

Earnest Practices in Writing Processes¹

Prácticas Sensatas en el Proceso de Escritura

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Abstract

This article describes a study exploring the effects of instruction in learning strategies on students' writing. The study specifically examines the use of brainstorming and categorizing using graphic organizers, as well as reviewing strategies. This study took place in an English program for children and teens in a bi-national center in South America. As the implementation was carried out, students completed three surveys and two questionnaires before and after implementing the writing strategies. Data collected also included students' written pieces of work, as well as results of pre- and post-tests designed for the project. Results show that students improved text organization, and that their texts were clearer when using the learning strategies of brainstorming, categorizing and reviewing. The data also indicate that students on the whole perceived the strategies to be useful in their writing processes. These findings suggest that final written products can be improved if teachers train students with tools to enhance writing skills.

Keywords: writing skills, learning strategies, Task-Based Learning, writing process, Cognitive Academic Language Learning Approach.

Resumen

Este artículo describe un estudio exploratorio de los efectos de la instrucción de las estrategias de aprendizaje en el proceso de escritura de los estudiantes. El estudio examina específicamente el uso de las estrategias lluvia de ideas y organizadores gráficos, así como la revisión de las estrategias. Este estudio tuvo lugar con un programa de inglés para niños y adolescentes en un centro binacional en América del Sur. En la implementación del proyecto, los participantes diligenciaron tres encuestas y dos cuestionarios antes y después de implementar las estrategias de escritura. Los datos recogidos también

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incluyeron trabajos escritos de los estudiantes como lo resultados de las pruebas preliminares y posteriores diseñadas para el proyecto. Los resultados muestran que los estudiantes mejoraron la organización sus textos y la claridad en la expresión de ideas usando las estrategias de aprendizaje: lluvia de ideas, clasificación y análisis. Los datos también indican que los estudiantes en general consideran útiles estas estrategias en su proceso de escritura. Los hallazgos sugieren que la versión final de los escritos puede ser mejorada si los profesores entrenan a sus alumnos en el uso de estrategias de aprendizaje para desarrollar sus habilidades de escritura.

Palabras clave: Habilidades de escritura, estrategias de aprendizaje, aprendizaje basado en tarea, proceso de escritura, adquisición cognitivo del lenguaje académico

Resumo

Este artigo descreve um estudo exploratório dos efeitos da instrução das estratégias de aprendizagem no processo de escritura dos estudantes. O estudo examina especificamente o uso das estratégias chuva de ideias e organizadores gráficos, bem como a revisão das estratégias. Este estudo teve lugar com um programa de inglês para crianças e adolescentes em um centro binacional na América do Sul. Na implantação do projeto, os participantes preencheram três pesquisas de opinião e dois questionários antes e depois de implantar as estratégias de escritura. Os dados coletados também incluíram trabalhos escritos dos estudantes, como os resultados das provas preliminares e posteriores desenhadas para o projeto. Os resultados mostram que os estudantes melhoraram a organização de seus textos e a clareza na expressão de ideias, usando as estratégias de aprendizagem: chuva de ideias, classificação e análise. Os dados também indicam que os estudantes, em geral, consideram úteis estas estratégias em seu processo de escritura. As descobertas sugerem que a versão final dos escritos pode ser melhorada se os professores treinam seus alunos no uso de estratégias de aprendizagem para desenvolver suas habilidades de escritura.

Palavras chave: Habilidades de escritura, estratégias de aprendizagem, aprendizagem baseada em tarefa, processo de escritura, aquisição cognitiva da linguagem acadêmica

Introduction

Writing is one of the most advanced actions that a human being can carry out as it conveys more than one mental process. Still, many people have trouble when expressing their ideas using pencil and paper. Students often assume that writing is a very difficult task. In fact, as a practice it does require complex preparation and progression. According to *El Tiempo* newspaper, the *Instituto Nacional para la Evaluación de la Educación (ICFES)*³, reports the following test results for written communication of university graduates: only 2% of the students obtained satisfactory results, with 4% acceptable, and 67.4% with scores of deficient (Redacción Vida de Hoy, 2012).

