

Exploring EFL Students' Writing Strategies in Composing Classroom Action Research (CAR) Proposals

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DOI: 10.37729/scripta.v11i2.5689

Abstract. This study explored the writing strategies employed by EFL students when composing Classroom Action Research (CAR) proposals, focusing on the frequency of strategy use. Using a quantitative research design, data were collected through a structured questionnaire administered to 48 undergraduate students in the English Language Education Study Program at the University of Palangka Raya. The questionnaire measured the frequency of pre-writing, while-writing, and revising strategies. The findings reveal that students frequently engaged with while-writing strategies, particularly translation from Indonesian to English. The pre-writing stage showed moderate engagement, with students commonly reviewing examples of well-written proposals but less frequently using formal outlining techniques. In the revising stage, feedback from lecturers was highly valued, with students actively using it to improve their proposals. However, self-editing strategies were less emphasized, indicating a reliance on external feedback for revisions. The study concludes that while students benefit from translation and feedback-driven revision, there is a need for more significant support in developing independent revision skills and expanding academic vocabulary.

Keywords: EFL students, Writing strategies, Classroom Action Research proposals

1. INTRODUCTION

Achieving proficiency in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) opens up numerous opportunities for students, particularly in higher education and international careers. As English functions as a global lingua franca, it enables individuals from diverse linguistic backgrounds to communicate and access international resources, literature, and platforms. Improving writing skills is essential for undergraduate students; it forms the foundation for academic and professional success. Proficient writing skills enable students to create well-structured essays, research papers, and reports, showcasing their knowledge and analytical prowess. Therefore, developing writing skills during the undergraduate years enhances academic achievements and prepares students for the demands of the professional world, ensuring their ability to convey ideas with confidence and precision.

Most EFL students struggle to write well in the target language [1]. As an output skill, English writing is a crucial part of language learning, requiring various language knowledge, including vocabulary, grammar, rhetorical strategies, and writing conventions [2]-[5]. Writing takes more time to think, prepare, rehearse, make mistakes, and find alternative and better solutions [6]. It also teaches them resilience, patience, and the importance of revision, essential skills for aspiring writers. Writing is challenging for second language learners because it involves a complex process. From pre-writing activities to drafting and revising, learners must actively participate in each stage of the writing process [7]-[9]. Learners are often caught copying and pasting ideas from different sources and putting them together. Most EFL students do not know how to explain and coherent their thoughts when writing in English [10]- [12]. Indonesian students learning English as a foreign language face challenges in mastering it. Senior high school students are required to develop all language skills, including writing [13]. However, they often struggle to construct sentences, paragraphs, or texts.

Writing is a production skill that challenges writers to create explicit, well-structured texts using proper language. In other words, a writer must focus on vocabulary, coherence, cohesion, and grammar while applying critical thinking throughout the writing process. This highlights the difficulty of writing, as writers must communicate their thoughts and ideas and develop language proficiency to produce letters, essays, journals, and research papers [1].

In academic work, students are usually expected to define key terms to show their tutors they understand them. Similarly, academic writers define terms to ensure readers clearly understand what these key terms mean. Also, this skill is crucial in academic writing, especially when students have to write a complete report about their research effectively. For students in non-English speaking countries, proficiency in English is a vital tool that facilitates their academic and professional success.

Among the core language skills—listening, speaking, reading, and writing—writing is often considered the most complex and challenging for non-native speakers. It plays a significant role in academics, allowing students to communicate their thoughts, construct logical arguments, and convey ideas persuasively. This is particularly important when writing academic papers, reports, or research proposals [14]-[17].

One academic task that requires strong writing skills is preparing a proposal for Classroom Action Research (CAR). CAR is integral to teacher education programs, allowing future educators to address and solve classroom challenges systematically. Writing an academic paper requires students to understand the research process and communicate their research problem, objectives, methodology, and potential outcomes in a clear and organized manner [14]. Despite the importance of writing, many EFL learners face significant challenges in academic writing, struggling with organization, vocabulary, and sentence structure [10].

