

Investigating the use of writing strategies by advanced learners of English: Results of a study

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Abstract

The paper discusses the results of a study which explored the writing strategies that advanced learners of English drew upon when composing a summary of an academic text. The data were collected from 28 English majors who were requested to summarize a text dealing with foreign language pedagogy and then asked to fill out a short questionnaire concerning the writing strategies they had fallen upon when completing this task. The questionnaire included questions dealing with self-evaluation of writing skills, the favorite ways of developing these skills, the strategies used before, during and after the task, the focus of attention in the course of writing, as well as the factors that were helpful and detrimental to the performance of the activity. The data collected in this way were subjected to qualitative analysis which involved identification of common themes with respect to the strategies employed to complete the task.

Keywords: writing strategies; summary writing; advanced learners; immediate report

1. Introduction

There can be little doubt that the act of writing in a second or foreign language (L2) is a highly complex process during which learners not only draw upon their linguistic resources, which may be lacking in many respects, but also have to take into consideration the specific conditions in which they attempt to complete the writing task (e.g., their own situation as writers, the genre, the reader), employ appropriate strategies to address these conditions (e.g., organizing content, rereading, accommodating existing demands), or fall back on various textual devices intended to structure their writing (e.g., the use of the passive voice in academic texts). The existence and importance of intricacies of this kind have been recognized by many experts in the field of second language writing. Polio and Williams (2009, p. 486), for example, observe that, "(...) L2 writing is undeniably a complex process that involves both the cognitive processes of second language acquisition (SLA), as well as the genres, purposes, and values of the targeted L2 discourse community". Matsuda and Silva (2010, p. 233), in turn, comment that "[t]he process of writing involves a series of highly complex cognitive operations that takes place in response to a rhetorical situation (Bitzer, 1968) – a complex web of relationship among the elements of writing, including the writer, the reader, the text and reality (Silva, 1990)".

Growing realization of the fact that writing involves both the text as a product, the act of composing as a process and the social influences shaping this process (cf. Cumming, 2001) has somewhat inevitably impacted the way in which writing is taught and studied. As Leki (2002, p. 60) comments "[m]odern L2 writing instruction and research have gradually broadened their perspective by shifting focus from texts, to processes (i.e., composing), to disciplinary and sociopolitical contexts (i.e., social construction)". This shift has been reflected in the evolution of approaches to L2 writing pedagogy from the *controlled composition approach*, in which writing skills are developed in the service of oral skills, to the *paragraph pattern approach*, where the main emphasis is placed on the ability to construct logical discourse forms, to the *process approach*, in which problem-solving is stressed and writing is viewed as an exploratory and recursive process. The latest trends in writing instruction could be labeled as *post-process approaches*, such as the *genre-based approach*, with its emphasis on teaching specific types of writing reflecting various social purposes, or the *critical pedagogy approach*, with its concern with making learners aware of the power relationships expressed in writing (cf. Gordon, 2008; Matsuda & Silva, 2010; Polio & Williams, 2009). On the one hand, the adoption of a particular approach to writing pedagogy is bound to determine to a large extent the strategies that learners will use when constructing their texts. On the other, the extent

to which teachers have taken up some of the developments mentioned above may vary widely from one country to another or even between different educational levels within a single country. With this in mind, the present paper reports the findings of a study which investigated the use of L2 writing strategies by Polish university students majoring in English, a context in which a combination of different approaches to writing instruction is typically used.

