

# Study of writing strategies used by English major students

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## Abstract

*The use of writing strategies has been widely acknowledged to improve students' writing achievement. Due to a lack of knowledge of writing strategies, it is important for students to explore their learning strategies in writing. This study is aimed 1) to describe the students' writing strategies preference; 2) to identify the difference in the writing strategies employed by students in every writing stage. A survey was conducted to one hundred and forty students majoring in English. The participants filled out the Writing Strategies questionnaire. The result indicated that the students' writing strategies use fell at a medium level. Moreover, there is no significant difference in students' writing strategies used in every writing stage. However, knowing the student's preference in writing strategies is beneficial both for students and teachers.*

**Keywords:** Writing strategies; pre-writing; while writing; revising.

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## Introduction

Writing is one of the most important skills in teaching English as a foreign language. It is a challenging skill due to the process of writing involves the complex cognitive process. Learning writing also includes the learning of writing skills, rules, and conventions (Mastan, Maaroo, & Embi, 2017). The writing objective is to enable students to produce an accurate and appropriate English written text (Hyland, 2008). In order to attain good writing skills, students can use appropriate writing strategies to help them to become successful writers.

Writing strategy is defined as “the sequence in which a writer engages in planning, composing, revising and other writing-related activities” (Torrance, Thomas and Robinson, 2000). Ibraimi (2016) explains that writing strategy is a tool or plan of action the learner develops to achieve his or her goals and objectives in a writing class. Writing strategies are used effectively to help learners to write and to achieve better result as well as helping them to accomplish the goals of writing. The categorization of writing strategies therefore varies as it was depended on the researcher's definition on writing strategies. For example, Riazi (1997) categorizes composing strategies into three main strategies: cognitive, metacognitive and social strategies. Sasaki (2000) classifies writing strategies into eight main categories,

namely: strategies on planning, retrieving, generating ideas, verbalizing, translating, rereading, evaluating and others. Mu (2005) conducted a study on ESL writing strategies. He categorizes the writing strategies into 5 group strategies and 30 writing strategies. Those group strategies are rhetorical strategies, metacognitive strategies, cognitive strategies, communicative strategies, and social/affective strategies. In line with Hsiao and Oxford (2002), Mu states that this classification has limitations related to impractical use due to the different standards for classifications held by the researchers. However, Abas and Aziz (2016) elaborate that this taxonomy is significant for ESL writing and teaching because of its explicitness and accessibility particularly for beginner writers.

In relation to the writing process, students are provided with a series of planned learning experiences to help them achieve their writing goals. Brown (2001) explains that there are three stages of writing related to the writing process. They are pre-writing, drafting and revising stages. Chien (2012) also discusses that during writing there are three main processes, planning, composing and revising. The writing process demand learners to get involved with activities of recalling the stored knowledge, generating ideas, goal setting, organizing ideas and topics, reviewing, evaluating and revising. Moreover, Brown (2001) explains that the process of writing involves complex abilities where the written products are often the result of thinking, drafting and revising procedures that require specialized and complex skills. Some studies have shown that the use of appropriate writing strategies continuously is beneficial in helping the learners to overcome their writing difficulties (Sasaki, 2004; 2012; Mastan et al., 2017). Therefore, learning strategies are very important in writing since learning strategies to help learners dealing with complex activities in the writing process.

A line of research was initiated recently to investigate the significance of writing strategy. Maarof and Murat (2013) indicated the ESL students were categorized in a medium level of writing strategy use. They also reported the different use of the type of writing strategies by high and low proficiency students. De Silva (2015) investigates the impact of writing strategy instruction on writing strategy use and writing performance of a group of undergraduate students. He revealed the importance of writing strategies training in improving students' writing performance. Therefore, teachers as the trainer and instructor need to develop classroom activities based on students needs. Thus, this study aimed to describe the students' perception of the use of writing strategies in their writing strategies.

