

GENDER EFFECT ON THE USE OF WRITING STRATEGIES

The author: Mrs. Hafida HAMZAoui

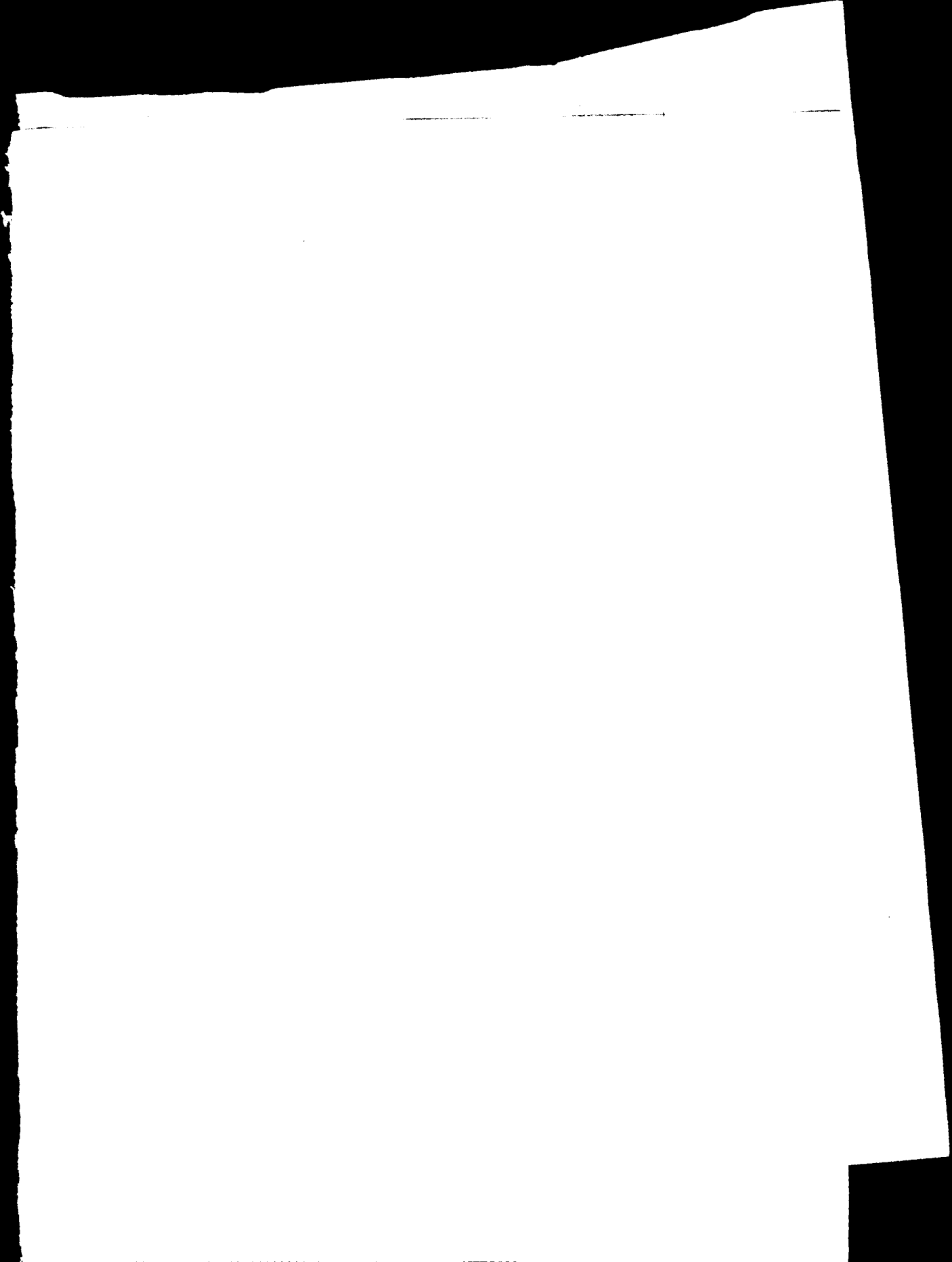
Dpt. of Foreign Languages
Faculty of Arts and Human and Social Sciences
Abou Bakr Belkaid University of Tlemcen

Abstract

Language learners use a set of strategies to facilitate the learning process or the performance of a language task. The present article tries to unveil the strategies used by learners in writing and more specifically in essay writing. Then, it proceeds to a comparison of the writing strategies used by male and female students to see whether gender affects the use of writing strategies. For these purposes, the researcher undertook a case study at the level of English 'licence' degree university students.

