

## EFL COMPOSING SKILLS AND STRATEGIES: FOUR CASE STUDIES

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**ABSTRACT.** *The present study analyses how differences in the strategies used by EFL writers relate to differences in their writing skills. Data were collected from four undergraduate university Spanish students, two good and two poor writers, enrolled in EFL classes at the Universitat de Barcelona. They were required to take an English test, write an argumentative essay and think-aloud as they wrote an essay.*

*This study identified a number of differences in the strategies used by both pairs of writers. On the whole, it was suggested that what separated good writers from poor ones was the more interactive approach and investment of effort which led to a larger number of metacognitive strategies displayed by the former; particularly, of strategies for planning, organizing, evaluating and revising content as well as other cognitive strategies which entailed dealing with the lexicon and transmitting the message accurately.*

**KEYWORDS.** *Writing, EFL students, strategies.*

**RESUMEN.** *El objetivo de este estudio es analizar cómo diferencias en las estrategias utilizadas por estudiantes de inglés como lengua extranjera se relacionan con diferencias en su capacidad de redactar. Para ello, se recogieron datos de cuatro universitarios españoles, dos escritores considerados buenos y otros dos, no tan buenos, matriculados en cursos de inglés en la Universidad de Barcelona. Dichos sujetos realizaron una prueba de nivel de inglés, una redacción argumentativa en inglés, y una sesión de think-aloud mientras escribían una redacción.*

*Este estudio identificó diferencias en las estrategias utilizadas por cada par de estudiantes. En general, los resultados sugieren que lo que separa escritores buenos de no tan buenos es la mayor interacción y esfuerzo de los primeros, lo cual resulta en un mayor número de estrategias metacognitivas, en particular de estrategias para planificar, organizar, evaluar y revisar el contenido así como otras estrategias cognitivas que implican mejorar el vocabulario y transmitir las ideas de forma más precisa.*

**PALABRAS CLAVE.** *Composición escrita, estudiantes de segundas lenguas, estrategias.*

Although there is a considerable body of research analyzing the way writers compose in second language settings (see Zamel 1983; Raimes 1985, 1987; Silva

1993; Cumming 1989, among others), research on EFL writing is quite scarce. As Valdés et al (1992: 333) have noted, “most FL professionals have taken the position that writing is a “secondary” or less crucial skill than listening, speaking and reading...” Consequently, little attention has been paid to the development of the students’ EFL writing abilities. Part of the problem lies in the fact that in many EFL contexts, such as in Spain, there is not a solid tradition in the teaching of L1 writing skills, whose learning has been often left to the students themselves (Camps 1994). Although we have witnessed an increase in the number of research studies carried out by researchers in Spain into L1 writing (c.f. Camps 1994; Tolchinski 1993; Cassany 1993) and L2 writing (cf. Manchón-Ruiz *et al.* 1997; Manchón-Ruiz, in press), many questions about EFL writing still await an answer. For instance, we do not know much about the way our students write in a foreign language; nor even in their mother tongue; we are unaware of the specific problems they encounter in producing a piece of writing; or about the processes and strategies they engage in while composing.

This study attempts to shed some light onto these questions. Particularly, it aims at analyzing the composing processes, strategies and other writing behaviors observed in university Spanish students while writing in English.

## 1. THE STUDY<sup>1</sup>

Four Spanish university students, two good writers and two poor writers, were selected out of a sample of 200 students enrolled in undergraduate advanced EFL classes at the Universitat de Barcelona. The four students were carefully selected so that potential intervening variables were controlled. They were chosen according to the following criteria: a) their ages were similar ranging from 18 to 21; b) they were all enrolled in English Majors; c) all of them had obtained a similar score in an English Cambridge First Certificate proficiency test, administered in class, ranging from 5.4 to 6.2, on a 10-point-scale; d) the two pairs were also selected according to the total score obtained in an argumentative composition, evaluated by two raters on a 25-point-rating scale measuring: organization, content, cohesion, vocabulary and grammar. According to the results<sup>2</sup>, the two good writers, María and Alex, were above the 75% percentile, and the two poor writers, Teresa and Laura, were graded below the 25% percentile; and finally, e) none of the writers reported having received any systematic instruction in how to write -either in the L1 or L2.

### 1.1. *Elicitation procedures*

Upon selecting the subjects, these were required to verbalize their thinking processes either in their mother tongue or in English, to the extent that they were

able to, in a composing aloud session. They were previously trained in thinking-aloud with a reading activity rather than with a writing task, so as not to induce writing behaviors they might not have used otherwise. Upon concluding the think-aloud sessions, oral interviews were held with each student which involved having subjects retrospect on the changes they had made when writing as well as on the strategies (e.g., planning, organizing, etc.) they had -or had not- engaged in during the composing of the essay.

The audiotapes of the think-aloud procedures were transcribed and coded. Each page and line of the protocol was numbered and so were the clauses written in the composition. Pausing was also recorded. Finally, and following Witte and Cherry (1984), protocols were divided into thought units (goal-oriented segments) and its strategies classified according to the following coding scheme<sup>3</sup>.

The general framework adopted was Wenden's (1991, 1993) threefold classification of metacognitive strategies: planning, monitoring and evaluating. Then, based on the data itself, and following work done by other studies on learning strategies (O'Malley & Chamot 1990; Wenden 1991), communicative strategies (Faerch & Kasper 1984) and writing strategies (Flower 1989; Cumming 1989; Uzawa and Cumming 1989; Wenden 1993; Arndt 1987; Witte and Cherry 1994, and Cooper & Matsuhashi, cited in Camps 1994), a number of strategies<sup>4</sup> were identified and classified as follows.

