

## The Relationship between EFL learners' writing strategy use and their writing scores<sup>1</sup>

Gökhan ÇETINKAYA<sup>2</sup>

Gülay BİLGAN<sup>3</sup>

### Abstract

The aim of the study is to investigate the relationship between EFL learners' writing performance and their use of writing strategies in the context of voluntary-based English Preparatory School. To do this, Writing Strategy Inventory developed by Özbay (2008), semi-structured interviews and students' writing grades of their 3rd midterm exam were used. Writing Strategy Inventory was delivered to 166 students; however, only 152 students took the midterm exam. Following the quantitative data collection procedure, semi-structured interviews were carried out with 15 students chosen via extreme case sampling method based on the students' scores on the Writing Strategy Inventory. The results show that there is a significant but a low correlation between students' writing strategy use and their midterm results. However, during the interviews, students state that they can't use the writing strategies during the exams because of limited time for the writing part or just because the strategies such as searching the topic on the internet and looking up dictionaries they generally use are not appropriate for the exams. Furthermore, the use of writing strategies does not differ according to gender; on the other hand, students with higher self-proficiency level use more writing strategies.

**Key words:** L2 writing, writing strategies, writing performance.

## EFL öğrenenlerin yazma stratejisi kullanımı ile yazma puanları arasındaki ilişki

### Öz

Bu çalışmanın amacı isteğe bağlı hazırlık sınıflarında yabancı dil olarak İngilizce öğrenen öğrencilerin yazma stratejileri ile yazma performansları arasındaki ilişkiyi araştırmaktır. Bu amaçla Özbay (2008) tarafından geliştirilen Yazma Stratejileri Envanteri, yarı yapılandırılmış görüşme, öğrencilerin üçüncü vize sınavı sonuçları kullanılmıştır. Toplamda 166 öğrenci Yazma Stratejileri anketini doldurmuştur ancak sadece 152 öğrenci üçüncü vize sınavına girmiştir. Strateji anketi ile nicel verinin toplanmasının ardından öğrencilerin strateji envanterinden aldığı puanlar üzerinden gerçekleştirilen uç örneklem yöntemi ile seçilen, üçüncü vize sınavına girmiş 15 öğrenci ile yarı yapılandırılmış görüşme gerçekleştirilmiştir. Öğrencilerin vize sınavı sonuçları ile kullandıkları yazma stratejileri arasında anlamlı ancak zayıf bir ilişki bulunmuştur. Ancak görüşme sonuçları öğrencilerin internet ve sözlük gibi genelde kullandıkları stratejilerin sınav ortamı için uygun olmaması ve de sınavlarda kısıtlı bir süreye sahip olmaları nedeniyle yazma stratejilerinden genel olarak faydalanamadıklarını

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<sup>2</sup> Öğr. Gör., Düzce Üniversitesi (Düzce, Türkiye), Yabancı Diller Yüksekokulu, gkhncetinkaya@gmail.com, ORCID ID: 0000-0001-6353-0744.

<sup>3</sup> Öğr. Gör., Tekirdağ Namık Kemal Üniversitesi (Tekirdağ, Türkiye), Yabancı Diller Yüksekokulu, gbilgan@yahoo.com, ORCID ID: 0000-0002-0305-0607 [Makale kayıt tarihi: 7.11.2018-kabul tarihi: 22.12.2018; DOI: 10.29000/rumelide. ]

ortaya koymuştur. Ayrıca yazma stratejilerinin kullanımı cinsiyete göre değişmemekle beraber, öz yeterlilik seviyesi yüksek olan öğrencilerin daha çok yazma stratejisi kullandığı ortaya çıkmıştır.

**Anahtar kelimeler:** İkinci dilde yazma, yazma stratejileri, yazma performansı.

## Introduction

Writing in FL (foreign language) is one of the key skills required in both academic and professional areas; however, as a productive skill, it is not always an easy task for learners. Unlike in L1 (first language) writing, L2 (second language) learners learn the language itself and how to write in that language simultaneously (Hayland, 2003). Thus, L2 writing has its own difficulties; as Weigle (2005) explains L2 learners, especially ones with low proficiency levels, cannot easily access linguistics and lexical knowledge that they already have in their L1 while they write in the target language. In short, as Hinkel (2011) briefly indicates “L2 written discourse paradigms are principally, strategically, and globally different from those found in L1 writing” (p. 528).

