

Writing Strategies of Chinese Undergraduate English Major Students

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Abstract

English writing is very important for Chinese students since it is a crucial part of many tests, such as the College Entrance Examination for high school students in China, College English Tests (CET), and the Unified National Graduate Entrance Examination. Some students frequently employ writing strategies such as memorizing sample phrases, sentences, or essay templates to cope with exams. Some studies confirmed that there is a certain relationship between students' use of writing strategies and their writing performance. There are some high-performing students who usually can not only express certain content in a coherent structure but can also organize the sentences well with little to no grammatical mistakes when writing in English. The participants of this case study are undergraduate students who are high-performing writers and English majors. They completed two writing tasks, followed the think-aloud protocol, and joined the semi-structured interview. Results determined the strategies of the participants, such as meta-cognitive, cognitive, rhetorical, and affective/social strategies. Findings have important implications for teaching and learning writing.

Keywords: Chinese student-writers, English writing, high-performing writers, writing performance, writing strategies

1. Introduction

Writing skills are not easy to master, especially for second-language learners (Fajrina, Everat, & Sadeghi, 2021; Maarof & Murat, 2013; Suvin, 2020). Mastering writing skills requires the learners' long-term practice and skill development (Al Asmari, 2013). Bai, Hu, & Gu (2014) mentioned that effective use of writing strategies is good for learners in improving students' writing competence. Writing strategies may help to enhance the quality of writing (Maarof & Murat, 2013).

In terms of English writing, seeking help from better-scored classmates or peer friends is one of the strategies of less skilled students (Almatarneh, Ab Rashid, & Yunus, 2018; Raoofi, Chan, Mukundan, & Md Rashid, 2014) It is very common for students to communicate with each other about the study problems. Austria (2017) asserted that peer tutoring is an effective strategy for college English writing classes. High-performing students' writing strategies and experiences can provide practical writing experience for low-performing writers. Other students can learn from high-performing students how to effectively use strategies to tackle writing challenges. Bryce, Faheem, Ali, & Shina (2023) advocated that exposing students to a variety of writing strategies could facilitate writers to choose and apply strategies, then control their writing process more effectively, thus enhancing their writing performance in class. So, it's important to explore high-performing students' writing strategies.

The existing studies found that writers with different proficiency may prefer to employ different writing strategies, such as those in Listyani's (2018) study. Writing strategies are the primary factor that separates skilled writers from less proficient writers (Han, 2017; Maftoon & Seyyedrezaei, 2012). Al Asmari (2013) stressed that writing strategies instruction should be involved in the curriculum. Raoofi et al. (2014) suggested that writing teachers should provide some instructions in writing strategies, especially strategies that are regarded to be highly correlated with great writing performance. Therefore, exploring high-performing students' writing strategies may help curriculum makers and administrators optimize curriculum to meet the needs of learners at different levels. It may also help teachers formulate teaching plans and improve teaching methods according to different learners' situations, as well as better guide students at different levels to help them find suitable writing strategies and effectively apply them to the writing process to develop their writing ability. This study has

enriched the qualitative research on writing strategies, especially the qualitative research on the use of writing strategies by high-level writers. The study has valuable implications for the teaching and learning of English writing.

The study has the following specific objectives.

- (1) Determine the writing strategies of high-performing undergraduate English majors;
- (2) Discuss the similarities and differences of the writing strategies of the five participants;
- (3) Discuss the implications of the findings for the teaching and learning of writing.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Writing Strategies

As writing aims to express one's ideas clearly and logically, the writers need to employ some strategies (Maftoon & Seyyedrezaei, 2012). For example, students frequently employ writing strategies such as memorizing sample phrases/sentences or essay templates to cope with exams. Some studies have confirmed that there is a certain relationship between students' use of writing strategies and their writing performance, such as Alanazi's (2020) and Teng's (2020) research.

Raoofi, Miri, Gharibi, & Malaki (2017) pointed out that writing strategies refer to the procedures and techniques that learners use to improve writing or write more effectively. Mu and Carrington (2007) said in their study that second language writing strategies are writers' conscious decisions for solving problems during the writing process. Some researchers, such as Petrić and Czár (2003), classified the writing strategies categories into three phases: the pre-drafting stage, the drafting stage, and the revising stage. Wenden (1991) and Riazi (1997) (as cited in Mu & Carrington, 2007) classified writing strategies into rhetorical strategies, meta-cognitive strategies, cognitive strategies, and social/affective strategies. This paper will also adopt this classification. There is not a uniform classification of writing strategies at present. Scholars have different definitions and classifications of writing strategies from different perspectives and understandings.

Mu and Carrington (2007) explained that: rhetorical strategies "refer to the strategies that writers use to organize and to present their ideas in writing conventions acceptable to native speakers of that language", including organizing text, cohesive strategies, genre consideration, comparing different rhetorical conventions; cognitive strategies are the learners' actions implemented in actual writing, including generating ideas, elaborating, clarification, retrieval, revising, rehearsing, and summarizing; meta cognitive strategies are writers' mental procedures used to control the whole writing process, and that are composed of planning, evaluating and monitoring (Mu & Carrington, 2007; Wenden, 1991 as cited in Maftoon and Seyyedrezaei, 2012; Zhang, Chen & Yu, 2019); social/affective strategies refer to the ones that "writers employ to interact with others in order to clarify some questions or regulate emotions, motivation, and attitudes in the writing", for example, practice/discussing with classmates, peer/teacher review, ask teacher questions, self-rewarding or encouraging.

Some studies suggested that strategy training is necessary for ESL students to enhance their writing abilities (Fajrina et al., 2021; Listyani, 2018). Sundrarajun's (2020) results showed that students thought that their Business Article Writing course was helpful for the improvement of their writing ability. Study by Karim, TG. Mohamad Maasum, & Latif (2018) underscored that writing strategy instruction is helpful in ESL learners' achievements of writing listing paragraphs. Chien (2007) found through interviews that writing instructions from teachers may influence the students' use of rhetorical strategies in writing. So, it is essential to study L2 writing strategies and raise awareness among students and teachers about the importance of English writing strategies to improve their learning and teaching outcomes.

