

FACTORS AFFECTING CHINESE COLLEGE STUDENTS' ENGLISH WRITING SELF-EFFICACY AND WRITING SELF-REGULATED STRATEGIES

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Abstract: This paper discusses the importance of English writing for college students in China. The paper argues that English writing is an important skill for college students to succeed in their studies and careers. The paper also discusses some of the challenges that college students face in learning English writing.

Keywords: English writing, college students, China, challenges, importance

Introduction

Nowadays, English writing, the prominent medium for much of international communication, wins greater attention in foreign language education. It, as one of the expressive language skills, is an important carrier for learners to exchange ideas, express emotions and spread culture, and can also reflect their language use ability and thinking ability. For foreign language learners, writing is an important indicator of their foreign language level, and also is usually an advanced skill as well as a complicated activity, which needs to deal with cognition, motivation and language process.[24] In many Asian countries like China where English is a foreign language, English writing is a struggling experience and the most difficult skill for learners to develop.[4] To teachers, it is also a tricky link in the teaching process. In a word, cultivating English learners' writing ability is one of the significant goals of foreign language teaching and learning.

Under the background of globalization era, English, as an international language, is increasingly valued by Chinese universities and government. Meanwhile, English writing, as one of its important skills, has attracted increasing attention. It is widely accepted that a strong writing ability will enhance students' overall English level. College students are the backbone of the country, and their written English ability is an essential capacity for their life and work in the era of globalization, so it is no wonder that a good command of English writing is the standard and requirement of the country for its talents. According to the latest edition of A Guide to College English Teaching (2020) issued by the Education Department of China, College students are required to be able to express their personal views freely in written English and write a variety of genres on a considerable number of topics logically with proper use of skills. It can be seen that the state places great emphasis on college students' writing proficiency in English. However, according to the current survey of college students' writing status, it is obvious that there is still a big gap between students' English writing level in China and the expectations of the state and the society. Their writing ability still remains far from satisfactory.

Chinese academicians have done a lot of research on how to improve students' writing skills, but the object of their concern has been biased. They pay more attention to teacher factor, exploring teachers' teaching methods and strategies, while ignoring the concern of the learning subject—students. Learner factor, including learners' strategies as well as emotional and cognitive activities haven't got the attention it deserves. Actually, students' writing ability is influenced greatly by a variety of learner factors such as self-concept and self-efficacy.[13] To understand what leads to poor writing performance and how individual factors may influence language performance, further studies are needed.

Up to now, researchers in the globe have made many explorations on the correlation between English writing level and English writing strategies as well as writing self-efficacy. Although the previous studies have provided valuable insights into the interrelationships among the individual variables involved in the present study and English writing performance for foreign language learners, they have their weaknesses. Most of the previous studies have rarely focused their object on college students, especially non-English majors in Chinese context. Instead, they have been carried out in ESL contexts where English is the native or dominant language, which is very different from EFL contexts where other languages are native and dominant. Therefore, research is needed in EFL contexts because some of the findings and generalizations obtained in ESL contexts may not be applicable to the EFL learners. The existence of these problems provides space and necessity for the present study. This study, taking Chinese non-English major college students into consideration, examines the status quo of students' English writing self-efficacy and self-regulated strategies and their association in order to give teachers insights into how to improve students' writing competency.

1. Literature Review

2.1. Writing Self-efficacy

Writing self-efficacy was developed from the self-efficacy concept. Bandura who firstly proposed the concept of self-efficacy, interpreted it as people's judgment and evaluation of their ability to do some or some kind of tasks.[5] Then, with the increasing studies on self-efficacy, many researchers began to focus on writing self-efficacy. McCarthy, Meier and Rinderer (1985) put forward that writing self-efficacy refers to learners' confidence in writing skills. [23] Graham and Harris (1989) stressed that self-efficacy concerns whether learners are confident enough to complete certain writing tasks.[10] Subsequently, Shell, Murphy and Bruning (1989) advocated the combination of writing skills and writing tasks, so they looked on writing self-efficacy as the judgment to use specific writing skills and perform specific writing tasks successfully.[35] Pajares (2003), on the basis of self-efficacy theory, proposed the concept of writing self-efficacy which referred to whether learners were confident enough to apply their prior writing skills and knowledge into a writing task.[25] Writing self-efficacy, according to Jones (2008) and Woodrow (2011), refers to learners' confidence in their capacity to execute particular writing assignments, and it has a direct impact on key elements including method utilization and degree of engagement. [14] [46]

