

Investigating the English Writing Strategies Used by Chinese Senior High School Students*

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Abstract—The present study mainly reports the writing strategies which employed by Chinese senior high school students. It aims at: 1) finding out what writing strategies the student writers used and how frequently the student writers use these strategies in their writing; 2) whether the employment of writing strategies varies with gender difference; 3) what relationship between writing strategy employment and writing proficiency is; and 4) to what extent the first language exerts an influence onto the second language writing. The empirical investigation, by taking use of a questionnaire and a writing test, was carried out among 98 subjects chosen from Grade two at the Attached Middle School of Henan Normal University. Several major findings have been found. Apparently, the student writers used different types of writing strategies with a high frequency; the patterns of writing strategy employment between groups of male and female student writers were different. A significant difference had been found between the male and female students: when compared with male student writers, female employed higher English writing proficiency, had stronger motivations and clearer attributions of their unsatisfactory writing performance, and performed writing strategies much better. Frequency of writing strategy use varied with different writing proficiencies. Both high-level students and intermediate-levels employed more writing strategies than the low-level ones, while there was no significant difference in their frequency of employing writing strategies between high-level students and the intermediate ones.

Index Terms—senior high school students, English writing strategies, use

I. INTRODUCTION

The New Standard of Senior High School English in China points out that the aim of middle school English teaching is to develop students' listening, speaking, reading and writing abilities from different aspects. English Writing, as one of students' key language outputs, is a good reflection of students' overall proficiency of English language learning (Poltizer & McGroarty 1985; Leki 1992; O'Malley et al. 2006; Perl 1980). Nowadays, Chinese students', especially Chinese middle school students' English writing has been a hot topic that draws much attention of many English researchers and English teachers. And many people believe that the present situation of students' writing in China is far from satisfactory (Zhou 2010). The teaching of English writing in senior high school also allows of no optimism. At the Attached Middle School of Henan Normal University, where the researcher worked there almost for ten years, we found that a lot of senior high school students show little interests in English writing. Therefore it is very difficult for them to get high scores in the writing part of examination. And we also found that the teaching methods of writing used by many teachers in class are relatively less effective. Sometimes the students show high interests in English studies, teachers seem to pay little or even no attention to their strategies in the process of writing. To some extent we can conclude that the students use fewer strategies in their everyday writing especially in the examination (Rubin 1987; Richards et al. 2006). So it becomes a very important task for Chinese English teachers and researchers to improve the present situation of writing teaching in middle school.

Some people believed that the use of relevant language strategies will help students to improve their language proficiency and achievement in the process of learning (Bremner, 2009; Brooks & Grundy 2008; Krapels 1990; Seliger 1984; Wesche 2007). Therefore, this research was conducted, on the basis of the data collected from 98 second-year students at the Attached Middle School of Henan Normal University, to investigate what kind of writing strategies and how frequently the student writers use these strategies in their English writing; whether the employment of writing strategies varies with different gender; how writing strategy employment and writing proficiency related with each other; and to what extent the first language (L1) produces an influence on the second language (L2) writing.

By observing students what strategies they have used and how to use the writing strategies, we expect this study will help senior high school students know some writing strategies and develop students' writing abilities. What is more, this study is expected to give some suggestions and solutions for the reform of middle school English teaching. Last, we hope that the situation of English writing teaching in China's high schools will be promoted.

II. DATA AND METHODOLOGY

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A. Subjects

This empirical study involved 98 in total senior high school students, selected from grade two at the Attached Middle School of Henan Normal University. They were second-year students enrolled in the 3-year program of the senior high school education. All the subjects were in normal classes at approximately the same proficiency level. The sample was narrowed down from 100 to 98 after the investigation through questionnaire, because two students did not answer their questionnaires properly: one just left out dozens of items in the questionnaire and the other chose more than one answer to one item. So we don't think it will be valid data to our research. The age of the students ranged from 16 to 18, and there were 45 male and 53 female students in the sample.

