

The influence of writing strategy teaching on academic writing skills

What this research was about and why it is important

Writing is crucial for academic success in higher education. The task becomes even more challenging when learners need to express their knowledge about topics in a second or foreign language. For many learners this complex process is quite challenging, so it is important to understand how learners' academic writing skills can be improved. Successful writers use different strategies to organise and shape their texts (e.g.: planning the structure of the text, using other texts as examples, etc.). This study looked at how the teaching of such writing strategies influenced the academic writing skills of language learners. The researcher was also interested to see if the effect of writing strategy training was similar for high and low attainment learners. Learners used more writing strategies more effectively after they had learned about them. Learners' academic writing also improved.

What the researchers did

- Participants were 72 University students in Sri Lanka who were studying for a Bachelor of Science in English.
- Participants were grouped according to their scores on an English reading and writing test. 36 participants had high attainment in English, 36 had lower attainment.
- The researcher taught one group of learners about writing strategies over a period of 24 weeks. The other group received the same amount of teaching but did not learn about writing strategies.
- The researcher trained learners to use writing strategies using the following strategy training cycle:
 - *Goal setting* (What are we trying to accomplish?) → *task analysis* (What is the problem?) → *deciding on the genre* (Who is the audience?) → *awareness raising* (How could we make our task easy?) → *exploration of available strategies* (Do we already use strategies?) → *modeling of strategies* (How could we use strategies successfully?) → *joint construction of the text* (How could we apply strategies when writing?) → *reinforcement with a similar task* (Do we really know how to do it?) → *gradual withdrawal of scaffolding* (How much support do we need now?) → *independent construction* (Can we do the task without support?) → *evaluation*
- Learners completed a questionnaire before and after the researcher taught them different writing strategies. The questionnaires before and after the teaching session covered questions about learners' language learning background, their self-evaluation of their language skills and their attitudes to writing in English and about their writing behaviour.
- Learners completed two writing tasks before and after the teaching sessions. They had to describe a graph and write an essay. Learners had one hour to complete the tasks.

What the researchers found

- Learners who learned about writing strategies used more strategies after the teaching session than before. This was true for the low and the high attainment groups.
- Learners who learned about writing strategies used nearly all types of writing strategies more often than their peers who had not learned about writing strategies. Learners improved particularly in planning.
- The academic writing of learners with strategy training improved more than that of learners without writing strategy training.
- The writing of learners in the low attainment group improved more than that of learners in the high attainment group.

Things to consider

- This study showed that teaching writing strategies to learners can help them to use such strategies more effectively.
- The study also showed that writing strategy use was linked to improved academic writing. Learners who learned about writing strategies and used more strategies in their writing, also produced better texts.
- A related study by the same researcher with the same group of learners also showed that strategy training led to increased self-motivation, determination and positive attitudes toward writing in English.

Materials available from <https://www.iris-database.org>

How to cite this summary: Müller, L-M. & De Silva, R. (2018). The influence of writing strategy teaching on academic writing skills. *OASIS Summary of De Silva (2015) in Language Teaching Research*.

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