The main concern of this action research project was to tackle the problem of writing difficulties with effective practices. The project describes the how learning strategies were used to aid the writing process of nineteen 11-14 year-old students using Flower and Hayes's cognitive model of writing and the Task-Based Learning Framework (as cited in Willis, 1996). This project was carried out in a Saturday English program for children and teenagers in a large, bi-national center in Colombia. The innovation attempted to supply writers with appropriate strategies to make the writing process simple. It also provided continuous self-monitoring as well as specific language targets to achieve. The study focused on the following research questions:

1. *How does the implementation of learning strategies help students in their writing process?*
2. *Which learning strategies can be implemented in the writing process?*

Literature Review

Writing

When writing, we join both sides of our brains, bringing logic and originality onto paper. Conveying empirical and theoretical knowledge, we assume a posture towards the written piece we are working on (Hancock, 2009). As defined by Tichy (1998), writing is the procedure by which people are capable of expressing their ideas in an appropriate manner making use of symbols or a written system. Thus, one can just say that writing is a bipartite activity which embraces the systematic

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convention of symbols, grammar, and organization; the construction of concepts throughout experiences and prior knowledge.

The free expression of ideas can help learners find their own voice and discover themselves as communicators. Through writing, students can achieve cognitive clearness needed to articulate thoughts, as well as the ability to relate different topics into one single assertion. As such, writing is an action which requires a developmental method with steps to be completed. (Hancock, 2009). According to Rohman (as cited in Hyland, 2009), good writing is the combination of words, which allows a writer the integrity to dominate the subject.

The Writing Process. Writers put into practice many different processes to achieve their goals. Thus, they need an expandable range of performance to help in planning, drafting, and reviewing their work (Langer & Applebee, 1983). First, we generate ideas of the topic we are going to write about. For the organization of these primary ideas we generate, we usually convey prior comprehension of the topic itself, experiences surrounding it, and relevant information about it (Langer & Applebee, 1983).

According to Flower and Hayes (as cited in Hyland, 2009), writing is a cognitive process, and we must bear key aspects in mind when training writers. The first aspect to consider is the fact that the act of writing must be carried out within an established context, which is directly influenced by the writer's memory, specifically long-term memory. Writers use their previous knowledge and adapt it to the rhetorical problem in order to plan what they want to say. From here, the writer continues discovering its components and finds solutions to finally start writing (Hyland, 2009). Identifying the parts of the topic and framing the theme within an environment to carefully explore its parts is just the first step of writing. This is referred to as the planning stage. Planning may be the longest step during the process of writing before translating ideas into written words. Yet, it can be said that writing, reviewing, revising, and evaluating take place all together.

Learning Strategies

Learning is a process that conveys many different matters: dynamism, motivation, and the generation of connections between neurons to relate, retain, organize, and select information (Chamot & O'Malley, 1994). Strategies help to achieve tasks in a structured and consequential way. By using strategies, every learner is able to

create mental pathways that require their brains to fetch information connecting new ideas to pre-existing notions or concepts (Anderson & Barnhardt, as cited in Echavarria, 2008).

Learners are able to operate different learning strategies resolving different problems once they have been trained (Chamot & O'Malley, 1994). In addition, learners must know what the strategy is for, how to use it, when to use it, and the reason why they are employing that strategy; covering all declarative, procedural, and conditional knowledge for students (Lipson & Wilson, as cited in Echavarria, 2008). Researchers explain that for the acquisition of these strategies, students must be conscious and aware to systematize the use of the strategy. Further, they stress that it takes more than one task or lesson to internalize the strategy (Chamot & O'Malley, 1994). Learning strategies for writing can be divided into the following stages: planning, translating, and reviewing.

