

## Metacognitive Strategies Employed by EFL Writers in Integrated and Independent Writing Tasks

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**Abstract:** Good language learners use metacognitive strategies and are aware of the process of language learning. Due to the important role of metacognitive strategies, this study aimed at investigating the metacognitive strategies EFL learners apply while doing two types of writing tasks, namely, integrated and independent. To do so, 202 participants at intermediate proficiency level took part in this study. They were assigned to write a reading-to-write and a writing-only test task and after accomplishing each task, they filled out a writing metacognitive strategy inventory which was previously validated. The results indicated that no significant difference existed between the two tasks in metacognitive strategy use. Also, gender played no significant role in metacognitive strategy use and their interest in writing was weakly correlated with strategy use.

**Key words:** Metacognitive strategies • Writing, EFL learners

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### INTRODUCTION

Writing plays an important role in an academic context due to the value of communicating with others with appropriate discourse conventions and the value of the writers' perception and learning the domain-specific knowledge [1]. One important issue in testing every type of writing is that in the process of generating a text in L2, there may be some disruptions due to the need for lengthy searches for suitable lexical and syntactic options [2]. In this regard, it has been emphasized that a good writing relies on using strategies because at any moment, the writer encounters interrelated problems and one small change in writing a text may influence other ideas [3]. Therefore, it can be inferred that a writer needs strategies to be able to cope with these problems.

Almost all agree that a good language learner is someone who is metacognitively aware of the process of language learning and testing, applies metacognitive, cognitive and socio-affective strategies flexibly and effectively [4, 5, 6] and benefits from these strategies. Richards, Platt and Platt argue that metacognitive strategy use is affected by metacognitive knowledge which is influenced by L2 proficiency, age, experience, or L2 study duration [7]. Richards also claims that irrespective of the level of proficiency of the writers, they all need to learn strategies in order to write smoothly and autonomously

[8]. In addition, Weigle asserts that strategic competence is a bridge between one's language knowledge and the exterior situation. She continues that these strategies can distinguish between novice and experienced writers [2].

A number of studies have investigated the differences between reading-to-write and writing-only tasks in the second language context. They have addressed different issues such as the resulting writing, topic effect, language proficiency, rater reliability and the process. However, few studies have investigated the L2 writers' processes in accomplishing performance-based test tasks. To meet this need, a few studies have focused on issues related to the processes of L2 writing-only and reading-to-write tasks which have provided some insights into task interpretation, decision-making, strategies and construct. In other words, these studies inform us about the process and strategies employed by test takers in writing-only and reading-to-write tasks. They have revealed some similarities in the writing processes of reading-to-write and writing-only tasks but at the same time they presented information about differences across different reading-to-write tasks.

Asención conducted a validation study of two reading-to-write tasks, namely, a summary and a reflective essay, using think-aloud protocols. The participants in this study were 89 learners of English at two proficiency levels of intermediate and advanced who attended at two

instructional settings of ESL and EFL. She also had 50 native speakers of English. Generally, she found that the highest number of think-aloud segments were related to monitoring, the second highest were about planning and finally the lowest categories were related to organizing, selecting and connecting. The results indicated that native speakers and ESL writers spent much time planning their content and were more aware of their personal reactions to the source text in comparison with the EFL writers. Instead, the EFL writers spent more time on the linguistic issues and were more aware of language tasks and difficulties [9].

Plakans also conducted a qualitative approach to study the process of composing reading-to-write and writing-only tasks. Ten participants took part in two interviews, before and after the task and two talk-aloud verbal protocol sessions for each type of tasks. The analysis of data indicated that overall, similar steps were taken in the processes of both tasks, although the way they approached each step and the amount of time spent on each step was different. It was also found that interest and experience of the writers influenced the process of composing and this effect was stronger in reading-to-write tasks. She concluded that if the writers are interested, reading the text before writing makes the process more constructive, while for other writers the process of accomplishing the two tasks did not produce much difference and they had less thinking before writing. Moreover, in their writing-only task process, nearly all the writers spent much time on planning, whereas in the reading-to-write tasks, those interested ones compared their own opinions in relation to the given text, interacted more and tried their best to take a position [10].

