Research Article

Exploring Writing Strategies of Two Sophomore Students of a State University in the Philippines: A Case Study on its Implications for Pedagogical Support and Cognitive Awareness

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Abstract

Writing is considered to be one of the most essential tools for the academic survival of every student that is also very relevant when they step into the world of work. Thus, this study investigated the use of writing strategies by the sophomore students of a university in Claveria, Misamis Oriental, Philippines. Two respondents were selected in this mini-qualitative exploratory case study that took advantage of individual face-to-face interviews and casual conversations using open-ended questions with direct quotations. Findings disclosed that the willingness to incorporate other resources was taken optimistically during planning. Revision was given a positive outlook, while evaluation was recognized in the form of re-reading. With this, two themes emerged from the analysis of the data. First, the pedagogical support that refers to a reinforcement of other sources in writing helped a lot in the development of respondents' writing skills and cognitive awareness of respondents' weaknesses and incompetence in writing. Therefore, instructors should provide students with extensive exposure to writing through various classroom activities and opportunities. In this way, they can empower the students by assuming full responsibility.

Keywords: *Writing strategies; pedagogical support; cognitive awareness*

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Introduction

Writing, as one of the four skills in language, is a tool necessary for academic survival and a means of great help when students step into the world of work (Bentouzi, 2023; Hoa & Trinh, 2023). Students are expected to develop these skills during the academic program because employers, during hiring and even promoting, find written communication skills an essential asset to be considered (Wu et al., 2023). According to Graham & Perin (2007), a student equipped with writing skills is evidence that he has gained knowledge or has been educated about the essence of writing. Every student must have this skill to communicate effectively (Bentouzi, 2023; Monaghan, 2007; Villanueva, 2008).

Our ancestors had manifested the inherent desire to write. In Prehistoric times, cave dwellers engraved their accomplishments on the stone walls. The Egyptians recorded their history by using hieroglyphs. The Indians used palm leaves to write their learning. The English most excellent writer and dramatist William Shakespeare penned his famous Romeo and Juliet. This means that writing must be harnessed and put into practice to continue preserving information for the next generation as a vehicle for communication.

However, writing is considered to be the most complex, challenging, and least attractive skill to master (Alhaisoni, 2012a; Klimova, 2011; Richards & Renandya, 2002; Sara, 2022; Villanueva, 2008). Moreover, according to Richards and Renandya, this difficulty lies in generating and organizing ideas; even translating these ideas into readable compositions is an additional insufficiency.

Also, Dvorak claimed that language textbooks had related composition to grammar or mechanics for the last twenty-five years instead of compositional skills. With this, writing strategies are thought to be instrumental in helping L2 learners expand their writing skills (ibid). If fully utilized by the students, these writing strategies can augment their writing inefficiency. Learning becomes inadequate if students cannot write clearly and effectively about what they think or cannot transform thoughts, ideas and even their personal experiences into written words (Graham & Perin, 2007).

Based on the researchers' observations, the ability to generate, express ideas, and organize information in the classroom setting is in crisis. Students prefer to do performance tasks than to read or write. If they write, they are not meeting the writing standards like spelling, proper punctuation, correct sentence structure, and even vocabulary. With this scenario, college instructors are floundering and at a loss on what to do to reinforce the needs.

Nevertheless, Mohite (2014) postulated that instructors must foster independent and collaborative learning in the language teaching pedagogy. Instructors must find ways to develop or enhance students' writing skills to draw out their potential. Because according to Oxford, as quoted by Mohite (2014), strategies can be learned through mediation or assistance. In this modern era of globalization and information technology, the Philippines needs those Filipinos who can write well not only for themselves but also for the country as well.

Hence, this study investigated the writing strategies used by the respondents to improve their writing skills. Moreover, this focused on the question-do the students incorporate writing strategies concerning planning, revising, and evaluation in their writing. While writing has been practiced and studied in elementary and high school years, little attention has been paid to formally evaluating high school graduate students' writing proficiency. Although the University of Science and Technology of Southern Philippines (USTP)-Claveria has a general admission test, which is a typical requirement for college admission, this is not a specific measure of their writing proficiency.

Literature Review

Academic writing is a crucial skill for college students, as it involves expressing ideas clearly and coherently, engaging with complex and challenging topics, using appropriate evidence and sources, and following the conventions and standards of different disciplines and genres. To improve their academic writing proficiency, students must develop and apply various strategies throughout the writing process, such as planning, drafting, revising, editing, and presenting. The final goal of any writing is the same communication, but that goal is not always reached. In an academic setting, writing plays a role; the skill of writing aids students in answering assignments and helps improve academic performance (Graham & Perin, 2007). In college, they are required to learn the core components of academic writing, rhetorical structure, and even vocabulary.

