while writing, as my vocabulary, isn't strong enough, therefore, aa..... I don't know all the synonyms so it makes trouble while writing, using the same words while writing makes your paragraph boring and unattractive. The conclusion is another thing that makes me scared because I never know how to write the conclusion and I was always afraid to tell my teacher about it (Maria Hussain-Interview).

According to the discussion, students believe that grammar and vocabulary are important issues that students often face, and this troubles them a lot in writing. Additionally, they mentioned that the repetition of words makes their writing boring and unattractive. It means that the students are short of words while writing and they are unaware of the writing techniques. This shows that the students feel writing tasks are very difficult because of the problems they face before the writing stage. This indicates that the students are aware of the problems that create hindrances in their writing but perhaps they are not sure regarding the

solution to these problems. Therefore, this can be suggested that the students need to follow some planning strategies to overcome these problems that they face before they start writing.

During Writing Stage (2)

Drafting is nothing but putting your points and ideas on paper and arranging these points in a readable manner. Writers usually research their topics at the prewriting stage and then they accumulate the entire information at this stage. First, the writers do a rough draft and then they try to arrange their points in the best possible way and gradually prepare a final draft which is known as organizing.

The next theme for the current study is organizing. To find the answer to this theme the students were asked if they organized an outline in detail before they started writing. For the current study, participants described organizing as creating an outline or drawing a bubble diagram. For example, the informant (1) explained that:

Yes, I do draw a bubble diagram and make a mind map in order to organize an outline during writing. Bubble diagram on any topic relaxes me and aa.... I feel comfortable while writing. It also umm.... Do not let me be distracted. I stay within the topic (Shaneela-Interview).

Informant (2) described that:

Yes, I do because like that... I can be able to know what I'm supposed to do next. Outlining also keeps a check on writing and it's a good technique to follow while writing (Thira-Interview).

Informant (3) revealed that:

Yes, I organize an outline in detail before starting writing because that outline which I wrote in detail helps me in writing. Also, my thoughts get a shape and help me in writing (Manisa-Interview).

Informant (6) explained that:

Of course, organizing an outline in detail before your writing gives a solid look to your writing because your writing can be called conscious writing if you have an organized outline of writing in your mind (Mahnoor-Interview).

Whereas informant (9) indicated that:

Yes, I outline in my mind, because it really helps in giving a good expression to the written text (Arooba-Interview).

It is evident from the above responses of the students that they have learned the technique of organizing their thoughts. That means the students were unaware of these writing techniques previously. The participants in their responses have defined that they have started outlining using bubble diagrams. This also indicates that they have benefitted from metacognitive strategic intervention where planning and organizing learning strategies have helped learners organize their ideas. They also show a positive attitude towards planning strategy as one of the informants mentioned that the outline helps them express their ideas in written text.

After Writing Stage (3)

Another major theme that has been stated by the informants of the study is "Revising". Here (in this study) participants' idea was revealed by asking them if they had developed unity and coherence (i.e. the paragraph flows smoothly from beginning to end) in a paragraph while writing. This question was asked to find the answer if the students developed conscious writing or not. The very question may also answer if the students revised after completing their writing or not.

Informants answered that:

S1: Yes because it gives unity, support and gives a good impression to the reader. **S2:** Yes, it is a must develop unity and coherence like this you will mention the exact points and the reader will understand your paragraph in a better way. **S3:** Yes, I uh..... develop it because without unity and coherence of sentences it is difficult to understand the paragraph. **S4:** No

S5: Yes developing unity and coherence in your writing help the reader in understanding. **S6:** Of course, the paragraph is all about unity and coherence if your paragraph lacks these terminologies then it doesn't call a paragraph it would rather be called an irrelevant mixture of sentences. **S7:** Yes, I do, well..... with unity and coherence, it makes the paragraph understandable and the readers come to know what we actually are trying to tell them **S8:** Yes, I always because if unity and coherence will not be there my teacher will never be satisfied and my ideas will not be vivid. **S9:** Well! I think writing is not an easy task, sometimes I think I can develop unity and coherence and get succeed in it as well. However, sometimes, I fail to do so.

S10: yes

Shortly, the idea of unity and coherence in writing was approved by the students. Students, therefore, have a positive attitude towards strategy learning and they have revised and found the revising technique useful in their writing. Accordingly, it is suggested that the students should go through their writing once it is completed to see the flow of writing.

Shortly, the students of SBKWU have a positive attitude and belief towards learning strategies. Accordingly, it is suggested that it is better for students to focus more on metacognitive strategies which help them write well. In other words, the informant's ideas clarify that attitude and beliefs were considered major factors towards learning writing skills.