In another study, 34 intermediate ESL adults took two tests, one with thematically-related reading and writing tasks and one with unrelated reading and writing. The results of his study indicated that the thematic connection between the reading and writing modules enhanced both the processes and the products of their writing tasks. The researcher suggests that writing strategies may differ between reading-to-write and writing-only tasks because of the effect of source texts on the writing process. He reported eight types of strategies employed by the test takers when completing the reading-to-write task: considering task problems and weaknesses, considering content and form issues, monitoring text production, goal-oriented summarizing, adjusting plans and styles, revising based on goal, generating supplementary content and revising arguments [11].

Sasaki added the variable of L2 writing expertise to the strategies used by the writers and found that experts and more skilled writers employed more strategies, although the experts used a greater variety of strategies. After instruction, it was found that novices used more strategies such as rereading and global planning. Nonetheless, Sasaki concluded that skill and expertise had stronger effects on the writing process than the instruction [12]. On the other hand, Boshier used a stimulated recall protocol and revealed that there may be a writing expertise independent of the participants' L2 proficiency which influences their L2 writing [13]. Also, in a study conducted on five Portuguese who wrote summaries in English, it was found that medium proficiency writers used fewer strategies, whereas lower proficiency group used more strategies [14].

Many of the studies conducted on the process of these two tasks so far had a rather small number of participants, just worked on strategy use in general and didn't consider gender as a variable. There is also much controversy in the results of the existing studies. In addition, the differences in the studies in terms of tasks, rubrics and the results have made it difficult to make a solid conclusion. Furthermore, there are very few studies that have worked on the strategies and, to the knowledge of the researcher, no study was found on the metacognitive strategies proposed by Bachman and Palmer [15]. The present study was, thus, motivated by the limitations of the previous studies and aimed at investigating the metacognitive strategies employed by Iranian EFL learners at intermediate proficiency level while doing writing-only and reading-to-write tasks for academic English writing assessment. The information obtained in this research will illuminate the differences between the metacognitive strategies used in these tasks and provide a clear picture of the underlying abilities of the second language learners. To achieve this aim, the researchers intended to answer three questions:

- Are there any differences in the nature of metacognitive strategies employed by EFL learners in reading-to-write and writing-only test tasks?
- Does gender affect the metacognitive strategy use by EFL learners in reading-to-write and writing-only test tasks?
- Is there any relationship between EFL learners' interest in writing and their metacognitive strategy use in reading-to-write and writing-only test tasks?

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

**Participants:** The participants were 202 university students with different majors who participated in a TOEFL examination and their TOEFL scores were in the range of 370-583. Among the participants 91 (45%) were male and 111 (55%) were female students.

**Instruments:** To measure the metacognitive strategies of the participants, three instruments were employed: the metacognitive strategy inventory (MSI), a reading-to-write task and a writing-only task. Moreover, a TOEFL exam was administered to measure their proficiency level.

**Metacognitive Strategy Inventory:** The inventory was designed and developed based on strategic competence proposed in Bachman and Palmer's model of communicative language ability [15]. They postulated it as consisting of three major components, namely, goal setting, assessment and planning. The inventory incorporated two parts, one for collecting some demographic information such as participants' gender, age, years of studying English, their interests in writing and a self-assessment question about how they evaluated their writing ability. The second part consisted of statements concerning the metacognitive strategies based on a five-point Likert scale format with options ranging from 1 (never true of me) to 5 (always true of me).

**Writing Tasks:** A prompt for the independent task and a passage for the reading-to-write task were selected from the TOEFL materials. Then, appropriate prompt and precise instructions were added to the integrated task to provide the students with the details about how to work on it.

