

Writing Strategies and Thematic Progression in Some Undergraduate Students' Essays: The Case of Level II Students of the Bilingual Department

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ABSTRACT

The present study sets out to examine the writing strategies and the thematic progression used by Bilingual Students of level II, in the Department of Bilingual Studies. In a bid to achieve the said aim, Self-Regulated Learning Theory propounded by Soviet and American psychologists (1960-1980) was used as the theoretical foundation for the study. Thus the population chosen for the purpose of this research output was made up of fifty (50) Level II students from the department of Bilingual Studies, among which twenty-eight (28) were BIF (Bilingue Francophone) and twenty-two (22) from BIA (Bilingue Anglophone). The study revealed that Bilingual II students employ a variety of strategies so as to achieve successful writing. BIF students tended to rely more on indirect strategies such as metacognitive, social and affective strategies in order to produce successful writing. Moreover, they applied compensation strategies in order to overcome their linguistic shortage to produce coherent texts, contrary to the BIA students who mostly applied direct strategies, as a result of their exposure to the English language since their early age. Concerning the Thematic Progression, it was observed that the majority of the writers decided to organize their texts using Constant Theme Progression and derived hypertheme. Finally, the study recommends the use of more compensation, memory, cognitive and metacognitive strategies in order to increase the informants writing abilities and capacities.

Keywords: *writing strategies; thematic progression; BIF; BIA*

RÉSUMÉ

La présente étude se propose d'examiner les stratégies de rédaction ainsi que les progressions thématiques utilisées par les étudiants du niveau II du département des Etudes Bilingues. L'étude optera pour la Théorie de l'Auto-Régulation de l'Apprentissage préconisée par des psychologues Soviétiques et Américains (1960-1980) comme fondation théorique. A c'est effet, le corpus sera constitué de cinquante étudiants du département des Etudes Bilingues, dont vingt-huit (28) BIF (Bilingue Francophone) et vingt-deux (22) BIA (Bilingue Anglophone). L'étude révèlera que les étudiants de niveau II utilisent plusieurs types de stratégies de rédaction. Cependant les étudiants BIF ont tendance à recourir aux stratégies indirectes telles que les stratégies métacognitive, sociale et affective afin de produire des textes de bonne qualité, contrairement aux BIA qui s'appuient sur les stratégies directes, étant donné leur exposition à la langue anglaise dès leur plus jeune âge. En ce qui concerne la Progression Thématique, il a été observé que la majorité des apprenants utilisaient la Progression à Thèmes Constant et à Thèmes Dérivés afin de mieux organiser leurs textes. En dernier recours, l'étude recommandera aux apprenants de souvent faire recours aux stratégies de compensation, mémorielles, cognitives et métacognitives afin d'améliorer leurs capacités de rédaction.

Mots clés : *stratégies de rédaction ; progression thématique ; BIF ; BIA.*

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INTRODUCTION

For many years now, writing has received a lot of consideration by various authors, right from the antiquity to the present days. Today, should it be emphasised, it seems to be more important than ever. Nunan (2003) defines writing as an intellectual activity of finding ideas and thinking about the way to express and arrange them into statements and paragraphs that are clear to be understood by people. Writing plays a vital role in human activities, more particularly in the domain of education. Therefore, the development of writing is needed for university students, as it is a very essential skill for their academic development. Moreover, it is the best means for evaluating students' proficiency in a language. This evaluation is made possible through the usage of some specific writing strategies. Torrance et al., (2000:182) define the term writing strategies as "*the sequence in which a writer engages in planning, composing, revising and other writing related activities*". Better still, writing strategies are parts of writing process, which aims at gaining insight into the mental processes that writers engage in while composing. Writing is considered as an important ability for production and dissemination of knowledge within any disciplinary discourse. An observation of some students' written productions however, showed that the learners have difficulties in planning their writing, as a results of poor writing strategies. Regarding thematic progression, relatively little attention has been paid to explore Theme-Rheme structure used by senior high school students. For this reason, there is a need to explore Theme-Rheme structure use by the university students. The impetus behind this study is to check the writing strategies used by Bilingual Students of level II and their thematic progression as well. Thus, the present paper is divided into five main parts. The first part overviews the concepts under study, namely writing strategies and thematic progression. It ends with the theoretical aspect of the study. The second part reviews some works in the domain of writing and writing strategies and works on thematic progression as well. The third section deals with the methodology of the study. Material, methods and data collection procedures are exposed. The fourth part is concerned with data presentation and analysis. The final part aims at discussing the main findings of the study and provides some recommendations to learners and teachers.

