Analysis on the Application of English Writing Strategies by Chinese Independent College Students

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Abstract: Based on the previous research on writing strategies at home and abroad, this paper will mainly focus on writing strategy use and writing strategy training. The author selected 100 non-English majors from The College of Post and Telecommunication of WIT for this study. The findings of the present study affirm the value of strategy training. On the one hand, it shows strategy training is valid and feasible. On the other hand, it will benefit both language teachers and students, it not only help students become more successful to learn a foreign language but also provide teachers a meaningful way to focus on their teaching.

Key words: English learning, writing strategies, Independent College, web-based environment

1. Introduction

Writing is an indispensable part of second language acquisition. As one of the productive skills, writing can be a good reflection of students overall mastery of English language learning. The requirement of English writing ability would become one of the important criteria for qualified personnel in the 21st century. Brookes and Grundy (1998) claimed the importance of writing by arguing that while no one would deny the importance of spoken language, this is no reason to neglect equally important written mode.

According to Petric and Czarl (2003), based on Cohen's (1998) definition of learning strategies, defined writing strategies as "actions or behaviors consciously carried out by writers in order to make their writing more efficient" (Petric & Czarl, 2003). Researchers focusing on writing strategies found that successful and unsuccessful writers can be identified according to the use of writing strategies. Raimes (1987) found that ESL writers use a broad range of strategies in the process of composing, involving planning, rehearsing, rescanning, rereading the assigned topic, revising and editing. Bereiter and Scardamalisa's (1987) study showed that more experienced writers use a knowledge transforming strategy to reorganize their ideas in order to arrive at an adequate solution, and revealed that experienced writer and novice writers differ mainly in their writing strategies instead of language proficiency, Cohen (200) concluded that students' productive ability could be improved through strategy training. The students who had been trained on strategies could use the vocabulary more fluently and express themselves clearly by using limited words. The Chinese researchers on this field also have played an important part. Wu and Zhang (2000) found that the basic problem in Chinese students' English writing is lack of ideas, which the syllabus, textbooks as well as English writing classes have not paid enough attention to and the

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pre-writing activities in the process approaches of teaching writing is feasible and should be integrated into English writing classes.

Yang (2002) investigated the use of writing strategies during English writing processes, three major differences between successful and unsuccessful writers have been identified, the former plan more during both pre-drafting and drafting, the former tend to focus more on the expression of ideas and idiomatic expression while the latter pay more attention to spelling and grammar, and the former revise more than the latter and are more liable to revise at sentence and discourse level.

Liu's study (2004) suggested that high writing quality could be attributed to the combination of a large vocabulary size and English writing strategies use. There exists a limit beyond which writing strategies could exert greater influence on writing quality. The participants that had received the strategy training could employ the strategy effectively and compensated for their small vocabulary size.

Wang (2004) investigated the use of self-monitoring strategies in Chinese students' English writing. Results indicated that students can be trained to use self-monitoring in their writing and self-monitoring is an effective way for students to improve the organization of their composition. Difficulties students encounter in English writing may result from various factors such as lack of vocabulary, deficient master of grammar, influence of the native language and culture differences. Among all of them, an important factor may be lack of effectively using writing strategies. Beriter and Scardamalia (1987) revealed that experienced writers and novice writers differ mainly in their writing strategies instead of language proficiency.

2. Research Purpose and Significance

In order to improve students' writing, the author also began to explore students' writing strategies during their writing process. And difficulties students encounter in English writing may result from various factors such as lack of vocabulary, deficient master of grammar, influence of the native language and culture differences. Among all of them, an important factor may be lack of effectively using writing strategies. Beriter and Scardamalia (1987) revealed that experienced writers and novice writers differ mainly in their writing strategies instead of language proficiency.

This study tries to find out whether students in independent college employ writing strategies in writing and what strategies they might employ, and whether English training could improve student's English writing performance, what' more, what improvements they might make in their English writing through strategy training. In order to meet the needs of the study, the following research questions will be investigated in the study:

(1) Do students in independent college employ writing strategies in their English writing? If yes, what strategies are employed?

(2) Can writing strategy training improve students' English writing performance? If yes, what improvements they might take?

