EFL STUDENTS' METACOGNITIVE LEARNING STRATEGIES IN ESSAY WRITING

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Abstract: This study focused on the metacognitive learning strategies of EFL students related to their activities in writing an essay. This study aimed to know to what extent EFL students used metacognitive learning strategies and how they used them in writing essays. The data were collected using questionnaires and interviews. Fifty students from English Education Department filled in the questionnaire and nine students were taken to participate in the interview. All of the participants had taken Essay Writing from the previous semester. After analysing the questionnaires, the findings indicated that in using metacognitive learning strategies most students used planning (4.08), monitoring (4.06), and evaluating (4.14) in writing their essays. Thus, it can be categorized into good criteria. From the interview, it revealed that most students used planning activities such as doing reading preparation after deciding the topic, generating ideas, and making an outline to organize their ideas. In monitoring, it was found that the students commonly monitored the development of their ideas during writing and checking their writing regarding to the content, organization, and language used during the process of their writing. For evaluating, the students used self-evaluation, peer review, and feedback from the lecturer to evaluate their essays. Finally, the study revealed that the students commonly implemented metacognitive learning strategies in their essay writing.

Keywords: Essay Writing, Evaluating, Metacognitive, Monitoring Learning Strategies, Planning

INTRODUCTION

Writing is a skill that students should achieve as they learn English as a Foreign Language (EFL). It is now commonly acknowledged that writing is essential for both information transmission and knowledge transformation, leading to the creation of new knowledge (Weigle, 2002). However, writing at university and school is different. Writing at university considered as a level of writing where the students' literacy is demonstrated through clear, precise, and grammatical prose that the ideas are well delivered using appropriate structures and critical thinking (Henderson, 2015). Hyland in Syahriani & Madya (2020) stated the purpose of writing is to possible students in generating an English written text accurately and appropriately. Despite the need to acquire writing skills, numerous studies have shown throughout the years that mastering writing is a challenging, intricate task that involves strict practices and explicit learning (Aliyu, Fung, Abdullah, & Hoon; Al-Hazmi & Scholfield in Al-Jarrah et al., 2018). Thus, academic writing has always been a challenge for EFL students. Furthermore, Essay Writing is a writing course series in academic writing that should be mastered by them. In fact, writing an essay can be challenging for students. Kusumawardani (2018) mentioned an English essay is not easy to write since students as the writer need to be rich in knowledge and information. She also added that there are basic principles to be concerned such as language features and the essay structures. Therefore, essay writing is complicated and students may face difficulties in the writing process.

Studies on learning strategies in students' writing process had been conducted by researchers. Mu (2005) classified ESL writing strategies namely rhetorical strategies, metacognitive strategies, cognitive strategies, communicative strategies, and social/affective strategies. Among these strategies, several studies showed metacognitive strategies impact positively on students' writing. The study by Al-Jarrah, Mansor, & Rashid (2018) found a positive effect on the implementation of metacognitive strategies and students' writing performance. Another study indicated teaching students argumentative writing in English was effective by using metacognitive learning strategies (Oktoma et al., 2020). So, metacognitive strategies are useful for students' writing.

Furthermore, the study by Al Moqbali et al. (2020) investigated the extent of different types of metacognitive writing strategies used by students, explored the relationship between students' use of these strategies to their language performance, and examined the gender differences in the use of these strategies. It showed students used planning, monitoring, and evaluating at high frequencies. There is no significant relationship between the use of the strategies to students' language performance. It also revealed that the strategies were applied more by female to male students. The next study by Monteclaro & Karwad (2022) showed the EFL students' perception of writing in English and the metacognitive strategies used by proficient and less proficient students. The study revealed students perceive writing as challenging, yet a significant skill to develop. It also revealed the proficient and less proficient students used similar metacognitive strategies in writing.

