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Writing strategies used by Croatian students in EFL argumentative essays

Foreign language (FL) proficiency assumes effective application of all four language skills in order to communicate properly in the target language. The development of writing in particular has been acknowledged as one of the main challenges in FL learning and teaching. Against the background of increasing L2 writing strategy research in recent years (Leki 1998; Sasaki 2000; Casanave 2004), scholars have been focusing on learners' writing strategies in various writing tasks. However, empirical research on FL writing competence in the Croatian context has yet to receive sufficient attention. In response to this need, the present study sought to explore the writing processes and products of eight Croatian EFL university students during their collaborative work on argumentative essays. We opted for a case study design. The aim of this case study is threefold: (1) to identify the writing strategies that EFL students predominantly employ in the process of essay writing within the traditional cognitive framework, (2) to explore participants' attitudes toward collaborative writing, and (3) to investigate if there are any distinctions in the use of writing strategies by skilled and less-skilled student writers. We analysed and compared data collected from a think-aloud protocol, immediate retrospective interviews, and written drafts of papers. The results indicated that the participants utilized a relatively high level and diverse repertoire of writing strategies. The findings also showed that there are no significant differences in the number of writing strategies used by skilled and less-skilled writers. However, the former displayed a more effective strategy usage than the latter. Accurate application of writing strategies, explicit teaching

in class, awareness of different rhetorical conventions of academic writing in other languages, and individual factors are identified as the key elements of discourse competence. The findings are discussed in light of FL writing competence and implications for future teaching pedagogy and practice.

Keywords: writing strategies, Croatian EFL students, argumentative essays, collaborative writing, skilled and less-skilled writers

1. Introduction

According to the English subject curriculum in Croatia¹ (Kurikulum 2019), the main objective of foreign language learning and teaching is the development of communicative language competence. It implies the successful oral and written exchange of information, attitudes, and values between the students who do not share the same mother tongue. Among the fundamental goals of learning and teaching English is the mastery of all four language skills – listening, speaking, reading and writing, as well as the student’s ability to independently and effectively apply learning strategies. Although each of the four skills mentioned holds an important place in FL learning, in the early studies (Homstad & Thorson 1994) it was writing that was proved to be a skill often neglected and overlooked. The reason behind this is that writing was largely considered to be a complementary skill which serves only to support other facets of language learning such as grammar acquisition (Homstad & Thorson 1994). As the interest in the role of writing in English as a foreign language (EFL) teaching and second language acquisition (SLA) has substantially increased over the last decade, so has the attention it received.

In the academic context, writing is viewed as a means for developing learners’ higher cognitive functions such as critical thinking and problem solving (Hayes & Flower 1980; Warschauer 2010). However, it is not acquired naturally and requires practice (Miftah 2015; Reinking & von der Osten 2017). Learning to write in a foreign language is a complicated process, requiring not only a range of skills but also the ability to make claims and provide appropriate supporting evidence (Howell et al. 2018). Moreover, each genre – every occasion for writing – presents specific challenges to the writer and calls upon different combination of skills and abilities. It incorporates generating, organizing, and filtering ideas by being involved in complex activities, such as brainstorming, discussing, outlining, drafting, monitoring, and revising (Raimes 1992; Hyland 2003).

Among many factors affecting the process and product of EFL writing, Angelo-va (1999) has enlisted the following: L1 writing competence, language proficiency,

¹ <https://mzom.gov.hr/istaknute-teme/odgoj-i-obrazovanje/nacionalni-kurikulum/predmetni-ku-rikulumi/engleski-jezik/742>

metacognitive knowledge about the writing task, writing strategies, use of cohesive devices, and writers' personal characteristics. The positive correlation between strategy instruction and the quality of learner's writing is supported by many additional studies (De Silva 2015; Ong & Zhang 2013). By teaching writing strategies, teachers create a basis for excellent academic performance and writing achievement of learners who later use them (Abas & Abd Aziz 2016; Mu 2005). In other words, teaching writing strategies has proven to be beneficial as writing strategies are found to be the key factor which separates skilled from less-skilled writers (Zamel 1983; Arndt 1987; Victori 1999). Among the strategies that help improve learners' writing ability, Talapngoen and Deerajiset (2017) cite metacognitive, cognitive, social and affective strategies.

Recent writing studies (De Silva & Graham 2015; Teng 2023; Yang et al. 2023; Zhu et al. 2024) have focused on three major issues in strategy development: (1) the teachers' role in effective strategy application, (2) the learners' writing processes and (3) the context of writing. Zhu (2001) addressed the first issue by stressing the importance of teachers' ability to recognize the writing difficulties of their learners. Present-day findings have indicated that argumentative essay writing creates rhetorical difficulties for EFL learners, because they, among other things, lack the skill to employ efficient writing strategies (Zhu, 2001). In their reference to the second issue, Homstad and Thorson (1994) realized that without knowing the processes that undergo in ESL² (English as a Second Language) writers' minds as they learn to write, changes in teaching practices would be neither visible nor possible. Therefore, it is safe to assume that a more comprehensive look at how learners overcome common writing challenges leads to a greater understanding of learners' writing processes. As for the third issue, capturing novice writers' strategy use would provide a fuller picture of how students use various resources to cope with challenging tasks in their social context use (Leki 1998, Casanave 2004; Sasaki 2007; Wong 2005). Although a plethora of new research has been carried out on writing strategies abroad, little to no understanding of writing behaviours in the Croatian authentic context exists. This was the motivation behind the current study,³ which, correspondingly, aims to explore Croatian students' use of writing strategies in EFL essay writing. Moreover, it is the hope of the researchers, that the findings of this study will be beneficial for designing advanced instructional writing strategies in the Croatian educational settings.

² ESL and EFL are terms that are often used interchangeably, but they actually refer to two different types of English language learning. ESL (English as a Second Language) learners are learning English in order to be able to communicate in an English-speaking country, while EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners are those who are studying English in a non-native country for other reasons such as academic study or personal interest.

