An action research on the development of self-regulated writing strategies of Turkish EFL students

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Abstract

Writing is one of the most difficult tasks with multiple challenges for students learning a foreign language. An important element in helping students develop their writing ability is the identification of the problems they face while writing and the use of pedagogical interventions which raise their awareness and help them use their own learning strategies to handle. Zimmerman and Riesemberg (1997) suggest that higher levels of self-regulation are important to skilled writing because composing is an intentional activity that is quite often self-planned and self-sustained. This study aims to explore the effectiveness of strategy instruction on foreign language learners' writing skills and self-regulation abilities through an action research perspective. The data were collected via learners' diaries, reflections, essays, questionnaires and checklists. The project was carried out in a classroom of 18 students within three cycles of action for three weeks, each cycle evolving on the previous one. In the first two cycles, students were given self-regulation strategy instruction and modelling, then assigned writing tasks. Their strategy use was investigated through a questionnaire, diaries and reflections. In the third cycle, students' errors and difficulties were the focus and their opinions were taken via reflection paragraphs. The results showed that strategy training could help students improve their writing skills but further instruction and feedback were needed as they used a small number of strategies and only a slight improvement was seen in their writings.

1. Introduction

1.1. The problem

Writing, an active and productive skill, is seen as one of the most arduous task with multiple challenges for students learning to write in a foreign language. It is a complex activity that requires a certain level of linguistics knowledge, strategic skills, vocabulary and grammar. For years, an enormous amount of research has been conducted to search for interesting and practical methods to enhance student writing, but an action research study carried out at Cukurova University (YADİM) (Yavuz &

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Genç, 1998), students are likely to continue to have negative attitudes towards writing towards writing no matter what methods are used. They are usually afraid of making errors and they lack self-efficacy in writing. An essential element in helping students develop their writing ability and increase their motivation is the identification of the problems they face in their writing and the use of pedagogical interventions which raise their awareness and learning strategy use. However, these are not enough. As approved by a number of research, self-regulation skills are crucial to write well. Zimmerman, Bonner and Kovarch (1996) claimed that "many students who have knowledge of a learning strategy will not continue to use it unless their knowledge leads to appropriate goal setting, accurate strategic process and outcome self-monitoring and greater self-efficacy" (p. 10).

There are a number of different definitions and models of self-regulated learning strategies (SRL), but a general working definition is provided by Wolters, Pintrich, & Karabenick (2003) which is "an active, constructive process whereby learners set goals for their learning and then attempt to monitor, regulate and control their cognition, motivation and behavior, guided and constrained by their goals and the contextual features in the environment". In short, students who are metacognitively, motivationally and behaviorally active participants of their own learning process can be ascribed as self-regulated learners. They can understand the strategies and environments necessary for their learning, and feel capable of performing to their personal standards. Most of the research on learning strategies focused on cognitive and metacognitive strategies. However, in social cognitive theory of academic self-regulation, students regulate their motivational, affective, social processes as well as cognitive aspects (Zimmerman, 1986).

Instruction in writing strategies and verbal self-guidance has been proved to be effective on the enhancement of self-efficacy perceptions and improvement of writing skills in terms of schematic structure and quality of compositions. In their study, Nguyen and Gu (2013) found that strategy-based instruction in the form of training learnings in task-specific metacognitive self-regulation improved both learners' autonomy in learning and their writing ability. Therefore, the present study sought to clarify how self-regulatory mechanisms through which instruction in strategies for essay writing fosters writing skills. Zimmerman and Martinez-Pons (1986) found the evidence of 10 self-regulated learning strategies which are highly correlated with the academic achievements of students which will be the basis of the current action research project.

1.2. Review of Literature

Drawn upon sociocognitive and sociocultural approaches, definition of self-regulation in second language acquisition context is taken from Wang, Quach and Rolston (2009) as "a person's continuous adjustment of the use of language-learning strategies to achieve the self-set goals through interactions with their peers and adults across social and cultural contexts". Research indicates that there are several

factors on the choices and frequencies of self-regulated language learning strategies including cultural context, classroom environment, home environment, teaching methods, and other individual factors like age, gender, intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, self-efficacy beliefs (Huang & Chang, 1998; Nyikos & Oxford, 1993; Zimmerman, Bandura, & Martinez-Pons, 1992).