Planning. In the planning stage, students activate prior ideas and express new thoughts through listing, ordering, and sorting (Hyland, 2009). This is done using one's long-term memory. Planning involves identifying a topic to be treated, contextualizing it, and finally using of all its parts. Wati (2011) explored how to improve students' writing abilities through the use of a pre-writing strategy. One of the objectives was to address the lack of ideas to start writing. The author describes how planning activities are connected to idea generation and structuring. By using this strategy, students' success was improved by a rise in scores of 23% according an established set of rubrics (Wati, 2011). This study confirms the importance of planning in the process of writing and its success when using strategies.

Langer and Applebee (1983) state that ideas are more important than mechanics when writing. They suggest different strategies to address the problem of generating and organizing thoughts by developing young writers' abilities, and supplying specific tasks and an ample collection of practices. Their study found that writers improved their organization of ideas by using strategies. Results confirm that writers also need constant advice to succeed. This helps demonstrate that using strategies to generate and organize ideas is fundamental in the writing process (Langer & Applebee, 1983). This research reveals that writers not only need to be familiar with the topic they will deal with, but they also need to constantly be provided with learning strategies to approach the first step in the writing process without difficulties.

Translating. During this stage writers must put all the ideas they previously generated in a paper to communicate. Translating proposes the notion of transforming ideas into words; it involves writers in coping with all language requirements such as structure, grammar, and spelling. In one study, thirty-four teachers of twenty different universities in Japan reported that almost all rhetorical difficulties were caused because writers did not know how to develop sentences or paragraphs (Izzo, 1999). This caused misunderstanding of the central message. Results of the study showed that mistakes were significant when communicating in a written way. Students did not write in English continuously, nor were they connected to the activity. This study provides evidence about what kinds of problems students can have when they do not have chances to translate or correct their work.

In Asser & Poom-Valickis (2002), writing is a mean of learning. The purpose of this study was to motivate students to be writers by supplying the right tools to complete the stages of the writing process. The problem was that students did not know when they were making mistakes. In this case, drafting, analyzing, categorizing and providing constant feedback helped students in this second stage of the process. As a result, students were able to improve their writing skills through instruction, reflection, and making them constant observers of their own work. These two studies demonstrate that during the translation stage students need to be conscious about what they are doing. In addition, they need time and constant feedback to develop their writing skills.

Reviewing. In this stage, writers evaluate and revise their work. This practice takes place simultaneously along with translating. It is suggested that writers be completely conscious about their progress and if necessary go back and revise ideas. Kowaleski, Murphy, and Starns (2002) describe how to improve elementary school students' writing skills through instruction on pre-writing, writing, and writing revision in a ten week program. Students were asked to follow a rubric with six features to evaluate, including idea generation, organization, word choice, sentence fluency, voice, and grammar. After using the rubric and being instructed, 95% of the students were above the expected level, showing more self-awareness and using more learning strategies to address the process. Researchers conclude that through strategies writers were aware of their strenghts, weaknesses, and needs.

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During a preparatory English course delivered for students who did not pass the entrance exam for universities in Florida, Greenberg (1997) identified that one of the problems why those students could not achieve acceptable results was because they did not have effective writing skills. The main purpose of the project was to develop

vocabulary, topic selection, drafting, and revision by utilizing visual stimulus. In addition, the author implemented strategies such as peer correction, proofreading, workshops, and cooperative grouping to constantly revise students' work.

Research Design

Context and Participants

The setting for this project was a Saturday English program for children and teens in a large, bi-national center in South America. Children attend two-hour English classes every Saturday for 16 weeks per semester course. The program's methodology includes two instructional approaches: Task-Based Learning and the Cognitive Academic Language Learning Approach. In terms of the approach to writing in the program, it coincides with the cognitive writing model of Flower and Hayes (as cited in Willis, 1994) as it includes steps such as giving feedback and stating objectives. Students in the English program are evaluated according to their oral and written abilities covering four aspects: 1) content, 2) vocabulary and spelling, 3) text organization, and 4) grammar. Teachers are asked to evaluate these elements according to language knowledge and also the intellectual development of each student.