**TOEFL Exam:** In order to evaluate the participants' English proficiency level, a complete paper-based TOEFL sample was selected from one of the TOEFL preparation books to determine the proficiency level of the participants.

**Procedures:** The first job of the researchers was to assess the content validity of the inventory. Therefore, it was given to nine experts in the field, five with Ph.D degree and four M.A. holders to comment on the items for relevance and their necessity and usefulness. The content validity ratio (CVR) and content validity index (CVI) were

calculated for all the questions. The mean CVR and CVI for the questionnaire were found to be 0.82 and 0.91 showing acceptable indexes [16]. Then a sample of 296 students (187 females and 109 males) with the mean age of  $24.20 \pm 8.62$  years old from five language institutes who were studying at intermediate level participated in the pilot study. The result of a factor analysis revealed that the questionnaire consisted of two main constructs; assessment and planning. It was also found that assessment embraced three types, 1. how well one has done, 2. what one has to work with and what is needed, 3. the desirability of the task. Cronbach's alpha was computed and it was found that alpha for the 29 items was .88 indicating a reasonable index of internal consistency reliability.

Afterwards, in one session the TOEFL exam was administered in different universities for those who were volunteers to take part in the study. After they completed the writing-only and the integrated tasks they filled out the questionnaire. The data obtained from the questionnaires were fed in SPSS software for statistical analysis.

## **RESULTS**

To probe the first question, i.e., whether there are any differences in the nature of metacognitive strategies employed by EFL learners in reading-to-write and writing-only test tasks, a paired t-test was run to see whether there were any differences between the mean scores of reading-to-write and writing-only metacognitive strategies used while doing the test tasks (Table 1).

As Table 1 demonstrates, the mean scores of metacognitive strategies employed by the participants are almost equal in the two writing tasks (writing-only task=3.6, reading-to-write task=3.57). The obtained *p* value is bigger than .05 and the critical *t* with *df* of 201 (1.96) is bigger than the calculated *t* (1.68). All these results reflect that the null hypothesis can be confirmed because the difference between the two means was not significant.

Further calculations were conducted to investigate the differences between the four components of metacognitive strategy (1. assessment: how well one has done, 2. assessment: what one has to work with and what is needed, 3. assessment: the desirability of the task, 4. planning) in the two writing tasks. Four separate paired samples t-tests were subsequently calculated (Table 2).

Table 1: Paired Samples T-Test for the Differences in the Metacognitive Strategies Used in the Two Writing Tasks

	Mean	SEM	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
W	3.6	.037			
RW	3.57	.036	1.68	201	.094

W: writing-only taskRW: reading-to-write task

Table 2: Paired Samples T-Test for the Differences in the Four Components of Metacognitive Strategy in the Two Tasks

Component	Mean difference	SEM	t	Sig. (2-tailed)
1 W & RW	.037	.028	1.3	.195
2 W & RW	.022	.02	1.12	.262
3 W & RW	-.009	.036	-.262	.262
4 W & RW	.046	.025	1.83	.069

W: writing-only taskRW: reading-to-write task

Table 3: Bootstrap for Paired Sample Test for the Differences in the Four Components of Metacognitive Strategy Used in the Two Tasks

Components	Mean difference	Bias	Bootstrap <sup>a</sup>		Sig. (2-tailed)
			Std. Error		
1 W & RW	.037	.001	.028		.199
2 W & RW	.022	.000	.02		.280
3 W & RW	-.009	.001	.036		.798
4 W & RW	.046	.001	.025		.073

a. Unless otherwise noted, bootstrap results are based on 1000 bootstrap samples

W: writing-only taskRW: reading-to-write task

Table 4: Binomial Test for Equality of Gender Proportion

	Category	N	Observed Prop.	Test Prop.	Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)
Gender	Female	111	0.55	.50	0.18 <sup>a</sup>
	Male	91	0.45		
	Total	202	1.00		

a. Based on Z approximation.

