

# A Qualitative Study into L2 Writing Strategies of University Students

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## Abstract

This study reports on an investigation into writing strategies of Malaysian university students learning English as a second language. Qualitative data were collected from 21 undergraduate university students aged 19 to 21. The students interviewed reported using a variety of writing strategies. It was also found that all of the participants reported doing some pre-writing activities, and having awareness of their own writing problems. The findings of the study also revealed that the highly proficient student writers reported using more metacognitive strategies such as organizing ideas and revising content than less skilled ones. Limitations of the study are discussed, and suggestions for future research are offered. Implications for writing instruction are also presented.

**Keywords:** writing strategies, writing proficiency, L2 learning, qualitative study

## 1. Introduction

Writing is a complex process involving the consideration of many motivational, cognitive, cultural and social factors. Its development largely relies on the use of the writing strategies and techniques. An important element in helping students develop their writing ability is the identification of the problems they face in their writing, and the use of pedagogical interventions which raise their metacognitive awareness about writing. One of the important factors that appear to play an important role in the development of different skills of language is learning strategies. SLA researchers have investigated the roles of L2 learning strategies in the development of language learning, and how they are related to L2 motivation (Oxford & Ehrman, 1995; Wharton, 2000), learning styles (Chen, 2009; Liu, 2008) language proficiency (Bruen, 2001; Hong-Nam & Leavell, 2006; Lai, 2009; Park, 1997) and performance (Kummin & Rahman, 2010; Phakiti, 2003, 2008; Yau, 2009; L. Zhang & L. J. Zhang, 2013). Although research in this area has been robust, language learning strategies have not been clearly defined in the literature of SLA.

Besides the research into general language learning strategies, many research attempts have been made to address strategies specific to L2 writing. Writing strategies are thought to be instrumental in helping L2 learners expand their writing skill. Over the past few decades, research into L2 writing strategies has been extensive (Arndt, 1987; Cumming et al., 1989; Mu, 2005; Raimes, 1985; Roca de Larios et al., 2008; Sasaki, 2002, 2004, 2007; Victori, 1999; Whalen & Menard, 1995; Wong, 2005). Some researchers have investigated the role of writing strategies in relation to writing performance (McMullen, 2009; Nguyen & Gu, 2013). For example, in a study aimed at investigating the effect of writing strategy instruction on writing performance among 54 Vietnamese university students, Nguyen and Gu (2013) found that writing strategy training significantly improved ESL writing performance.

Research has also focused on documenting the link between L2 writing proficiency and writing strategies. Most of the research addressing the relationship between writing proficiency and writing strategy use has shown that writing proficiency is closely related to writing strategy use (Arndt 1987; Chien, 2012; Mu, 2005; Raimes 1985; Bai et al., 2013; Sasaki, 2000, 2002; Victori, 1999). For instance, Chien's (2012) study into writing strategies of 40 EFL university students revealed that student who had high writing proficiency used significantly more planning, revising and reviewing strategies than those with low writing proficiency. Similarly, in a large scale

study of Singaporean ESL students, Bai et al. (2013) found that ESL writing strategies (e.g., planning, revising and evaluating) were significantly correlated with English language proficiency.

SLA researchers also investigated how L1 writing strategy use is related to L2 writing strategies (Alhaisoni, 2012; Cumming et al., 1989; Keck, 2006; Skibniewski, 1988; Whalen & Menard, 1995). With few exceptions, research targeting the relationship between L1 and L2 writing strategies reveals that L1 writing strategy use is closely associated with L2 writing strategies. The close relationship between L1 and L2 writing strategies may buttress the role of L1-L2 transfer of writing strategies. Previous research also indicates that students' command of L1 writing has a significant relationship with their command of L2 writing (Sasaki & Hirose, 1996; Schoonen et al., 2003, 2011). For example, Sasaki and Hirose (1996), in their investigation of 70 Japanese university students learning English as a foreign language, found a significant relationship between L1 (Japanese) and L2 (English) writing proficiency. In a more recent study, Schoonen et al. (2011) examined the relationship between L1 and L2 writing proficiency among 400 Dutch EFL students, and found that that students' L1 (Dutch) writing proficiency significantly predicted their L2 (English) writing proficiency. Therefore, it seems logical to conclude that L1 writing ability play an important part in determining L2 proficiency.

Writing plays an essential role in academic settings; it helps the students to do key assignments, enhance their performance and functioning, and extend their knowledge (Graham & Perin, 2007). As students enter higher education, they understand better the importance of writing. In universities, they are required to learn the core components of academic writing, rhetorical structure, lexicon and conventions of writing in order to produce formal essays and reports at the university level. These writing skills enable the students to make headway into their specialized field because they can forge academic relationships within their disciplines through their academic writing ability (Hyland, 2004). In addition, at university, the assessment of students' educational achievement is more closely linked with their writing skill because instructors asked for reports, assignments, project papers and other writing tasks which can be used as an evidence for the students' understanding of the materials presented at courses. Mastery of writing ability is of principal importance for all of the students to successfully perform writing tasks and it is even more essential for L2 students such as ESL students since they have to write in English other than in their native languages.