1. Introduction

Writing is an essential skill for university students, mainly for language students such as those preparing for an English 'licence' degree because their academic success is usually judged by means of written assignments and examinations. Yet, this skill is claimed by many linguists and educationalists to be difficult because it requires both mental and physical efforts on the part of the writer (Bryne 1979, Kroll 1990). In effect, the writer has to handle many components at the same time: content organisation, grammar, word choice, purpose, audience, writing mechanics, etc. This is why students use some strategies to facilitate the task of writing i.e. tricks or behaviours used by writers to overcome their linguistic problems and carry the composition task successfully. In fact, language learning strategies held the attention of many researchers from the late 1970s, they were listed, categorised and studied in relation to the factors influencing them. However, of all the factors that influence strategy use, gender is the one to which the least attention has been paid. The few research works carried in this field found that gender could have a significant impact on how students learn a language. Graham (1997), for example, in her research project found a sensible difference between male and female students stating that:



"Across all tasks, there was an indication of a more careful planned approach on the part of girls." (p.81). Other research works found that female students employed more learning strategies and/ or employed strategies more effectively (Nyikos(1990); Erhman & Oxford (1989); Oxford et al. (1988)).

To know more about the impact of gender on strategy use and more specifically on writing strategy use, the researcher undertook a study at the level of university students to determine the set of strategies used by the latter, and see whether male and female students use similar or different strategies.

2. The Study

2.1. Subjects

The subjects of this study are university students enrolled in the English Department of the Faculty of Arts and Human and Social Sciences, University of Tlemcen. Four students were taken at random from the 1st, 2nd, 3rd and 4th years (two male and two female students from each level), but only one male and one female students attended all the experiments in the 2nd year. Consequently, this research work is concerned with 7 male and 7 female students i.e. 14 students in all.

These students are in the age group of 17 to 27 years old their mother tongue is Algerian Arabic (a dialectal variety), their first language is Standard Arabic, while French and English are respectively their first and second foreign languages.

Before entering university, subject students learn English in the middle and secondary schools for five years. Then, after being received in the baccalaureate exam, they are oriented to the English department according to their wish and results. Their undergraduate studies last four years. During the 1st and 2nd years of graduation the four basic language skills are focused (speaking, writing, listening, reading). In the 3rd year only speaking and listening are maintained, while in the 4th year language based modules are not taught. Scientific subjects are gradually introduced from the 1st year, whereas literary ones are introduced in the 2nd year. In addition, the modules of Arabic literature and educational psychology are taught in Arabic and French respectively.

2.2. Research Method

2.2.1. Corpus

The 14 students were required to write 3 essays (E1, E2, E3) in English not exceeding 150 words on different topics (see appendix)

within 30 minutes. Three essays were used in order to multiply data sources. Students were asked to think loudly while writing their essays and were recorded on tapes. Afterwards, these tapes were transcribed to obtain think-aloud protocols. These represented the data of the present research work.

Essay writing was chosen as a task because it is a free type of writing task and an elaborated one which combines several competences, and therefore, may reveal a great deal of the strategies used by students to write.

2.2.2. Instrument

The 'think-aloud' procedure was used in this study to gain insight into learners' thoughts and detect the strategies they use while writing. This instrument has won a lot of success to capture learners' mental processes (Alderson 1984, Cohen 1987). In writing, this experiment consists in giving a task to a subject, then asking him to say all what he thinks of loudly while writing. During this time his reflections are recorded on a tape and represent the data for the researcher.

2.2.3. Procedure

For the 'think-aloud' procedure, The researcher held a group discussion with subject students of each level. During this session she explained the different steps of this experiment as well as its objectives providing examples and demonstrations. Then, each student was given the essay topic and isolated in a room where he/ she was recorded from the beginning till the end of the treatment of his/ her essay. Students were given three topics to write on during a period of three weeks (winter 2000) i.e. one topic a week. Thereafter, the tape script of each student's record was done. The resulting protocols allowed the identification of the different strategies used by students to write an essay.