Table 5: Independent Samples T-Tests for the Gender Differences in the Four Types of Metacognitive Strategies

Components		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances				T-Test for Equality of Means		
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean difference	Std. error difference
W	1	3.014	.084	.599	200	.55	.058	.098
	2	.931	.336	.357	200	.722	.027	.075
	3	1.436	.232	.701	200	.484	.089	.127
	4	3.001	.085	.811	200	.418	.078	.097
RW	1	3.721	.055	1.008	200	.314	.102	.101
	2	.719	.398	.044	200	.965	.003	.074
	3	.904	.343	.209	200	.835	.025	.121
	4	1.703	.193	.236	200	.814	.022	.095

W: writing-only taskRW: reading-to-write task

Table 6: Spearman's Rho Test for the Relationship Between Interest in Writing and the Two Test Tasks

			RW	W
Spearman's rho	Interest	Correlation Coefficient	0.248**	0.200
		Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	0.004
		N	202	202

\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

As it is demonstrated in Table 2, all the  $p$  values are greater than .05. Thus, no significant differences could be observed in each pair. In component 3, it can be seen that the mean difference is negative indicating that they used this strategy less in writing-only than in reading-to-write test task. To assure this lack of difference a bootstrap for paired sample test was also run. This way, one can randomly sample from the original dataset to obtain statistical estimates. This statistic can be used to test the means for two samples and examine the reliability of the results. The results of the bootstrap confirmed the results of the four paired  $t$ -tests (Table 3).

To find the answer to the second research question, i.e. whether gender affects the metacognitive strategy use by EFL learners in reading-to-write and writing-only test tasks, first a non-parametric binomial test was conducted to test the equality of the number of male and female participants. This test is used with categorical data where the null hypothesis is that the two groups are equally distributed. The results indicated that the difference was not significant with  $p$  value of 0.18 (Table 4).

Afterwards, eight independent samples  $t$ -tests were conducted. Since it was observed that the Levene's tests for equality of variances were not statistically significant ( $p = 0.05$ ), the first lines of the table shown in SPSS were reported here (Table 5).

As it can be seen in Table 5, in all cases the observed  $t$  (0.599, 0.357, 0.701, 0.811, 1.008, 0.044, 0.209 and 0.236) is smaller than critical  $t$  (1.96) at  $p < 0.05$  with 200 degrees of freedom indicating that no significant differences existed between men and women in using metacognitive strategies in each component of the questionnaire.

Finally, to investigate the relationship between the participants' interest in writing and the metacognitive strategies they had employed while reading-to-write and writing-only tasks, two Spearman's rho tests were conducted. Spearman's rho was used because their interest in writing was measured on an ordinal variable, while their strategy use was interval. It was found that the relationship between their interest and strategy use in both tasks was statistically significant ( $p = 0.05$ ). Although the relationship was significant, the correlation of 0.1 to 0.29 is considered as a weak one [17]. In this study, the correlation coefficient for reading-to-write task was .248 and for writing-only task, it was .2. This level of significance may be due to the large samples ( $N=100+$ ) taking part in this study because in such a large sample, very small correlations may be statistically significant (Table 6).

## DISCUSSION

The first research question aimed at investigating whether there were any differences in the nature of metacognitive strategies employed by EFL learners in reading-to-write and writing-only test tasks. Holistic analysis indicated no significant differences in the metacognitive strategies that participants had used while doing these two tasks. Similarly, when the differences between the four components in the two types of writing tasks were examined, it was found that no statistically significant differences could be observed. Regarding the effect of gender on metacognitive strategy use, it was also found that gender played no role in the strategy use among the participants. Finally, the results revealed that the participants' interest in writing had a weak correlation with their strategy use.

The results indicated that components 1, 2 and 4, though there was no significant difference between them, had been used more in the writing-only task. It may be because the participants had to rely on their own and not the given text. This caused them to use a little more metacognitive strategies so that they could deal with the problems they faced. However, the third component of the metacognitive strategy was used more in the reading-to-write task. It may be because when they had a text, they had less planning, less assessment of their needs and less assessment of how well they have done. They could get all these from the text as it acted as a model for doing the task.

