



## Research Article

# EFL Learners' Strategy Instruction, Their Self-regulation, and Writing Achievement

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### Abstract

The goal of this study was to investigate the impact of writing strategy instruction on two aspects of EFL learners' performance: their writing skill development and their self-regulation. It was suggested that teaching writing strategies in the writing class can assist the EFL learners to improve their language skills in general and writing in particular. The population of the study, about 42 only females, was consisted of all pre-intermediate EFL learners who were studying in Simin Language Institute in Kerman, Iran. The researcher used three instruments in order to collect the necessary data. First, Oxford Placement test was used as a device to homogenize the population of the study. The second instrument was implementing pre and posttests of writing to determine the writing level of the subjects. The third instrument was using self-regulation questionnaire. To this goal, the questionnaire designed and examined by Dornyei's (2001) was used. According to the achieved means of the two groups, the learners in the EG improved their writing more significantly than those of the learners in the CG. In fact, teaching writing strategies could positively impact the writing level of the participants among the EG. Based on the data, it can be concluded that meaningful relationship could be investigated between the use of teaching writing strategies and writing skill and learners' self-regulation.

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## 1. Introduction

Lack of basic writing ability affects students in nearly all classes and levels. Science students need to write results, social studies and history students require the ability to report their findings and form coherent papers; even students in art, vocational, music and math classes might occasionally be required to write about their work, and to communicate with their teachers in writing. Most adult learners in our country need to participate in proficiency examinations such as IELTS and TOEFL. This need will

require them to improve their writing ability and skill in a practical manner (Koo, 2008). Besides, it has to be noticed when teaching writing, there are a lot of problems that the language teacher has to pay attention to (Hashemnezhad and Hashemnezhad, 2012). It means that EFL learners normally face serious problems when they try to master writing. One of these problems is lack of self-regulation that the learners need so as organize their thoughts and ideas in a logical manner. It may reveal itself for various reasons. Moreover, it is important to notice that Lack of enough skill and knowledge in writing, poor training and

instruction, and lack of trained teachers can be only some of the problems that may lead to failure in writing. The problem becomes more complicated when the learners face personal problems such as lack of motivation and skill to write efficiently (Connor, 2002). This normally puts some restrictions on the selection of the materials, the size of the writing and the ideas that they have planned to state and all these may lead to failure in writing. Finally, it can be discussed that one major problem on the way to mastering writing is learners' limited exposure to writing strategy instruction, teachers' unawareness of the wide choices of writing strategies, and the nature of the education system which relies heavily on exam results rather than on learners' development of creative thinking skills (Koo, 2008). All these problems ask for more studies that may assist the EFL learners in the writing class to improve this writing ability and skills.

This study is important and useful to do since it will help EFL teachers and also learners in language institutes, universities and even schools to overcome some of the pedagogical and psychological obstacles that teachers and learners struggle with when they decide to teach or to write. It will discuss the writing problems that are produced as a result of the lack of required training in the writing class by focusing on the self-regulation and strategy training in the writing classes. Therefore, the achievement will be useful for learners, teachers, textbook designers and practitioners.

Teaching writing strategies can facilitate the writing skill of the learners by giving learners both the skill and self-confidence. Strategy teaching tells the learners how they have to begin their writing, how to continue and finally how to bring it to an end. The main objective of this study is to introduce and teach the strategies that may help the learners in two ways: one is encouraging the use of self-regulation strategies and the other is improving their writing skill by teaching writing strategies. The study aims to notice if teaching some writing strategies has any effects on the writing improvement of the learners.

To achieve the given objectives stated above, two directional questions can be raised and presented in order to investigate:

What is the impact of writing strategy instruction on the writing performance of the EFL learners?

What is the relationship between EFL learners' self-regulation and their writing achievement?

