

# Writing Strategies and Writing Proficiency of Chinese Vocational College Students

Wen Yang<sup>1,\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Graduate School, Lyceum of the Philippines University – Batangas, Philippines

\*Corresponding author: Yang Wen (Email: hychsutheodore2@gmail.com)

---

**Abstract:** This study intended to examine the level of writing strategies and writing proficiency of students at a vocational college in China. 308 students at a private vocational college in China were selected as respondents. Then, the relationship between writing strategies and writing proficiency was explored by SPSS. The findings indicated that the vocational college students applied the writing strategies at a low level. And they were at relatively low levels of writing proficiency. Also, there was no difference in writing strategies when grouped based on major or language proficiency. However, the proficient learners applied more cognitive strategies in writing. Besides, the science learners did better in terms of content and argumentation, and the proficient learners outperformed in structure and organization. Furthermore, a strong link was shown by the Pearson analysis between writing strategies and writing proficiency. An implication of the study was that students need to be encouraged to use various strategies to improve their writing.

**Keywords:** Chinese learners, Language studies, Writing strategies, Writing proficiency.

---

## 1. Introduction

The development of information and globalization contribute to the global village. As a result, English serve as the lingua franca in the global village. English is increasingly becoming a basic skill needed for the workforce and is crucial in the job market. It is often recognized as essential for employment, with particular importance for professional employment. The vocational college is a place where skilled talents are developed. As a result, all students in China are required to take an English course at all academic levels of education, including the vocational college.

Writing is a method of communicating ideas or attitudes and is one of the four fundamental skills. People can convey ideas or persuade others by writing. Writing can be used as a learning method to develop more linguistic abilities. However, writing in L2 is difficult. In actuality, it's one of the hardest production abilities for EFL students to master. The L2 writing process differs from the first language writing process in terms of strategy, rhetoric, and linguistics [1]. As a result, writing skill is consistently viewed as a sign of a learner's language proficiency.

Despite the critical importance of writing, Chinese college students still have a lot of issues with their writing, including grammatical errors, incoherence, and a lack of persuasiveness. Additionally, this can be seen in their writing scores on the CET-4/6 or TEM-4/8. Therefore, it is important for students learning English as a foreign language to develop their writing skills.

Because writing activities typically require planning, monitoring, and modifying, writing strategy is one issue that deserves attention in supporting writing. Writing techniques are a set of intentional actions that writers take when they are writing. Researchers consistently separate proficient learners from less skilled learners based on the writing strategies they employ. So, exploring the application of writing strategies by students is of great significance for helping them make a good writing.

Writing strategies used in second language have recently become the subject of substantial research. Some studies [2-4] found that EFL students employed a variety of writing strategies in various circumstances. According to research by Raofi et al. [2] found university students in Malaysia use a variety of writing strategies, with metacognitive strategies being the most common. Liyanage and Bartlett [3] noted that the students used more compensation strategies in the Saudi Arabic to make up for their lack of background knowledge. However, different conclusion was obtained by Mohseniasl [4] who observed that students used avoidance techniques when writing. They have to simplify or omit things to complete the task because of their limited language skills.

Besides, the relationship between writing strategy and writing proficiency is always investigated. However, relevant research yields mixed results. For instance, the findings of Oh et al. [5] showed that, notably pre-writing approach had a statistically significant influence on L2 writing with 7.2% explanatory power. A metacognitive intervention has been shown to be effective in enhancing learners' writing performance, according to some researchers. Similarly, Cer [6] discovered that students who got the intervention exhibited a greater desire to plan and generated more readable writing. This was accomplished by offering a deliberate intervention in writing. While some other studies failed to show a difference in the frequency of writing strategy use between high and low proficiency students [7]. Accordingly, studies on the relationship between writing strategies and writing proficiency needs more exploration.

Given the significance of writing strategy and inconsistency on the relationship between writing strategy and writing proficiency, this study took the vocational college students in China as respondents to explore their use of writing strategies and the relationship between writing strategies and writing proficiency. It is hoped that this study will provide some implications for creating instructional designs that are student-centered and that foster self-directed learning.