Teachers tried many ways to improve students' writing competence through training. Some published studies focused on training writing strategies. For example, Austria (2017) demonstrated that student peer response is a good way to hone students' editing skills, as they are both editors and readers in the process. Mouri (2020) later mentioned that the summarizing strategy is good for students to practice grammar and write better. Writing strategies are the primary factor that separates skilled writers from less proficient writers (Han, 2017; Maftoon & Seyyedrezaei, 2012). The existing studies found that writers who have different proficiency may prefer to employ different writing strategies, such as Listyani's (2018) study and Maarof and Murat's (2013).

Likewise, Fajrina et al. (2021) found that significant differences exist in strategies employing between high English proficiency learners and lower English proficiency students. Raoofi et al. (2014) also revealed that the success of writing depends largely on whether the writer uses appropriate writing strategies. Suvin (2020) also confirmed that skilled writers used more meta-cognitive strategies than less skilled ones. However, Ridhuan and

Abdullah (2009) concluded that high-achiever students and low-achievers used the same strategies, especially cognitive ones.

2.2 Characteristics of High Performing Writers

Al Asmari (2013) mentioned that skilled writers use more writing strategies, and they know how to employ strategies that work for their writing. That helped them perform better on writing scores. Raoofi et al. (2014) got the result that the skilled participant writers used more meta-cognitive strategies (e.g., revising the paper and organizing the ideas) than the unskilled participant writers. Pongsukvajchakul (2021) found that skilled students applied more effective planning strategies.

They could understand the writing task's requirements well and would follow the writing rules. Furthermore, they know how to meet the requirements and standards of the writing task (Li, Wang, Qian, & Shang, 2022). A good writer should know the assessment criteria for texts. That means they are very familiar with the writing assessment criteria for good writing products.

High performing students are more competent at expressing and organizing their thoughts, and they could be aware of both the writing problems faced in the composing and strategies they use well; they stress on overall writing issues, like coherence and inner unity (Raoofi et al., 2014). Al Asmari (2013) indicated that proficient writers are good at making summaries, questioning and attaching their personal experience to their texts by using various writing strategies. In the writing process, it does need sufficient vocabulary too, which is reported as a predictor in evaluating writing quality (Fajrina et al., 2021).

Maftoon and Seyyedrezaei (2012) introduced writing strategies used by a girl called Tina, who was identified as a good language learner. Besides processing good linguistic proficiency and good ability to apply cognitive and metacognitive strategies in writing, Tina as a good writer, she also does well in making full use of language knowledge learned from reading to promote her writing. Al Asmari (2013) mentioned as well, that experienced writing needs intensive reading and the ability of making inferences from reading materials.

High-performing student writers usually can not only express certain content in a coherent structure but can also organize the sentences well with little to no grammatical mistakes when writing in English. Therefore, it does require solid grammar knowledge and productive thinking. Additionally, they also need effective writing guidance from teachers and positive interaction among peers.

2.3 Theoretical Framework on Writing

Writing is a kind of complex cognitive activity and some strategies are needed in the process of this activity (Türkben, 2021). It concerns the students' thinking and writing process. Flower and Hayes (1981) pointed out that the elements of writing behaviors are reflected in the three units: the task environment, the writer's long-term memory, and the writing processes. The task environment includes the rhetorical problem or assignment and the text production. The long-term memory is all the related knowledge of the writer. They also pointed out that: the writing process includes planning, translating and reviewing; and these different processes are cyclic and interact with each other. For example, planning does not always take place before writing and the writers may change their plan while they write. It is important for writers to learn how to write in the writing process (Sağlamel & Kayaoğlu, 2015). The research is based on this process theory of writing.

The process-based writing could help learners to know more about their writing process and develop their writing proficiency. Flower and Hayes's (1981) writing process theory are widely accepted and used in L2 teaching and learning (Hyland, 2003a, as cited in Kadmiry, 2021). The teacher in the process-based writing class needs to create a supportive environment where learners can construct their own writing actively (Jalaluddin, 2019; Kadmiry, 2021).

3. Methods

3.1 Study Design

This study will utilize the qualitative case study design. Zainal (2017) explained that case studies explore specific phenomena in life by analyzing the contextual situation. Starman (2013) also pointed out that case studies are suitable for exploring personal experience and are concerned with the factors that affect the process of case development. This case study aims to explore high-performing Chinese college writers' writing journey to proficiency, including their strategies and perspectives on writing strategies. The researcher employed a purposive sampling approach to identify the high-performing writers. The cases contribute to answering the research questions, specifically the writing strategies, their similarities and their differences, and their implications for teaching and learning writing.

3.2 Study Participants

In this study, participants or cases are five undergraduate students who are high-performing writers in English. They are English majors at the fourth-year level (the last year in college) and are currently enrolled in a university in China. The researcher asked for advice from the writing teachers on potential participants to identify the participants who meet the inclusion criteria and request additional criteria. The “high-performing” here mainly means that the participant’s score for the writing course is in the top three in their class (and above 85/100) and they passed TEM4 (Test for English Majors-Band 4) and TEM8 (Test for English Majors-Band 8). The requirements of TEM are consistent with the syllabus by the National Advisory Committee for Foreign Language Teaching [NACFLT] (2000) for college English Majors. A score of TEM between 60 and 69 means “passed,” a score between 70 and 79 means “good,” and a score of 80 or above means “excellent.” Passing the TEM8 means that their English level has reached the advanced level required by the national syllabus (Jin & Fan, 2011).

