

Learners' Autonomy Cultivation in Writing by Strategy Training

Xiao-fang Wang

School of Foreign Languages, Nanyang Institute of Technology
Nanyang, 473004, Henan Province, China
xfwdy@126.com

Abstract—Writing is an essential skill in language learning which currently features learners- centeredness and self-learning competence. Cultivation of learners' autonomy in writing is supposed to help learners to become a self-developing life-long learners with sustainable writing ability. Based on the critical role strategies play in fostering learners' autonomy, the present paper offers a strategies-based instruction (SBI) which explicitly embeds learning strategies into normal writing teaching through strategy training to promote learners' autonomy in writing. The findings show that strategy training has greatly inspired learners' strategy awareness in the process of writing and bettered their writing quality which will help improve their autonomous writing in their future work and life.

Keywords—Learning strategies; Strategy training; Learners' autonomy in writing

I. INTRODUCTION

To cultivate learners' writing ability as an independent learner, learning strategies play a vital role in various factors. Strategy training can help learners better grasp writing strategies and achieve effective results.

The notion of "learning strategies" partly originated in cognitive learning theory which holds that learning is an active and learner-regulated process. The purpose of applying strategies is to "affect the learner's motivational or affective state, or the way in which the learner selects, acquires, organizes, or integrates new knowledge.[1]" (Weinstein and Mayer 1986:135).

In the 1990s, researchers integrated language learning strategy studies into learner autonomy, and the combination proved to be important and necessary because the ultimate goal of teaching is to help learners become autonomous and effective. Therefore, fostering learners' strategy awareness and capability of practical use is to improve their autonomous learning abilities for lifelong learning.

II. STRATEGY TRAINING

It is wise for learners to acquire a broad range of language learning strategies for an autonomous and successful learning process. And learning can and should be facilitated by making learners become aware of the range of strategies which can be heightened by providing strategy training-explicit instruction in how to apply language learning strategies.

Cohen (2000:67) holds the idea that a further purpose of strategy training is to cultivate autonomous learning by giving learners more freedom to select and use strategies that are most suitable for themselves, without much prompt from language teachers [2].

Previous researches have presented many favorable strategy training approaches in a variety of educational settings. Strategies-based instruction (SBI) is a learner-focused method by which learning strategies are explicitly and implicitly inserted into the course content. Learners experience the advantages of systematically applying the strategies to the learning and use of the language they are studying. Teachers may conduct SBI instruction by starting with established course materials, then determining which strategies to insert and where; starting with a set of strategies they wish to focus on and design activities around them; or inserting strategies spontaneously into the lessons whenever it seems appropriate. Teachers who adopt strategies-based instruction can make the strategy training individualized in terms of teaching requirements [3]. (Cohen, Andrew 2003:7)

CALLA approach is a five-step model: introduction, presentation, practice, evaluation, and expansion [4]. (O'Malley and Chamot 1995) This approach offers a highly explicit instruction through applying strategies to specific learning tasks and helps learners take more responsibility for selecting and applying and transferring appropriate learning strategies.

A CALLA (Cognitive Academic Language Learning Approach) lesson is built around the following five steps: (1) Preparation—learners' background knowledge and schemata about the content being studied as well as their learning strategies are explored. (2) Presentation—the teacher presents the necessary new content and learning skills needed for the lesson. (3) Practice—learners perform various activities to reinforce the material to be learned. (4) Evaluation—learners evaluate their own learning. (5) Expansion—learners use what they have learned and apply it to new situations [5]. (O'Malley and Chamot 2001)

The aim of CALLA is to offer students chances to learn a new language independently and to become more self-directed by gradually utilizing various learning strategies in any learning contexts.

Teachers using CALLA must first prepare the students for learning to use these strategies and to do so they must find out more about their background and take a look at how students previously approached an academic task. The teachers will then incorporate the right learning strategies for a specific task. Students will then practice the strategies on those tasks. The teachers will then evaluate how well they worked, encourage more practice and add the use of other strategies to other tasks.

III. TRAINING PRACTICE

This paper holds the belief that language learning will be promoted through explicit strategy training to enhance learners' awareness of strategies. The most efficient way to heighten learner awareness is to provide strategy training—explicit instruction in how to apply language learning strategies. The following training sample is designed according to the five steps of CALLA. It offers a clear and practical process for teachers to adopt in classroom setting.

TABLE I. SETTING WRITING GOALS

Setting Writing Goals	
Strategy objective	Developing in students an awareness of the importance of writing with a clear purpose and training them to use the strategy of setting goals for specific writing tasks.