TABLE I.
DISTRIBUTION OF THE SUBJECTS USED IN THE PRESENT STUDY

	Male	Female	Total
Class one	22	26	48
Class two	23	27	50
Total	45	53	98
	46%	54%	100%

B. Instruments

The instruments used in the data collection were 1) a timed writing test; 2) a Chinese writing strategies questionnaire. The writing test conducted was designed to measure students' writing proficiency or achievement. The final score will be used to judge their writing proficiency and individual writing level. Of course, the scores in the final examinations in the former two semesters will also be referenced. And here the researcher adopted the writing task in the exercise book which was based on the New Standard of Senior High School English. The reason to adopt this data is, on the one hand, for the assessment apart from the convenience of collection; on the other hand, for the authoritativeness and fairness of our research results.

In this study, we designed a writing strategy questionnaire to elicit students' beliefs about English writing and their employment of writing strategies. The questionnaire was designed in Chinese rather than English because most senior high school students will have difficulties to understand the academic terms. In the questionnaire, we used many academic terms, which was based on the instruction of my understanding and adaptation of Oxford (1990) and Petric & Czarl (2007).

This writing strategy questionnaire consisted of five parts: Part One, Personal Data. It mainly asked about the subjects' personal information such as name, gender, age, class and their scores of the writing; Part Two, Self Evaluation. It included 25 items to elicit subjects' first and second language proficiency, their comprehension level, general writing strategies or habits, etc.; Part Three, English Writing Strategies. This part contained 31 items, which were subdivided into three stages, i.e., pre-writing stage, while-writing stage, and revising Stage; Part Four provided the individual opinions on writing exercises, writing difficulties, writing instructions and emotional attitudes towards writing. Another part is the motivations of doing writing exercises and self diagnoses of the attributions to their unsatisfactory writing performance, included the questions from item 57 to item 88. For the convenience of statistical calculation, there is no open question to ask students to offer their supplement to this questionnaire.

C. Data Collection and Analysis

All data were collected from two classes at the Attached Middle School of Henan Normal University, under the supervision of the researcher. The researcher first explained explicitly that the main aims of the research to the students. And make every student know that some writing strategies will be included in the research. All the students had been told that they should complete the questionnaire thoroughly according their own experiences and understanding about writing strategies. And we also let all the subjects to know that we will keep secret for the result of this research and it will not do any harm or disadvantages to them. We distributed the copies of the questionnaire and explain the requirements for filling the blanks and answering the questions. If they had any difficulties in answering the questionnaire, they can turn to the researcher for her help. Before distributing the questionnaires, all of the subjects had been told that their head teacher, parents, or any other person, will have no access to the result of this research. In order to protect their secrets, all the subjects' names will be concealed and we will not use them in reporting the research. The subjects should complete all the questions within 30 minutes.

We used some statistical tools to analyze the data that we got from the questionnaires. For the questionnaire was designed to investigate different aspects about writing, self-evaluation of the writing proficiency, general writing strategies, specific writing strategies employed in the writing process, and motivations and attributions, some items ranged the choices from 1 to 5, some from 1 to 3, and the other just with two choices. So when processing the data, the researcher chose to calculate them or by percentage or by mean and standard deviation. If one or two items in one questionnaire were left blank, it was still viewed valid and counted by the mean of all choices. But if there are two answers for one question, we will think this questionnaire is not valid. All the items in the questionnaire were statements and the choices ranged from the negative extreme to the positive extreme with grading 1 to 5, while the statements could be positive or negative, so when inputting the subjects' scores of the questionnaire, the items presented by

negative statements must be graded from 5 to 1.