Given the important role writing plays within the academic and educational settings and institutions, it seems essential to identify factors affecting the development of writing. Previous research has shown that factors such as motivation, attitude, and language strategy influence L2 learning. Although considerable number of studies have investigated how writing strategies are related to writing proficiency (Chien, 2012; Mu, 2005; Raimes, 1985; Sasaki, 2002; Victori, 1999), goal orientation (He, 2005), writing performance (McMullen, 2009; Nguyen & Gu, 2013) L1 writing strategies (Alhaisoni, 2012; Cumming et al., 1989; Whalen & Menard, 1995), and learning context (Leki, 1995, Sasaki, 2004, 2007; Wong, 2005), little research has explored the writing strategies of undergraduate students in second language learning contexts. Furthermore, very few qualitative studies have focused on documenting the types of language learning strategies particularly L2 writing strategies among foreign /second language learners. This study seeks to investigate the writing strategy use among university students learning English as second language in a national university in Malaysia.

## **2. Method**

### *2.1 Subjects*

Twenty one undergraduate students learning English as a second language at a national university in Malaysia participated in this study. Following initial contact, semi-structured interviews were carried out with 12 female and 9 male students. The interviewees were freshman and sophomore students and ranged in age from 19 to 21 years. The 9 interviewees had low proficiency in writing and 11 had satisfactory level of writing proficiency (medium to high ability). The writing proficiency of the participants was assessed via a writing test composed of an argumentative essay and a descriptive report. The interviewees' mother tongue was overwhelmingly Malay, the national language in the country, though a considerable number of the participants (6 students) were first language speakers of Chinese and Tamil.

### *2.2 Data Collection and Procedure*

The researcher met the purposefully-selected students individually and explained the purposes and the details of the interview. Each interview took 15-20 minutes. The interviews were about the strategies ESL students use in their writing, and how they develop their writing ability. All interviews were conducted according to an interview protocol that was developed for this study. To suit the needs of the participants, the time and place for the interview was arranged according to students' preference and convenience. After explaining the purposes of the study, the participants were told that participation in the study is voluntary. The interviewees were also told that

the interviews would remain totally confidential, and only would be used for the purposes of this study. Interview was the only instrument used for data collection in this study.

### 3. Results and Discussion

The data for writing strategy use was coded using a typology based on Mu's (2005) taxonomy of L2 writing strategies (Rhetorical, cognitive, metacognitive, social and affective strategies) which was synthesized from previous L2 writing strategy research. The results showed students used various types of strategies in their L2 writing. Students' comments mainly touched on different types of metacognitive strategies such as planning, organizing ideas, monitoring, revising and evaluating. However, other categories of writing strategies such as social and cognitive strategies emerged from the interviews.

One of the important themes that emerged from the interviewees' descriptions about their writing behavior was systematicity in their writing. In other words, all of the interviewees referred to stages and steps they follow in their writing. Instances such as *I usually start with ..., first I write down the key points, I often make an outline..., after reading the title, I brainstorm the ideas....* were indicative of planning. The interviews revealed clear pre-writing activities of the students in their writing endeavors. This metacognitive awareness may be resulted from the pedagogical interventions of the writing course or from their pre-university writing efforts when they were preparing for the Malaysian University English Test (MUET) which includes the challenging writing section. A majority of the students interviewed reported that they use a kind of outline when they start writing an essay. This is a reply of an interviewee: *I know how to start, I make an outline..., I often organize it and then I write the essay ... and sometimes I change it to and I put new ideas.*

The interviewees also mentioned the use of cognitive, social and affective strategies. One of the participants said *"I usually ask my friends or teacher to help me in the problems I face in my writing"* another one said *"sometimes I got mixed up when I write, I took few moments to rest and then I start"*. Some students reported that they use internet for their writing and assignments. As one of the interviewee explained, internet is an authentic source for developing writing. *"I can find a lot of good essays about everything in internet, the essays were written by native English, by English teachers by..., and it can help me how to write my essay. It is very good"*. Cognitive strategies were also emerged from the interview, for example one of the participants' comments are a clear illustration of cognitive writing strategies: *I usually try to remember words, synonyms, good structure, and use them in my essay; I want to use the new words that I learned from books.* Similarly, another interviewee explained: *I always use memorized expressions in my sentences, in my writing. I use my knowledge.... I use vocabulary and phrases that I learned.*

With regard to what they want to do in order to improve their writing, a majority of the students mentioned that three techniques: reading more materials (books, articles, newspapers), doing more writing practices, and seeking help from others, are very effective strategies for developing writing. This result is in harmony with Okamura's (2006) study which found that reading English articles and seeking help from native speakers of English were two important strategies which Japanese EFL university students used for developing their EFL writing skill. There were also other frequently mentioned techniques such as, expanding general knowledge, attending writing classes, increasing vocabulary knowledge and improving grammar. Some participants also referred to other internet-related activities such as using blogs, electronic forums, emails and Facebook to develop their writing skills.

