Investigating composing strategies in the project papers of Arab postgraduate students

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ABSTRACT

Students at higher education are frequently required to write essays and project paper. In fact, writing is very much integral to the students' learning experience in higher education. Writing essays trains students into the expectations of the discipline, and how to present their thoughts and reflection to their lecturers. Research into students' writing at university has shown that the experience of writing not only helps students to become familiar with the standards and style of written expression expected in their disciplines, but it also helps them to clarify their understanding of the subject matter about which they are writing. This study examines the written work of five postgraduate students from the Middle East. The data collection procedures involved analysis of the students' written work and interviews. The present study used several taxanomies of ESL writing strategies in order to investigate and understand the students' conceptualization of their writing tasks. The findings revealed that the students employed several composing writing strategies in order to help them work with, think about and manipulate the materials required in order to do the writing task. The writing process was also interactive, which means that the students used and build upon their previous knowledge, skills and strategies in writing. The present study ends with the suggestion that students' attention must be directed to the foundations of writing a project paper in order that they have a greater sense of audience's awareness, in addition to increasing their knowledge on discourse conventions of academic writing.

Keywords: academic writing; ESL writing strategies; written work; interactive writing process; ESL/EFL writers

INTRODUCTION

The development of English as a second language (ESL) writing is complicated in that it involves various factors, which affect the process and product of writing. Silva (1990) suggests that ESL writing instructions are marked by four most influential approaches: the controlled approach, the current-traditional rhetoric approach, the process approach and the social approach. The controlled approach, which is influenced by structural linguistics and behavioural psychology focuses on training students to practice sentence patterns and vocabulary because learning to write is a habit formation process (Mu 2005). The current-

traditional approach regarded learning to write as involving students to identify and internalize organizational patterns of writing. Flower and Hayes (1981) model is often referred to in the process approach. They viewed writing as a recursive process which involves planning, generating, translating and editing (cited in Mu 2005). The final approach, which is the social approach views learning to write as part of becoming socialized to the discourse community. The writer has to learn what is expected and tries to approximate it.

The four influential approaches are applied by educators in different academic settings in order to achieve the purpose of teaching writing to the students. The present study focuses on an academic setting at tertiary level. Writing academic papers is an integral part of the curriculum at tertiary level education. Students are expected to write assignments, research papers and thesis in which they are required to display analytical skills and critical thinking skills about particular issues. Myles (2002) states that writing is best viewed as a continuum of activities that range from the more mechanical or formal aspects of 'writing down' on the one end, to the more complex act of composing on the other end (Omaggio Hadley 1993). However, the majority of students do not find it easy to write their assignments, project papers and essays into an acceptable form as expected by the academic community that they are in. Furthermore, the nature of academic literacy often confuses and disorients students, "particularly those who bring with them a set of conventions that are at odds with those of the academic world they are entering" (Kutz, Groden & Zamel 1993, p. 30). This problem is even more compounded for students writing in English as a second or foreign language because they lack the knowledge of the conventions and expectations of academic writing in universities where English is used as the medium of instruction (Ballard & Clanchy 1997, in Paltridge 2004). Dong (1997) observes that academic writing,

> involves learning a new set of academic rules and learning how to play by these rules. Often these rules change from discipline to discipline, and the audience and the purpose of writing vary according to each writing context. For non-native students, the mismatch of writing difficulties and expectations operating in their home countries compound their writing difficulties. (Dong 1997, p. 10)

In addition, it is common to find the influence and interference of the first language (L1) in the writings of students for whom English is a second language (ESL) or English is a foreign language (EFL). This can be attributed to the argument that language and writing are culture specific, with each language having its own rhetorical conventions. The ESL or EFL writers have to negotiate the genre conventions, understand the knowledge and value of academic writing in their struggle to write effectively and acceptably.

Writing effectively in academic setting is indeed a challenge for many students, especially at the graduate level as academic writing is believed to be cognitively complex. It involves the acquisition of academic vocabulary and discourse style, which is particularly difficult. Myles (2002) argues that acquisition is a product of the complex interaction of the linguistic environment and the learner's internal mechanisms. To add to the already complex problem, students at postgraduate level are also often uncertain of what is required of them when it comes to writing. Casanave (2002), for instance, reports on the experiences of five masters students enrolled in a graduate TESOL program in the US. Regardless of their mother tongue or previous educational experience, the students were unprepared for the diversity of written genres they were required to engage in. Dawson (2004) also asserts that each student brings with him or her a diversity of strengths and weaknesses. For instance, "mature students will usually have experience of writing in the workplace but not academic

writing; international students may be able to write at a sophisticated level in their first language but not in English" (p.88). This is in line with Swales's argument (2001) that graduate writing "is no longer a straightforward cumulative process, but more a matter of new starts and unexpected adjustments" (p.52), as it also requires an in-depth understanding of the context of production and interpretation of students' texts, as well as an understanding of the roles played by the people involved in the production of the texts, and the contexts in which the texts are produced, and assessed (Johns 1997).

