



The Effects of Integrating Writing Strategy Instruction on Iraqi EFL High School Students Writing Development

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Abstract

This study investigated the impact of writing strategy instruction on the writing development and strategy use of Iraqi EFL high school students. Employing a mixed-methods, quasi-experimental design, the study compared an experimental group (EG) receiving explicit writing strategy instruction to a control group (CG) receiving standard instruction. Quantitative data from pre- and post-tests revealed that the EG demonstrated significantly greater improvement in writing scores and increased use of metacognitive, cognitive, and socio/affective writing strategies compared to the CG. Qualitative data from student reflective journals indicated a shift from unstructured writing habits to more conscious and deliberate strategy application. The findings support cognitive and metacognitive theories of writing and highlight the effectiveness of explicit writing strategy instruction in enhancing EFL writing skills.

Paper Info

Keywords

EFL education, writing strategy instruction, writing development.

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1. Introduction

The significance of English as a global language is massive. It is crucial in international communication, business and academia (Crystal, 2003); thus emphasizes the importance of English proficiency in our globalised era. In order to learn the language, student needs to have 4 basic skills: reading, writing, listening, and speaking. These abilities interact and contribute to the overall language proficiency (Mohammad et al., 2020). In such skills, writing, in particular, is considered to be difficult for English as a foreign language (EFL) learners (Mohammad et al., 2020). Writing is important to express thoughts, ideas, and attitudes, and the acquisition of this ability can have a significant effect on academic achievement and the

opportunities available in the future (Ibnian, 2017; Nasser, 2019). Notwithstanding, writing has usually been reported as the most difficult language skill to develop by EFL learners compared to its counterparts listening, speaking, reading (Hedge, 1988; Nunan, 1989). This is because the process of writing involves the combination of idea generation, grammatical accuracy, syntactic competence and rich vocabulary (Hedge, 1988; Nunan, 1989; Fareed, 2016). Learners often struggle with developing effective writing skills due to difficulties in understanding and applying English grammatical rules, structuring sentences correctly, and choosing appropriate vocabulary (Fareed, 2016). Time constraints and the need for extensive practice also contribute to the difficulty (Hedge, 2000). Motivation plays a crucial role; a lack of motivation, often stemming from fear of failure or uncertainty, can significantly hinder progress (Harmer, 2006a). Limited reading also hinders their writing because reading provides exposure to a broad range of vocabulary, sentence structures, and organizational patterns (Harmer, 2006b; Eisterhold, 1997). Native language interference is another factor; learners often think in their native language and translate directly into English, resulting in awkward and incoherent writing (Friedlander, 1997). Some research shows students who are native to Vietnam seem to show high interest in learning speaking, reading and listening compared to writing which makes writing more problematic (Nguyen, 2011; Trinh, 2014).

For Arab EFL learners, these general difficulties are compounded by specific linguistic and cultural factors (Alsamadani, 2010; Abu Rass, 2015). Writing in a second language is more difficult because it requires a high level of proficiency in syntax, semantics, and writing from other cultures (Alsamadani, 2010). Students also think that if they can master their first language well, then they will be able to transfer that same proficiency to their second language (Kereni, 2004; Al Fadda, 2012). The habit of transferring structures and rhetorical styles from Arabic to English, which has a very different approach to academic writing, can lead to writing that is considered ineffective in English (Alfaki, 2015; Al Fadda, 2012; Alenazi, 2018; Klimova, 2014). As a consequence, some university L2 students feel confused, demotivated, and show a negative attitude towards writing in general (Gere, 1987; Sharples, 1993; Erkan & Saban, 2011).

Iraqi EFL learners encounter distinct obstacles shaped by the country's particular conditions. Studies have revealed prevalent issues such as incorrect capitalization, inadequate assessment rubrics, a lack of ideas, and grammatical shortcomings (Mohammad et al., 2023). Many students enter universities with insufficient English proficiency, grappling with fundamental writing skills like idea generation, organization, grammar, and vocabulary (Nunan, 1999). Research highlights that Iraqi EFL learners frequently make errors in grammatical structures and coherence (Ali, 2012; Jasim, 2012). Furthermore, the stress in the post-conflict period also creates a feeling of life being unjust and hopeless that might undermine performance academically (Yahya, 2017; Abdul-Kareem 2014). Confronting this situation requires well-prepared, committed and empathetic teachers who are able to establish the necessary learning environment and cater for students' cultural and social requirements (Elttayef & Hussein, 2017). With challenges like these in mind, the need to examine the role of writing strategy instruction as a catalyst for increasing students' writing development is important. This study aimed at investigating the impact of writing strategy instruction on the writing proficiency of Iraqi EFL high

school students and their use of writing strategies. This will inform targeted interventions and professional development initiatives designed to enhance the quality of EFL instruction and improve students' writing skills. To address these aims, the study explored the following research questions:

1. Does writing strategy instruction improve Iraqi EFL high school students' writing development?
2. Does writing strategy instruction improve students' use of writing strategies?
3. What are the perceived changes in writing strategy use and writing processes reported by Iraqi EFL high school students who receive writing strategy instruction?