## 2. Literature Review

Writing has had an essential role in human life. We need to learn to write in order to share thoughts, feelings, and our ideas. As Mertens (2010) states, writing is perhaps the greatest of human inventions, binding together people, citizens of distant epochs, who never knew each other. It plays a pivotal role in today's contacts among the

members of various discourse communities all around the world (Dehghan & Chalak, 2016). Books break the shackles of time and inspire us to make our own contributions to the collective knowledge of the human species. In the field of second/foreign language (L2) teaching and learning, writing is considered as an important part of successful learning. In fact, writing can support L2 learners clarify their own thoughts and improve the quality and quantity of their own learning. However, learning to write is considered as a complex skill for EFL learners, because various cognitive, metacognitive, and linguistic processes are involved and learners face difficulty in planning their writing process, organizing, drafting, and revising their writing (Mertens, 2010).

According to Mason et al., (2011) many EFL students struggle with the writing process as a complicated task because it requires the simultaneous combination of several strategies and the application of various mental resources. To be successful, these writers need an understanding of the components of a text as well as knowledge of writing strategies which can be used to shape and organize the writing process. English as a foreign language (EFL) students with writing difficulties spend little time in critical writing processes and tend to focus on low-level transcription skills such as handwriting, spelling, capitalization, and punctuation. Generally speaking, dissatisfaction with these kinds of problems in L2 learning context lead the teachers focus on the emergence of new strategy models in order to facilitate the learning of target language writing. Self-regulation strategy development (SRSD), as one of the writing strategy-based models or intervention programs, is designed to teach strategies for completing writing academic tasks to L2 learners (Harris & Graham, 2006). SRSD was developed by Harris and Graham in the early 1980s. As Wong and Bulter (2012) state, SRSD was initially designed to address the self-regulation difficulties of students with learning difficulties through incorporation of self-regulation strategies. Moreover, according to Little (2007) and Oxford, (2011), SRSD instruction consists of explicit, interactive, and nonlinear instructional stages working together. On a closer look, SRSD helps simplify and organize the myriad of complex tasks required throughout the writing process: define a course of action for successfully completing all or part of a writing assignment, make the mental operations that occur during planning, composing, evaluating, and revising visible and concrete, and enhance students' knowledge about the writing genres and the process (Graham & Harris, 2005). Another important variable in L2 learning is reflective thinking, which is deeper than just thinking about something. It refers to almost any purposeful thought where the learners engage in active, persistent, and careful consideration of ideas for deeper

understanding (Wilson & Murdoch, 2006). Basically, one of the most basic objectives of education is to train individuals to thinking about their thinking (Moon, 1999, cited in Kim, 2005). As in our changing society users need to change problem solving strategies and apply new knowledge to the novel situations; it is important to prompt reflective thinking during learning. As Rudd (2007) states, an important role of reflective thinking is to prompt the thinker during problem solving situations, because it provides an opportunity to step back and think of the best strategies to achieve goals. In addition, as Boud et al., (1985) state, reflective thinking in any field of language learning and teaching is essential. Teacher and learners need to have a reflection on their routine regularly. Reflection is comprised of cognitive and affective activities that individuals employ to examine experiences to create new understanding.

A number of researchers have sought to identify the types of self-regulatory processes that students use while engage in academic tasks. Many of these studies also have determined whether the use of processes would vary as the function of individual difference is variable. For instance, Nabavi Ekhlas and Shangaraffam (2012) went into the relationship between determinant factors of self-regulation strategies and main language skills and overall proficiency based on the social cognitive theory of Bandura (1986). In order to find the relationship between these self-regulation strategies with overall proficiency and language skills, 150 Iranian candidate of IELTS took part in their research. The findings showed that Iranian EFL learners could benefit from using behavioral self-regulation strategies and self-regulation strategy use correlated with language skills. Moreover, Harris et al., (2015), investigated the implementation of SRSD in story writing by 11 second grade teachers who first collaborated in practice-based professional development in SRSD. Students at-risk for failure in writing were randomly assigned to treatment and control conditions in each teacher's classroom. Teachers implemented SRSD with small groups of students at-risk of failure in writing (referred to as Tier 2 intervention in the Response to Intervention, or RTI, model) in their classrooms; the control students at-risk in writing received regular classroom instruction from their teachers. Integrity of strategies instruction and social validity were assessed among the participating teachers. Student outcomes which were assessed included the inclusion of genre elements and story quality, generalization to personal narrative, and teacher perceptions of intrinsic motivation and effort for writing. Significant effects were found for inclusion of genre elements and story quality at both posttest and maintenance. The intervention also resulted in significant generalization to personal narrative. In another study, Bakry and Alsamadani (2014) attempted to investigate the impact of SRDS on writing persuasive essays among