Writing skills are fundamental in the contemporary world, serving as a powerful medium through which individuals can deliver thoughts, convey ideas, and communicate effectively. Related to language learning, writing is one of the most essential skills in teaching English as a foreign language [1], [18]. Proficient writing skills empower individuals to establish compelling narratives, persuasive arguments, and clear messages, enabling them to influence and engage their audience.

Effective writing strategies are essential in various contexts, whether in academic research, professional communication, creative writing, or other forms of written expression. Writing strategies help writer convey their thoughts clearly and precisely. The classification of ESL writing strategies is often based on the three primary phases of the writing process. The classification of writing strategies into three stages: before writing (which includes time planning, mental planning, expert model, reference, and outlining), during writing (which involves sentence and paragraph verification, outline revision, language transfer, positive grammar and vocabulary, use of a dictionary, and peer assistance), and after writing (which includes reading aloud, revision, drafting, instruction matching, collation, and self-reward) [19].

Learners had little practice writing and had problems with the types of paragraphs and essays they wrote [20]. The writing strategies and processes differ between Indonesian EFL and English L1 students [21]. Indonesian EFL students used different writing strategies and processes than English L1 students [7]. The lecturers should include writing strategy instruction in their writing lessons, particularly those methods closely associated with excellent writing performance [7]. The participants were most likely to use writing strategies during the “While Writing” stage of the writing process [22].

Based on these findings, the study suggests that a process approach to writing instruction should be used, and various activities and materials should be employed to promote strategies in both the pre-writing and revising stages. The three strategies involved in the writing process are pre-writing while writing and revising [23]. This is because the assessment of students’ educational achievement is more closely linked with their writing skills because instructors ask for reports, assignments, project papers, and other writing tasks, which can be used as evidence for the student’s understanding of the materials presented at courses [24]. Students with strong writing skills used writing strategies more often than those with weaker skills, and this was consistent across all three writing stages: before, during, and after writing [25].

This study seeks to explore the writing strategies commonly used by EFL students when preparing CAR proposals. By identifying the strategies students find most valuable, this research aims to provide insights that could help educators support students in developing practical writing skills for academic success. This study builds on previous research by focusing specifically on the writing strategies used by EFL students in preparing CAR proposals. Understanding which strategies are most frequently used and how students perceive their usefulness can provide valuable insights for educators in helping students improve their writing skills.

2. METHOD

This study employs a quantitative research design to investigate the writing strategies used by EFL students in composing Classroom Action Research (CAR) proposals. The research design consists of a survey method, using a structured questionnaire to collect data on students' writing strategies and the frequency of their use of these strategies.

Research Design

The study adopts a one-shot survey design, collecting data from participants at a single point in time. This method is appropriate for exploring the students' writing strategies in a specific context—writing CAR proposals—allowing for a comprehensive analysis of their approaches to pre-writing, while-writing, and revising phases. Using a quantitative survey enables the researcher to describe trends, attitudes, and behaviors among EFL students [26].

Participants

The participants of this study are undergraduate students enrolled in the English Language Education Study Program at Universitas Palangka Raya. These students have taken the Classroom Action Research (CAR) course during the 2023/2024 academic year. A total of 48 students who have experience writing CAR proposals were selected as the sample using purposive sampling. This sampling method was chosen to ensure all participants have relevant experience with the research task under investigation.