2.3. Results

2.3.1. Definition and classification of the produced writing strategies

When writing the three essays involved in this study subject students were found to use a set of strategies to solve their composing and linguistic problems. These strategies were recorded and grouped under three categories metacognitive, cognitive and social/ affective strategies according to the classification scheme proposed by O'Malley and Chamot (1990). The definition of each is provided below.

a) Metacognitive strategies

They involve thinking about the writing task, planning how to deal with it within the time allowed, monitoring the language produced, and evaluating how well one has realized the writing task. This category consists of the following strategies:

- 1- *Topic reading*: The student reads the topic either once or many times to understand the subject.
- 2- *Finding key words*: the learner either underlines or writes down on his/ her draft the key words of the topic to determine the most important things he/ she should speak about in the essay.
- 3- *Brainstorming*: the learner starts saying or writing any words/ideas that seem to be in connection with the topic without any organisation.
- 4- *Planning*: the learner organises in advance how to deal with the topic. He generates a plan for the parts (introduction, development, conclusion), sequences and main ideas to be used in his/ her writing (the outline).
- 5- *Oral construction of the text*: The learner starts speaking to himself/ herself and constructs parts of the text orally before he/ she writes them.
- 6- *Topic consultation*: while writing the learner reads the topic again either to check what he/she has written and see whether it corresponds to what is asked from him/ her, or to continue writing on the same track and avoid being irrelevant.
- 7- *Plan consultation*: while writing the learner comes back to his/ her plan from time to time to follow it in the course of his/ her writing. This strategy is generally hidden and was difficult to detect.
- 8- *Revision*: During this phase the learner reviews what he/ she has written in order to correct and improve the overall text taking into consideration both form and content. This revision happened at different times: on the draft, while copying down from the draft to the exam paper, and on the exam paper.
- 9- *Writing a second draft*: the student may need to ameliorate his/ her written product, then he/ she writes a second draft permitting more revision.
- 10- *Self-monitoring*: checking, verifying, or correcting one's comprehension or performance while writing. Five types of monitoring were recorded.

Comprehension monitoring: checking, verifying, or correcting one's understanding of a word or a sentence.

Production monitoring: checking, verifying, or correcting one's language production.

Auditory monitoring: using one's ear for the language (how something sounds) to make decisions about spelling for example.

Visual monitoring: using one's eye for the language (how something looks) to make decisions about language spelling for example.

Style monitoring: an internal stylistic register that the learner uses to correct his/her writing.

*10- *Time-saving strategies*: these are strategies used by students to save them time and permit the completion of the writing assignment in the allowed period of time. These strategies are metacognitive because they are part of planning as they involve taking decision to write a draft, for example, or not before the actual writing task begins. Within this class two categories were recorded:

**No draft*: in order to save time the learner decides not to use a draft and to write directly on the exam paper.

**Start on draft, continue on exam paper*: it is always difficult to write the beginning of an essay, the learner may make many false starts. This is why, instead of not using a draft, some students prefer to write the first sentences on the draft, copy them, then continue on the exam paper. Those learners who fear to make mistakes go back to the draft every time they deal with a complex sentence or idea. Other learners write the introduction and development of their essays on the draft, copy them on the exam paper, then write the conclusion directly on the exam paper.

It should be mentioned that the strategies 1 to 5 are called pre-writing strategies because they are used by students before they start writing their essays.

b) Cognitive strategies

They involve applying techniques/ strategies to accomplish the writing task (that is use strategies that help in the production of ideas and language).

1- *Writing in two languages*: this is a strategy used by learners to overcome the obstacle of an unknown piece of language. When the student doesn't know how to write an idea in English (L3), for example, he/ she switches to Arabic (L1) or French (L2) writes the idea then continues in L3. Later on, he/ she comes back to this part of the sentence and tries to translate or arrange it.

2- *Generating sentences in Arabic/French while writing in English*: this strategy appeared in L3 writing, some students used Arabic or French to generate sentences, then translation was done into English to construct the sentence/ sentences.

3- *Re-reading*: repeating a chunk of language i.e. a word, a phrase, or a paragraph while writing. This is done to help in continuing writing following the same flow of ideas, but it happens that the writer corrects what has been written while re-reading.

4- *Translation*: rendering ideas from one language to another in a relatively verbatim manner. Students translated from French or Arabic to English.

e.g. "ça sort de l'ordinaire" _____ it exits from the ordinary.

5- *Transfer*: while translation is premeditated transfer is not. It happens when the learner uses previously acquired linguistic knowledge to facilitate writing. Transfer can concern vocabulary, a grammar rule or a spelling one.

e.g. A bomb exploded: transfer of the verb 'exploder' from French to English and addition of an English inflection of past verbs.