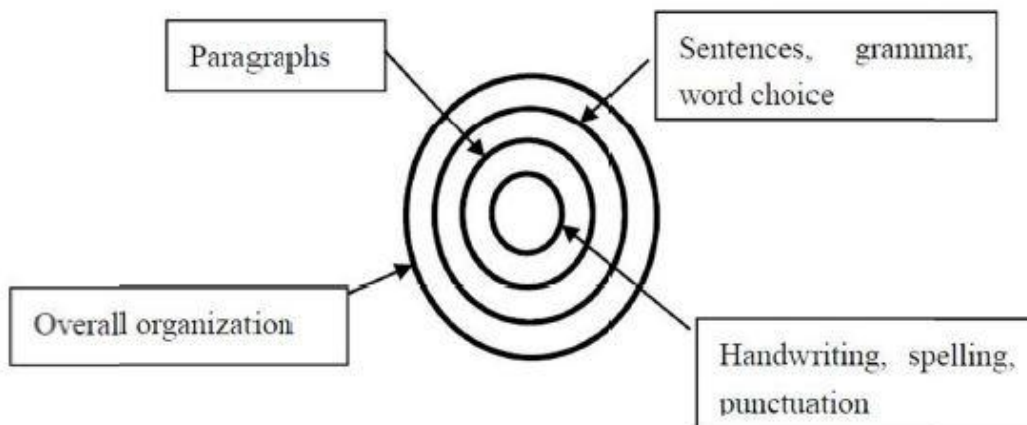
This research sought to contribute to the body of knowledge on effective pedagogical interventions in EFL writing, particularly within contexts facing unique socio-cultural and educational challenges. By specifically investigating the impact of writing strategy instruction on Iraqi EFL high school students, this study aimed to provide empirical evidence that can inform the development of more targeted and effective teaching methodologies. The ultimate goal is to empower EFL learners with the skills and confidence necessary to become successful and proficient writers in English, thereby enhancing their academic and professional opportunities.

2. Literature Review

Writing is a crucial skill in learning a foreign language, encompassing various sub-skills such as composing, spelling, and handwriting. To produce any written work, students must organize their ideas effectively. Given that writing lacks direct interaction between the writer and the reader, clarity is essential. Tuan (2010) emphasizes that with more practice, students enhance their writing abilities. However, Al-Gharabally (2015) notes that writing often becomes a “means of evaluation,” which can lead to students feeling assessed when instructors review their work. Writing takes many forms—creative, expository, editorial, epistolary, and more—and can be done in various ways, whether by hand or on a keyboard (Alakeeli, 2013). Pangaribuan and Manik (2018) describe writing as a method for students to express their ideas, thoughts, opinions, and experiences. They also highlight that factors like grammar, vocabulary, punctuation, recognition, and spelling can influence writing quality. Reid (as cited in Damayanti, 2009) identifies three main purposes of writing: to explain, to entertain, and to persuade. Focusing on these purposes helps students progress through different stages of their writing. To achieve success in writing, accuracy and correctness in grammar, punctuation, vocabulary, word order, spelling, and capitalization are essential. McDonough et al. (2013) view writing as a means of practicing language, as writers strive to communicate their ideas. They categorize writing into six types: personal, public, creative, social, study, and institutional writing, as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Levels of Writing (after McDonough et al., 2013, p. 188)



Writing holds a pivotal role in foreign language acquisition, enabling learners to articulate thoughts and information through well-structured sentences (Nasser, 2018). Zemach et al. (2003) propose a four-stage process for effective paragraph writing, encompassing pre-writing, drafting, revising, and editing, each essential for producing refined written work. Pre-writing, the initial stage, focuses on selecting a topic and gathering pertinent ideas, serving as the foundational step in the writing process (Mogahed, 2013). Subsequently, drafting transforms these gathered notes into initial sentences, emphasizing the construction of logically sound statements (Gebhard, 2006). Revising then involves refining the draft by rearranging ideas, shaping meaning, and enhancing language, potentially including additions, corrections, or reordering of details. Finally, editing, or rewriting, constitutes the concluding stage, involving a meticulous review for errors in structure, content, and grammar, such as spelling, punctuation, subject-verb agreement, and verb tense usage, as well as mechanical errors (Zemach et al., 2003).

