CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

The introduction of this study discusses the justification for language learning strategy research in general and writing strategies in particular and explains the context of the research including the problems investigated and suggested solutions to alleviate the problems. Then, it presents key research questions addressed in the present study. Finally, the chapter deals with a brief description of the significance and scope of the study.

1.1 Reasons for conducting language learning strategy research

Language learning strategy has gained considerable attention in the area of language teaching and learning practice since the 1970s. One of the major reasons for this interest is its role in making learners responsible for their own learning. This is because learning strategies are believed to facilitate and enhance learning, helping learners perform language tasks effectively and efficiently if they are used appropriately and flexibly (Vann and Abraham, 1990). As pointed out clearly by Oxford (1990, p.1), learning strategies “… are tools for active, self directed movement, which is essential for developing communicative competence”.

The appropriate use of language learning strategies is also believed to contribute to independent learning (see Allwright, 1990; Wenden, 1991a for the discussions of independent language learning). If learners become aware of learning strategies, identify their own set of effective learning strategies and reflect thoughtfully on their own learning experience, they continue to learn through out their life. That is why teaching how to learn is more important than providing information on a particular topic because as time goes by, the amount of information learnt and retained will reduce.

The other important reason for conducting research in language learning strategy is that it can be teachable (Chamot, 2001; Cohen, 1998; Oxford, 1990; Oxford and Nyikos, 1989). This means that learning strategies that are proved or likely to be effective in terms of improving the language ability of the learners can be taught to those who do not use them or to those who need to maximize their learning experiences for better language performance. Thus, the idea of strategy training has recently been
applied widely and successful findings have been obtained (e.g., Goh and Taib, 2006; Pani, 2004; Rao, 2007).

Another reason for the popularity of language learning strategy research is its relationship with language proficiency. As a review of Oxford revealed, a number of researchers (Cohen; O’Malley and Chamot; Oxford and Ehrman; Oxford, as cited in Oxford, 2001, p.169) have concluded that more frequent use of strategies is often linked to higher levels of language proficiency. Later, drawing on extensive experience in research, Oxford states that “…appropriate use of language learning strategies, which include dozens or even hundreds of possible behaviour…. results in improved L2 proficiency overall or in specific language skill areas” (2002, p.126). The research findings of several researchers (e.g., Green and Oxford, 1995; Peacock, 2001; Peacock and Ho, 2003; Wharton, 2000; Yang, 2005) also indicate that more proficient learners were found to use more learning strategies than less proficient learners did.

Language learning strategy research mainly focuses on the learners themselves. This might contribute to its popularity because of its existence in the era of the learner-centered instructional approach that has achieved a dominant position in education. Particularly, focus on the learners themselves for improving learning has been the core area since the emergence of the communicative approach, which has brought about a paradigm shift from teacher centered to learner centered instruction (e.g. see Gupta, 2006b for the discussion of the change of learners and teachers’ attitude towards communicative approach). As pointed out clearly by Cohen, language learning strategies “can have a major role in helping to shift the responsibility for learning off the shoulders of the teachers and on to those of the learners” (1996, p.18).

This paradigm shift coupled with the prevailing dynamic changing world leads teachers and researchers to find ways to improve learning and teaching to meet the ever growing needs of the learners as well as the society.

Above all, the trust in learner centered approaches to improve language teaching emanates from:

the belief that learners are self-directed, responsible decision makers. Learners are seen to learn in different ways and to have different needs and interests. Language programs and teachers who work in them should therefore set out to provide learners with efficient learning strategies, to
assist learners in identifying their own preferred ways of learning, to develop skills needed to negotiate the curriculum, to encourage learners to set their own objectives, to encourage learners to adopt realistic goals and time frames, and to develop learners’ skills in self-evaluation (Richards, 2002, p. 23).

In short, the realization of the contribution of learning strategies to language development, in “pave[ing] the way towards greater proficiency, learner autonomy, and self regulation” (Hsiao and Oxford, 2002, p.372) and the assumption of ‘teach- ability’ of learning strategies and the presence of empirical evidence that indicates a relationship between the strategy use and proficiency in a target language have further encouraged researchers and teachers to involve in training the learners in specific skill areas using learning strategy instruction.