WRITING STRATEGIES: DEFINITION AND CLASSIFICATION

Throughout the ages, different authors have attempted to define and classify writing strategies. As Oxford (1998:8) points it out, writing strategies can be viewed as specific actions used by students to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-affected, more affective and more transferable to new situations. Within the process tradition, composition is viewed as a goal-oriented, cognitively demanding, problem-solving task Bereiter and Scardamalia (1987). Writing strategies are seen as those procedures employed by the writer to (i) control the online management of goals, (ii) compensate for the limited capacity of human cognitive resources and (iii) overcome the problems that writers pose to themselves, Penuelas (2012). Thus, according to Westwood (2008), applying strategies helps the writer to think productively before writing, makes the writer sequence their ideas logically by adding relevant details and information, imposes a structure to the text, finally, it makes the students review and improve their drafting each time they are engaged in writing.

Theories dealing with language writing strategies have been developed from language learning strategies because writing has been considered for long as being part of learning process. For this reason, many researchers have emphasized learning strategies on writing strategies. So, over the years, different taxonomies have been developed to classify language writing strategies. Some researchers deal with a *five-factor structure* that considers the relationship between writers' beliefs on writing and the strategies that they employ: elaborative, low self-efficacy, no revision, scientist and task-oriented, Lavelle & Bushrow (2007). Other L1 researchers use a *two-dimensional structure* to describe strategies: the first stage concerns the stage in the writing process at which writers decide content Galbraith (1992). One of the most comprehensive and widely used taxonomy is that of Oxford (1990:10). Oxford (ibid) sees the aim of language learning strategies as being oriented towards the development of communicative competence. Her classification consists of two main classes, namely direct and indirect strategies. These strategies are considered in turn below.

Direct strategies.

Direct strategies are strategies applied directly to the process of learning a new language. These strategies comprise three sub-categories, namely: memory strategies, which consist in memorizing and retrieving information in writing situation; cognitive strategies, consisting in manipulating the target language or tasking correctly by using some processes and mechanisms; compensation strategies, which help the learners overcoming their linguistic shortage by relying on their mother tongue to compensate limitations in their target language.

Indirect strategies.

Indirect writing strategies are strategies which support and manage language learning without directly involving the target language. They comprise metacognitive strategies, which consist in centering, arranging, planning and

evaluating writing; affective strategies, where students can control their emotions, attitudes, motivation and values when writing an essay; social strategies which help the students to seek for opportunities to work with others, to understand the target culture and the language as well.

The present study is also going to adopt Oxford's (1990) taxonomy because it is more relevant to our learning situation and provides a detailed account of all the writing strategies. In developing ideas into a text, students need to be aware that their text must hold together on one topic, the text must be coherent and cohesive. This introduces the notion of thematic progression in writing.

THEMATIC PROGRESSION

Many researchers have investigated the Theme-Rheme structure use of diverse texts. The first theoretical studies on thematic progression are attributed to Dane's (1970; 1974), who pointed out that "*Thematic progression is the choice or ordering of utterance themes, their mutual concatenation and hierarchy, as well as their relationship to the hyperthemes of the superior text unit (such as paragraph or chapter) to the whole of text and to the situation*" (Danes, 1974:114). Thematic progression cannot be studied without a clear underlying definition of theme-rheme dichotomy.

The notions of Theme and Rheme.

The notions of Theme-Rheme are the most important component of thematic progression, henceforth TP. Several words are used in literature to refer to the dichotomy theme and rheme. Some scholars prefer the words "*topic-focus*"; or "*theme-predicate*", (Dane's, 1970); (Hajicov'a, 1986); (Lambrecht, 1994); (Sgall, 2000) among others. Halliday & Mathieseen (2007: 89) state that theme is the basic part of a message that provides the beginning point of a message, whereas rheme is the following part in which the theme is developed. Another definition is given by Lipson (2004: 114), who views theme as a major system that involves a clause in a message and rheme as the part in which that theme is developed.