Both studies discussed about metacognitive strategies in students' writing. The first study used grade twelve school students as participants while the current study used university students. The second study also used university students as participants but the writing task discussed was a paragraph writing which was different from this study. The current study used students' essay writing to be discussed. It is important to conduct this study because there is still little study on metacognitive learning strategies with this type of writing task specially to explore during the process. Whereas, as what stated before, essay writing is difficult. There are processes needed to write it. Then, the use of appropriate metacognitive learning strategies such as planning, monitoring, and evaluating is needed to help students in the process of writing. Thus, this study is about EFL students' metacognitive learning strategies in essay writing. The researcher intended to know to what extent EFL students used metacognitive learning strategies related to their planning, monitoring, and evaluating activities and how they used them in essay writing. The participants of this study are English Education Department students at University of Muhammadiyah Prof. Dr. HAMKA. Since the result of this study showed how the students applied metacognitive learning strategies through the process of essay writing, the researcher hopes this study can increase teachers' understanding on the students' writing process to help them by giving the best approach in teaching essay writing, lead the students to the use of metacognitive learning strategies in writing essays, and lead to the use of learning tools to make the teacher involved in monitoring students' writing.

METHOD
As mentioned in the introduction, this study aimed to know to what extent EFL students used metacognitive learning strategies and how they used them in writing essays. To achieve these, a qualitative method was used in this study. Creswell (2014 p.10) stated "qualitative research is an inquiry approach useful for exploring and understanding a central phenomenon". Then, the

researcher used purposeful sampling to determine the participants. Lodico, Spaulding and Voegtle in Yuliani & Fadhly (2020) mentioned purposeful sampling as the selection of individuals who have key knowledge or information pertaining to the study's objective. Thus, English Department students from University of Muhammadiyah Prof. Dr. HAMKA were purposively selected as participants for this study. They were in sixth semester and had taken Essay Writing I and II classes in the previous semester. Questionnaires and a list of interview questions were used as instruments. The existed questionnaire was adapted from Xiao (2016) and Fitrianti & Susanti (2021) containing 17 questions divided into three classifications of metacognitive learning strategies namely planning (items 1 to 6), monitoring (items 7 to 12), and evaluating (items 13 to 17). The interview questions were made to explore how the students used these strategies in their essay writing process. The interview questions covered the questions about how the students plan, monitor, and evaluate their essays.

To collect the data, fifty EFL students were given the questionnaires. They filled in the questionnaires using a Likert scale of 1 to 5 ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) for each statement. Furthermore, nine students were taken in the interview to collect the data on how they used metacognitive learning strategies in essay writing process. The data from the questionnaires was calculated and analysed to get the mean scores on three classifications of metacognitive learning strategies (planning, monitoring, and evaluating). After the mean scores were known, the results being interpreted based on the table below suggested by Sugiyono (2013) as cited in Raharja (2017).

$$\text{Interval Level Value} \quad = \quad \frac{\text{Max Score – Min Score}}{\text{Total Score of the Statement}}$$

$$\text{Scale Width} \quad = \quad \frac{5-1}{5} = 0{,}8$$

a. Minimum Index : 1
b. Maximum Index : 5
c. Interval   : 5 – 1   = 4
d. Interval Distance : (5-1) : 5   = 0,8

Table 1. Scale Category

Scale	Category
1,00 – 1,80	Not very good
1,81 – 2,60	Not good
2,61 – 3,40	Less good
3,41 – 4,20	Good
4,21 – 5,00	Very Good

As for the qualitative data, the interview was transcribed first. Then, the transcribed data was analyzed using steps to analyse the qualitative data based on Miles and Huberman's theory (1994). These steps are data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing or verification.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The Result of Questionnaire

The researcher calculated and analyzed the data to get the mean scores of each classification of metacognitive learning strategies. It can be known that every student used metacognitive learning strategies in writing their essays. The table below showed the mean and percentage of metacognitive learning strategies used by students.

Table 2: Mean scores of metacognitive learning strategies used in essay writing

No	Classification	Mean	Percentage
1	Planning	4.08	33%
2	Monitoring	4.06	33%
3	Evaluating	4.14	34%
Total		**12.28**	**100%**

The findings indicated that students' planning, monitoring, and evaluating activities can be categorized into good criteria. Based on the data, the most component used in essay writing is evaluating which is 4.14, followed by planning 4.08, and the least is monitoring 4.06. However, the differences between the mean scores of these classifications are not very high which is 4.14, 4.08, and 4.06.