³ The present study is part of an unpublished Master's thesis of the second author based on the research conducted by the first author, during the project "Textual Coherence in Foreign Language Writing: Croatian, German, English, French and Hungarian in comparison" (KohPiText: IP-2016-06-5736, fully supported by the Croatian Science Foundation).

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Definition of writing strategies

The development of cognitive psychology in the middle of the 20th century promoted a new model of information processing, within which the concept of learning strategies appeared. *Language learning strategies* can be defined as specific steps and actions taken to enhance one's own learning, through the storage, retention, and use of new information about the target language. They are considered one of the most important factors accounting for language proficiency (Gardner & MacIntyer 1993), individual differences (Skehan 1989), and learner autonomy (Dickinson 1987). In the field of SLA and in the educational context, language learning strategies are described as strategic tools under learners' "deliberate control" (Oxford 2011: 12), designed to help the learners with their language acquisition. Similarly, O'Malley and Chamot (1990: 1) define strategies as specific behaviours that individuals use to process, understand, learn and retain new information. Oxford's (1990) taxonomy of learning strategies has been widely used in ESL/EFL learning research. It involves two types of strategies: *Direct strategies* which include *memory*, *cognitive* and *compensation* strategies, and *Indirect strategies* which include *metacognitive*, *social*, and *affective* strategies. Hence, when talking about *writing strategies*, it can be deduced that they are consciously employed tools that aid skilful written expression and overall competence in a second language. Synonymously used terms for *strategies* are *specific actions*, *steps*, *techniques*, *procedures*, and *behaviours* (Zamel 1983; Khaldieh 2000). Apart from that, several pre-existing definitions of writing strategies emerged in the reviewed literature.

Edward (2005, as cited in Talapngoen & Deerajviset 2017: 51) defines writing strategies as a "set of skills that learners use in the process of writing which could help learners overcome their difficult task of writing." Similarly, Flower and Hayes (1980, as cited in Wong 2005: 31) describe writing strategies as "decisions taken to cope with the problems (both linguistic and rhetorical) posed by the writing task as perceived by the writer." Okasha and Hamdi (2014: 675) emphasize that writing strategies are "ways of controlling the writing process to produce well-organized production crystallized by high quality". For the purposes of the present study, the most fitting definition of writing strategies is provided by Manchon et al. (2007: 231), who describe them as "any actions employed in the act of producing text." This view is complemented by Torrance et al.'s (2000: 181) assertion that writing strategies are the sequences "in which a writer engages in planning, composing, revising and other writing-related activities."

In alignment with these perspectives, writing strategies in the current research are defined as the full range of operations utilized during the process of generating

an argumentative essay, encompassing all actions that occur across the four distinct stages of writing: prewriting, drafting, revising, and editing.

2.2. Writing strategy taxonomies

A considerable amount of strategy research has focused on the identification, description, and classification of language learning strategies. Strategy assessment tools include procedures such as oral interviews, questionnaires, observations, verbal reports, written diaries and dialogue journals, recollective studies, computer tracking, and think-aloud protocols. Although their reliability is questionable, they presently remain the only way to better understand actions and unobservable processes of the subjects completing a writing task (Chamot 2005).

One of the earliest taxonomies on EFL writing strategies is Arndt's (1987) investigation of the composing activities of Chinese postgraduate EFL students as they produced texts in their first and second language. The three most familiar taxonomies – Rubin (1987), Chamot and O'Malley (1994), and Oxford (1990) – overlap in many of the same strategies. The differences among them, however, are differences of pedagogical orientation. While Rubin and O'Malley and Chamot's frameworks focus on cognitive learning theories, Oxford's inventory remains "the most comprehensive classification of learning strategies to date" (Ellis 1994: 539). She attempts to meet the needs of the "whole" learner throughout the language learning process by adding more social and affective strategies. Each of these taxonomies has been supported by research, but there is still no consensus in the field as to which would be the most appropriate framework to use (Hsiao & Oxford 2002). Therefore, it seems that the most useful approach to define and describe strategies is one that is integrated and inclusive of the work of various researchers.

Over the years, different researchers have proposed several taxonomies of writing strategies, each with distinct categorizations. For example, Sasaki's (2000: 269) classification includes eight core categories: "planning, retrieving, generating ideas, verbalizing, translating, rereading, evaluating, and others". Similarly, Riazi (1997) organizes writing strategies into cognitive, metacognitive, and social strategies, while Wenden (1991) simplifies the categorization to just cognitive and metacognitive strategies. In contrast, Victori (1997) and Leki (1995) identified a myriad of classifications of writing strategies and termed them with different labels. Thus, the following list of strategies emerged from Leki's research: 1. *clarifying strategies*; 2. *focusing strategies*; 3. *relying on past writing experiences*; 4. *taking advantage of first language/culture*; 5. *using current experience or feedback*; 6. *looking for models*; 7. *using current or past ESL writing training*; 8. *accommodating teachers' demands*; 9. *resisting teachers' demands*; 10. *managing competing demands*. Victori (1995), on the other hand, identified seven types of writing strategies based on the interviews

and think-aloud protocol analysis: 1. *planning strategies*; 2. *monitoring strategies*; 3. *evaluating strategies*; 4. *resourcing strategies*; 5. *repeating strategies*; 6. *reduction strategies*; and 7. *use of L1 strategies*.

Despite the diversity in these classifications, for the purposes of developing the coding framework for the present study, the researchers adopted Mu's taxonomy of writing strategies due to its simplicity and practicality. Mu (2005: 9) divides writing strategies into five broader categories: "rhetorical, metacognitive, cognitive, communicative, and social/affective writing strategies". During the current analysis, however, the researchers identified several sub-strategies which were not included in Mu's original system. As a result, an additional category, termed "others", was added to the taxonomy. Furthermore, a newly identified code-switching strategy was classified under rhetorical strategies, consistent with the definitions provided by Chien (2007) and Mu and Carrington (2007). This study will therefore focus on five main categories of writing strategies.

Mu and Carrington (2007: 2) identified *rhetorical strategies* as those that writers use to organize their ideas and model the text in accordance with appropriate L2 writing conventions.