Participants were nineteen children between the ages of 11-14 in an intermediate level in the program. According to their age and cognitive development, they were able to write descriptive, narrative and argumentative texts.

Pedagogical Intervention

Several strategies were chosen to implement with students in order to facilitate the different stages of the writing process.

Planning. In the planning stage, the first strategy introduced was grouping. Students needed to organize some information according to their common knowledge. Two other planning strategies, brainstorming and outlining were also implemented. Outlining was introduced with the intention of helping learners categorize and organize their ideas. The use of visual organizers, specifically graphic organizers, was an important part of the instruction to the planning strategies.

Translating. The What-Why-How writing strategy (Peha, 2003) was considered useful to help students write their sentences in a more

complete and organized way. The use of connectors to organize written work was also presented. In this case, students identified connectors as organizers for their paragraphs. Categorizing sentences was also a strategy to facilitate students' discovery of the importance of organizing their sentences within the paragraph.

Reviewing. Reading aloud was a reviewing strategy implemented with students in order for them to appraise their work at any time before reproducing a final version. Using checklists during last stage of the writing process was another strategy implemented in order to focus students' attention on problems to address in their writing.

Data Collection Instruments

Data collection instruments provided evidence of the usefulness of the strategies for students during the different stages of the writing process. Three instruments were chosen to complete the data collection: (1) artifacts, (2) Likert scale questionnaires and (3) surveys.

Artifacts

For each strategy implemented, artifacts of students' work were collected. To keep track on how strategies improve students organization, pre- and post-tests designed for the project were also kept in order to demonstrate how learning strategies made a difference or not in the students' overall writing abilities.

Table 1. Artifacts collected

Lesson	Strategy implemented	Artifact kept	Focus
1	Grouping	Graphic organizer	Recycle LS
2	Brainstorming	List	Introduce LS
3	Brainstorming	Graphic organizer	Practice LS
4	Brainstorming	Graphic organizer	Practice LS in groups
5	Outlining	Graphic organizer+ Written piece	Pre post-test on LS
6	Brainstorming+ Outlining	Graphic organizer+ Written report	Introduce LS
7	Monitoring production + self and peer correction	Written report + checklist	Pre post-test on LS
8	Monitoring production	Graphic organizer + written piece	Pre post-test on LS
9	Outlining + Monitoring production	Graphic organizer + Written piece	Pre post- test on topic + practice LS
10	Monitoring production	Graphic organizer + written piece	Practice LS
11	Brainstorming +Outlining+ Monitoring production	Graphic organizer + written piece	Practice LSs
12	Self and peer correction	Written report + checklist	Practice LS

Likert Scale Surveys

The first Likert survey (See Appendix A) was undertaken to estimate writers' motivation and beliefs about writing. The questionnaire contained five statements: 1) *Writing is something you like to do*, 2) *Writing is something easy to do*, 3) *You are a good writer*, 4) *It is important to plan before writing*, and 5) *Starting to write is easy*. These phrases aimed at clarifying what students' perceptions were as writers and how they saw the process. This was important so that motivational issues could be identified. Another purpose of the survey was to identify how familiar students were with the generation and organization of ideas.

The second Likert scale survey was taken from Brown (2002). This survey had the purpose of finding out whether students were individual learners, and contains questions about common activities to consolidate knowledge. The third Likert scale survey (See Appendix B) was carried out at the close of the study and asked students if they considered the different strategies applied during the semester helpful or not. The seven strategies used in order to improve students writing process were listed in the survey and students responded to each.