Setting proper goals is one of helpful ways to cultivate students to become more successful and self-directed learners. In a broad sense, setting goals is to present personal objectives or decide on the purpose(s) of a particular task or action. For the sake of writing, goal-setting concerns deciding what purpose(s) a writer intends a particular piece of writing to serve, such as, to inform, to defend a view or to entertain the reader with a story. To be aware of the goals of writing from the very beginning is vital to effective written communication as it bears on subsequent considerations of the intended reader, the necessary information to include in the writing, and the most optimal ways of presenting and organizing the information. [6] (Yongqi Gu, 2011)

Stage 1 Preparation: Raising learners' awareness of writing strategy—setting goals

The teacher tells the students that in everyday life, they may set different kinds of goals for themselves, and elicit some answers from the students and write them down on the blackboard.

The teacher tells the students that they have gone to college and a long-term goal of life has just been achieved. What goals will they set for their new college life? With so many courses to learn and campus activities to participate in, how can they set specific goals for different purposes? With respect to English learning, what goals should be set to meet challenges from abundant new words, long paragraphs and teachers' teaching given in English?

Take writing as an example, do they often set goals for their English writing? How do their goals influence their efforts to write compositions? The students are told that if they

Training Sample

Strategy training for writing

Stage 1 Preparation: Raising learners' awareness of writing strategies

(Setting writing goals, planning for content, getting ideas, attending to grammatical structures, revising, getting feedback and revising)

Stage 2 Presentation: Explaining and Modeling (selected example)

Stage 3 Practice (selected materials)

Stage 4 Evaluation (pair work or group work)

Stage 5 Expansion (relevant exercises to consolidate)

Sample

only learn more words, or only learn from the text, they might just study the limited textbook knowledge and may not incorporate them into everyday use. If they want to improve their writing, a lot of work must be done, such as reading more, learning more vocabulary, getting to know some knowledge about how to write in English, imitating excellent passages, etc.

The teacher tells the students that setting goals is beneficial whenever they start a learning task because goals will help provide a direction for their efforts. They can apply the strategy of goal setting to classroom learning, homework learning and even their everyday lives.

Stage 2 Presentation: Explaining and Modeling (selected example)

The teacher demonstrates to the students how to set goals by using think-aloud.

Selected example:

Directions: You are allowed to write a short essay entitled The Way to Success by commenting on Abraham Lincoln's famous remark, "Give me six hours to chop down a tree, and I will spend the first four sharpening the axe."

Teacher's Think-aloud

When I see the directions, I know I need to do some thinking before starting to writing. First, I get to know the title of the intended essay "The Way to Success". Second, the essay I am going to write must be connected with Lincoln's remark. Then comes the problem: what does Lincoln's remark mean? How does the implied meaning relate to the title "The Way to

Success"? By thinking Lincoln's remark, I can guess that his remark indicates some way to success. What is the way implied in his words? I pay more attention to key words in his remark "spend the first four sharpening the axe" which means that he would like to spend enough time making preparation for chopping down a tree, like sharpening his axe. So now I gradually get to know the correlated meaning between Lincoln's remark and "The Way to Success": Full preparation is one way which is crucial for success.

The process of thinking is a way of making sure that I know where I am heading and that I remain on the right track when I plan and write. In other words, the thesis statement will serve as a guideline to my paper. What I am going to write should center around it, support it, bear it out, and disprove arguments against it.

Now I will list my goals on the notebook to remind my writing.

Overall goal:

Write an essay entitled "The Way to Success" by commenting on Abraham Lincoln's famous remark, "Give me six hours to chop down a tree, and I will spend the first four sharpening the axe." (defending a view)

Specific goals:

What Lincoln's remark means;

How to comment on Lincoln's remark;

What theme could be implied from Lincoln's remark related to the title "The Way to Success";

How to develop the essay with the implied theme.

The teacher reminds the students that it is significant for them to bear goals they set in mind while writing, so it is a good way to put down their goals on their notebooks in order to refer to them whenever necessary.

Stage 3 Practice (selected materials)

The teacher shows a strategy worksheet for setting writing goals on the screen and asks the students to write goals on their notebook. The students are reminded that there can be more than one goal, depending on the purpose. It is clever to underline or highlight those most important goals which can affect what information to include and how to present it in the writing.

Sample

Directions: For this part, you are allowed 30 minutes to write a short essay on E-learning, try to imagine what will happen when more and more people study on-line instead of going to school. You should write at least 150 words but no more than 200 words.



Fig. 1 E-Learning

Stage 4 Evaluation (pair work or group work)

The teacher asks the students to do pair work and compare the goals they wrote and exchange ideas and thoughts about why there goals are set. Then some students are asked to tell which are overall goals and which are more detailed ones, and the teacher takes notes on the blackboard. Last, the teacher discusses the goals given by the students with the whole class to see whether they are appropriate.

Next, the teacher asks the students plan for content. After content completion, students are asked to compare their copies with a peer and read their peer's notes and question them more about the characters, clues or ending.

The teacher should make it clear that although planning is important, what has been planned could be changed during the actual writing process in terms of possible internal and external factors.