Cognitive strategies involve the identification, retention, and storage of words, phrases, and other elements of the target language. They represent the strategies "that writers use to implement the actual writing actions" and entail actions such as generating ideas, summarizing, revising, retrieval, clarification, elaborating and rehearsing (Mu & Carrington 2007: 2). This category of strategies helps the writers to successfully overcome the challenges they encounter as they write (Wenden 1991). Cook (2008) affirmed close connection between cognitive and metacognitive strategies but also emphasized their differences. Cognitive strategies, he claimed, include the actual writing procedure, whereas the metacognitive ones are rather used for monitoring and self-directed learning.

Metacognitive strategies are the ones "writers use to control the writing process consciously" (Mu & Carrington 2007: 2). Oxford (1990: 136) argues that the word *metacognitive* alludes to "something beyond the cognitive" and believes metacognitive strategies to be one of the most vital groups of strategies because they serve as a compass to learners by directing their focus on what is important. Metacognitive strategies include higher-order executive mental operations like planning, evaluating, and monitoring and contribute to independency and autonomy in EFL writing (Goctu 2017). In other words, metacognitive strategies play a key role in the development of critical thinking (Zarouk & Khaldi 2016) by allowing learners to control, reflect and regulate their own learning process to foster better educational outcomes. However, Rivers et al. (2022) note that these strategies are only effective when learners are fully aware of their own thinking and learning procedures.

Social/affective strategies are tools “that writers use to interact with others to clarify some questions and to regulate emotions, motivation, and attitudes in the writing” (Mu & Carrington 2007: 2). They involve stimulating learning through establishing a level of empathy between the teacher and learner. Social/affective strategies encompass a broad range of activities, some of which involve interacting with other people to reinforce the task performance, e.g. cooperating and getting feedback, some of which imply usage of external reference sources of information, e.g. resourcing, and some of which have to do with gaining affective control, e.g. resting, using deep breathing or positive self-talk, and rewarding oneself with good performance.

Finally, *communicative strategies* help learners use the language they already know. This macro-category of writing strategies aims at getting the message across and keeping the conversation going despite gaps in target language knowledge (Williams & Burden 1997; Leki 1998; Reinking & von der Osten 2017). Reduction, avoidance, and sense of reader are listed under communicative strategies (Mu 2005).

2.3. Previous studies

Empirical studies related to the present study have dealt with identifying EFL learners’ writing strategies and determining a connection they have with academic success.

Identification of writing strategies at different educational levels has been studied by scholars from Asian countries (Sasaki 2000; Mu & Carrington 2007; Liu 2015). Strategies such as *planning*, *reading* and *evaluating* appeared in most of the research findings but there was no general consensus on their total number or clear-cut boundaries of their categories. However, a vein of research on writing strategies of EFL students agreed on a positive correlation between the students’ strategic awareness and their writing performance (Kasper 1997; Al Asmari 2013; Graham & Perin 2007; Talapngoen & Deerajviset 2017). Whether this positive correlation is grounded in frequency and number of writing strategies being used or the way they are being executed, still remains unclear since findings related to this issue suggest a mixed result.

Early research findings on writing strategy use in L1 and L2, although countless, also point to contradictory results. Some researchers (Thorson 2000; Hinkel 2004; Lee 2005; Martínez 2005) claim that writing processes in L1 (first language) are different from those in L2 (second language), while others (Matsumoto 1995) emphasize the similarities. Moreover, some researchers argue that cultural differences interfere with L2 students’ rhetorical organization problems, while others (Hirose 2003) discard this claim. In one of the first researches in the area, Rubin (1975) acknowledged cultural differences, but also noted that the employment of strategies

depended on a number of other variables such as target language proficiency, age and context. The final controversy revolves around positive (Arnd 1987; Woodall 2002) or negative transfer (Wu 1995) of writing strategies from L1 to L2.

Prompted by the recognition that writing strategies are a key factor distinguishing high-achieving from low-achieving writers, several studies have aimed to compare these groups based on their use of writing strategies. These studies focus on the quality, rather than the quantity, of strategies employed by skilled and unskilled writers, hoping to reveal patterns that explain differences in strategy use. For instance, Raimes (1985) examined the writing processes of unskilled ESL learners from four linguistic backgrounds – Chinese, Greek, Spanish, and Burmese. Her findings indicated that, although participants used all of the investigated strategies, they rarely devoted significant time to planning and revising strategies. This is consistent with Zamel's (1983) earlier study of Chinese, Spanish, Portuguese, Hebrew, and Persian EFL learners, which similarly found that unskilled writers, in contrast to skilled ones, paid less attention to generating ideas and revising.

Victori (1999), however, argues that regardless of the specific writing strategy in question, the key factor distinguishing competent from less competent writers is their level of awareness in using these strategies. In her study of undergraduate EFL learners in Barcelona, she concluded that proficient writers apply strategies consciously and purposefully. Another difference between strong and weak writers was noted by Yeon (2002), whose research showed that low-achieving writers relied on L1-to-L2 translation strategies more frequently than their higher-achieving peers. Kasper's (1997) investigation into the writing behaviours of ESL learners from various national backgrounds also revealed that proficient writers understood that the primary goal of writing is communication, whereas weaker writers viewed grammatical accuracy as the main objective.

In academic settings, argumentative writing is regarded as one of the most challenging forms of discourse for both skilled and less-skilled writers (Chaya 2005). Weaknesses are often attributed to a lack of preparation (Varghese & Abraham 1998), as well as to insufficient content, poor organization, and the absence of a coherent argumentative structure (Chaya 2005). Additionally, Jonassen and Kim (2010) point to external factors such as teachers' incompetence, learners' inadequate prior knowledge, and pressure from educational stakeholders as contributing to these difficulties. In this research, we search for solutions in collaborative writing which is perceived as one of the conditions contributing to learners' improved text quality with less cognitive effort. In other words, collaboration might influence the lexical complexity and linguistic accuracy of learners' co-constructed essays, allowing them to produce significantly longer and moderately more error-free clauses. Originally associated with the sociocultural theory, collaborative writing is defined

as an activity in which two or more learners interact with each other to jointly produce a single text. It requires learners to mutually engage and cooperate, reach decisions, and share responsibility for the completion of the task.