2. Second language writing strategies – theoretical and empirical issues

In their overview of the conceptualizations of and research into L2 writing strategies, Manchón, Roca de Larios and Murphy (2007, p. 230) define these strategies as "(...) the actions (...) writers engage in while they generate, express, and refine their ideas in a nonnative language," with the implicit assumption that, as is the case with strategies employed with respect to other language skills and subsystems, these actions refer to both actual writing behaviors and mental operations underlying these behaviors. They point to the fact that a plethora of terms have been used in the literature to refer to writing strategies, such as, for example, *writing behaviors*, *composing behaviors*, *composing operations*, *writing techniques and procedures*, *production processes* or *process-related skills*. While the use of writing strategies can perhaps be primarily associated with the process approach, whether it is confined to the cognitive processes involved in composing texts in a goal-driven, recursive, problem-oriented way or extended to include the social constraints imposed by a specific context and situation, such strategies can be employed irrespective of a particular approach to writing instruction, although it stands to reason that they are likely to differ in nature (cf. Gordon, 2008; Oxford, 2011). In other words, whether the focus in teaching writing skills is on the product, process, mastery of a specific genre or understanding of functions realized in writing by specific language forms, learners can draw upon a range of strategies that can facilitate the attainment of the goals set by their instructors.

L2 writing strategies have been classified in many ways which differ as a function of their comprehensiveness, the level of detail of the specific purposes for which such strategies can be deployed. Zhang (2008), for example, focuses on strategic actions that have received the most attention in research studies and frames his discussion around the division of these actions into *planning* (e.g., the language used), *translation* (e.g., behavior of skilled and unskilled writers), *restructuring* (e.g., ideational, textual and linguistic), and *backtracking* (e.g., the choice of the first or second language for this purpose). Cohen (2010), in turn, gives examples of *basic writing strategies* (e.g., planning how to write an academic essay, making an effort to write different types of texts in the target

language), strategies used while writing an essay (e.g., postponing editing of the writing until all the ideas have been written down), and *strategies used once a draft essay has been written* (e.g., revising the essay once or twice to improve the language and content). Oxford (2011) also provides examples of L2 writing strategies but does so with respect to some of the instructional approaches mentioned above, namely the *writing process approach* (e.g., planning, drafting, revising), the *genre approach* (e.g., identifying the purpose, attending to the context), and the *functional approach* (dividing a paragraph into parts, determining the purpose of each part). Perhaps the most comprehensive taxonomy of L2 writing strategies can be found in Manchón (2001), and Manchón, Roca de Larios and Murphy (2007), who make a vital distinction between a *broad conceptualization* and a *narrow conceptualization* of these strategies. When it comes to the former, it has underlain two lines of inquiry, one that adopts a *learner-internal perspective* where "(...) writing strategies are explicitly or implicitly equated with how L2 writers go about composing, i.e., with any action employed in the act of producing a text" (2007, p. 231), and the other that embraces a *socio-cognitive perspective*, which focuses on "(...) strategies from the perspective of the actions carried out by L2 learners to respond to the demands encountered in the discourse community where they write or learn to write". The specific classifications proposed within each of the two perspectives vary, with researchers adopting the learner-internal view focusing upon various macro-processes (e.g., planning) or dividing strategies in accordance with well-known taxonomies of strategic devices, such as that put forward by Oxford (1990), whereas those in favor of the socio-cognitive stance might, for example, break down L2 writing strategies into seeking assistance, self-regulation, stimulation, use of tools and language practice (cf. Cummins, Busch, & Zhou, 2002). As regards the narrow characterization, it focuses solely on learner-internal processes and includes two sets of specific phenomena in the course of writing, that is the employment of *control-mechanisms* (e.g., self-regulation) and *problem-solving devices* (e.g., an attempt to cope with a linguistic problem, coming up with an alternative).

The methodology of research into the strategies that learners fall back upon when creating written texts mirrors to a large extent the dominant trends in empirical investigations of general language learning strategies (cf. Pawlak, 2009). Thus, as demonstrated by Manchón, Roca de Larios and Murphy (2007) in their overview, researchers have employed both cross-sectional and longitudinal designs, opting for case studies, experimental studies and survey studies. As regards the procedures of data collection, both retrospection and introspection have been used. The former has mainly relied on questionnaires, either modifications of existing tools, such as Oxford's (199) *Strategy Inventory for Language Learning* (SILL) or instruments specifically developed for the purpose of

