



## **A Study of Chinese College Students' English Writing Strategies**

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### **Abstract**

**The study investigates how Chinese college students use strategies in English writing with the help of questionnaires. The results show that many students don't do well in using metacognitive strategies and social strategies when they do English writing exercises. Most students need to develop the good habit of using strategies in English writing, trying hard to improve their writing ability. English teachers should make efforts to help their students get the knowledge of strategies, paying much attention to the training of writing strategies in the classroom teaching.**

**Key words:** Chinese college students, English writing strategies, questionnaires, training

### **INTRODUCTION**

English writing is an important part of college English learning in China. Nowadays most information people send or receive is passed in writing in letters, e-mails, compositions or articles. So it is important for Chinese college students to establish solid foundations for their English writing, expressing themselves correctly in English. As is known to all, writing is one of the productive skills in language learning. English writing is a kind of language output process, in which a learner may use the knowledge that he has learned to express his ideas. So it may directly reflect a learner's ability of using English. But English writing has long been a weak point for many Chinese students in English learning and it is far from being satisfactory. Most English teachers have realized the importance of teaching English writing and they try hard to teach their students some necessary writing strategies.

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

In the study of English learning strategies, O'Malley and Chamot (1990) divide learning strategies into three parts, including metacognitive strategies cognitive strategies and social/affective strategies. They point out that strategy teaching is significant in developing learner autonomy in second language learning. Another expert called Oxford (1990) concludes that learning strategies may fall into six categories, namely, memory strategy, cognitive strategy, compensation strategy, metacognitive strategy, affective strategy and social strategy. The former three types belong to direct strategies and the latter three types are indirect strategies. When teaching English writing, English teachers should take some measures to tell their students to use different strategies in different situations.

Nunan (2001) thinks that writing is not only a kind of hands-on behavior, but also a kind of intelligence behavior. When learning English writing, students usually do exercises and practices that range from easy ones to difficult ones, and finally they may learn to think and write English papers by themselves. In this process, students may gradually cultivate their thinking abilities, including their divergent thinking, logical thinking, imaginary thinking, etc.

Process Approach is a frequently used English writing teaching strategy which is based on the Interactionist Theory. Badger and White (2000) think that writing in process approach can be seen as predominantly having something to do with linguistic skills, such as planning and drafting, and there is not much emphasis on linguistic knowledge in writing, such as knowledge about grammar and text structures. In the Process Approach, a typical writing model depicts writing as having the following five stages: prewriting, drafting, revising, editing and publishing. So it may be seen that the Process Approach puts emphasis on English learners' writing process, from which they can get many writing experiences and benefit a lot.

Some other researchers developed the Genre-based Teaching Approach carefully (Hammond, 1995; Wray & Lewis, 1997). It stresses on the functions of texts and the ways in which these texts realize their particular social functions in writing. In this approach, students may know that texts are not only linguistic constructs, but also social meaningful constructs. They may gradually grasp the schematic structures of different texts and learn to construct their own compositions. By using the Genre-based Teaching Approach, teachers may help their students realize that writing is a social interactive activity which has its regular pattern. In this teaching approach, teachers should teach their students to analyze, describe and apply different kinds of texts based on the related social cultural backgrounds.

In China, the study of English writing is getting more and more attention than ever before. It is widely accepted that many Chinese students' compositions have many similar shortcomings, such as being wordy, lack of coherence etc. It has been found that many students can not do well in English writing when they meet unfamiliar culture topics. The main reason is that Chinese students and native English speakers have different cultural backgrounds and thinking patterns. For example, native English writers like to put one main subject at the beginning of an article and develop it clearly with supporting details, while Chinese students tend to describe the main topic in a circular reasoning pattern due to our Chinese habits. So, when writing English, Chinese college students are often influenced by their Chinese thinking patterns and the difference between Chinese and Western thinking patterns (Geng, 2010).

## **RESEARCH REPORT**

In this part, the researcher analyzes how Chinese college students apply English writing strategies with the help of questionnaires.

### **Research Purpose**

This study is designed to investigate Chinese college students' application of English writing strategies and find out some practical strategies to help them improve their writing ability in hope of solving their problems in English writing.

### **Subjects**

The subjects in the research are all sophomores majoring in Math, Law and Education in the University of Jinan in China. They are 230 students including 126 boys and 104 girls who are randomly chosen from 8 classes. They range in age from 18 to 22, with an average age of 20. In China, they have learned English as a foreign language for about 10 years under the guidance of their teachers in traditional classroom environment. They usually have some writing assignments given by their teachers. When they don't have English classes, they can not get many opportunities to write in English.