Questionnaires

The questionnaires provided more subjective and detailed information from participants. The questionnaires undertaken sought to uncover writers' developmental perceptions and their opinions about the implementation of the process. The first questionnaire was designed to identify whether students commonly used graphic organizers. The questionnaire included only two items in order to find out about students' knowledge of these tools. Questions included:

- 1) *Do you know what a graphic organizer is? If so, how do you use graphic organizers?*
- 2) *Do you think graphic organizers are helpful? Why?*

The second questionnaire was undertaken after the implementation of all strategies. Its purpose was to find out what students' perceptions were regarding learning strategies. Questions included:

- 1) *What do you think about learning strategies?*
- 2) *Do you think learning strategies helped you in your writing process?*
- 3) *Do you think your writing skills improved this semester?*
- 4) *Mark the most useful strategy used during the whole semester? Why?*

Data Analysis and Interpretation

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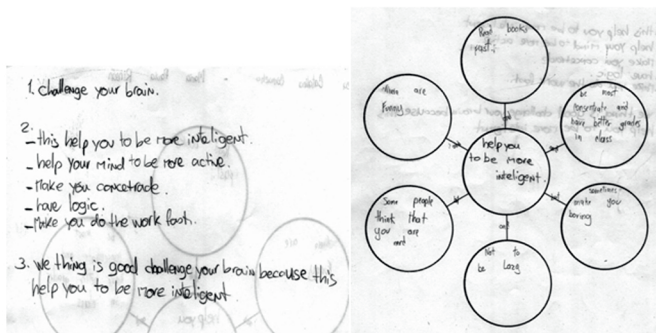
Instruction in learning strategies was carried out alongside writing tasks. Data analysis took into account how students worked and performed, paying attention to any improvement in the three stages of the writing process: planning, translating, and reviewing.

Artifacts

Planning. Planning strategies taught included listing and using the graphic organizer in order to brainstorm ideas. In one activity, students were asked to follow three steps in order to brainstorm. First, students addressed a problem or issue. Second, they were asked to write down five different ideas about that problem or topic. Finally, they defined their criteria about the issue.

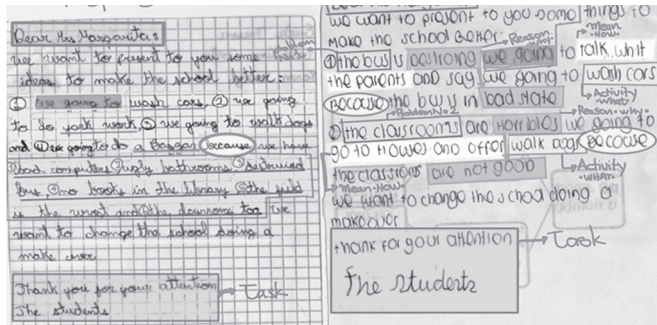
Using graphic organizers demonstrated that students were able to coordinate their ideas better. They were asked to complete the three steps listing first without and then with the graphic. The graphic organizer compelled students to fill in all the spaces and complete the three steps for brainstorming. They wrote their criteria inside the middle bubble and their ideas inside the surrounding bubbles.

Figure 1. Graphic organizers for planning



In order to implement the outlining strategy, students were asked to complete task in which they wrote a letter to their school principal about necessary repairs to the school. The teacher showed pictures of a school badly in need of repair, and students wrote a letter describing the activities they proposed to raise money and the improvements necessary. They wrote the first letter just having in mind the recent pictures shown and no other support. Then, they completed the task with the graphic organizer. Learners were asked to address two problems and propose what to do to raise money, how they were going to do it and the reason why.

Figure 2. Letter to the school principal



The “before” sample shows that children wrote the first letter including the main idea, a list of activities to get the money, and they mention almost all the needed repairs in the school. The “after” samples demonstrate that students used the outlining strategy grouping the problem, the activity, the means, and the reason. The second letter demonstrates that the paragraph can be clearer in terms of communication and intention.

Translating. One example of the What-Why-How strategy was an activity in which students were asked to talk about scary situations using simple past and past continuous. They were introduced to different scenarios and a model of how to use a four box graphic organizer. Then, they had to complete the four boxes describing their situations answering information questions.

Figure 3. Four-box organizer



Students constructed their sentences keeping in mind the questions. This strategy was completed several times with students with similar positive results in their written products and writing process.