Table 1. The demographic profile of the five participants

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Number of years of learning English	Final grade of writing course	The degree of TEM4	The degree of TEM8	Awarding in writing contests
Grace	Female	22	16	93	Excellent	Good	The Second Prize Award in “FLTRP Cup” English Writing Contest (School competition)
Mark	Male	22	16	92	Excellent	Pass	The Third Prize Award in “FLTRP Cup” English Writing Contest (School level)
James	Male	22	17	93	Excellent	Good	The contestant of the “FLTRP Cup” English Writing Contest (School level)
Xela	Female	21	17	94	Excellent	Good	The Third Prize Award in “FLTRP Cup” English Writing Contest (School competition)
Ann	Female	22	16	90	Excellent	Pass	The Second Prize Award in the National Creative English Contest (Preliminary round)

3.3 Data Collection

The research instruments included two writing tasks, a think-aloud protocol, and a semi-structured interview guide. The participants were required to write two essays based on selected topics from the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) independent writing test since the TOEFL is an authoritative and standardized international test. The topics chosen were those familiar to the learners, such as student life and family life. Participants could choose only one topic (each task provides two topics) which they preferred. Participants wrote an essay of over 300 words on his/her chosen topics. The original writing time is 30 minutes for one essay. In consideration of the recording of the think-aloud in this study, each writing task was added 20 more minutes for participants to spare enough time to speak out their thinking process. This also aims to reduce the impact of thinking aloud on writing. Therefore, the total duration for each writing task is 50 minutes for writing and thinking aloud. The writers could allocate their own time for writing and think aloud according to their own

situation. During the writing, students could not use any type of dictionary or resources to completely simulate a real exam scenario.

The think-aloud protocol aims to record the writer's thinking processes during the prewriting, during-writing, and post-writing stages. Specifically, the protocol required participants to say out loud the thinking processes of preparing during the prewriting stage; the thinking process during the actual writing, including but not limited to determining the writing direction, words, content, views, ideas, connecting ideas; and the thinking process while revising the essays. The participants were recommended to speak out the specific reasons for their writing behaviors (for example, why to delete or change some word) instead of simply mentioning the behaviors. When thinking aloud, they were allowed to speak in English and/or Chinese. The study used a similar think-aloud protocol data collection method as Guo and Huang's (2020).

Participants typed with prepared laptops. A camera recorded the screen of the laptop during the whole writing process. The voice of think-aloud and the screen of the laptop were simultaneously recorded as a video by the camera. This allows the researcher to combine the think-aloud with participants' specific writing behaviors together to explore their writing strategies effectively. The researcher could observe the participants' writing process during all the stages of writing, such as their duration of planning at the prewriting stage and the behaviors in editing and revising their writing process.

They were requested to think aloud while writing. However, if some of them could not juggle writing and think aloud, then they could focus on writing first. Once they finished the writing, they all recalled the whole thinking process in time and then spoke that out intensively. Nevertheless, they all showed that they could juggle writing and thinking aloud in the practice meeting.

Each participant wrote in a separate, comfortable, safe, and quiet room so that they could think aloud freely. After the writing, participants had 15 minutes as break time. Then they were encouraged to revise their essays freely in about 40 minutes. During the post-writing or free revision process, they were allowed to use the dictionary or online resources. The revising process also required think-aloud and the process was recorded as well as the formal writing process.

The semi-structured interview guide contained seven open-ended questions in English and Mandarin. It was validated by three experts for alignment with objectives and language clarity. The researcher adjusted the interview guide according to the experts' suggestions. The researcher did not follow the order of the questions strictly and asked probing questions based on the conversation. Each interview was about 50 minutes, and the audio was recorded by the voice recorder. This could enrich the research data and together with the think-aloud data, they provide a better illumination of the research questions.

4. Results and Discussion

The following sections detail the writing strategies employed by each participant.

4.1 The Case of Grace

Both of Grace's two articles used a similar structure. When she received the topics to choose from, she knew how to organize the essay at once. During the think-aloud protocol, she stated that she would state her own views in the first paragraph; in the second paragraph, she would demonstrate and prove the points of her views, and she would summarize the whole text in the third paragraph. In the interview, she said that she did not spend much time thinking about how to organize the essay because the practice and the examinations she took before have enabled her to build some patterns or formulas in her mind, so she did not need to think too much about this. The planning process showed that she used meta-cognitive strategies, and when she generated and analyzed the ideas or opinions, she also used cognitive strategies, such as the comparison of suggestions from elder friends with younger friends. After determining the general framework of the essay, she began to think about the content of her writing. In the think-aloud protocol, she spoke, before starting writing in task 1, that: "We have all experienced this: when we are in trouble, we turn to our elders or older people around us. So, I can start from such a phenomenon to trigger thinking about the problem." Below are her starting paragraphs for the two tasks.

It is a common phenomenon that when we are faced with difficult choices or other problems, we tend to ask parents or elder people around for advice, which in our mind usually can help to make wise decisions. Personally speaking, I agree that getting advice from friends who are older than you is more valuable than getting advice from those of the same age as you. (Grace's first paragraph for task 1)

The structure of Grace's two starting paragraphs is the same. She started the paragraph as a common phenomenon then showed out her opinion. She even used the same transitional word "Personally speaking", these showed that she used the same rhetorical strategy in both opening paragraphs.

It is widely recognized that parents are always playing a guiding role in their children's growth so naturally they give some suggestions on the classes their children might choose in university. Some of the suggestions from parents are beneficial to take, while others may upset their children. Personally speaking, although advice from parents may be not always perfect, college students should not be completely free to choose whatever courses they like without any influence or suggestions from parents considering their high value. (Grace's first paragraph for task 2)

During the interview, she said that in the process of generating or analyzing ideas or opinions, she mainly thinks in native language Chinese and then translates the ideas or opinions.

When she finished writing a sentence, she would often go back to check what she wrote. She checked grammar, vocabulary, and spelling errors. This showed that she was using the meta-cognitive strategy to monitor the writing process. She also refined the content as she revised, trying to make sure there were connections between and among sentences. When she encountered writer's block, she read back the previous sentences and then determined the following content according to the written content. She again used meta-cognitive strategies to plan the writing content while writing, and she also used rhetorical strategies to organize the text or connect the content. She sometimes used simple words to avoid mistakes. She also used the strategy of word substitutions to avoid repeating a word. For example, she explained that in the interview: "I changed 'help' to 'advice' in the first sentence to avoid repeating the word 'help' in the same sentence." She clearly utilized cognitive strategies.