Patterns of thematic progression.

Egins (2004) and Danes (1974) distinguished between three patterns of thematic progression namely: linear progression, constant progression and TP with derived Theme.

- **Simple linear thematic progression.**

Also called zigzag pattern, the linear theme is defined by Paltridge (2006:149) as the connected relations between the first rheme and the following theme. In other words, the rheme of one clause is taken up as the theme of a subsequent clause, following this particular schema:

Sentence 1: Th 1→Rh1

Sentence 2: Th 2= (Rh1)→Rh2

Sentence 3: Th3= (Rh2)→ Rh3

- **Constant theme thematic progression.**

Constant thematic progression is the most elementary thematic progression. It is a progression where the same Theme appears in a series of utterances, but the Rhemes are different (Paltridge, 2006:148). Bloor and Bloor (2004: 88) state that constant theme shows the first theme that is carried on and used at the beginning of next clause which means that the clauses repeat the first theme as their main topic. This kind of thematic pattern often appears in short biographical passages and narratives. It is also frequently found in textbooks and descriptions of factual information. Illustration is done by the following schema.

Sentence 1: Th1 → Rh1

Sentence 2: Th1 → Rh2

Sentence 3: Th1 → Rh3

- **Derived hyperthematic progression.**

As the name implies, derived hyperthematic progression is a progression where the particular Themes in subsequent clauses are derived from a hypertheme or from the same overriding Theme, (Belmonte & McCabe-Hidalgo, 1998). This progression is mostly used in longer texts.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theory upholding the present study is Self-regulated Learning. The theory originated from the Soviet psychologists in early 1980s, developed from the American psychologists in 1960s. Self-regulated learning refers to one's ability to understand and control one's learning environment. It includes elements like goal setting, self-monitoring, self-instruction, and self-reinforcement Harris & Graham (1999). Kuhl (1992) defined Self-regulations as the ability to behave according to one's own intention in a flexible way. Simply put, Self-regulation refers to students' self-generated thoughts, feelings and actions which are systematically oriented towards attainment of their goals. Zimmerman (2001) views self-regulated learners as, those who are metacognitively, motivationally and behaviourally active participants in their own learning process. According to him, in terms of metacognitive processes, self-regulated learners plan, organize, self-instruct and self-evaluate at various stages during the acquisition processes. From the motivational view, self-regulated learners perceive themselves as self-efficacious, autonomous and intrinsically motivated. In terms of behaviour, self-regulated learners select, structure and even create social and physical environments that optimize the acquisition process.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Much has been advanced in the study of writing strategies and thematic structure as well. Yi (2009) examines the writing ability for classroom writing assessment in high schools in some Korean essay writing. The study aimed at exploring the writing ability of learners and examining whether English teachers at high school level in Korea have established their own but theoretical definitions of writing ability. To this effect, six (06) English teachers participated to the interview as respondents and their answers were discussed qualitatively. The study revealed that there are ways to help them have their own concrete construct of writing ability before they establish and administer valid and consistent assessment scheme. However, this study has limitations of generalising the findings because of the small number of participants involved in the study. Moreover, the study is centered on the writing ability of students, which is totally different from the present study which investigates writing strategies.

Another study was made by Peñuelas (2012) who examines the writing strategies of some American university students. The impetus behind her study was to check the strategies used by native English speakers while composing and their level of proficiency in the English language. For this purpose, the participants involved in her study were two hundred and thirty-one (231) American undergraduate students from different fields of studies having Spanish, Italian and French as their Second Language. Two questionnaires were administered to the learners, the first comprising their social background and the second one highlighting an inventory of writing strategies. The results indicate that proficient and less proficient writers use a wide variety of strategies; however, expert writers favour the use of cognitive, metacognitive and compensation strategies, followed by affective, memory and social strategies. The study equally revealed that writers who get the best grades use more strategies. As concerning the gender of the participants, it was revealed that women also use more strategies than men in terms of both categories and individual strategies. The study concludes that writing strategies used by writers are illustrative of their learning style. This study is similar to the present study in the way that it deals with writing strategies used by undergraduate learners of English language. However, in the ongoing study, the writing strategies are examined from a Cameroonian context standpoint.