Writing Strategies

Writing, one of the four skills in a language, is usually regarded as the most difficult skill, whether in a first or second/foreign language (Richards & Renandya, 2002). Writing is a complex act that involves learners in active construction of ideas; organizing information across various text types; and revising and editing (Ferris & Hedgcock, 2011). Writing is often a source of frustration for many EFL learners. There were several problems in writing as have been documented to involve difficulty to develop ideas in a second/foreign language, weak organization, poor grammar use, incorrect vocabulary choice, and lack of strategic competence (Abas & Bakir, 2013; Kao & Reynoldsb, 2017; Myles, 2002).

Strategies of Writing have been suggested tools that could be beneficial to the learners in counteracting the problems. These strategies consist of procedures and activities that students can use to write more skillfully (Creswell, 2000; Graham, 2006). They are intentional decisions by the writer that are implemented to solve writing problems (Flower, 1998) and include strategies for generating ideas, planning, organizing, revising, and reflecting (Graham et al., 2013). Though in the past two decades, research had focused on different topics around learning strategies that L2/FL learners use when writing, such as the types of strategies that are used (Chien, 2012; Kao, 2010), the sociocultural context of using them (Lei, 2016; Simeon, 2016), and the use of strategies across various types of texts, tasks, and contexts (Bai, 2018; Kost, 2011). Most of these studies have focused on comparisons between more and less successful writers of strategy use and the strategy writers use is also has a great effect on scores written by them. Although descriptive research has shed light on students' writing problems and strategy use, the issue still remains about how best to help learners use effective strategies. This challenge involves investigating how to promote writing strategy instruction about elevating level of strategic awareness and metacognition (Harris et al., 2010).

Studies on Writing Strategy Instruction

Comprehensive literature reports exploring that a number of approaches to instruction can do wonders for EFL writing development. Miri et al. (2024) argue that literature can enhance critical thinking that in turn enhances creative writing skills of Iraqi EFL learners. Similarly, Awla et al. (2023) technology integration fosters interactive learning environment and boosts writing practices. Thongchalem and Jarunthawatchai (2020) reported similar findings on student's writing skills development as a result of scaffolding learning experiences. Chen (2022) focused on integrating writing strategy training in EFL teaching and found significant improvements in strategy use and writing performance in the experimental group. This investigation brought attention to the close relationship among strategic knowledge, strategic use, and writing performance. De Silva and Graham (2015) supported these findings by further providing evidence that writing strategy instruction was effective when embedded in a process oriented context.

Moreover, Cer (2019), Grenfell and Harris (2017) and Simeon (2016) among other scholars have found a number of components influencing skill building process and performance enhancement when it comes to EFL writing. Furthermore, current studies highlight the importance of cognitive and motivational factors on EFL writers (Teng, 2022). Resources such as ChatGPT have also been investigated for its viability to offer automated feedback and support (Baskara, 2023). Alenezi (2022) identified that blogging in lessons contributed to improving the positive attitude toward English writing, which will boost learners' engagement. Chen (2022) also found the effectiveness of structured teaching in facilitating strategic student learning. Mustafa and Shawkat's (2023) study demonstrated the benefits of strategy-based lessons in enhancing autonomous learning among university students, thus, encouraging autonomous learning. Further, creation of metacognitive skills has long been found in research to significantly affect writing engagement (Anderson, 2012). Journaling also fosters engagement and improves writing skills (Chanski, 2015; De Silva & Graham, 2015; Wenden, 1999). These studies collectively highlight the

importance of varied instructional approaches and cognitive-motivational aspects in the enhancement of EFL writing instruction and learners' achievements. But even with the existing research, much is left to be done in terms of these concepts in other domains. Studies conducted with the Iraqi environment troubled with such research. Accordingly, the present research attempts to demonstrate the extent to which strategy-based instruction is effective in developing writing for Iraqi EFL high-school learners.

3. Methodology

This classroom-based study, conducted in winter 2025, employed a mixed-methods, quasi-experimental design to examine the impact of writing strategy instruction on Iraqi EFL high school students' writing development and strategy use. Quantitative data, gathered through pre- and post-tests, and qualitative data, obtained from student reflective journals, were analyzed. The independent variable was writing strategy instruction, with writing development and strategy use as the dependent variables. Students were assigned to either an experimental group (EG), receiving writing strategy instruction, or a control group (CG), receiving standard instruction. This design enabled the assessment of the intervention's effects on both writing performance and strategy application.