## Instrument

The instrument used in this study is a questionnaire on English writing strategies. The items of the questionnaire are made by the researchers based on the framework of learning strategies put forward by O'Malley and Chamot (1990). There are 15 items in the questionnaire, each one on a 5-point scale ranging from "strongly agree" (point 5) to "strongly disagree" (point 1), the middle point being neutral (point 3). These items include some metacognitive strategies (Items 1-5), cognitive strategies (Items 6-10), and social/ affective strategies (Items 11-15). The higher a student scores in the items, the higher level of English writing skills he/she presents.

## Data Collection

On December 9 of 2014, 230 questionnaires were distributed to the subjects. They were asked to read the items and finish the questionnaires carefully according to their true conditions within 10 minutes. After they finished, all the questionnaires were collected and 223 of them were found to be valid. 7 copies were invalid because the subjects' scores in these copies were not clear.

## Results and Analysis

In order to effectively investigate how the students study English writing and explore some strategies to overcome the existing problems, a table is used to show the means of the subjects' scores for the items.

Table1

Items	Numbers of the subjects	Means of the subjects' scores
Item 1	223	2.35
Item 2	223	2.69
Item 3	223	2.47
Item 4	223	2.18
Item 5	223	3.02
Item 6	223	3.86
Item 7	223	3.25
Item 8	223	3.12
Item 9	223	3.79
Item 10	223	3.64
Item 11	223	2.89
Item 12	223	2.63
Item 13	223	3.85
Item 14	223	3.97
Item 15	223	4.16

From the data in the table, it can be easily found that the subjects don't do well in using metacognitive strategies when writing in English. The relevant items are "I try every means to improve my English writing ability." (Item 1, M=2.35), "I practice English writing every week." (Item 2, M=2.69), "I often make plans of writing English compositions." (Item 3, M=2.47), "I may evaluate my level of English writing by comparing my paper with my friends' papers regularly." (Item 4, M=2.18) and "I can focus my attention on writing an English paper in a short time." (Item 5, M=3.02). Among the five items about metacognitive strategies, the means of the subjects' scores for items 1-4 are below 3.00, which shows that many Chinese students are not good at applying metacognitive strategies. Maybe they like to follow their teachers' instructions and they haven't cultivated the good habit of autonomous learning.

As can be seen in the table, some cognitive strategies are used widely by these subjects. The related items are "When I write English compositions, I try to recall the words that I have learned to express my ideas." (Item 6, M=3.86), "I make efforts to learn some new English

words every day to enlarge my vocabulary so as to improve my English writing.”(Item 7, M=3.25), “I try to memorize many words that have the same or similar meanings to enhance my ability of diction in writing.”(Item 8, M=3.12), “I often review some grammar rules that have been learned in order to do well in writing English compositions.”(Item 9, M=3.79) and “I like to recite the good English compositions given by my teachers in order to accumulate nice sentences.”(Item 10, M=3.64). It seems that many Chinese students like to use some cognitive strategies to improve their English writing skills. Usually they are required by their teachers to adopt the necessary cognitive strategies to help them do better in using words and grammar rules when writing English compositions.

The subjects can't do well in using social strategies, which can be shown from Items 11-12. They are “I usually ask my classmates for help when I have difficulties in English writing.” (Item 11, M=2.89), “I like to ask my teacher to help me when I have no idea about how to express an idea in English.” (Item 12, M=2.63). It is obvious that many students don't like to use social strategies to help them do better in English writing. The reason for it may be that many Chinese students may feel very shy when asking their classmates or teachers for help in their English learning. They would like to do English writing by themselves.

Many subjects do well in using affective strategies, which may be seen from the means of the subjects' scores for the following items. They are “I try to overcome my anxiety when I have to have English writing classes.”(Item 13, M=3.85), “I like to encourage myself to do better in English writing.”(Item 14, M=3.97), and “I often tell myself to have enough confidence in improving my English writing.”(Item 15, M=4.16). The students have learned English for more than ten years and many of them have fostered their ability of overcoming anxiety and regaining their confidence in English writing.

### **PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS**

From the above discussion, it may be concluded that most Chinese college students need to improve themselves in applying strategies in English writing. Teachers should try a lot to help them, making the training of writing strategies become an important part of the normal classroom English teaching. They should let the students know the significance of using strategies in English writing.

Firstly, teachers should try their best to make their students become interested in learning English writing. The subjects' scores in items 1-4 may tell us that they do not have much interest in doing English writing exercises. That is the main reason for their bad performance in using metacognitive strategies. So teachers should try to construct a good learning environment and stimulate their students' interest in English writing.