Studies also suggest that academic achievements are highly correlated with SRL strategies, so teaching students how to use these strategies effectively has a significant impact on students' performances and self-efficacy beliefs which in turn helps them become more self-regulated and autonomous. (Paris & Paris, 2001; Travers & Sheckley, 2000; Wang, Quach & Rolston, 2009; Wood, Bandura & Bailey, 1990). A great deal of literature reports pedagogical interventions and effective instructional strategies to promote self-regulation for students including direct instruction and modeling, monitoring and feedback, reflection and guidance. (Boekaerts & Corno, 2005; Cleary & Zimmerman, 2004; Graham, Harris, & Mason, 2004; O'Malley, 1987; Pintrich, 2000; Schunk & Ertmer, 2000; Tonks & Taboada, 2011; Zimmerman & Bandura, 1994).

Although there has been a great deal of research on SRL strategies in academic context, limited research can be found on their benefits for specific language skills of English as a foreign language (EFL) learners with task-specific instruction in real classroom context. As for the particular concern of the present article, many instructional recommendations to increase the quality of EFL students' writing have included teaching writing strategies, developing motivation and modeling, and promoting active engagement and higher-order thinking (Hammann, 2005). A combination of all these recommendations for the improvement of students' writing performances brings about the umbrella term SRL which "integrates learning behaviors or strategies, motivation, and metacognition" (Hammann, 2005).

Instruction in self-regulatory strategies for writing, therefore, is highly recommended in the literature (Boekaerts & Corno, 2005; Hammann, 2005; Zimmerman, 2008; Zimmerman & Risemberg, 1997). Students who have the knowledge about SRL strategies may become well-organized, generate content, use materials like technology or library more effectively, and reflect on their own performance leading to improvement. Based on the recommendations about direct instruction of SRL strategies, this study was designed in a way to see how students benefit from task specific SRL strategy instructions to improve the quality of their writing tasks within a real language classroom setting.

1.3. Research Questions

Students of Architecture Faculty in Amasya University take a one-year English education before they start their own program. These students take a placement test at the beginning of the school year and streamed into different classes based on their levels. The situation described here is for an elementary level preparatory class with 20 students who take 26 hours of English a week.

When the students first took the placement test, most of them could hardly introduce themselves and others or talk about their families, hometowns. Their grammar and vocabulary test scores were also very low. The situation was worse for writing. Almost none of the student wrote anything for the writing tasks which were just about their lives and personal details. However, in six weeks they made a great progress as could be seen on their mid-term exam scores. In the first mid-term exam, they could make conversations with their peers, do well on the test and understand a reading passage. However, there was little or no progress on their writings. Mean scores of their writings in the mid-term exam was as low as 3.6 out of 10. The writings given as homework were also very poor in terms of structure, content and organization of ideas.

Their failure in writing tasks can be attributed to several factors. First of all, most of the students confess that they firstly write in Turkish and then try to translate it to English usually with the help of a translation website. Secondly, the four English instructors who teach different skills admit that they do not give any writing instructions or do exercises. Instead, they choose and give writing tasks from the course books as homework, then only check for mistakes in students' writings as feedback. In an attempt to help students with their writings, this action research seeks answers to the following questions:

1. Does training in self-regulation strategies lead to improved writing in English?

2. Do learners adapt and use these self-regulation strategies for new tasks?

2. Method

2.1. Procedure and Participants

This is an action research with an aim to bring about change and improvement in practice as Burns (1999, p. 30) describes. Rather than dealing with the theoretical, action research allows practitioners to address those concerns that are closest to them, ones over which they can exhibit some influence and make change. (Ferrance, 2000). Educational action research can be engaged in by a single teacher, by a group of colleagues who share an interest in a common problem, or by the entire faculty of a school. Action research projects consist of seven-step process. These seven steps, which become an endless cycle for the inquiring teacher, are the following:

- Selecting a focus
- Clarifying theories
- Identifying research questions
- Collecting data
- Analyzing data
- Reporting results
- Taking informed action

In this article, a small-scale action research project was conducted with eighteen undergraduate students who are learning English as a foreign language in an elementary level preparatory class at Amasya University during 2014-2015 school year. The project lasted for three weeks with two-hour classroom interventions each week. The primary aim of the project was to help students improve their writing skills through task-specific instruction on self-regulation strategies.

