

# An Empirical Study of English Writing Strategies Used by Non-English Majors

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**Key words:** English Writing Strategies; non-English majors; motivational intensity; gender

**Abstract:** This thesis is a tentative research report of an investigation of writing strategies employed by the college students of non-English majors. The study reported her tries to examine the frequencies of the writing strategies employed by the non-English major college students, figure out the relationship between the students' strategy use and motivational intensity as well as the difference in writing strategy use between female and male students. At last, pedagogical implications and limitations of the study were pointed out. The author also gave some suggestions on further related researches.

## Introduction

In recent years, researchers' attention in the field of second language acquisition (SLA) have been shifted from the exclusive focus on teaching to increased concerns for learning strategies, because it is believed that in comparison with teachers' role, students themselves and their ability to take full advantage of opportunities to learn play a more important role in their learning. [1] The most general findings among the investigation of language learning strategies are that the use of appropriate language learning strategies can lead to improved proficiency or achievement in the students' learning activities. [2] Although there have been some studies on writing strategies both at home and abroad, but most were done on a rather small scale and few were done with the considering of some affective factors such as motivational intensity, gender, aptitude and so on. [3] What is more, it has been pointed out that more empirical research on L2 writing strategies is needed in our country. [4] [5] Thus the present study is carried out to explore the relationship between writing strategy use and the relationship between some variables (e.g. motivational intensity, gender) and the use of writing strategies.

## Methodology

### A. Subjects

The 130 students who participated in this study were selected from two universities. One is Hubei University of Chinese Medicine, and the other is South-central University for Nationalities. In this research, the subjects are sophomores from different majors including International Business, Law, Business Administration, Economics, gardening and Computer science. The subjects are made up of 103 female students and 27 male students.

### B. Instruments

The instruments used in the data collection were: 1) a revised version of the Writing Strategy Questionnaire designed by Petric, et al and 2) a required writing assignment from a book talking about writing in CET6 which is written by an authoritative person. [5] The data for this study were collected through a writing strategy questionnaire based on Petric and Czarl's writing strategy questionnaire in their published article "Validating a Writing Strategy Questionnaire" (System 31:187-215). [6]

### C. Data collection

About 170 questionnaires were distributed, and 165 valid questionnaires were collected. Then the subjects were told that they need to finish a writing assignment next week which would occupy 10% of their final examination of that semester to make sure they would take a serious attitude

towards the writing assignments. Then the next week, 152 compositions were collected in all. Among the 152 compositions, 32 were picked out because the writers did not take part in answering the questionnaire or did not answer the questionnaire properly. As a result, there were 130 compositions to be scored.

#### D. Data analysis

After the questionnaires are collected, the data were analyzed by SPSS. [7] First, descriptive statistics, including frequencies, means, and standard deviations, were used to describe the overall characteristics of the students' writing strategy use. Second, correlation analyses between writing strategy use and writing achievements were conducted to see how writing strategies are related to writing achievement. Finally, the researcher conducted the t-tests to find out the relationship between the writing strategy use to motivational intensity and gender.

### Results and Discussion

#### A. Relationship between writing strategy use and motivational intensity

There were ten statements used to measure students' motivational intensity. The values of the five statements put forward oppositely on purpose had been recoded ahead of our statistical analysis of the data. The data were recorded by exchanging the value "1" and "5", "2" and "4" with the value of "3" remaining the same. Finally, the data of motivational intensity were found to range from the minimum value of 22 to the maximum of 45. Rationally, students whose scores are more than or equal 38 are those with high motivational intensity, while students whose scores are less than or equal 31 are the ones with low motivational intensity. In order to make sure whether the assumed high motivational intensity and low motivational intensity groups belong to two different groups, the t-test was carried out. The results are as following table.

Table 1 T-test of the students' Motivational intensity Group Statistics

	scores	N	Mean	Std.Deviation	Std.Error Mean
<b>Motivational intensity</b>	38-45	32	40.1875	1.99091	.35195
	22-31	29	29.1724	1.96521	.36493

#### Independent Samples Test

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variance		t-test for Equality of Means		
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig.(2-tailed)
<b>Motivational intensity</b>	<b>Equal variances assumed</b>	.162	.689	21.712	59	.000

From the above table, we can know that the high motivational students and low motivational students do not belong to the same group ( $p < .05$ ).