The Results of Interview

Planning is the beginning stage before the student start engaged in writing. During this stage, several plans were engaged by EFL students before writing the essay. All students described their typical writing preparation including reading of relevant materials after deciding the topic, generating ideas, and making an outline to organize their ideas. These are the examples of the students' responses from the question concerning the steps they do before writing an essay:

> *I determine the topic that relates to the problem I want to review, then the second I make an outline, the third thing I do is looking for references, which can support the contents of my essay so that my essay is richer with many sources. (Student 2, Male)*

> *The first thing I do is usually finding a topic. Because determining the topic is also rather time-consuming and it is also difficult to determine which topics are suitable for academic writing which is not difficult to write too. (Student 6, Female)*

From the students' answers, it can be said that the students decided the topic and doing reading preparation by looking for the references related to the topic. However, student 6 had difficulty in determining the topic that are suitable for academic writing.

The next question is dealing with how students generate ideas to include in their writing before writing an essay. A student stated that to develop ideas, she starts from one topic. Then, if she knows something about the topic, she develops it from there. If she is really stuck, she does not know what to discuss, she finds out some from references on Google or on articles (Student 4, Female). Another student mentioned,

I often get ideas by reading a lot of other examples or from my own experience. I must have mastered that thing. I do not want to write about things that are abstracts. Also, if I do not know the topic or the topic is determined by the lecturer, I take ideas from the internet. I can collaborate and add it with my own ideas. (Student 5, Male)

Based on the students' answers, they retrieved their prior knowledge about the topic, looked for references to get new insights, and collaborated their ideas from the internet. Furthermore, student 5 mentioned he chose the topic based on his experience and avoided things that are abstracts.

Then, the following extracts of students' interviews show their responses for the question concerning how they organize their ideas:

I make an outline and I design the thesis statement. Then, I make a draft to try to write from the introduction, what to discuss in the body paragraphs, and the concluding. (Student 3, Female)

Before writing, it is easier if we have made an outline. So, the writing will not be messy. So, if I find an idea, I can know where to write it, in which part. (Student 8, Female)

I usually reflect on the ideas based on personal experiences or use techniques like brainstorming. That is to generate ideas so that other ideas can emerge to be added to the main idea. I write it randomly. I also prefer to write it directly on a book so that if "Oh this is wrong", it can be crossed out by hand. I can immediately write down the thoughts that arise from looking at the previous ideas. (Student 6, Female)

It can be seen that the students made an outline by putting the ideas based on the structure of essay writing starting from the introduction, body paragraphs, until the conclusion. Meanwhile, student 6 stated she did not mind about putting her ideas in order, she also eliminated and added the ideas that were more relevant to what she wanted to write randomly.

In monitoring, the finding revealed all students monitor their writing process carefully. They rechecked and reorganized the ideas while writing essay. It can be seen from the following students' responses on how they monitor their writing while writing an essay:

I usually adjust my plan. If I feel the development or between one thing and another is not right to be put together, I usually look for other ideas that are more suitable or discard one of them. At least from the ideas that I have prepared, I sort them out, or adjust them again while writing. Next, if I read something from someone and think the point is really important, I usually write it down. It is because we have learned that if we want to convey something or strengthen our opinion, it has to be from an expert and we have to include their name. So, I put it in. (Student 5, Male)

I add or delete the ideas and I modify it again. If there is something I want to add or there are ideas that come up again for additions, I add it. If there is something that I think seems too much, I delete it. I also use some expert quotes, but not many. For example, the general statement in the introduction, I might strengthen it using expert quotes. Like what I have said earlier, "Global Warming", what is the impact of that in my opinion, then I will strengthen it with expert quotes. I do not use it for the conclusion. (Student 7, Female)

It can be drawn that students used the plan or outline they had made during planning and modified their ideas to be further generated. This study showed that students maintained the ideas to make it relevant to what they intended to write and used experts' opinion to strengthen it.