It is a common phenomenon that when we are faced with difficult choices or other problems, we tend to ask parents or elder people around for advice, which in our mind usually can help to make wise decisions (she wrote, "make decisions more wisely" at first and revised after writing). (the sentence from Grace's essay for task 1)

She rehearsed constantly and tried different ways of expression to find the most appropriate one or the one she is more satisfied with. For example, she wrote "Most of them could not consider things from different perspectives" first, and then she revised it to "Most of them could not consider things comprehensively". And she revised the sentence "In fact, I also agree that..." twice, as shown below. These actions are examples of cognitive strategies in task 1.

Original: *In fact, I also agree that.....*

The first revision: *In fact, I personally agree that.....*

The last revision: *Personally speaking, I agree that.....*

After she finished writing, she read her essays all over again and double-checked the text.

She copied a part of the sentences in the given topic and pasted in her beginning paragraph and the last paragraph in Task 1. She thinks that the sentence from the given topic is very good and concise, and she used it directly maybe for convenience. She said she could not write a more concise sentence than the given one on the topic. She employed cognitive strategy.

Grace used an online dictionary but she didn't communicate with others during the process of freely revising after writing. She said that she often uses the computer to type, so she is more used to typing than handwriting nowadays, and she thinks there is no difference between writing on the computer and paper writing.

During the regular practice, Grace cared about the feedback of their teachers. She said: "I look forward to getting timely feedback and personalized suggestions from the teacher after writing practice. Generally, we have some common problems in the writing process, but each student also has specific writing problems. Written or oral feedback is fine for me, but the teacher's feedback is more beneficial for guiding me on how to improve my essay or improve my writing ability, rather than simply pointing out the problem." Grace showed that she uses social/affective strategies during the regular practice.

4.2 The Case of Mark

During the interview, he said, "I hope to get a good score in the usual writing test." This is one of his purposes of writing. Mark showed a strong sense of purpose in writing as he mentioned some strategies that aim to get high scores. For example, in the interview, Mark mentioned that he sometimes tries to use advanced or high-falutin words and grammar in his writing. He shared: "I usually use two or three arguments to explain one point, but sometimes in a time-limited task, it is inevitable to write something useless (that means the sentences which are

not very relevant to the topic) just to meet the word count requirement.” This revealed that he used meta-cognitive strategies to plan and monitor the writing content, and he also evaluated his output.

In the process of revision, he pays much attention to the language problem. Because there may be a penalty for obvious language problems in the normal exams. He also tries to avoid using a word too many times. For example, he used “indispensable” to replace the word “important” in the sentence below.

For current educational situations, finding more effective teaching strategies and making reforms of traditional teaching methods are indispensable for our domestic education to make further progress, which can also play a vital role in improving the soft power of our country. (the sentence from Mark’s essay for task 1)

He also refused to use “important” in the text again and again. Mark said, “For the things I can’t express sometimes, I will quickly use some familiar phrases or words to replace it [them].” Mark employed cognitive strategy.

Mark perceived the distinctions between Chinese and English and strived to observe the structure of English. He said that compared with Chinese, English has the phenomenon of nominalization, which should be noted. As a result, in his sentence, he used “discussion” instead of the verb phrase “was/were discussing.” These actions showed his rhetorical awareness and strategies.

For myself [sic], I stand with the new teaching strategy holding that high school teachers take more time on developing in-class activities like discussion and exchanging ideas between students, which I think is more effective than mere lecturing from the teacher. (Mark’s first paragraph for task 1)

Mark mentioned in the interview that he thought he used attributive clauses very often. In the sentence above, he wrote originally “For myself, I stand with the new teaching strategy that holds that.....”, but for the sake of brevity and avoiding excessive phrasing, he changed “that holds that” to “holding”. He evaluated his text (attributive clauses were used too often) by using meta-cognitive strategies first then revised by resorting to cognitive strategy.

Mark recalled, “I used the word ‘provide’ four times in total in the essay. The word ‘provide’ appeared twice in the second sentence of the second paragraph, which made the sentence look monotonous and boring. When I revised it after I submitted my essay, I came up with another word, ‘offer,’ fortunately, so I changed one to ‘provide’ by its [offer].” Below is a case in point from Mark’s task 1. He maximized cognitive strategy at this point.

Compared with the traditional teaching method, the new teaching strategy that provides more time for students’ discussion can indeed offer a free atmosphere for students to open their minds and exchange their ideas as much as possible.

He did typesetting while writing. Mark typed slowly on the keyboard. Mark said that he rarely uses the keyboard to type for writing. In his case, typing proficiency affects his writing, and typing interferes with/interrupts his thinking. He felt that his thought process was not the same in pen and paper as it was in typewriting. When writing by paper and pencil, the overall content/sentence structure will be planned in advance, but typing is often a state of thinking, while typing is more fragmented.

After completing task 1, Mark took a walk to relax. He also mentioned that during regular practice, he hopes to get evaluation and feedback from his teachers and classmates. He would like to revise the productions according to their suggestions to perfect his texts and improve his writing skills. Nevertheless, he replied that he does not often consult teachers about writing on his own initiative. These are examples of how Mark uses social and affective strategies.

4.3 The Case of James

James spent the least time on planning in task 1. He said that he always used less time on planning for time-pressured assignments because he worried that he would lose scores if he couldn’t finish the writing task within the given time. He explained that this habit he has developed because of the past training and examinations he took.

James reported in the interview, “When I write a sentence, as long as I decide what to write, a simple sentence will be generated in my mind to express it. I think about the content of sentences in Chinese. Then, I produce the corresponding English sentences. The original sentence generated in my mind may just be a very simple one [sic] with a few basic sentence components and I need to enrich it.” These are his cognitive strategies.

James expressed how he organized his ideas. “This type of writing topic is very common for us [sic] so I know how to organize the essay as soon as I see the topic. I adopt a normal structure. The beginning of the whole text

is quoted by a phenomenon, and I showed my own opinion at the end of the first paragraph. Then, I elaborated on my own view in the next three paragraphs in the middle of the essay. In the last paragraph, I summarized my views. The second paragraph and the third paragraph have an obvious transition relationship, so I started paragraph three with the word ‘Conversely’. The fourth paragraph follows the third paragraph to further clarify my views, so I used the word ‘furthermore’ as a connection between the two paragraphs.” James practiced rhetorical strategies.