2.2. Data Analysis

Three cycles of enquiry and reflection were carried out, in which one cycle influenced the next. In these cycles of investigation, it was expected that students would be able to use writing strategies more effectively and write better-structured opinion essays with higher motivation and self-regulation skills. Data were collected through various resources such as students' task diaries, a self-regulation strategy questionnaire, organizing sheets, self-checklists, reflections and class discussions and interviews.

Table 1. Data collection procedures during the cycles of the action Research

Cycle 1	Data
The intervention: 2-hour self-regulated learning strategies instruction	Student Dairies
	Writings
	Self-evaluating questionnaire
Cycle 2	Data
The intervention: 2-hour self-regulated learning strategies instruction, writing strategies, Modelling, more interesting topics,	Self-checklist,
	Writings,
Cycle 3	Data
The intervention: 1-hour Class discussions about strategies.	Reflections

3. Results

The results of the data were analyzed and discussed within each cycle.

3.1. Cycle 1

The research started with a short class discussion in the class about how the students studied on their writing homework and how they perceived their efforts and progress and class notes were taken. Almost all of the students accepted that they used translation websites to do their homework and the main reason was that it was easier and they did not feel that they could write well enough in English. So, they first wrote in Turkish then translate it to English. However, they were fully aware of that writing via translation websites did not help them at all. This class discussion showed

they were really willing to learn to write good paragraphs in English but they did not know how.

As the first intervention, in a two-hour class time, students were trained on the steps of self-regulated learning strategies with possible examples and models and their importance was stressed. These steps are:

- Goal-setting and planning
- Seeking information
- Keeping record and monitoring
- Environmental structuring
- Organizing and transforming
- Rehearsing and memorizing
- Self-consequating
- Seeking social-assistance
- Reviewing records and revising
- Self-evaluating

After strategy-instruction, a sample opinion essay (Appendix D) was handed out and analyzed with a focus on some writing strategies as well such as brainstorming, organizing ideas with a mind map, outlining, sentence structuring and revising. The students were also given notice of L1 use illustrating the results of bad translation and how they could benefit from their native language. Then students were assigned an opinion essay writing task on various topics written on a sheet including writing steps taught and a mind map. They were grouped into four to have classroom discussions about their work. They were supposed to write their essays in four days and on the fourth day they had classroom discussion to talk about their works and reflect on each other's essays. They were also asked to write a task-diary in L1 in which they wrote about their efforts and feeling about the task and whatever they did for it. Then they submitted their essays and diaries two days after they made their final changes according to their peers' reflections.

As the main objective of the research is to see how training on self-regulation strategies will affect their writing skills, firstly we looked at the students' diaries to see if they used these strategies or not. In their diaries and post-writing reflections, there were some important points that need attention for the next step. In general,

- Students did planning and research. They tried to get help from their friends.
- They found the task very difficult and they lost their motivation. Their self-efficacy beliefs were quite low as they thought they had not enough linguistic knowledge to write these essays.
- When they had difficulty in writing English, they returned to write in Turkish and translate.
- Class discussions helped them revise their essays and see some of their mistakes.

- They complaint that they did not do any writing in the classroom and did not know how to do it.
- They wanted to write about more interesting topics.
- Writing mean scores were improved to 6,2 / 20 with a %31,3 increase.