- I. PLANNING STRATEGIES.* Strategies by which the writer plans and talks out what ideas will come next, and explicitly states his or her objectives for content organization and writing procedures. Under this type, there were included strategies for:
- *Planning overall content and ideas* (PL id), such as retrieving ideas, relating new information to old information, making connections among existing ideas and setting general content goals either in the form of notes or verbalizations.
  - *Planning procedures* (PL pr), such as planning subsequent actions (procedures or strategies to be adopted) or planning delayed actions (postponing an action deliberately).
  - *Planning organization* (PL or), such as grouping ideas; deciding on the overall organization of the text (e.g., organizing according to a rhetorical plan); deciding how to sequence ideas and how to structure the text as a whole or parts of it.
  - *Planning linguistic text* (PL tx), such as rehearsing or verbalizing several versions of the text to be produced.

**II. MONITORING STRATEGIES** include strategies undertaken when checking and verifying progress in the composing process and when identifying oncoming problems. They might involve:

- *Task-Monitoring strategies* (TM), such as assessing how the task is progressing; how successfully the intended meaning is conveyed; tracking the use of how well a strategy is working or whether there is a need for adopting new ones.
- *Self-Monitoring strategies* (SM), such as expressing one's feelings towards the task, becoming aware that one is having problems.

**III. EVALUATING STRATEGIES.** Strategies undertaken when reconsidering the written text, previous goals, planned thoughts, as well as changes undertaken on the text.

- *Evaluating strategies* (EV), such as questioning or evaluating the written text or planned thoughts.
- *Reviewing strategies* (REW), such as reconsidering goals previously set (g), or reading the text, either the entire text (gl), the previous sentence (st) or paragraph (p).
- *Revising strategies* (REV): Making changes to the text in order to clarify meaning (the changes may involve problems with ideas, word choice, cohesion, coherence and organization).
- *Editing strategies* (ED): Making changes to the text to correct the grammar, syntax, vocabulary (when the purpose is not clarifying meaning), spelling, and punctuation.

**IV. RESOURCING STRATEGIES (RES).** Using available external reference sources of information about the target language, such as consulting the dictionary to look up or confirm doubts (grammatical, semantic or spelling doubts), or to look for alternatives (synonyms).

**V. REPEATING STRATEGIES (RP).** Repeating chunks of language in the course of composing, either when reviewing the text or when transcribing new ideas.

**VI. REDUCTION STRATEGIES (RD).** Strategies to do away with a problem, either by removing it from the text, giving up any attempts to solve it, or paraphrasing with the aim of avoiding a problem.

*VII. USE of L1 STRATEGIES (L1).* Using the mother tongue with different purposes: to generate new ideas, to evaluate and make sense of the ideas written in the L2 or to transcribe the right idea / word in the L1.

Finally, thought units were also classified based on the linguistic aspect the writer focused on, which could include any of the following: coherence /cohesion (coh), organization (org), expression (exp), idea (id), grammar (gr), punctuation (punct), syntax (synt), vocabulary (vc), spelling (sp), rhetorical concerns (voice, tone, etc), or topic knowledge (tp. kn.).

The full set of protocols was coded after establishing reliability (87% of agreement over 316 coding decisions) with a second rater on a randomly-selected 10% of the protocols, and after revising the original categories. In addition, intrarater reliability, established two weeks after the initial coding on a randomly selected 10% of the protocol data, averaged 92% over 378 decisions. Following Perl (1978), Arndt (1987) and Raimes (1985), once each protocol was coded, the resulting codifications were placed on a chart which illustrated the writing behaviors in relation to their position, frequency and duration, and provided a basis for generalizing about the behaviors of each subject's composing process. A sample of the coding for one of the students can be found in the Appendix.

Furthermore, following other studies (e.g., Perl 1978; Stallard 1974; Raimes 1987), the occurrences of each subcategory coded in each protocol were also tallied and this number was subsequently considered to compare the behaviors among all four students. Given the small sample (only four students) and the fact that some thought units had been unavoidably double and even triple coded, no statistical tests were conducted with the data.

## 1.2. Results

The analysis of the protocols yielded insights into the writing strategies the four writers exhibited on composing. Yet, it should be noted that given the reduced number of subjects observed, the findings described here should only be taken as indicative of what good and poor EFL writers' strategies might be.

The coding charts constructed for each individual allowed the examination of the behavior that characterized each one of them, and the number of the occurrences of the variables observed meant comparisons could be made among them. Tables are provided comparing all the occurrences of the four writers; however, what became evident is that tables alone do not explain some of the differences observed among the students. This is why data is often complemented by detailed accounts elicited from the individual coding charts or protocols. Finally, it should be mentioned that although the essays the students wrote were not analyzed as part of the data, they were

sometimes considered to complement some of the findings obtained with the protocols.

### 1.2.1. *Writing time and length of written texts*

In spite of the fact that students had not been given any time limitations for writing the essay, no major differences were found concerning pre-writing time and the total time students took to compose (Table 1). However, in comparison, the two better writers spent more time on overall pausing (between 10' and 11') than the two poorer writers (between 5' and 7'). This pausing was visible throughout the composing process.