Secondly, students all know that vocabulary and grammar rules play important roles in their English writing. Most of them try a lot to enlarge their vocabulary and memorize as many grammar rules as possible in order to improve their English writing. In this aspect, teachers should try to help their students by doing many things, such as telling them some good ways of learning new words and grammar rules. Usually teachers have learned English for many years and accumulated some experiences of learning new words and grammar rules. If they are patient to tell their students those experiences, they are certain to help the students a lot. English teachers should give their students some homework about reciting words and grammar rules, which is an efficient way of increasing students' writing ability. They should teach their students how to express the same meaning in some different ways, which may help them make their English writing more colorful. Teaching students some useful sentence

patterns, proverbs and so on may also contribute greatly to the improvement of their English writing abilities.

Thirdly, teachers should make good use of the strategy of peer response in teaching English writing. Peer response is an effective and valuable method of learning language writing, which is very popular in many countries. Teachers may organize their students to do some pair-work or group-work, letting them revise and discuss their compositions with partners. Peer response is a good way of writing evaluation, and it is greatly useful to arouse students' sense of being audiences and to stimulate their English writing motives. Discussions and debates are both meaningful communicative activities, in which students can exchange their opinions freely and illustrate their own views in English writing. In all, students may reap many inspirations from each others' evaluations by peer-response, which may broaden their horizons in English writing.

Fourthly, teachers' timely feedback and encouragement have much influence on students' English learning so that teachers should try to make full use of positive encouragements to help their students regain confidence whenever they have difficulties in English writing. When giving comments on students' writing, teachers can pick up some good compositions as models and read the sample writings in front of the whole class. On one hand, students who get teacher's approval may be very likely to become more confident than ever before, and then their learning motivation will be stimulated. On the other hand, the students who are not good at English writing may get many benefits from that and they may try to improve their English writing.

Lastly, as we all know, it is important that students realize and master the differences between English and Chinese thinking patterns. It has been found that Chinese students may make many mistakes in English writing because of the influence of their Chinese thinking patterns. So teachers should try to develop students' English thinking ability, which is very significant for students to enhance their English writing ability.

### CONCLUSION

In China, many English learners may have difficulties in English writing. For instance, they may not have much time in English writing. Their English classes are usually teacher-centered so that the students can not get many chances of practicing their English writing, etc. But it is true that English writing may become interesting and attractive if some effective strategies are used by the students.

The findings of the study show that many problems do exist in Chinese college students' English writing. So in order to improve students' writing ability, teachers should figure out some strategies to help their students. With the help of questionnaires, it has been found that some useful writing strategies should be used to cope with students' difficulties in English writing. Chinese college students need to cultivate their sense of using strategies, especially the metacognitive strategies and social strategies in their English writing. English teachers should pay much attention to the training of writing strategies in their classroom English teaching.

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## APPENDIX

### Chinese College Students' English Writing Strategy Scale

Based on the classification of learning strategies given by O'Malley and Chamot (1990), a questionnaire "Chinese College Students' English Writing Strategy Scale" is designed by the researchers in order to investigate Chinese college students' general use of English writing strategies. The results of the survey are only used in the study of English teaching and learning.

Items 1-15 are about your feelings when you learn English writing. Please choose the number after each item, which may embody your true condition concerning the item. The five numbers 1-5 after each item stands for "extremely disagree", "disagree", "uncertainty", "agree", "extremely agree" respectively.

Thanks for your cooperation!

1. I try every means to improve my English writing ability.  
[1] [2] [3] [4] [5]
2. I practice English writing every week.  
[1] [2] [3] [4] [5]
3. I often make plans of writing English compositions.  
[1] [2] [3] [4] [5]
4. I may evaluate my level of English writing by comparing my paper with my friends' papers regularly.  
[1] [2] [3] [4] [5]
5. I can focus my attention on writing an English paper in a short time.  
[1] [2] [3] [4] [5]
6. When I write English compositions, I try to recall the words that I have learned to express my ideas.  
[1] [2] [3] [4] [5]
7. I make efforts to learn some new English words every day to enlarge my vocabulary so as to improve my English writing.  
[1] [2] [3] [4] [5]
8. I try to memorize many words that have the same or similar meanings to enhance my ability of diction in writing.  
[1] [2] [3] [4] [5]
9. I often review some grammar rules that have been learned in order to do well in writing English compositions.  
[1] [2] [3] [4] [5]
10. I like to recite the good English compositions given by my teachers in order to accumulate nice sentences.  
[1] [2] [3] [4] [5]
11. I usually ask my classmates for help when I have difficulties in English writing.  
[1] [2] [3] [4] [5]

12. I like to ask my teacher to help me when I have no idea about how to express an idea in English.  
[1] [2] [3] [4] [5]
13. I try to overcome my anxiety when I have to have English writing classes.  
[1] [2] [3] [4] [5]
14. I like to encourage myself to do better in English writing.  
[1] [2] [3] [4] [5]
15. I often tell myself to have enough confidence in improving my English writing.  
[1] [2] [3] [4] [5]