REVIEW

# An Analysis of the Pre-writing Strategies Employed by Chinese College Students in the Timed Examination

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| ARTICLE INFO | ABSTRACT |
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| | This thesis is trying to analyze the pre-writing strategies used by Chinese college students in a timed examination. The purposes of this study is to identify the possible strategies the Chinese college students claimed they used in the pre-writing stage of the timed examination, find if differences exist between the pre-writing strategies employed by skilled writers and unskilled writers, and find which strategy best facilitate writing in a timed condition. |

## 1. Introduction

Writing has been searched for many years. Many researchers have given clear definition of writing. From the study of Hedge (2000:302),[10] "writing is the result of employing strategies to manage the composing process, which is one of gradually developing a text". This reveals that writing involves different mental operating process, which is very close to the explanation: writing is an expression of what one thinks, and the success of writing closely connects effective thinking. Various strategies are employed in the writing process.

The focus of this thesis is on the pre-writing strategies of Chinese college students before they start composing

in timed condition. The pre-writing strategies of high and low achievers will be compared. This analysis is of great values for college teachers, so they can use more effective pre-writing strategy.

In fact, the strategies students with high writing achievement have used differ from that of low-achievement students in brainstorming ideas and texts, revising and editing (Chien 2007).[2] Certain previous literature has shown that there are some differences between the pre-writing strategies employed by effective and less effective writers. This thesis made efforts to find out whether the differences still exist in the timed examination. This can help students to select effective strategies to facilitate the writing in timed condition.

## 1.1 The Value of This Research

Writing is a complex process. As a matter of fact, many students are not aware of the importance of writing when studying foreign language (FL).Writing is language practice as a support for other skills learning, to communicate about the FL culture, or to learn about composing (Reichelt 1999&2001).[15][16] This is why students have a low level of motivation to develop their writing. According to Wolff (2000: 11),[23] writing in a foreign language is defined as the "most efficient L2 learning tool we have."[6] Writing is usually divided into three stages according to the process approach: pre-writing, during-writing and post-writing. In addition, based on the study of Flower and Hayes (1980),[8] composing is categorized as three cognitive processes or strategies: planning, translating, and reviewing. This reveals that during the pre-writing stage, planning is utilized. Different students write in different way and their planning before writing is also different.

Studying the pre-writing strategies employed by Chinese college students in a timed examination, also allows us to study whether a relationship exits between the pre-writing strategies used by skilled writers and unskilled writers in timed condition. In fact, many study shows that strategy used in the pre-writing stage can foster the writing process in some degree. In China year ago, due to large class sizes and limited writing classes, students spent less time on writing inside class. However, currently, Chinese Ministry of Education published "Teaching Requirements for College English Curriculum" in 2004. The requirements put great emphasis on college students' writing development. Nevertheless, in Chien's (2012)[3] case study, she studied the relationship between writing strategy/planning and writer's achievements. [8]Her studies gave the clues that there were some differences between the pre-writing strategies used by high achievers and low achievers. In the experiment, it shows that high achievers tend to make less planning efforts during their composing process.

## 2. The Introduction of Pre-writing

### 2.1 The Concepts of Pre-writing Strategy

As previously mentioned, writing is usually divided into three stages according to the process approach: pre-writing, during-writing and post-writing and composing is categorized as three cognitive processes or strategies: planning, translating, and reviewing (Flower & Hayes, 1981).[7] Planning occurs during the pre-writing stage, and so pre-writing may be the most crucial stage when composing (Wing, 2009).[22] Rohman (1965)[17] claimed that pre-writing referred to the discovery stage in the composing process in which the writer made his "subject" similar with himself. He raised the question, what kind of thinking fosters writing, when defining the principle of pre-writing. In his article, he defined thinking as the activity in the mind which created ideas, plans and designs, which is active and persuasive logical thinking. This thinking comes from experience and is defined as a set of cognitive operations by many researchers. However, this kind of thinking is not assumed to happen only before the writing process. It is true that this thinking still occurs during the writing process. Besides, Hedge (2000)[10] stated that if teachers wanted to help students produce and promote the composing outcome, then teachers should be clear that how writing is produced.[1]She also claims that a series of complex cognitive operations are needed when preparing to write. This cognitive operation occurs throughout the whole writing process, including Pre-writing, drafting and revising.