The enrollment of international students in colleges and universities directed the researchers to investigate L2 writing in the 1950s and 1960s (Hinkel, 2011), and it has grown remarkably since 1990s. (Manchon, 2012). As a result of this growth, different theories have come out, but these theories have not taken the place of one another but used together (Gordon, 2008), and as Manchon, Larios and Murphy (2007) state, “writing strategies should be viewed within a wider research movement known as process writing” (p. 229). In process writing, focus is not on the product but on the cognitive stages that the writer go through, namely - planning, composing and revising (Gordon, 2008).

On the other hand, researchers started to take the social dimensions of the writing process into consideration in 1990s and in accordance with this movement, the studies of L2 writing strategies have shifted from purely cognitive approaches to socio-cognitive orientations (Manchon et al., 2007). For example, Zimmerman and Risemberg (1997) proposed a socio-cognitive model of self-regulation in L2 writing. They argue that the self-regulation is composed of three forms as environmental, behavioral and covert of personal; these forms of interact reciprocally, as well. Based on these forms, they also suggest ten major self-regulatory techniques that the writers most commonly practice.

Manchon (2012) states that a variety of personal and situational variables mediate the development of L2 writing, so it is a multifaceted phenomenon; as Özbay (2008) states, L2 writers' use of writing strategies is one of those variables, as well. However, most of the studies investigate the generic language learning strategies rather than L2 writing strategies (Raooifi, Binandeh & Rahmani, 2017). In addition, there are also very few studies investigating the relationship between learners' use of writing strategies and their writing achievement (Chen, 2011).

The role of writing strategies in L2 writing and the gaps mentioned above by the researchers conducted the current research. Based on these, our research questions are as follows;

- 1) Does the use of L2 writing strategies differ according to gender?
- 2) Does the use of L2 writing strategies differ according to students' self-proficiency level?
- 3) Is there a relationship between students' writing strategy use and their writing scores?

## Methodology

This section presents the overall research design, participants, data collection instruments, and data collection procedures and analysis.

### Research design

The study is a correlational survey aiming to find out the relationship between students' use of L2 writing strategies and their writing scores. For this, both quantitative and qualitative data were used for triangulation. Triangulation is a process in which different types of samples, data and data collection instruments are used for the validation of the findings (Creswell, 2012).

### Participants

The English preparatory program at Düzce University is voluntary-based; that is, when the students start university, it is their own will to study English or to go on their departments. The participants of the study are 166 (52 females and 114 males) students studying English at Hakime Erciyas Foreign Language School at Düzce University in 2017-2018 academic year. In addition, 92 of the participants are from Engineering Faculty, 65 of them are from Business Faculty, and 9 of them are from Forestry, Tourism and other Faculties.

### Data collection instruments

Writing Strategy Inventory was developed by Özbay (2008) for her PhD thesis. The inventory is mainly based on Zimmerman and Risenberg's (1997) model of self-regulation in writing and Grabe and Kaplan's (1996) writing model (Özbay, 2008). It is based on 5-likert scale and consists of three subscales as pre-writing strategies (strategies used before writing), while-writing strategies (strategies used while writing) and reviewing/revising strategies (strategies used after writing). It has 30 items in total, and the first subscale – pre-writing – consists of 8 items, the second subscale– while-writing strategies - includes 13 items, and the last subscale– reviewing/revising strategies - consists of 9 items. In addition, none of the statements in the inventory is negatively stated. In Özbay's (2008) study, the inventory was found to be highly reliable ( $\alpha = .94$ ), and for the current study, Cronbach's alpha coefficient is .94, too.

To triangulate the data, semi-structured interviews were conducted. The interviews are mainly based on two questions; what writing strategies the students use in general and and if the use of these strategies affect their writing performance in general and writing exam scores.