Drawing from this body of research, it is clear that language learning strategies remain a topic of ongoing debate. There is no consensus on how to define, classify, or implement them, likely because they cannot be observed directly but must instead be inferred from learners' behaviours. Recent research has seen a shift in the approach to L2 writing, moving from the traditional cognitive paradigm to a sociocultural one (Block 2003; Lantolf 2006; Lei 2008). This emerging perspective no longer views writing as a purely internal cognitive activity isolated from broader social, historical, and political contexts (Prior 2006). Consequently, this study will adopt this more comprehensive view, arguing for an approach that acknowledges both traditional cognitive modes and the wider sociocultural framework in which writing occurs.

3. Methodology

3.1. *Research questions and hypotheses*

The main aim of the present study is to identify writing strategies used by Croatian writers in EFL argumentative essays and to investigate if there are any distinctions in the use of writing strategies by skilled and less-skilled student writers, addressing the following questions:

1. Which categories of writing strategies are predominantly used by the Croatian EFL students in the writing process?
2. What are EFL students' attitudes toward collaborative writing?
3. Are there any differences between skilled and less-skilled EFL writers in their use of writing strategies?

Taking into consideration the results of previous investigations on strategy use in argumentative essays, the following hypotheses were developed:

H1: EFL writers mostly use writing strategies that enhance higher-order thinking when approaching a writing task.

H2: EFL writers recognise both positive and negative effects of collaborative writing.

H2: Skilled EFL writers tend to use a larger number of different strategies more frequently and efficiently than the less competent writers.

3.2. Participants

The study sample comprised eight double-major undergraduate students, enrolled at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, J. J. Strossmayer University of Osijek, Croatia. The participants' first language was Croatian. Their age ranged from nineteen to twenty and their English proficiency level was B2. Four of the students had lower, and four higher proficiency in writing. Students' writing proficiency had been previously assessed through a composition of 150 words in which they were expected to provide both points of view (advantages and disadvantages) on the topic *Life in the City*, express their opinion and give supporting arguments. Argumentative essays had been graded by several professional raters using the same sets of linguistic criteria (Text Type, Coherence, Cohesion, Task Completion, Vocabulary, and Grammar) from the Assessors' Manual, specifically created by the project team members for the purpose of the project. All the students voluntarily participated in the research and signed consent forms. More information on the characteristics of the participants is displayed in Table 1.

Table 1. Background information on the participants

Name	Age	Sex	English Level	Year of Study	Major	Writing Proficiency
Participant 1	19	female	B2	1 st year undergraduate	English - Croatian	higher
Participant 2	19	male	B2	1 st year undergraduate	English - Croatian	lower
Participant 3	19	female	B2	1 st year undergraduate	English - Croatian	lower
Participant 4	19	female	B2	1 st year undergraduate	English - Croatian	lower
Participant 5	19	female	B2	1 st year undergraduate	English - Croatian	higher
Participant 6	19	female	B2	1 st year undergraduate	English - Hungarian	lower
Participant 7	20	female	B2	2 nd year undergraduate	English - Philosophy	higher
Participant 8	20	female	B2	2 nd year undergraduate	English - History	higher

3.3. Instruments

The paper reports on a case study of the writing processes and products of Croatian EFL university students during their collaborative work on argumentative essays in English. We gathered the qualitative data from multiple data analysis methods, namely think-aloud protocols, reflective interviews, and essay analysis. The researchers chose this mixed method approach because it could "broaden the scope of the investigation and enrich the researcher's ability to draw conclusions" (Dörnyei 2007: 186). The main source of data was concurrent think-aloud protocol as it provided the best access to participants' cognitive processes during the execution of a writing task (Charters 2003). With regard to reliability, sample composition and severity ratings of think-aloud data, the worldwide study results are still

conflicting. However, the researchers found more advantages than limitations and regarded this method as more accurate for capturing learner’s learning processes.

Individual writers approached the interview immediately after the written assignment to test the validity of the think-aloud protocol and to shed more light on their thoughts during the writing process. The interview comprised thirty-five questions devised by the researchers, most of which were open-ended and required longer elaboration on writers’ educational background, reading and writing habits, strategy implementation, reflections on collaborative writing and think-aloud protocols. Mohite (2014) explains that interviews “provide an insight into past experiences, perceptions and feelings of interviewees” and that they “allow the researcher to establish the reasons for interviewees’ behaviours and mental processes”. As a drawback, some studies (Russo et al. 1989) confirmed that reflective interviews lasted longer and might produce biased accounts of participants’ thoughts as a result of their decision to conceal or invent ideas. Table 2 contains technical data on research methods collected from the eight participants during and after the writing process.

Table 2. Summary of data collected from the eight participants

	Think-aloud protocol	Semi-structured interview	Documents	Length of observation
Participant 1	1 transcript with 40.095 characters	1 transcript with 34.409 characters	1 outline, 1 final paper (368 words)	108.09 min
Participant 2	1 transcript with 40.095 characters	1 transcript with 26.374 characters	1 outline, 1 final paper (368 words)	102 min
Participant 3	1 transcript with 18.494 characters	1 transcript with 22.421 characters	1 outline, 1 final paper (326 words)	60.41 min
Participant 4	1 transcript with 18.494 characters	1 transcript with 22.065 characters	1 outline, 1 final paper (326 words)	58.72 min
Participant 5	1 transcript with 25.799 characters	1 transcript with 29.493 characters	1 outline, 1 final paper (370 words)	67.56 min
Participant 6	1 transcript with 25.799 characters	1 transcript with 28.587 characters	1 outline, 1 final paper (370 words)	71.44 min
Participant 7	1 transcript with 16.735 characters	1 transcript with 25.789 characters	1 outline, 1 final paper (362 words)	74.76 min
Participant 8	1 transcript with 16.735 characters	1 transcript with 21.943 characters	1 outline, 1 final paper (362 words)	71.45 min