This study firstly described the profile of the respondents

in terms of major, and language proficiency. Then it determined the level of application of the writing strategies and writing proficiency. Furthermore, it tested the differences in writing strategy and writing proficiency when grouped according to major and language proficiency. Lastly, the relationships between writing strategies and writing proficiency was investigated.

## 2. Methodology

In this study, a quantitative technique approach was used to address the research issues. The questionnaires were used to collect the quantitative information about the two research variables, which was then examined quantitatively.

About 300 non-English major students from a vocational college in Central China were recruited to participate in this study based on a convenience sample. The second-year students were chosen because their English language proficiency was relatively stable.

Two instruments were involved in this study. A questionnaire on writing strategies based on the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning was constructed to gather data on the deployment of strategies in writing. Metacognitive strategy, cognitive strategy, compensatory strategy, and social/affective strategy are all included in this questionnaire. A writing proficiency scale with 19 items was adopted to assess the respondents' writing abilities based on Weir [8] evaluation of writing. Structure and organization, content, argumentation, language, and mechanics are the four dimensions of the questionnaire. Both questions utilized the four-point Likert scale, with responses ranging from "strongly agree" to "agree" to "disagree" and "strongly disagree".

The two surveys were sent out via *Questionnaire Star* to get the respondents' responses regarding the use of writing tactics and writing ability. It should be noted that several ethical issues, such as the goal of the research and confidentiality, are taken into account before distribution. After this, the SPSS was applied for the data analysis. Descriptive analysis of the two questionnaires were conducted to investigate the participants' strategy use and writing proficiency. Then, correlation analysis was used to clarify the relationship between learners' writing strategy use and writing proficiency.

## 3. Result and Discussion

### 3.1. Profile of the Respondents

**Table 1.** Profile of the Respondents

Major	Frequency	Percentage
Natural Science	141	45.8
Art Science	167	54.2
Language Proficiency		
High level	234	76.0
Low level	74	24.0

Table 1 offers the profile of the respondents in terms of sex and major. The first indicator was major, and there were 141 science students and 167 art students with the proportion of 45.8% and 54.2 % respectively. Thus, the respondents are in a balanced proportion in major. In terms of the language proficiency, the table showed the high-level students is 234, accounting for 76%, with 74 low-level students, accounting

for 24%. This means that the high-level students outnumbered the low-level students.

### 3.2. Writing Strategies of the Respondents

**Table 2.** Writing Strategies of the Respondents

Indicators	Weighted Mean	Verbal Interpretation	Rank
Metacognitive Strategies	2.39	Disagree	3.5
Cognitive Strategies	2.41	Disagree	2
Compensatory Strategies	2.39	Disagree	3.5
Social-affective Strategy	2.43	Disagree	1
Composite Mean	<b>2.41</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	

Table 2 indicates that overall, the application of writing strategies by the vocational college students in China was at a relatively low level. This result corresponds to the study of Maarof and Murat [7] who surveyed that the EFL students apply less strategies in writing. They found the upper secondary school students devote more time in the while-writing stage, while the prewriting stage of planning and post writing stage of evaluating were ignored. This result is related to the traditional product writing teaching.

This finding is also confirmed by the conclusion reached by Merrotsky [9] taking the less successful language learners as respondents, he observed that when facing language problems, the learners seldom try hard to tackle it, but just write something randomly, or even give up.

Among the four subtypes of strategies, the social-affective strategy ranks first, followed by cognitive strategy. The metacognitive and compensation strategy are the least used. In contrast to the results of other studies, the ranking of writing strategies is different [10]. In her study, the most applied strategy is metacognitive strategy, and the social-affective strategy ranks the last. The respondents' unique characteristics may be the cause of the dispute. The respondents to this study are students at vocational colleges who often perform poorly in academic learning but are more socially and physically engaged. When writing, they could ask for assistance or work together to complete the task. Additionally, their relative low level in language learning also decreases the use of metacognitive strategy. This denotes the importance of getting help from others in writing instead of relying on their own capabilities as high achievers do. This shortcoming should be taken into consideration by instructors and hence substituted by the most appropriate strategies specifically those utilized by proficient learners.