Studies investigating students' writing in academic context reported that many factors influence students' decisions when they write a piece of academic text. The factors include understanding the purpose of the text, the academic and cultural context, and the extent to which the writer received advice on the positioning and organization of the text (Prior 1995), the students' perceptions of their audience (Johns 1997, Casanave 2004) and the discipline in which the student is writing (Johns 1997, Newman et. al. 2003, Swales 1990). The complexity of the factors involved echoes Silva and Matsuda's (2002) observation in which they found that writing is always embedded in a complex web of relationships between writers, readers, the text and reality and are constantly changing. Therefore, teaching and learning of English in a proper way can help students deal successfully with their academic demands and to perform successfully in their disciplines and professional contexts (Adams & Keene 2000).

To reiterate, the cited literature shows that there are many problems with ESL or EFL students' academic written work in English because they lack the knowledge of the conventions and expectations of academic writing in universities. The present study, thus, focuses on an investigation of the composing strategies in Arab postgraduate students' writing process. The composing strategies in writing are conceptualized as a part of communicative strategies in ESL writing instruction (Mu 2005). Cohen (1988 cited in Mu 2005) defines communicative strategies as means that writers use to express their ideas in a most effective way. Cumming (2001) points out that composing strategy are made up of micro and macro level. The former concerns learners' involvement in searching for words and syntax, while the latter concerns learners' attention to ideas and language concurrently. Both the micro and macro level involved planning and revising processes. In the present study, the composing strategies encompasses writing strategies in the planning and revising process which can help writers to express their ideas in the most effective way.

The investigations on the composing strategies of Arab postgraduate students' writing were carried out in order to answer the following research questions:

1. What composing strategies do the five postgraduate students employ in the process of producing the written text?
2. How do the composing strategies contribute in the development of their writing process?

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

Pedagogy at the tertiary level emphasizes the student-centered learning approach. Consequently, students at graduate level are expected to be self-directed learners and pose a certain level of analytical and critical thinking skills. However, students from the Middle East have problems adjusting to the education system in Malaysia, such as the teaching styles, unfamiliarity with test construction and testing and the grading system of the university (Khairi & Cameron 2010). In addition, many of these students were accepted although they

did not have acceptable level of English proficiency scores (IELTS and TOEFL scores). The students in this study informed the researcher that they are not familiar with the tutorial and seminar style of teaching and learning because classes in their countries are lecture based. Students are seldom required to do oral presentations, write assignments and conduct project work. Assessments are in the form of exams, hence, the teaching styles and assessment procedures in Malaysia pose significant problems to the students. Furthermore, these students encounter difficulties in producing academic task such as writing project paper. Abad (1998), for instance, reported the weaknesses of Yemeni students of English who were admitted into the English department, despite their low proficiency in English. Rabab'ah (2003) also emphasized that the problems are attributed to the teaching and learning methods in the Arab world which may judged as unsuitable for learning a foreign language. Hisham (2008 in Noraini Ibrahim 2011) reported that Arab students at the Business faculty, at University Utara Malaysia (UUM) have problems in vocabulary register, grammar and referencing in their writing.

THE CONTEXT

Respondents in the present study were five students who were enrolled in a masters course in English Language Studies at a public university in Malaysia. The course under investigation ran for 14 weeks each semester and was a compulsory course for all students enrolled in the MA in English Language Studies. The students were required to complete prerequisite courses before enrolling in this particular course. This sample of students was sufficient to meet the objectives of the study because they share almost similar linguistic, cultural and educational background, which differed from the Malaysian students. There were, however, some individual differences among them with respect to their ages, country of origin and exposure to English (Table 1). I referred to these students as Ma, My, Eh, Jf and Wa.

TABLE 1. Respondents' personal information

No.	Student	Age	Country of origin	Exposure to English
1	Ma	27	Libya	At university
2	My	25	Iran	At high school
3	Eh	29	Iran	At high school
4	Jf	26	Iraq	At university
5	Wa	30	Iraq	At university

One of the course's assessments is project work, which contributed 30% of the overall assessment component. The students were asked to conduct fieldwork in a chosen domain (spoken or written), identify the appropriate approach or approaches in order to investigate the identified issue in the selected domain, identify the unit of analysis to be investigated and conduct a discourse analysis on that particular unit. The students were given guided information and breakdown of marks for each section.

i.   A Concise and Effective Title – 1 mark
ii.   An Introduction with a Statement of Problem - A good introduction statement of problem and research questions. Why is the issue to be investigated? Why the interest? What are the burning questions that need to be answered? - 4 marks.
iii. Details of Approach/es chosen for the analysis - A clear discussion of the approach/s used and reason(s) for the choice; appropriateness of choice with reference to issues. – 3 marks
iv.   Literature review – relevant and appropriate review of literature – 2 marks.

v. The Research Design - What is the research design selected? Document the steps to collect and analyse the data – 4 marks.

vi. Data analysis –Presentation of findings in relation to the research questions. (2 marks) Identification of features present in the discourse is necessary and hence reference to the data is crucial. (2 marks). Findings must allude to the review of literature. (2 marks)

vii. Discussion of findings - ability to interpret the underlying pragmatic and communicative meaning of the discourse as interaction- with emphasis on the presence / peculiarities of features present in relation to the participants/context – power, culture, status or discourse as language in use (genre, etc.)- 5 marks

viii. Conclusion - Emphasis on insights gleaned from the analysis /to what extent the approach is able to analyze/interpret discourse, etc.- 3 marks.

ix. Organization and structure – 2 marks.