3.4. Data collection and analysis

The study was conducted at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, J. J. Strossmayer University of Osijek, Croatia. Initially, the subjects of this study were scheduled for writing sessions in a setting that facilitates thinking aloud. The subjects paired up randomly or based on their preferences. The researchers then gave each pair instructions to collaboratively (in pairs) write a joint argumentative essay

on the topic of *Online shopping* and to verbally express their thoughts while performing the given task. They gave no verbal clues during the session. In case of silence, the researchers would encourage the students with the cue card: "Please, keep thinking aloud!". For better reliability and task control, participants used PsychWriter, a comprehensive report generator, to type and save their essays on the computer. The sessions were audio- and video-recorded and then transcribed by language professionals. Shortly after, the participants met with the facilitators who informed them of the purposes and details of the recurrent interview. The facilitators confirmed that taking part in the research was voluntary and that all the replies would be kept confidential. The verbal response data gathered from interviews are maintained in a qualitative format – that is, in word- and text-based form for analysis. Unlike collaborative approach in the writing sessions, participants attended the interview individually. This approach allowed one-to-one engagement and provided the supervisor with the individual's inner thoughts unaffected by the verbal responses of any other participant. The content was subsequently transcribed and subjected to analytic induction. In this stage, the researchers returned consistently to transcripts and documented essays to re-read and re-examine the data in search of significant or repetitive themes relevant to this study. The researchers designed a coding scheme for identification of students' writing strategies which were thereafter manually counted and presented as quantitative data.

4. Results

The first research question aimed to identify writing strategies EFL students use in their writing processes. The researchers opted for Mu's (2005) taxonomy for identification and classification of the writing strategies. The data analysis demonstrates that the identified writing strategies belong to the groups of *rhetorical*, *metacognitive*, *cognitive*, *communicative*, *social/affective*, and *other* strategies as illustrated in Table 3. It can be observed that students used versatile writing strategies during the completion of their essays.

The results point to extensive and frequent usage of the following sub-strategies by all participants: *organizing ideas* (f=8), *formatting/modelling* (f=8), *planning* (f=8), *evaluating* (f=8), *generating ideas* (f=8), *revising* (f=8), *resourcing* (f=8), and *using current or past EFL writing training* (f=8). On the contrary, writing strategies such as *sense of readers* (f=2), *comparing* (f=3), *resting* (f=3), *cooperating* (f=3), and *accommodating teacher's demands* (f=3) were utilized by less than 50 percent of subjects. In general, the domains of *cognitive* (f=51), *rhetorical* (f=29), and *metacognitive* (f=23) strategies proved to be the most prominently employed ones, whereas sub-strategies belonging to the groups of *communicative* (f=13), *others* (f=16), and *social/affective* (f=20) strategies were the least favoured by the students. The results

point to fairly even distribution of all sub-strategies in *cognitive*, and *metacognitive* categories, whereas far more uneven frequency of sub-strategies in *rhetorical*, *communicative*, *social/affective*, and *others* categories. In Table 3, the authors added fragments to provide further elaboration on students' thoughts and writing processes. These fragments contain extracts from semi-structured interviews and reveal the reasons behind students' writing preferences or decisions to use different sub-categories of writing strategies.

Table 3. Frequency of applied writing strategies with participants' fragments

Writing strategies	Sub-strategies	f	Fragments
Rhetorical (29)	Organizing ideas	8	"Well, I mostly [organize] the paragraphs, introduction, main part, positive, negative."
	Use of L1	5	"Then we would sometimes have to stop and translate into Croatian first."
	Code-switching	5	"It is much easier for me to write in English because I structure sentences in English in my head, even when I'm writing in Croatian."
	Formatting / Modelling	8	"I think generally about how, let's say, margins, font should look like."
	Comparing	3	"Well, I do [think about the difference in approach to writing in Croatian and English]."
Metacognitive (23)	Planning	8	"We talked about how we would do it, if we were going to use a concept or not."
	Evaluating	8	"I started writing something else, and as I write something else, I leave both parts, and then think again about the first one."
	Monitoring	7	"I try avoiding repetition, if I, for example, used <i>one of them</i> , <i>second</i> in the first paragraph, then in the second one I use <i>first of all</i> or <i>another thing is that</i> ."
Cognitive (51)	Generating ideas	8	"Then we started writing a concept, just to write down some ideas what to write about."
	Summarizing	7	"Once I'm done, I like to read [the text] to see how it all adds up and how it sounds altogether."
	Revising	8	"We changed one sentence maybe, changed a few conjunctions."
	Retrieval	7	"I remember the next first [word] that has a similar meaning."
	Clarification	7	"In the end, I like to read the instruction once again to see if I've maybe missed some guidelines."
	Elaborating	7	"If something has additionally crossed my mind, then I include it into text somehow."
	Rehearsing	7	"I try using some paraphrase or something to explain that what I had in mind."

Communicative (13)	Avoidance	7	"Well, if it's not urgent, then I leave [writing] for later."
	Reduction	4	"... because we weren't sure, and we wanted to go further, not to linger too much on that so we gave up from that idea then."
	Sense of readers	2	"[I think about] the fact of how readable that essay would be."
Social/Affective (20)	Resourcing	8	"If we have a certain resource, then I like going through it first."
	Cooperating	3	"My colleague and I usually work in pairs."
	Getting feedback	6	"*Name* and I always send each other our compositions when we finish them, and then we purely help each other constructively or check if we have any grammatical errors."
	Resting	3	"Well, if it's not urgent then I leave it for some other time."
Others (16)	Accommodating teacher's demands	3	"The professor gave us MLA structure at the beginning and told us how to work, so I followed the instructions."
	Using current or past EFL writing training	8	"Today we have [split the main part into paragraphs] because in high school they really insisted on this."
	Risk-taking	5	"Sometimes I even do [apply grammatical structure whose accuracy I'm not sure of], I mean, I bluff"

The second research question investigated major contributions of think-aloud protocol on EFL students' attitudes toward collaborative writing. The qualitative analysis of the transcribed audio recordings provided some relevant answers. Upon the completion of essay writing, individual participants attended a retrospective interview during which they expressed their opinion on the collaborative work, think-aloud protocol, and the final version of a written text.