Data Collection Instrument

A structured questionnaire was employed as the primary data collection tool. The questionnaire was adapted and widely used in studies on writing strategies [19]. It consists of 40 questions focused on writing strategies. These 40 items are divided into three categories: Pre-writing strategies (8 items), While-writing strategies (16 items), and Revising strategies (16 items). The participants responded to each item using a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 to 5, with 1 indicating "Never or almost never true," suggesting that the respondent rarely experiences or agrees with the statement. A rating of 2 represents "Rarely or usually not true," indicating infrequent agreement or occurrence. A score of 3 signifies "Sometimes," reflecting a moderate level of agreement or experience. Meanwhile, a 4 denotes "Often or usually true," showing frequent agreement or occurrence, and a 5 represents "Always or almost always true," indicating a strong, consistent alignment with the statement. This scale allows for quantitative analysis of the frequency of different writing strategies.

Data Collection Procedure

The questionnaire was piloted on a small group of students (outside the sample group) to ensure clarity and reliability. After revisions based on the pilot test, the questionnaire was administered to the participants during class sessions. Students were given clear instructions on how to complete the questionnaire. The data responses were collected and coded systematically for analysis.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, focusing on the mean scores for each category of writing strategies—pre-writing, while-writing, and revising. The statistical analysis was performed using SPSS 25 software to compute the frequency of strategy use and the perceived usefulness of each strategy. The mean, median, and mode were calculated to determine the most commonly used strategy and their perceived effectiveness.

Additionally, the analysis categorized responses into high, medium, and low usage based on Oxford's Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) interpretation scale. This helped provide a clearer picture of which strategies students relied on most and which they found less effective.

Validity and Reliability

The questionnaire's reliability was confirmed using Cronbach's Alpha, ensuring the internal consistency of the items. A Cronbach Alpha value of 0.932 for the frequency of strategy use indicated a high level of reliability, demonstrating that the questionnaire was a reliable tool for measuring the intended constructs. The content validity was established through expert judgment from lecturers in the English Language Education Study Program at Universitas Palangka Raya.

3. FINDINGS

The study examined the writing strategies used by EFL students in writing Classroom Action Research (CAR) proposals, focusing on the frequency of strategy use across the pre-writing, while-writing, and revising stages, as well as the perceived usefulness of these strategies. The data from the questionnaire revealed that students employed different strategies at varying frequencies across the three stages of writing:

Table 1. Frequency of Writing Strategy Use Stages

Stages	Mean	N
Pre-Writing Strategy	3.576	48
While-Writing Strategy	3.925	48
Revising Strategy	3.622	48

Based on Table 1, the average score for the frequency of the pre-writing strategy stage is 3.576, for the frequency of the while-writing strategy stage is 3.925, and for the frequency of the revising strategy stage is 3.622. These scores, which range from approximately 3.5 to 3.9, indicate that these strategies are categorized as high-frequency level based on Oxford's scale.

Table 2. The Results of Using Pre-Writing Strategy

Number Item	Statements	Mean Score
1	I make a timetable for the writing process to create an outline for my proposal.	3.313
2	Before I start writing I read the requirements of the course objectives and comprehend the topic for my proposal.	4.208
3	I look at more examples of proposal framework model written by a native speaker or more proficient writer.	4.292
4	I start writing my proposal outline without having a written plan.	2.563
5	I think about what I want to write and have a plan in my mind, but couldn't write it down on my proposal outline.	3.771
6	I note down the key words and short notes related to the topic of my proposal outline.	3.813
7	I write my proposal outline in English directly.	3.146
8	I write my proposal outline in Indonesian directly.	3.500
Total	3.576	

Students showed a moderate use of pre-writing strategies, with an overall mean score of 3.576. The most frequently used strategy was reviewing examples of proposal frameworks written by native speakers or more proficient writers (mean score of 4.292). This suggests that students found it helpful to reference model proposals as they planned their own writing. However, the strategy of starting to write without a written plan had a lower mean score of 2.563, indicating that students preferred planning before drafting their proposals.