All the data were then keyed into computer and analyzed with statistical software SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences, designed by SPSS company in America). Descriptive statistics such as standard deviations, overall pattern of writing strategies and means were obtained. We subsequently did ANOVA (analysis of variance) calculation to see to what extent the students differed, significantly or not. Afterwards, a stepwise multiple comparisons of the writing strategy use among groups of different gender and among groups at different writing proficiency were carried out to find the similarities and differences between male student writers and female ones, and between high-level student writers and the low-level ones. At last, the correlation analysis between general writing habits and specific writing strategies was conducted to see how the employment of specific writing strategies was related to the general writing strategies.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. General Statistic Description

There were 22 items which aimed at participants' self evaluation of their writing-related information in the questionnaire, and the results were reported according to the percentage every choice held. Among all the subjects, according to their self report stated in Table I, 10.39% of them thought their English proficiency were at the elementary level, 31.17% just between elementary and intermediate levels, 57.14% at intermediate level, and 1.30% at upper intermediate level. Here one thing we have to point out is, it is not absolutely scientific to identify the individual students' level according their own judgments, because it is very hard for the students to know accurately what level they are in the second language learning. We just did a small modification to the data after calculation. The criterion is the score we get from the writing test. So the consultative effect of the data cannot be denied.

TABLE I.
OVERALL EVALUATION OF ENGLISH PROFICIENCY

Item 1 Choice	English proficiency Elementary	Between elementary and intermediate	Intermediate	Upper Intermediate	Advanced
Percentage	10.39%	31.17%	57.14%	1.30%	0%

B. Writing Strategy Employment

Tables II presented a descriptive statistics on each self belief in English writing with a brief description of all these strategy employed and items in the study.

TABLE II.
MEAN AND STANDARD DEVIATION OF THE OVERALL EMPLOYMENT OF WRITING STRATEGIES

Item	Description of general writing strategies	Mean	Standard Deviation
1	Reciting English model essays	2.195	0.795
2	Analyzing models and summarizing writing skills	2.195	0.859
3	Writing after models	2.688	0.907
4	Taking notes or writing dairies, letters in English as writing exercises	1.818	0.739
5	Reciting newly learned words by consciously using it when writing	2.039	1.044
6	Signing up to take a training course of English writing	1.390	0.691
7	Learning some writing theory intentionally	2.247	1.002
8	Studying the culture of English-speaking countries to assist English learning	2.263	0.870
9	Paying attention to different types of literature in learning	2.338	0.926
10	Consulting others with the difficulties in writing	2.792	0.922
11	Reading and comparing compositions of classmates	2.169	0.909
12	Consulting teachers about writing skills	1.740	0.696
13	Summarizing the progress and deficiency in my writing	2.753	0.830
14	Exchanging writing experiences and skills with classmates	1.883	0.725
15	Using the standards of models to direct and assess my writing	2.688	1.091
16	Reading several days later after finishing writing	2.130	0.978
17	Reading my own compositions	2.571	0.895

As seen in the Table II, for general writing strategies, item 10 (Consulting others with the difficulties in writing), with the mean value of 2.792, turned out to be the strategy that was shared by most of the subjects. It was convinced by the interview to some subjects. The interview indicated that most student writers like peer work. When they came across difficulties in the process of their language learning, the first person sh/e will turn to is his/her peer or fellow student. They put much reliance on their peers. Then the top value followed by item 13 (Summarizing the progress and deficiency in my writing, $M=2.753$). In or after class, student writers are likely to investigate the composition and try to find the errors by themselves. Zhou (2010) found the psychological evidence to support this claim. The means of Item 3 (Writing after models) and item 15 (Using the standards of models to direct and assess my writing) were the same, i.e., 2.688, which indicated that writing by imitating models in second language played an important role in students' writing

process, and students had already figured out the importance of writing after and according to models. Another reason is that students begin to feel the pressure of college entrance examination and they want to find some good models to imitate. The means 1.390 of item 6 (Signing up to take a training course of English writing) and 1.740 of item 12 (Consulting teachers about writing skills) revealed that subjects seldom learned writing strategies on their own initiative. Interestingly, from these two items, we found few students have learned writing strategies intentionally before the research. And even some students didn't know the term at all. In our research, one mediate-level student told the researcher that he spent a lot of time on practice writing. But he didn't realize that there are some strategies for him to adopt in English writing. The low value of the mean 1.818 of item 4 (Taking notes or writing dairies, letters in English) indicated that these subjects, in few cases, intentionally practiced writing in the target language of English. The researcher also found the phenomenon in teaching.