As for the question concerning what things students monitor while writing your essay, the answers are as follows:

Monitoring is important in the middle of making an essay so that our essay stays on track and the point to be discussed does not widen. What the center of attention of the essay problem is what I try to explore so that the essay can describe the issue of the problem that want to be discussed. (Student 2, Male)

If I want to move from the introduction to the body and conclusion, and so on, I monitor first to check whether the previous writing is connected between the introduction and the body, whether the idea that was previously in the introduction and the body will deviate or not. So, I will check first and if I think it is already right, then I dare to move on to the next writing. (Student 6, Female)

As can be seen above, most students monitored to see if their writing had linked well one to another, to keep their writing on track following the topic discussion, and to check their writing before moving on to the next stage of writing. Additionally, student 2 stated that monitoring the writing is crucial.

Furthermore, the following extracts of students' interviews show their responses to the question whether they check their language used while writing an essay:

I do not really prioritize grammar while writing. Because the point is, the idea that I want to discuss, what is in my head, I first pour it into writing. (Student 1, Male)

I pay attention to grammar at the end. So, I usually use the Grammarly app. (Student 4, Female)

If there is a grammatical error, I will fix it. (Student 7, Female)

The sentence structure and vocab too because sometimes the vocab is difficult to understand or feels less connected. (Student 9, Female)

It showed that while writing some students focused on the language used and some students did not. Furthermore, student 1 preferred to focus on the ideas and student 4 mentioned that she can use an application "Grammarly" at the end of writing. In contrast, students 7 tried correcting grammar mistakes that occur while writing and student 9 paid attention to the sentence structure also the vocabulary used.

The next question is highlighted whether students find problems or difficulties during monitoring their writing and what kinds of problems they faced. A student stated that the problem he usually encountered is how to attach his opinion in the supporting points and how to link the issue. Another problem is how to make point 1 to point 2 bridging logically (Student 2, Male). Other responses are as follows:

> *The difficulty when making an essay is the sequence. I have to make a sequence from beginning to end that is really connected. I am afraid it is not connected enough or the topic will stray from the discussion. (Student 3, Female)*

> *The most difficult part of the writing process for me is usually the development of ideas if the topic is quite difficult. My ideas development is not enough so that there are not many paragraphs or discussion in my writing. (Student 4, Female)*

> *I find the word that is less efficient, convoluted, or mixed up. Then, I also find that there are a lot of "and" or "or" or other words which are a waste of words so that the writing is not optimal. Lastly, between one sentence and another sentence does not fit or connect. What is being discussed at the beginning, after the period, the next discussion is different when it is supposed to be strengthened. (Student 5, Male)*

It can be concluded that the incoherency among ideas they display was the problem, it was hard to connect the ideas to make it logical and not to go far from the topic discussed. Moreover, student 4 had difficulty in developing the ideas if the topic is difficult so that her paragraphs did not have much discussion. Furthermore, student 5 stated that he used conjunction repetitively.

As for the responses on the question concerning how students solve the problems, they face during writing are as follows:

> *I reread it again and try to understand what I have written. I go back to remember that the topic must be from general to specific. So, I double-check again and understand more about what I have written whether I think it is right or not, whether it is off the discussion or not. (Student 3, Female)*

> *I just look for similar topics or ones that are not really the same, I look at people's references. From there I usually immediately find the idea. Then, I can put it into my writing. (Student 4, Female)*

> *I automatically go blank. So, I ask for advice or help from my friends or the lecturer who teaches the course. (Student 6, Female)*

It can be seen that the students reread what they had written to get better comprehension of their own writings, tried to look for ideas by reading from references that has similar or same topic with them, and also sought help from their lecturer and friends.