Overall, it is clear that students tried to use some of the strategies taught. However metacognitive aspects of self-regulation like goal setting, planning and self-evaluating were not common strategies. Also, students had a really big problem with organizing and sentence structuring in English. It was upsetting that some of the students did not give up translation and submitted their translated writings without using any self-regulation strategies.
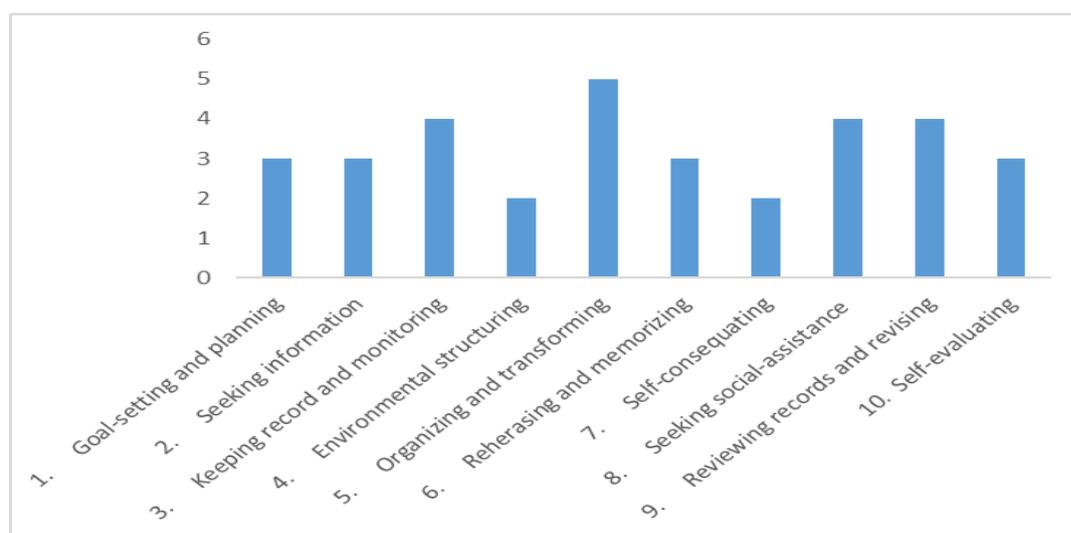

Figure 1. Self-regulated learning strategies used in Cycle 1

3.2. Cycle 2

After discovering that although students tried to use self-regulation learning strategies, they could not use these strategies effectively. So, the second cycle of the project continued with more instruction on self-regulation strategies and by taking students' demands into account, a sample essay was written on the board.

Firstly, a brainstorming activity was done about the topic by drawing a mind map. After talking about how to organize ideas, use dictionaries to choose the right word, sentence structuring and how to write without translating, a sample paragraph was written by using strategies instructed. They were more convinced that without translating they could write easy paragraphs by planning well and using these strategies. Then students were again assigned to write an opinion essay on a topic they chose among more interesting topics written on the sheet they were handed. But this time they were also asked to follow the steps on the sheet (Appendix C) and tick the strategies they used while doing the task.

As seen on the figure, more students used target strategies to complete the writing task as gathered from their checklists. What is encouraging is that the students

handed in highly improved articles in terms of organization of ideas and content as they used more self-regulation. Mean scores of wring tasks were 9,3 with a %46,9 percent increase. However, they still had problems with sentence structuring, which needs further attention.
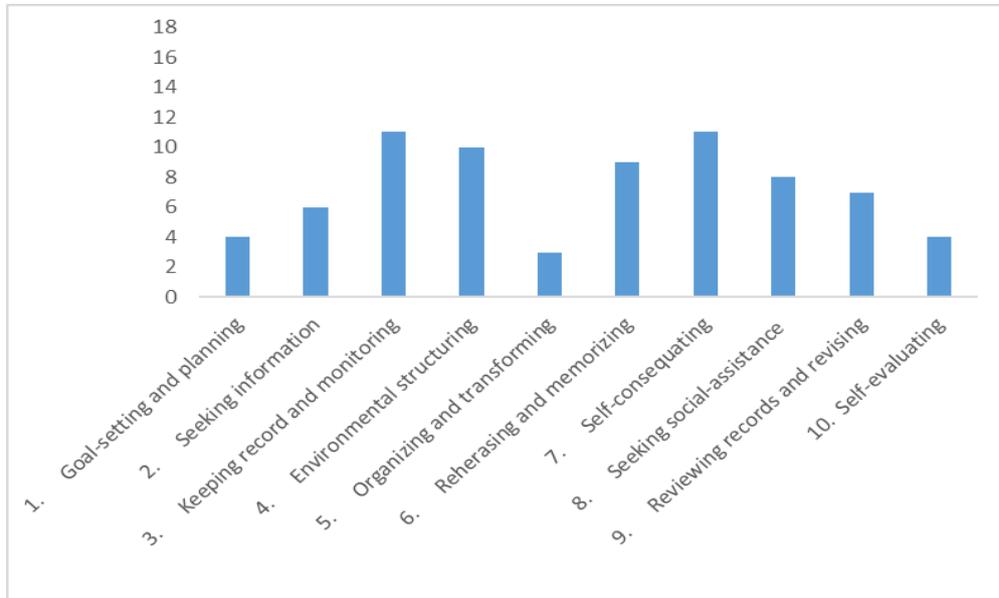