3. Research Methodologies

3.1 Subjects

The paper is conducted in The College of Post and Telecommunication of WIT. One teacher of English and the 100 non-English students take part in the research. Students were in the first term of their second year college study, majoring in accounts and law, for the reason they were going to take CET-4 at the end of the third term, a

lot of time and energy they used to practice writing, which could guarantee that they would show great interest in doing the questionnaire and treat it seriously. Meanwhile, with six years' English learning experience at middle school and a year and a half college study, these subjects have generally developed relatively stable learning behaviors.

3.2 Instruments

To measure the writing strategies adopted by independent college students in classroom investigated, two self-report means, namely, questionnaires, proficiency test are employed. A writing test (contains pre-test and post-test) to be conducted in class was designed to measure writing achievements. In the test, all the students are required to write a composition of about 120-150 words on a given topic. The subjects' compositions would be scored according to their content and language respectively.

The questionnaire on writing strategies used in this study is based on Petric and Czarl's (2003) writing strategy questionnaire in their published article "Validating a Writing Strategy Questionnaires". According to Petric and Czarl's suggestions, the authors made a few changes to the questionnaire. And then the questionnaire was translated into Chinese, tested in a pilot study and finally administered to collect information on language learners' writing strategies and individual background in the current study.

The final version of the questionnaire, which contains three sections, used in the current study consists of 30 items, in which, 5 items at the stage of pre-writing, 13 items at the stage of while-writing, and 12 items at the stage of revising. Among all these items, 10 for metacognitive strategies, 15 involving cognitive strategies and 5 about social strategies are scattered at the three stages of pre-writing, while-writing and revising. All the items chosen in the present questionnaire have been verified to be valid and reliable in Petric and Zcarl's (2003) study. Therefore, it might be reasonable to think that the questionnaire of the current study has sound validity and reliability.

3.3 Data Collection

For the procedures of data collection, it's important to mention that the writing test was done before the filling out of the questionnaire, since is was feared that the questionnaire could to some extent remind the students of the use of some writing strategies and influence the validity of the investigation.

Several days before filling the questionnaire, the students were requested to write a composition of about 120-150 words on a given topic.100 subjects' composition were collected. Among the 100 compositions, 10 were picked out for later on the writers didn't answer or did not answer the questionnaire properly. So there were only 90 compositions to be scored.

In terms of scoring the compositions, one common way to score in writing research is to use more than one teacher, two or more teachers. In this study, two teachers took part in grading the compositions. One is the author of present study, the other is an experienced teacher. The content and language of a composition were scored respectively, and then their mean was calculated out as the overall scores of the composition. Both the full language score and content score of a composition were set at 100. The overall composition scores are the mean of its language scores and content scores. Thus the overall scores of a composition are also 100.

Referring to the CET-4 writing assessment standards, the evaluators worked out their standards for evaluating students' writing. Besides, before the actual scoring of the students' compositions, the teachers did some training: two compositions were randomly selected from those which were collected during the writing test, and scored according to the standards that were made, and then the scores given by the two evaluators were

compared and manipulation of the standards were discussed and agreed on. The two teachers scored the compositions separately without consulting with one another.

While collecting questionnaire the subjects filled, students must be serious and honest in answering such questionnaire. In the process of distributing the questionnaire to the students, instructions should be made for how to answer that. Teacher read aloud and explained to the students at the very beginning. It took about 25 minutes to finish the questionnaire. Altogether 100 questionnaires were collected, but 10 of them were picked out 10 subjects left out some items.

The data obtained from questionnaire and tests are then put into the computer for statistical analyses with the Statistical Product and Service Solutions (SPSS Statistical Package). On the basis of these analyses, tentative interpretations, conclusions and suggestions are made.

4. Result

4.1 Writing Strategy Employed by the Students

Subjects of the present study receive writing strategy training in pre-writing activities and while-writing and post-writing activities. It could be seen from Table 1, wiring strategies during pre-writing stage, while-writing, and during revising are due used by the participants, and they are still not frequent users of many of them. The table also shows the difference among strategies employed by subjects during revising is the least, while the difference among strategies employed during while-writing is the most. The result of the statistic on the three types of stage strategies can be interpreted in this way: in the while-writing stage, the students employ writing strategies more often than in the prewriting or revising stage. This outcome could be attributed to the product approach to writing teaching, in which most of the subjects have been taught.

Table 1   The Means and Standard Deviations of the Writing Strategies

Writing stage	Mean	Standard deviation
Pre-writing	2.85	1.52
While-writing	3.05	1.41
revising	2.56	1.45

Comes to the writing strategy group, the mean score and standard deviation of strategies is shown in the following Table 2.