Regarding to the evaluating activities, this study revealed that students used various ways to evaluate the essay. As has been discussed in the literature that in evaluating the product is reread and reconsidered to know whether changes are needed, the study revealed that students did revision at the end of their writing after the evaluation has been done. These are the examples of the students' responses on the question concerning how they evaluate their essays:

> *The first thing is from myself. We usually also form a group or sometimes the lecturer even tells us to communicate with each other. I also ask my friends to evaluate my essay. Sometimes, it is also collected by the lecturer, and then the lecturer will assess what is lacking. (Student 5, Male)*

> *When I took the essay writing class, we usually divide a group into pairs. Later we review each other's essay. Then after rechecking it, it will be given back to the lecturer to be rechecked. (Student 6, Female)*

> *I got feedback. We submit it, then lecturer was like "Oh this is not right. Where is the thesis statement?" and it turns out that the thesis statement is placed in the wrong paragraph. It is usually told to be changed or later if what I wrote needs evidence, then the lecturer will tell me. So, it was revised. (Student 8, Female)*

It can be concluded that the students used self-evaluation, peer review, and feedback from their lecturer to evaluate the essay. It was found that some of the lecturers used peer-review as strategies used to make the students evaluate their friends' essays before the essay finally being submitted to them. Furthermore, the lecturers gave evaluation through feedback by pointing out the mistakes made on students' writing.

With regards to the revisions students usually made in their essays, a student stated that the revision he makes is usually sentences after dots or paragraphs. A new sentence usually has a capital letter or usually begins with subject, verb, object and adverbs. He usually missed something to make it become a correct sentence; there is a missing part, there is a waste of words, and there are parts that should not be in that section, then it can be moved to another section. (Student 5, Male). Other responses to the question can be seen as follows:

> *Yes, if there is something missing, it has been reviewed by lecturers and friends, I definitely rework it again, revise what I think is missing. Sometimes it is also possible that the idea does not fit so that I change the idea again. (Student 6, Female)*

> *Yes, I often do revisions. Grammar, the structure of the essay, the general or thesis statement, and also whether it is still connected to the topic or not. (Student 7, Female)*

> *The concrete evidence, it must be from people's research. For example, if I am here talking about "Infectious cough", then I have to find research that proves that coughing is infectious and write it in my writing. For grammar… I used application… Grammarly. (Student 8, Female)*

It can be drawn that students revised the essay regarding to the relation of the content to the topic, the elimination and addition of ideas to improve their writing, the changes of ideas, and the grammar. Furthermore, student 5 also paid attention to the structure of the sentence, punctuation, capitalization, and the organization of the sentences.

This study revealed that the use of metacognitive learning strategies in essay writing by EFL students were categorized into good criteria. It also revealed that evaluating activities were found as the most used, followed by planning, and then monitoring. These findings were opposite with the study of Arnawa (2022) where the study reported that the most strategies used among these three types were monitoring, followed by planning, and evaluation. Furthermore, these were linked with the interview data where all the students showed how they did plan, monitor, and evaluate their essay writing.

The interview findings related to students' planning revealed several similarities and contrasts with other studies. The study by Nugrahani (2021) shared similar finding where all the students determined the topic and read some source materials before developing the outline. In generating ideas, the students' statements aligned with the statement by Flower and Hayes in Xiao (2016) who identified generating ideas as one of three types of planning strategies based on the focus goal which includes retrieving information from long-term memory, updating earlier concepts to reflect new knowledge, drawing conclusions, connecting ideas, and searching for examples, contradictions, and objections. The study by Aliyu & Fung (2020), Al-Jarrah et al. (2018), and Aripin & Rahmat (2019) indicated the same finding which in planning, the students recall their prior knowledge to identify and decide regarding the main points to include in their writing. The ideas generated then being organized by making an outline. The study by Nugrahani (2021), Raoofi et al. (2014), Fitrianti & Susanti (2021), and Monteclaro & Karwad (2022) shared similar finding with this study as the students organized or plan their ideas before started writing by making an outline. However, this study showed contrast with other studies in terms of students' planning. The study by Al Moqbali et al. (2020) revealed that the students mostly think about the grammar, structures, and words they need to use in the task during planning. The study by Monteclaro & Karwad (2022) also showed that in planning, students focus on vocabulary, spelling, and grammar while in this study none of the participants concerned this kind of things. Furthermore, the study by Al Moqbali et al. (2020) found one student considered the readers in the planning stage *"I make sure the ideas are clear to the reader"* which the students in this study did not think about this during their planning.