CATEGORY	GOOD WRITERS		POOR WRITERS	
	María	Alex	Teresa	Laura
<i>Pausing Time</i>				
Overall Pausing Time	10' 09''	12' 02''	5' 25''	7' 01''
Pausing Time Pre-writing	1' 38''	0' 21''	0' 8''	0' 45''
<i>Composing Time</i>				
Pre-writing Time	2' 13''	2' 02''	0' 31''	1' 54''
Total Time Composing*	55' 00''	57' 00''	38' 00''	56' 00''
(*) Includes pre-writing time				

Table 1. *Composing Time*

Concerning the length of the essays, all four students wrote a fairly similar number of words (ranging between 193 and 227 words), and of clauses (ranging between 27 and 40) despite being given unlimited length restrictions. Nevertheless, the two better writers wrote more words per clause (between 6 and 7) than the two poorer writers (around 5 words) and their essays displayed a larger number of paragraphs, between four and five, compared to those of the poor writers, which only had three (Table 2).

CATEGORY	GOOD WRITERS		POOR WRITERS	
	María	Alex	Teresa	Laura
Paragraphs written	4 / 5 (?)	5	3	3
Clauses written	37	27	40	37
Words written	227	209	213	193
Words per clause	6.1	7.7	5.3	5.2

Table 2. *Essay Length*

### 1.2.2. Planning strategies

*Planning content.* As mentioned above, none of the students spent much time pre-writing. In fact, and with the exception of one student, María, the other writers set about writing soon after they had chosen the topic (either on *Euthanasia* or *Abortion*). However, the picture that seemed to emerge from the protocols was that the two good writers, María and Alex, exhibited more planning strategies (between 34 and 44 occurrences) throughout the task than the poor writers (between 16 and 24) (see Table 3), although the two writers used different approaches.

PLANNING	Number of Occurrences			
	GOOD WRITERS		POOR WRITERS	
	María	Alex	Teresa	Laura
Ideas	34	44	24*	16
Procedures				
Subsequent Action	29	40	9	16
Postponed Action	4	—	—	10
Organization	7	8	—	—
Linguistic Text	71	59	45*	22
Total	145	152	78	68

\* About half of them occurred while attempting to write the last paragraph.

Table 3. *Planning Strategies*

María showed clear signs of planning-in-advance strategies. She spent the longest span of her pre-writing time generating ideas by drawing a sketchy outline of the topics she wanted to deal with and subsequently developing each idea. Alex, on the other hand, seemed to follow a kind of mental plan, which came to light as he started to write. These two writers' initial plans, however, only served to consider some general ideas which were not fully developed until the two writers actually started to write them.

In contrast, the two poor writers, Laura and Teresa, did not seem to write according to any pre-determined or emergent plan. Instead, expanding their 'general opinion' seemed to be the only 'plan' that led to their subsequent writing. Once this opinion was written down, they started questioning what else to say. In fact, their lack of a clear plan and a clear purpose in writing the essay was evident in a number of aspects: they often displayed what Cumming (1989: 113) called a 'what-next-strategy', that is, of questioning what else to write about after writing some ideas. These instances were sometimes accompanied by comments such as 'I don't know what else to say' or 'let's see if something else comes up.' Furthermore, the protocols also reflected an over-dependence on the existing text to further generate new ideas. That was especially the case with Laura. She needed to read the paragraph written

-and often the entire essay- every time she wanted to generate a new idea. In the case of Teresa, this was more evident when she had to start the last paragraph, which she strove to write by rereading the entire essay several times, with the hope that "something would come up", and by resorting to the dictionary, hoping a new idea would emerge from the words being looked up.

In comparison, then, and as shown in Table 3, the two good writers exhibited a larger number of strategies for planning ideas than the two poor writers; but, interestingly enough, whereas in the former case not all planned ideas were developed or written down, in the case of the poor writers, idea generation and writing was a more straightforward procedure, with little reflection on the newly generated content. In other words, whereas María and Alex thought of more ideas than they actually wrote, Laura and Teresa rarely discarded them once these had been expressed.

*Planning text.* It comes as no surprise that the occurrences of planning text of María and Alex (between 59 and 71) also outnumbered those of Laura and Teresa (between 22 and 45). That was so, because generating new ideas also entailed rehearsing more alternatives (Table 3).

Common to all four writers was the fact that much of their planning time was devoted to making attempts at putting thoughts into words. These attempts were systematically interrupted by other strategies, such as evaluating, reviewing, editing, resourcing and idea generation. That is, none of the writers in the study composed in a linear fashion, but they all followed a recursive process, as already substantiated in previous L1 and ESL research (e.g., Perl 1978; Flower & Hayes 1980; Cumming 1989).

These interruptions, nevertheless, were more evident in the case of the two better writers, which often resulted in the writing of more sporadic sentences compared to the longer chunks written by Teresa and Laura at any one time. This finding by itself may suggest that the two better writers wrote less fluently than the two poor writers or at least with less ease. However, a more plausible explanation for this decrease in fluency is the realization that these interruptions were deliberately undertaken to reassess planned ideas or written text to better accommodate it to the newly generated or written ideas. In other words, María and Alex displayed more instances of evaluating, re-structuring and planning while writing than Teresa and Laura, though at the expense of their fluency.