Table 2 T-test of the mean of the individual writing strategies employed by high (38-45) and low (22-31) motivational intensity

Variances	Mean		Std. Deviation		t	Sig. (2-tailed)
	High Motivational Intensity(N=32)	Low Motivational Intensity(N=29)	High Motivational Intensity(N=32)	Low Motivational Intensity(N=29)		
Pre-writing strategies	3.0195	2.9267	.47105	.41662	.812	.420
While-writing strategies	3.1295	2.9926	.34777	.30861	1.619	.111
Revising strategies	2.5117	2.6013	.40362	.38398	-.886	.379

Table 2 T-test of the mean of the stage writing strategies employed by students with high (38-45) and low (22-31) motivational intensity

Table 3 T-test of the mean of the individual writing strategies employed by high (38-45) and low (22-31) motivational intensity

Variances	Mean		Std. Deviation		t	Sig (2-tailed)
	High Motivational Intensity(N=32)	Low Motivational Intensity(N=29)	High Motivational Intensity(N=32)	Low Motivational Intensity(N=29)		
itemA2	4.6563	4.1724	.48256	.96618	2.435	.019
itemA6	3.5313	2.9310	1.10671	1.13172	2.093	.041
itemA7	3.2500	2.5862	1.24434	.98261	2.296	.025
itemB7	4.0625	3.4138	.61892	.86674	3.333	.002
itemB14	2.6438	2.0031	.70066	1.14578	2.237	.030
itemC3	1.3750	2.1379	.60907	.78940	-4.248	.000

From Table 3, we can see clearly that high motivational and low motivational students do not showed difference in the use of stage writing strategies ( $p > .05$ ). The results about the differences in the use of individual strategies between the two groups are presented in Table 3 from which we can know that high motivational and low motivational students showed some significant differences in six individual writing strategies. For item A2 (Before I start writing I revise the requirements.), itemA6 (I note down words and short notes related to the topic.), itemA7 (I write an outline of my paper in English.), itemB1 (I start with the introduction.) and itemB7 (I go for sure in grammar and vocabulary.), high motivational students showed a higher frequency of reporting use than low motivational students at a significant level  $p < .05$ . While for itemC3 (When I have finished my paper, I hand it in without checking it.), low motivational students' means were higher than high motivational students' means at a very significant level  $p = .000$ .

#### B. Relationship between writing strategy use and gender

The author conducted the t-test in order to find out if there is any difference in writing strategy use between the female and male students. The results are demonstrated in the following two tables.

Table 4 T-test of the mean of the stage writing strategies employed by the female and male students

Variances	Mean		Std. Deviation		t	Sig (2-tailed)
	Female(N=103)	Male(N=27)	Female(N=103)	Male(N=27)		
Pre-writing strategies	3.0473	3.0972	.41240	.63580	-.387	.701
While-writing strategies	3.1019	2.9180	.33467	.35808	2.506	<b>.013</b>
Revising strategies	2.5413	2.5185	.36909	.39445	.281	.779

As shown in Table 4 of the three stage categories of writing strategies, only in the while-writing stage, female students showed higher frequency of reporting use than male students. Females' mean was higher than males' mean at a significance level  $p < .05$  ( $p = .013$ ).

Table 5 T-test of the mean of the individual writing strategies employed by the female and male students

Variances	Mean		Std. Deviation		t	Sig (2-tailed)
	Female(N=103)	Male(N=27)	Female(N=103)	Male(N=27)		
itemA1	2.3592	2.8519	1.08334	1.29210	-2.018	.046
itemA6	3.4951	2.7778	.96887	1.31071	3.168	.002
itemA8	1.9515	2.6296	.91157	1.39085	-2.402	.022
itemB3	3.2039	2.5556	.96365	1.05003	3.054	.003
itemC2	3.0485	3.5556	1.09704	1.01274	-2.170	.032

As for the individual strategy use, only the data which are statistically significant are presented in table 5. In all the categories of writing strategies, only five of them are statistically significant. As it can be seen from table, the female students' means were higher than male students' means at a significance level  $p < .05$  for itemA6 (I note down words and short notes related to the topic.) and itemB3 (I stop after a few sentences or a whole paragraph, covering one idea.). While for itemA1 (I make a timetable for the writing process.), item A8 (I write notes or an outline in Chinese.), itemC2 (I only check what I have written when I have finished the whole paper.), male students showed higher frequency of reporting use than female students at a significant level  $p < .05$ .

