

College Students' Cognition of English Writing Strategies

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Abstract: Writing has always been a weakness for Chinese students. Writing strategy refers to a set of rules for arrangement or plot in writing, penetrates the whole writing process and can have drastic effect on the writing performance and writing quality. However, some issues remain unresolved: are Chinese learners aware of the importance of writing strategies? In addition, does the learners' cognition have any impact on the writing quality of the learners? And how much do they know about it? Hence the present research was carried out. This is an investigation targeting for some college students in one of the top universities in China on the cognition of writing strategies and the usage or involvement of writing strategies in the English teaching process. The results show that: a) The majority of the participants lack of interests in it. They did not recognize the importance of writing strategies. b) The interest of high score group is better than that of low score group, which presents kind of correlation between interest and writing quality. c) The more the students know about writing strategies, the better their writing quality is.

1. Introduction

Writing strategy relates to how to write an article. It in essence is a set of methods that dominate the author to layout the article, to arrange the words, phrases and sentences and to revise the writing. It penetrates the whole writing process and has great effect on the writing performance and writing quality(Liu Donghong,2004)[5]. Some cognitive psychologists who do researches on writing found that the major differences in the writing ability of the experts and novices lie on the writing strategies they acquired and used (Currie, K., Biggam, J., Palmer, J., Corcoran, T.2012)[2]. Obviously, writing strategy determines the learners' writing ability to certain degree.

In the past decades, many researches have been conducted in the field of second language writing. Therefore, there is a wealth of literature on writing development and writing strategies for college students (Murray, 2009, Cottrell, 2008)[1][4]. The importance of writing strategy has been verified by some of the researches. However, surprisingly little attention seem to have been paid to how much students have acquired about the writing strategies, and how they aware to use them during writing process. What's more, teaching of writing strategies has been conducted in the English Writing classes for Chinese English majors.

The aim of this article is to investigate their cognition and reflect some issues in the practical teaching. An investigation into the cognition of writing strategies and the usage or involvement of writing strategies in the English teaching process has been made.

2. Literature Review

Second language writing research should include not only the writing process and writing quality, but also the writing strategies. Since 1970s, a series of studies on writing strategies were launched by Rubin, Naimen, Frohlich and Todesco and other scholars.

The past few decades witnessed the development of writing strategy research in the following aspects: 1) Different application of writing strategies by different learners. 2) Correlation between

writing strategy and writing performance. Xiu Xudong, Xiao Defa (2006) [6] conducted a questionnaire survey and tests for 463 four-grade students in three universities, and found that "Learning strategy of writing" and "writing process strategy" had a direct impact on the writing process of the TEM-8 test writing, and indirectly affected the TEM-8 writing score and total score. Accordingly, conclusion was made that teaching writing strategies can improve learners' writing ability. Although the small-sample, empirical research does have limitations, it at least proves that strategy instruction has no negative effect on writing. The study, with English majors as the research subject, should be further proved by the researches with non-English majors. 3) Writing strategy training and effectiveness. Macaro (2001) [3] randomly divided six classes of the second grade French students into the experimental group and control group. Research methods applied are as following: pre-test and post-test, questionnaire and interviews. In five months, the students of the experimental classes received teaching on various writing strategies, such as some meta-cognitive strategies—preview, monitoring and evaluation. In the post-test, the researchers found that the experimental group had made great progress in terms of grammatical accuracy. The students changed somehow in the writing method. When using a dictionary, they became more selective. When writing, they also became more careful. The teaching on writing strategy has a positive effect on the teaching of writing.

The importance of writing strategy has been verified by some of the researches. In addition, teaching of writing strategies has been conducted in the English Writing classes for Chinese English majors. But for the non-English majors, are teachers and students aware of the importance of writing and writing strategies? Are the teaching and learning of writing strategies involved in class and after class? Therefore, the current research was conducted with the subject of Chinese non-English majors on writing strategies cognition and such teaching in class. The aim of this study is to answer the following questions: 1) Have college students realized the importance of English writing and writing strategies? 2) What kind of writing strategy do students learn from the teaching in class? 3) Do learners' cognition of writing strategy directly affect their writing performance? In other words, are there any difference between the high score group and low score group in terms of the cognition?

3. Methodology

3.1 Subject

All 92 subjects were randomly selected undergraduate non-English majors from a top university in China, with 36 majoring in computer science and 56 from the Law School. The majority of the participants when finished the questionnaire had been learning English for 5-11 years. 82.4% students had never attended the English Writing course.