One of the general strategies for successful writing is to use an active voice whenever possible, making the writing more direct, clear, and concise (Custom-Writing.org, 2023; Day, 2023). Another strategy is to minimize using "there is/there are" constructions, which can weaken the sentence structure and obscure the main subject and verb (ibid). A third strategy is to start quoting with the author's name, which helps establish the source's credibility and authority and avoid plagiarism (ibid). Additionally, writers should avoid redundant words, such as "very," "really," "actually," etc., which can clutter the writing and dilute the meaning (ibid).

Besides these general strategies, writers should also be aware of the specific design for writing assignments frequently included in post-secondary courses, such as essays, reports, reviews, summaries, etc. Each type of assignment has its purpose, audience, structure, format, and language features that writers need to master and follow (Horkoff, 2021). For example, an

essay typically consists of an introduction with a thesis statement, a body with several paragraphs supporting the thesis, and a conclusion summarizing the main points and restating the thesis (ibid). A report usually has a title page, an abstract or executive summary, a table of contents, an introduction with background information and objectives, a methodology section that describes how the data was collected and analyzed, a results section that presents the findings, a discussion section that interprets and evaluates the results, a conclusion that draws implications and recommendations, and a list of references (ibid).

Furthermore, writers should employ specific strategies for each stage of the writing process: pre-writing, writing, and post-writing. Pre-writing strategies include analyzing the assignment prompt, brainstorming ideas, researching relevant sources, organizing information into an outline or a graphic organizer, etc. (University of Wisconsin Whitewater, n.d.). Writing strategies involve composing a draft based on the outline or graphic organizer, using transitions to connect ideas and paragraphs, using appropriate vocabulary and grammar to convey meaning and tone, using citations and quotations to acknowledge sources, etc. (ibid). Post-writing strategies consist of revising the draft by checking the content, organization, coherence, and argumentation, getting feedback from others such as peers or instructors, editing the draft by correcting errors in spelling, punctuation, syntax, and style, and presenting the final work to readers in a suitable format (ibid).

Several studies have investigated the relationship between writing strategies and writing proficiency among college students. For instance, A study by Villanueva (2008) compared the English writing proficiency of a class in the Basque Country and Sweden. He measured several components like the verb, conjunction, spelling, and text length in an essay write-up of the students. The results showed that several factors contributed to the better performance of the Swedish students' writing proficiency. The main differences between the Basque and the Swedish classes were the use of English, the teacher's command of English, the teaching approach/methodology, and the learning environment. The quality of teaching is a critical factor in writing proficiency.

Moreover, Liu (1996) claimed that reviewing is an essential strategy that involves looking into what has been written or planned and evaluating its quality and effectiveness. Reviewing can lead to revision if the writer detects errors or flaws in the draft or if the plan is not followed or is negative. Reviewing can occur during or after writing and can be triggered by internal or external factors such as self-monitoring or feedback from others. Liu argued that reviewing is essential for improving writing proficiency and suggested that teachers should encourage students to review their own and others' work regularly and systematically.

Another study by Chien (2012) examined the writing strategies used by 40 EFL university students in Taiwan and compared them between high and low-writing proficiency groups. The results showed that high-proficiency students used more writing strategies than low-proficiency students and differed significantly in their planning, revising, and reviewing strategies. High-proficiency students also reported more positive attitudes and beliefs about writing and more confidence in their writing abilities than low-proficiency students. Chien concluded that writing strategy instruction should be integrated into EFL writing courses and that teachers should provide explicit guidance and modeling on using various strategies effectively.

Similarly, Alhaisoni (2012b) investigated the writing planning strategies of 197 Saudi Arabian third-year male university students and their relationship with writing proficiency and frequency of use. The findings revealed that the students used various planning strategies such as brainstorming, outlining, setting goals, etc., but there was a significant difference between good and poor writers. Good writers used more planning strategies than poor writers and used them more frequently and flexibly. Alhaisoni suggested that planning strategies should be taught explicitly and practiced regularly in writing classes and that teachers should monitor and scaffold students' use of planning strategies.