## Materials and Methods

A survey study was conducted to English Department students of a Private Islamic University in Kendari with a total of 140 students as the participants. They consisted of 102 female students and 38 male students. The data were obtained from a questionnaire and a semi-structured interview. The questionnaire is adapted and developed from Petric and Czarl's writing strategy questionnaire in their published article *Validating a Writing Strategy Questionnaire* (Petric & Czarl, 2003). This adapted questionnaire was chosen since it is concerned with the information related to writing strategies. Besides, this instrument has been used in other studies which have the same purpose of describing students' writing strategies (Zhang, 2015; Maarof & Murat, 2013; Chen, 2011; Baker & Boonkit, 2004). The data from the questionnaire were analyzed using statistical analysis to get the mean score. The data from the interview were transcribed and coded to support the result of the questionnaire.

## Results and Discussion

The overall mean of reported use writing strategies by the participants of this study is 3.28 ( $\bar{x} = 3.28$ ) with the standard deviation 1.113 ( $SD = 1.113$ ). According to Oxford's scale for interpretation of scores, the mean score shows that the overall use of writing strategies is at a medium level. It means that, on average, all of the participants sometimes use the writing strategy items listed in the questionnaire.

Table 1. Summary of writing strategies use in each stage.

| Stages             | Mean | SD    | N   |
|--------------------|------|-------|-----|
| Pre-writing        | 3.41 | 1.024 | 140 |
| While-writing      | 3.43 | 1.108 | 140 |
| Revising           | 3.43 | 1.108 | 140 |
| Overall strategies | 3.28 | 1.113 | 140 |

In terms of writing stages, the findings showed that there is no difference in frequencies of the strategy used. As showed in Table 1, the use of writing strategies in every stage was categorized as medium. It means that of overall writing strategy use in every stage all participants sometimes used those writing strategies.

Table 2. Overall writing strategies most frequently used.

| Stage  | Strategies   | Mean  | SD    | Level |
|--|--|-------|-------|-------|
| Pre-Writing  | I use my background (world) knowledge to help me with ideas.   | 3.67  | 0.970 | High  |
|  | I make notes and plan in Indonesian before writing.  | 3.54  | 1.121 | High  |
|  | I read my lesson notes, handouts, and course requirements before writing.                                      | 3.53  | 0.948 | High  |
|  | I write an outline in Indonesian.  | 3.51  | 0.971 | High  |
| While Writing  | I reread what I have written to get ideas and continue my paper.   | 4.14  | 0.853 | High  |
|  | I use an English-Indonesian, Indonesian-English dictionary.  | 3.94  | 1.088 | High  |
|  | I write the introduction first.  | 3.83  | 1.059 | High  |
|  | If I don't know the word in English, I stop writing and look up the word in the dictionary.                    | 3.83  | 1.010 | High  |
|  | I only use words that I am sure are correct.   | 3.79  | 0.963 | High  |
|  | If I don't know a word in English, I find a similar word that I know.  | 3.75  | 0.968 | High  |
|  | If I don't know a word in English, I write it in Indonesian and later try to find an appropriate English word. | 3.68  | 0.947 | High  |
| I simplify what I want to write if I don't know how to express my thoughts in English. | 3.65   | 0.848 | High  |       |
| Revising   | I use a dictionary when revising the vocabulary use in my paper.   | 3.79  | 0.958 | High  |
|  | I go back to my writing to edit and change the content (ideas)   | 3.50  | 1.049 | High  |

Table 2 provides in detail the individual strategies most frequently employed by students during their writing activities. In comparison to the other two stages, the writing stage showed the most number of frequently used strategies. At the pre-writing stage, the students chose to employ *I use my background (world) knowledge to help me with ideas*. (M= 3.67,