Reviewing. The reading aloud strategy was implemented to help students correct mistakes regarding agreement, word order and spelling. Students were asked to first read their written reports silently to examine mistakes. Some questions regarding spelling and vocabulary arose while doing the activity. Then, they worked in pairs and exchanged papers to read their partners' papers aloud. After listening to each other's work, the teacher delivered to each student a blue marker to start correcting mistakes to help their partners.

Students also employed a checklist (See Appendix C) to peer correct their written pieces during the first workshop. Instruction on how to use the checklist was delivered providing examples, and students peer corrected in two different stages with two separate groups of classmates. Students exchanged reports and went over all the bullets in the checklist. They were given a blue marker to act as proofreaders and correct any mistakes according to the checklist.

Likert Surveys

Results of the surveys indicate that students do not think they have problems when writing, but that they believe that planning is an important step. Results also show that roughly half of the students often used learning strategies even if they did not acknowledge that activity as a strategy. Twenty-one percent of the students reported that they always practiced these different activities, and twenty-six percent reported employing them sometimes. These results indicate that students know what strategies are, and that they use them when writing.

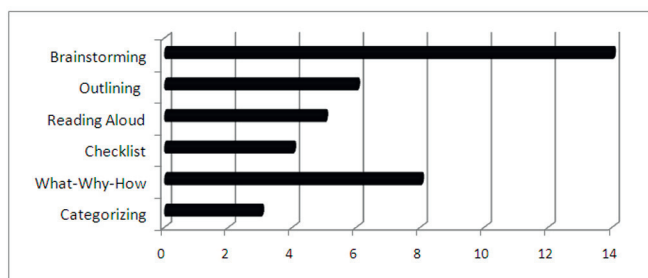
Questionnaires

Results of the questionnaires indicate that students knew what graphic organizers were at the outset of the study, and some of the students knew their purpose and / or reported using them for pre-writing. Nevertheless, most of the students did not use them when writing. Further, roughly half of the students considered graphic organizers a helpful aid to organize their ideas before writing. After the intervention, students generally agreed that learning strategies are useful. Some students affirmed that they could organize their ideas better

and correct their mistakes using learning strategies. Many students also reported that they considered learning strategies very important for writing, specifically to help them in the generation, organization, and categorization of their ideas. Students also reported the usefulness of the strategies in their school English classes, and remarked on the difference they perceived with the previous semester, admitting that they had had organizational problems with their ideas, sentences and paragraphs.

In terms of students' perceptions as to the usefulness of specific strategies, the most popular learning strategy was brainstorming. They mentioned that this strategy helped them organize their ideas and categorize them for a better writing outcome. The second most popular strategy was the What-Why-How sentence organizer. Students felt that their sentences were more complete and that organization was easier. Learners also chose outlining and as one of the most helpful strategies saying that the categorization of ideas was easier. Finally, participants acknowledged that reading aloud was helpful when revising their work alone.

Table 2. Student perceptions about usefulness of learning strategies



Results

Results of the data analysis may allow us to draw several important conclusions, especially in reference to students' use and perception of learning strategies. In general, most students felt that the strategies were helpful for the writing process, particularly in the data collected after working with the strategies in class. Learners were able to name particular strategies and describe their usefulness. In some cases, it appears that students used learning strategies for other skills and in other settings, for example in their English classes at school.

Further, it is possible to see changes in students' work using the strategies in the artifacts collected. There is evidence of organization and planning, as well as revision work using the strategies covered in class. Students' texts appear to be more structured, and it is clear that students were also able to learn how to implement the strategies on their own. There is also evidence of transfer of the strategies to independent work or other learning contexts, such as English classes at school.

In terms of possible subsequent actions based on the results of this study, the following can be proposed: (a) continue to implement and explore learning strategies more to improve writing skills; (b) provide more specific written feedback for students in their written reports to help them with the generation, organization and categorization of ideas; and (c) provide specific feedback on grammar, sentence and paragraph structure, spelling mistakes, punctuation and use of connectors.