For specific writing strategies, in the part of general writing strategies (see the Table above), item 10 (Consulting others with the difficulties in writing), item 13 (Summarizing the progress and deficiency in my writing), item 3 (Writing after models) and item 15 (Using the standards of models to direct and assess my writing) were the most favored ones, and item 6 (Signing up to take a training course of English writing), item 12 (Consulting teachers about writing skills), item 4 (Taking notes or writing dairies, letters in English as writing exercises) the least favored ones, which indicated that the students rarely practiced writing in English or studied writing skills or strategies intentionally; they were not active in strategy training. From here, we also can conclude that in writing of teaching in middle school, teachers didn't pay enough attention to writing strategy training.

C. Contrast of Gender Differences

In order to find out if there is any difference between the male and female student writers in their writing proficiency and employment of writing strategies, all the participants first were divided into 2 groups, and then the following tests were carried out to examine their respective writing proficiency and writing strategy employment, several comparisons were also made.

(1) Gender Differences in Writing Proficiency

Table III stated directly and clearly that there did exist a difference in writing proficiency according to gender: male and female student writers differed in their writing scores by mean value of 85.92 to 94.25, and female students in general got much higher scores than male ones, that is, female students on the whole showed a higher writing proficiency. And Ellis (2009) pointed out that there exists gender difference between the male learners and the female ones when we are in terms of language developing sequence. Comparatively speaking, male students are in their initiative level when we compare them with their female peers. One-way ANOVA was performed to see whether writing proficiency is marked with gender or whether gender will produce significant effect on writing proficiency. The result ($F(1, 75) = 11.385, p = .001 < .05$) revealed that there was a significant difference in writing between male and female students. That is, female student writers received significantly higher rating than their male counterparts. We also can conclude that female student writers employed much higher language proficiency than the male ones.

TABLE III.
GENDER DIFFERENCE IN WRITING PROFICIENCY

Gender	Number	Mean	Standard Deviation
Male	45	85.92	15.24
Female	53	94.25	12.35

(2) Gender Differences in Employment of General Writing Strategies

The mean values of 2.0353 and 2.3227 from Table IV directly and clearly illustrated that male and female student writers differed in their employment of general writing strategies, or say, the general writing habits. Female students on the whole got much higher scores of writing strategy employment than male ones did. A significant difference was found between male and female students in their general writing strategies by ANOVA ($F(1, 75) = 7.094, p = .009 < .05$). Female student writers received significantly higher writing strategy employment scores than that of male students. In this research, we found that female students were more likely to use different kinds of writing strategies in English writing. For example, they consulted their teachers more often than the males do when they came across some difficulties. And female student writers were more dependent on their teachers. Mostly, they could follow teacher's directions well. But for the male students, it was another occasion. So we can conclude that female student employed more writing strategies than the male students.

TABLE IV.
GENDER DIFFERENCE IN EMPLOYING GENERAL WRITING STRATEGIES

Gender	Number	Mean	Standard Deviation
Male	45	2.0353	.4286
Female	53	2.3227	.4501

ANOVA ($F(1, 75) = 7.094, p = .009 < .05$)

(3) Gender Differences in the L1 Influence on the L2 Writing

There were four items which were expected to examine the influence of first language on English writing. One-way

ANOVA was performed to examine whether there also exists a difference for gender. The results were summarized in Table V.

TABLE V.
GENDER DIFFERENCE IN L1 INFLUENCE UPON L2 WRITING

Gender	Number	Mean	Standard Deviation
Male	45	2.7500	.5303
Female	53	3.1106	.4629

ANOVA (F (1, 75) = 9.313, p=.003<.05)

As shown in Table V, the mean was 2.7500 for male and 3.1106 for female and from ANOVA (F (1, 75) = 9.313, p=.003<.05), p value was .003, far below the value of .05, all of which indicated that there was significant difference in gender. Female student writers got significantly higher scores than males did, and this predicted that female ones received much stronger influence from first language on their second or foreign language writing. From the writing test, we found that there are more cases of using coinages in female students' writing, i.e., female students are more likely to invent words when they couldn't find a suitable words to express their ideas. From the questionnaire, we also find that female students were normally influenced by the negative transfer from their mother tongue in the process of L2 writing; however, male students were easily influenced by the positive transfer from the mother tongue. In order to verify what we concluded from the questionnaire of writing strategy, an interview had been carried out among the sample students. The conclusion had been proofed by the interview.