a given study, interviews, or some kind of combination of both (e.g., Grainger, 2005), with a view to identifying general patterns. Since the goal of the latter is to offer insight into the use of writing strategies as learners are engaged in the act of composing, it involves the application of such procedures as think-aloud protocols or immediate recall, with the caveat that such data sources are often augmented with direct observation, text analysis and the like (e.g., Alhaisoni, 2012). Moving on to the main foci of research into L2 writing strategies, Manchón, Roca de Larios and Murphy (2007) show that the relevant studies have zoomed in on four main areas, that is: (1) strategies used by L2 writers (e.g., the use of the learners' L1 in the planning, writing, revision and monitoring process), (2) variables affecting writing strategy use (e.g., writer-internal factors, such as the level of L2 proficiency, and writer-external factors, such as the cognitive demands of the writing task), (3) transfer of strategies across languages (e.g., the role of proficiency, learners' goals, maintenance of L1 standards), and (4) the effect of instruction on the use of strategies (e.g., the importance of teacher training, duration and the presence of a metacognitive component). The synthesis of the empirical findings in these four domains allowed the authors to arrive at some, however tentative, generalizations, which are as follows: "(1) L2 writers implement a wide range of general and specific strategic actions in their attempt to learn to write and to express themselves in writing in an L2, (2) given the socio-cognitive dimensions of composing, the L2 writer's strategic behavior is dependent on both learner-internal and learner-external variables, and (3) the writer's strategic behavior is mediated by the instruction received and can be modified through strategy instruction (...)" (2007, p. 248). Obviously, there is an obvious need to constantly verify whether and to what extent these generalizations hold up in various education contexts, instructional settings as well as specific student groups, an assumption that provided an impetus for the study reported below.

3. The study

3.1. Aims and research questions

The study was intended to investigate the use of L2 writing strategies by advanced learners of English as they were composing a specific text type (i.e., a summary), taking into account both the actions directly related to the process of constructing this piece of writing and those drawn upon in response to some external demands. Consequently, the research project can be said to fall into the realm of the broad conceptualization of L2 writing strategies, integrating at the same time the learner-internal and the socio-cognitive perspective that this conceptualization embraces. More precisely, the following research questions were addressed in the course of the study:

- What are the patterns of L2 writing strategies used by advanced learners of English, both in general and with respect to composing summaries?
- What are the dominant types of L2 writing strategies employed before, during and after the performance of the task?
- Which L2 writing strategies are used to overcome problems that students encounter in the course of summarizing?
- Which writing strategies are considered to be the most helpful in completing the task?

3.2. Participants

The participants of the study were 36 third-year students majoring in English in a Department of English Studies attending three different groups, 26 of whom were females and 10 males. As found from the demographic section of the questionnaire used for the purpose of data collection (see section 3.3. below), their average experience in learning English amounted to ca. 11 years, which indicates that for the majority of them formal instruction must have started some time in elementary school. The students were quite convinced of the importance of writing in learning a foreign language, as is evident in their assessment of 4.26 on a scale from 1 (lowest) to 6 (highest). Such a high value can in all likelihood be attributed to the fact that, in order to get a BA degree, they are required to complete a thesis devoted to literature, culture, linguistics or foreign language pedagogy, a task which clearly calls for a considerable level of expertise in composing academic texts. It can also be the corollary of the fact that many of the participants apparently lacked the requisite expertise, as visible in the fact that the mean semester grade in the writing class amounted to 3.63, with the rating scale from 2 (lowest) to 5 (highest). It would seem that, being aware of their deficient writing competence and the prospect of having to fulfill the mandatory requirement for the completion of the BA program, the participants were also cognizant of the need to improve in this area, which found a reflection in their opinions about the importance of writing skills. As is usually the case with BA programs in foreign languages, over the three-year period the students had the benefit of an extensive English course, divided into several components, one of which was academic writing, and they had to attend a number of content classes (e.g., literature, linguistics, foreign language methodology, cultural studies), some of which also required them to compose different kinds of written discourse.