Participants

Two intact 12th-grade classes from an Iraqi high school were selected for this study, consisting of students with six years of consecutive English language learning. To minimize confounding variables, the classes were chosen for their comparable EFL learning backgrounds. One class (Class A), initially comprising 30 students, was randomly assigned as the EG, while the other (Class B), also initially 30 students, served as the CG. However, upon further assessment using the Oxford Quick Placement Test (OQPT), only 27 students in the EG and 25 students in the CG demonstrated intermediate English proficiency, making them eligible for the study. The data from the remaining eight students, despite their participation, were excluded from the final analysis. Both groups participated in the same writing program, with the same instructor, materials, and assignments, for a duration of 14 weeks, with two hours of classes each week.

Research Tools

This study employed several research tools to assess English writing proficiency and strategy use among participants. The tools are detailed below:

Oxford Quick Placement Test (OQPT): To bring to surface the preexisting differences of the participants' overall English proficiency, the OQPT was given by the researcher prior to the commencement of the intervention. The results of the OQPT brought to light that the participating students possessed an intermediate level of English proficiency.

Writing Strategy Questionnaire (WSQ): A questionnaire (with constructs adapted from three existing English writing strategy inventories) was employed to measure students' writing strategies (Hwang & Lee, 2017; Petric & Czár, 2003; Raoofi et al., 2017). The questionnaire was translated into Arabic to facilitate better understanding by respondents. It included 5-point frequency scale (ranging from 'almost never' to 'almost always') to measure how often students were using certain writing strategies. The questionnaire also contained an initial part to collect personal data: sex, age, number of years of English learning and students' opinions about learning EFL writing. The validity of the questionnaire was verified by an EFL writing professional. In addition, a pilot test was also carried out to check the reliability of the questionnaire. Reliability The internal consistency of the metacognitive, cognitive, and social/affective strategy subscales was indicated by the calculated Cronbach's alpha coefficients for the three measures were .86, .80, and .87 respectively, indicating acceptable internal consistency. The WSQ was applied as pre-test and post-test to EG and CG in order to measure differences in participants' strategy use after attending the intervention.

Writing Performance Test: To evaluate the impact of the writing strategy instruction on students' writing proficiency, a writing performance test was administered both before and after the intervention. The test required students to compose opinion essays, approximately 300 words in length, in response to two distinct prompts. Students were allotted 40 minutes to complete each essay. The essays were assessed using a rubric adapted from Connor-Linton and Polio (2014) and Jacobs et al. (1981), which encompassed five key writing aspects: content (30 points), language use (25 points), organization (20 points), vocabulary (20 points), and mechanics (5 points), for a total score ranging from 0 to 100. The writing performance test was administered as a pre-test to both the EG and CG prior to the writing strategy training. Having brought to a successful completion the 14-week intervention period, the same writing performance test was given as a post-test to EG and CG to size up any changes in students' writing performances.

Reflective Journals: To accrue from deeper insights into the EG's evolving strategic awareness and writing process adjustments, and thereby approaching the third research question, reflective journals were tapped into. Students completed these journals at weeks 2, 8, and 14 of the intervention, providing data on their perceptions of writing strategies and their effectiveness.

Data Collection Procedure

Both the EG and CG completed the OQPT, WSQ, and the pre-test writing performance task. Drawing upon established models of strategy instruction from prior research (e.g., Chamot, 2005; Oxford, 2017), this study adapted and implemented a structured approach tailored to the specific needs of the Iraqi EFL high school student context. The in-class writing strategy instruction was delivered over four distinct phases:

1. **Strategic-Awareness Raising Phase:** The initial phase focused on increasing students' conscious awareness of their own writing processes. The teacher

facilitated this by employing “think-aloud” techniques, prompting students to reflect on their writing practices, thought processes, and challenges encountered during writing tasks. This encouraged metacognitive reflection and a greater understanding of their individual strategy use.

2. **Demonstration Phase:** In the second phase, the teacher explicitly modeled effective writing strategies relevant to different genres. This involved a “think-aloud” demonstration where the teacher composed writing pieces in front of the students, verbalizing the strategic thought processes and decisions made at each stage of the writing process (before, during, and after writing). This provided a clear and concrete example of how to apply specific strategies.
3. **Practice Phase:** Students then engaged in practice activities where they applied the modeled strategies to similar writing tasks. To support strategy application, a checklist was used to remind students of key strategies before, during, and after writing. In the later stages of the intervention (weeks 11-14), this scaffolding was gradually removed to promote greater independence and internalization of the strategies.
4. **Evaluation Phase:** To further promote metacognitive reflection, students were required to complete reflective journals immediately after completing writing tasks in class. These journals served as a platform for students to self-evaluate the effectiveness of the writing strategies they had employed and to identify areas for improvement.