After he finished the first paragraph, he adjusted the layout of the text. He monitored not only the coherence of the text when he wrote, but he also paid attention to the accuracy of the words and expressions. For example, he keeps improving his sentences by revising. In the sentence below, he changed “more important” to “paramount” and added a prepositional phrase “in shaping children’s development” which clearly specified in what aspects “parental education” is important. These make his expression more precise.

Original: *While this perspective has some certain advantages, I suppose that parental education is more important to children in many aspects.*

Revised after writing: *While this perspective offer [sic] certain advantages, I suppose that parental education is paramount (replaced “more important”) in shaping children’s development in many aspects.*

He changed the word “advantages” to “merits” in the sentence below when he composed the second half of the sentence to avoid using “advantages” twice in one sentence. Obviously, James maximized cognitive strategy here.

While both sources of advice have their merits, I believe that receiving guidance from friends who are older can provide distinct advantages. (the sentence from Jame’s essay for task 1)

He used meta-cognitive strategies to monitor his whole writing process. When he finished writing and found that the number of words was less than 300, he added one sentence at the end of the last paragraph. These also showed he had rhetorical awareness and used strategies to meet the requirements of the task.

Ultimately, the most valuable advice is one that is thoughtful, empathetic and relevant to the specific circumstances. (The sentence which he added at the end of the last paragraph in task 2)

James said he is completely adapted to typing. James used ChatGPT to enhance his essay in task 1. He said he was satisfied with the text polished by ChatGPT, as ChatGPT provided several words he wanted in writing but could not think of by himself. For example, he wanted to use the word “pertinent” in the sentence “thus their advice is practical and pertinent to us” during the writing, but he forgot its spelling, then he used “relevant for” instead. After writing, during the process of free revision, ChatGPT provided the word to him. This is his style of using the cognitive strategy for revising.

James said that for ordinary writing exercises, once he finishes the writing, he doesn’t like to revise again and again. But in examination he often revises/checks once after writing. After writing, he would like to reward himself by eating and watching videos on his phone. Such incentives to oneself are his way of applying affective strategies.

4.4 The Case of Xela

The think-aloud showed that after getting the topics, Xela first read them carefully and analyzed the content, and then she selected the topic which is suitable for her based on her own experience. For example, in Task 1, she said that she chose topic 1 (which is about teaching) because she was very familiar with it. Xela has no elder friends, so she did not want to choose topic 2, which was a discussion about suggestions from elder friends and the young ones. After choosing the topic, she began to conceive her writing. When she wrote the first paragraph, she stated what she supported. She said it is better not to speak in an absolute tone,” so I could use ‘It seems to be...’ to start the essay”.

It seems to be a (sic) common sense for Chinese teachers in high school to monologue in class and for Chinese students to write down the content. (the first sentence from Xela’s first paragraph for task 1)

After writing the opening paragraph, Xela later came up with some valuable points by outlining them using keywords. Xela relayed in the interview, “Before writing, I made a simple writing framework. I wrote down the outline of each paragraph with a few keywords, which can effectively prevent me from forgetting my ideas. These keywords work as a writing outline. Once I see the keywords, I can immediately think of the corresponding writing ideas.” She used meta-cognitive strategies to plan and monitor the writing content.

Firstly, secondly, and lastly, each other, limitations, inspire were the keywords that Xela listed. All these keywords were used in her essay. She typed around the key words, and expanded them into sentences. She prefers type writing, which she finds more comfortable and convenient.

In this study, Xela spent the longest planning time (14 minutes) in task 2. She was more anxious in task 2. She said something self-encouraging. She checked the remaining time many times during her writing. Xela said that the length of time for planning varies depending on the writing assignments as well as her own state of writing at that time. She felt she could not think clearly in Task 2, and that affected her writing. In fact, Xela drank water often during the writing to relieve the writing anxiety caused by time constraints. She also told herself some encouraging words to boost her confidence. These are Xela's versions of effective strategies.

Xela recited the sentences repeatedly while organizing the ideas in her mind into language expression. This was her way of rehearsing. She said that she cares much about accuracy, richness, and variety of expression. For example, she pays attention to collocation. When she wrote "express their opinions" in the sentence below, she considered several alternatives, including "understanding," "idea," "view," and "line," to follow "express." She initially used "idea" but decided to change it to "opinion" after consulting the dictionary during revision.

This class model encourages them to express their opinions about the question and to listen to others especially when their classmates harbor the opposite beliefs. (the sentence from Xela's first essay)

There are similar examples, like "come up with their ideas." At first, she wrote "come up with their thoughts" but she made timely corrections as she wrote, illustrating her monitoring of linguistics as she wrote.

She uttered, "In the first two sentences of the third paragraph, I originally intended to use 'model' as the subject for the two sentences, but when I wrote the second sentence, I thought two consecutive sentences with the same subject seemed too flat, and that may bore the readers. After writing, I modified the subject of the second sentence to "students" and turned it into a passive-voice statement. This is also her practice in enriching the diversity of sentence structure.

Secondly, the Western model provides the students with a more active approach to take in the existing experience and facts. Students under this model are endowed with the opportunity to participate in the constitution of the answer instead of accepting directly what the teacher chooses to tell them. (the sentence from Xela's first essay)

In the process of revision, she embellishes the text by adding some modifiers to the sentences to make the expression more accurate and richer. For example, she added "in their middle age" which is the prepositional phrase indicating range after "parents." She wrote "diverse experience," but then she changed it to "extensive."

Secondly, comparing with young people, parents in their middle age are more likely to make beneficial decisions since they are equipped with more extensive (she used "diverse" at first, but changed to "extensive" after writing) experience and wider horizons. (the sentence from Xela's essay for task 2)

Sometimes she also tries to simplify the sentences to avoid making them too complicated. For example, she replaced the phrase "it has to be admitted that" with "admittedly". These all reflect her use of cognitive strategies.