Conclusion

The instruction on learning strategies in this project demonstrated that students can successfully complete their written tasks following the principals stated by Flower & Hayes's theory (in Hyland, 2009). This fact, linked to the literature reviewed, clearly supports the utilization of strategies to first tackle the lack of ideas through systematically generating and structuring thoughts (Wati, 2011). Flower and Hayes (in Hyland, 2009) insist that writers must be aware of the techniques to fulfill writing tasks throughout the three stages: planning, translating and reviewing. Writers should also be helped to recognize mistakes and correct errors. Making writers constant observers of their work can help them to enhance their writing and face problems such as structure of sentences, spelling, or paragraph ordering (Asser & Poom-Valickis, 2002).

This study helps us understand how writing challenges can be solved by delivering students the appropriate tools: brainstorming, outlining, categorizing, rubrics, peer correction, proofreading, and training. These tools supply learners with options to help them accomplish the stipulated goals, benefitting students in their writing process.

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Appendix A. Likert Survey 1

Institución Universitaria Colombo Americana

Scale Questionnaire Number 1

The purpose of this questionnaire is to estimate students' perceptions towards writing as an activity and its process.

STUDENT SURVEY					
Mark with an X your opinion about the sentences according to the following scale: SA: strongly agree A: agree U: undecided D: disagree SD: strongly disagree					
Writing is something you like to do	SA	A	U	D	SD
Writing is something easy to do	SA	A	U	D	SD
You are a good writer	SA	A	U	D	SD
Is important to plan what you are going to write before starting	SA	A	U	D	SD
Starting to write is easy	SA	A	U	D	SD

Appendix B. Likert Survey 3

Institución Universitaria Colombo Americana

Scale Survey Number 2

The purpose of this survey is to know how students perceive learning strategies implemented during this semester

STUDENT SURVEY						
Mark with an X your opinion about the sentences according to the following scale: SA: strongly agree A: agree U: undecided D: disagree SD: strongly disagree						
1	Brainstorming is a helpful learning strategy to do before writing.	SA	A	U	D	SD
2	Outlining is helpful to categorize and organize your ideas.	SA	A	U	D	SD
3	Using checklists to review your written work is useful.	SA	A	U	D	SD
4	Reading aloud is positive because you can discover errors.	SA	A	U	D	SD
5	Using connectors make your written work clearer.	SA	A	U	D	SD
6	Using What-How-Why sentence organizer was good for being more specific.	SA	A	U	D	SD
7	Categorizing sentences is helpful to organize your paragraph.	SA	A	U	D	SD

Appendix C. Reviewing checklist

Revising	CHECKLIST			
Adding	• Expand <i>Try to be clear about explaining your ideas using samples.</i>			
	• word-count <i>Check if your paragraphs are balanced</i>			
	• go back to your prewriting (brainstorming and outlining) <i>Look if it is necessary to change some ideas</i>			
	• Look for ideas you didn't use. <i>Ask your partner for some advice and get some recommendations.</i>			
Rearranging	• reorder <i>Organize your ideas according to the categories in your outline</i>			
	• you used the same word too many times <i>Use different words like synonyms and connectors</i>			
	• Are your sentences easy to understand <i>Are you clear enough? Put in order your ideas to explain what you want to say</i>			
Removing	• Check if your ideas work out <i>Look if your sentences are explaining your ideas.</i>			
	• take out unnecessary words <i>Erase words you do not need.</i>			
Replacing	• more details <i>Add more details to your paper.</i>			
	• Use stronger examples <i>Check if your examples are really connected to your topic.</i>			
	• quotations to support your argument <i>Look if there is any information from magazines or newspapers that could work for your paper.</i>			
Rewriting	• Are your sentences grammatically correct <i>Check for grammar mistakes</i>			
	• you used punctuation marks correctly <i>Correct punctuation.</i>			
	• spelling <i>Check spelling mistakes.</i>			

Adapted from the website Daily Writing Tips. <http://www.dailywritingtips.com/the-writing-process/>