A Look at How Effective English Writing Strategies Are
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Abstract: In view of the importance of writing strategies, this current study discusses what strategies junior middle school students can use to improve their writing after writing strategies training. Additionally, it examines whether using writing strategies in the writing process can promote students’ learner autonomy in terms of writing, and whether they enhance their writing achievements or not. The experiment lasted 12 weeks and was conducted in Tangma Junior Middle School. The research participants were 96 students selected randomly from two classes in Grade 9, an experimental class and control class. The major research findings show that, after training in writing strategies, students in the experimental class could use more strategies to instruct their writing process, and it is also concluded that using writing strategies in the writing process could enhance students’ writing achievements. Meanwhile, their autonomous learning abilities in terms of writing were also improved, from low to medium level.

Introduction

Nowadays, along with the wide use of English, English teaching and learning has a higher status all over the world. Since English writing is considered to be the most difficult part in the English learning process, junior middle school students in China desire to obtain an effective model to promote their writing. However, we have found in our teaching experience that the English writing outcomes is dissatisfactory. The reasons mainly derive from the generally traditional teaching model in which teachers largely pay close attention to their teaching rather than to the students’ own learning. Meanwhile, due to the plenty of teaching content but limited time in class, the training on writing is slightly neglected by teachers, not to mention that guided learning strategies would be used in class. In other words, there are very few middle school teachers and students who realize the importance of using certain writing strategies in the writing process (Richards, Plat & Platt, 2010)[1]. As a result, writing strategies are seldom used by junior middle school students. Since the current teaching situation demands immediate action, it is important that English teachers take effective measures to tackle this problem.

The purpose of writing teaching and learning is not just to focus on increasing students’ writing scores, but also to enhance their writing achievements and help them to use writing strategies and become an autonomous learner in English writing.

Previous Research on Teaching Writing by the Use of Writing Strategies

Numerous studies have been conducted with regard to the use of writing strategies in the writing process, along with the effectiveness of using writing strategies on writing achievements and autonomous learning in terms of English writing. Liu (2005) [2] for example finds that many American and Chinese students frequently placed the topic sentence as the first sentence in a paragraph when they were writing. Deneme (2008) [3], in a study of 50 learners of English in Gazi University, shows that learners exhibit a high use of compensation and meta-cognitive strategies and moderate the use of memory, cognitive, affective and social strategies. Nihat (2014) [4] examines the effect of the process writing approach on writing success. By analyzing the data from experimental procedures, it can be concluded that using the process writing approach has a prominent effect on improving learners’ writing skills. In the light of this study, what is left for the
teacher is that they can conduct writing strategies training better in the process of pre-writing, writing and post-writing.

Additionally, Xu and Tang (2007) [5] review learner autonomy in terms of English writing and the survey investigated Chinese students’ autonomy in writing based on a definition of learner autonomy. They found that using writing strategies can promote students’ autonomous learning abilities in writing. Though they noticed an improvement in learner autonomy by using writing strategies, they do not however provide enough convincing evidence. Meanwhile, Kamberi (2013) [6] has found that feedback is an accepted strategy to guide language teaching and learning in writing, and teachers and students can make use of feedback to promote writing.

The above studies provide valuable research findings that contribute to this current study and plenty of information on writing strategies. Additionally, the influence of using strategies on writing achievements and autonomous learning in terms of English writing is also argued. Nevertheless, some relevant studies in China on learning strategies mostly concentrates on listening, oral English training and reading, but studies on the writing strategies are lacking. Therefore, it is worthwhile undertaking further research in China.

Research Methodology and Instruments

This research primarily aims to explore how using writing strategies can enhance junior middle school students’ writing achievements and their autonomous learning level in terms of English writing. The project was undertaken for a three-month teaching experiment in a junior middle school named Tangma in Northeastern China in 2015. 96 students were selected randomly from two parallel classes in the ninth grade. 47 students were in the Experimental Class (EC) and they were taught writing strategies. 49 students in the Control Class (CC) were taught traditionally, without any training in writing strategies. Also, the two classes had a similar writing level averages. The research instruments in this current study consisted of a writing strategies questionnaire, a learner autonomy questionnaire in writing, a pre-test and a post-test, a follow-up interview, and the statistical package for the social science (SPSS) program Version 17, used to assess the data.

At the beginning of the experiment, all the participants were asked to finish a pre-test writing, about an 80-word-composition on the topic “How to Be a Good Tourist,” within 30 minutes. 96 compositions and 96 questionnaires were collected from the EC and CC. During the writing teaching procedure, the students in EC were taught by the method of writing strategies training, while the traditional writing teaching methods were used in the CC. That is to say, the CC students were taught some vocabulary and grammar knowledge. Then the teacher explained the main content of the writing task. It is worth mentioning that the teaching content, time, and the other factors, except the teaching approaches, were the same for both the EC and CC.