*Planning Organization.* Another distinctive feature between the two pairs of writers involved their concern -or lack thereof- for planning the organization of the text. Both, Alex and María, generated ideas while taking into account -to a larger or lesser extent- the overall organization of the text. With María this became evident not only when writing the first notes, but also every time she went back to the outline, before proceeding with the next paragraph. Alex, on the other hand, spent all of his pre-writing time, albeit short, planning the overall organization of the text. He started questioning what rhetorical organization he should adopt, whether a neutral



argumentation, presenting reasons for and against, or one in which he should take sides, an option which he finally adopted. Throughout his composing, he kept setting organizational goals (e.g., “ok, now the first argument for..”), especially at paragraph boundaries. In fact, one systematic strategy he displayed throughout the essay was that of using memorized phrases, such as *first of all*, especially at the beginning of each paragraph, a behavior he reported using frequently.

Laura and Teresa, on the other hand, did not set any observable organizational goals, as can be seen in Table 3. This is not surprising, considering the ‘freewriting’ or ‘improvising’ style both of them seemed to exhibit. As mentioned before, it was ‘expressing their opinion’ which actually directed their subsequent writing, without a very clear sense of where the discourse was heading, and even less of how it should be organized.

*Planning Procedures.* In terms of procedural goals, differences were also found between the two pairs of writers. As shown in Table 3, the number of subsequent actions planned by the two good writers (between 29 and 40) outnumbered that displayed by the other two writers (between 9 and 16). Most of these actions involved verbalizing what the writer was intending or was about to do; for example, looking up words in the dictionary, going back to the outline (in the case of María), reading the existing text again, confirming a doubt, and so on. In fact, most of these procedural goals were triggered following monitoring strategies, as will be explained below.

Postponing actions were uniquely displayed by two of the writers, María and Laura, and they were usually concerned with putting off looking up words or solving grammatical doubts for later. However, one noticeable difference between the two writers lay in how they went about dealing with these postponed actions at the time they had to deal with them. Whereas María engaged in problem solving strategies by actually looking up the words or deciding on their grammaticality, Laura, on the other hand, deliberately decided not to look them up, or solve them, and often deleted them from the text to avoid having to handle any problems. This avoidance strategy was, in fact, a common behavior of Laura’s composing, as can be observed in Table 9 on reduction strategies.

### 1.2.3. *Monitoring strategies*

*Self-Monitoring.* No differences were observed in terms of self-monitoring strategies (Table 4). Only two of the writers displayed instances where they seemed to become aware of how well or badly they were approaching the writing task. One of these writers was María, who started writing the first ideas with much difficulty and not fully committed to what she was writing: “...I don’t know if this is right...or this is what I meant”.

Teresa also displayed a number of self-monitoring strategies as she was attempting to write the last paragraph, which became her greatest handicap in writing the essay. She spent more than half of the total writing time in writing this paragraph,

that is, the conclusion. She had great difficulty in putting her “fragmentary” thoughts into written form, partly due to her inability to come up with the right idea, both in her L1 and in English, and partly owing to her premature editing and resourcing attempts. And aware of her inability to come up with the right idea, she admitted becoming more and more nervous.

MONITORING	Number of Occurrences			
	GOOD WRITERS		POOR WRITERS	
	María	Alex	Teresa	Laura
Self-Monitoring	4	—	3*	—
Task-Monitoring	18	14	7	8
Total	22	14	10	8

\* All of them occurred as she was writing the last paragraph

Table 4. *Monitoring Strategies*

*Task-Monitoring.* As for task-monitoring, the table above shows differences between the two poor (between 7 and 8 occurrences) and the two good writers (between 14 and 18 occurrences). The systematic interaction that both María and Alex maintained with the text was also reflected in their ability to identify when they had a problem (e.g., the ideas already written did not coincide with what they intended to say or they had already been mentioned somewhere else in the text), or when they had to adopt a different strategy. In fact, the identification of these on-line problems often triggered the setting of new procedural goals, which derived in further evaluations, reviewing, generation of ideas and in the restructuring of the written text, interfering once again with their writing fluency. With Teresa, the only task-monitoring strategies she showed occurred when she was attempting to write the last paragraph and realized she was not managing well.

#### 1.2.4. *Evaluating strategies*

All four writers displayed evaluating strategies while writing the text and upon completing it. Most of the revisions and changes were done on the first draft, since writing a second or a third draft was not a procedure observed with any of the students.

*Reviewing* strategies were sometimes difficult to trace as the writers often reread silently. Only María showed clear signs of reviewing goals, and those usually involved going back to the outline and crossing out the topics she had already developed.

No major differences were found in terms of reviewing sentences and paragraphs, with perhaps the exception of Teresa, whose protocol only showed one occurrence of reviewing paragraphs. As for reviewing the entire essay, if

quantitatively the two poor writers' occurrences (between 3 and 5) slightly surpassed those of the two good writers (only 2 times), qualitative differences between both pairs became evident (Table 5) in the protocols. That is, the protocols revealed that most of the global rereadings observed with Laura and Teresa had been undertaken either as a springboard to generate further ideas (in the case where students were starting to write down ideas), or merely as a proof-reading activity (in the case when evaluating was the goal). But in no case did these readings seem to be carried out with the objective of revising the overall content generated, as occurred with the two better writers. In other words, the poor writers rarely used reviewing as a way of rethinking or revising the ideas they had generated or for any other purposes than the two mentioned above.

REVIEWING	<i>Number of Occurrences</i>			
	GOOD WRITERS		POOR WRITERS	
	María	Alex	Teresa	Laura
Goals	4	1	—	—
Text				
Entire text	2	2	3	5
Paragraph	5	6	1	8
Sentence	38	22	14	29
Total	49	31	18	42

Table 5. *Reviewing Strategies*

In contrast, both María and Alex used reviewing motivated by a broader range of objectives: to retrieve new ideas; to assess whether the written text matched the intended meaning; to evaluate the linguistic structure as it had evolved; to keep them focused and ensure they were still on track; to decide how to connect the preceding idea with the forthcoming ones; to revise, and to edit.