Similarly, Raoofi, Binandeh and Rahmani (2017) examined the writing strategies and writing proficiency of some Iranian University students. They wanted to emphasize the writing strategies privileged by Iranian learners of English language and explain the reasons behind their choices. To this effect, a total of three hundred and fourteen (314) learners constituted their corpus. The participants completed a questionnaire on proficiency and achieved two writing tasks. The results of the study showed that the participants use regulation strategy and metacognitive strategy as the first and second most frequently used writing strategies respectively, while social strategy was reported as the least frequently used category. The results also revealed that students with high writing abilities reported a significantly higher level of writing strategy use compared to those who had intermediate or low writing proficiency. It was found that students with higher writing ability reported using significantly more metacognitive, cognitive, affective and effort regulation strategies than those with lower writing proficiency. This study is similar to the ongoing study in the way that it tackles writing strategies by undergraduate students. However, it differs in the sense that, the notion of thematic progression is equally incorporated to better analyze the writing strategies of some learners.

Concerning, Thematic Progression, Ping (2007) reconsider the thematic progression and the essay writing of twenty (20) Singaporean students. He made a comparison between the good and weak essays to find out if there are differences in the way the two groups of writers organize the message structure of their writing. Ping (2007) found that there is little difference in the selection of theme between the two groups of essays. The good essays are characterized by elaborated developments of theme and rheme. The developments in the weak essays, in contrast, are thin.

Rahkman (2012) investigates the way high school students from Indonesia organize their ideas in their exposition texts and their consistency with argumentative language features in terms of Thematic Progression. The corpus was constituted of nine (09) high school expository essays. The result showed that the students organize their ideas in three ways of Thematic Progression, including the Zig-zag Pattern or Simple Linear Theme Progression (SLP), the Reiteration Pattern or Constant Theme Progression (CTP), and the Multiple Theme Pattern or Derived Theme Progression (DTP). In terms of Thematic Progression consistency, some texts from middle and high achievers are consistent with the argumentative language features, since they employed SLP than CTP and used DTP. The study concludes that some students still need guidance to create good pieces of writing. In a similar study by Jing (2015) on the thematic progression of Chinese EFL learners, he found that students need meta-knowledge of coherence and thematic progression in order to improve the coherence of their writings. These studies are similar to ours, in the way that all the aspects of writing strategies and thematic patterns are analyzed. However, this research piece examines both thematic progression and writing strategies, which makes the difference with the previous studies.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

The design adopted for the study is a survey, with a questionnaire which aims at gathering the views and attitudes of students concerning their writing strategies.

The informants

Before a sample is taken, it is important to define the population to which the results are expected to be generalized. Thus, the population chosen for the purpose of this research output was made up of fifty (50) Level II students from the department of Bilingual Studies, among which twenty-eight (28) were BIF (Bilingue Francophone) and twenty-two (22) from BIA (Bilingue Anglophone). The choice for this level was motivated by the fact that the participants in the present investigation had studied writing in high school and at their university first year. Therefore, they had experience on writing argumentative essays. Twenty-eight (28) students corresponding to 60% of the total sampled population are BIF, while twenty-two (22) students, representing 40% of the informants are BIA. Out of the fifty (50) students, fourteen (14), representing 28% of the sample population admit using French in out and out of the class; twelve (12), corresponding to 24%, use English and Pidgin English in and out of the class. Nine (9) and eight (8) use French and English and English respectively, for a percentage of 18 and 16%. Five (5) students admit using all the four languages, a number which corresponds to 10%, while the two (2) remaining students admit using French and Camfranglais, for a percentage of 4%.

Methods of data collection

There are various methods used to ensure effective and efficient collection of data in all research projects. The main data for this study were collected from a survey method using a questionnaire and a test on a particular topic to the learners.

1. The questionnaire.

The questionnaire consisted of nine (09) questions comprising three (03) open-ended questions and six (6) questions on writing strategies. More precisely, the three (03) first questions concerned the field, gender and the languages spoken by learners in class. The other remaining six (6) questions were related to the strategies used by learners. The strategies were divided into two (2) groups, namely direct and indirect strategies. The direct strategies comprised memory, cognitive and compensation strategies, while the indirect strategies included metacognitive, affective and social strategies. The learners were to tick the strategies they use the most.