Though some children detest any dependence on their parents' success and want to explore a new section, admittedly, starting under the guidance of an old hand will be easier. (the sentence from Xela's essay for task 2)

Moreover, she said that she tries to use rhetorical devices in her writing. For example, when she revised the whole text after writing, she changed the original word "considering" to "practical", and that makes the two words "rational" and "practical" rhymed.

For my part, parents can play a positive role in this process as long as their ideas are rational and practical (the original word is "considering" here). (the sentence from Xela's essay for task 2)

She used three different electronic dictionaries to look up the meaning and usage of the words, and even compared the explanations of words and the sample sentences given in different dictionaries. She treated the process of revision as a learning process and had fun with the learning (such as getting a new word). She also mentioned that online resources such as podcasts also help her to enrich her understanding of society and the world, which may become her writing content in the future. These actions showed her cognitive strategies.

Xela rewarded herself with a cup of milk tea after task 1. She also cares a lot about the evaluation and feedback from their teachers and classmates during regular practice. Xela added that it is a great help to her when she has a girl partner who knows her well and gives regular feedback on her productions. These are Xela's take on social and affective strategies.

4.5 The Case of Ann

In terms of the expression of ideas, Ann said that she often used pros and cons arguments, making sure that both arguments were logical and connected naturally. It shows that she has rhetorical awareness. Ann also paid attention to keeping a balance between the number of arguments for each side in task 1. Based on her thinking aloud, she concerned that stating one disadvantage of the first teaching method seems less symmetrical but explaining two advantages of the second method of learning and teaching, although she supported the second teaching method.

She used the passive voice to emphasize “students’ sense of cooperation”. She practiced cognitive strategies during writing.

Secondly, students’ sense of cooperation can be enhanced during the proceeds of discussion and projects. (the sentence from Xela’s essay for task1)

She wrote “In my opinion” in the ending sentence of the first paragraph, but changed to “As far as I am concerned” when she revised, as she thought the former was too ordinary. This showed she used cognitive strategy for revising.

As far as I am concerned, the more effective way for students’ learning is getting students involved in the discussion and projects. (the last sentence from Ann’s first paragraph for task 1)

Ann meanwhile articulated, “In addition to the opening paragraph and the ending paragraph, the middle part is divided into three paragraphs to explain my point of view. I used ‘Firstly,’ ‘Secondly,’ and ‘Thirdly’ as the beginning words of the three paragraphs. Nevertheless, when I reread the text after writing, I thought that the views expressed in these three paragraphs were logically progressive, and I felt that the words ‘Firstly,’ ‘Secondly,’ and ‘Thirdly’ as the connection words of the three paragraphs could not show the logical relationship among the three paragraphs. Therefore, I changed [the words] to ‘To begin with’, ‘Furthermore’ and ‘In addition.’” Ann clearly executed her rhetorical strategies for connection.

Ann stated, “In my writing exercises, I consciously attach more attention to the connection of the preceding and following sentences. For example, after I finish writing a sentence, I often think about the internal logic among it and the sentences around it, and I also consider the relationship between this sentence and the whole essay.” She used meta-cognitive strategies to monitor her writing and she also has rhetorical awareness to ensure the cohesion of the whole text.

Ann said, “I try to use written language in the writing tasks. I think the sentences, like ‘It is easy for us to think.....’, are too colloquial, but sometimes I really can’t think of anything else to replace that while writing.” This showed Ann’s stylistic awareness.

Ann also said that her thoughts would be disturbed by the computer screen and keyboard when she typed. Ann also does not like typing just like Mark. They both prefer pen and paper writing.

During the interview, Ann said she felt a little nervous before writing and she was afraid of writing poorly. After writing, she also wants to get the evaluation and feedback from their teachers and classmates. Ann would consult teachers about her own writing during the regular practice. After getting the feedback, she often revises her work based on the input she got.

To sum up, the researcher determined writing strategies used by the five participants in their English writing process based on the observation of their actual writing process, their input during the think-aloud, and their ideas during the interview.

It should be noted that the two writing tasks in this study were completed in a limited time, and they were not allowed to retrieve any resources or consult others, so there were few communication strategies involved in their writing process. However, after completing the writing, participants were free to revise their own texts according to their own will or ideas. In the process of revision, they used some communication strategies, and some of their ordinary writing habits were also mentioned in the post-writing interview.

4.6 Similarities and Differences of the Writing Strategies of the Five Participants

4.6.1 Meta-cognitive Strategies

In the time-pressured writing task, participants generally did not have enough time to make specific and detailed writing plans and could only determine a general writing direction or find an important core point to write before writing. To plan, they chose the topic, carefully read and analyzed it, and relied on their schema related to the

topic to form their own ideas and find the direction of writing. Then, they further selected and organized ideas until they came up with the general structure of the essay.

Table 2. Duration of planning at prewriting stage (from the official start of writing time to the start of typing)

Pseudonym	Grace	Mark	James	Xela	Ann
Task 1	Option 1		2 minutes 23 seconds	6 minutes 11 seconds	3 minutes 18 seconds
	Option 2	4 minutes 15 seconds	6 minutes 27 seconds		
Task 2	Option 1		3 minutes 9 seconds		
	Option 2	3 minutes 6 seconds		14 minutes	4 minutes 50 seconds

They all did planning, and the planning before writing was rough and general without many details, but they thought about what to write for each paragraph or sentence while writing. They all sifted and organized their writing ideas. Table 4 shows that their duration of planning at the prewriting stage is different. In these two writing tasks, only Xela used the meta-cognitive strategy of listing keywords for outlining. The other four writers did not have any written outlines but could have prepared one in their head.

The participants needed to monitor their writing and possibly alter their original writing plan as they progressed. They determined what to write next according to what they had written to ensure coherence, cohesion, and internal logic, and beware of repetitive words and even ideas. Before writing, they focused on the structure of the whole essay and the relationships among paragraphs, and during the writing process, they paid more attention to the internal logic among sentences. They valued the management of writing time and monitored the written word count and the other rules.