METHODOLOGY

ESL WRITING TAXONOMY

This study adapted the ESL taxonomy of writing strategies proposed by Wenden (1991), Sasaki (2000), Riazi (1997) and Mu (2005) (refer to Appendix 1 for the taxonomies). Each taxonomy is referred to in the data analysis process. The researcher then put together the composing strategies in order to produce a combination of the main composing writing strategies and sub categories of the composing writing strategies.

RESEARCH INSTRUMENTS AND PROCEDURES FOR DATA COLLECTION

The students were required to conduct a project on a topic that they chose based on issues on discourse and pragmatics which are in the course. The written project formed 30% of the overall assessment. Data for the present study were derived from the students' written work and interviews. The students' written work was evaluated and comments were made on the written work. The lecturers discussed with the students their work during the consultation hours and the students' work was referred to during the consultation. This procedure enabled the researchers, who are also lecturers of the course to identify the types of composing strategies used by the students, which is the purpose of the study. It is important to point out that it is not the purpose of the present study to find out how many types of composing strategies are employed by each respondent.

The lecturers conducted individual consultation with the students during the tutorial sessions regarding their project work. There were three consultations in total, which were conducted in weeks 8, 11 and 13. Some students emailed the lecturers when they wanted more help and some made appointment with the lecturers outside tutorial time when they needed it. The lecturers also discussed the project work in general during the tutorials and some students raised issues of concern during this time.

The respondents were also asked to complete a questionnaire, which was designed to elicit information on the participants' personal backgrounds, their past education (including their exposure to English), their experience in conducting research and writing project papers, the problems that they had when they write essays and project papers and what they do to help them solve their problems in writing essays and project papers.

FINDINGS

The purpose of the analysis and data interpretation was to discover the types of composing strategies and the subjects' explanations and clarifications regarding the composing writing strategies that they employed in the course of doing and completing the project paper. Several types of sub categories of the composing strategies were found with regard to research question one, which is 'What composing strategies do the five postgraduate students employ in the process of producing the written text? The result is presented in Tables 2 and 3.

TABLE 2. Sub categories of main composing writing strategies

Type	Researchers/year Wenden (1991), Riazai (1997), Sasaki (2000), Mu (2005)
Clarification:	
• Self-question	▪ Wenden
• Interact with other persons	▪ Riazi
• Search for materials	▪ Riazi
Planning:	
• Thematic planning	▪ Sasaki
• Planning	▪ Mu
• Organizing. The organization of the generated ideas involved:	▪ Sasaki
	▪ Mu Wenden
i. Monitor	▪ Mu Wenden
ii. Evaluate	▪ Riazi
iii. Rationalize	
Generating ideas	▪ Sasaki
▪ Generate ideas	▪ Mu
▪ Verbalizing a proposition	▪ Sasaki
▪ Note taking	▪ Riazi
▪ Drafting	▪ Riazi
▪ Rereading	▪ Riazi
	▪ Mu
▪ Revising	▪ Mu
▪ Elaborating	▪ Mu,Sasaki
▪ Retrieval	▪ Wenden
	▪ Sasaki
▪ Translate from L1 to L2	▪ Riazi
▪ Use of mother tongue knowledge and skill transfer from L1	
▪ Thinking in one's native language	▪ Wenden
▪ Summarising	▪ Mu
Social strategies	▪ Riazi
Resourcing	▪ Wenden,
Others	▪ Sasaki
Social/affective strategies	▪ Mu

MAIN COMPOSING STRATEGIES

After identifying the types of individual composing strategies, (referred to as sub categories of the main composing writing strategies) employed by the students, the next step in the data analysis process is to group the sub categories into the main type of composing writing strategies. All students used the five types of the main composing writing strategies, which

are identified as rhetorical, meta cognitive, cognitive, social/affective and communicative strategies, as shown in table 3.

TABLE 3. The main composing writing strategies

No.	Types of writing strategies	
1	Rhetorical strategies	
	• Organizing	▪ Sasaki
2	Meta cognitive strategies	
	• Planning	▪ Riazi, Mu
	The organization of the generated ideas involved:	
		▪ Mu, Wenden
	• Monitor	▪ Mu, Wenden
	• Evaluate	▪ Riazi
	• Rationalize	
3	Cognitive strategies	
	• Generating ideas	▪ Sasaki, Mu
	▪ Note taking	▪ Riazi
	▪ Elaborating	▪ Riazi, Mu
	▪ Clarification: Self-question	▪ Wenden
		▪ Riazi
	▪ Drafting	▪ Riazi
	▪ Rereading	▪ Mu
	▪ Revising	▪ Mu
	▪ Summarising	▪ Sasaki
	▪ Translate from L1 to L2	▪ Riazi
	▪ Use of mother tongue knowledge and skill transfer from L1	▪ Wenden
	▪ Thinking in one's native language	
4	Social/affective strategies:	
	• Interact with other persons	▪ Riazi, 1997
	• Search for materials	▪ Riazi, 1997
	• Resourcing	▪ Wenden, Mu
	• Getting feedback	▪ Mu
5	Communicative strategies:	
	▪ Verbalizing a proposition	▪ Sasaki
	▪ Sense of readers	▪ Sasaki, Mu