As the basic and primary stage, pre-writing accordingly needs to be researched and studied. Rohman (1965)[17] claims that pre-writing is before composition where every idea is ready to write, and he also states the reason why he puts focus on pre-writing: 'it is crucial to the success of any writing that occurs later and it is seldom given the attention it consequently deserves' In essence, the pre-writing process is a crucial phase in the composing process. Students employ multiple strategies consciously and unconsciously in preparation before they start composing. According to Flower and Hayes (1981)[7], Hayes (1996)[9], and Hayes and Flower (1980)[8] pre-writing strategies or planning is sub divided into brainstorming or generating ideas and organizing the text and setting up goals. Students utilize these strategies in different ways; however, not all of them use these strategies in an appropriate way. Some research has found that the pre-writing strategies that high achievers used are different from those of low achievers. Chien (2007)[2] also states that the strategies students with high writing achievement have used differ from those of low-achievement students in brainstorming ideas and texts, revising and editing. The authors of this study have made the assumption that the differences in the pre-writing strategies used by skilled writers and unskilled writers in timed condition is of value for college students' writing development.

### 2.2 The Techniques Employed in the Pre-writing

It is widely accepted that pre-writing techniques can be categorized into clustering, brainstorming, free-writing,

note taking and reasoning and questioning. However, in Sasaki's study, he clearly defined the pre-writing techniques into the following categories.

**Table 1** (Sasaki 2000:290)[18]

| Technique | Definition |
|---|---|
| Global planning | detailed planning of the overall organization |
| Thematic planning | less detailed planning of the overall organization |
| Local planning | planning what to write next |
| Organizing | organizing generated ideas |
| Generating ideas | naturally generated & descriptive generated |
| Reasoning& Questioning | journalist's questions |
| Translating | Translating generated ideas into L2 |

However, this table cannot show the techniques students used in a timed condition. There are very few studies concerning the pre-writing strategies used in the timed condition, which is the thesis of this study.

## 2.3 Pre-writing Strategy Employed by Chinese College Students

In China, many factors contribute to students' low composing competence, the great number of students; the incoherence between the classroom instruction and the College English Test (CET); students' purpose for test; and teacher's low proficiency in teaching writing (You 2004).[24] From the perspective of teachers, for a long time, teachers paid much attention to the production of writing rather than the composing process. Pre-writing strategies have been paid less attention. From the perspective of students, it is a fact that EFL writing is the toughest part for Chinese college students as indicated by their low writing examination scores, like The International English Language Testing system (IELTS). Many students feel a blank in their minds when they are given an essay to compose, especially when they are not familiar with the topic. It usually takes a long time for students to start writing. This, to some extent, reveals that Chinese students do not do so well in the pre-writing part. This thesis will give an overview of what kind of strategies Chinese college students claim they have employed before their writing in the timed condition, and there will be analysis through comparing the pre-writing strategies used by the higher and lower achievers in the timed examination. This can help to find out which pre-writing strategy can have a greater influence on college writing achievements in the timed examination.

## 2.4 Related Studies of the More-and Less-Skilled Writers' Pre-writing stage

### 2.4.1 An Overview of Related Studies

As previously mentioned the authors' assumption is that skilled writers can be distinguished from less-skilled writers on the basis of their effectiveness in the pre-writing stage. Action here refers to the "cognitions or other behaviors" that are employed to achieve some certain writing goals (Flavell 1979).[6] This assumption is of great values, because if true help clarify writing development. Statistics from some study reveals that the strategies effective writers have employed in the whole writing process is distinctively different from the novices. In the following part, there is the description from others' findings about the strategies employed by effective writers and the novices.

Based on the study of Hayes and Flower (1981)[8] and Hayes (1996)[9], different strategies were used in different stages in the English writing process. Moreover, writers employ different strategies at the three writing stages. Many studies have stated that even for the native, the strategies employed by more skilled writers uses differ from that of the less skilled writers (Bridwell 1980[1], Stallard 1974[19], Wall & Petrovsky 1981).[21] Besides, studies from others also show that different EFL writers compose in different ways by using different strategies during the writing process (Raimes 1985[14], Zamel 1983[26]). This is mainly due to that different people think in different ways, preserve different world knowledge, and have different level of learning strategies. Based on the definition of metacognition from Flavell (1979)[6], metacognitive strategies and metacognitive knowledge have different degree of influence on the planning.