They understood and were very familiar with the writing assessment criteria for the writing class or the requirements of the various English tests very well as they have numerous and valuable experiences in school examinations. They applied the writing requirements and assessment criteria of the exams/assignments to self-assessment in the writing process. Therefore, their self-assessment standards are consistent with the standards of the target writing assignment or the writing test, which is one of the reasons why they could get high scores in writing.

From the actual writing observation, it was found that the writers used the copy-paste function of the computer to edit or modify the texts. They used the function of automatic word count to monitor writing progress. For example, after finishing one paragraph in task 1, James used the mouse to select the entire paragraph to check the total number of words in that paragraph. He mentioned in the interview that he also like the computer's automatic recognition of wrong words in writing exercises.

Mark exemplified meta-cognitive strategies, noting, "After I have the overall structure of my essay in mind, I always make a general assessment about how many words to write for each paragraph and how much writing time could be allocated to each paragraph. These could help me monitor my writing." The other four participants had the same awareness of writing management and monitoring. This shows that good writing management ability and monitoring ability are their common characteristics.

4.6.2 Cognitive Strategies

They all used cognitive strategies to center on the topic. They all avoided words and ideas they were uncertain of to reduce errors and tried to use a variety of sentence structures. They all said that they would use the vocabulary, phrases and sentence patterns accumulated in the process of reading in their writing. During the writing process, they constantly monitored, revised, and summarized what they wrote. Grace copied a few directly from the sentences of the given explanation for the topic in task 2. The other four participants paraphrased a few of the sentences in the given explanation for the topic.

To elaborate ideas, writers all brainstorm to find an appropriate writing direction and elaborate the topic. While generating ideas, they often use cognitive strategies such as reasoning, contrasting, summarizing, self-questioning, expressing opinions, and reaffirming. After obtaining some ideas in mind, they consciously select the points they may discuss and let go of the ideas they may not be able to expound.

In their think-aloud, the writer-participants did self-questioning. They revised the sentences they produced to ensure they were self-satisfying. When it took them some time to think of the right ideas, they selected and used the familiar ones.

The five participants' entire writing process showed that they had the autonomy to learn language knowledge through writing. They manifested good learning behaviors; for example, they used high-falutin words and phrases when revising their texts. They also ensured the use of the correct synonyms.

When revising, participants stated that the substitution strategy is effective in solving practical problems and can improve the quality of the text. However, sometimes, when revising by substituting words, they may fail to find suitable words to replace the target one or make mistakes by using unfamiliar and inappropriate words or synonyms. Almatarneh et al. (2018) also pointed out that sometimes the strategies of avoidance which were used in vocabulary, grammar, spelling, and writing organization by Jordanian Postgraduate Students didn't work well, and it may even weaken their texts.

They always read and reread their output to check for mistakes. Thinking, planning, monitoring, revising, self-evaluation, and other activities in writing caused them to pause repeatedly throughout the writing process. The texts produced by the five participants in this study have few errors, proving their English proficiency. The writer-participants can generally write out what they want to express, even if they use simple words and produce simple sentences. All participants were provided extra time to revise their essays freely after writing. As their drafts showed, the quality of their revised texts was significantly improved after the revision. Moreover, their self-assessment of the revised texts is higher as well. This finding supports the conclusion from Na and Yoon's (2016) research that lengthening writing time could improve writing quality. Oh (2019) pointed out that writers could do better with available resources in writing.

They are good at rewriting sentences, like developing a simple and short sentence to a complex and long sentence or merging two sentences into one as needed. In this study, they all revised their essays. During the process of free revision after writing, they all looked up the electronic dictionary.

For the writing exercise, Grace, Xela, Mark, and Ann would check the whole text after writing. However, James said that for ordinary writing exercises, he doesn't like to revise again and again.

4.6.3 Rhetorical Strategies

As senior English majors, participants are familiar with the structural patterns of English articles. In the two writing tasks, all the participants knew how to organize their essays while they got the topic. Participants had no difficulty in organizing their essays. They tried to express the writing content in English patterns.

The participants first ideated in their mother tongue. However, they expressed the writing content in English. They all emphasized the logic of the content and used some cohesive or transitional devices to keep the essay coherent. They all cared a lot about the writing requirements.

Sometimes, they resorted to more advanced vocabulary/grammar/sentence patterns when they polished their essays. Sometimes, they gave up some ideas due to their limitation of language ability or deleted some parts that had already been written. They rarely used rhetorical devices or techniques like metaphors and puns. More than half of the participants in Li and Zeng's (2019) study also thought they lacked writing practice at the university, and most of their participants did not have much knowledge about rhetorical devices, and they lacked the awareness of using them as well.

The writer-participants also demonstrated a sense of the distinction between spoken and written language and the stylistic awareness of argumentative writing.

In addition, they all comply with the writing task requirements and use monitoring strategies throughout the writing process, including monitoring linguistics, time allocation, word count, layout, and so on.

4.6.4 Social/affective Strategies

In the two tasks, all participants chose not to consult the teacher or others because the writing tasks were time-limited, and they usually could not consult others during time-limited writing assignments. Fajrina et al. (2021) also found that students often use strategies that don't require a lot of time for timed school writing assignments.

Social strategies highlighted their interest in feedback. The participants in this study accepted teachers' feedback, which could point out the problems with the content, structure, and logic of their essays. They believe that the acquisition of linguistic knowledge relies on the accumulation of daily learning and efforts. They could also solve linguistic problems in different ways, such as peer review or the use of technological tools, which could

reduce the writing teacher's load. The findings of Li and Zeng (2019) also posited the preference for feedback from teachers to point out language problems. Therefore, writing teachers should consider the differences in students' proficiency and needs when providing feedback for their writing. Ntombela, Ngubane & Govender (2020) emphasize the importance of interaction in writing class and suggest that teachers should provide a certain social writing space in writing class to support students' collaborative writing activities, which is in line with the requirements of sociocultural theory.