The writing strategies that were explicitly taught to the EG were grounded in the framework of general model strategies, that has been suggested from Oxford (2017). The key strategy categories and sub-strategies are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1

Writing Strategies Taught to the EG

Writing Strategies	Sub-strategies and Speculation
Metacognitive Strategies	<p>Planning: Analyzing the task purpose; Using a graphic organizer; Setting the writing goal</p> <p>Monitoring: Checking the relevance of content; Checking the grammar and vocabulary; Identifying writing problems</p> <p>Evaluating: Rereading, Revising, and Editing; Reconsidering written text and goals; Evaluating what I did more or less well</p>
Cognitive Strategies	<p>Generating Ideas: Brainstorming, inferencing</p> <p>Revising: Making changes and revisions in written text</p>

Elaborating: Relating new information and details

Clarification: Clarifying words and ideas

Retrieval: Getting information from memory

Summarizing: Synthesizing the written text

Social/Affective Strategies

Resourcing: Referring to dictionaries or resources

Getting Feedback: Getting advice from teachers and peers

Confidence Building: Encouraging oneself and reducing anxiety

In contrast, the CG received standard writing instruction focused on text content and features of model essays, without explicit strategy instruction. After the 14-week intervention, both groups completed the WSQ and the post-test writing performance task. The reflective journals from the EG were also collected.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data from the WSQ and writing performance tests were analyzed using SPSS version 26. Descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations) were used to compare pre- and post-test scores for both groups. The essays were marked by the researcher and another English teacher who was not involved in the study. The inter-rater reliabilities for the scorings of pre-test and post-test were .81 and .88 respectively, and any discrepancies were resolved through discussions. The score for each writing essay was the average of the scores rated by the two independent raters. Qualitative data from the reflective journals were analyzed through narrative interpretation and the creation of strategy matrices to identify patterns in students' strategy use over time and to explore the development of metacognitive awareness.

4. Results and Discussion

Results for the first Research Question

The first research question aimed to examine if writing strategy instruction improves Iraqi EFL high school students' writing development. Prior to conducting inferential statistical analyses, a Shapiro-Wilk test was conducted to assess the normality of the data obtained from both the WSQ and the writing performance test at pre-test and post-test stages. The results of the Shapiro-Wilk test indicated that the data for all instruments at both time points were normally distributed, as the p-values (alpha) exceeded the significance level of 0.05 (see Table 2). This suggests that the data meet

the assumptions of normality, allowing for the application of parametric statistical analyses.

Table 2

Shapiro-Wilk Test for Normality

Instrument	Time Point	Statistic	df	Sig.
WSQ	Pre-test	0.962	30	0.321
WSQ	Post-test	0.958	30	0.275
Writing Performance Test	Pre-test	0.971	30	0.543
Writing Performance Test	Post-test	0.965	30	0.389

As seen, all the “Sig.” values (p-values) are greater than 0.05. This means that for all instruments and time points, we fail to reject the null hypothesis of normality. Therefore, it was concluded that the data are normally distributed for each instrument at each time point.

The results pertaining to the first research question, concerning the impact of writing strategy instruction on writing performance, revealed a significant interaction effect between time and group ($F = 8.91, p < .01$), as shown in Table 3. This statistically significant interaction indicates that the EG demonstrated a substantially greater improvement in average writing scores from the pre-test to the post-test compared to the CG. To put it another way, while both groups showed some improvement over time, the EG’s gains were significantly larger, suggesting that the writing strategy instruction had a positive and meaningful impact on their writing abilities.

Table 3

Interaction Effects of Time x Group and Means for Writing Scores

Writing Performance Tests Scores		CG (N=25)	EG (N=27)	Time x Group
		M (SD)	M (SD)	F
Writing Scores (range 0~100)	Pre-test	68.31 (7.75)	67.31 (8.92)	8.91**
	Post-test	71.68 (6.62)	79.22 (6.10)	

Note: $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

A closer look at the mean scores provides further insight. The EG’s average writing score increased from 67.31 (SD = 8.92) on the pre-test to 79.22 (SD = 6.10) on the post-test, representing a substantial gain of over 11 points. In contrast, the CG’s average score increased from 68.31 (SD = 7.75) to 71.68 (SD = 6.62), a gain of only

about 3 points. This difference underscores the effectiveness of the writing strategy instruction in promoting significant improvements in writing performance.