### 3.3. Writing Proficiency of the Respondents

**Table 3.** Writing Proficiency of the Respondents

Indicators	Weighted Mean	Verbal Interpretation	Rank
Structure	2.33	Disagree	1
Content	2.31	Disagree	2.5
Argumentation	2.29	Disagree	4
Language use and Mechanics	2.31	Disagree	2.5
Composite Mean	<b>2.31</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	

It is clear from the table above that the respondents' levels of writing proficiency are fairly low. Given the respondents' limited English proficiency, such a result is not unexpected. This conclusion is in line with many other studies. Fareed et al. [11] observed EFL students in Parkistan also face many grammatical problems in writing. Difficulty in using cohesive device, such as reference, ellipsis, substitution, and cohesive ties were also reported by learners in Egypt in the study of Ahmed [12]. These results suggest that writing pose a challenge to the EFL learners for whom language is always a problem.

Among the four dimensions, the structure ranks the first, followed by content, language and mechanics. The last dimension is the argumentation. This means the vocational college students do best in the organization of writing. The generally constant structure of writing, such as the introduction, body, and conclusion, may be associated to the better performance. And the conjunctions which are easily master make the writing more coherent or logical.

Not surprisingly, the dimension of argumentation is the hardest part for the Chinese learners. This finding conforms to the study of Watkins and Zhang [13] who discovered that the EFL learners are always not competent in arguing in writing. Some of them will only state my-side views, ignoring the other sides of the topic. Also, the Chinese students tend to persuade through personal experience, reducing the convince of the arguments.

### 3.4. Writing Strategies When Grouped According to Profile

**Table 4.** Writing Strategies When Grouped According to Profile

Major	F-	p-	Interpretation
Metacognitive	0.164	0.685	Not
Cognitive	3.836	0.051	Not
Compensatory	1.054	0.305	Not
Social-affective	2.521	0.113	Not
<b>Language</b>			
Metacognitive	2.785	0.096	Not
Cognitive	4.052	0.045	Significant
Compensatory	0.310	0.578	Not
Social-affective	3.114	0.079	Not

Table 4 presents the difference on writing strategies when grouped based on major and language proficiency. The p value( $p>0.05$ ) signifies there is no significant difference between science learners and art learners on the application of writing strategies. This result, however, did not correspond to the views that art learners may use more strategies at language learning. For example, Engineer students are found to rely most on metacognitive strategies and least on social strategies, while political majors used social strategies the most and memory strategies least.

The disagreement lies in that, in China, English course always occurs at a large size class, which can accommodate students from different majors. The same learning environment, including the same teacher, same teaching method leads to the same writing learning from different majors.

At the same time, the table shows overall there is no difference between the proficient learners and the less proficient learners on the use of writing strategies. This result is consistent with the view of Wen [14] who pointed out that

the fundamental difference in writing strategies use between successful and unsuccessful learners existed in appropriacy rather than the amount and frequency of the use of writing strategies. The self-report questionnaire in this study may mainly deal with the frequency, not the quality of the writing strategies applied.

Meanwhile, differences on cognitive strategies application between the proficient learner and less proficient learners can be found. Cognitive strategies contribute to the learners directly. They can help learners process the materials in writing, such as, regrouping the ideas, translation. The difference suggests that the high-level students may do better in writing by focusing on how to write and what to write at the same time, while the low-level students pay more attention to what to write.

### 3.5. Writing Proficiency When Grouped According to Profile

**Table 5.** Writing Proficiency When Grouped According to Profile

Major	F-value	p-value	Interpretation
Structure	0.476	0.491	Not Significant
Content	6.012	0.015	Significant
Argumentation	3.998	0.046	Significant
Language use and Mechanics	0.971	0.325	Not Significant
<b>Language Proficiency</b>			
Structure	4.136	0.043	Significant
Content	3.851	0.051	Not Significant
Argumentation	1.179	0.278	Not Significant
Language use and Mechanics	0.614	0.434	Not Significant

Table 5 displays the difference on writing proficiency when grouped according to major and language proficiency. In terms of major, it was noted that there was a statistically significant difference in content ( $p = 0.015$ ) and argumentation ( $p = 0.046$ ). The test found science learners outperformed in content and argumentation. This finding can be explained by the different thinking styles of different majors. The science students are always exposed to logical thinking, which make them competent at reasoning and generalizing. Thus, the science learners outperformed the art learners in argumentation.