2. The test.

The test consisted of one single topic in which the learners were asked to produce an argumentative essay. The aim was to see how these latter apply their strategies and the thematic progression they mostly use. Students' participation was voluntary and confidential.

Methods of data analysis.

The data of the study were analyzed both quantitatively and qualitatively using descriptive statistics method. More precisely, the occurrences of strategies used by the students were identified and classified in tables and charts. This method unveiled the most used strategies by learners. Concerning the test, each essay was first broken up into major clauses (main and subordinate) and analyzed for theme and rheme. This is because subordinate clauses should also be included in the analysis as they develop the main clauses and so perform an important role in developing the message in the text. The topical themes and rhemes of the clauses in each essay were later on compared with each other in order to come out with some similarities and differences.

RESULTS.

An overview of the total writing strategies identified in this study provides a general idea on how these items are used as a group in the table a below.

Table 1: Inventories of strategies used in the study.

Writing Strategies	Frequencies	Distribution (%)
Memory	66	22.99
Cognitive	41	14.28
Compensation	47	16.37
Metacognitive	55	19.16
Social	44	15.33
Affective	34	11.84
TOTAL	287	100

Table 1 above shows that the most used writing strategy by Bilingual II learners was memory strategy, with sixty-six (66) occurrences, for a percentage of 22.99%. It is immediately followed by the metacognitive strategies, with fifty-five (55) elements, corresponding to 19.16% of the six strategies. With forty-seven (47) and forty-four (44) items each, the compensation and social strategies follow with 16.37 and 15.33% respectively. Next are the cognitive strategies with forty-one (41) occurrences for 14.28%, and the affective strategies with thirty-four (34) items for 11.84%.

THEMATIC PROGRESSION

Concerning thematic progression, the results have shown that the learners make use of the three types of thematic progression in order to organize their ideas in their texts, namely: simple linear progression, constant theme progression and derived hyperthematic progression. The following table summarizes the results found in the study.

Table 2: Thematic progression used by learners.

Types of progression	Frequencies	Distribution (%)
Simple linear progression	16	07.51
Constant theme progression.	156	73.23
Derived progression.	41	19.24
Total	213	100

From the table above, it can be observed that two hundred and thirteen (213) instances of thematic progression have been identified all over the study, with constant thematic progression being the most used with a total amount of one hundred and fifty-six (156) occurrences, for a percentage of 73.23%, as illustrated by the following extract.

Ref 1: *Teachers are not responsible for students' failure in official examinations. They do their best to give all the necessary lessons to the students so that the students can graduate. Teachers are those to guarantee students' success.*

The above example is a case of constant thematic progression. In this example, although the Theme for each clause is different from Theme 1, Theme 2 and Theme 3 all refer to the same topic which is teachers' responsibility. Derived hyperthematic progression is the second most used progression by learners with forty-one (41) instances, representing 19.24%. The abstract below is a case of hyperthematic progression.

Ref 2: *There are several reasons behind students' failure in official examination such as the lack of seriousness of teachers, the dishonest nature of some teachers and the perverse nature of others, the lack of seriousness of students, group pressures and juvenile delinquency. Concerning seriousness, some teachers lack concentration when they are doing their job... Moreover, some teachers are perverted.....*

This sentence has as hypertheme the reasons behind students' failure in official examination. This hypertheme is split into several subthemes such as lack of seriousness of teachers and students... The following example demonstrates

the model of linear TP, in which the given information in each sentence topic refers anaphorically to the new information in the last occurring comment.

Ref 3: In schools, there are two categories of people: teachers and learner. Teachers are responsible for giving knowledge to students and students are receiving lessons. By so doing, each plays a particular role.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS.

As already mentioned, the study sought to examine the writing strategies used by Bilingual Students of level II and their thematic progression as well. Thus, in the present section, the main findings of the study are presented. The writing strategies used by learners are exposed first, the thematic progression second and in the third some recommendations are addressed to lecturers and learners in order to upgrade their writing abilities.

The strategies used by learners.

An overview of the strategies used in the study has revealed that learners use more direct strategies with one hundred and fifty-four (154) instances for a percentage of 53.65% than indirect strategies with one hundred and thirty-three (133) uses, representing 46.33%, as the following diagram shows.