Previous studies concerned the instrument of measuring writing self-efficacy[35] [26] [14] [46] [38] [18] [37]; looked into the connection between writing performance and writing self-efficacy[23] [52] [27] [19] [13] [21]; explored the factors related to self-efficacy in English writing such as writing anxiety and writing strategies[31]

[46] [20] [15] [49] [12]; determined whether there are differences in variables such as gender and age in English writing self-efficacy[34] [28] [27].

Researchers have also investigated the effects of different evaluation methods on improving writing self-efficacy, such as the use of student self-evaluation, peer evaluation, automatic scoring by machine and Teacher-student collaborative assessment[50] [47] [51] [8] [39] [22].

2.2. Writing Self-regulated Strategies

Self-regulated strategies use learners' agency, purpose, and instrumental cognition in order to acquire knowledge or skills. They include techniques including gathering knowledge, rehearsing, using memory aids, organizing and changing information, and self-preservation. The technique of applying self-regulated strategies to writing is known as writing self-regulated strategies. Writing self-regulation strategies refer to the ways writers manage their cognitive behaviours while writing, such as checking the referential appropriateness of pronouns[6] and they are organized and distributed for authors to effectively manage and control recursive writing processes, such as planning, translation, and revision, and to achieve communicative goals[30].

A large body of research verified the positive effect of writing self-regulated strategies on writing performance[33] [41] [45] [44]; examined whether the application of self-regulation techniques varies in writing by different genders and grades[1] [3] [43]; explored the effect of feedback on writing self-regulation strategies[29] [17] [48] [42].

Previous studies also demonstrated the significant correlation of writing self-regulated strategies with self-efficacy[53] [16] [32] [2] [7] [36] [40]. They all revealed that writing self-regulated strategies were positively correlated with writing self-efficacy. However, there are also some researchers who came to the completely different conclusions. For instance, Graham, Harris and Mason (2005), as revealed by Graham, Harris & Beard (2019), in their study offered their students Self-Regulated Strategy Development instruction, but the self-efficacy beliefs of struggling pupils did not improve as anticipated. [11]

2. Method

3.1. Research Design

In this study, survey questionnaires that matched the study's aims, including determining Chinese college students' writing self-efficacy and writing self-regulated strategies, were used to collect the data. Correlational research method was used to analyze the relationship between the two variables in the same population, which aims to examine to what degree the correlation exists between them.

3.2. Participants

This study selected non-English major undergraduates ranging from freshmen to sophomores in Anhui Xinhua University in China as the investigation and research subjects. Students who major in English were not included in the survey. In China, students learn English from their primary school to colleges and universities. And the vast majority of colleges and universities including Anhui Xinhua University offer students College English Course in the first two years to improve their comprehensive English proficiency. The target respondents in this study are 409, which were determined by using Raosoft sampling calculator with level of confidence (95%) and margin of error (5%).

3.3. Instruments

Two questionnaires were adapted to aid in the investigation.

Questionnaire 1, which has 26 items, was adapted from Ting Sun and Chuang Wang’s Questionnaire of English Writing Self-Efficacy (QEWSE) (2020) to determine the sample respondents’ writing self-efficacy. The Self-Efficacy for Writing Scale, created by Bruning et al. in 2013 to assess middle and high school students’ writing self-efficacy, and the Questionnaire of English Self-Efficacy, created by Wang and Bai in 2017 to assess EFL students’ English self-efficacy, served as the foundation for Sun and Wang’s invention of the QEWSE. The QEWSE has five subscales: self-efficacy for self-regulation, ideation, organization, grammar and spelling, and usage of English writing. In this part, a measure scale ranging from 1(I cannot do it) to 4(I can do it well) was selected.