*Revising.* The differences between the two pairs pointed out in the preceding section are further supported by the larger number of revising strategies (see Table 6) that María and Alex displayed (between 10 and 20 changes) compared to Teresa and Laura (two changes each). But here again, the two good writers undertook different approaches. Whereas María did most of her revisions after writing the text and while writing the final draft, Alex preferred to do so as soon as he had written ideas. Most of these revising strategies were used to clarify or connect ideas, and in fact, new ideas were added after using these strategies. In the case of the two poor writers, no further ideas were added to the text once this had been generated. In fact, Teresa and Laura's evaluating strategies could be more appropriately defined as proof-reading strategies, virtually limited to the editing of surface level features.

	<i>Number of Changes</i>			
	GOOD WRITERS		POOR WRITERS	
	María	Alex	Teresa	Laura
REVISING	20	10	2	2

Table 6. *Revising Strategies*

*Editing.* As far as editing strategies are concerned, no significant differences were observed between the two pairs of writers (Table 7). For all four cases, editing was perhaps undertaken too prematurely, which sometimes interfered with their process of generating ideas or text. As for the range of editing changes, these covered a number of aspects involving grammar, lexicon, wording, punctuation and spelling. Perhaps it is worth commenting that the only changes made to the syntax of some sentences were observed with María and Alex, and overall, these two latter writers also employed more lexical substitutions.

	<i>Number of Changes</i>			
	GOOD WRITERS		POOR WRITERS	
	María	Alex	Teresa*	Laura
EDITING				
Grammar	8	2	6	8
Word	9	6	2	2
Wording	6	1	—	5
Spelling	8	1	2	1
Punctuation	3	—	4	-
Syntax	3	1	—	-
Total	37	11	13	16

\* All of them were undertaken when writing the last paragraph

Table 7. *Editing Strategies*

*Evaluating.* The overt concern for vocabulary observed with María and Alex was also reflected by their larger number of occurrences in evaluating word choice. As can be seen in Table 8, the two good writers analyzed word choice using as many as twice the number of assessments (between 28 and 39) as those made by the other two writers (between 11 and 15). In fact, this was perhaps one of the strategies that most differentiated the two pairs of writers.

Furthermore, the two better writers did comparatively question more often the appropriateness of the ideas generated (idea) or written (between 7 and 13 occurrences) than did the two poor writers (only two times), and only the former assessed the coherence between sentences (coherence), albeit not much more frequently.

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EVALUATING	<i>Number of Occurrences</i>			
	GOOD WRITERS		POOR WRITERS	
	María	Alex	Teresa	Laura
Grammar	4	13	6	4
Syntax	2	1	—	—
Idea	13	7	2	2
Spelling	5	1	8	—
Organization	2	1	1	1
Coherence	4	2	—	—
Expression	3	1	4	9
Vocabulary	39	28	15	11
Topic knowledge	2	—	2	1
Opinion	2	—	1	—
Total	85	58	40	32

Table 8. *Evaluating Strategy and Foci of Attention*

1.2.5. *Reduction strategies*

Comparatively, no major differences were identified with the occurrences of reduction (or avoidance) strategies, although, as mentioned earlier on, these occurred more frequently with Laura (Table 9). She had numerous “dilemmas” in evaluating the appropriateness of the written text, especially as far as grammar was concerned; thus, a coping strategy she used was either to eliminate the issue in question or leave the item as it was, in the hope that it would be correct or “it would wash”, as she said.

REDUCTION	<i>Number of Occurrences</i>			
	GOOD WRITERS		POOR WRITERS	
	María	Alex	Teresa	Laura
Eliminating the problem	1	1	2	2
Leaving the problem	1	—	2	4
Paraphrasing	2	—	—	1
Total	4	1	4	7

Table 9. *Reduction Strategies*

1.2.6. *Use of L1 strategies*

No notable differences were observed between the two pairs (Table 10). All four writers used both their L1 and English alternatively. Sometimes they interchanged the use of both languages to achieve the same objectives; for example, while transcribing their thoughts, students started in English but often code switched into their L1 if they

could not come up with the right L2 word. At other times, however, the use of one or the other language was triggered depending on the strategy put into play.

The L1 appeared more frequently when verbalizing major content plans, and especially, when making comments or monitoring their writing task. English was more often used when transcribing ideas, rehearsing and reading back. However, these writers also resorted to their L1 when reading back or repeating text that was written in English. This behavior, which took the form of back translations, was apparently undertaken with the objective of assessing whether the L2 words put on paper made any sense to them, and whether these words expressed their intended meaning<sup>5</sup>. In this sense, using their L1 played a major role in monitoring and evaluating the ideas conveyed, just as has already been suggested by other studies (Manchón-Ruiz, in press; Rowe 1990; Friedlander 1990).

USE of L1	<i>Number of Occurrences</i>			
	GOOD WRITERS		POOR WRITERS	
	María	Alex	Teresa	Laura
Planning Ideas	13	10	14**	1
Planning Text	3	8	2	3
Evaluating	9	1	6	2
Total	25	19	22	6

\*\* Of the 14 occurrences counted, only four occurred while writing the first two paragraphs and the remaining ten instances took place while writing the last paragraph.