### Data collection procedure and analysis

In the first phase, by using convenience sampling method – “choosing the nearest individuals to serve as respondents and continuing that process until the required sample size has been obtained or those who happen to be available and accessible at the time” (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007, 113), Writing Strategy Inventory developed by Özbay (2008) together with personal information form was delivered to 166 EFL learners studying English at voluntary-based preparatory school at Düzce University. In the second phase, 15 students were chosen among 152 students who took the 3<sup>rd</sup> midterm exam in the spring term. Those students were chosen based on their scores on the writing strategy inventory by using extreme case sampling – “a kind of purposeful sampling in which you study an outlier case or one that displays extreme characteristics” (Creswell, 2012, 208). Students' scores on writing strategy use were

sorted from highest to lowest, and students were chosen among the ones who are at the top or bottom of the list. Then, semi-structured interviews with the students were conducted to triangulate the quantitative data.

Quantitative data were analyzed via SPSS 23.0. Skewness and kurtosis values of students' total score of writing strategy inventory and 3<sup>rd</sup> midterm writing scores were calculated. They were found to be between -1 and +1 – skewness =  $-.324$  ( $SE = .188$ ),  $.466$  ( $SE = .197$ ) and kurtosis =  $.092$  ( $SE = .375$ ),  $.534$  ( $SE = .391$ ) respectively. Tabachnick and Fidell (2013) assert that skewness and kurtosis ratios between +1.5 and -1.5 indicate normal distribution, so we could carry out parametric tests for all the analysis. In this sense, Independent Samples *t* test for the research questions 1 and 2, Pearson Product Momentum Correlations for the research question 3 were used.

For the analysis of the qualitative data, voice-recorded interviews were first transcribed. Then, the transcriptions were critically evaluated and main headlines were constructed.

## Results

First, descriptive statistics were conducted to have an insight into the participants' use of writing strategies in general before answering the research questions. The results reveal that participants use the writing strategies at a moderate level ( $M = 3.37$ ,  $SD = .65$ ). In addition, the use of the strategies in each part, strategies used before writing ( $M = 3.35$ ,  $SD = .77$ ), strategies used while writing ( $M = 3.33$ ,  $SD = .68$ ), and strategies used after writing ( $M = 3.41$ ,  $SD = .71$ ), are also very at a moderate level.

To answer the research question 1 “Does the use of L2 writing strategies differ according to gender?” Independent samples *t* test was carried out. The results are presented in table 1 below.

**Table 1:** Independent samples *t*-test results for the participants' use of writing strategies by gender

Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	T	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Female	52	3.50	0.65	1,750	164	0,82
Male	114	3.31	0.64			

As shown in table 1 above, female students ( $M = 3.50$ ,  $SD = .65$ ) use writing strategies slightly higher than male students ( $M = 3.31$ ,  $SD = .64$ ) do. However, it is not at a statistically significant level,  $t(164) = 1.75$ ,  $p = .082$ .

To be able to answer the research question 2 “Does the use of L2 writing strategies differ according to students' self-proficiency level?” Independent samples *t*-test was conducted. The results are presented in table 2 below.

**Table 2:** Independent samples *t*-test results for the participants' use of writing strategies according to their self-proficiency level

Self-Proficiency	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	T	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Low	48	3.15	0.63	2.73	164	.007
Mid	118	3.45	0.65			

As presented in table 2 above, participants who considers his/her proficiency level higher ( $M = 3.45$ ,  $SD = .65$ ) use significantly more L2 writing strategies than those considering his/her proficiency level lower ( $M = 3.15$ ,  $SD = .63$ ),  $t(164) = 2.73$ ,  $p = .007$ .

To answer the research question 3 “Is there a relationship between students’ writing strategy use and their writing scores?” Pearson Product Momentum Correlation was used. The results are presented in table 3 below.

**Table 3:** Correlations between participants’ use of writing strategies and their writing scores

		Writing Scores
Writing Strategy Use	Pearson Correlation	.233**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.004
	N	152

Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed). \*\*

As shown in table 3 above, there is a positive significant relationship between students’ use of writing strategies and their midterm exam scores,  $p = .004$ ; however, it is at a modest level ( $r = .233$ ).