Table 2   Mean Score and Standard Deviation of Each Strategy Group

Strategy group	Mean	Standard deviation
Metacognitive	3.21	1.26
Cognitive	2.90	1.30
Social/affective	2.25	1.11

From the above we can see that metacognitive strategies are most employed by subjects with the highest mean score, followed by cognitive strategies, and social strategies are least employed with the lowest mean score. Besides, cognitive and social/affective strategies, whose mean scores are both below the average of the Likert scale used   in   the questionnaire, are paid great attention during writing strategy training program. Probably because of the cultural differences, social/affective strategies are used least by the students. And they draw special

attention in the strategy training program.

4.2 Writing Scores in Pre-Test and Post-test

The following table provides the analysis of the pre-test and post-test writing scores of the students before writing strategies training.

From the review on the literature of writing strategy training, we find many researchers confirm the effectiveness of strategy training. They believe writing strategy training do contribute to the gain in listeners' writing comprehension proficiency. In order to answer the question above, firstly, Independent-sample T Test was applied to analyze.

Table 3   Mean Score and Standard Deviation at Each Test Stage

Test	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Pre-test	90	3.06	1.33
Post-test	90	3.78	2.26

After the whole semester writing learning in independent college, the mean of the writing scores rose from 3.06 to 3.78 which increased 0.72 there is no significant improvement in the post-test. Secondly, pre- and post-test scores of students' were analyzed with the same method. The result is presented as follow:

Table 4   Mean Score and Standard Deviation at Each Writing Stage

Test	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Pre-test	90	3.09	1.35
Post-test	90	6.79	5.26

As it's shown in the table, there is a significant difference between pre- and post-test scores. The Mean of post-test rose from 3.09 to 6.79 which increased 3.7. We know that the only difference of the learning process between these two groups is the writing strategies training for the independent college students. That is to say, through the writing strategies training, the students' writing competency is improved significantly after the whole semester learning.

As shown in Table 4, writing strategy straining positively correlates with writing learning outcomes. Many researchers have proved the positive correlations between writing strategy and writing learning achievements. Planning (pre-writing strategies), entering (while-writing strategies) and evaluating (post-writing strategies) are three critical steps in writing learning, while, these strategies were seldom suggested by the teacher in independent college class. Though some students may find out the learning strategies and use them in their learning on their own initiative, their strategies use is neither integrated nor systematic. So, in this study, through questionnaire investigation and tests, we found writing learning outcomes significantly improved after writing strategies training. And from the results of questionnaires, we found the writing strategies training is quite helpful in students' realizing and writing strategies; secondly, students' learning autonomy and awareness of using English writing strategies need to be inspired. Furthermore, promoting writing strategy use to help improve writing performance can be a great challenge for English teachers in independent college, from the above tables it revealed that writing strategies are not frequently used, rather are moderately used when doing the English composition. In addition, more strategies are used in the writing stage than in the pre-writing stage while the revising strategies are used the least, which calls for strategy training activities among students in class. Most importantly, the strategies used in

the pre-writing stage deserve more attention. It is very essential for subjects to have brainstorm to generate ideas and plan by making a well-organized outline before they actually get start. What's more, the students should be taught more revising strategies to help improve their quality of writing.

In short, it is really necessary to conduct English writing strategy aiming to improve students' English writing performance; it requires teachers of English not only to enrich their knowledge on writing process and strategies, but also to conduct long-term writing strategy instruction in regular teaching with regular teaching classes and integrated with other language skills.

5. Limitations and Suggestion for Further Research

Despite the great effort the researcher made in doing this study, there are still some limitations. First, the experiment is conducted for only one semester. It is not long enough to develop students' capability for well applying writing strategies to language acquisition. Secondly, the single source of the subjects is 100 students from The College of Post and Telecommunication of WIT. The small-sized sample may influence the reliability of the statistical results. Thirdly, the instructor's training experience is somewhat limited in this study.

Considering the limitations of the study mentioned above, the researcher ventures to give several suggestions for further research. First, the number of students in the future study could be enlarged to involve more numbers and the results will be more convincing. Second, besides writing strategy questionnaire, interviews could be employed to facilitate the data collection to get more accurate data about strategies used by independent college students. Third, the term of writing strategy training is long-term accumulation; it needed to be prolonged to draw more convincing outcomes. Last, more variables which might influence the results should be taken into consideration and well analyzed when implementing the study.

6. Acknowledgments

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