They all believe that sharing the article with others and asking for other people's suggestions can help improve the products. They also like to communicate with their classmates, such as exchanging ideas/opinions on a certain issue or exchanging their essays for comments. But they don't often have enough opportunities. After writing, they would like to reward themselves, but they have their own preferences.

They all have obvious reader consciousness and consider the reader's reading experience. For example, they were all conscious of the layout of the text. Their pursuit of the accuracy of expression, diversity of words and sentences, or avoiding tedium are both based on the concern of readers' reading experience. Al Asmari (2013) suggested that the learners should consider and understand the potential readers.

The participants prepared everything well before writing. They checked what they needed and tried to relax. Writing anxiety due to time constraints is understandable. For the five participants, their writing anxiety was not a major factor in task completion. Na and Yoon (2016) proved that time affects the quality of writing, and it influences the writer's use of strategies significantly. Their experiments showed that the participants employed different strategies for writing tasks, both time-constrained and untimed.

4.7 Implications for the Teaching and Learning of Writing

Armed with their extensive knowledge and the benefits of training experience, participants could use different writing strategies. They applied the strategies eclectically, which enabled them to succeed in their writing tasks. Writers use different strategies to deal with different writing tasks (Hu & Chen, 2007; Mu, 2005). As Listyani (2018) discussed, writers who have different proficiency may prefer to employ different writing strategies. The teaching of writing must include teaching more writing strategies and the actual writing practice. As of this writing, there is no unified definition and classification of writing strategies at present. The related research on writing strategies should be conducted in the context of Chinese ESL students so that their specific behaviors of using writing strategies can be adequately described, analyzed, or generally taught in writing classes.

Maarof and Murat (2013) state that knowing the strategies is helpful, but writers' insight into the requirements of the writing tasks and the use of appropriate strategies to complete the tasks usually determine the performance of the strategies employed. All the participants hold that writing strategies play a very positive role in completing their writing tasks. Still, they also firmly believe that the use of writing strategies should be based on continuous improvement of language ability. That means language ability is the foundation of the use of strategies. Writing strategies cannot completely solve all writing difficulties, and difficulties may even be encountered in the process of using writing strategies. Raoofi et al. (2014) mentioned that writing proficiency is a very crucial factor in determining the use of strategies. This requires learners to constantly learn language knowledge, improve their language ability, and develop other related skills.

Xela and Mark asserted in the interview that their appreciation of writing strategies stemmed not only from teachers' introduction in class but also from their constant exploration in practice and reflection. It is necessary for teachers to introduce writing strategies to students in class. They were firm, however, in saying that teachers do not need to tell students all the writing strategies directly. According to them, a writer must explore writing strategies in various writing exercises on their own. Then, students could find suitable writing strategies for themselves.

Contrary to what Xela and Mark underscored about teaching all writing strategies, some studies suggest that teachers provide students with explicit instructions on writing strategies. Students at different levels have different needs for writing instructions, so teachers can adopt different writing methods according to specific situations. As Manchón (2018) summarized, the strategy research aims to develop knowledge that could be useful for improving second or foreign language learning and teaching in the classroom. Grace added other benefits of actual writing in class; "Writing requires not only language knowledge but also writing strategy and critical thinking ability."

In addition to objective examinations in writing classes, students must also have regular actual writing practice to apply the theories and strategies they learn in class. If possible, the practice may be timed. Feedback should also be provided immediately and constructively. It may come from peers, the audience/readers, and the teacher. The

actual writing practice must outweigh the objective examination. Writing teachers should focus more on the process of students' writing.

In this study, participants reported that it took them more time and effort to organize the spoken language for think-aloud than other normal writing assignments. They stated that thinking aloud did not affect their completion of the writing task much. James added that he enjoyed thinking aloud while writing because while concentrating on writing/reading/a certain task, he often finds himself whispering thoughts, what is currently passing through his mind, to himself. He felt that talking and writing simultaneously helped him stay focused on his work. When not talking softly while writing, he may forget what he wants to write about. Hence, thinking aloud can be explored as a strategy to teach writing, helping writers generate, organize, and articulate their ideas.

In the era of globalization, technology makes the world more connected. Knowing how individuals or groups write in various cultural contexts helps enhance people's understanding of one another in cross-cultural communication. With the development of the integration of technology and writing, teachers may also bank on the use of technology in teaching and allow learners to use it more meaningfully in learning to write.

In modern life, people need good writing skills in many scenarios. Developing students' comprehensive writing skills and helping them extend their school writing skills to work and life writing skills will benefit them throughout their lives (Okpe & Onjewu, 2017).

5. Conclusion

The study explored individual writing strategies used by the five participants in their writing process in the two tasks based on the observation of their actual writing process, their input during the think-aloud, and their ideas during the interview. The researcher summarized the similarities and differences of the writing strategies of the five participants in the results. The implications for the teaching and learning of writing are likewise discussed.

The high-performing student-writers also expressed their perspectives on English writing instruction and writing classes, emphasizing the addition of more writing strategies, and actual writing practice instead of objective examinations. They also highlighted the importance of immediate and constructive feedback for improvement. All perspectives have invaluable implications for the teaching and learning of writing in this context.

6. Limitations and Suggestions for the Future Study

This study recognizes its limitations, including the duration of the study, case selection criteria, its sample size of five participants and the results. The duration of data collection for this study is about 1 month. Researchers could conduct diachronic studies in the future to explore the changes in individual writing strategies with the development of their language ability. In addition, the study verified Young's (2005) finding that the ability of participants to produce think-aloud data is individual. So, it is necessary to involve this personalized factor in case selection criteria to select individuals who are perfectly appropriate for the study design. The sample collection scope is in one university, so the results of this study cannot represent the general situation of the group of all high-performing writers. Future researchers could expand the sample size in a big collection scope in the future and apply the method of this study for exploration of writing strategies of high-performing students and of struggling writer-students. They may focus on the strategies English writers use in specific writing tasks, as well as the strategies they adopt when applying information technology to writing. At last, the researchers were not able to comprehensively examine participants' writing behaviors so the results were not able to analyze much about this.

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