Figure 2. Self-regulated learning strategies used in Cycle 2

3.3. Cycle 3

After the first two cycles of the project, the aim of the third cycle was to see if students would use self-regulation strategies without any further instruction and guidance. Therefore, Cycle 3 started with the assignment of a new writing task. After they handed out their essays, they were asked to write a reflection on this process. Some common entries from the reflections showed that;

- Students' self-efficacy beliefs changed into that if they study well they could write really good paragraphs without Google Translate.
- They felt more motivated and autonomous.
- Writing scores were higher.
- They started to learn from their mistakes.
- Even without instruction most of the students continued to use some self-regulation strategies.
- They believed that when they did good planning, researching and checking, they wrote better paragraphs and that now they knew better how to form their opinions and turn them into writings.
- Mean scores of writing tasks were similar to the previous cycle, as 8,9.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The present study was an action research project which lasted for three weeks in three cycles. The purpose of the project was to develop self-regulation strategies of learners and therefore to gain improvement in their writing skills. In the first two cycles, students were instructed about self-regulated learning strategies and asked to use them while doing their writing tasks. In the third cycle, the focus was on the students who failed to write their essays and their opinions were taken.

As an answer to the research questions, the project yielded some positive outcomes in learners' self-regulation skills and writings, but they still needed more improvements in their writings especially in terms of sentence structuring and linguistic inefficiencies, which shows that further actions are needed but it was out of the scope of this research. While some learners who had not often exercised any self-regulation skills previously started to plan and monitor and seek help from friends for a writing task, others who were familiar with these skills improved their organizing, revising and evaluating skills. At the beginning, their self-efficacy beliefs were quite low and they did not have any motivation to try. They had believed that they were poor writers and did not have enough linguistic knowledge to write better essays. Through the SRL instructions, modeling, planning, peer support and reflections, they became more eager to use whatever they have just learnt instead of just writing in Turkish and translating online. Besides, the quality of their essays improved significantly within the course of actions. This conclusion is in line with Hammann's statement (2005) that with an effective strategy instruction, students will attribute their writing difficulties to the lack of appropriate strategy use rather than the lack of the writing ability. When they believed that they could learn to learn, they became more encouraged to try harder instead of just giving up because they did not have the "gift."

The study was limited to three weeks of intervention with a small number of participants. The only focus of the research was on writing performances and students' backgrounds, individual factors and motivational impacts which are highly related with SRL strategies (Zimmerman, Bandura, & Martinez-Pons, 1992) were not taken into considerations. Many further studies need to be carried out to understand long-term effects of SRL strategy instruction for different language skills for EFL learners. Still the findings of the research remarked some important key points. Firstly, instructors should be aware of that students' failures may be not because of their lack of knowledge but their inappropriate strategy use and helping them to be aware of their potentials would provide them with more self-efficacy beliefs and motivation, in turn higher academic achievements. In other words, instructors should incorporate writing strategy instruction in their classes by supporting self-regulation, encouraging goalsetting and scaffolding (Hammann, 2005; Wang, Quach & Rolston, 2009). Secondly, instructors need to monitor students' SRL practices regularly to help them adapt and improve these newly learnt strategies continuously for their own further studies. Finally, reflective practices of instructors focusing on difficulties

learners face while processing new language skills may be helpful to find solutions to change their own instructional techniques through such action research based on theoretical knowledge.

Overall, the results of the research indicate that with continuous instruction and feedback, learners would be able to improve their ability to self-regulate for a writing task and that increased strategy use would yield better engagement in writing, therefore as their linguistic knowledge improves, they will be better engaged in writing. However, the first emphasis should be on increasing learners' motivation and their beliefs that they can do better if they develop self-regulation skills.

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Appendix A.

Self-regulated Learning Strategies Taught (Zimmerman, 1989)

Categories/Strategies Definitions

1. Self-evaluating
Statements indicating student-initiated evaluations of the quality or progress of their work; e.g., "I check over my work to make sure I did it right."