In monitoring, the students kept track to the development of their ideas. The study by Xiao (2016) shared similar finding with this study where the students in monitoring their writing focused on developing the ideas that had planned at first and consciously monitored the development of the ideas to avoid deviating from them. Students in this study were found included experts' quotations as same as a student in the study by Nugrahani (2021) who mentioned that she included experts' opinion in the body paragraphs of her essay to support the thesis statements. During writing, it was found that students monitor the coherency and connection of the ideas in their writing the most. This is aligned with a study by Fitrianti & Susanti (2021) where it revealed that

the most strategy applied by students in monitoring was *"I try to think about how to connect each paragraph of my essay"*. The students in this study considered checking their writing during the process is crucial. It is supported by a study who also showed that while writing there was 87,5% students trusted that checking their writing is very crucial (Al Moqbali et al., 2020). Furthermore, this study revealed the students maintained the content of their essay to not go far from the topic discussion. The study by Nugrahani (2021) indicated that all students reread their essays to make sure the goals they set were achieved and the contents of their essay were related to the topics. However, the finding of this study was both agree and disagree with the statement of Cresswell (2000) who stated annotations made by self-monitoring students were primarily concerned with spelling or grammar rules. Some students were found focused on the grammar while some students did not prioritize it during the writing process.

Additionally, the students' problems and how they solved them during writing showed similarities with other studies. The study by Aliyu & Fung (2020) revealed the students had an idea but they did not know how to present it in their writing shared similar statement with a student from this study where he did not know how to attach his opinion in his writing. Students in the study by Nugrahani (2021) also showed similar problem related to the incoherency in students' writing. To overcome the problems, a student from the study by Monteclaro & Karwad (2022) stated that *"I usually pause and check my work by reading it"* showed the same statement with the students in this study. Additionally, the study by Nugrahani (2021) also revealed that the students searched and read more relevant sources as the solution for their problem also shared the same finding with this study. There were also found students sought help from their lecturer and friends. It is aligned with the statement by Charles in Xiao (2016) who claims that self-monitoring encourages students to place themselves in readers position and look at their writing critically and analytically. Finally, studies by Ningrum (2018) and Monteclaro & Karwad (2022) also shared the same finding where the students overcome their problem by seeking help from their teacher and friends.

Lastly, in evaluating, Nugrahani (2021) mentioned that other people or readers are needed as assistance for a writer in evaluating stage. This study shared same findings with other studies where the students evaluated their essay using self-evaluation, peer review, and teacher's feedback. The finding is also in line with the study by Nugrahani (2021) where the students got feedback from their lecturer as well as input from their friends. Additionally, the students did revision after doing evaluation regarding content, organization, and language used in their essays. A student also collected extra information such as concrete proofs from researchers to strengthen her point in their revision in line with the study by Aripin & Rahmat (2019) where the students took action to collect extra information. In addition, this study shared similar findings with the study by Al-Jarrah et al. (2018) where the students revised the sentence formation and paragraphs arrangement in their writing. Furthermore, the study by Aliyu & Fung (2020) revealed the same finding where the students rewrote the paragraph of their writing.

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings and discussion, some conclusions can be drawn from this study in which students used metacognitive learning strategies in their essay writing. This study revealed students' use of planning (4.08), monitoring (4.06), and evaluating (4.14), which can be categorized into good criteria. Furthermore, it revealed that most students used planning activities such as doing reading preparation after deciding the topic, generating ideas, and making an outline to organize

the ideas. In monitoring, it was found that the students commonly monitor the development of the ideas and check their writing regarding the content, organization, and language used during the writing process. For evaluating, the students used self-evaluation, peer review, and feedback from the lecturer to evaluate their essays. The evaluations were done in the areas of the content, organization, and language used in their essays. Lastly, it was found that the evaluating activities lead to the use of revisions by students to improve their essay writing.

Even though the present study revealed that the students used metacognitive learning strategies in writing an essay, the need of increasing students' awareness to use these strategies are still needed. The help from teacher to lead them to the use of these strategies in essay writing may be helpful. It is to help the students make proper planning, monitor the writing process and notice the problems they may face as well as correct them, and also to give proper evaluation through feedback to help students improve the quality of their writing. The use of tools to make the teacher involved in the process of students' writing may be useful for the students' process of essay writing and the implementation of these strategies.

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