These findings suggest that the use of writing strategy instruction equipped students with the tools and techniques necessary to approach writing tasks more effectively. It is likely that the students were able to combine strategic instruction with the writing process that helped increase their skills. Overall, students were able to combine instructions proficiently to orchestrate and improve performances on the performance scales.

Results for the Second Research Question

The second research question aimed to examine if writing strategy instruction improves students' use of writing strategies. The analysis of the WSQ showed notably significant differences between the EG and CG across all assessed strategy categories (see Table 4). Specifically, statistically significant interaction effects of Time x Group were found for Metacognitive Strategies ($F = 9.21, p < .01$), Cognitive Strategies ($F = 5.92, p < .05$), and Socio/Affective Strategies ($F = 10.81, p < .01$).

Table 4

Changes in Writing Strategy Use Over Time: EG vs. CG

Interaction Effects of Time x Group		CG (N=25)	EG (N=27)	Time x Group
Writing Strategy Categories	Time	M (SD)	M (SD)	F
Metacognitive Strategies	Pre-test	2.84 (0.56)	2.98 (0.61)	9.21**
	Post-test	3.17 (0.51)	3.56 (0.58)	
Cognitive Strategies	Pre-test	2.74 (0.63)	2.70 (0.52)	5.92*
	Post-test	3.03 (0.60)	3.19 (0.63)	
Socio/Affective Strategies	Pre-test	2.89 (0.51)	2.79 (0.53)	10.81**
	Post-test	3.10 (0.60)	3.34 (0.50)	

*Note: $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

Within the metacognitive strategies domain, the EG exhibited notably larger gains in the average reported frequency of utilizing these strategies relative to the CG. This observation indicates that students in the EG may have enhanced their strategic

awareness, enabling them to deploy a more comprehensive array of metacognitive strategies in a more routine and organized manner. These students demonstrated a heightened awareness of leveraging self-regulation techniques, encompassing pre-writing planning, real-time monitoring during composition, and post-writing evaluation procedures. Furthermore, these constructive shifts may be associated with the assignment of completing reflective journals, which stimulated students to deliberate on their learning journey, acknowledge challenges, and brainstorm potential resolutions.

Considering cognitive strategies, the experimental cohort displayed a marked distinction in amplified utilization contrasted with the CG. Such findings may be attributed to the purposeful inclusion of more pertinent, higher-order strategies throughout the intervention phase. Consequently, it is proposed that explicit strategy instruction possesses the potential to guide students toward a more judicious application of strategies when confronting writing tasks.

Ultimately, a salient and significant difference was likewise identified within the socio/affective strategies subgroup. This particular classification was initially the least preferred among all students preceding the implementation of writing strategy instruction. However, subsequent to the strategic intervention, students within the EG disclosed a substantially greater propensity to employ social and affective strategies compared to their counterparts in the CG.

Results for the Third Research Question

To address the third research question, which explored perceived changes in writing strategy use and processes, the EG students' reflective journals from weeks 2, 8, and 14 provided rich qualitative data. Responding to guiding prompts after each writing task, these EG students consistently highlighted positive transformations in their approach to writing directly attributable to the explicit strategy training. A prominent, recurring theme was the enhanced awareness and application of a diverse range of writing strategies, moving away from intuitive, unstructured habits towards more conscious and deliberate practices. For example, many students reported that metacognitive planning strategies proved exceptionally beneficial in the essential tasks of organizing and outlining their essays. Before the explicit strategy training, student S9 confessed in Reflective Journal 2 (RJ2):

“Normally I would simply follow the essay models of writing introduction and thesis statement, but I just write and come up with ideas randomly.”

This student's account vividly portrays a previously unstructured process reliant on rote imitation. However, the student's reflections also reveal the transformative impact of planning strategies. S9 noted:

“Now I know how to plan my outline with clear ideas before I start to write. By doing so, I have a clear direction of how to write and my writing performance is better now.”

This excerpt poignantly illustrates how the explicit instruction in planning strategies provided a previously lacking framework. This framework provided the scaffolding

this student needed and enabled this particular student to approach writing with greater purpose, clarity, and direction.

Beyond the planning phase, several EG students also emphasized the critical importance of monitoring strategies. They found that these strategies allowed them to refine their developing ideas and ensure the overall coherence of their argumentative essays. By using such monitoring techniques, the students heightened their awareness in constructing well-organized arguments which could then assist them in crafting clear connections between their supporting details and their main ideas. As Student S16 shared in a representative comment from RJ3:

“Using monitoring strategies is very effective in writing essays, because it always reminds me in developing consistent ideas through the whole essay. Furthermore, I become more aware of some irrelevant ideas I first wrote and change them to correspond the main idea.”