3.3. Data collection and analysis

In order to collect the necessary data concerning the use of writing strategies, the students were instructed to write a summary of an excerpt from an academic article during one class which was 90 minutes in length. The article was devoted to foreign language methodology and more specifically the role of learner autonomy in language learning, a subject with which the students were relatively familiar because of the courses that they had been attending, and the excerpt with which they were presented was 700 words in length. The selection of a summary as a genre that the participants were expected to compose was dictated by the fact that it was the main focus of the writing class in the last year of the BA program, it constituted part of their end-of-the-year examination in English, and the skill of summarizing was of paramount importance in writing a BA thesis. Thus, it was assumed that, on the one hand, the students would take the task seriously, regarding its performance as a valuable practice opportunity, and, on the other, that, completing such tasks on a regular basis, they would be more likely to resort to a wider range of writing strategies than in the case of genres that were not currently in the focus of attention.

Once the necessary instructions had been given and the excerpts had been distributed, the students set about summarizing the text, an activity that took about 60 minutes, and, right after the completion of the task, they were asked to provide an immediate report concerning the use of writing strategies. The data were collected by means of a questionnaire, which, apart from several items eliciting demographic information needed for the description of the participants in the previous section, included seven open-ended questions targeting both the strategies they usually employed with an eye to developing writing skills and the specific actions they had embarked upon in the course of summarizing the excerpt. The queries were as follows:

- What are your preferred ways of improving writing skills?
- What strategies did you use to prepare for the task?
- What strategies did you use when performing the task?
- What strategies did you use after performing the task?
- What did you pay attention to when you were writing?
- What did you do to overcome the problems that you encountered when writing?
- What helped you the most when you were performing the task?

In order to ward off potential misunderstandings and to ensure that the responses were indeed reflective of the strategic actions the students engaged in, the entire survey was worded in Polish and the participants were given a choice as to whether to respond in their mother tongue or the target language, with

the vast majority going for the former option. It should also be explained at this point that the decision to include an item concerning general use of L2 writing strategies was related to the researchers' assumption that the actions that the students reported engaging in in the process of producing the summary might be related to or perhaps even determined by their general approach to the development of writing skills. The collected data were subjected to qualitative analysis which consisted in identifying recurring patterns in the responses the participants supplied to the open-ended questions. Following the guidelines offered by Miles and Huberman (1994), this involved the procedures of data reduction, data display, conclusion drawing and verification, with the responses being read and reread, coded and recoded, and unclear or inconsistent instances being discussed by the two researchers and categorized on this basis.

3.4. Results

The presentation of the findings in this subsection follows the order in which the open-ended questions were listed in the questionnaire, starting with the preferred strategies for improving writing skills in general that the participants mentioned, followed by the specific actions they reported falling back upon when tackling the task of summarizing the article excerpts. When it comes to favorite ways of developing their writing competence, the analysis of the data showed that the students appreciated in particular different forms of practice, which consisted in reading and writing a diversity of texts to familiarize themselves with specific genres. However, while the majority adopted a broad view in responding to this question, referring to strategies that they fell back upon to become more adept in creating different types of written texts, there were also some participants who interpreted it narrowly, confining their answers to improvement in composing summaries, which can in all likelihood be ascribed to the performance of the writing task in hand. The former pointed most frequently to such strategies as analyzing different text types, identifying useful words and phrases, and then deliberately trying to use them in their own writing, corresponding with native-speakers or other proficient users of the target language with the help of text and e-mail messages or different forms of synchronous computer-mediated communication, or simply attempting to create pieces of writing as often as possible on a variety of topics, sometimes within a self-imposed time limit. The latter mentioned reading different texts and trying to summarize them orally and in writing, analyzing the errors committed in previously composed summaries, and, with respect to the performance of specific tasks, going through a text several times, identifying its most important parts,

searching for keywords or coming up with a draft. The following responses or excerpts from responses illustrate some of these points:¹