Questionnaire 2 was adapted from Questionnaire of English Writing Self-Regulated Learning Strategies (QEW SRLS) invented by Ting Sun and Chuang Wang (2020) to examine the use of writing self-regulated strategies by college students. This questionnaire consists of three parts: environmental SRL strategies (6 items); behavioral SRL strategies (4 items) and personal SRL strategies (10 items). Besides, environmental SRL strategies possesses two subcategories, namely seeking assistance strategies (3 items), persistence strategies (3 items). Personal SRL strategies comprises self-evaluation strategies (3 items), organization and transformation strategies (5 items), and goal setting and planning strategies (2 items). The scale was used to indicate how often each statement applies to the respondents:

1 = Never; 2=Seldom; 3 = Sometimes; 4 = often.

3.4. Procedure and Data Analysis

In order to assess the degree of internal consistency and stability of the grouped items in the instrument, Cronbach’s Alpha was first used to analyze the internal validity of the 46 questions overall from the three questionnaires.

Table 1: The Reliability Test Result for Two Variables

| Indicators | Cronbach Alpha | Remarks |
|--------------------------------------------|----------------|------------|
| Ideation | 0.791 | Acceptable |
| Organization | 0.904 | Excellent |
| Grammar and spelling | 0.836 | Good |
| Use of English writing | 0.941 | Excellent |
| Self-efficacy for self-regulation | 0.861 | Good |
| Seeking assistance strategies | 0.809 | Good |
| Persistence strategies | 0.844 | Good |
| Seeking opportunity strategies | 0.750 | Acceptable |
| Self-evaluation strategies | 0.769 | Acceptable |
| Organization and transformation strategies | 0.871 | Good |
| Goal setting and planning strategies | 0.786 | Acceptable |

George and Mallery (2003) provide the following rules of thumb: “_ > .9 – Excellent, _ > .8 – Good, _ > .7 – Acceptable, _ > .6 – Questionable, _ > .5 – Poor, and _ < .5 – Unacceptable”

As is revealed in Table 1 that all of the Cronbach Alpha is beyond 0.7, which suggests that the respondents understood the items and gave the appropriate answers. The questionnaires are proved reliable and stable in consistency.

Then, survey questionnaires provided the data for this investigation. Data collection started from 27th February and ended on 7th March, 2023 through Wenjuanxing — a professional and influential online platform for questionnaire.

After the data were collected, they were used to describe and infer the features of each variable and the correlation between the two variables with the computer methods. All collected data was engaged in statistical analysis by the tool of Statistic Package for the Social Science (SPSS) 29. First, the reliability and validity of the students’ writing self-efficacy and writing self-regulated strategies were analyzed. Second, descriptive statistics were conducted to compute the means and standard deviations for each item of the students’ writing self-efficacy and writing self-regulated strategies. Third, Pearson’s r correlation was used to conduct correlational analysis to determine the relationship between the writing self-efficacy and the writing self-regulated strategies.

3. Results and Discussion

The respondents’ overall assessment of English writing self-efficacy is provided in Table 2. The composite mean of 1.95 indicates that the respondents can do all the indicators basically. There is low level of English writing self-efficacy among college non-English major students. Among all the indicators, Organization ranks first with the highest weighted mean 2.06. Compared with the other four skills, the respondents are more confident in their ability of organization. The next is the Grammar and Spelling with the weighed mean 1.98. The indicators Ideation and Self-efficacy for Self-regulation got the same weighted mean 1.96. The last one is Use of English writing with the weighed mean 1.77.