3.2 Data collection

The research data were gathered by a self-report questionnaire, which was administered to the students to fill in during an hourly session. The questionnaire included two parts: basic information and questions related to strategy cognition and the strategy mentioned during the teaching. All 92 questionnaires were collected, 7 of which has been regarded as invalid because the answers were out of specification.

Furthermore, compositions were collected before that. All subjects were required to write five argumentative writings on different topics. Under the consideration that writing score would be affected by topics and other variables, the final score was the accumulative average of five writing scores.

3.3 Data analysis

All the data collected, including questionnaire items, personal information and writing scores, at the first step were typed into computer and analyzed in SPSS. In order to avoid the mistakes in evaluation and typing, the above jobs were undertaken by two close friends, Zhang Min and Zhang

Xiaohai, with the researcher together. Discrepancies were resolved through discussions until the three raters came to 100% agreement.

4. Results

From the perspective of students' cognition and attitude on English writing (Q1), 23 participants claimed "Listening" was the most helpful one among the four basic language skills in their future work. While 40 chose "speaking"; 19 got "reading"; only 3 of them, with 3.5%, confirmed "Writing". In terms of interest in writing (Q2), 10 of 92 presented directly that they had no interest; 45.9%, the majority didn't care about it; just 3 participants showed interest in English writing. It's obvious that Chinese EFL students lack of interest and cognition on English writing. Not enough attention had been paid on it.

Table 1: Q1:which of the following help you most?

	Frequency	Percentage
Listening	23	27.1
Speaking	40	47.1
Reading	19	22.4
Writing	3	3.5
Total	85	100.0

Table 2: Q2:Interest on Writing

	Frequency	percentage
No interest	10	11.8
Don't care	39	45.9
A little	33	38.8
Like it very much	3	3.5
Total	85	100.0

On the issue of writing strategy, 65% students admitted that they had heard about it before the investigation. However, only 15% of them learned it from the teaching in class. In addition, when they were asked what the strategy was, the majority had little knowledge about it. Some related it to strategy for test; some thought it was "write more, read more", "recite more new words" and so on; the others regarded it as "the clear writing ideas, complete expression and no grammatical mistakes". When asking about the importance of writing strategy, 30 learners (35%) argued that it's the most important part for English writing. Consequently, participants' cognition on the importance of writing strategy remains to be strengthened. However, on the question "Should the writing strategy be introduced in class?", the majority, with 91%, confessed that it's necessary. The result shows that although some students didn't agree with the most crucial role of writing strategies in writing, but they were still holding the view that it must be necessary, and had a very strong thirst for it.

In order to determine whether the cognition of writing strategy affects learners' writing performance, namely whether there are significant difference between the low score group and high score group, the research analyzed the questionnaires of two groups with Independent sample T-test and got the following result. According to Table 3, except on variable 1 (Q1) and variable 5 (Q5), the two groups showed differences. With the respective .002, .021 and .012 T value ($< .05$), variable 2, 4 and 6 (Q2, Q4, Q6) have significant difference between two groups.

Table 3 Independent sample T-test

	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference
Q1	-.420	37.987	.677	-.1000	.2379
Q2	3.245	38	.002	.8000	.2466
Q3	1.322	37.291	.194	.2000	.1513
Q4	2.413	38	.021	.8500	.3522
Q5	.728	36.792	.471	.2000	.2748
Q6	2.633	38	.012	.6500	.2468

Furthermore, in order to examine the relationship of cognition to writing quality, correlation analyses was made. The results are in the following table. Variable 4 and 6, with significance of .026 and .013 ($< .05$) are significantly and positively correlated with writing performance.

Table 4 Pearson Correlation test Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

		Q4	Q6	The numerical
Q4	Pearson Correlation	1.000	.592	.551
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.012	.026
	Value	40	40	40
Q6	Pearson Correlation	.592	1.000	.590
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.012	.	.013
	Value	40	40	40
value	Pearson Correlation	.551	.590	1.000
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.026	.013	.
	Value	40	40	40

5. Discussion

The above results show that though current teaching methods and teaching concept have been or are attempting to be out of the traditional teaching method, college students' English learning is under very strict guidance. 93% of Chinese EFL Students paid attention to the cultivation of "listening", "speaking" and "reading" skills, and ignore the "writing". With the rapid development of the culture and economy, the increasing exchanges with foreign countries arouse increasing need of English communication. However, it's certain the communication not only refers to the verbal communication, but also written communication. Accordingly, English writing should be concerned and become an indispensable part of college English teaching in China.