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION ON THE FIVE TYPES OF THE MAIN COMPOSING STRATEGIES

All five students were found to use the five main composing strategies, with varying degrees of usage. All the five students used the rhetorical strategy, which comprised the organizing strategy. They found that organization helped them to work on the outline and content of the project work. For metacognitive strategies which comprised of planning, monitor, evaluate and rationalize, the five students employed all the sub strategies, although some of them said they did not use the strategies often. The planning strategy was used by all students all the time because planning is essential in ensuring that their project work is well organized. Where monitoring strategy is concerned, all the students agreed that the process of monitoring helped them in making sure that they were attending to and writing the project paper as required. Although all five students used the evaluate strategy, Wa and Eh confirmed

that sometimes they did not evaluate what they had written. This occurred when they did not spend time on their work. The students reported that rationalization occurred when they made decision regarding suitability of the reading materials that they have read.

All the five students confirmed that note taking, drafting, revising, translating from their first language (L1) to the second language (L2), the use of mother tongue knowledge and thinking in one's native language were often used throughout the writing process, compared to the other composing strategies under the cognitive strategies category. They confirmed that thinking in their native language helped them to comprehend the reading materials. After they had understood the materials, they incorporated the materials in the written work and proceeded with the drafting process. Social/affective strategies were employed by all the five students throughout the writing process because interacting with their classmate and others were important as a means of providing moral support. Consulting reading materials was essential and expected because reading materials provide the backbone of the project. Finally the students reported that sense of readers is an unfamiliar familiar strategy because they had very little exposure to report writing when they did their degree in their home countries.

The next section presents findings and discussion for research question 2; 'How do the composing strategies contribute in the development of their writing process? It is essential to point out that although the main composing writing strategies are numbered as one, two, three, four and five, the numbers are not based on which writing strategies occurred first, second and so on.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION ON HOW THE COMPOSING STRATEGIES CONTRIBUTE TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE WRITING PROCESS

RHETORICAL STRATEGIES

Rhetorical strategies as strategies used by writers to organize and present their ideas in writing conventions that are acceptable to native speakers of English (Mu 200, p.8). Organizing, as pointed out by Sasaki (2000) involves the organization of the beginning, development and conclusion of an essay. The students reported that the initial stage involved interpreting the question, which led to the employment of a variety of composing strategies in order to fulfill the requirement of the academic task, one of which is organizing strategy. Before the students started writing, they spent some time planning the organization of the project paper. Although the students had completed a few courses before they enrolled for this particular course, they said that every course had different requirement regarding the style and content of a project paper. When they were informed and shown the structure of the project paper for this particular course, they were astounded and nervous. The word and phrases in bold showed how the students felt.

Student Ma, for instance could not understand anything:
> *I **didn't understand** what was on the paper when I looked at it. Although I learn it before*
> *when Dr N teach us I cannot remember. I immediately think how to do the project*

Student Jf stated that it was a difficult task to do,
> *When I look at the paper I said **"this is difficult". How will I write?***

Student Wa panicked,
> *I remember a little about this but I still don't know how to do the project. **I panic**.*

However, when the lecturers explained in detail the structure of the project and discussed with the students on the 'what' and the 'how' of it, the students' apprehension decreased because they knew what to do and how to approach the task. The explanation given led them to plan how to organize the project paper.

METACOGNITIVE STRATEGIES

According to Wenden (1991) meta cognitive strategies are mental operations or procedures that learners use to regulate their learning. Riazi (1997) describe meta cognitive strategies as self-regulatory strategies which helped the students to exercise control over the performance of the writing tasks, thus reducing their anxiety over not knowing what to do. Meta cognitive strategies are directly responsible for the execution of the writing task. There are four sub strategies identified under this category: planning, monitoring, evaluating and rationalizing.

PLANNING

Planning refers to writing the outline of the project paper. Detailed information on the components of the project paper were given to the students (see pp. 4 -5). As the lecturers were also concerned of the initial process involved in the writing of the project paper, the initial task which the students were asked to do was to work on the topic, area of investigation, specific issue/topic of investigation, statement of the problem, research objectives and the research questions. The lecturers also referred to Swales CARS model (1990) because this was the structure that the students were to adhere to in wriitng the Introduction section. A sample of the Introduction section written by one of the students, Jf, is shown in this paper. The excerpts in figure 2 and 3 were taken from Jf's work. They showed how Jf developed his outline based on the feedback given by the lecturer.

Topic: Assassination of Al Mabhouh

Area of investigation: this project aims to investigate ideological differences in two newspapers, one American based news report and another Dubai-based news report.

Statement of the problem: There will be differences in ideologies perceived or reported by the reporters because they are from different media.