Believing that learning strategy instruction would enable second language learners to be equipped with appropriate learning strategies that can be applied in language learning activities that lead to the improvement of the learners’ language performance in different skill areas, several researchers have been involved in examining the learning strategies use of the learners in developing the three language skills: listening, speaking, and reading. For example, Rost and Ross, (1991) identified effective listening strategies that have brought about improvement in listening abilities of less successful students; Huang and Van Naersser, (1987) identified speaking strategies employed by successful learners; Reyes (2006) was able to improve the learners’ reading performance through metacognitive strategy training. The results of these studies can be cited as evidence to illustrate the progress of language learning strategy studies for the betterment of language teaching and learning and can further encourage researchers to make a more comprehensive study on each skill area.

Likewise, the researcher was motivated to conduct the present study to identify effective writing strategies that can help EFL learners develop their writing competence.

1.2 The need for writing strategy research.
Since the late 1970s, there has been a growing interest in English L2 writing research. There are various reasons for this. Of these, two major reasons will be mentioned here. First, the 1970s was a period in which writing research emerged as a result of
recognizing writing as one of the four language skills that should be taught to students. Before the late 1970s, there was no writing course offered to the students, for it was considered as “a support skill in language learning” (Reid, 2001, p.128). It was at the Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages [TESOL] convention held in the late 1970s that not less than six papers on writing were started to be listed in the yearly program (Kroll, 1990).

The second important reason for initiating research on L2 writing in general and writing strategies in particular is that writing in English is difficult for ESL/EFL learners. Many researchers (e.g., Chamot, 2005; Hedge, 2005; Kim & Kim, 2005; Kroll, 1990; Lee, 2005; Rao, 2007; Sanders, 2000; Shokrpoour and Fallahzadeh, 2007; Telebi Nezhad and Negari, 2007) believe it is challenging to develop competence in writing for the majority of students in EFL and ESL contexts.

There are many reasons why writing is believed to be difficult for many ESL/EFL learners. One is due to the complex nature of writing. It requires the development of different skills and knowledge such as organization skills, sentence construction skills, knowledge of English grammar, knowledge of writing styles, and knowledge of the context in which writing takes place.

Several researchers have explained the complexity of writing in their own ways. For example, Hedge (2005) states:

Compared with speech, effective writing requires a number of things: a high degree of organization in the development of information, ideas or arguments; a higher degree of accuracy so that there is no ambiguity of meaning; the use of complex grammatical devices for focus and emphasis; and a careful choice of vocabulary, grammatical patterns, and sentence structures to create a style which is appropriate to the subject matter and the eventual readers (p.7).

Moreover, as Telebi Nezhad and Negari (2007) stated that writing is the product that results when different activities occur. Activities like brainstorming, planning, outlining, organizing, drafting, revising, and others require the learners develop relevant skills in ESL/EFL in order to produce effective texts. These skills may not be developed without explicit instruction and guidance from the teachers.
Different factors are also found to affect the development of writing skills of ESL students. According to Angelova (as cited in Mu, 2005), these include language proficiency, L1 writing competence, use of cohesive devices, metacognitive knowledge about the writing task, writing strategies and writers’ personal characteristics.

Difficulties arising from the complex nature of writing and the factors affecting the development of writing competence, both presuppose the need for the explicit teaching of strategies that help second language learners approach writing, compose a text and improve their writing performance. In other words, while dealing with the difficult task of writing, EFL/ESL students have to develop and apply appropriate writing strategies that help them write effective texts. This is because strategies are believed to “pave the way towards greater proficiency, learner autonomy and self regulation” (Hsiao and Oxford, 2002, p.372).

1.2.1 Context of the current research

From insights gained through the review of literature, it was learnt that since the 1970s many studies were conducted on learning strategies and training techniques by different researchers in different countries (e.g., see a review by Lee. and Oxford, 2008). These researches conducted focused on finding ways to empower learners to become better language learners. However, no research of this kind has been conducted in Jimma University and any other tertiary education institutions and secondary schools in Ethiopia, where English is used as a medium of instruction.

Therefore, the rationale for this research on the writing strategies of undergraduate university students at Jimma University relates not only to the fact that this area has not been dealt with earlier but also because of the reasons mentioned below.

One of the major reasons that initiates this study is the researcher’s growing concern for the writing performance of his students. For more than 20 years, he has been teaching students who have come from different areas of the country (the capital city, urban, semi urban and rural) and from families with different economic and social backgrounds. Out of these students learning writing, some of them have shown good writing performance, whereas some of them have been found to have serious problems in communicating their ideas in writing. The presence of such variations inspired the researcher to investigate the writing strategies employed by both the proficient and less
proficient students with the intention of identifying effective composing strategies from highly proficient students and devise a mechanism by which the less proficient students can be taught the strategies to improve their writing performance.