Furthermore, from the contrast between the high score and low score group, we found that the two groups had no significant differences in the first variable. 95% students from the high score group claimed that "listening, speaking and reading" will be helpful in their future work. While all participants from low score group chose the above three items. The high percentage from the two groups further verified the concept of all participants on this variable, namely all the participants lack of awareness of the importance of writing.

In terms of writing interest, although few participants chose "like writing or like it very much", there were significant differences between the high score group and the low score group on this variable ($T = 002$, $< .05$). 100% students in high score group preferred the three choice items: "Don't care about it", "A little bit like it" and "Like it very much". Nevertheless 75% from the low score group chose the first three items: "No interest", "Don't like it" and "Don't care about it". In addition, the rest 25% got the fourth item—"a little bit like it". This presents that interest is very important, which directly affects the students' writing attitude and their grades. Accordingly, in the process of writing teaching, we when imparting knowledge, should pay attention to improving the students' interest in writing.

On the third variable "Have you ever heard of writing strategy through various channels?", T value 0.194 (greater than .05) shows there was no significant difference between the high score group and the low score group. But from the frequency of two groups, there was slight difference.

75% students of the high score group had heard of it, while in low score group only 45% assured that they had heard of it.

The Fourth and sixth variables are the keys in this questionnaire. It deals with students' cognition of the importance of writing strategies and relevant knowledge involved. The respective T values 0.021 and 0.012 show that two groups have significant differences. The followed Pearson correlation test, with 0.026 and 0.013 significant level, also proved that participants' cognition of the writing strategy and their extracurricular study with writing strategy related to their writing scores. On the other hand, in terms of the frequency, the high score group affirms the importance of writing strategy with the significantly higher rate than that of the low score group (70% vs 20 %). Besides that, 70% from the high score group had learned the strategy, while the low score group who did it is less than 50%. This suggests that writing strategy cognition and study have positive correlation to learners' writing performance.

In other words, the more learners recognize about the importance of writing strategies, the more knowledge they contact to, the higher grades they will get in their writing. Factors that affect learners' writing performance, of course, are not just writing strategy. Therefore, when improving learners' knowledge about writing strategies, we cannot ignore other factors, such as vocabulary, grammar, etc.

6. Summary

This research concludes the following results: 1) Chinese EFL students lack of correct understanding of writing, and show no strong interest in it. 2) The high score group obviously shows stronger interest in writing than that of the low score group, which indicates that writers' interest in writing impacts the writing performance to some degree. 3) Participants' cognition of the importance of writing strategy is weak, which remains to be strengthened. 4) The more learners recognize about the importance of writing strategies, the more knowledge they contact to, the higher grades they will get in their writing. That's to say, writing strategy cognition and study affect learners' writing performance.

These results make sense in the real English teaching. In the practical teaching, teachers should not only pay attention to improving students reading ability, but also the development of the writing ability and interest in writing. In addition, in order to improve learners' writing ability, their cognition of writing strategies should also be strengthened. Although the high score group in the study has a certain amount of writing strategy awareness and some strategic knowledge, we must pay attention to another problem presented in the questionnaire---the learners have a fuzzy concept about it. The reasons for that are as following. Firstly, when talking about "teaching", only 15% students mentioned that they had learned the strategy from their English teachers. In a sense, it exposed the disadvantages in the real teaching, teachers did not realize the importance of writing strategies, and have not consciously guided the students to learn it. Secondly, from the perspective of students, more than half of the students when filled in the questionnaire had admitted that they rarely involved with study some knowledge about writing strategies. They didn't realize the importance of writing strategy, and lack of active learning spirit. To solve above problems, in the real English teaching, we must first of all correct the wrong concepts and attitude towards writing strategy. Furthermore, teachers should guide students to know English writing strategies correctly, and to apply them in the practical writing.

The study aims to find out the relationship between learners' writing ability and writing strategy cognition. The results illustrate the importance of writing strategy and its influence on writing performance, which lay a foundation for further discussion on writing strategies. On the basis of the results, future research can focus on different application of writing strategies between the high score group and low score group, and on specific strategies which influence learners' writing performance.

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