Table III, table IV and table V show how the male student writers differ from the female ones in a great detail. Their differences lie in three aspects: general writing proficiency, employment of general writing strategies, and their difference in to what degree they were under the influence of mother tongue. Therefore, the researcher concluded here, on the basis of the results from Table III to Table V, that there were several significant differences between male and female student writers. And when compared with male student writers, female ones were in higher English writing proficiency, had stronger motivations and clearer attributions of their unsatisfactory writing performance, employed writing strategies better, and received a stronger influence from mother tongue upon the English writing.

(4) The Interrelationship Between Writing Strategy Employment and Writing Proficiency

One of the research questions in this thesis was to test whether there was any difference, in the aspect of writing strategy employment, between student writers at different writing proficiency. That is, was there any difference in the strategy employment between students at high, intermediate, and low writing proficiency? In order to answer the question, all the subjects were divided into three groups as high achievers, intermediate achievers, and low achievers, according to the overall writing scores they obtained in the exam. Those students who scored 90 and above were regarded as high achievers, the top-scoring group; those who scored between 80 to 89 were viewed as intermediate achievers, the middle-scoring group; and those graded under 80 were deemed as low achievers, the bottom-scoring group. One-way ANOVA was run to see if there was significant difference between the groups. Table VI stated more detailed information.

TABLE VI.
WRITING PROFICIENCY COMPARISON AMONG GROUPS

Group	Number	Mean	Standard Deviation
High achievers	36	94.35	4.9815
Intermediate achievers	38	85.48	4.9356
Low achievers	24	71.08	10.7875
Total	98	83.63	14.8657

ANOVA (F =133.128, p<.001)

Table VI showed that the mean score for all the participants was 83.63, the group mean of high achievers (94.35) was much higher than it; the group mean of intermediate achievers (85.48) was just around it; and the mean value for the group of low achievers (71.08) was much lower than it, almost 20 points below. Results of ANOVA (F =133.128, p<.001) showed that there was a significant difference between these groups.

To see if there was also difference in the employment of writing strategies between the groups, the values of mean and standard deviation for every group in the use of writing strategy were worked out, multiple comparisons between paired groups were done, and one-way ANOVA was also performed to test the significance of the differences.

TABLE VII.
COMPARISON OF WRITING STRATEGY EMPLOYMENT AMONG GROUPS

Group	Number	Mean	Standard Deviation
High achievers	36	3.1570	.2515
Intermediate achievers	38	3.0112	.2885
Low achievers	24	2.7740	.2602
Total	98	2.9901	.3045

ANOVA (F =11.195, p<.001)

The values of mean 3.1570 for high achievers, 3.0112 for intermediate achievers and 2.7740 for the low achievers,

and it showed that the higher the writer's writing proficiency, the more frequently they would employ the writing strategies. We cannot neglect the fact that, in the interview we found some top students had the chance to get some knowledge about writing strategies, both intentionally and unintentionally. It is very common for a top student to learn some knowledge about writing strategies because they have many interests on it (Zamel 1976, 2007; Sun 2008; Cohen 2000). Another reason may lie on the fact that top students (we called high achievers in this research) who have much higher language proficiency probably have relatively high comprehensive ability and logical reasoning ability (Fowler & Hayes 2008; Gunning 2008). Therefore, they could do much better not only in English writing, but also in speaking, listening or reading. In another word, logically, the top students could do better in the questionnaire answer.