The other reason emanated from the researcher’s belief that students’ writing problems can be solved by the students themselves if they are taught the required writing skills and strategies in spite of the prevalence of multitude of problems in the teaching-learning process. One of the approaches to implement this could be to show and empower them with meaningful learning tools. After all, focusing on learner factors can be a short cut to bring about changes in learners’ writing performance. The desired changes might be achieved, for instance, if the learners are made to think about their writing performance, made aware of the techniques of writing that help them improve their writing performance and are allowed to experience and apply strategies properly with motivation and on a voluntary basis. As pointed out clearly by Wen and Johnson (1997), learning strategy is one of the modifiable learner’s variables “…which contribute[s] most immediately and directly to the product or learning outcomes, in this case English achievement…[learners variables] are more open to intervention and therefore of particular interest to teachers and learners seeking to optimize language learning outcomes” (pp.28-30).

In fact, learners’ variables according to Wen and Johnson (1997) include both modifiable and unmodifiable variables. Modifiable variables in turn include learning purpose, attitude, motivation, effort, management strategies and language learning strategies, whereas unmodifiable variables include intelligence, aptitude, sex, age and prior learning. Each of these variables can contribute to the development of writing competence. However, due to different limiting factors, some of these will not be dealt within this research.

There are also non-learner factors that have a direct or indirect influence on the development of the learners’ writing ability. These include environment related factors (social, economical, cultural, family background), and school related factors (books, qualification of teachers, class size, the use of technology, assessment method). For instance, the results of the study conducted by Gupta (2006a) show clearly that the learning environment in India plays a pivotal role in changing the attitude of the learners by motivating and putting pressure on them to strive to meet the high proficiency level in English language demanded by the social milieu. However, in the
Ethiopian context the impact of learning environment in facilitating the improvement of the language proficiency of students might not be fast enough and it will take sometime to reach the level of influence created by learning environments in India. Therefore, it seems plausible to focus on learner factors (e.g. learning strategies, motivation) as they can be controlled in order to bring about a change in the language development and proficiency of students.

1.2.2 Demands of written English in academic and professional settings

At Jimma University, good skills of writing are crucial for the academic success of the students because students are required to take notes from lectures and secondary sources, write term papers, do course assignments, present reports on their laboratory or field work findings and write exam papers. In addition, in their final year, all students are required to conduct independent research and produce a formal research report as a partial fulfillment for the completion of the degree programme. While doing this, students are expected to undertake literature reviews, design research instruments, submit research proposals, collect and interpret data, draw conclusions and write a report. All these writings done by students are evaluated from the angle of the organization and logical presentation of contents, adequacy of the contents, effectiveness of the language used, use of sound arguments and the use of an appropriate format.

Writing skills are not only required by students to meet their academic requirements, but also to meet the requirements of the job market. At work places such as high schools, higher educational institutions, banks, hospitals and industries and nongovernmental organizations in Ethiopia, English is used as a working language along with the national or regional state languages. English is also used as the official language of diplomacy, commerce and international contacts.

The need for high proficiency in written English goes beyond the national and institutional level as the English language has become a bridge for communication between different cultures and economies in the globalization process.

1.2.3 Problems to be investigated

In Ethiopia, students join tertiary education institutions after passing a national school leaving certificate examination upon completion of grade 10 and after attending a two year preparatory programme and successfully passing the university entrance exam.
In order to enable them to develop writing skills required for pursuing their academic career effectively, a 48 hour English writing course covering 16 weeks of instruction is delivered during the first year or second year programme.

However, there are different factors that constrain the effective realization of the desired learning objectives. Some of the major ones are related to large class size, poor teaching-learning facilities (lack of teachers with adequate language skill and proficiency, books, libraries, classrooms, computers, etc.), lack of motivation in learning, that is, lack of cooperation carrying out the activities, teachers’ workload and their inability to correct and give feedback to students’ written assignment, inadequate time allocated for the course and poor background of students in learning the English language.

With regard to the problems encountered by students, the researcher while conducting the writing course learned that some students composed their thoughts and ideas clearly and logically using effective language, whereas others faced difficulties in expressing them. The texts composed by the students were found to exhibit inadequate content, disorganization, lack of focus and use of incoherent sentences with serious spelling and syntax errors. In addition to their poor writing performance, the students with such difficulties appeared to be less motivated to perform writing tasks in and outside the classroom.