6- *Language switch*: the learner uses an L1/L2 term while writing in L3 without bothering to translate.

e.g. efficace ___ for ___ efficient

7- *Approximation*: use of a single vocabulary, item, or structure which the learner knows is not correct, but which shares enough semantic features in common with the desired item.

e.g. pipe ___ for ___ water-pipe the garden ___ for ___ the yard

8- *Circumlocution*: the learner describes the characteristics or elements of the objects or action instead of using the appropriate item or structure.

e.g. I want my house to be in a place where everything is available. ----- i.e. a market

c. *Social/ Affective strategies*

They involve interacting with another person or using affective control to assist completion of the writing task. In fact when writing their essays, students were isolated in a room where no interaction with other persons was possible. This is why we could not report any social strategy, only affective strategies were recorded and we shall use "affective strategies" thereafter.

1- *Avoidance*: two types of avoidance have been detected.

Word/phrase avoidance: the learner simply tries not to write unknown or uncertain words, structures, forms or items.

Sentence abandonment: the learner starts writing a sentence but is unable to continue. Then, stops in the middle and abandons the sentence and sometimes the whole idea after some unsuccessful trials.

2- *Risk taking*: this strategy is the reverse of the preceding one. If the learner wants to express a word or sentence and is uncertain about the vocabulary or the structure, he/ she will still use it.

3- *Making false starts*: when the learner doesn't know how to start writing, to break his/ her phobia of writing, he/ she starts writing anything and crosses it out, then writes something else, if still invalid, crosses it out until he/ she finds the right words.

2.3.2. A comparison of the strategies used by male and female students

After having identified the writing strategies used by subject students, the study turns to a comparison of strategy use between male and female students in writing the three essays (E1, E2, and E3). This comparison is done at the level of the three categories of strategies presented above.

a) Metacognitive strategies

The frequency of male and female students using metacognitive strategies in the three proposed essays written in English (L3) is compared in the following table.

Strategies		E1		E2		E3	
		Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Topic reading		4	4	5	2	5	3
Key words		3				1	
Brainstorming		2	1			1	
Planning		4		4			
Oral construction		1		1	1		
Topic consultation		1	1	1	4	1	
Plan consultation		2		1			
Revision on draft		2	3	3		2	2
Revision while copying		5	6	6	6	5	5
Revision on exam paper		2	1			1	1
Write a 2 nd draft			1				
Comprehension monitoring		4	2	2	2	2	2
Production monitoring		1	2		1	1	1
Auditory monitoring			4		1		2
Visual monitoring		1	3			1	1
Style monitoring		1	1	1	1		
Time-saving strategies	No draft				1		1
	Draft, exam paper	4	1	3			
Total	A.F.	37	30	27	19	20	18
	R.F.	29.36 %	23.80 %	21.42 %	15.05 %	15.87 %	14.28 %

Table 1 : The metacognitive strategies used by male and female students to write the three English essays.

The above table reveals that male students used a wider range of metacognitive strategies than females in each essay, compare:

Females: E1 (13/ 18), E2 (09/ 18), E3 (09/ 18).

Males: E1 (15/ 18), E2 (10/ 18), E3 (10/ 18).

The metacognitive strategy types which show some difference are pre-writing and self-monitoring strategies. The obtained results reveal that except for *topic reading* which was used by some girls, pre-writing strategies were mainly used by male students. Concerning self-monitoring strategies, these were more used by girls than by boys except for comprehension monitoring which was more used by boys in E1 and equally used by both genders in the two other essays.

b) Cognitive strategies

To compare the micro-strategies used by both genders in the three essays, the following table is provided.

Strategies		E1		E2		E3	
		Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Writing in 2 languages		1	1				1
Approximation		1	3	1		1	
Circumlocution		1			1	1	1
Language switch				1	2	1	2
Translation		3	2	1	4	3	3
Transfer					1	1	1
Re-read& continue		3	4	5	5	2	6
Re-read & correct		1	2	1	4	2	4
Generating sentences in Arabic/ French		1	1	1		1	
Total	A.F.	11	13	10	17	12	18
	R.F.	17.46 %	20.43 %	15.87 %	26.98 %	19.04 %	28.57 %

Table 2 : The cognitive strategies used by male and female students to write the three English essays.

The figures provided by the above table indicate that female students used more cognitive strategies in each essay than male students.

Re-reading is the strategy which shows the widest discrepancy . If we consider both types of re-reading (i.e. re-read & continue and re-read & correct), we note that female students used this strategy twice more than males. Boys, for their part, used more the strategy *generating sentences in Arabic/ French*.

c) Affective strategies

The table below represents the affective strategies used by both genders in the three essays.