This result is in line with what Alrashidi [15] discovered. In his study, Alrashidi observed that in argumentative writing, science learners performed more logically. Their voice or stance is clearly voiced or expressed, while the diction of the art learners is vague and uncertain.

Besides, there is also significant difference in structure and organization between the proficient learners and less proficient learners( $p>0.05$ ). The proficient learners are more competent in producing a well-organized written. This result in in line with what Zhou and Intaraprasert[16] found. By examining how the Chinese graduate students apply the connectives in writing, he concluded that their writing is full of cohesive devices, but advanced writers employed these devices more often than do intermediate writers.

Surprisingly, the result shows there is no difference on language and mechanics between the proficient learners and less proficient learners( $p<0.05$ ). This suggests that the proficient students and less proficient students are in the same level in language and mechanics. The same level may lie in

the aid of the learning software, which can help check the grammatical or spelling problems. However, this is not inconsistent with the conclusion made by Owu-Ewie, and Williams [17] in the study of focusing on the senior high school students. They found that in the works by the high-level students, there is no grammatical problems and are full

of advanced words. While the low-level students prefer to use basic words, and there are always grammatical problems, such as, the tense, agreement.

### 3.6. Writing Strategies and Writing Proficiency

Table 6. Writing Strategies and Writing Proficiency

		Organization	Content	Argumentation	Language and mechanics
Metacognitive strategy	Pearson Correlation	.474**	.469**	.479**	.455**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000	.000
Cognitive strategy	Pearson Correlation	.328**	.355**	.353**	.350**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000	.000
Compensation strategy	Pearson Correlation	.339**	.393**	.377**	.372**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000	.000
Social affective strategy	Pearson Correlation	.324**	.373**	.360**	.402**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000	.000

According to Table 6, the participants' writing strategy use is significantly correlated with their writing proficiency, indicating that students employing more writing strategies are more likely to perform better in their English writing. This supports the result identified by Pitenoe et al. [18] who investigated the effect of learning strategies on writing. Specifically, he revealed that both cognitive and metacognitive strategies can improve the content of Iranian intermediate learners' writing. However, unlike this study, this study employed a simultaneous analysis of writing strategies rather than the parts of the strategies. The result of this study also conforms to the study conducted by Bai et al. [19]. In a similar vein, taking the pupils in Singapore as respondents, it is concluded that text-generating, revising, monitoring, evaluating, and resourcing strategies were significantly correlated with the participants' English language results [20].

Interestingly, this result is in contrast with is Sun [21] who concluded that there is no obvious correlation between social strategies and writing proficiency, no matter in the while-writing phase or in the post-writing phase. Besides, in the study of Zhao [11], the relationship between the cognitive strategies and writing achievement is not obvious. Furthermore, according to Chen [22], writing strategies only have certain predictive power (16.4%) for the writing achievements, content scores and language scores.

The different result may be explained by the fact that in English writing, besides writing strategies, many other factors also contribute to the writing performance, such as learning style, learning motivation, writing task, writing setting. Therefore, writing strategy has certain predictive power for writing proficiency, but it is not the only factor.

## 4. Conclusion

The findings revealed that the application of the writing strategy and the writing proficiency of the vocational college students in China was at a relatively low level. Results also provided evidence for the predicting effects of the strategies on EFL writing proficiency. It was recommended that English teachers offer writing strategies explicitly in their classrooms.

This is necessary to help students during the writing process and to improve their writing quality.

In light of these findings, some recommendations are proposed. Firstly, for teachers, as shown in the study, writing strategies can directly influence the writing proficiency, so they should improve students' application of writing strategies. Also, the result shows that, the application of the writing strategies is not high in the writing process. The metacognitive strategy and compensation strategy receive the least attention from the college students. Therefore, it is necessary for the teachers to address this problem with more relevant training. For instance, they may encourage students to make a plan before writing and have a peer assessment for polishing it.

Secondly, for students, it is necessary for them to realize that their poor writing proficiency perhaps is not due to their low writing ability but may be caused by the inappropriate or less application of the writing strategies. So, they are supposed to learn more English writing strategies and know when and how to apply English writing strategies, and students are suggested to do more English writing and to apply strategies as much as possible. A better understanding of their strategies in writing, they may enhance their writing.