Stage 5 Expansion (relevant exercises to consolidate)

The teacher tells the students to write goals for another writing task that involves commenting on something, including a list of general and specific goals.

The strategy of setting writing goals is one of strategies trained to develop the students' writing ability. Besides, there are planning for content, assessing the audience, getting ideas, attending to language at the word level, attending to grammatical structures, writing an essay, revising an essay and getting feedback and revising. This is a writing strategy package produced by Yongqi Gu [6]. (Yongqi Gu, 2011) Each strategy can be trained by following the above five steps. For the rest of writing strategies, simple explanations will be offered in this paper.

a. Planning for content. The writing strategy of planning for content is to aid students focus on initial planning before they begin to write. Characters, setting and event are three important aspects concerned for effective writing.

b. Assessing the audience. Essays which are to meet different audience' taste often present information and language differently. It is taken into account that the writers are composing articles matching the readers' needs, styles and language proficiency, that is, they need to know who the audience is and what they are expecting to get from their reading.

c. Getting ideas---Reading to find out more. Reading others' essays is not just to get to know the stories, but to

cultivate inspiration about the ways of presenting information and using language for good organization and content.

d. Attending to word choice. Appropriate lexical choice is an effective linguistic way to write effectively. The strategy of attending to word choice can enlarge one's vocabulary, deepen his or her cognitive understanding of subtle meanings of words, contribute to precise and accurate expression.

e. Attending to grammatical structures. Correct grammatical structures are essential for conveying meaningful message. It is important to make students aware of the importance of a good acquisition of grammar and proper utilization in practical writing.

f. Writing an essay. Writing an essay is the exact process of applying the strategies of writing in the right context. It is also a process during which strategies are triggered and internalized. Whether effective writing strategies can be employed flexibly depends on various factors, such as accurate understanding of these strategies, quantity of practice, task genres, etc.

g. Revising an essay. Revising is a process of checking and reshaping which can take many shapes, such as peer correcting, teacher revising, and self-carried revising. By revising, the writing can be improved from lexical, syntactic, and pragmatic levels.

h. Getting feedback and revising. By getting different feedbacks from different sources, various types of revised versions about content, structure, grammar and language can be offered. Effective writers often get feedback on their writing from their peers and other sources to help themselves revise their writing and make it better in different angles.

Writing is a hard cognitive task which needs teachers' involvement to facilitate students' ability by writing strategy training. Strategy training is applied to explicitly teaching students how to use strategies, which can enhance students' efforts to reach language goals (Oxford and Leaver 1996) [7].

Students should be encouraged to practice what they get in classroom training after class, so that they are supposed to form a good habit of setting goals, planning for content or assessing the audience, etc., to better their writing skillfully and automatically.

IV. CONCLUSION

Strategy training with Strategy-Based Instruction has successfully raised learners' awareness to use the strategies and helped learners be equipped with writing strategies and apply them in the right context and internalize them ultimately to become more autonomous writers (Yongqi Gu, 2011) [6].

In practical teaching in writing, this writing strategy training can be applied to helping learners improve their writing abilities to be an independent learner. The teachers need to carry out the practice consistently to help students apply automatically. In terms of instant feedback on writing, there are still problems to be solved, such as large class sizes, weak language basis.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

This paper was financially supported by two projects: (1) The "13th Five-Year Plan" of Educational Science in Henan Province: An Analysis of the Value of ESP and Its Development from the Perspective of Language Economics (2016-JKGHB-0289); (2) Henan Government's Decision-Making Research Bidding Project, Research on the Countermeasures of Promoting the Development of Central Plains Tourism Industry with Distinctive Culture under "One Belt and One Road Initiatives" (2017B108).

REFERENCES

- [1] Weinstein, C. E., and R E. Mayer. The Teaching of Learning Strategies. Ed. M. C. Wittrock. New York: Macmillan, 1986.
- [2] Cohen, A. D. Strategies in Learning and Using a Second Language. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, 2000.
- [3] Cohen & Andrew. Strategy Training for Second Language Learners. Washington D.C: ERIC Digest, 2003.
- [4] O'Malley and Chamot. Learning Strategies in Second Language Acquisition. UK: Cambridge University Press, 1995.
- [5] O'Malley and Chamot. Learning Strategies in Second Language Acquisition. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press, 2001.
- [6] Yong-Qi GU, Guang-Wei HU, Jun ZHANG and Rui BAI. Strategy-Based Instruction: Focusing on Reading and Writing Strategies. Beijing : Foreign Language Teaching And Research Press, 2011.
- [7] Oxford, R. L. & Leaver, B. L. A Synthesis of Strategy Instruction for Language Learners. Ed. Oxford, R. L. Language Learning Strategies Around the World: Cross-cultural Perspectives. Second Language Teaching & Curriculum Center, University of Hawaii. Honolulu: (1996): 46-227.