Table 2: Descriptive statistics of English Writing Self-efficacy

| Indicators | Weighted Mean | Verbal Interpretation | Rank |
|--------------------------------------|---------------|-----------------------|------|
| 1. Ideation | 1.96 | Can do it Basically | 3.5 |
| 2. Organization | 2.06 | Can do it Basically | 1 |
| 3. Grammar and spelling | 1.98 | Can do it Basically | 2 |
| 4. Use of English writing | 1.77 | Can do it Basically | 5 |
| 5. Self-efficacy for self-regulation | 1.96 | Can do it Basically | 3.5 |
| Composite Mean | 1.95 | Can do it Basically | |

Legend: 3.50 – 4.00 = Can do it Well; 2.50 – 3.49 = Can do It; 1.50 – 2.49 = Can do it. Basically; 1.00 - 1.49 = Cannot do It

Writing self-efficacy refers to writers’ beliefs and confidence in their abilities to perform writing tasks successfully. From Table 2, it can be easily concluded that in general, students are relatively more efficacious in organization while less efficacious in the use of English writing and they are not capable of practical writing. This

is consistent with Sun and Wang’s finding (2020), which explained that in Chinese EFL context, the English instruction are dominated by examination-driven approaches which focus on grammar and linguistic skills and students lack opportunities to practice their writing. [37]

The result has a slight difference from the previous study. Tang and Xu (2011) examined the writing self-efficacy of 218 freshmen and found that students have a medium level of writing self-efficacy. [38] This result is supported by Kirmizi and Kirmizi’s (2015) study.[15] The difference may lie in the fact that Anhui Xinhua University is far from a prominent university, and the participants of the present study from this institution are generally weak in English, which definitely affect their writing self-efficacy.

Table 3 presents the overall assessment of English writing self-regulated learning strategies. The composite mean of 2.34 indicates that the respondents do not utilize these self-regulated strategies in writing frequently. Among all the indicators, persistence strategies got the highest weighted mean of 2.53, and it is followed by organization and transformation strategies with the mean score of 2.51. They have the same verbal interpretation sometimes. All other four items share the same verbal interpretation seldom. And behavioral self-regulated strategies got the lowest weighted mean of 2.12. Obviously, seeking assistance strategies, behavioral self-regulated strategies, self-evaluation strategies and personal self-regulated strategies are almost neglected by students when they write.

Table 3: Descriptive statistics of English Writing Self-regulated Learning Strategies

| Indicators | Weighted Mean | Verbal Interpretation | Rank |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------|-----------------------|------|
| 1. Seeking assistance strategies | 2.46 | Seldom | 3 |
| 2. Persistence strategies | 2.53 | Sometimes | 1 |
| 3. Behavioral self-regulated strategies | 2.12 | Seldom | 6 |
| 4. Self-evaluation strategies | 2.25 | Seldom | 4 |
| 5. Organization and transformation strategies | 2.51 | Sometimes | 2 |
| 6. Personal self-regulated strategies (Goal setting and planning strategies) | 2.17 | Seldom | 5 |
| Composite Mean | 2.34 | Seldom | |

Legend: 3.50 – 4.00 = Often; 2.50 – 3.49 = Sometimes; 1.50 – 2.49 = Seldom; 1.00 - 1.49 = Never

The results are partially consistent with Sun and Wang’s (2020) findings, which also investigated Chinese university students and reported that they did not have a frequent use of self-regulated strategies in writing. [37] In their study, organization and transformation strategies and persistence strategies are also students’ most frequently used strategies. However, goal setting and planning strategies rather than behavioral self-regulated strategies are the least frequently used strategies. The slight difference may lie in the fact that their subjects are English majors while the present study took non-English majors as participants.

From the statistical results shown in table 3, it can be seen that the frequency of self-regulated strategies used by Chinese non-English majors in English writing is quite low. Students do not pay enough attention to the positive effect of using self-regulated strategies on writing quality, and they also lack awareness to do that. This situation

needs to be attached great emphasis on by English instructors and they should think out the effective ways to deal with that.

With regards to the relationship between English writing self-efficacy and self-regulated learning strategies. It is observed that, as shown in Table 4, the computed rho-values indicates strong direct correlation and the resulted p-values are all less than the alpha level. This depicts that there exists highly significant relationship and implies that the better the writing self-efficacy, the better are the learning strategies employed, and vice versa.