Table 10. *Use of L1 Strategies*

Whether these four writers first thought their ideas in L1 and then translated them into English could not be easily traced in the protocols as they often verbalized their thoughts in English while already writing them. However, one behavior that could be observed with one of the writers, Alex, was his serious attempts to avoid literal translations or sentences that sounded “too Latin”, as he put it. That is, he would come up with a new idea, often in Catalan, and spend time thinking how to translate it into an acceptable English structure. That strategy was frequently followed by the generation of alternatives, which were evaluated and discarded if not accepted.

### 1.2.7. *Resourcing strategies*

Other than for planning or evaluating, students often stopped to consult words in the dictionary. Most of the time, resourcing strategies were displayed to look for either the English translation of the L1 word they had in mind, or to check the spelling, although this latter strategy only occurred with two of the students. As can be observed in Table 11, comparatively, the two good writers looked up words more

often (between 15 and 21) than did the poor writers (between 5 and 12), and looking for a synonym was a resourcing behavior only observed with the two good writers.

RESOURCING	<i>Number of Occurrences</i>			
	GOOD WRITERS		POOR WRITERS	
	María	Alex	Teresa	Laura
Grammar	—	3	—	—
L2 Spelling	5	—	5	—
L2 Synonym	2	1	—	—
L2 Word	5	16	3	4
L2 Word form	3	—	1	1
L2 Meaning	—	1	3	—
Total	15	21	12*	5

\* Of the 12 occurrences counted, eight occurred while writing the first two paragraphs and four, while writing the last one.

Table 11. *Resourcing Strategy and Foci of Attention*

### 1.2.8. Repeating strategies

These strategies were mainly observed when the writers were transcribing their thoughts or evaluating the written text, probably to retain information in mind or, as suggested by other authors (Arndt 1987; Raimes 1985), as a way to provide impetus to continue composing. However, except for María, perhaps, no major differences were observed with the four writers in their use of these strategies (Table 12).

REPEATING	<i>Number of Occurrences</i>			
	GOOD WRITERS		POOR WRITERS	
	María	Alex	Teresa	Laura
on transcribing ideas	10	6	3	3
on evaluating ideas	2	2	2	7
Total	12	8	5	10

Table 12. *Repeating Strategies*

## 2. DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

The findings obtained with the think-aloud protocols suggest that the two better writers' use of writing strategies differed in many ways from that observed with the two poorer writers. Bearing in mind that the four writers had obtained similar scores in the English language test, this result shows that some EFL writers are able to undertake a writing approach that is more conducive to good writing than other

writers with similar proficiency; or following Raimes's words, some writers "use what they have and move on from there" (1985: 250). As a matter of fact, this lack of interdependence between linguistic and composing competence has also been substantiated by previous research (cf. Sasaki and Hiroshi 1996; Whalen and Menard 1995; Cumming 1989).

In essence, being active and committed to the task are the two traits that best characterize the strategic approach displayed by the two good writers. That is, as they were composing, they maintained a very interactive relationship with the text, investing time and effort in transmitting their ideas and in developing the text. These two traits became apparent through the observation of several aspects.

First of all, their interactive approach was evidenced by the large number of metacognitive strategies they set in motion at different levels: firstly, in planning, not only in terms of generating more ideas and alternatives but also in setting a larger number of procedural and organizational goals than poor writers; secondly, in constantly monitoring what and how they were doing, by identifying oncoming problems and assessing the text produced against their intended meaning; and finally, in their evaluating strategies, which meant a larger number of revisions and restructuring of the generated text, and in setting a wider range of objectives when reviewing and editing.

Furthermore, the fact that the two good writers approached the composing process with more effort than the other two writers became clearer, especially when striving to get their intended meaning across. That is, their concern for conveying their message led to the generation of more alternative ideas; more rehearsing attempts, more evaluations of both ideas and word choice and more revisions of ideas and coherence. In particular, when dealing with word choice, they demonstrated a larger number of concerns and of strategies, such as evaluating word appropriateness, adopting an English structure, avoiding repetition, checking or confirming words, and finally, looking for synonyms and for the grammatical context of the words. Furthermore, these writers also resorted to other strategies not observed with the two poor writers, such as using memorized phrases (e.g., Alex); avoiding literal translations; struggling to come up with more accurate vocabulary, and in general, spending more time on the overall evaluation of their written text.

The consequences of this strategic approach certainly resulted in the writers pausing longer, composing at a slower pace, writing sentences in smaller chunks, and therefore making their writing appear less fluent, as Humes (1983) has also observed. The final result, however, was the writing of essays with similar length to that of the two poor writers, but with more paragraphs, more complex sentences (measured by the number of words per clause), more elaborated ideas and more cohesive and coherent paragraphs.



Comparatively, the two poor writers approached their composing process with less effort and interaction, displaying a limited number of metacognitive strategies. No efforts were apparently made to set an overall content or organizational plan, either at the beginning or as they were writing. Instead, they relied on the created text to move forward, showing an over-dependence on the generated text, and on the whole, reflecting a fairly text-bound behavior as described in the Scardamalia and Bereiter's model (1992).

Likewise, these writers were less concerned with transmitting their meaning precisely. Their generation of ideas was followed by little rethinking, and once these ideas were written down, they were rarely revised and modified. In fact, one of the most striking differences between this pair and the other two writers was their restricted use of revising strategies. Finally, they were not so concerned with word choice and repetitions as the two good writers; they showed fewer confirming and resourcing strategies, and reviewing was usually undertaken as a proof-reading activity, rather than a full revision of content and organization. For these writers, therefore, their first draft looked very much like the last draft, a finding also observed with ESL writers (Beach 1976).