Table 3. The Results of Using While-Writing Strategy

Number Item	Statements	Mean Score
9	I start with the introduction for my proposal.	4.396
10	I identify the research problems or knowledge gaps as a preliminary to writing my proposal.	4.021
11	I look at for previous research results when writing my proposal.	4.354
12	I stop after each sentence to read it again.	3.208
13	I stop after a few sentences or paragraphs covering one idea.	3.896
14	I reread what I have written on my proposal outline to get ideas how to continue my proposal.	4.313
15	I go back to my proposal outline and make changes in it.	3.750
16	I write bits of the text in Indonesian and then translate them into English.	4.000
17	I am confident with the grammar and vocabulary.	3.208
18	I simplify what I want to write if I don't know how to express my thoughts in English.	4.125
19	If I don't know a word in English, I write it in Indonesian and translate it in English.	4.438
20	If I don't know a word in English, I stop writing and look up the word in the dictionary or machine translation.	4.313
21	I use a dictionary.	2.833
22	I use machine translation.	4.250
23	I ask my friend to help out when I have problems while writing my proposal.	3.917
24	I ask my lecturer to help out when I have problems while writing my proposal.	3.771
Total	3.924	

The while-writing stage saw the highest engagement, with a mean score of 3.924. The most frequently used strategy was writing unknown words in Indonesian and translating them into English (mean score of 4.438), highlighting the students' reliance on their first language to overcome vocabulary challenges. In contrast, using a dictionary was the least employed strategy, with a mean score of 2.833, suggesting that students preferred machine translation or peer assistance over dictionary consultation.

Table 4. The Results of Using Revising Strategy

Number Item	Statements	Mean Score
25	I only read what I have written when I have finished the whole proposal.	3.583
26	When I have written my proposal, I hand it in without reading it carefully.	1.833
27	I use a dictionary when revising my proposal.	2.750
28	I use machine translation when revising my proposal.	4.375
29	I make changes in chapter of introduction.	3.542
30	I make changes in chapter of literature review.	3.313
31	I make changes in chapter of research methodology.	3.625
32	I go back to my proposal to edit and change the grammar, vocabulary, spelling and punctuation.	4.333

33	I check if my proposal matches the requirements of the course objectives.	4.604
34	I leave my proposal aside for a couple of days and then I can see it in a new perspective.	3.458
35	I like to discuss my proposal with other students when I have finished.	3.979
36	I like to discuss my proposal with my lecturer when I have finished.	3.125
37	I show my proposal to somebody and ask for his/her opinion.	3.646
38	I compare my proposal with the other proposal written by my friend on the same topic.	3.625
39	I give myself a reward after completing my proposal.	3.542
40	I check my mistakes after I get back my proposal with feedbacks from the lecturer, and try to learn from them.	4.625
Total		3.622

The revising stage had a moderate level of engagement, with a mean score of 3.622. The most commonly used strategy was checking mistakes after receiving feedback from the lecturer, with a mean score of 4.625, indicating that students valued feedback as an essential part of their revision process. However, handing in a proposal without reading it carefully had a deficient mean score of 1.833, showing that most students understood the importance of thorough revision.

4. DISCUSSION

The current study results on writing strategies among undergraduate students in the English Education program at the University of Palangka Raya indicate a high level across all stages of the writing process. Students reported high-frequency use of writing strategies, with mean scores in pre-writing (3.576), while-writing (3.925), and revising (3.622) strategies. These scores indicate that students actively employ these strategies while writing proposals.

The results of this current study align with and expand on various findings. The freshman students primarily used writing strategies at a medium level, with a strong focus on the while-writing strategy, followed by pre-writing and revising [22]. While this aligns with the current study's finding that while writing strategies are commonly employed, the undergraduate students exhibited higher levels of engagement across all stages, suggesting that more advanced students may develop a more balanced use of writing strategies as they progress through their studies. In all three stages of writing (before, during, and after), high achievers used strategies more often than low achievers. Therefore, high achievers are more active in using writing strategies than those with weaker writing skills [27].