students who studied Arabic as a foreign language. Twenty-four learners of Arabic in the institute of the Arabic language for nonnative speakers at Umm Al-Qura University were selected as the sample. The sample was divided into two groups: the experimental group received 9 training sessions using SRDS, and the control group practiced writing traditionally, which is common in teacher-fronted classrooms. The results of the study indicated that SRDS was effective in writing persuasive essays for the students of Arabic, in general. Also, the most predictable skills to be improved were: paragraph writing, creating ideas, organization, clarity of position, and sentence structure and vocabulary.

Naghdiipour and Emeagwali (2013) attempted to assess and compared the level of reflective thinking in undergraduate university students and to investigate lectures' perception on the promoter or inhibitors to their students' reflective thinking. A sample of 96 students, who were taking practical courses such as 'Special Teaching Methods', Teaching Language Skills', and Teaching Practice', as well as 10 instructors from Easter Mediterranean University took part in their study. The results revealed that the age and level of education were two key determinants of reflective thinking behavior. Besides, Phan (2009) designed a study to examine processing strategies, effort, reflective thinking practice, and achievement goals as important factors contributing to the prediction of students' academic success. Phan used causal modeling procedures to explore the direct and mediating effects of these theoretical orientations on students' academic achievement and learning. 347 second and third-year undergraduates completed a number of inventories (e.g., the Reflective Thinking Questionnaire). Results showed that performance-approach goals exerted a negative effect on academic achievement. Both mastery and performance-approach goals also directed affected reflection, whereas deep processing strategies were directly affected by mastery goals and effort. Importantly, both reflection and effort were found to act as potent mediators. The review of literature shows there are a few studies that have investigated the role of strategies on the writing abilities of L2 learners. More specifically, the literature does not report any empirical studies that show the effectiveness of SRSD on the descriptive writing and reflective thinking skills of L2 learners in an EFL context.

There is a dynamic interaction between self-regulation ability and critical thinking skills. On the one hand, abilities related to reflective thinking can be considered as self-regulated processes (Zimmerman, 1990). On the other hand, the enhancement of self-regulated strategies leads to the development of critical thinking abilities (Kuiper, 2002). On the whole, critical thinking helps self-regulated learning (Phan, 2010), and some processes necessary to SRL may depend on critical thinking (Wolters, 2010). Indeed, the widely used instrument to

assess SRL (Pintrich et al., 1993)—Motivated Strategies for Learning Questionnaire (MSLQ)— includes a subscale for critical thinking which assesses the extent to which students apply prior knowledge to new situations and solve problems, and evaluate and analyze information thoughtfully (Pintrich, 2004). Moreover, in self-regulation process, learners become self-aware (Zimmerman, 1990), and self-awareness is linked with reflective thinking and reasoning, that is, critical thinking (Lynch & Dembo, 2004). Likewise, as students become self-regulated readers, they are engaged in problem-solving practices such as analyzing situations, prioritizing goals, making choices and decisions, and evaluating outcomes which are, in fact, the basic skills of critical reading (Ruohotie, 2002).