Certainly, the results suggested here are consistent with the findings obtained in L1 and ESL writing studies, in which the more successful writers have been observed to be more interactive (e.g., Raimes 1987), to put more effort into their writing approach (e.g., Stallard 1974) and in sum, to engage in a larger range of problem-solving or decision-making strategies (Cumming 1990; Flower & Hayes 1980), particularly, strategies for planning, organizing, evaluating and revising content as well as other cognitive strategies which entailed dealing with the lexicon and transmitting the message accurately. These findings are also substantiated by current research on learner strategies and learner training (Brown and Palincsar 1982; Brown 1980; Wenden 1991, 1993) which point to the direct relation that exists between the use of metacognitive strategies and more successful language learning.

Nevertheless, the present study has shown that these metacognitive strategies can take a number of forms. That is, an analysis of each writer's protocol made evident the different approaches that the two writers with similar writing proficiency undertook to attain the same goals. For example, both María and Alex displayed a large number of planning and evaluating strategies; however, the two writers proved to have different approaches: one preferring outlining and the other devising a mental plan; one evaluating more ideas before or as these were written down, and the other on writing the final draft; and finally, one reviewing after ending the paragraph and the other while writing it. The important point here is that despite these differences, the two alternative ways led the writers to the same result: a more effective planning, evaluating and reviewing of the text. These results further evidence the fact that writing is a too complex skill to be approached in a single, unique way. Rather, it is

undertaken by following different paths and utilizing different approaches just as the writers of the case studies did.

### 3. IMPLICATIONS FOR WRITING INSTRUCTION

Gardner (1983 -cited in Cumming 1989) has claimed that “humans can develop several different kinds of core intelligences, one of which is writing expertise” (1989: 124). This is by itself a strong enough reason for promoting the teaching and development of good writing skills. Unfortunately, in many countries, such as Spain, writing does not still seem to be at the top of teachers’ agendas. Hence, there is a need to adopt a new perspective on the role and importance of good writing, which should become a responsibility shared by both L1 and L2 teachers and a top priority in the school curricula.

Teaching discursive models and encouraging extensive reading are definitely good ways of promoting good writing skills. However, they are not enough. The deficient or inadequate use of strategies of two of the writers in the case studies and the better strategic use of the two better ones makes it evident that if instruction were expanded to include general procedures for composing, task-specific strategies and enhanced awareness of the writing task, results could be improved.

To start with, EFL writing would benefit enormously from applying the same instructional techniques that many ESL process writing programs have already been applying for over twenty years. That is, EFL writers need, first of all, metacognitive strategies to be able to regulate and execute their writing. Emphasis should be made on developing good planning strategies, not only in terms of retrieving topic knowledge, but also in deciding overall organization, and in selecting information based on the purpose and audience for whom they write. As many of these writers have previous practice in writing personal and narrative stories, they should ideally be encouraged to write on more expository or argumentative writing for which they would have to manipulate and “transform” their knowledge (Scardamalia & Bereiter 1992), thus activating a larger number of planning, association and grouping strategies.

As many of the deficiencies EFL writers have are also language related, they should be encouraged to take extra time and effort (Raimes 1985; Uzawa & Cumming 1989) either when writing ideas or, even better, when evaluating them so that varied structures and more accurate vocabulary would result. Certainly, encouraging activities aimed at enriching the students’ linguistic resources (e.g., grammar and range of lexicon) would result in essays of better quality while, at the same time, allowing the writers to release their attention for higher order cognitive skills (organizing, planning content, evaluating and so on), when composing.

This study also revealed that crucial for EFL writers is the teaching of strategies for monitoring and evaluating their written outcomes. The inefficient evaluating strategies displayed by Teresa and Laura evidenced the need to instruct students to attend to “meaning” when evaluating (Cumming 1989), while postponing editing or proof-reading after major revisions have been undertaken. Teachers should also help students distance themselves from the text, to develop self-critical skills (Arndt 1987), for example, by leaving the text aside for a few days immediately after writing it, or revising other peers’ texts to develop critical skills. Encouraging a more frequent use of relevant reference materials, such as good dictionaries and grammar books (Uzawa & Cumming 1989) is especially important for EFL writers as they often lack the native intuition that would allow them to evaluate at ease. Likewise, they should also learn to monitor their writing as they compose, matching the text they have produced with their intended meaning and deciding when the situation requires the use of alternative strategies. Finally, it is very important that students learn to use strategies in a very flexible way, adapting them to the specific demands of different tasks and to their own personal preferences.

For this teaching model to be successful, it is essential, however, to provide teachers with specialized training in composing skills. Certainly, one of the main reasons why students have not been well instructed in how to write is due precisely to the lack of teachers with adequate training in writing skills. Not many teachers are acquainted with the nature of writing skills and with strategies and techniques for good writing. This study, in short, suggests that those of us who are in the field of education, particularly in the teaching of languages, need to become aware of the nature and complexity of EFL writing more thoroughly, for such awareness and understanding will allow us to help our students become better writers.

