

Use of Think-Aloud Protocols: Investigating the Writing Habits of Saudi EFL/ESL Learners

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Abstract

This paper aims to investigate the writing processes of bilingual Saudi writers by means of think-aloud protocols. Think-aloud or talk-aloud protocols involve having participants verbally describe their activities while performing a given task. My goal was to understand the writing habits of Saudi EFL/ESL learners and what native Arabic speakers experience when writing in English by examining how they write compositions in English. My basic question for this investigation was “How do EFL/ESL Saudi learners write in English?” The goal of this study was to identify useful information for teaching ESL composition to Arabic-speaking learners in general and Saudi learners in particular.

Keywords: Think-aloud protocols, Writing, EFL, Composition, Writing habits

1. Review of Related Literature

Research in second language writing from the 1970s to 1980s shifted from a focus on analyzing written texts to addressing learners' writing processes (Uzawa, 1996). Second-language writing researchers have identified characteristics of the writing processes of skilled and unskilled writers (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1987). Unskilled writers, for instance, are strongly concerned about writing mechanics such as spelling, punctuation, and grammar and rarely revise their writing beyond the word level. The writing processes of second language learners have also been studied in terms of their L1 or in terms of a translation process during L2 writing (Cumming, 1989). Many second-language writing processes have been found to be comparable to those of L1 writing. For instance, L2 writers plan content, revise texts, and use thinking strategies in very similar ways in both languages. The same types of performance errors that occur in L1 writing also occur in L2 writing. However, Cumming (1987) noted that previous research on second language writing had not clearly distinguished writing expertise from second language proficiency. Using think-aloud protocols with a large number of students, Cumming (1987) reported that "basic writers" "exhibited a lack of control or appropriate self-regulation" in their approaches to L2 composition (p. 112). However, "expert writers" approached their composition tasks with "clear notions of what it should entail, knowledge of how it should be organized as discourse, and concern for how it might be best expressed in language" (p. 112). The expert writers were able to write by developing well-articulated plans that guided their decision-making. Kobayashi (1992) examined differences between English compositions written with two writing processes (writing first in Japanese and then translating into English and composing directly in English). According to Ericsson and Simon (1993), the think-aloud method allows access to participants' short-term memory streams, and verbalizations reveal the cognitive processes involved in task completion.

This paper compares my findings to those of previous research on second language writing. The participants in this study were three Saudi graduate students studying English as a foreign language at Indiana University of Pennsylvania. Their first language was Arabic, and they had studied English as a foreign language in Saudi Arabia for over twelve years. They passed the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) with scores over 590, as required by their US institution for admission. Thus, they had a fairly good knowledge of English grammar and vocabulary. They could also easily express themselves in English, as demonstrated by their conversations with native speakers of English.

2. Methods

The participants had the option to write either on a topic of my choosing (the problems that non-native speakers face when pursuing graduate studies at American universities) or on a topic of their own choice. Both these options were crucial for this investigation. The first allowed my observations to focus on a specific writing task most Arab EFL/ESL students know and are eager to explore. The second, in contrast, allowed a focus on naturally occurring writing problems. Two of the participants chose to write about the specified topic while the third chose his own topic. I collected two types of data: direct observations of what

the participants were doing, and the participants' narratives of what they wanted or were trying to do or say. Both tape-recording and note taking were used in this task.

I trained the participants in think-aloud protocols, informing them they would write about a topic in English and express their thoughts aloud as they wrote. They were allowed to verbalize their thoughts in either English or Arabic, and all chose to write by hand rather than on a computer. They were also allowed to use an English-Arabic dictionary during the task. The writing task took about thirty minutes.

The aim of the think-aloud protocols was to urge the participants to reveal what they were thinking about during the writing process. During the task, I sat beside the participants and took notes. If participants forgot to verbalize, I reminded them to do so and sometimes gave the reminder prompt, "What are you thinking of now?"

After the writing task, I transcribed and analyzed the think-aloud utterances and conducted a follow-up interview to discuss the participants' think-aloud utterances and answer my questions. The interview was valuable for clarifying the participants' thinking and cognitive strategies, which were not fully expressed in the think-aloud protocols.

3. Results and Discussion

I focused on the think-aloud data from the pre-writing phase as well as that from the writing phase. For the former, the participants clearly described what they planned to do. They said that the whole essay might consist of four or five paragraphs: a paragraph for the introduction, two or three paragraphs for the body, and a paragraph for the conclusion. They thought that the first sentence would be the topic sentence, which could appear at the beginning or the end of the first paragraph. Then they started to write the first topic sentence. They then explained that they were going to relate the topic to their personal experiences. For instance, one participant wrote, "The first time I experienced a cultural shock was in 2001 when I first came to the United States." He said that he thought in Arabic, spoke in Arabic, and then tried to form correct sentences in English. He also focused on writing in the correct tense(s). In selecting individual words in the first paragraph, he was unsure which one to use. For instance, he was not sure whether the words "people" or "students" would be more appropriate for describing those who want to study in another culture. Finally, he chose "people." He explained how he was going to classify the cultural shocks he faced as those related to "the use of language," "living conditions," "financial matters," and "dealing with people." Each type of shock, this participant said, would comprise a separate section. Even while thinking about these ideas, he thought it would be useful to check his spelling and punctuation. He felt he should reread what he wrote to check grammatical errors and the relationship between the ideas.