At the end of the experiment, post-test, post-questionnaire and follow-up interviews were conducted with the EC and CC. Both the pre-test and the post-test were scored by two English teachers with rich teaching experience. According to the marking criteria in the senior high school entrance exam, the scores were graded considering the content, language and consistency of the whole composition. To make sure there was consistency in scoring, the two teachers firstly graded a same composition, and finally they agreed on common scoring criteria after comparing their differences.

Research Findings and Discussion

The research findings were generated from data collected at the end of the experiment by using student questionnaires, interviews, and pre- and post-testing measuring tools.

Discussion of the Questionnaire on Learner Autonomy in Terms of Writing

As mentioned above, one of the primary research purposes was to explore how using writing strategies could enhance the levels of junior middle school students’ autonomous learning in terms of English writing. The differences between the results of the pre-questionnaires from the EC and
CC on learner autonomy indicated that the students both in EC and CC possessed a low level of autonomous writing before the experiment. After the writing strategies training, the students in the EC were required to fill out a post-questionnaire on learner autonomy. Compared with the pre-questionnaire, the data and results are presented by Paired Sample T-test in Table 1.

Table 1. A description for the pre-questionnaire and post-questionnaire on learner autonomy in EC.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Items</th>
<th>Groups</th>
<th>M(Pre-Q)</th>
<th>M(Post-Q)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Before writing, I consider the audience who would read my essay, such as my parents, the teacher or friends.</td>
<td>Audience</td>
<td>1.9058</td>
<td>2.5032</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. I write in order to get a high score.</td>
<td>Extrinsic motivation</td>
<td>3.0232</td>
<td>3.2254</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. I write so as to find a job.</td>
<td>Intrinsic motivation</td>
<td>1.8362</td>
<td>2.6009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. I think writing plays a vital role in improving my English level.</td>
<td>External source</td>
<td>1.9783</td>
<td>2.6445</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. I can learn a lot from writing in English.</td>
<td>Goal setting</td>
<td>1.9580</td>
<td>2.7209</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. I try those writing tasks that are challenging.</td>
<td>Organization</td>
<td>2.0290</td>
<td>2.7005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. I will look up many resources when I am writing.</td>
<td>Drafting</td>
<td>1.8420</td>
<td>2.8323</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. I will imitate a sample essay when I am writing.</td>
<td>Reviewing</td>
<td>1.8608</td>
<td>2.8902</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. I will ask the teacher or students for help when I am writing.</td>
<td>Self-review</td>
<td>1.9274</td>
<td>2.6652</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. I know where to find reference resource.</td>
<td>Total mean</td>
<td>2.0402</td>
<td>2.7532</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. I will consider the requirements before I write.</td>
<td>Std. Deviation</td>
<td>.37325</td>
<td>.21131</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. I notice the organization of the essay.</td>
<td>Sig. (2-tailed)</td>
<td>.002</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. I will make an outline.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. I revise the words, grammar and structure when finish writing.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. I ask for others to revise my essay.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. I can evaluate the writing scores almost accuracy.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. I believe I have a high ability in English writing.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1 clearly shows that the sig. (2-tailed) value is 0.002 lower than 0.05, which provides evidence that there is a significant difference, and that, after the writing strategies training, the level of the EC students’ autonomous writing improved. The mean value of audience, motivation, external resource, goal setting, organization, drafting, reviewing and self-review increased to more than 2.5, which can be inferred to a medium level of learner autonomy in terms of writing (Oxford & Burry-Stock, 1995) [7].

To sum up, the mean value was less than 2.4 before the experiment and more than 2.5, but less than 3.4, after conducting the writing strategies training. This means students’ learner autonomy in writing increased from a low level to a medium level. Thus the findings are coincident with Cohen (2000) [8] and it can be said that using writing strategies can advance levels of autonomous writing.

Discussion of the Writing Tests

In order to examine the effectiveness of applying writing strategies training, the writing achievements here means the writing scores, and both the pre-tests and post-tests were compared in this study. The students of both the EC and CC were asked to write a composition of about 80 words on the topic “How to Be a Good Tourist” within 30 minutes to check whether writing
strategies training works or not and makes a difference on the writing achievements. The data collected from the writing tests were processed through the Paired Sample T-test.

Table 2 reveals that the mean cores of the EC and CC are 8.4419 and 8.50 respectively, which represents a slight difference. (The writing composition was worth 15 points in the English test.) Additionally, the Standard Deviation between the EC and CC is also almost similar. It can be seen that there are no obvious differences in the writing achievements between the EC and CC before the experiment. To provide further evidence, the figures in Table 3 illustrate that the sig. (2-tailed) is much higher than 0.05, and 0 is excluded in the 95% Confidence Interval of the Difference, implying that there is no significant difference in the pre-test, which means that writing achievements in CC have been enhanced a little bit by using the traditional writing teaching approach.

However, the differences of the EC students’ writing scores after receiving writing strategies training were statistically significant, as shown by the sig. (2-tailed) <0.05. 0 is excluded in the 95% Confidence Interval of the Difference, which means the difference between the writing scores in the pre-test and post-test is conspicuous and that can account for writing scores of students in EC are increased after the writing strategies training.