Research objectives:

1.   To investigate how the two news report describe the same event.
2.   To find out the reasons why the news was written.

Research questions:
1.   How do the two news report describe the same event?
2.   What are the reasons for the writers to write in that way on the same news?

FIGURE 1. Student Jf's first outline

Student Jf's second outline (figure 2) showed that Jf has benefitted from the comments given by the lecturers, which lead him to elaborate and extend the outline to make it better. The comments are in italics.

Comments: The topic should be more focused.

Topic: Discourse Analysis of Al Mabhouh assassination: A Critical Discourse Analysis

Comments: You should provide some background information on this topic before you inform the reader about the area of investigation.

Area of investigation: The Hamas movement has been around in Palestine for less than a quarter of a century. The movement was established as a call and to propagate the policy to bring about an end to the state of Israel. Since then, there has been endless conflict and attacks carried out by both Israeli's and Palestine's soldiers, involving civilians and leaders of both nations. Mahmoud Al Mabhouh, a senior Hamas military commander, was one of the individual in Israel's wanted list. There were many attempts to assassinate him, but all failed. However, he was assassinated on the fateful day of 19ᵗʰ July, 2010. News of Mabhouh's assassination made headlines in newspapers in Arab and all over the world. *It is this attention that has prompted this study to investigate the ideology delivered in two newspapers; one American based news report and another Dubai-based news report.* (the sentence in italics was added by the lecturer)

Comments: Is there a stark difference between these two newspapers when they write on issues in the Middle East or about Palestine or Palestinian? If yes, why does this create a problem? Does it have any effect on the readership (people who read the newspapers?)Which CDA framework will you used?

Statement of the problem: Different types of power may be distinguished according to the various resources employed to exercise such power. The extent to which power is exercised, whether it is more or less coercive depends on the knowledge, information and authority that a person has (van Djik, 1998). Journalists or reporters, for instance, often deliver ideology upheld by the media in their news report. It is perceived that the two news report, which has different ideology will report the assassination of Mabhouh in different manner because both newspapers have different perspectives, interests and stance. Fairclough's 3 dimensional model will be used to analyse the news report at three levels; text analysis, discourse practice and sociocultural practice.

Comment: The research objectives and research questions are not clear. How are you going to investigate how the two news reports describe the same event? Are you analyzing any language features in the news report? Are you going to interview the reporters or will question 2 be answered based on the analysis for question 1?

Research objectives:

1. To investigate how the two news report describe the same event.
2. To find out the reasons why the news was written.

Research questions:
1. How do the two news reports describe the same event?
   a. What types of vocabulary, grammar and text structure are used?
   b. How do these language aspects represent ideology?
2. Why do the writers write in that way on the same news?

FIGURE 2. Student Jf's second outline

The students' responses in the interviews also confirmed that planning is an essential composing strategy. The bold parts in the interview excerpts showed how the students handled the planning process. The students prepared some kind of framework (Eh and Wa) and did an outline (Jf, My and Ma).

> *Student Eh:*
> *I **plan** by prepare some framework. I use **I always refer to the model Dr give us***
> *Student Jf:*
> *I start with general idea for the project paper. After I read what I want to do **I draw pattern outline** to make clear what I want to write*
> *Student My:*

> *I read and read the question many times to help me understand the question.* **When I understand better then I prepare general outline**. *I change the outline many times after I read on the topic*
> *Student Wa:*
> *I start with big idea.* **Then I make framework on the topic**. *But many times I change the framework.*
> *Student Ma: When I understand why outline important, I start my work by make* **outline** *first.*

MONITOR, EVALUATE AND RATIONALIZE

The process of monitoring, evaluating and rationalizing are related as the processes involved students to monitor and evaluate their progress as well as rationalizing the decisions that they made at different stages of writing the project paper. The students informed the researchers that they read a variety of materials related to the topic that they intended to work on. The readings enabled them to form a mental plan and a framework on how the reading materials could be used and if the reading materials were really relevant. This process showed that the students evaluated the reading materials through purposeful reading, which led to rationalizing the decision on whether or not to use the reading materials. Since the students have done their outline, they also referred to their outline throughout the reading process. At this stage, the students wrote notes, reviewed their notes, compared their notes to their outline, changed their outlines, revised and edited their outline. Therefore, the planning strategy which had to do with working on a framework or outline proved helpful and useful. The bold parts in the excerpts showed how outline helped the students to find the right reading materials and write notes.

> *Student My:*
> **The outline I do help me find books and journals to read** *and I think reading I need to write my project. I write many many notes when I read. I also read my notes and look at my outline*
> *Student Wa:*
> *I read many many books. I read many articles and I do notes. I use my notes to improve my outline.* **Yes I do my outline I think many times, I change if I feel not correct.**
> *Student Ma:*
> *Yes when I read I understand the topic. I write many notes.* **I check if I can use my notes in outline.** *I also change my outline I prepare because when I read I find many information.*

COGNITIVE STRATEGIES

Wenden (1991) describes cognitive strategies as mental operations or steps used by the learners to learn new information and to apply it to specific learning tasks. The cognitive strategies are secondary to metacognitive strategies.