$SD= 0.970$ ) as their favorite strategy. Next, they chose *I make notes and plan in Indonesian before writing*. ( $M= 3.54$ ,  $SD = 1.121$ ). They also prefer the strategy of *I read my lesson notes, handouts, and course requirements before writing*. ( $M= 3.53$   $SD=0.984$ ). *I write an outline in Indonesian* ( $M= 3.51$ ,  $SD=0.971$ ) was also chosen by the students as their favorite strategy in this stage. In the while writing, most of the students chose *I reread what I have written to get ideas and continue my paper* ( $M= 4.14$ ,  $SD= 0.853$ ) as their initial strategy in the writing process. Next, the students chose the strategy of *I to use an English-Indonesian, Indonesian-English dictionary* ( $M= 3.94$ ,  $SD=1.088$ ). They also prefer the strategy of *If I don't know the word in English, I stop writing and look up the word in the dictionary* ( $M=3.83$ ,  $SD= 1.010$ ) to help them in their writing. Other strategies were mostly used related to the vocabulary use. They are *I only use words which I am sure are correct*. ( $M=3.79$ ,  $SD=0.963$ ); *If I don't know a word in English, I find a similar word that I know* ( $M= 3.75$ ,  $SD=0.968$ ); *If I don't know a word in English, I write it in Indonesian and later try to find an appropriate English word*. ( $M= 3.68$ ,  $SD = 0.947$ ); and *I simplify what I want to write if I don't know how to express my thoughts in English* ( $M=3.65$ ,  $SD = 0.848$ ). Apart from that, the majority of students also choose *I write the introduction first*. ( $M= 3.83$ ,  $SD= 1.059$ ), which is interestingly it was not their initial strategy to start their writing. For the revising stage, there were two strategies most frequently used by the students. *I use dictionary when revising the vocabulary use in my paper* ( $M=3.79$ ,  $SD=0.958$ ) was seemed as the favorite choice. Then followed by *I go back to my writing to edit and change the content (ideas)* ( $M=3.50$ ,  $SD=1.049$ ).

Table 3. Use of writing strategies employed by male and female students.

| Writing Stage            | Male (N= 38) |       | Female (N=102) |       | t     | Sig. (2-tailed) |
|--------------------------|--------------|-------|----------------|-------|-------|-----------------|
|                          | Mean         | SD    | Mean           | SD    |       |                 |
| Pre_Writing Strategies   | 3.40         | 1.067 | 3.41           | 1.009 | -.040 | .969            |
| While Writing Strategies | 3.45         | 1.124 | 3.42           | 1.103 | .303  | .762            |
| Revising Strategies      | 3.14         | 1.133 | 3.04           | 1.117 | 1.014 | .312            |

Table 3 showed that both male and females students were reported to use more writing strategies in the stage of pre-writing and while writing, whereas they were less used in the writing strategies in the revising stage. The result also showed that both male and female students' use of writing strategies were categorized at a medium level. It means that they sometimes use the writing strategies in their learning activities. It is consistent with the

findings from Chen (2011) and Maroof and Murat (2013). The *t*-test is conducted in order to find out the different use of writing strategies between male and female students. It showed that there is no difference in the use of writing strategies in every stage employed by male and female students ( $p>0.05$ ). It is in contrary with the results discovered in Zhang (2015), he found that female students showed higher frequency of reporting use than male students with respect to stage strategy use. Sadi and Othman (2012) also found the differences on strategies use between skilled and less-skilled students in term of planning, drafting and reviewing. Moreover, Al Asmari (2013) revealed that there were significant differences in the total use of writing strategies in favor of males.

Table 4. The use of writing strategies in the pre-writing stage.

| No | Strategies   | Male |           | Female |           | <i>t</i> | Sig. (2-tailed) |
|----|--|------|-----------|--------|-----------|----------|-----------------|
|    |  | Mean | <i>SD</i> | Mean   | <i>SD</i> |          |                 |
| 1  | Reading my lesson notes, handouts, and course requirements before writing. | 3.61 | 1.028     | 3.50   | 0.920     | .583     | .561            |
| 2  | Using my background (world) knowledge to help me with ideas.               | 3.58 | 1.154     | 3.71   | 0.897     | -.687    | .493            |
| 3  | Making notes and plan in Indonesian before writing.                        | 3.34 | 1.169     | 3.61   | 1.100     | -1.249   | .214            |
| 4  | Writing an outline in Indonesian.  | 3.42 | 1.004     | 3.55   | 0.961     | -.692    | .490            |