The result of ANOVA ($F = 11.195, p < .001$) proved that there was significant difference among the three groups in their use of writing strategies. The results from multiple comparisons showed that there was no difference between high and intermediate achievers ($p = .146$), but there were significant differences between high and low achievers ($P < .001$) and between intermediate and low achievers ($P = .01$). We extrapolate that both high achievers and the intermediate ones had already acquired the basic knowledge of language learning. There is no significant difference in the ways or methods they adopted in the process of language studies. To some extent, we can claim that the language proficiency of some intermediate achievers are as high as the high achievers. For, up till nowadays, there is no such a test model that can inspire the accurate level of individual language learners. So this research result is preconceived in our research. The research result also had been verified by Thomas & Luoisia (2009) and Keh (2006).

(5) The L1 Influence on the L2 Writing

At first the researcher supposed that the first language, or mother tongue, would exert a strong influence on second or foreign language writing (Ellis 1994; MacIntyre & Noel 2008). While, from the research results we can find that, the first choice was a mixed use of both English and Chinese, followed by English and Chinese was their last choice. For the strategy of writing in Chinese first and then translating into English when composing, many subjects reported that was what they did in the past. The next strategy of replacing the unknown English word by using blanks, characters, or Pinyin, etc. shares the same answers as the above one, all of them together proved that the influence from mother tongue was not so strong. Which resulted from, firstly, their overall English proficiency were at intermediate level, and secondly they usually trained to think directly in the target language, therefore in their native language writing, they never took notes or made an outline and finally translated them into English.

With the comparison of L1 influence on L2 writing between male and female student writers, we found that for the influence from first language exerted on the second or foreign language writing, and there was a significant difference between male and female student writers: female writers received much stronger influence from mother tongue on their foreign language writing than males did. This result verified two researches of Green & Oxford (2005) and Oxford & Nyikos (1992).

IV. CONCLUSION

On the theoretical basis of Chamot & O'Malley's frameworks of learning strategies, the present study explored, of senior high school students from the Attached Middle School of Henan Normal University, the variation of writing strategies employed; the frequency and the relationship between employment of writing strategies and writing proficiency; the gender difference in writing proficiency, in the employment of writing strategies, the influence from mother tongue upon second language writing and etc. And the findings showed, apparently, male student writers and female student writers differed significantly in several aspects: for example, when compared with males, females were of higher English writing proficiency; they had stronger motivations and clearer attributions of their unsatisfactory writing performance. Female student writers employed writing strategies better and with a higher frequency and received much stronger influence from the mother tongue on English writing. Another finding is that student writers with different writing proficiency varied as to the frequency of employing writing strategies, i.e., both high achievers and intermediate achievers reported significantly more employment of writing strategies than the low achievers, while between high achievers and intermediate achievers, there was no significant difference in their frequency of employing writing strategies.

The findings of this study have some pedagogical implications for the instruction and curriculum development. Firstly, writing strategies are teachable and learnable. In the daily teaching activities, teachers should introduce and teach students writing strategies (learning strategies), and identify the writing strategies that their students are or are not using. We can conduct the research with the following ways: write research diaries, do survey, think aloud, interviews and etc. As researchers, they have to know the advantages and disadvantages of each method, so that they can design the suitable and appropriate questionnaires of writing strategies which are comparable with students' abilities. And they can also try to help their students learn quicker, easier, and more effectively by weaving writing strategy training into regular class time. Secondly, the student writers should learn to identify the writing strategies they are employing and be instructed to choose the most suitable strategy for their writing. Successful writers sometimes will serve as informants for them who do less successful in writing. Through the peer working with each other, students will take a very active role in writing activities. Thirdly, the traditional methods of teaching English often easily result in students' embarrassment at not knowing how to write and their lack of interest in English leaning and English writing. Motivation provides the primary impetus to initiate the learning of the second language and later the driving force to sustain the

long and tedious learning process. Learners who are highly motivated to learn a language are likely to use a variety of strategies. Although employing appropriate and effective writing (learning) strategies could improve learners' proficiency, the teacher and the students are supposed to do more. The teachers should try to encourage the students' motivation and help them find the real attribution to their success and failure, and the students should try to train themselves to be determined and active learners and learn to attribute the learning outcome primarily to their own efforts and develop abilities. And then they will be more likely to employ an active approach to reaching learning goals.

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