There are eleven types of micro strategies identified. These micro strategies will be discussed together because there is an overlapping of the function of each individual strategy. The micro strategies are generating ideas, note taking, elaborating, clarifying, drafting, rereading, revising, summarizing, translating from L1 to L2, use of mother tongue knowledge and thinking in one's native language.

When the subjects received the question, they initially started by interpreting the questions. In ensuring that they have interpreted the question correctly, the students turned to clarification strategy. The students asked questions as a means to clarify their interpretation and also interacted with other persons to assist them (asked lecturers questions, discussed with their classmates and asked former students questions about the task). When they asked themselves questions and interacted with others, they also generated ideas about the project paper.

Then they started with the initial planning (identified as metacognitive strategy), which resulted in the action of searching for and reading materials (books, journals, online articles, previous project papers borrowed from their friends) on the topic which they intended to work on. When the students read, they made notes and summary (they wrote notes from the texts that they read, summarized the materials and planned on how to use them in their writing). Some of the sources are information that they have been taught in the other courses, hence, they tried to relate the old information to the new task that they have to do. The students confirmed that they frequently translated from L1 to L2 when they read because when they made notes or summarized the materials, they frequently resorted to thinking in their first language. The bold parts in the in the excerpts reflected the use of the cognitive strategies:

> *Student Jf:*
> *I don't think in English all the time because my English not so good.* **I translate from my mother tongue to English.** *I also use dictionary to make sure I translate correct. So maybe sometimes my notes not correct or the summary not correct because I translate.*
> *Student Ma:*
> *I read this article and I remember I learn in course… I write new information about it and* **when I go back I check my notes. I compare and see how I can use in this project.**
> *Student Wa:*
> *I have problems when I read many many materials. I think what I read all can use for my topic. And I read again many times to understand to see which part I can use. Because not all reading I can use.* **I think I learn because I make notes and I do again my outline** *when I have notes.*
> *Student My:*
> *I start by thinking* **I plan and organize my reading.** *I know this when I write in my country. This help me look for reading.* **I write notes when I read.** *This also I learn in my country.*

During the reading process, the note-taking activities involved using pencils or highlighters to mark important points in the materials, copying some parts, summarizing and paraphrasing parts of the materials that they considered important, relevant and useful in writing their project paper. The students also related that this process often resulted in revising the outline which they had produced in the initial stage of planning. When they used the notes that they had made in their writing, they also tried to elaborate on the notes using their own ideas and opinions. Sometimes this resulted in confusion because the lecturers could not understand what the student intended to say (refer to the underlined sentence). The examples shown were taken from student Ma and Eh's work.

STUDENT MA'S WORK

According to Wunderlich (1980), the speech acts must firstly be organized by "main grammatical moods" such as declarative, indicative and subjective and etc. Next he states that

the classification of speech acts must be done by the "propositional content and satisfactory condition" and therefore the result can be observed. Such idea put speech acts involved within the pragmatics as the context seems required for getting suitable meaning.

When the lecturer asked the student to explain the underlined sentence, the student explained that in her opinion, Wunderlich's organization of speech acts which is related to propositional content and condition reminded her of pragmatics aspect. She further added that pragmatic has to do with understanding the real meaning of the utterance, while speech acts has to do with categorizing the act. The student's explanation helped the lecturer to understand what the student was trying to put across, hence, the student was asked to rewrite the sentence based on guidance from the lecturer.

STUDENT EH'S WORK

Cultural differences also lead to the application of different strategies. Since the participants are unequal in terms of social status, the strategies adopted by each might differ from those adopted by the other.

In response to the underlined sentence, Student Eh stated that cultural differences resulted in the employment of different politeness strategies, but did not explain on this issue. Instead, he continued with another issue, which is social status. According to Eh, he wanted to relate culture to social status, but this certainly was not accomplished as shown in his writing.

SOCIAL/AFFECTIVE STRATEGIES

Social/ affective strategies are strategies used by writers to interact with other people (Riazi 1997) and to use various sources to access materials (Mu 2005). When the students were given the task, they sought clarification the task by talking to their lecturers, classmates and the previous students who have completed the course. This is certainly a social strategy because it involved interaction with members of the academic community. The students also consulted their lecturers and their friends when they have problems related to the project work and when they needed explanations of feedback from their lecturers. The students reflected on this as a type of moral support that they needed throughout the process of writing and in completing their project work.

The task of searching for materials is similar to resourcing because students turned to external reference or sources available around them, such as looking up for words in the dictionary, using the library and the Internet to get reading materials and to refer to the previous students' project works. The bold parts in the interview excerpts confirmed that the students discussed with their friends, lecturers and referred to reading materials.