2. Organizing and transforming
Statements indicating student-initiated overt or covert rearrangement of instructional materials to improve learning; e.g., "I make an outline before I write my paper."

3. Goal-setting and planning

Statements indicating students1 setting of educational goals or suhgoals and planning for sequencing, timing, and completing activities related to those goals; e.g., "First, I start studying two weeks before exams, and I pace myself."

4. Seeking information
Statements indicating student-initiated efforts to secure further task information from nonsocial sources when undertaking an assignment; e.g., "Before beginning to write the paper, I go to the library to get as much information as possible concerning the topic."

5. Keeping records and Monitoring
Statements indicating student-initiated efforts to record events or results; e.g., "I took notes of the class discussions"; "I kept a list of the words I got wrong."

6. Environmental structuring
Statements indicating student-initiated efforts to select or arrange the physical setting to make learning easier; e.g., "I isolate myself from anything that distracts me"; "I turned off the radio so I can concentrate on what I am doing.1*

7. Self-consequating
Statements indicating student arrangement or imagination of rewards or punishment for success or failure; e.g., uIf I do well on a test, I treat myself to a movie."

8. Rehearsing and memorizing
Statements indicating student-initiated efforts to memorize material by overt or covert practice; e.g., "In preparing for a math test, I keep writing the formula down until I remember it."

9. Seeking social assistance
Statements indicating student-initiated efforts to solicit help from peers, teachers, and adults; e.g., "If I have problems with math assignments, I ask a friend to help."
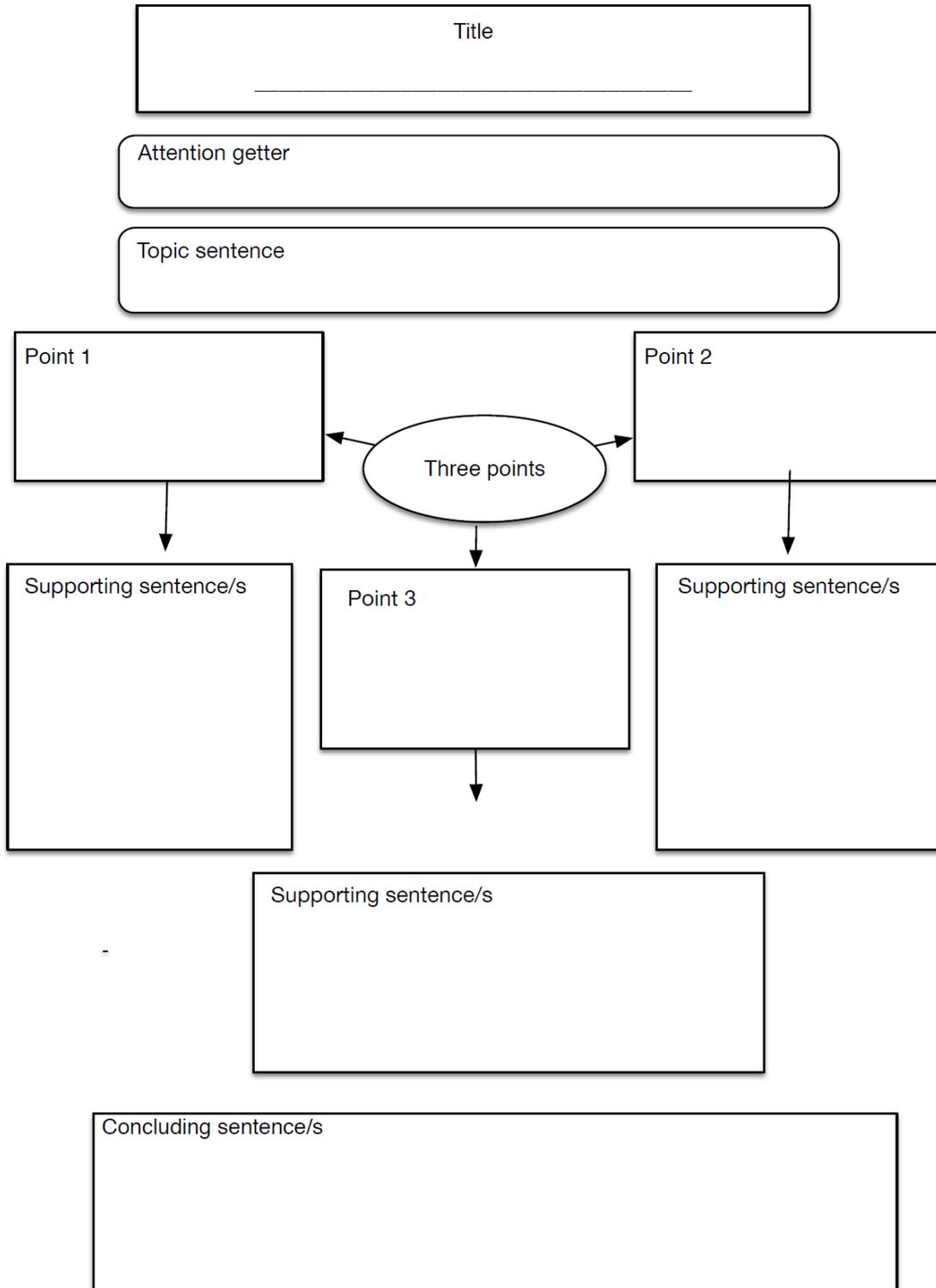
10. Reviewing records
Statements indicating student-initiated efforts to reread notes, tests, or textbooks to prepare for class or further testing; e.g., "When preparing for a test, I review my notes."