### 2.4.2 The Comparison between Effective Writers and Less Effective Writers

As for the skilled writers, Zamel (1982)[25] showed that skilled EFL writers experienced the process of creating meaning from self-reports and the written work of the participants in her study. These writers think about the ideas or thoughts by stimulating their knowledge memory and then recorded these thoughts on the paper. This means good writers can elicit their related previous knowledge to the utmost to help their following writing. In fact, these skilled writers can put their ideas on the paper with the most appropriate form which can best express their opinions. Besides, it is important to recognize the fact that good writers are more flexible. This means they are more likely to make changes to their composition and start

another one when necessary. This can also be identified from the study of Zamel (1983),[26] which claimed that skilled writers were able to rework their essay over the time consistently if they had assess to other's work as the reference. This shows that professional writers' planning stage is not fixed, but flexible. They are more likely to change their original plan if a new idea comes to their mind. Zamel's finding shows that skilled writers compose with more focus on meeting the requirements of the thesis statement than the linguistic background. Zamel's finding also can be found from the study of Pianko (1979)[13], Raimes (1985)[14], Sommers (1980)[20], and Stallard (1974)[19], they stated that skilled writers tend to be more flexible, and this is extremely obvious in the planning stage. This is also very similar with the finding of Matsumoto (1995)[12]. Based on the interviews with several professors about their composing strategies, effective writers were always ready to change their original plan once they begin to write. In contrast, it needs to be noted that the professors are expert writers rather than skilled writers. Expert EFL writers are defined as the writers who preserve the professional work and often write research papers in English (Sasaki 2000)[18]. On contrast, some studies show that the less-skilled writers seem to be more fixed, and they seldom change their original plan when they compose. They adhere to the original plan and continue the writing without changes. This also can be found in the finding of Matsumoto (1995),[12] who supposed that the novices start their writing quickly with less time on planning[24]. In most cases, they followed the original outline or planning without the changes during their composing process.

However, few studies have shown whether this finding stays true if the writing is in a timed condition. In a timed examination, it is obvious that writers have limited time for the whole writing. For example, there are only 60 minutes for the writing part and only 40 minutes for the task two writing. It seems that writers have less time to make changes during the pre-writing stage than their outside school writing. It is of great academic values to study the flexibility of the planning in a timed condition. In this thesis, there will be a deep looking into the timed condition of whether skilled and unskilled writers' planning is flexible or fixed.

Besides, the interviews from Matsumoto are of great importance to the study what high skilled writers do before their writing. The participants in the interviews who are professors in the college described that they first, decided who they are writing for before their starting and have the audience in mind consciously (1995)[12]. That is, the professors have their targeted audience in their mind,

which serves as the first step of their planning stage. This means skilled writers are clear who their audience is and they focus on achieving the goal for the targeted audience, like writing down appropriate title. This can help writers prepare the goal setting. In addition to this, for the skilled writers, their first concern is the explication and articulation of their ideas and opinions. They focus more on the whole content meaning. This also can be found in Matsumoto's finding, which showed that proficient writers firstly emphasized the general content of the writing, other than the detailed structure, "dealing with larger chunks of discourse without minor formal aspects and delay editing at the end of the process" (1995)[12]. Sasaki (2000)[18] also explained skilled writers differ significantly from unskilled writers in the overall organization. However, unskilled writers start writing with less planning and continually edit the previous writing when they are composing. This also can be found in the study of Cumming (1989)[4], Raimes (1985) [14]and Zamel (1982&1983)[25][26] who stated that unskilled EFL writers made fewer efforts and more efforts to revise the writing at the word and phrase level. Unskilled writers spend more time on editing the previous writing because they do not make a well-rounded plan at the pre-writing stage. They have not prepared an outline of essay before they start writing and are not clear about the organization of their thoughts. Therefore, they are not confident in what they have written, and do not have an effective outline in their mind to help them compose an organized composition. Moreover, unskilled writers are more likely to spend the most time on the word or phrase level. There are still many other findings which are very similar with that of Matsumoto. Cumming (1989)[4], Raimes (1985) [14]and Zamel (1983) [26] claimed that skilled writers tend to pay more attention to planning and revisions at discourse level. However, unskilled writer are intended to focus less on the planning stage (Murphy& Manchon 1999[11], Zamel 1983[26]). This reveals that skilled writers tend to spend more time on planning the content and organization of the composition. However, unskilled writers are more likely to spend less time on the planning stage. However, in a timed examination, due to the time limitation, further study is needed to verify that skilled writers spend more time on planning than that of unskilled writers.