### 3. Method

The population of the study, about 42 only females, was consisted of all pre-intermediate EFL learners who were studying in Simin Language Institute in Kerman, Iran. The researcher used three instruments in order to collect the necessary data. First, Oxford Placement test was used as a device to homogenize the population of the study. It is a test of grammar and vocabulary and short reading cloze tests that appear in multiple-choice forms. This gives a high reliability to the scoring of the tests. The second instrument was implementing pre and posttests of writing to determine the writing level of the subjects of the study before and after they received the treatment. The pretest was used by the researcher before the experiment started and the posttest after it. The topic of both pre and posttests belonged to the same area. This would help the learners discuss similar ideas for both tests. For the pretest, both groups were asked to write a 100-word paragraph on the topic below:

-Where is your ideal destination to travel to? What are your reasons for your selection? Explain and discuss your ideas in detail. After they received the treatment, they were asked to write on the following topic as their posttest: -Explain your hometown in terms of the weather, attractions and historical perspectives. Discuss your ideas with enough support. Since scoring writing tests are threatened by subjectivity of the scorer (Heaton, 1988) to reduce this deficiency, the researcher asked two independent raters to give their judgments on the tests. The raters were experienced colleagues who had taught writing for more than five years. Therefore, any writing was rated by three scorers: two colleagues and the

researcher herself. The raters were asked to use the impression or holistic method of marking as it was necessary to focus on writing as a whole. It entails one or more markers awarding a single mark (= multiple marking) based on the total impression of the compositions as a whole. The third instrument was using self-regulation questionnaire in order to estimate the self-regulation of the learners before and after the experiment. To this goal, the questionnaire designed and examined by Dornyei's (2001) was used. It was originally designed to estimate the self-regulation ability of the learners on vocabulary. To adapt it to the goals of this study, the researcher changed the content of the questionnaire and adapted it to the needs of the study and the learners. Besides, two items that were irrelevant to the goal of this study were deleted. Finally an 18 item questionnaire following six point Likert scale was developed ranging from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree', and respondents were required to mark their answers by ticking the appropriate box for the option that best expressed their personal learning experience.

Before using the questionnaire for the study, two colleagues were asked to check the content of the questionnaire for validity. After their observation, two irrelevant items were deleted and some of the notions were changed to be adapted to the objectives of the study. To estimate the questionnaire reliability, Chronbach's Alfa was used and finally it was proved to be reliable at 0.75. When the subjects of the study responded to the questionnaire, the researcher helped them to comprehend the items if they had any difficulty in comprehension. The questionnaire was used two times for the EG, once before and other after the treatment of writing strategies were taught. It was a quasi-experimental study which used sampling procedures and pre and posttests of writing to collect the data of the two groups which were chosen by taking a placement test. The independent variable was using teaching writing strategies in the writing class and the dependent variables was improving the writing ability and self-regulation of the learners. The present research used numeric data for analyzing and answering the research questions. It was a cross-sectional study that lasted for 8 weeks, 28 hours.

### 4. Results

To answer the first questions both types of data, descriptive and inferential, were used and presented in tables.

**Table 1.** Paired Samples Statistics (CG)

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	Pre-test for the CG	15.6885	13	0.79911	0.22163
	Post-test for the CG	15.8177	13	1.24437	0.34513

The data in table 1 shows the means for the pre and posttests of the CG. As it can be seen, the mean for the pretest of this group is estimated to be 15.68 for their writing performance and it changed to 15.81 for the posttest. In fact the use of traditional teaching of writing did not have deep and significant impact on the writing development of these learners. Table 2 offers the inferential data for the CG who were exposed to teaching traditional writing. Based on the data, the p value is estimated to be .642 that is much higher than .05. In fact, it shows that there is no meaningful relationship between the use of teaching writing traditionally and writing improvement of the learners. The relevant degree of freedom is 12 with very low standard deviation.

The data in table 3 shows the means for the pre and posttests of the EG. As it can be seen, the mean for the pretest of this group is estimated to be 15.24 for their

writing performance and it changed to 16.99 for the posttest. In fact, the use of writing strategy teaching led to the writing development of these learners. The change in the mean score can prove the positive impact of teaching writing strategies.