To have a deeper understanding of the participants’ use of writing strategies, semi-structured interviews were conducted. First of all, all the participants stated that the items in the writing strategy inventory reflect their usage in general. In addition, to learn more about the strategies used by the participants, the first main topic of the interviews was “what strategies they use in general”, and the main headlines constructed based on the students’ responses are presented in table 4 below.

**Table 4:** Interview results for the participants' reported use of writing strategies

	High strategy users	Low strategy users
Searching for the topic or related vocabulary before writing	4	1
Planning	5	3
Using Dictionary	3	-
Translation	2	2
Reviewing	8	4
Consulting peers/teachers	2	1

As presented in table 4 above, the students who scored highly on the writing strategy inventory reported using more strategies as expected. In addition, only the use of translation as a writing strategy is stated by equal number of participants. The mostly reported strategies are “reviewing” (a strategy used after writing) and “planning” (a strategy used before writing). It is also remarkable to note that one student reported using compensation strategies “paraphrasing or using synonyms” in the exams since he cannot have an access to the internet or a dictionary. In addition, one student stated using no strategies at all.

## Discussion

Research findings on the use of L2 writing strategies are both limited and contradictory. Mutar and Nimehchisalem (2017) and Liu's (2015) studies reveal that there is a significant difference between male and female learners' use of L2 writing strategies. In the present study, female learners were found to be using more strategies, but it is not a significant level.

Takeuchi, Griffiths and Coyle (2007) state that the use of language learning strategies' relation to success directs the LLS research field. As in Bai, Hu and Gu (2014) and Raoofi, et al.'s (2017) studies, the current study reveals a positive linear correlation between the use of L2 writing strategies and L2 proficiency. However, it is a chicken-egg question whether the high usage of strategies increases L2 proficiency or vice versa (Griffiths, 2003).

There are not many studies on the relationship between the use of L2 writing strategies and writing achievement (Chen, 2011). Unlike the previous studies (Chen, 2011; Liu, 2015; Özbay, 2008), the current study reveals a positive but weak correlation between the learners' use of L2 writing strategies and their writing exam scores. This might be because all the students use strategies to some extent as the descriptive statistics present a moderate level in general; on the other hand, what is more important is the effective usage of these strategies. As Bai, et al. (2014) summarize, the use of writing strategies may differ between more and less successful writers qualitatively rather than quantitatively. In addition, the underlying reason behind the weak correlation might be the lack of access to certain strategies or simply

the limited time allocated for the writing as the interview data reveals. Excerpts from the interviews give us more details to explain the issue; for example,

Excerpt 1: "I feel so stressed in the exams that I cannot even think of any other things but just writing. Nothing else comes to my mind; I just write and write maybe at the end I just quickly reread...."

Excerpt 2: "I usually use the internet to search for the topic and related vocabulary, but in the exams I cannot use any of these.... Hmm, time prevents me from revising the text, as well...."

Excerpt 3: "...I can only finish writing the text in the exam; I have no time to plan my writing, correct my sentences or check the topic sentence, coherence etc."

Moreover, Chen (2011) explains that the writing strategies have a correlation with achievement but the achievement in writing is affected by some other personal and situational factors; language proficiency and motivation can be some of these factors, as well. In addition, Hinkel (2011) explains that low L2 proficiency effects the creation of high-quality texts negatively. One of the interviews explains as follows;

*"I cannot write very well and get low marks from the exams... hmmm I do not want to write, either. I believe my English is not very good. I do not study English at all and I do not use anything special to improve it. That is the only reason why my writing grades are so low, using strategies or not has no effect on the issue...."*

## Conclusion

The current study reveals no difference between the male and female learners' use of writing strategies. On the other hand, it was also found out that learners with high self-proficiency use more writing strategies and their writing scores weakly correlate their use of L2 writing strategies. These results imply that strategies has an important role for the development of L2 writing. The direction of the correlation between L2 proficiency and L2 learning strategies is uncertain, but learners with the goal of high proficiency in L2 must produce compositions with high quality (Hinkel, 2011 and Gordon, 2008). In this sense, the effective use of writing strategies can help learners for their development of writing. In addition, learners' strategies can be modified by strategy instruction (Manchon et al., 2007). Via this way, students can be taught some strategies that they can use under any circumstances such as exams so that they can be more successful.

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