> *Student Wa:*
> *After I get back my work, **I discuss with my friends** to clarify my lecturer's comments. If I don't understand, I make appointment to see my lecturer.*
> *Student My:*
> ***I also ask my senior friends about their work**. If they did the same topic as me, then I borrow their work. I read their work to get references and ideas.*
> *Student Eh:*
> ***I use internet a lot to find information about my topic**. If I have problems to get materials, **I ask my lecturer and my friends** if they have the reading material.*

COMMUNICATIVE STRATEGIES

Mu (2005) describes communicative strategies as strategies that writers may use to express ideas in a more effective way. Verbalizing is a composing strategy proposed by Sasaki (2000), which involves verbalizing the content the writer intends to write. In other words, the writer actually verbalizes what he/she wants to write during the composing process. The students' reactions to this strategy are reflected in the interview excerpts:

> *Student Ma:*
> ***I always talk to myself. I mean when I read I read to myself to see if I understand.*** *When I write I also talk because I want to make sure my notes or my summary correct.*
> *Student Jf:*
> ***Yes I talk because I can understand the notes I can understand what I read*** *because I want to make sure I write like what Dr …want.*
> *Student Wa:*
> ***When I talk to myself I can understand what I read and what I write***.
> *Student My:*
> ***I sometimes read loud because I want to make sure I understand***. *What I write is important so dr…can understand what I write.*
> *Student Eh:*
> ***I think I also talk Yes I think so because I must write my notes correctly***. *My summary must correct also because if I don't know what I write I cannot do my project.*

The interview excerpts confirmed that the students also have their readers in their mind. This may be due to the fact that the lecturers often reminded them the importance of communicating clearly to the reader their intention. This composing strategy helped the students to pay more attention to their writing in order that their writing is complete enough to stand alone in the absence of the writer. This view is akin to Harnett (1997 in M, 2005).

DISCUSSION

The results revealed that the students approached the task of writing the project paper by drawing from and relying on a variety of the main and sub types of the writing strategies. The students' employment of the meta cognitive strategies confirmed that the students are aware that these self-regulatory strategies helped them to control, monitor and evaluate their writing process and performance, thus contributing to increase in their confidence level over what they have to do. The cognitive strategies which encompassed eleven sub categories of composing writing strategies indicated that cognitive strategies formed an important aspect of the reading and writing processes. The students were constantly involved in the interactive process of perceiving the writing task (clarifying, note taking, summarizing, paraphrasing, elaborating, drafting, redrafting, reading, rereading), which resulted significantly in a continuous process of revising their outline and the content of what they had written. The students also resorted to their first language (thinking in first language, translating from L1 to L2 and transferring their writing skills in L1 to L2), which is perceived as another interactive and dynamic process because the students were using and building on the resources that they have. This resulted in improving their second language proficiency and L2 writing skills.

The social/affective strategies as confirmed by the students were employed in different phases and levels of their writing, as a way to help them compose and improve on what they have written. The composition process of the project paper also required the

students to source from a variety of reading platforms (library, journals, online materials and databases). Riazi (1997) asserts that this is a complex and dynamic orchestration of a variety of searching, reading, writing and reasoning activities (p. 128). The process of verbalizing, which is categorized as communicative strategies, appears to be another essential strategy for the students because the strategy increases their awareness and understanding on what to write and how to write the topic.

CONCLUSION

Although general composing process patterns in writing project papers are similar in the first language (L1) and the second language(L2) in that any project paper should have an introduction, body and conclusion, L2 writers have more difficulty with setting goals, generating and organizing materials. They lack the stylistic and lexical resources, and hence, have a more difficult task of producing a piece of written work. The students' interactive involvement in the academic activity of writing a project paper has implications on their understanding and knowledge of how to write and produce a piece of academic written text which are deemed appropriate in the academic context.

The students' reflections on the process indicate that they are tacitly acquiring knowledge such as knowledge of the discourse community. Such knowledge is essential as Dong (1997) discovered that conflicts between the students' L1 and the acquisition of academic literacy in English, in which the major problematic area for students is the ''lack of membership and social contact'' (p. 453) with their chosen academic discourse communities. The students commented that they verbalize what they have read and write in order that they can ensure their audiences (their lecturers) understand what they have written. This finding is akin to that of Riazi (1997). In the present study, the attention given to the foundations of writing a project paper (topic, area of investigation, research objectives, research questions and statement of the problem) provide the students with a greater sense of audience's awareness, in addition to increasing their knowledge on discourse conventions of academic writing. The questions posed by the lecturers have helped students to state specifically what they want to do for their project.

The composing processes also lead to certain types of learning in L2. Since the project paper is focused on content, the students reported that the lecturers' comments have helped them improve their knowledge in the field. Similar findings were reported in Casanave and Hubard (1992), Jenkins (1993 in Braine 2002). Riazi (1997) refers to acquisition of this knowledge as domain-specific subject matter. Comments given by the lecturers of the course, such as *'more examples on this aspect of politeness', 'what is the gap in this area? – justification isn't strong', 'what does this example indicate'* and many more help the students improve their knowledge on the topic/issue. Incidentally, it also helps them improve their language awareness because these type of comments help them improve and develop their L2 proficiency.

Finally, the present study also reveals that teaching the Arab postgraduate students to write project papers must involve careful planning where attention to the structure of argument, manifestation of the use of reading materials into the written work, attention to the reader and paying attention to stylistic features of writing (genre of academic writing, morphosyntactic features, cohesion and coherence) should be explicitly taught and practised.