A closer examination of individual strategies reveals that some strategies were more used than others. More particularly, memory strategy, with sixty-six (66) occurrences, for a percentage of 22.99%, the metacognitive strategies, with fifty-five (55) elements, corresponding to 19.16% of the six strategies, compensation with forty-seven (47) items for 16.37% were the most frequently employed strategies by learners in the present study. Among those three (3) strategies, the most used memory was “*I memorise new words by reading dictionaries*”, with twenty-five (25) cases, immediately followed by “*I make decisions about the content, organization of my composition before starting to write or while writing*” with twenty-eight (28) occurrences. Also, 16.37% of the students preferred using compensation strategy to overcome their linguistic weaknesses. The most used compensation strategy was “*I use synonyms when I cannot find the word I mean*”, with twenty-five (25) uses. Some of the students relied on social and affective strategies to motivate theme producing sound and coherent texts.

However, some discrepancies have been observed concerning the usage of individual strategies. A closer examination has shown that BIA students use more direct strategies with eighty-five (85) instances, compared with the BIF with sixty-nine (69) uses. This can be explained by the fact that the BIA students are more exposed to the English language than BIF as it is their first medium of communication and instruction. There is therefore a linear relationship between frequency of direct strategies and exposure to English. Contrariwise, the BIF students rely mostly on indirect strategies to overcome their linguistic shortage. Affective and social strategies predominated over the rest of the strategies and showed their importance for their successful writing. The most employed affective strategy was “*I encourage myself to find a better solution to a language problem in my composition*”, with twenty (20) uses, followed by the social strategy “*I give my writing to a friend or someone who is good at writing so that I have an opinion about my writing*”, with thirteen (13) cases. Furthermore, to cover up their linguistic problems, they rely on compensation strategies to produce coherent texts, as follows: “*I use synonyms when I cannot find the word I mean*” and “*I use the dictionary to find out words that I do not know how to express in English*”.

Learners' thematic progression.

Concerning the Thematic Progression used by learners, the students organized their ideas in three ways of TP patterns, which indicate that their texts were consistent with argumentative language features, in terms of Thematic Progression. In spite of some minor weaknesses such as grammatical errors and shortage in linguistic features that still need further improvement, the students seemed to be able to apply the three basic progressions. It was equally observed that the majority of the writers decided to organize their texts using Constant Theme Progression, with one hundred and fifty-six (156) uses 73.23%. This could be due to the fact that it is the simplest way of developing continuity in a text. Moreover, it provides a better understanding of the text themacity. The second most employed thematic progression was Derived hypertheme Progression or Split Theme Progression with forty-one (41) instances, for 19.24%. This progression often occurred in expositions and argumentative texts, and it related specific themes to a more general one. Only 07.51% of the students applied Linear Thematic Progression as a result of its complexity in an argumentative essay, the majority of the learners avoided using that progression in order to keep the text coherent.

Implications of the study.

Based on the above findings, the study was able to address some recommendations to teachers and learners. The implementation of thematic progression patterns strategy in teaching writing should be effectively adopted by teachers

in class. Furthermore, students should be encouraged to use more compensation, memory, cognitive and metacognitive strategies in order to increase their writing abilities and capacities.

CONCLUSION

The aim of the study was to examine the writing strategies used by Bilingual Students of level II and the thematic progression they usually opt for in their written productions. In the course of the analysis, it was observed that Bilingual II students employ a variety of strategies so as to achieve successful writing. The results also indicate that some strategies were more employed than others due to the fields and the competences of the learners. Indeed, the BIF students tended to rely more on indirect strategies such as metacognitive, social and affective strategies in order to produce successful writing. Moreover, they applied compensation strategies in order to overcome their linguistic shortage to produce coherent texts, contrary to the BIA students who mostly applied direct strategies, as a result of their exposure to the English language since their early age. Concerning the Thematic Progression, it was also observed that the learners organized their ideas in three ways of TP patterns, namely: simple linear, constant and derived hypertheme thematic progression. In spite of some minor weaknesses such as grammatical errors and shortage in linguistic features that still need further improvement, the students seemed to be able to apply the three basic progressions. It was equally observed that the majority of the writers decided to organize their texts using Constant Theme Progression and derived hypertheme, because it is simplest way for them to organize their text. Finally, the study recommends the use of more compensation, memory, cognitive and metacognitive strategies in order to increase the informants writing abilities and capacities.

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