Furthermore, Maarof & Murat (2013) conducted a study to investigate the writing strategies of 50 high-intermediate and low-proficiency students in Malaysia and to determine any significant differences in strategy use between the two groups. The results indicated that the students were moderate users of writing strategies and that the most frequently used strategies were planning strategies, while the least used were revising strategies. The study also found a significant difference in the use of planning, drafting, revising, and editing strategies between the two groups, with high-intermediate students using them more than low-proficiency students. The study recommended that teachers should encourage students to use various writing strategies to enhance their writing performance and that they should provide feedback and guidance on how to use them effectively.

The literature reviewed in this section suggests that academic writing is a complex and challenging skill that requires various strategies throughout the writing process. These strategies can help writers to develop, organize, express, evaluate, and refine their ideas in a clear, coherent, and convincing manner. The literature also indicates a positive relationship between writing strategy use and writing proficiency and that high-proficiency writers tend to use more and different strategies than low-proficiency writers. Therefore, teachers need to integrate writing strategy instruction into their writing courses and provide students with opportunities to practice and apply these strategies in their writing.

Methods

Role as researcher

This study was conducted in the researcher's workplace. Despite the routinely yet necessary function as an instructor, she had to be responsible in every aspect of the study. Deadlines had to be beaten to come up with a sound, acceptable output.

Participants

The participants in this study were the students of USTP-Claveria. Specifically, one participant, a half-Japanese and half-Filipina female second-year student, is a 20-year-old, unwed mother with one child. Her Japanese father left them seven years ago, and her mother died four years ago. She is now dependent on the monthly rental of their apartment. She said the only school that accepted her was USTP-Claveria because she had a problem with her birth certificate. She comes from the College of Engineering and Technology. Another participant, a second-year male student, comes from the College of Agriculture. He is 17 years old and a graduate of a Science High School. He has been winning essay contests sponsored by the Mindanao Association of States Tertiary Schools (MASTS). He is also the Editor-in-Chief of the University's Collegiate Publication.

Data collection

To explore in detail, students' perceptions, insights, and understanding were elicited through an open-ended question that provided direct quotations. The researchers had to set the respondents' schedules since the final examination was approaching. Before the interview, researchers had to ask permission from the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences and set schedules for the in-charge to use the e-room. A voice recorder was utilized during the interview to ensure everything was captured. The interviews were then transcribed, as it was inevitable that participants would speak the vernacular. The researchers allowed them to use the dialect, thinking that it might hinder their responses only if limited to English.

Data analysis

After the interview, the data analysis was started by sifting respondents' responses. These sifted responses were coded and eventually recorded for categorization. The results of which were subsequently grouped into emergent themes.

Trustworthiness

This mini-qualitative exploratory case study took advantage of individual face-to-face interviews and casual conversations using open-ended questions with direct quotations. In the interview, the researchers tried to look into the use of writing strategies. Students were informed about the research and assured that it had no bearing on their academic performance and that whatever their replies should be tolerated with the utmost confidentiality. Respondents who did not come on the scheduled date and those who refused at the last hour were not reprimanded. Thus, this study was limited to two respondents only out of four targets.

The study focused on the students enrolled at USTP-Claveria. This covered the respondents' writing strategies, particularly planning, revising, and evaluation. Although the data collected in this study were limited to students enrolled in USTP, the findings may be relevant to other State Universities and Colleges of the Philippines (SUCs) or beyond.

Results and Discussions

Planning: Willingness to incorporate other resources

When the respondents were asked how they approach an academic writing task, the male respondent said that at first, he would do the mental outlining rather than scribble what comes to his mind. He said that writing right away can result in abundant ideas that later would confuse him on how to arrange those ideas. On the other hand, the female respondent replied that she would always start by staring at the paper before she could generate ideas. However, the two respondents admitted that guidance is needed in developing their writing skills, particularly from a teacher or reliable relative. They need someone who can coach them on the different ways to approach a writing activity. This finding agrees with Mohite (2014), who postulated that instructors must foster independent and collaborative learning in the language teaching pedagogy. It was said that strategies could be learned through mediation or assistance.

Moreover, using other resources, mainly the internet, is their other solution for resolving writing activities. They claimed that relevant writing samples online are of great help because they are not only learning by their convenience but also according to their pacing. This result is supported by Zhang et al. (2014), when almost 92% of the students found it quite useful when asked whether the technology was useful for aiding their writing task. Below are the samples of lifted statements from the respondents:

"One of the ways of developing my writing skills is by using technology; I surfed the internet, read articles, and listened to current events to get more ideas and even to learn some salient words. I like reading other references as well.

First, I try to understand the topic, and if I have time, I look for the details by reading articles, researching through the internet, and gathering ideas by watching movies and events. I am particular about the details of my composition. That is why I rely heavily on the internet, books, or articles."