All the participants consider writing an essential skill for academic success. Although majority of them preferred writing over the other three language skills, they did not assess it as the highest level of competency. All the participants agreed that variables such as topic choice, time allotment, the environment and physiological needs do play a significant role during the written assignment. Moreover, text genre and learners' previous writing experience also make a difference. Interestingly enough, all the participants expressed positive attitudes toward collaborative writing, which none of them had experienced before. Some of the reasons for their positive perspectives are: *ability to elicit more ideas in a shorter amount of time, compatibility, mutual support, two heads think better than one, it is easier to remember, I give my best*. Only one participant perceived collaborative work more strenuous than individual but attributed this purely to her personality and *the need to assume full control over the writing task*. All eight participants suggested learning English writing skills through collaboration. They believed that collaboratively modelled text structures demonstrated better performance indicating that texts were more grammatically accurate, coherent and argued. They also believed that individual approach to the same task would yield different, probably less effective, results. As can be extracted from Table 3, and very much in line with a cognitive model of writing

(Hayes & Flower 1980), the *planning* and *revising* processes were identified among the most frequently used strategies in a decision-making process of writing. Widely used metacognitive strategies, such as *monitoring* and *evaluation*, allowed the learners to interpret an essay question, identify and use the information and most relevant strategies, and evaluate the end product. Possible limitations of collaborative work perceived by research participants are: disagreement with a colleague, uneven workload, minimized control over the writing task, different approaches to essay structure, and interrupted stream of consciousness. Participants also confirmed positive attitudes toward think-aloud protocols which encouraged them to verbalise their thoughts and mutually solve problems. The researchers also noticed no hesitations in participants' responses or unresolved issues in their self-regulated writing.

Concerning research question three investigating the potential differences in strategy use between skilled and less-skilled EFL writers, the following observations have been made. Based on their assessed strategy use, we grouped the students into two categories – skilled and less-skilled writers. For the purpose of further analysis, skilled writers (those who scored higher in essay writing) were compared to less-skilled writers (whose essay grades were lower). As illustrated in Table 4., the distribution of total number of strategies per participant in both groups is fairly even, insignificantly in favour of skilled writer.

Table 4. Number of writing strategies used by skilled and less-skilled L2 writers

	Skilled writers				Less-skilled writers			
	P1	P5	P7	P8	P2	P3	P4	P6
Total number of strategies per participant	19	19	21	22	17	17	19	18

As Table 5 shows, the strategies range in frequency, from most used *cognitive* to least used *communicative* strategies in both groups. However, no significant differences were found between competent and less competent writers in their macro-strategy usage.

Table 5. Macro-strategies used by skilled and less-skilled L2 writers

	Rhetorical	Meta-cognitive	Cognitive	Communicative	Social / Affective	Others
Skilled writers	15	12	27	7	10	10
Less-skilled writers	14	11	24	6	10	6

To gain more insights into the differences between skilled and less-skilled writers, the researchers inspected the participants' answers from reflective interviews. The analysis suggested that the most prominent difference between the two groups of writers re-

sides in the frequency and/or manner in which participants employed certain sub-strategies, i.e. *use of L1*, *code-switching*, *planning*, *evaluating*, *generating ideas*, *revising*, *sense of readers*, *accommodating teacher's demands*, *reduction*, and *risk-taking*.

The interview data pointed to the first difference in sub-strategy use reflecting the *use of L1* and *code-switching*. Less-skilled writers reported relying more on mother tongue or back-translating while generating ideas during their writing process. Skilled writers, on the other hand, were more prone to utilizing code-switching strategy and alternating between languages.

We noticed that lower achieving writers planned very little, rarely made notes before writing or rewriting. Higher achieving writers were inclined to longer and detailed *planning* and *revising* of their work; they focused more on managing the development of content and concerned themselves less with the accuracy.

Both groups of students differ in their way of using *evaluating* strategy. While less competent writers seem to be more concerned with the structure and evaluate only the small segments of the generated text (e.g. vocabulary, spelling, punctuation and sentence structures), more competent writers focus first on the text as a whole and then on its parts. Moreover, when a text is produced, skilled writers do not perceive it as the final product, but a composition subject to systematic evaluation and revision in the light of its content improvement and effective communication.

One of the strategies least applied by the skilled writers and completely overlooked by the less-skilled writers was the *sense of readers*. Similarly, the strategy *accommodating teacher's demands* was reported only by high achieving writers. Much more audience awareness training should be introduced to less competent writers in order to help them achieve the communicative goal more efficiently.

We also noticed that less-skilled writers used *reduction* strategy, whereas skilled writers preferred *risk-taking* strategy. The former implies avoiding potential difficulties in essay writing and the latter willingness to experiment with the less familiar structures, regardless of the uncertainty.

Finally, the overall strategy use speaks in favour of skilled writers who exhibited a higher level of strategy awareness and were much more specific in their verbalization. Unfortunately, less-skilled writers demonstrated terminological difficulties in labelling some of the strategies, as well as insufficient knowledge of their accurate implementation.

5. Discussion

This study aimed to explore the use of writing strategies among EFL learners, particularly examining the types, frequency, and efficiency of strategy use by both

skilled and less-skilled writers. The findings corroborate the role of writing strategies in facilitating language learning, personalizing the writing process, and reflecting goal-oriented behaviour, as previously highlighted in the literature (Sasaki 2000; Zhu 2001).

Regarding the first hypothesis, which posited that EFL writers predominantly utilize strategies that enhance higher-order thinking when approaching a writing task, the results affirmed this proposition. We identified all eight participants as resourceful learners, employing a broad array of strategies, including *rhetorical*, *cognitive*, *metacognitive*, *communicative*, *social/affective*, and *others* strategies. The academic context, particularly the familiarity with argumentative essay writing at the tertiary level, likely contributed to their extensive strategy use. These findings align with earlier research, indicating that students commonly use well-established strategies in academic writing contexts (Sasaki 2000; Lee et al. 2015; Mu & Carrington 2007). For higher-proficiency learners, there is no need for additional strategies because the process of using the familiar ones has already been automatized. In other words, writing competence is not necessarily the product of larger number of strategies that the learners employ, but rather deliberate and consistent application of the carefully selected ones. If strategies are further effectively combined to fit the writing task and learner's learning style, the writing outcomes are likely to be accomplished.