- *The best way is to practice (...) practice makes perfect so I believe you should write a lot.*
- *Students should write a lot at home; the more I write, the better I become at writing (...).*
- *It is important to write frequently on whatever topic you like.*
- *Learning useful words, phrases and then writing the text in such a way so as to use them.*
- *Writing e-mails and texting people in English.*
- *I set myself a time limit within which I am to write a given piece; otherwise I will be doing it all day long.*
- *Reading the text twice, writing down keywords, making a draft and only then writing the summary.*

The first question dealing specifically with the writing task that the students were asked to perform focused upon the actions and thoughts that they engaged in prior to composing the summary. The strategies reported the most frequently at this stage included reading the text a few times, first, with a view to getting its gist and, second, with an eye to understanding detailed information, both of which served as a basis for pinpointing the key ideas that needed to be included in the final version of the summary. The participants drew on a number of techniques in order to facilitate this process, such as mentally constructing the structure of the text and constantly adjusting it, underlining the main points, highlighting the key words, trying to find their synonyms, looking up the meaning of difficult lexical items or ensuring that the crucial sentences would be paraphrased rather than quoted verbatim. Also worth mentioning are the metacognitive strategy of directed attention, as evident in attempts to eliminate distractions, and the affective strategy of self-encouragement, as seen in an effort to think positively about the task (cf. O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1990), with the crucial caveat that they were mentioned only by single students and did not constitute the core of their responses. Illustrative examples of these trends are provided below:

- *I read for general understanding and again for important details.*
- *I read the whole text, then read again paragraph by paragraph, underlining aspects that can help me build a summary.*
- *What counts is underlining most important ideas, reading twice, making a rough draft.*
- *I underlined the main points, eliminated less important information, read the text carefully twice and tried to think positively.*

¹ Both here and throughout the remainder of the paper, the excerpts are either translations of the students' responses by the present authors, or appear in their original form in situations when participants chose to use English when answering the open-ended questions.

- *I read the text a few times and underlined the most important sentences, explained new words using a dictionary.*
- *I tried to concentrate on the task, not to get distracted and to introduce references not to forget about it later on.*

Moving on to the strategies that the students reported falling back on as they were in fact putting together their summaries, they mirrored to a large extent those used when preparing for the completion of this task and involved, yet again, identifying the main ideas, underlining the key points, looking for synonyms or antonyms, and trying to paraphrase vital segments of the excerpt. Somewhat predictably perhaps, these actions were accompanied by frequent instances of rereading the text or its specific fragments, extracting the most crucial information from each paragraph, attending to sentence structure, constantly ensuring that the summary reflected the content of the original, as well as checking the draft for accuracy, coherence and cohesion. What does come as a surprise, however, is the fact that two participants manifested reliance on their mother tongue when composing the summary, writing the first draft in Polish and only later translating it into English, as it would seem that such practices should be absent from the strategic repertoire of students who were just about to graduate from a BA program and were therefore required to represent an expert level of mastery of the target language. The following excerpts exemplify the most typical strategies used in the course of composing:

- *I tried to find out what the main idea was, underlined key points and rewrote them in my own words as a draft; then I read the text once more to make sure I didn't skip anything and then I thought how to arrange my sentences so that they make a coherent whole; next I rewrote the text checking for grammar and vocabulary mistakes.*
- *I tried to use as many synonyms as possible, formulating sentences in such a way that they do not stick too close to the original but keeping the original sequence of ideas.*
- *Reading the text, underlining important sentences, and writing the most important information in Polish in my own words.*

Once the task had been completed, the students appeared to be the most concerned with ensuring that their summaries were up to standard both with respect to content, organization and target language use, thus engaging in the metacognitive strategies of monitoring and self-evaluation. This was manifested in carefully reading the newly composed text and comparing it with the article excerpt, correcting the inaccuracies or inconsistencies that were identified, and, what is perhaps reflective of the admonitions given by their academic writing instructors and BA thesis supervisors, going to considerable lengths to ensure that the summary did not resemble the original too much, as this might trigger

accusations of plagiarism. Representative excerpts from the participants' responses follow:

- *I read the text and my summary and compared both texts.*
- *I read my summary from the beginning to the end and corrected where necessary.*
- *Making sure the text is coherent and grammatically correct.*
- *I read again and checked for errors. I also made sure my text did not stick to the original too much.*

When asked to report what they paid most attention to in the process of composing, the participants most often referred to such issues as making sure that the most crucial ideas were included in their summaries and that they in fact reflected the contents of the article, attempting to use varied, sophisticated lexical items and grammar structures, doing their utmost to ensure accuracy, cohesion, coherence, lack of repetitions and an adequate level of formality, and trying not to exceed the predetermined word limit. Once again, a priority for many of the students was ensuring that while their texts conveyed the key ideas communicated in the excerpt as closely as possible, the language was sufficiently different from that used in the original, as evident in their frequent efforts to search for suitable synonyms or to paraphrase key sentences. What can be seen here then is that throughout the process of composing the students were primarily preoccupied with the processes of monitoring and self-evaluation on different levels (i.e., with respect to content, organization, accuracy, use of specific target language forms), which testifies to considerable reliance on metacognitive strategies (cf. O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1990). The following examples are indicative of the main foci of attention that were reported by the participants:

- *Making sure that the summary reflects the original.*
- *I paid attention to the sentences I underlined and looked for synonyms, tried to paraphrase the text in such a way as to avoid the same word.*
- *I tried to include the most important information. I tried to avoid rewriting original sentences and to make sure I omitted the information I considered unimportant.*
- *I avoided repetition and made compound sentences.*
- *I made sure that the summary did not stick to the original too closely, e.g. sentence structure and vocabulary.*

The second last open-ended items included in the questionnaire pertained to the ways in which the participants had tackled the problems they had been confronted with when composing their summaries. The analysis of the responses demonstrated that difficulties of this kind could be divided into three categories, that is those that were related to the nature of the task that had to

be completed, such that were internal to the learner, and those that were connected with the conditions under which the task was being performed. As regards the first category, the students focused in particular on the characteristics of the excerpt which, in the opinion of some of them, was long, boring or difficult due to the issues touched upon and the terminology used, difficulty in selecting the most important ideas, the challenge involved in finding the right synonyms and paraphrasing parts of the text, and the need to comply with the imposed word limit. The second category was related to insufficient skills in summarizing, lack of adequate knowledge in the field of foreign language pedagogy or unfamiliarity with requisite lexis, fatigue as well as the need to focus on other priorities on that particular day, such as an upcoming test. Finally, the third category included diminished ability to concentrate on the task, mainly attributed to the noise in the classroom and the behavior of the peers, and the imposition of a time limit, which made extracting the most important ideas and paraphrasing them a daunting task.² Excerpts provided below are representative of the responses falling into each of the three categories:

- *Limited vocabulary in the field, understanding the text was difficult, selecting main points.*
- *I believe all information included in the text is important; I found it difficult to select; I cannot find better words than those used in the original text.*
- *Finding synonyms; the text was too long and I found it difficult to summarize it in 250 words.*
- *In general, writing summaries is problematic for me.*
- *Problems concentrating, fatigue, more important things than writing a summary like a test.*
- *The text was too long; it was noisy in the classroom; I found it difficult to concentrate.*
- *I could not concentrate because of noise and lack of vocabulary was also a problem.*

Finally, when requested to list things that had proved to be the most helpful in composing the summary, the vast majority of the respondents reported the use of a dictionary or a thesaurus, invaluable crutches which enabled them to look up the meaning of sophisticated lexical items and look for synonyms of the words from the original, an action that constitutes the cognitive strategy of resourcing. Almost equally common was consulting different aspects of the task with other students, either with the purpose of resolving vocabulary-related problems or picking their brains about the ideas to be included, which is a manifestation of the social strategies of asking questions or cooperating with others (cf.