Table 4 offers the inferential data for the EG who were exposed to teaching writing strategies in this writing class. Based on the data, the p value is estimated to be .000 that is lower than .05. In fact, it shows that there is perfect meaningful relationship between the use of teaching writing strategies and the writing improvement of the learners in the EG. The relevant degree of freedom is 14 with very low standard deviation. In other words, it can be confirmed that it is recommended to the teachers to teach writing strategies in their writing class and they can be certain that the procedure will impact the writing improvement of their learners in a positive manner.

**Table 2.** Paired Samples Test (CG)

		Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference					
				Lower	Upper				
Pair 1	Pre-test for the CG - Post-test for the CG	-0.12923	0.97680	0.27092	-0.71951	0.46104	-0.477	12	0.642

**Table 3.** Paired Samples Statistics (EG)

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	Pre-test for the EG	15.2433	15	1.05750	0.27305
	Post-test for the EG	16.9987	15	0.88201	0.22773

**Table 4.** Paired Samples Test (EG)

		Paired Differences					t	Sig. (2-tailed)
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
				Lower	Upper			
Pair 1	Pre-test for the EG - Post-test for the EG	-1.75533	1.18402	0.30571	-2.41102	1.09965	-5.742	0.000

**Table 5.** Paired Samples Test (CG & EG, pre)

		Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference					
				Lower	Upper				
Pair 1	Pre-test for the CG - Pre-test for the EG	0.40769	1.38268	0.38349	-0.42785	1.24324	1.063	12	0.309

Table 5 offers the data of t test for the pretests of EG and CG. As the data reveals, there is no meaningful relationship between the pretests of the two groups: sig= 0.309>0.05. It does not show any meaningful relationship between the two tests of the two groups. Table 6 offers the

data of t test for the posttests of EG and CG. As the data reveals, there is some sort of relationship between the posttests of the two groups: sig= 0.021<0.05. It shows meaningful relationship between the two tests of the two groups.

**Table 6.** Paired Samples Test (CG & EG, post)

	Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
				Lower	Upper			
Pair 1 Post-test for the CG - Post-test for the EG	-1.18077	1.59658	0.44281	-2.14557	-.21597	-2.667	12	0.021

**Table 7.** Inter-rater correlations for writing samples

Raters	RATER 1	RATER 2	RATER 3
RATER 1	1.000		
RATER 2	0.727	1.000	
RATER 3	0.882	0.782	1.000

**Table 8.** The data of the questionnaire for both administrations

	Means	Std. D.
Before	3.1844	1.6922
After	4.0342	2.8920

**Table 9.** Paired Samples t test for the pre and post use of the questionnaire (EG)

	Paired Differences		t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
	Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference			
		Upper			
Pair 1 pre and post use	-0.04073	-2.297	14	0.04	

Since writing tests is threatened by the subjective judgment of the rater, it was important to rate each paper by two or three examiners. For this purpose, the number of raters in this study were increased to three. Table 7 presents the correlational data of the three scorers to know if the rating of the three scorers has been reliable or not. As the data reveals, there is high correlation between the first and second rater:  $r = 0.727$  and it is even higher between the first and third rater:  $r = 0.882$ . Based on the given data in table 4.7, it can be claimed that there is high correlation between the three scorers and this make the writing score reliable.

To assess the self-regulation of the learners, it was necessary to use the questionnaire. The self-regulatory questionnaire was used for two times and the learners in the EG responded to it. The data in the following tables reflect the means of the responses for each administration separately. Based on the given data, the learners' self-regulatory principles increased to some degree, but not significantly.

As the data shows, the mean of the questionnaire items for the first use was calculated to be 3.1 and it was increased to 4.03 for the third time. In fact, it can be claimed that the increase in the mean is an indication of the increase in the self-efficacy of the learners in the EG who were exposed to the strategy instruction in the writing class. Thus, the second research questions can be answered positively by referring to the data of table 7. Moreover, the data in table 9 is another evidence that can support the idea of the impact of writing strategy instruction on the self-

efficacy development of the learners. As the data reveals, the p value is estimated to be 0.04 and it is lower than 0.05 and it can prove that there is meaningful relationship between the use of the questionnaire of self-efficacy before and after the treatment.