Strategies		E1		E2		E3	
		Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Avoidance		2	6		3	2	3
Risk taking			1			1	1
False starts			3		2		4
Total	A.F.	2	10	0	5	3	8
	R.F.	09.52 %	47.61 %	00.00 %	23.80 %	14.28 %	38.09 %

Table 3 : The affective strategies used by male and female students to write the three English essays.

Table 3 shows that female students used far more affective strategies than male students. The strategy *false starts* was exclusively used by girls. These results indicate that girls were more anxious about completing the writing task than boys. This led them to use affective control to assist the writing of the three essays and, therefore, use many affective strategies.

3. Conclusion

Given the small number of male and female students involved in this study, it is difficult to come to any clear conclusions regarding any differences in the essay writing strategies used by the two groups. Certain patterns, however, do seem to emerge.

Female students did not use most pre-writing strategies (*key words, brainstorming, planning and oral construction of the text*) as revealed by table1. However, they seemed to be more pre-occupied by self- monitoring than males. The remaining metacognitive strategies did not show a significant difference in use between both genders. At the level of cognitive strategies, though there was no noticeable difference

between the strategy types used by both genders, girls used these strategies more frequently to produce vocabulary and sentences than males. With regard to affective strategies, female students showed a more important use. Table3 shows that *false starts* to find out the best way to start a sentence was a female strategy. *Avoidance* too was more recorded with females, the latter tended to *avoid* more structures and words they had some doubts about than male students. In sum, female students were more careful, cautious and concerned with the language they used in their essays (i.e. using more cognitive and affective strategies) than the way with which they wrote their essays (i.e. using fewer metacognitive strategies).

Male students, on the other hand, were more preoccupied by how to conceive and write their essays and mainly how to start writing using more pre-writing strategies among the metacognitive strategies. In fact, they showed less concern to those strategies used in vocabulary and sentence production i.e. cognitive strategies. They also did not show a high anxiety when completing the writing task, thus employing few affective strategies.

To conclude, this study tried to shed some light on the writing strategies used by each gender to orient teachers and course designers in their material planning and strategy training courses appropriate for each gender. In fact, both male and female students were found to use some effective writing strategies, such as pre-writing strategies for boys and the cognitive strategies used by girls to generate vocabulary and sentences. It is therefore worth making each gender benefit from the knowledge of the other gender.

Bibliography

ALDERSON, J.C. (1984): "Reading in a foreign language: a reading problem or a language problem?", in J.C. Alderson and A.S. Urquhart (eds.), *Reading in a foreign language*, Harlow, Longman, pp 1-27.

BRYNE, D. (1979) ; Teaching Writing Skills ; London ; Longman.

COHEN, A.D. (1987): "Student processing of feedback on their compositions", in A. Wenden and J. Rubin (eds.) (1987), *Learner strategies in language learning*, Hemel Hempstead: Prentice Hall International English Language Teaching.

ERHMAN, M. and OXFORD, R. (1989) "Effects of sex differences, career choice and psychological type on adult language learning strategies", in Modern Language Journal vol. 73, pp.3-13

GRAHAM, S. (1997) Effective Language Learning; Clevedon; Multilingual Matters LTD.

KROLL, B. (ed.) (1990) Second Language writing: Research insights for the classroom, Cambridge, CUP.

NYIKOS, M. (1990) "Sex related differences in adult language learning: socialization and memory factors"; in *Modern Language Journal* 74; pp. 273-87.

O'MALLEY, J.M. and CHAMOT, A.U. (1990) Learning Strategies in Second Language Acquisition, Cambridge: CUP.

OXFORD, R. L., NYIKOS, M., and ERHMAN, M. (1988) "vive la difference? Reflections on sex differences in use of language learning strategies"; in *Foreign Language Annals* 21; pp. 321-29.

Appendix

The topics given to 1st and 2nd year students:

E1:

Describe the house of your dreams: how it would be, where it would be, and what it would consist of.

E2:

Are you for or against the working woman?

E3 :

Your grand father/ grand mother was a moudjahid/ moudjahida who took part in the Algerian War of Independence. Write about one of his/ her exploits in the war.

The topics given to 3rd and 4th year students:

E1:

Once you were on a picnic you saw a strange flying object, you followed it until you attended its landing. Surprisingly, aliens came out of it. Describe what you saw and what you felt.

E2:

During your four years of under-graduation you deal with many subjects (modules). Do you think that these subjects prepare students to be good English teachers in the future? If not what do you propose to add or change.

E3 :

Your grand father/ grand mother was a moudjahid/ moudjahida who took part in the Algerian War of Independence. Write about one of his/ her exploits in the war.