## NOTES

1. The study presented here is part of a larger investigation whose objectives were to trace the relationship between good and poor EFL writing skills and the writers’ a) metacognitive knowledge (that is, knowledge about oneself as a writer, about the writing task and the use of strategies), b) language proficiency and c) writing strategies. Due to space limitations, however, only the third variable is analyzed in the present study (see Victori 1995 for a complete account of the study).
2. The judgments of both raters for all of the compositions (n=200) were compared and the final reliability score between both ratings proved to be extremely high (.9064).
3. Following other studies (Perl 1978; Raimes 1985; Smagorinsky 1994, among others), the coding scheme was derived from the data, based on the categories observed and the research questions addressed. However, it is also used as the basis for generalizing about the behavioral patterns of each subject’s composing behavior.
4. Sometimes various strategies occurred simultaneously (e.g., planning idea and planning text; evaluating and using the L1, evaluating and editing, etc.), which explains why many thought units were double or triple coded.
5. See Manchón-Ruiz *et al* (in press) for the use of L1 in backtranslations.

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APPENDIX

TERESA'S ESSAY (clauses 1-22; minutes 1-5)

*Euthanasia is the best way<sup>1</sup> to die<sup>2</sup> when there's nothing left<sup>3</sup> to do<sup>4</sup>, Because sometimes it's very cruel<sup>5</sup> make someone live with pain<sup>6</sup>. Most of people dying<sup>7</sup> –because they're really dyings<sup>8</sup>- are kept alive by machines<sup>9</sup> that make them<sup>10</sup> breath without caring about<sup>11</sup> if they want (to) or not<sup>12</sup>. It's very difficult<sup>13</sup> to know<sup>14</sup> what is going on in the mind of someone else<sup>15</sup>, specially if he or she cannot speak<sup>16</sup>. If they were asked<sup>17</sup> they would probably say<sup>18</sup> that they would rather die<sup>19</sup> instead of going through (the) pain<sup>20</sup> Doctors only want<sup>21</sup> to keep them alive<sup>22</sup> and*

CODING FOR FIRST FIVE MINUTES OF TERESA'S THINK-ALoud COMPOSING TAPE

(Each line represents one minute's worth of composing time and the numbered horizontal brackets show which clause is being written down).

<div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-around; margin-bottom: 5px;"> <span style="border-top: 1px solid black; border-bottom: 1px solid black; padding: 0 5px;">1,2</span> <span style="border-top: 1px solid black; border-bottom: 1px solid black; padding: 0 5px;">3,4</span> <span style="border-top: 1px solid black; border-bottom: 1px solid black; padding: 0 5px;">5</span> </div> <div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-between; font-family: monospace; font-size: 0.9em;"> <span>PLid/tx WR</span> <span>PLtx WR</span> <span>EV(tp.kn)</span> <span>CM</span> <span>REWst</span> <span>LI</span> <span>CM</span> <span>PLtx</span> <span>MK(sk)</span> <span>REWst</span> <span>PLid/tx</span> <span>WR</span> </div>
<div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-around; margin-bottom: 5px;"> <span style="border-top: 1px solid black; border-bottom: 1px solid black; padding: 0 5px;">6</span> <span style="border-top: 1px solid black; border-bottom: 1px solid black; padding: 0 5px;">7</span> <span style="border-top: 1px solid black; border-bottom: 1px solid black; padding: 0 5px;">8</span> </div> <div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-between; font-family: monospace; font-size: 0.9em;"> <span>PLid/tx</span> <span>WR</span> <span>EV(exp)</span> <span>RP</span> <span>PLidltx</span> <span>WR</span> <span>CM</span> <span>PLtx</span> <span>EV(id)</span> <span>WR</span> <span>WR</span> </div>
<div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-around; margin-bottom: 5px;"> <span style="border-top: 1px solid black; border-bottom: 1px solid black; padding: 0 5px;">9</span> <span style="border-top: 1px solid black; border-bottom: 1px solid black; padding: 0 5px;">10</span> <span style="border-top: 1px solid black; border-bottom: 1px solid black; padding: 0 5px;">11</span> <span style="border-top: 1px solid black; border-bottom: 1px solid black; padding: 0 5px;">12</span> <span style="border-top: 1px solid black; border-bottom: 1px solid black; padding: 0 5px;">13,14</span> </div> <div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-between; font-family: monospace; font-size: 0.9em;"> <span>WR</span> <span>WR</span> <span>PLid/tx</span> <span>WR</span> <span>WR</span> <span>PLid/tx</span> <span>CM</span> <span>PLid/tx</span> <span>WR</span> <span>RP</span> </div>
<div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-around; margin-bottom: 5px;"> <span style="border-top: 1px solid black; border-bottom: 1px solid black; padding: 0 5px;">15</span> <span style="border-top: 1px solid black; border-bottom: 1px solid black; padding: 0 5px;">16</span> <span style="border-top: 1px solid black; border-bottom: 1px solid black; padding: 0 5px;">17,18</span> </div> <div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-between; font-family: monospace; font-size: 0.9em;"> <span>PLtx</span> <span>WR</span> <span>WR</span> <span>PLtx</span> <span>WR</span> <span>PLid</span> <span>PLtx</span> <span>WR</span> </div>
<div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-around; margin-bottom: 5px;"> <span style="border-top: 1px solid black; border-bottom: 1px solid black; padding: 0 5px;">19,20</span> <span style="border-top: 1px solid black; border-bottom: 1px solid black; padding: 0 5px;">21,22</span> </div> <div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-between; font-family: monospace; font-size: 0.9em;"> <span>PLtx</span> <span>WR</span> <span>PLid</span> <span>PLtx</span> <span>WR</span> </div>