A similar problem was observed in Addis Ababa University. For instance, a study conducted by Taye (2005) provides evidence of the general complaints about preparatory students’ knowledge and skills of using the English language. His findings show that the students have: “...poor ability in expressing themselves as well as in understanding what is put to them in the classroom” (p.48). Furthermore, the case study conducted by Nuru (2005) on undergraduate students’ competence in writing revealed that the standard of written work of students that dissatisfied the instructors and employers was found to suffer from “...lack of mastery of the basic skills of writing....Such as coherence, completeness and logical arrangement were missing in their work” (p.19).

1.2.4 Suggested solutions to alleviate the writing problems of students
The researcher believes that the writing problems of the students can be alleviated through empowerment, that is, by raising their awareness about the importance of good
writing skills for successful career development and by organizing and offering effective writing skills training courses that will enable them acquire knowledge and skills in efficient writing strategies so as to help them develop good writing skills. This would require investigating and identifying writing strategies of both proficient and less proficient students and examining the influences of these strategies on the writing proficiency of the students and finally draw conclusions and then recommend those strategies with a strong and desirable impact on improving learners’ writing proficiency. Students need to be given a chance of choosing and practicing these strategies to develop their personal repertoire of effective writing strategies by exerting the required effort to compose creative texts and continually improve their writing skills. Teachers can also use the list of writing strategies identified and recommended to design and implement effective technique or methods of teaching to be used for teaching writing competence courses.

This study also aims to identify whether motivation influences the use of writing strategies and to provide empirical evidence to find out if the students from different disciplines use different writing strategies

1.3 Key research questions

The following key research questions were addressed in the present study.

1. What writing strategies are most and least frequently employed by study subjects or groups?
2. Which of the writing strategies are related to the writing proficiency of the subjects?
3. Do the students from different disciplines use different writing strategies?
4. Are students’ writing strategies associated with certain approaches to writing?
5. Does motivation have an effect or influence on the use of writing strategies?

1.4 Significance of the study

The present study being the first of its kind to be conducted at Jimma University investigates the writing strategies of undergraduate university students and identifies the strategies that have a strong relationship with their writing proficiency. The study aims to benefit students, teachers, researchers and material development experts in different ways.
One of the major benefits of the study is to provide a list of effective writing strategies that have a strong relationship with proficiency in writing. This list can be used by motivated students to choose and implement strategies in order to develop their writing competence. This use of effective writing strategies in turn makes the students sensitive towards their writing performance and take charge of their own writing skill development.

Teachers can use the list of writing strategies to design activities to teach their students in a systematic way. They can also use the instruments to investigate the preferred and effective writing strategies of their students so as to improve their instruction and enhance the development of the writing competence of their students. Moreover, teachers will realize better the importance of motivation in the process of developing writing skills utilizing writing strategies. Teachers also gain an awareness of differences in strategy use among disciplines. That is, the research may come up with findings that students from specific disciplines may not use certain strategies associated with higher proficiency. In this case, teachers can be confident of including activities that help students to learn those strategies.

Researchers can also get more insight into second language learners’ composing behaviour and the effect of different disciplines in strategy choice. Material development experts can make use of the findings for the production of materials that provide information about strategies that are useful for specific writing tasks that lead to the development of writing skills.

The idea of providing a list of effective writing strategies with the intention of their being used in training the students in their appropriate and flexible use can be an alternative to address the writing difficulties EFL undergraduate students face. This may be a sound solution for the Ethiopian context, where the student population at tertiary education is increasing dramatically and the teachers are unable to give feedback on their students’ writing assignments.

1.5 Scope of the study

This study attempts to investigate the writing behaviour of undergraduate students at Jimma University, Ethiopia. In the investigation, the study focuses on the writing strategies employed by the learners when writing texts and the factors influencing the use of writing strategies.
Regarding the writing behaviour of the subjects, the investigation was made from two angles. One was that the frequency of their writing strategy use was assessed through a 38 item questionnaire and proficiency test. The second was that the subjects’ writing experiences and strategy knowledge were assessed through a close and open-ended questionnaire and interviews.

In the case of factors influencing writing strategy choices, among others, the study centered on three major factors, namely fields of study, writing instruction approaches and motivation. The relationships between these factors and the writing strategy use of the subjects were also assessed using quantitative approaches and/or qualitative approaches.