Some limitations for the study were also given. Firstly, the present study is based on questionnaires. This method might not fully reflect how well students actually understand or behave when writing. For a more objective outcome in the future, other techniques, such interviewing and classroom observation, may be used. Also, writing is a very complex process which may be affected by many other factors, such as emotional factors, future research could examine how other variables, such as motivation influence writing performance.

## References

- [1] T. Silva. Toward an understanding of the distinct nature of L2 writing: The ESL research and its implications. TESOL quarterly, 657-677,1993.
- [2] S. A. Crossley, D. S. McNamara. Does writing development equal writing quality? A computational investigation of

- syntactic complexity in L2 learners. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 66-79, 2014.
- [3] S. Raoofi, S. H. Chan, J. Mukundan, S. Rashid. A qualitative study into L2 writing strategies of university students. *English Language Teaching*, 39-45, 2014.
- [4] I. Liyanage, B. Bartlett. Personality types and languages learning strategies: Chameleons changing colors. *System*, 598-608, 2013.
- [5] F. Mohseniasl. Examining the effect of strategy instruction on writing apprehension and writing achievement of EFL learners. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, 811-817, 2014.
- [6] E. Oh, Lee, M., C. Y.-I. Moon. The contributions of planning, L2 linguistic knowledge and individual differences to L2 writing. *The Journal of Asia TEFL*, 45-85, 2015.
- [7] E. Cer. The instruction of writing strategies: The effect of the metacognitive strategy on the writing skills of pupils in secondary education. *Sage Open*, 1-17, 2019.
- [8] N. Maarof, M. Murat. Writing strategies used by ESL upper secondary school students. *International Education Studies*, 47-55, 2013.
- [9] C. J. Weir. *Language testing and validation*. Great Britain: Palgrave, 2005.
- [10] P. Merrotsky. Tolerance of Ambiguity: A Trait of the Creative Personality. *Creativity Research Journal*, 232-237, 2013.
- [11] Lu. Zhao. A Correlation Study on Senior High School Students' Tolerance of Ambiguity English Writing Strategies and Writing Achievements. *Inner Mongolia Normal University*, (2022).
- [12] M. Fareed, Ashraf, M. Bilal. ESL learners' writing skills: Problems, factors and suggestions. *Journal of education and social sciences*, 81-92, 2016.
- [13] A. H. Ahmed. Students' problems with cohesion and coherence in EFL essay writing in Egypt: Different perspectives. *Literacy Information and Computer Education Journal (LICEJ)*, 211-221, 2010.
- [14] D. Watkins, Q. Zhang. The good teacher. *Effective schools*, 185-204, 2006.
- [15] Qiufang. Wen. *English Learning Strategy*. Shanghai : Foreign Education Press, 2005.
- [16] R. S. Alrashidi. The Effects of Data-Driven Learning on Intermediate Language Learners' Use of Metadiscourse Markers in Argumentative Essay Writing (A Quasi-Experimental Study) (Doctoral dissertation, The University of Liverpool (United Kingdom), 2022).
- [17] C. Zhou, C. Intaraprasert. Language Learning Strategies Employed by Chinese English-Major Pre-Service Teachers in Relation to Gender and Personality Types. *English Language Teaching*, 155-169, 2015.
- [18] C. Owu-Ewie, M. R. Williams. Grammatical and lexical errors in students' English composition writing: The case of three senior high schools (SHS) in the central region of Ghana. *Sinus English teaching*, 463-482, 2017.
- [19] M. R. Pitenoee, A. Modaberi, E. Ardestani, M. The effect of cognitive and metacognitive writing strategies on content of the Iranian intermediate EFL learners' writing. *Journal of Language Teaching and Research*, 594-600, 2017.
- [20] R. Bai, G. Hu, P. Y. Gu. The Relationship Between Use of Writing Strategies and English Proficiency in Singapore Primary Schools. *Asia-Pacific Edu Res*, 355-365, 2014.
- [21] Mengna, Sun. A Correlation Research between Senior High School Students' English Writing Strategies and English Writing Proficiency. *Xi'an International Studies University*, 2021.
- [22] Y. Chen. Study of the writing strategies used by Chinese non-English majors. *Theory and practice in language studies*, 245-251, 2011.