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APPENDIX 1

TAXONOMIES OF ESL WRITING STRATEGIES

TABLE 1. Cognitive and metacognitive strategies (Wenden, 1991)

Metacognitive strategies	Cognitive strategies

▪ Planning
▪ Evaluation
▪ Monitoring
	Clarification:
	  ▪ Self-question
	  ▪ Hypothesizing
	  ▪ Defining terms
	  ▪ comparing
	Retrieval
	  ▪ rereading aloud or silently what had been written
	  ▪ writing in a lead-in word or expression
	  ▪ rereading the assigned question
	  ▪ self-questioning
	  ▪ writing till the idea would come
	  ▪ summarizing what had just been written (in terms of content or rhetoric)
	  ▪ thinking in one's native language
	
	Resourcing:
	  ▪ ask researcher
	  ▪ refer to dictionary
	Deferral
	Avoidance
	Verification

TABLE 2. Composing strategies (Riazi, 1997)

Composing strategies	Constituents	Phase of composing process
Cognitive strategies Interacting with the materials to be used in writing by manipulating them mentally or physically	▪ Note making ▪ Elaboration ▪ Use of mother tongue knowledge and skills transfer from L1 ▪ Inferencing ▪ Drafting (revising & editing)	Reading & writing Reading & writing Reading & writing Reading Writing
Metacognitive strategies Executive processes used to plan, monitor, and evaluate a writing task	▪ Assigning goals ▪ Planning (making & changing outline) ▪ Rationalizing appropriate formats ▪ Monitoring & evaluation ▪ Appealing for clarifications	Task representation & reading Writing Reading & writing Reading/writing/task representations Task representation
Social strategies Interacting with other persons to assist in performing the task or to gain affective control	▪ Getting feedback from professors & peers	Writing
Search strategies Searching and using supporting sources	▪ Searching & using libraries (books, journals, ERIC, microfiche) ▪ Using guidelines ▪ Using other's writing as model	Reading & writing

TABLE 3. Japanese ESL Students' Writing Strategies (Sasaki, 2000)

Writing Strategies	Definition
Planning	Detailed planning of overall organization
(1) Global planning	
(2) Thematic planning	Less detailed planning of overall organization
(3) Local planning	Planning what to write next
(4) Organizing	Organizing the generated ideas
(5) Conclusion	Planning of the conclusion
Retrieving	
(1) Plan retrieving	Retrieving the already constructed plan
(2) Information retrieving	Retrieving appropriate information from long-term memory
Generating ideas	
(1) Naturally generated	Generating ideas without any stimulus
(2) Description generated	Generating an idea related to the previous description
Verbalizing	
(1) Verbalizing a proposition	Verbalizing the content the writer intends to write
(2) Rhetorical refining	Refining the rhetorical aspects of an expression
(3) Mechanical refining	Refining the mechanical or (L1/ESL) grammatical aspects of an expression
(4) Sense of readers	Adjusting expression (s) to the readers Translating the generated idea into ESL Rereading the already produced sentence
Translating	Translating the generated idea into ESL
Rereading	Rereading the already produced sentence
Evaluating	
(1) ESL proficiency evaluation	Evaluating one's own ESL proficiency
(2) Local text evaluation	Evaluating part of the generated text
(3) General text evaluation	Evaluating the generated text in general
Others	
(1) Resting	Resting
(2) Questioning	Asking the researcher a question
(3) Impossible to categorize	Impossible to categorize

TABLE 4. The taxonomy of ESL Writing Strategies (Mu 2005)

Writing strategies	Sub-strategies	Speculation
Rhetorical strategies	Organization	Beginning/development/ending
	Use of L1	Translate generated idea into ESL
	Formatting/modeling	Genre consideration
	Comparing	Different rhetorical conventions
Meta-cognitive strategies	Planning	Finding focus
	Monitoring	Checking and identifying problems
	Evaluating	Reconsidering written texts, goals

Cognitive strategies	Generating ideas	Repeating, lead-in, inferencing etc
	Revising	Making changes in plan, written text
	Elaborating	Extending contents of writing
	Clarification	Disposing of confusions
	Retrieval	Getting information from memory
	Rehearsing	Trying out ideas or language
	Summarizing	Synthesizing what has been read
Communicative strategies	Avoidance	Avoiding some problem
	Reduction	Giving up some difficulties
	Sense of readers	Anticipating readers' response
Social/affective strategies	Resourcing	Referring to libraries, dictionaries
	Getting feedback	Getting support from professors, peers
		Dissolve the load of the task
	Assigning goals	Reducing anxiety
	Rest/deferral	

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

The interview questions are used as a guide during the interview.

1. What did you do when you were given information about the project?

2. What did you do when you are asked to write out the topic, area of investigation, statement of problem, research objectives, research questions?

3. Does having the outline of the project help? How?

4. How many times did you do the outline?

5. How did you go about writing the outline?

6. How did you put in/ add on the information in the outline?

7. Did the lecturers' comments help or not? Please elaborate.

8. What did you do when you really don't know what to do or how to continue?

9. Did you do any translation work when you were doing the project? Explain.

10. What were the problems that you had? How did you solve the problems?