² The authors are fully aware of the fact that assigning some problems to a particular category rather than another was to a large extent arbitrary, as, for example, the need to take a test in the following class can be regarded as both a problem that is internal to the learner and an inherent part of the conditions in which the task was being completed. In each such controversial case, the interpretation was agreed upon by the present authors and an attempt was made to maintain consistency throughout the analysis.

O'Malley & Chamot, 1990: Oxford, 1990). In addition, some of the participants indicated such issues as the properties of the excerpt to be summarized (e.g., its logical structure, clarity of the presented ideas), familiarity with the topic touched upon, sufficient mastery of the target language, expertise in writing academic texts, the employment of specific strategies in the process of summarizing (e.g., highlighting, adopting a holistic view of the text), the ability to critically self-evaluate one's own work, and, somewhat surprisingly, the knowledge of the criteria for evaluating such assignments. This last point is interesting because, on the one hand, it speaks to the students' preoccupation with formal assessment and final examinations even though they had been assured that the task was being assigned solely for research purposes, and, on the other hand, it indicates that familiarity with evaluation criteria may in some cases positively impact the process of writing, which constitutes a compelling indication of positive washback (cf. Brown, 2004; Hughes, 2003). The following examples illustrate some of these points:

- *A dictionary and consulting others about synonyms.*
- *Using a dictionary, my own strategies, consulting another person, self-correction, being critical about one's own writing,*
- *The clear structure of the text to be summarized and clarity of the information included; it facilitated comprehension of the text and made it easier to find synonyms and different phrases.*
- *My dictionary and experience gained while writing my diploma paper.*
- *Underlining information, reading again, working on the text as whole, not on its separate parts.*

4. Discussion

The analysis of the data offered valuable insights into the use of L2 writing strategies by English majors, both with respect to the ways in which they handle writing assignments in general and the processes in which they engaged in when composing a summary for the purpose of the present study. When it comes to the first research question, it is clear that the participants recognize the rather urgent need to improve their writing skills, which is perhaps the corollary of the increased importance of these skills in the last year of the BA program, not only because of immediate course and exam concerns but also, or perhaps primarily, on account of the requirement to write a thesis on a specific subject for successful completion of this program. Even though writing is emphasized and tested throughout the three-year course of study, it assumes special significance with the advent of the last year since composing a BA paper necessitates the use of academic language, the ability to synthesize, analyze and write up a description

of a study as well as close adherence to stringent formal criteria, issues that are often entirely novel to students and not easy to grapple with. Thus, the participants reported engaging in different types of practice, both naturalistic (e.g., corresponding with proficient language users) and formal (e.g., making the point of writing or summarizing different types of texts, analysis inadequacies of previous pieces of writing) in nature (cf. Oxford, 1990), sometimes emulating the conditions of in-class writing (e.g., inclusion of a time limit). This testifies to their awareness that improvement in writing hinges upon the amount of effort that they invest in the development of this skill on a regular basis, a situation that is clearly laudable. What is equally commendable is the realization that there is a close link between familiarity with different genres, which can be attained through reading numerous texts representing these genres, and the ability to compose their own pieces of writing representing these types of texts.