In this sense, these types of excerpts highlight how monitoring strategies effectively foster a more deliberate and focused writing process.

The gains were not solely limited to specific writing phases. Looking at the responses on the whole, students also displayed a more holistic shift in how they were engaging with writing. Instead of focusing on simple habits, students displayed new engagement techniques that improved and improved their overall quality. Student S20 shared in RJ2:

“I used to write down whatever in my mind to complete the writing task, and my essay scores were very low. But now I become more careful in writing, I know how to generate organized ideas and I would check my arguments or grammar sentences all the time and finally revise again. My writing has been improving a lot and I become more confident in writing a good essay.”

This illustrates the shift from an “as-it-comes” approach to a more planned one. Another student, S13, noted in RJ3 how this type of monitoring helped lead to a higher understanding and appreciation of well-developed arguments:

“In the past, I only checked the grammar and vocabulary spelling after I finished, but now I would check my supporting arguments to see if they correlate with the main idea or not.”

Thus, through the explicit training, students displayed better integration techniques, planning skills, monitoring skills, and a deeper level of care for the writing task.

The findings of the current study aligns with established cognitive and metacognitive theories of writing. These theories posit that writing is not a mere transcription of thoughts but a complex cognitive endeavor involving planning, drafting, revising, and evaluating. Successful writers leverage a variety of strategies to manage these cognitive demands (Flower & Hayes, 1981; Hayes, 1996). Moreover, the study acknowledges the significant influence of the socio-cultural context on writing, especially for EFL learners navigating unique challenges. The relevance of Social Cognitive Theory is also apparent, as students’ self-efficacy and motivation are

affected by their learning experiences and their perceived success (Bandura, 1977, 1986).

Regarding the first research question, the finding that the EG, which received writing strategy instruction, demonstrated a significantly greater improvement in writing scores compared to the CG is supported by cognitive theories highlighting the importance of strategic knowledge in writing (Scardamalia & Bereiter, 1985; Zimmerman & Risemberg, 1997).

Providing direct instruction in writing strategies, we believe, provides students with more tools for dealing with the cognitive demands of writing. Through purposeful use of techniques such as planning, drafting and reviewing, learners can learn how they can combat common writing problems which stem from an inability to generate ideas, organise ideas or express them in a clear manner. This is consistent with McDonough et al. (2013), who considered writing as practising language, when writers need to convey their thoughts. This is in accordance with earlier research like Chen (2022), which revealed that incorporating the training of writing strategies into the teaching of EFL writing can produce substantial improvement in learning to write. The present investigation also highlighted the relationship between strategic awareness, use and proficiency. Likewise, De Silva and Graham (2015) reported that writing strategy instruction embedded within a process-based framework leads to enhanced writing performance, and Thongchalem and Jarunthawatchai (2020) demonstrated the effectiveness of scaffolding learning experiences on student writing skills. This finding seems to be especially important in the Iraqi EFL context since EFL students might suffer from problems stemming from a lack of resources (Abdul-Kareem, 2014), low previous exposure to English (Yahya, 2017), and conflict-induced psychological trauma. There's a role for explicit strategy instruction in these gaps, to support students and "accentuate the positive." The second research question, the results of which further confirmed that the EG made significantly more progress in their use of meta-, cognitive, and socio/affective writing strategies than did the CG, was built directly on the interactive nature of writing from metacognitive perspectives (Flavell, 1979; Schraw & Dennison, 1994). Metacognition is known as the knowledge and control of one's own cognitive activities.

Writing strategy instruction enhances metacognitive awareness by making students conscious of their writing strategies, their strengths and weaknesses, and how to select and apply strategies effectively. By completing reflective journals, students are further stimulated and encouraged to think about their learning and think of strategies to overcome their writing problems. This finding aligns with Harris et al. (2010), who emphasize the importance of raising strategic awareness and metacognition in writing instruction. Furthermore, Mustafa and Shawkat (2023) found that strategy-based lessons develop autonomous learning skills, suggesting that students become more independent and strategic in their learning. Specifically, the increased use of metacognitive strategies (planning, monitoring, evaluating) suggests that students became more self-regulated writers, better able to plan their writing, monitor their progress, and revise their work effectively. The improved use of cognitive strategies (generating ideas, revising, elaborating) indicates that students became more skilled at the specific cognitive processes involved in writing. The increased use of socio/affective strategies (resourcing, getting feedback, confidence building) suggests

that students became more aware of the social and emotional aspects of writing, and were more willing to seek help, collaborate with peers, and manage their anxiety.