The prevalence of while-writing strategies has been noted in multiple previous studies. While-writing strategies were the most frequently used by students. This supports the current study's observation that students heavily rely on strategies during the writing process itself [28], [29], [30]. Learners primarily used writing strategies, such as drawing on their experiences and knowledge in writing, along with checking spelling and grammar. These strategies fall under cognitive and metacognitive writing strategies [31].

The correlation between writing strategies and achievement emphasizes that while-writing strategies were the most commonly used by Chinese non-English majors [28]. This pattern is consistent with the current study's findings, suggesting that while-writing strategies may significantly influence students' writing performance across different contexts and educational systems. The moderate use of writing strategies observed in other studies contrasts with the higher engagement reported in the current study. ESL students used writing strategies moderately, focusing more on while writing and less frequent revision strategies [24]. Lower secondary students in Malaysia employed writing strategies at a moderate level, with the while-writing stage being the most frequently used [5], [32]-[34]. In contrast,

the students in the current study showed higher overall engagement, possibly due to their advanced educational level and exposure to writing instruction at the university level.

The undergraduate students tended to favor pre-writing strategies, particularly planning. This is consistent with the high mean score for pre-writing strategies observed in the current study [23]. With the need for increased awareness of writing strategies, students in the present study demonstrated high engagement in all stages of writing, indicating that they possess a well-rounded understanding and application of various strategies. The secondary students often have a mental plan before writing and seek assistance when encountering vocabulary challenges, which also resonates with the current study's focus on pre-writing strategies [35], [36]. The use of planning strategies before writing was a prominent feature among undergraduate students, further indicating that planning is a critical element of the writing process for students at different educational levels. However, it's worth noting that low-proficiency groups in both schools most often used planning, help-seeking, and effective management strategies [37], [38], [39]. Effectively using writing strategies is essential for achieving good writing results. This research shows that writing strategy distinguishes students with solid and weak writing skills [25]. Therefore, regularly using writing strategies can improve the quality of writing outcomes.

In conclusion, the current study's results emphasize the importance of a comprehensive approach to writing strategies, with students in the English Education program at the University of Palangka Raya exhibiting high engagement in pre-writing, while-writing, and revising strategies. These findings align with previous research that highlights the critical role of while-writing strategies but also extend the discussion by demonstrating that students at the undergraduate level are actively employing a full range of strategies across all stages of the writing process. This holistic engagement contrasts with the moderate use of strategies observed in some earlier studies and suggests that higher education plays a crucial role in developing students' effective writing strategies. The findings from this study encourage writing teachers to guide students in using writing strategies that can significantly benefit their skills [21], [40]. Previous research on teaching writing to EFL students suggests that explicitly taught strategies improve the quality of their writing.

5. CONCLUSION

This study investigated the writing strategies used by EFL students when composing Classroom Action Research (CAR) proposals, focusing on the frequency of strategy use and the perceived usefulness of those strategies across three stages: pre-writing, while-writing, and revising. The findings reveal that students actively engage in writing strategies, with the highest frequency of use observed in the while-writing stage, particularly in translation and referring to previous research. The pre-writing and revising stages also showed moderate levels of engagement, with students relying on planning techniques and feedback from lecturers. Students moderately employed pre-writing strategies, with a preference for reviewing examples of well-written proposals to guide their writing. While mental planning was common, formal outlining was less frequently used, indicating a need for more structured planning techniques. Translation from Indonesian to English was the most commonly used strategy during writing. This suggests that students heavily rely on their first language to overcome vocabulary limitations. Machine translation also played a significant role in assisting students with language challenges. These findings indicate the need for expanded vocabulary instruction to reduce reliance on translation tools. Revising was primarily driven by feedback from lecturers, with students placing high value on correcting mistakes based on external input. Although self-editing strategies were used, they were less emphasized, indicating that students may benefit from further instruction in independent revision skills. The study demonstrates that students benefit from explicit writing strategies, particularly in translation and feedback. However, to improve their writing, students need further support in developing independent revision and self-editing skills and expanding their academic vocabulary.

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