The remaining three research questions were concerned with the writing strategies that were applied in the course of summarizing the text, both with respect to the actions taken in the process of composing, the ways in which imminent problems were resolved and the techniques employed to facilitate the performance of the task. On the whole, the actions that the participants engaged in before, during and after writing the summary were quite predictable and beneficial, involving, among other things, extracting the main ideas, identifying key words, trying to find appropriate synonyms, paraphrasing key sentences, monitoring the written output in terms of content, language and organization, or going to great lengths to avoid plagiarism. Application of such strategies was in fact determined by the nature of the task as some of the things that need to be done when summarizing (e.g., checking with the original) would be superfluous in the case of a different genre (e.g., essay writing), while others (e.g., coming up with new ideas) are simply not applicable in this case. What may be some cause for concern is scant evidence for reliance on some metacognitive strategies, such as planning, the virtual absence of affective strategies, such as self-encouragement or lowering anxiety, or the use of the mother tongue when coming up with a draft. In fact, with reference to the third research question, some of the problems that the students reported can be traced back to infrequent employment of some of these strategic devices, since, for example, had they been better able to plan the task or control their emotions, they would have perhaps been more successful in dealing with choosing the ideas to be included in their summaries, getting around lexical difficulties, sticking to the word limit or responding to the time pressure. As for other difficulties, such as lack of experience in summarizing, inadequate knowledge of the topic and vocabulary related to it or the unpropitious conditions under which the task was performed, these can clearly be handled through pedagogic intervention, both

in terms of setting up instructional priorities, appropriate text selection or the organization of the task. It is also interesting to note that the students confined themselves to enumerating the problems that they were faced up with in the process of composing but stopped short of reporting ways of getting around them, which can likely be blamed on the way in which the question was formulated. Some insights in this respect can be obtained by responding to the final research question, because the participants pointed to the beneficial role of dictionaries or thesauri as well as cooperation with peers. Little is known, however, about the contribution of these actions to the process and product of composing since effective dictionary use requires considerable skill while excessive reliance on peers' assistance may be detrimental rather than helpful in some cases. What surely merits attention is the quality of the texts to be summarized, as poor writing may not lend itself for this purpose and exacerbate the problems that students may experience, as well as awareness of assessment criteria as these might affect the process of writing and its outcome in a positive manner.

While the study sheds light on the strategies that English majors draw upon when completing writing tasks and in particular when composing summaries, it suffers from several weaknesses. One of them is connected with the fact that only one data collection tool was used, which surely makes the interpretation of some of the findings difficult, if not impossible, a good case in point being the usefulness of some of the actions in which the students engaged as well as the quality of these actions (e.g., dictionary use). Had the researchers opted for employment of additional instruments, such as interviews with selected participants or analyses of the summaries in their presence, these issues could have been more appropriately addressed. It is also clear that the ways in which some of the questions were formulated might have substantially affected the responses, as was the case with the potential solutions to the problems the students encountered. In retrospect, the inclusion of closed-ended Likert-scale items concerning the use of specific writing strategies could have also proven to be beneficial. Finally, more attention should have been paid to controlling the conditions under which the task was performed because the noise and far too copious opportunities to consult peers might have negatively impacted the strategies that were used in the process of summarizing.

5. Conclusion

In the conclusion to their overview of existing research on composing strategies, Manchón, Roca de Larios and Murphy (2007) point to the most promising directions of such research, arguing, among other things, that it should be firmly grounded in theory, involve populations of younger and less proficient learners,

give more weight to the impact of strategies-based instruction, and be longitudinal rather than cross-sectional in nature. While the study reported in this paper does not meet these criteria and it is not free from methodological faults, its results are insightful in the sense that they offer crucial insights into the ways in which English majors approach the task of composing a summary and the factors that might have a bearing on the effectiveness and outcomes of this process. In addition to building up the existing empirical evidence on the application of L2 writing strategies with respect to specific types of texts, the findings may also turn out to be instrumental in shaping pedagogical practices, a contribution that can hardly be underestimated in light of the major challenge that writing skills pose for students at seemingly high proficiency levels. For such pedagogical proposals to be sound and practicable, however, further research is needed, in particular such that would explore the use of composing strategies in other types of writing tasks (e.g., essays, critical reviews, formal e-mails), preferably with the help of different data collection tools and in a more longitudinal manner. This is because only when ample data have been collected will it be possible to design effective training programs in the use of L2 writing strategies, such that would take account of the goals, needs and abilities of students majoring in English, the realities and exigencies of the programs they attend, as well as the expectations of the wider community.

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