In order to explore the attitudes and beliefs of the students, some additional questions were asked. The first question is as follows:

Did you find metacognitive strategic intervention training useful in improving your writing skills? If yes, how do you think this training improved your writing skills?

The attitude of the participants appeared very positive towards metacognitive strategic intervention training as most of the participants believed that the training improved their writing skills in one way or the other, for example, one student commented:

P1: Yes, I did. Because it helped me improve my writing skill. Previously I was making mistakes in arranging and rearranging the sentences but I feel that now I know a proper guide of how to arrange these sentences in order. And also I can connect these sentences using connecting words (Shaneela-Interview).

It is evident from the above response of the participant that the metacognitive strategic intervention training was useful for the student in improving writing skills. The participant in his response made a comparison between the writing techniques that he used before and after the training. It demonstrated that the student had issues in writing such as the arrangement of the sentences and their rearrangement and probably he was not aware of this technique to improve his writing skills. However, when the participant received the training he felt more confident regarding his writing skills and started using these techniques.

Similarly, another participant agreed with the fact that the training was useful. He said:

P5: Yes of course: I feel that the best part of writing I improved was the grammar because I used to make several mistakes of spelling and grammar and by revising my writing I have control over these mistakes now (Masooda-Interview).

The participants' response was also positive where she admits that the training has improved her writing skills. The participant was quite sure that she made a few grammatical

mistakes comparatively, she finds improvement in her spelling too. This can be implied from the response of the participant that after being part of this training she can control her mistakes. This indicates that the part of strategic training where the students can evaluate her mistakes has helped her correct her mistakes.

Additionally, another participant adds her experience in favour of the training and said:

P7: Yes, I did. Because I have started planning my ideas before I started writing that helps me organize my content before I write. By planning, I feel that I can organize my writing. This planning also helps me what I have to write first and then what to write later (Farkhanda-Interview).

Participant (7) agreed that the training helped the participant positively by saying that she has benefitted from the planning and organizing strategies. She found that she can better plan her writing now which shows that she used not to plan and organize before writing. This indicates that the planning and organizing part of the strategic training helped the participant to plan her ideas before writing.

Thus it is quite clear from the above responses of the participants that the strategies have improved their writing skills.

The second main question of the interview was as follows:

What area of writing did you find most improved by metacognitive strategic intervention training?

Once the participants responded to the first question which they found metacognitive strategic intervention training to be useful, the researcher posed the second question focusing on the areas that the participants found to have improved their writing skills.

The responses were as follows:

P2: I think that my grammar was improved the most and I have learned to arrange my ideas (Tahira-ainterview). P5: Unity and Coherence was a part of writing that I found most difficult and I feel that I am able to improve it (Masooda-Interview). P3: I think I can arrange my sentences in a logical order now in a better way and I have improved my grammar too (Manisa-Interview). P7: I think that before writing task is the most helpful part of writing where one knows of what to write and how to write (Farkhanda-Interview). P9: I think I have improved my grammar part where I make less mistakes in punctuations and prepositions now (Arooba-Interview).

The second question found that all the participants answered differently where some of the respondents found that they were able to improve their grammar whereas others found that they have exceeded in unity and coherence. Another participant found that she has learned to arrange her sentences in a logical order which has improved her writing. Moreover, one participant mentioned that after attending the metacognitive strategic training she makes a few grammatical mistakes. The responses of the participants indicate that they have been benefitted from the training which has improved their writing skills.

As a summary of all the findings which have been mentioned, the researcher came up with the attitudes and beliefs in relation to the stages of prewriting stage, during the writing stage, and after the writing stage. Stage 1: prewriting stage includes the theme “planning”, stage 2: during writing stage includes the theme “organizing” and “monitoring” and the stage 3: after writing stage involves the theme “revising”.

Findings of all the above themes answer the research question. The results show that the undergraduate students of SBKWU found the metacognitive strategic intervention

showing high impact to improve their writing skills, and therefore they had a positive attitude towards metacognitive strategic intervention.

Conclusion:

The research question on the attitudes and beliefs of tertiary students towards using metacognitive learning strategies in their English writing hence proved that students were positive towards metacognitive strategic intervention. The findings show that the students find metacognitive strategic intervention to be a useful tool to improve their learning. The results also proved that metacognitive strategic intervention has a strong impact on the components of academic writing (content and organization, unity and coherence, and grammar). It is suggested that metacognitive strategic intervention can be a helpful strategy and a means to enhance undergraduate students' academic writing scores.

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