It is clear that there are statistically significant differences in students’ writing achievements, and the most important reason for this is that the students received writing strategies training. From the differences, it can be concluded that the writing strategies training had an effect.

### Table 2. Group statistics for the pre-test between EC and CC.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
<th>Std. Error Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>EC pre-test</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>8.4419</td>
<td>2.58478</td>
<td>.39417</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CC pre-test</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>8.5000</td>
<td>2.60143</td>
<td>.39218</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 3. Paired samples test for the pre-test and post-test in CC and EC.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Paired Differences</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
<th>Std. Error Mean</th>
<th>95% Confidence Interval of the Difference</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Sig. (2-tailed)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CC Pre-test CC post-test</td>
<td>-0.38636</td>
<td>1.70111</td>
<td>.25645</td>
<td>-.90355</td>
<td>.13082</td>
<td>-1.507</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EC Pre-test EC Post-test</td>
<td>-2.13953</td>
<td>1.47328</td>
<td>.22467</td>
<td>-2.59294</td>
<td>-1.68613</td>
<td>-9.523</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Analysis and Discussion of the Interview

An interview, involving only the EC after the post-test compositions and filling out the two post-questionnaires, aimed to collect further evidence concerning students’ writing strategies and learner autonomy in writing. Six students were randomly selected from the EC whose writing achievements ranged from the high, medium and low level, according to their post-test writing scores. There were four questions in the interview: 1. Do you like English writing? Why? 2. Have you ever accepted such writing strategies training? What do you think of them? 3. What strategies have you used to overcome the difficulties encountered in your writing process? 4. Have you done any writing exercises autonomously after class?

The results of the interviews were as follows:

1) Whether the high level students or low level students, they began to like writing learning and their writing motivation was stimulated after writing strategies training. 2) The writing strategies training made the students’ confident and progressive in their English writing. 3) After experiencing some writing strategies training, more students learned to select useful strategies, such as cognitive and affective strategies, to solve problems and assist their writing. 4) They wrote more compositions autonomously after class than before. In summary, the answers from the interviews
were strongly convincing that the use of learning strategies in students’ writing process not only improve students’ writing achievements but also promote their learner autonomy levels in their English writing.

Conclusion

Major Research Findings

(A). Through the data brought out from the pre-questionnaire and post-questionnaire on learner autonomy in writing and the face-to-face interview, it can be concluded that after writing strategies training, students’ levels of learner autonomy in terms of writing increased. Catterall (1994) [9] discovered that some individual strategies can prompt learners’ autonomy in writing, and this study provides further evidence that using writing strategies can improve students’ learner autonomy in terms of writing. (B). By comparing the writing pre-test and post-test scores from the EC and CC, together with the interviews, it is obvious that the mean score value increased by about 25 percent, which shows that using writing strategies can enhance students writing achievements to a great extent. This is coincident with Ushioda (2006) [10], who found that students using strategies in the writing process can get higher scores.

Pedagogical Implications

The findings produced from the present study make some contributions to future English teaching and learning. It should be emphasized that the purpose of the study was to help students to learn more autonomously and effectively. As shown above, the effective use of writing strategies in the writing process is obvious. Thus, some pedagogical implications can be generated from this study.

Firstly, although students can frequently use some writing strategies such as meta-cognitive strategies and compensation studies in their writing process, there are still other strategies that are insufficiently used, such as affective and social strategies. Thus, the teacher should pay much attention to help them to develop and use such strategies. For example, encouraging them to work in groups and communicate ideas with other students. Secondly, from the analysis of using writing strategies in three stages, it can be seen that the strategies in the post-writing stage are often neglected by students. As a result, the teacher should introduce the writing strategies at different stages. Moreover, they should organize more activities when students finish writing their compositions. Thirdly, the teacher should pay much attention to instructing students to write more autonomously, such as encouraging them to write diaries in English after class or to do writing practice on the computer. To sum up, it is important for teachers to create a student–centered class to make students master what to learn and how to learn.

Suggestions for Further Study

What the present study concerned about is the application of using writing strategies in the writing process in a junior middle school. Due to the limitations of the study, some suggestions for the further study are offered.

Firstly, in order to make the research more valid, the future researchers should attempt to conduct the experiment in a large sample participants. Meanwhile, more energy and time to be taken will contribute to the convincing research.

Secondly, when scoring a writing test, it is helpful for the teacher to type participants’ writing into a computer in case that the handwriting would influence the assessment of the writing tests.

Thirdly, the previous studies of writing strategies mostly focus on those students in senior high schools or in colleges. Much more research should be conducted in junior middle schools.

Finally, more research on the effectiveness of using writing strategies on the autonomous learning in terms of English writing should be encouraged. At present, the relevant studies are in a few number. More studies are expected to be done to prompt the English teaching and writing.

In summary, the top priority, combined with the present topic of strategies used by junior middle school students, the main purpose of the writing strategies training is to make junior middle school
students learn to select what to learn and how to learn, and then make them become an independent and autonomous learner so that their English proficiency can be enhanced effectively.

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References