In the supporting paragraphs, the participants showed their fear of using the first-person pronoun "I." However, the participant above used "I" several times when comparing situations in Saudi Arabia and the US and in expressing his point of view. From time to time, participant one compared the "length" of his paragraphs, trying to maintain similar lengths for each topic. He expressed reluctance to reread the whole composition because he did not

know what to do if he discovered errors. It seemed that he thought revising meant correcting grammatical mistakes and felt that grammar correction was beyond his ability.

Further, I examined metacognitive features, such as participants' abilities to generate ideas and narrow down the topic. I also examined linguistic features such as the use of single sentences, clauses, phrases, and words, as well as spelling and punctuation. My overall evaluation was based on three factors: content, organization, and language use.

An analysis of think-aloud protocols reveals that participants used different approaches in writing their compositions. First, they somewhat planned the organization of their ideas and seemed to start organizing their ideas before writing. Second, when they started writing the body of their compositions, they needed additional thought to communicate their ideas more clearly and effectively. All of them spent over ten minutes writing the supporting paragraphs. The participants were "skilled" writers who thought about, organized, and then wrote down their ideas. Bereiter and Scardamalia (1987) found that expert writers can usually "transform" their knowledge as they write by rethinking and restating ideas until they become fully developed written expressions of thoughts, while inexperienced writers only transmit their knowledge as they write by simply stating their ideas without planning or how to present them. The participants knew and used English terms such as "brainstorming," "outlining," "topic sentence," and "introduction-body-conclusion" during the writing process. However, they were also heavily concerned about mechanics such as spelling, punctuation, and grammar, and during the pre-writing phase one of the participants cut short his planning and abandoned his efforts to organize his topic.

The think-aloud utterances were in Arabic, the participants' first language, and English. I compared participants' first L1 use with their L2 use during the introduction, body, and conclusion of their papers. During cognitively demanding tasks, participants tended to use Arabic more, suggesting that the level of knowledge demand affected their choice of L1 or L2. For instance, the body of the paper required more information and organization for the participants than the introduction and the conclusion, and the participants spent more time generating ideas for the supporting paragraphs. During this time, they struggled to get ideas from their L1 and express them in writing in their L2, according to the participants' recollections during the post-task interview. One stated that he sometimes tried to connect the different ideas of the paper by picturing an image of a tree. Every branch, he explained, represented a single idea. While developing the paragraphs, especially for the body of the paper, he spent time thinking about "finding" more branches that would support the central idea of the introduction.

The writing exercise took place at one of the participants' homes. The host participant said that when he writes at home, he usually generates more ideas for compositions than when writing in class. Therefore, it was easy to tape-record "real time" thinking-aloud utterances in the natural environment. This participant reported that the topic was not difficult and that the time allotted was appropriate. Although he was able to write and edit his composition in one setting, he was not pleased that the first draft could not tell as much of the story as could be told in a second or third draft. In the follow-up interview, the participant said that if he could

return to rewrite the same topic, he would choose more polished, precise, and careful words, sentences, and paragraphs. He said he might use a different approach to tell his personal stories. He wished he had had more time to write a strong conclusion that would make a stronger impression on the reader. In asking him what he liked best and least, he said that the sentences in the concluding paragraph needed more organization, but he was pleased that some paragraphs expressed his ideas concisely.

4. Conclusion

The use of think-aloud protocols in English composition revealed the benefits of first language use in second language writing. Our findings, and constant with what other researchers affirmed (Alhaisoni, 2012; Al-Semari, 1995; Al-Sharah, 1997), could be useful for students with low language proficiency. As Raimes asserted, “think-aloud composing for ESL composition research...can be applied...to generate words, sentences, and chunks of discourse and to communicate in the new language.” The task showed that, during writing, the learners employed both their L1 and L2. When writing, they tended to employ L1 strategies and then switched to their L2 for production. In short, they created meaning in their first language and then mentally translated it into the second. This is why second language writing for such students tends to result in awkward forms and syntactic and semantic errors that result from their limited language abilities. Higher-proficiency students, in contrast, do not rely as heavily on their first language because of their knowledge and mastery of the second-language writing processes. Teachers of English as a foreign or second language to Arabic-speaking students may consider the following suggestions and recommendations in writing classes: Teachers need to be aware of their students’ first-language writing skills and abilities. These skills and abilities should be incorporated into, rather than ignored in, writing in a second language. Teachers should examine the similarities and differences between L1 and L2 writing of the introduction, for instance. This could help students focus more on appropriate ways to write an introduction in a second language. Furthermore, because low-proficiency students need more practice in the pre-writing and planning stages than high-proficiency students, designing various activities to increase their awareness of the differences between L1 and L2 writing is crucial for them. From my personal experience, for instance, elementary school students initially write in English from right to left, the direction for writing Arabic. They do not include thesis statements in their first paragraphs, and may repeat the same ideas in more than one paragraph using different vocabulary. Therefore, focusing on the pre-writing and planning stages may help them better organize their ideas. The think-aloud protocols used in this study demonstrated that participants developed their ideas in L1 and then transferred them to L2 in their writing. However, their mastery and knowledge of English enabled them to plan how to organize their ideas, and it was clear to them that writing in English was different from writing in Arabic. They also understood the importance of following the introduction-body-conclusion pattern. They approached the writing task with clear notions of what the process should involve, how it should be organized, and how ideas should be expressed in English. They also considered both form and content. Because they were able to figure out how they would do it, they managed to make decisions about the content and organization of their composition with confidence.

EFL/ESL teachers need to help their students acquire such skills by having them practice how to plan, organize, and write English compositions.

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