The results also showed that ESL students reported to exert a great deal of effort to make their writing task longer. They tended to be productive, as much as they could, in their writing. Some of the interviewees exhibited a willingness to write long essays and texts; they reported making many attempts to write more text. One of the interviewee reported: *"in my writing I usually try to write more and more, and put everything I can remember about the topic in my writing, I make it longer...."* Another one said: *"it is important to put many things in your writing; it should be complete and long. I add more paragraphs.* This result may indicate that students in ESL university contexts are motivated to write in English as they are required to be capable of writing in English for different academic purposes.

It was also found that the skilled student writers mentioned more strategies in their writing than weak student writers. They reported using more metacognitive strategies than the less effective writers, such as presenting ideas in an organized way and revising. For example, "one of the interviewee said *"I usually try to write my ideas in several paragraphs according to introduction, body and conclusion"*. This result is consistent with previous research (Bruen, 2001; Lai, 2009; Peacock & Ho, 2003; Zhang, 2001) which indicated that students with higher language proficiency reported using more metacognitive strategies than the low language proficiency ones.

The results also revealed that the students with poor writing ability could not effectively put their ideas into separate paragraphs and they believed that had problems in adding new ideas to their essays after writing two or three paragraphs. One of the poor ability writers' comments evidenced her inability in organizing her writing into appropriate paragraphs: *I have some ideas when I write. I cannot write them in paragraphs. I write the first paragraph and I think a lot it is very difficult to add....* The relative lack of attention to metacognitive writing strategies such as revising content and overall organization may result from their lack of second language proficiency in general and L2 writing proficiency in particular. Probably the students with low writing ability only focus on word-level and sentence-level problems, and are not able to consider the paragraph organization and content revision.

Findings of this study also back up the claim strongly endorsed by Victori (1999) who revealed that successful student writers show both clearer knowledge and greater awareness concerning the strategies they use and the problems they faced in their writing than low writing proficiency students. Students who were less-skilled in writing mainly focused on the problems associated with vocabulary such as translating words into English and grammatical mistakes while more-skilled ones mentioned global writing problems associated with textual coherence, whole paragraph unity and word choice (appropriate and effective words). Unlike the students with good writing ability, students with poor writing ability did not make reference to difficulties such as lack of relevant information (points and examples) to support their ideas, and lack of ability in connecting ideas.

Despite the suggestive findings, there were several limitations in this study that need to be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the sample size was relatively small, and limited to Malaysian undergraduate students in one university, thus affecting generalizability of the results. Second, in this study, only interview was used for collecting data. Although interview can provide detailed information and in-depth insight into students' L2 writing strategy use, other data collection tools such as observation and think aloud seems to be essential for examining real-time writing strategy use, that is, the ESL writing strategies they reported in their interview may not reflect the strategies they use when writing in English. Thus, future studies should address limitations. It seems also essential to use a combination of qualitative and quantitative data collection instruments to get a better understanding of L2 writing strategy use.

#### **4. Conclusion and Implications**

This study demonstrated that university students use different writing strategies, and that success in L2 writing depends, in large part, on the use of appropriate writing strategies. The students interviewed used a variety of writing strategies such as metacognitive, social and cognitive strategies. ESL students mainly reported using different types of metacognitive strategies such as planning and revising in their L2 writing, though other categories of writing strategies such as social and cognitive strategies emerged from their interviews. They also emphasized on the importance of the social strategies in their writing, they reported relying heavily on their language instructors. They also reported seeking help from their classmates, and peers especially from those who are well-skilled at writing. On the whole, the study revealed that writing proficiency is an important factor in determining the use of writing strategies especially metacognitive strategies. Students who had high writing proficiency reported more use of different types of metacognitive writing strategies than those who had low writing ability.

The findings of this study suggest that language instructors should provide adequate strategy instruction especially those strategies that are considered to be closely related to successful writing performance. L2 writing teaching should address the techniques which help learners to increase their knowledge in the use of rhetorical conventions, coherence and cohesion devices and syntactic diversity in L2 writing. The finding further revealed that the proficient writers were more successful in expressing and organizing their ideas than less-skilled student writers. This finding suggest that L2 writing teachers should provide some model options and activities in writing especially for learners with low writing proficiency to expand their repertoire of writing skills and strategies.

Writing teachers need to identify the writing problems of low writing proficiency students, and to figure out effective ways to help them develop their writing skill. These students have many problems in L2 writing, and their writing is qualitatively and quantitatively different from those of high writing proficiency students. Therefore, explicit writing instruction seems to be very effective in helping less-skilled student writers to raise their metacognitive awareness about L2 writing. In addition, Teachers should also try to figure out different ways to encourage students to write in English, read and revise their text, and give them feedback accordingly.

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