Metacognitive strategies emerged as the most frequently used, supporting earlier studies that emphasized the higher-order executive skills that metacognitive strategies represent (Mu & Carrington 2007). The prevalence of these strategies, such as *planning* and *evaluating*, reflects their importance in executing writing tasks (Wenden 1991). The present study confirmed that metacognitive knowledge impacted greatly to the quality of writing. Moreover, the recursive use of metacognitive and cognitive strategies, particularly the combination of *planning* and *idea generation*, was evident. This is consistent with Cook's (2008) observation that these strategies are interdependent. The participants' extensive use of planning strategies suggests that planning is integral to the writing process, as it enables students to organise their thoughts and structure their arguments before writing (Mu & Carrington 2007). The evidence also confirmed that more successful writers planned more seriously and extensively (Victori 1999). As shown in Table 2, higher proficiency writers (Participants 1, 2, 7, 8) required more time to complete their essays. According to several studies (Cumming 1989; Sadi & Othman 2012; Karimi 2016) writers that spend sufficient amount of time in planning, organising ideas and reviewing the contents, are more successful. Identification of metacognitive strategies as prevalent in this study leads to conclusion that each student assumed responsibility for his/her own contribution in collaborative essay writing (Pašalić 2012). Frequent implementation of cognitive strategies could be assigned to early

language learning and students' writing practice. The results also demonstrate that skilled writers used writing strategies at any stage of writing, applying even the same strategy for different purposes. For example, they used *rereading* for developing and generating ideas, upholding coherence between sentences, and revising and editing the text. Less-skilled writers, on the other hand, paid little attention to *planning*, *revising*, and *editing*, or were not consistent with what they had initially planned (Sasaki 2000). Both cognitive and metacognitive strategies play a key role in the development of critical thinking and students' autonomy. In the present study, critical thinking stands out as a powerful tool that enhances text comprehension, analytical and evaluative skills, as well as the generation of ideas and decision-making.

Interestingly, communicative strategies were the least employed, echoing Ellis's (1985) assertion that fewer communicative strategies are used in academic settings where language accuracy is prioritized over fluency. This may explain why the participants in this study, like those in Lee et al.'s (2015) study, rarely used these strategies. The low frequency of social/affective strategy use reflects patterns observed in previous research (Pašalić 2012) confirming that students did not feel anxiety or discomfort while writing and therefore did not feel the need to use them. The limited use of affective strategies, such as resting, may also be attributed to time constraints during writing tasks, which leaves little room for rest periods. Collaborative approach to writing would assume better results in *cooperating* and *getting feedback* sub-categories. However, participants stated that such an approach had rarely been used in class, and if so, then initiated by individual students as part of their homework check.

The second research hypothesis suggested students' both positive and negative attitudes toward collaborative writing. In the present study, thinking aloud had a consistent and plausible positive effect on students' task performance. As stated in the reflective interview, the task of concurrently verbalising thoughts caused the participants to be more successful in task completion. All the participants expressed positive attitudes toward collaborative work, claiming it was overall a very positive experience. As later elaborated, there were many reasons to support the claims: a positive and unthreatening atmosphere, compatibility with the writing partner, individual personality traits, mutual support, higher motivation, reduced writing anxiety, and better awareness and use of more complex writing strategies. When asked about the potential limitations of collaborative writing, participants stated that there were some but they were usually affected by the genre nature and complexity level of the writing task. All participants were much inclined to believe that there were more advantages than disadvantages of collaborative writing.

The third hypothesis proposed that skilled EFL writers would employ a higher number of strategies more frequently and efficiently than their less-skilled counter-

parts. While the quantity of strategies used by skilled and less-skilled writers did not differ significantly, supporting findings from Yeon (2002), differences were observed in the frequency and effectiveness of strategy use. Skilled writers employed strategies more recurrently and effectively, particularly in areas such as *planning*, *evaluating*, and *revising*, in line with Kasper (1997), Raimes (1985) and Lei (2008). In contrast, less-skilled writers exhibited a more limited approach to *planning* and *revising*, often focusing on surface-level corrections (e.g. fixing grammar and spelling errors, punctuations, and vocabularies) rather than engaging in more substantive revisions (Arndt 1987; Lei 2008).

The contrast between skilled and less-skilled writers was particularly evident in their use of L1 strategies. Skilled writers tried to avoid code-switching and relied less on their mother tongue, a finding consistent with Matsumoto (1995). This suggests that proficient writers are more adept at thinking and writing in English, reducing their reliance on translation. Skilled writers are much aware of the difference between L1 and L2 rhetorical conventions and potential negative transfer of the writing strategies. Less-skilled writers are less familiar with L1 and L2 rhetoric and thus transfer L1 writing strategies to L2 ineffectively.

Another key finding was that skilled writers were more attuned to the interactional nature of writing, considering both the reader's perspective and the teacher's expectations. Skilled writers also exhibited a greater willingness to take risks, a trait associated with successful learners (Oxford 1990), while less-skilled writers were more likely to use reduction strategies, prioritizing accuracy over fluency (Lewis 2011).

Finally, the study revealed that skilled writers possessed greater self-awareness regarding their strategy use, a finding supported by Yeon (2002) and Victori (1999). More proficient writers were better able to reflect on their writing processes and adapt their strategies to suit both the task and their personal preferences (Wenden 1991). In the current study, the researchers have also attempted to explore the impact of the sociocultural context on L2 English writing of Croatian university students. Thus, L2 writing is perceived as a social activity that involves an implicit/explicit written communication between the writer and the reader in a specific community (Atkinson 2003; Hyland 2003). The research findings support Hyland's (2003; 2007) claims and help L2 teachers acknowledge that training less-skilled writers in good writing strategies would not necessarily be sufficient. Instead, teachers should explore ways of helping learners raise awareness of how meaning is created in a specific genre for specific target audience.