As for generating ideas, based on the interviews with the professors about the writing experience, all the professors in Matsumoto's(1995)[12] study utilized the word processing during the planning stage.[24] When the professors were preparing for generating ideas, they wrote down everything that came to their mind that related to the topic. This does not mean that the professors spend

much time on the word and phrase level in the pre-writing stage. It should be noted that the words they write down are the ones which closed related to the topic or theme. This can help them create a practical mind map to produce more ideas and select the appropriate ones. This also can help them to summarize their thinking and cluster their ideas. However, unskilled writers often encounter the problem that they cannot generate ideas effectively and efficiently. At the pre-writing or planning stage, they are slow to stimulate ideas from their previous knowledge. They cannot create practical mind map in the planning stage. In a timed condition, it is especially important to create effective ideas in the pre-writing stage to be well prepare for the following writing. However, in the timed examination, the difference of generating ideas in the pre-writing stage by skilled writers and unskilled writers is less studied and more studies are needed on whether the skilled and unskilled writers use the same pre-writing strategies.

As for generating ideas, it should be noted that effective writers differ from less effective writers in generating ideas to factors other than differing strategies. Another important factor which influences generating ideas is metacognitive knowledge. In the previous part, there is a general view of the construct of metacognition. According to Flavell (1979),[6] metacognition is categorized into metacognitive knowledge and metacognitive strategies. The metacognitive knowledge has influence on the strategies of generating ideas. In the timed condition, metacongnition is an extremely important factor that governs a writers thinking when planning to write.

The many research studies comparing the writing strategies employed by skilled and unskilled writers, like the studies of Bridwell (1980),[1] Faigley and Witte (1981),[5] Pianko (1979),[13] Raimes(1985)[14] and Stallard (1974)[19] all show there are differences in the writing strategies utilized by skilled and unskilled writers. However, these studies mainly focus on composing process and revising process. Limited researches has studied the pre-writing strategies, especially in the timed condition. The study of the pre-writing strategies can make a contribution to the writing development, especially if the pre-writing strategies of effective writers and less effective writers compared. Any further studies on pre-writing strategies should also focus on timed condition writing to further enhance the writing advancement. Especially, the writing performance of the Chinese college students is far out of satisfactory. It seems more urgent to continue the study of pre-writing strategies. Therefore, these efforts to study the pre-writing strategies in the timed condition is needed to support future Chinese college students.

## 3. Discussion

The types of pre-writing strategies Chinese college students claimed they employed in the timed condition can be clustered into thematic strategies, generating ideas, organizing generated ideas, and reasoning. It should be noted that these strategies were widely used by the majority of the college students, but not all college students. There were some differences between the strategies used by skilled and unskilled writers in timed condition and the finding in this thesis were similar with the studies of Chien (2012),[3] who claimed that skilled writers made fewer efforts on the planning.[3] The main difference between them was that skilled writer made more efforts on the global organization since they focused more on the content and meaning organization throughout the three sub stages of the planning. When using these studies to compare the strategies used by Chinese college students on a timed writing, the detailed planning of the general organization and what to write next seems to be less popular. In timed condition, skilled writers also employ detailed organization of the content and meaning level to prepare in the planning stage; even though, these cognitive actions happen in a short time. This is the main finding in the data, and this obvious difference between skilled and unskilled writers also reveals that the detailed organization of the content and meaning level tends to be more important in the writing achievement in timed condition.

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