Appendix B. Paragraph Organizing Sheet (Cycle 1)

Outlining a basic paragraph   *eslflow.co*

> **Title**
>
> _____

> Attention getter

> Topic sentence

Point 1		Point 2

Three points

Supporting sentence/s	Point 3	Supporting sentence/s

Supporting sentence/s

Concluding sentence/s

Appendix C. Strategy Guidance and Checklist (Cycle 2)

Choose one of the topics below and write an essay about what you think.
Is fashion important?
Is a lottery good idea?
Is cheating a good idea?
Is smoking good?
Is going to space a good idea?

Follow these steps
1. Brainstorming / think about the topic
2. Gather information about the topic
3. Take notes and write your main idea
4. Organize your ideas and your paragraphs, make an outline
5. Write a topic sentence for each paragraph
6. Write an introduction and concluding paragraphs
7. After you finish your writing revise and check for mistakes.
8. Ask a friend to read it
9. Use an English-English dictionary to check if you use right words.

	Yes: √ No: x
1. Ödevi ilk aldığımda nasıl yapacağımı düşünmeye başladım.	
2. Konuyu tam olarak anlamak için bazı kaynaklardan araştırma yaptım.	
3. Ödevi nasıl yapacağıma dair kendime bir çalışma planı yaptım.	
4. Aklıma gelen fikirlerin bir listesini yaptım.	
5. Kaynaklardan bulduğum bilgilerin bir listesini yaptım.	
6. Nasıl ve ne konuda yazacağıma dair bir taslak hazırladım.	
7. Konuyla ilgili arkadaşlarımdan fikirler topladım.	
8. Hazırladığım taslağa göre yazımı yazdım.	
9. Ödevi hazırlarken çalışabileceğim bir ortam hazırladım.	
10. Daha rahat konsantre olabilmek için yalnız kalabileceğim bir yer buldum	
11. Notlarımı gözden geçirdim.	
12. Hazırladığım taslağa göre paragraflarımı oluşturdum.	
13. Yazarken notlarımdan faydalandım.	
14. Yazarken hatalarımı kontrol etmek için tekrar tekrar okudum.	
15. Yazıyı bitirdikten sonra kendimi ödüllendirdim.	
16. Yazıyı bitirdikten sonra arkadaşlarımla eğlenceli birşeyler yaptım.	
17. Sınıfta arkadaşlarıma sunmak için yazımı tekrar kontrol ettim.	
18. Tekrar okuyup arkadaşlarıma anlatabilmek için çalıştım.	
19. Zorlandığım cümleleri not alıp arkadaşlarımdan yardım aldım.	
20. Yazdığım yazının iyi olduğunu düşündüm.	
21. Yazdığım yazıda birçok hata olduğunu düşündüm.	