Revising: Positive outlook

When queried if they revise their outputs, respondents said it is either to check their errors in mechanics, an organization of ideas, content, penmanship, and even neatness. Revision for them was something they were optimistic about. A respondent said:

"If I have time, I always rewrite my introduction, body, and conclusion. I am particular about the organization of my ideas and mechanics. I am not confident in my mechanics, but I am open to comments to learn from those errors. I will benefit from it. I prefer to be corrected to have better work.
Upon revising my output, I would usually add than to delete. I read aloud my draft, and if I am not contented, I will leave my composition for a day or, worst, even days. I watch movies and even listen to music in an attempt to seek ideas that I might use in my writing. When I am still unhappy with my ideas, I seek help from my teacher or relatives. I even go to the internet to do lots of reading."

To the respondents, the revision made their work better. They also perceived self-correcting as a wonderful experience and room for improvement. They believed a polished output is a mark of a genuinely enthusiastic individual with the patience for revising. On the other hand, they were picky to those who would check their outputs. One respondent preferred professionals to students only. In fact, from the respondent's point of view, she is not confident that a classmate or a student will check her output.

Evaluation: Critical self-editors

When questioned how they assess their writing output, respondents said, they would re-read, re-read, and re-read their outputs. If the flow of ideas is not satisfying, sometimes they do nothing, especially if they run out of time. They believe that pausing while writing and going to what they have written is already a sort of reviewing whether they have said what they want.
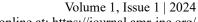
"Contented or not, I always read my work. As I write, I sometimes pause or even stop for a while to see my writing. Moreover, if I notice some awkwardness, I change it if I still have time. I've learned from my English teachers that every writer should have a plan of development and thesis statement so that he would stay in focus.

I hate cramming so I check my written output after. So, if I am given a writing task, I will do it but if I am not happy I would leave it then, do something else. I do not write when I am not in the mood. I read an article that awakens my senses that even after a week I could still remember the whole story; then, I would appreciate the writer."

Emergent themes

Two themes emerged from the analysis of the data as presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Analysis of data, categories and emergent themes

Data	Codes	Categories	Emergent Themes
Planning	Mental outlines Use of modern technology Listen to current events Need guidance Watch movies Listen to music Read books, articles	Willingness to incorporate other resources	
			Pedagogical support
Revising	Good Disposition Open to comments Initiative Use of modern technology Seek out help from the teacher	Positive outlook	
			Cognitive awareness
Evaluation	Must read the output Prepared to change mistakes Acceptance of incompetence	Critical self-editors	

Pedagogical support

This refers to the reinforcement of other sources in writing that helped a lot in the development of respondents' skills in writing.

> *"I am good in choosing the right words when I write my essay. Many have noticed this; and I attribute this to my knowledge in browsing the internet. Without the internet, I might not be able to write well. I am fun of surfing the net to learn new words and I use these words in my essay writing. The internet has been an influential factor to me; I do not know if I could write well if these resources are not available. Although I am not totally dependent, I am heavily relying on this technology."*

Cognitive awareness

Respondents' mindfulness of their weaknesses and incompetence in writing put them in an advantage stage. Writing is a complex process involving many facets (Crystal, 2004). When respondents were requested to rate themselves with one as the lowest and ten as the highest, they rated themselves only six.

> *"I am still not contented with my work. I need more improvement. I am not good at details. I am direct to the point. I want someone to tell me the secrets of good writers. I need more strategies and practice. I am still struggling with my writing. So I think I need more help."*

Conclusions

The following conclusions are drawn in light of the study's findings: first, students need some pedagogical support. Because instructors are not there for them to coach the different ways of solving a writing task, they resort to using technology as a substitute for tackling their writing activities. When this inadequacy is adequately addressed, this can be a source of motivation that drives students to achieve better writing proficiency. Since students are resorting to the internet, it is then encouraged that the University's administrators make internet connections steady and available in any part of the campus. This is to provide the students with the accessibility to the internet before, during, or even after classes to improve their writing skills better. At this point, these students are technologically savvy. So, supporting them in what they thought to be of help in acquiring writing skills are beneficial not only to students and instructors but also to the nation as a whole. Second, respondents' awareness of their incapacity in writing somehow places them at an advantage because good writing does not happen accidentally. By acknowledging their deficiencies, they have taken the first step. However, given these two facts, the researchers seemed to feel that there are still some unexplored waters for this study to pursue. Thus, these findings advocate the necessity for further research to look more profoundly into how students can improve their writing strategies.

Acknowledgment

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