## 5. Conclusion

The study bore some implications and ideas about the use of strategy writing techniques in the writing class. As it was already discussed, the results that were achieved through the pre and posttests of writing showed that the learners in the EG outperformed the learners in the CG. It can show the effect of using self-regulatory teaching among the learners in the EG who used more relevant ideas and better organization in their writings.

Considering the results of the two groups, it can be concluded that writing is a meaningful process that entails the active and meaningful participation of the learners in the teaching-learning processes. Data from this study showed that the difference in the mean score of the writing tasks was statistically significant, because the EG showed a significantly higher amount of growth in writing compared to the CG. Paying attention to the active participation of the learners in the learning processes can have facilitative and meaningful effect on their learning. Based on the achieved results, it was proved that teaching writing strategy leads to better self-regulation training and this can naturally facilitate the process of writing acquisition. Regarding the goal of the study, enough

emphasis was given to the role of self-regulation and other devices that can help the learners feel independent and orderly in their education. The results supported the writing improvement of the EFL learners in the EG more than that of the CG that followed the traditional teaching procedures. The findings suggested that writing strategy instruction can promote the acquisition of writing. During teaching writing, the students performed better on the test of productive writing since they were noticed to develop their self-regulation and writing strategies together. As it was observed, the scores on writing post-tests were higher when the students generated their own perceptions and understanding using their self-regulation.

In the present study, it was concluded when the individual learner transitions into a meaningful and cognitive learning context, they were given a complete responsibility to deal with the problem posed to him, whether learning a single new word or getting them to make a novel sentence with the learned words. Besides, it can be discussed as self-regulation increases, the learners' need to ask questions decreases since they have a plan for learning and practicing and above all they become independent of the teacher and classroom.

Based on the achieved results, it was proved that the use of writing strategies instruction can facilitate the process of writing acquisition. Regarding the goal of the study, enough emphasis was given to the use of writing strategies instruction. The results supported the writing improvement of the EFL learners in the EG more than that of the CG that followed the traditional teaching procedures. What is of most concern to language teachers is that learning strategies are not inherent abilities that belong to only gifted learners. Learning strategies can actually be learned. In addition, learning strategies are sensitive to the learning context and to the learner's internal processing preferences. If learners perceive, for example, that a task like vocabulary learning requires correct matching of a new word to its definition within a specified period of time (as in an exam), they will likely decide to use a memorization strategy. Their choice of which memorization strategy to use depends on their understanding of their own learning processes and on which strategies have been successful in the past.

The findings suggested that writing strategies instruction can promote acquisition of L2 writing faster and in a meaningful manner. During teaching writing, the students performed better on the test of productive writing since they were trained to develop their inner ability in using more relevant structure, vocabularies and other relevant fields.

### 5.1. Pedagogical Implications

The goal of this study was to examine the impact of using writing strategies instruction on the writing development

and self-efficacy of the learners. The achievements of the study indicate the idea that teaching writing strategies may assist the learners to be better EFL achievers not only in writing but in their self-efficacy. The use of these strategies significantly empowered the writing ability of the learners by providing them with some practical tools by which they can organize their thoughts, and as the next step they can produce better paragraphs. One important implication that can be drawn involves the selection of an appropriate learning style to yield increased development of writing knowledge. Data from this study showed that the difference in the growth of writing skill was statistically significant based on the learning style in which the participants completed the cognitive tasks using writing strategies instruction. It should be mentioned that the use of writing strategies instruction may not have been the only source of increased writing skill among learners. The growth in writing may have been brought about by a range of relevant contributing factors. Perhaps one reason for the increased growth in writing among learners was learners' meaningful participation in the activities they were supposed to follow. The study achievements could be more practical if the researcher could use the idea of strategy teaching to learning the language as a whole by considering all skills and components. In classrooms situations, teacher can focus on teaching strategies that might improve the skills without being concerned about the specific learners who may suffer from pedagogical and psychological limitations. They may feel unable to cope with the learning problems that they face; however, strategy teaching may assist them to overcome some of their learning problems.

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