### C. Relationship between writing strategy use and motivational intensity

From the above tables, we can see clearly that high motivational and low motivational students do not showed difference in the use of stage writing strategies ( $p > .05$ ). The high motivational intensity students and low motivational students had similar mean frequencies as for stage writing strategies use, which indicates that motivational intensity does not have much effect on the stage writing strategy use. From this, we can know that high motivational students were inclined to use topic-examining strategy, brainstorming strategy statistically more often than the low motivational students in the pre-writing strategy. [5] And they also paid much more attention to the correctness of grammar and vocabulary during the while-writing stage. What's more, they employed social strategy more often than the low motivational intensity group (itemB14). When coming to revising

stage, low motivational students were more likely to hand in their writing without checking (itemC3). This is quite reasonable because low motivational students did not attach importance to writing than the high motivational students did. They were not so willing to spend more time in checking their writing.

#### D. Relationship between writing strategy use and gender

As shown in Table 4 and Table 5 of the three stage categories of writing strategies, only in the while-writing stage, female students showed higher frequency of reporting use than male students. Females' mean was higher than males' mean at a significance level  $p < .05$  ( $p = .013$ ). It implies that female students employ writing strategies more often in the while-writing strategy than female students.

As for as the individual strategies are concerned, the female students' means were higher than male students' means at a significance level  $p < .05$  for itemA6 (I note down words and short notes related to the topic.). It indicates that female students used brainstorming strategies significantly more often than male students. While for itemA1 (I make a timetable for the writing process.), itemA8 (I write notes or an outline in Chinese.), itemC2 (I only check what I have written when I have finished the whole paper.), male students showed higher frequency of reporting use than female students at a significant level  $p < .05$ . This shows that male students tended to make a plan for their writing more often than female students. And as regards to outline listing, male students were inclined to write outline in Chinese more often than female students. Then in the revising stage, male students preferred to check their writing after they had finished the whole paper. And during the interview with three female students, they said they liked to check their essay when they had finished part of it and then continued to write. [6] This is in accordance with what female did in their while-writing stage. In the while-writing stage, females showed a statistically higher frequency of reporting use than males for itemB3 (I stop after a few sentences or a whole paragraph, covering one idea.) ( $p < .05$ ). They preferred to check their essay during their while-writing stage. That is to say, they always check the writing while composing the essay.

## Conclusion

### A. Major findings

First, the use of stage writing strategies does not vary with motivational intensity. That is to say, the high motivational intensity students and low motivational students have similar mean frequencies as for stage writing strategies. But the two groups do show some differences in specific strategies use. The differences include: high motivational students were inclined to use topic-examining strategy, brainstorming strategy statistically more often than the low motivational students in the pre-writing stage; and they also paid much more attention to the correctness of grammar and vocabulary during the while-writing stage; what's more, they employed social strategy more often than the low motivational intensity group (itemB14); when coming to revising stage, low motivational students were more likely to hand in their writing without checking (itemC3).

Second, the study shows the choice of writing strategies differs a little between female students and male students. It is found that female students showed higher frequency of reporting use than male students with respect to stage strategy use. And in the specific categories of strategies, the female students employ brainstorming strategies more often than male students.

### Implications

Third, Strategies used by learners with high motivational intensity are somewhat different from those used by learners with low motivational intensity. Teachers should firstly identify the students' motivational intensity so that instruction can be adapted accordingly. With teachers' help, students could practice using writing strategies according to their different learner characteristics.

### B. Limitations and suggestions for further study

There are some limitations in the present study. The first limitation of this study comes from the limited size of the samples. That is to say, the questionnaire sample size is small and drawn from only two universities. And the present study involves a small sample of 130 non-English major

students. A large size of the samples and more students from different non-English majors may lead to a more reliable and valid result.

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