In conclusion, the results of this study confirm the first hypothesis, demonstrating that EFL writers employ a wide range of strategies. They also confirm the second hypothesis, acknowledging both positive and negative implications of collaborative

writing. While the third hypothesis was only partially supported, the findings indicate that skilled writers use strategies more efficiently and frequently, underscoring the importance of strategic awareness in EFL writing. These insights contribute to the existing body of knowledge on writing strategies and offer practical implications for enhancing writing instruction, particularly in fostering metacognitive awareness and strategic flexibility among less proficient writers.

6. Conclusion

This paper contributed to studies on writing strategies of EFL learners. The current research aimed to explore and establish what writing strategies do Croatian EFL students predominantly use as they write an argumentative essay and to seek for differences in strategy use between skilled and less-skilled EFL writers.

According to the findings of this study, participants used different writing strategies classified as rhetorical strategies, metacognitive strategies, cognitive strategies, communicative social/affective strategies and other strategies belonging to none of the itemized groups. As the analysed data unfolded, the results also demonstrated that differences between skilled and less-skilled EFL writers lay in the efficiency of the strategies employed but not so much in the amount of writing strategies utilized by both groups. That is, skilled writers seemed to use writing strategies more consciously, consistently and attentively compared to the less-skilled writers, albeit both groups utilized approximately the same number of writing strategies during the writing process (Sasaki 2000; 2007).

Collaborative writing as a teaching strategy has not been investigated extensively in Croatia. This study therefore highlights the benefits of developing higher-level writing strategies linked to self-regulated learning (Rivers et al. 2022) through shared writing. More accomplished writers demonstrated not only more autonomy and sophistication in their strategy use but also more appropriate response to a specific text genre. They also viewed the task as lively dialogic interaction with a reader rather than solely as a linguistic assignment.

In the light of pedagogical implications, the present study offers several useful suggestions in increasing EFL students' writing quality. First, it can be said that success in EFL argumentative writing largely depends on the effective use of appropriate writing strategies. Thus, understanding how EFL students face essay writing is crucial for EFL teaching. Second, teachers are urged to detect factors that hinder success of less-skilled student writers, to raise learners' awareness about EFL writing and to integrate strategy training in order to help them enhance their essay writing achievements. Research participants suggested that strategies should be introduced systematically and taught explicitly in the class. In the semi-structured interview,

they admitted having no adequate knowledge on how to identify, or apply strategies to develop their writing quality. Third, think-aloud protocol confirms its value as a way of exploring individual's thought processes, allowing an authentic outlet of inner speech and reflective feedback. Fourth, allowing students to be exposed to more cognitively challenging tasks in a student-centered environment would equip them with more knowledge on how to effectively apply strategies and enhance their writing competence.

Bearing in mind all the aforementioned findings, there were several limitations to the present research which should be cautiously taken into account when interpreting the results. Firstly, although necessary for a qualitative analysis, the sample size of participants was very small and homogenous as it consisted of only first-year and second-year EFL students. This might have affected the reliability and representativeness of the results. Secondly, both think-aloud method and an interview as instruments used in this study have their shortcomings, as they heavily depend on subjects' ability to self-reflect on their strategy use.

To conclude, although some results of this study did overlap with the previous research findings, for purposes of gaining even better insights into EFL learners' use of writing strategies in broader settings, further research is definitely recommended. There is a justifiable need for systematic and methodologically aligned studies focusing on different sample size and aiming at development of writing competence at all educational levels.

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STRATEGIJE PISANJA HRVATSKIH STUDENATA U RASPRAVLJAČKIM ESEJIMA NA ENGLISKOM KAO STRANOM JEZIKU

Poznavanje stranoga jezika podrazumijeva ovladavanje svim četirima temeljnim jezičnim vještinama u svrhu uspješne komunikacije na ciljnom jeziku. Upravo razvoj vještine pisanja predstavlja jedan od glavnih izazova u učenju i poučavanju stranoga jezika. Posljednjih nekoliko godina uočava se sve veći interes znanstvenika (Leki 1998; Sasaki 2000; Casanave 2004) za proučavanjem strategija pisanja u ciljnom jeziku koristeći različite tipove zadataka. Međutim, empirijska istraživanja o vještini pisanja učenika u hrvatskom kontekstu još uvijek su nedostatna. Kao odgovor na tu potrebu u ovom se radu proučavaju procesi i rezultati pisanja osam hrvatskih studenata engleskog kao stranog jezika tijekom njihova zajedničkog rada na raspravljačkim esejima. Cilj je ove studije slučaja dvostruk: (1) identificirati strategije pisanja koje studenti koriste u procesu pisanja eseja primjenjujući tradicionalni kognitivni okvir i (2) istražiti postoje li razlike u primjeni strategija pisanja kod uspješnih i manje uspješnih studenata pisaca. Podatci su prikupljeni kvalitativnom analizom na tri načina: metodom glasnog navođenja misli, retrospektivnim intervjuiranjem ispitanika nakon završetka pisanja te analizom pisanih eseja. Rezultati su pokazali da su ispitanici koristili relativno visoku razinu i raznolik repertoar strategija pisanja. Rezultati su također pokazali da nema značajnih razlika u broju strategija pisanja kojima se koriste uspješni i manje uspješni pisci. Međutim, prva je skupina ispitanika pokazala učestaliju i učinkovitiju upotrebu strategija. Kao ključni elementi diskursne kompetencije spominju se pravilna primjena strategija pisanja, eksplicitno poučavanje u razredu, svijest o različitim retoričkim konvencijama akademskog pisanja na drugim jezicima i individualni čimbenici. O dobivenim spoznajama raspravlja se u svrhu unaprjeđenja vještine pisanja i buduće praktične primjene u učenju/poučavanju stranoga jezika.

Ključne riječi: strategije pisanja, hrvatski studenti engleskog kao stranog jezika, raspravljački eseji, pisanje u paru, uspješni i manje uspješni pisci

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