Other studies also had similar findings; for example, it had been found that similar steps were taken for the two tasks, though the way they approached each step and the amount of time they spent on each step differed [10]. That is, "two categories were eliminated in the writing-only task: 'reading and rereading source texts' in preparing to write and 'using source texts' in writing" (10, p. 95). On the other hand, Esmaeili concluded that reading module affected the participants' writing and they adjusted their writing based on what they had read. Actually, the reading module enhanced both the process and the product of the writing tasks. He asserted that strategies such as borrowing words and phrases were just used in the reading-to-write task [11]. Though he asserted that strategies differ in reading-to-writing and writing-only tasks, the first research hypothesis is in line with the findings of other studies [10, 19, 20]. It can be concluded that these two tasks can be two distinct forms of the same construct because they are comparable both in process and metacognitive strategy use.

One of the factors that have been largely investigated to determine its effects on strategy use is gender. However, concerning the role of gender in metacognitive strategy use, no study related to the process of integrated and independent writing tasks was found to have worked on gender differences. Among those who had worked on the process of these two writing tasks, some have just worked on female participants [21, 22, 23]; others have worked on both genders but did not consider this issue in their findings [24, 18, 25, 11, 12]; finally, some experts didn't mention anything about gender [26, 27, 28, 10, 29]. However, controversies can be seen in the findings of those who worked on the learning strategies and included gender differences, as well. For example, using SILL (Strategy Inventory for Language Learning by Oxford, 1990), some researchers found that females used strategies more as compared to males [30, 31]. By contrast, Phakiti found that males used metacognitive strategies more than females in L2 reading performance [32]. On the other hand, others found no gender differences in strategy use. For example, Yilmaz used SILL to investigate the relationship between different factors and language learning strategy use and found no significant difference between male and female participants in any of the strategies included in the questionnaire, except the affective strategies which were used by females more often [33]. Similarly, McMullen found no significant difference between men and women in strategy use while writing, although females used strategies more frequently [34]. Others who worked on Iranian students found no gender differences in strategy use [35, 36, 37]. Furthermore, an investigation of the learning strategies of EFL learners revealed that gender had no significant impact on the choice of metacognitive strategies [38]. Kummin and Rahman also used Motivated Strategies for Learning Questionnaire (MSLQ) to assess both cognitive and metacognitive strategies and found no significant differences in the use of metacognitive strategies by gender [39]. Given that most of the findings reveal no gender differences in strategy use, it can be concluded that the results presented in the present study that gender plays no important role in the employment of metacognitive strategies can be confirmed to a great extent.

Regarding the role of interest in writing, it was noticed that interest and experience of the participants influenced the process of writing [10]. In other words, interested participants read the given text more carefully and this made the process of reading-to-write more

constructive. Actually, the less interested ones had less interaction with the given text and spent less time on planning. However, in this study it was found that although the participants' interest had a significant relationship with the metacognitive strategies employed in writing-only and reading-to-write tasks, it was not meaningful. One reason could be the large number of the participants. Another reason was because of the time of test administration; that is, it was set after the classes when they were free. Thus, most of them may have been tired after their own classes and so their interest has not led to applying more strategies. Or, it may be because strategies are not normally introduced in writing classes; therefore, the participants were not familiar with strategies in order to apply them, though they were interested in writing. It seems that more research is needed in this regard to find a more reliable answer.

## CONCLUSION

The findings of this research improve our insight of the metacognitive strategy use in two tasks of writing-only and reading-to-write. It can be concluded that the presence of a text does not change the metacognitive strategies EFL learners apply while writing. However, since the participants who took part in this study didn't use metacognitive strategies at an acceptable level, teachers are expected to guide students in the process of writing tasks by providing them with examples and teaching metacognitive strategies and practicing them in the classes so that students become familiar with these strategies and make use of them while doing their writing tasks.

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