Addressing the third research question, students reported a shift from unstructured, intuitive writing habits to more conscious, deliberate, and strategic practices, emphasizing the benefits of planning, monitoring, and a more holistic engagement with the writing task. This finding supports the idea that explicit strategy instruction can lead to a fundamental shift in students' writing processes. By making strategies explicit, instruction helps students internalize these strategies and integrate them into their writing routines. The qualitative data highlights the importance of metacognitive awareness; as students become more aware of their own thinking processes, they are better able to identify and address their writing challenges. Anderson (2012) found that fostering metacognitive skills positively impacts writing engagement, while Chanski (2015) and Wenden (1999) show that journaling can promote engagement and enhance writing skills, which aligns with the use of reflective journals in the current study. The student quotes directly illustrate the theoretical principles at play: students internalizing and then independently applying learned strategies. The students' reflections highlight the potential of writing strategy instruction to empower Iraqi EFL learners; by providing them with the tools and techniques to overcome their writing challenges, instruction can help them develop confidence and a more positive attitude towards writing.

Integrating the findings from the three research questions reveals their interconnectedness. Explicit writing strategy instruction leads to improved writing development (RQ1) because it enhances students' use of writing strategies (RQ2), which in turn leads to perceived changes in their writing processes and a greater sense of control over their writing (RQ3). While the study provides valuable insights, its quasi-experimental design, while practical in a classroom setting, does not allow for the same level of causal inference as a true experimental design. Future research could address this limitation by using a randomized controlled trial. Additionally, the sample size was relatively small, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. Future research could also explore the long-term impact of writing strategy instruction on students' writing development and their academic success. The findings suggest that EFL teachers in Iraq and similar contexts are encouraged to include explicit writing strategy instruction in their pedagogical practices in order to equip students with metacognitive awareness, strategy teaching and access to practice and reflection on the use of strategies. To in conclusion, this study has added empirical evidence that writing strategy instruction can enhance the writing growth of Iraqi EFL high school students. The results are reported with respect to cognitive and metacognitive theories of writing and are corroborated by other studies established in the area, suggesting the need for writing strategies to be explicitly instructed, providing implications for EFL teachers and researchers.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study presents strong evidence of the benefits of combining writing strategy instruction with the EFL curriculum among high school students in Iraq. These quantitative results provide clear evidence that direct teaching of writing strategies

results in significant gains in student writing and in their use of effective strategy. In addition, qualitative information from the students' reflective diaries, indicates students had a deep shift in their writing had moved from un-reflected and intuitive process of writing to more thoughtful, planned and strategically approach to writing. These transformations indicate the significance of metacognitive awareness and self-regulation in writing acquisition. These results are in line with existing theories for cognitive and metacognitive processes and evidence for the effectiveness of strategy instruction. This research has significant implications for EFL teaching, especially in countries with specialized socio-cultural and educational needs such as Iraq. Because strategy instruction provides students with skills and procedures for handling the cognitive demands of writing, it has the potential to help students become more proficient and independent writers. According to the outcome of the present study, several suggestions are made in relation to EFL writing instruction.

Firstly, teachers of EFL, who teach in Iraq, or with similar settings, should show the writer explicit strategy instruction during teaching. This teaching should be closely interwoven into the routine science classes so as not to be marginal or an extra. Secondly, there is a need to lay heavy emphasis on the development of student metacognitive awareness. Teachers need to explicitly direct students to think critically about their own writing processes, to identify strengths and weaknesses present in their own writing, and then to carefully choose and employ strategies that are best to use with different writing tasks. Thirdly, instruction must encompass a wide variety of writing strategies. This will involve the planning, composing, rewriting, editing and self-assessment. These methods should be presented in a clear and well-organized fashion, so that students may develop a solid comprehension in a step-by-step fashion. Moreover, students need to spend time practicing the strategies they have been taught. This should be a scaffolded practice where support and guidance is given as required with the teacher working toward the students applying the strategies independently. Fifthly, students need to be prompted to reflect on how they used their strategies and the outcomes of their writing. The use of this critical reflection could be supported by action such as reflective journaling or other activity. Sixthly, comprehensive teacher training and professional development should be systematically planned to prepare teachers to deliver writing strategy instruction effectively in their classrooms. Lastly, testing long-term effects of writing strategy instruction in terms of writing development and academic achievement are in high demand for future studies. In addition, studies could compare the efficacy of various methods for teaching strategy instruction in writing, and examine the impact of cultural factors on writing development. Further exploration of how WSI has an impact on other aspects of the curriculum or school experience could be useful.

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Abstract in Arabic

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