The results echo the findings of many previous studies, which confirmed that writing self-efficacy has positive correlation with self-regulated strategy use. For example, Ekholm, Zumbunn, and Conklin (2015) took 115 undergraduate students in the United States as research objects, and the survey results showed that students' writing self-efficacy was positively correlated and significant with their writing self-regulation ability, that is, students with a high level of English writing self-efficacy experience also used writing self-regulation strategies more frequently. [9]

Table 4: Relationship Between English Writing Self-efficacy and Self-regulated Learning Strategies

| Ideation | rho | p-value | Interpretation |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------|---------|--------------------|
| Seeking assistance strategies | .314** | <.001 | Highly Significant |
| Persistence strategies | .341** | <.001 | Highly Significant |
| Behavioral self-regulated strategies | .484** | <.001 | Highly Significant |
| Self-evaluation strategies | .398** | <.001 | Highly Significant |
| Organization and transformation strategies | .391** | <.001 | Highly Significant |
| Personal self-regulated strategies (Goal setting and planning strategies) | .471** | <.001 | Highly Significant |
| Organization | | | |
| Seeking assistance strategies | .355** | <.001 | Highly Significant |
| Persistence strategies | .423** | <.001 | Highly Significant |
| Behavioral self-regulated strategies | .502** | <.001 | Highly Significant |
| Self-evaluation strategies | .423** | <.001 | Highly Significant |
| Organization and transformation strategies | .442** | <.001 | Highly Significant |
| Personal self-regulated strategies (Goal setting and planning strategies) | .428** | <.001 | Highly Significant |
| Grammar and spelling | | | |
| Seeking assistance strategies | .383** | <.001 | Highly Significant |
| Persistence strategies | .418** | <.001 | Highly Significant |
| Behavioral self-regulated strategies | .526** | <.001 | Highly Significant |
| Self-evaluation strategies | .520** | <.001 | Highly Significant |
| Organization and transformation strategies | .480** | <.001 | Highly Significant |
| Personal self-regulated strategies (Goal setting and planning strategies) | .506** | <.001 | Highly Significant |

| | | | |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------|-------|--------------------|
| Use of English writing | | | |
| Seeking assistance strategies | .334** | <.001 | Highly Significant |
| Persistence strategies | .355** | <.001 | Highly Significant |
| Behavioral self-regulated strategies | .618** | <.001 | Highly Significant |
| Self-evaluation strategies | .494** | <.001 | Highly Significant |
| Organization and transformation strategies | .433** | <.001 | Highly Significant |
| Personal self-regulated strategies (Goal setting and planning strategies) | .546** | <.001 | Highly Significant |
| Self-efficacy for self-regulation | | | |
| Seeking assistance strategies | .440** | <.001 | Highly Significant |
| Persistence strategies | .473** | <.001 | Highly Significant |
| Behavioral self-regulated strategies | .595** | <.001 | Highly Significant |
| Self-evaluation strategies | .506** | <.001 | Highly Significant |
| Organization and transformation strategies | .476** | <.001 | Highly Significant |
| Personal self-regulated strategies (Goal setting and planning strategies) | .520** | <.001 | Highly Significant |

Legend: Significant at p-value < 0.01

4. Conclusions

Based on the results of the study, the conclusions are drawn as follows: Chinese non-English majors have quite low self-efficacy in English writing. Compared to other four sub-domains, they have more confidence in organizing their writing. They seldom use self-regulated learning strategies in the process of English writing in general. Among six sub-domains, only persistence strategies as well as organization and transformation strategies are sometimes utilized and other four are all seldom adopted. Additionally, English writing self-efficacy has significant relationships with writing self-regulated strategies.

5. Recommendations

Based on the findings and conclusions, the author recommends the following:

- 1) The samples in the present study, due to the limited time and energy, are mainly chosen from one university of China. In future research, diversified samples from different universities and colleges of China should be collected to increase the representation of samples.
- 2) Chinese English teachers may take a variety of effective strategies and methods such as self-assessment interventions, teacher-student collaborative assessment and the Length Approach to improve students' writing self-efficacy and their use of self-regulated strategies given the fact of students' low confidence in their writing ability, infrequent use of self-regulated strategies.
- 3) Practical writing exercises should be reinforced in classroom teaching and instructors may incorporate more industry-related writing, like writing drug instructions, crafting social media posts, composing emails, to motivate and enhance students' writing enthusiasm and engagement.

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