Table 4 presented the comparison of mean scores from the use of individual strategies employed by male and female students at the pre-writing stage. The table revealed that among the most frequently used writing strategies, the females' mean scores for all individual strategies were categorized as high level. It means that the female students are generally using those strategies in this stage. However, the result of the *t*-test showed that there is no significant difference in the use of writing strategies both by male and female students in the pre-writing stage. In the pre-writing stage, the students are expected to be able to generate and gain information for their writing. Seow (2001) and Birnie (2015) suggest that the activities such as brainstorming, clustering, reading, or mapping ideas are benefit the students in planning what they want to write. Moreover, Bloom (2008) explains that the pre-writing stage usually concerns with generating an idea, shaping ideas, refining and organizing ideas.

Therefore, strategies are needed to help students with time management and complexities of writing since the students usually spend more time planning what they want to write.

Table 5. The use of writing strategies in while writing stage.

| No | Strategies  | Male |       | Female |       | <i>t</i> | Sig. (2-tailed) |
|----|---|------|-------|--------|-------|----------|-----------------|
|    |   | Mean | SD    | Mean   | SD    |          |                 |
| 1  | Writing the introduction first.   | 3.76 | 1.173 | 3.85   | 1.019 | -.445    | .657            |
| 2  | Rereading what I have written to get ideas and continue my paper.                       | 4.05 | 0.804 | 4.18   | 0.872 | -.763    | .447            |
| 3  | Using words which I am sure are correct.  | 3.79 | 0.963 | 3.79   | 0.968 | -.025    | .980            |
| 4  | Simplifying what I want to write if I don't know how to express my thoughts in English. | 3.74 | 0.828 | 3.62   | 0.856 | .739     | .461            |
| 5  | Writing unknown words in Indonesian and later try to find an appropriate English word.  | 3.66 | 1.097 | 3.69   | 0.890 | -.157    | .875            |
| 6  | finding a similar word for the unknowing word in English                                | 3.95 | 0.899 | 3.68   | 0.987 | 1.479    | .141            |
| 7  | Stopping to write when I found an unknown word and look up the word in the dictionary.  | 3.89 | 1.085 | 3.80   | 0.985 | .472     | .638            |
| 8  | Using an English-Indonesian, Indonesian-English dictionary.                             | 3.84 | 1.220 | 3.97   | 1.038 | -.620    | .536            |

Table 5 presents the data related to mean scores of writing strategies most frequently used by male and female students in while writing stage. The table informs that from the result of the

t-test, there were no significant differences in the use of writing strategies by male and female students in the while writing stage. Differ with pre-writing stage, at while writing stage, male students employ more writing strategies than the female students. It is contrary to Zhang (2015) who found out that female students employ more writing strategies while writing compared to male students. The result also reveals that both male and female students employ more strategies at this stage compared to other stages.

Table 6. The use of writing strategies in the revising stage.

| No | Strategies   | Male |           | Female |           | <i>t</i> | Sig. (2-tailed) |
|----|--|------|-----------|--------|-----------|----------|-----------------|
|    |  | Mean | <i>SD</i> | Mean   | <i>SD</i> |          |                 |
| 1  | I use dictionary when revising the vocabulary use in my paper. | 3.61 | 0.855     | 3.85   | 0.989     | -1.365   | .175            |
| 2  | I go back to my writing to edit and change the content (ideas) | 3.45 | 1.108     | 3.52   | 1.031     | -.361    | .719            |

Table 6 presents the mean scores of individual strategies use employed by male and female students in the revising stage. The *t*-test revealed that there is one strategy shows a significant difference in the use of the strategy between male and female students. At the revising stage, both male and female students are less frequently in using writing strategies. This is in line with the results discovered in Maarof and Murat (2013) which found that the students used more strategies in the writing stage than in the pre-writing and revising stage.

## Conclusion

The current study was carried out to investigate and describe the use of writing strategies by students in the English Department of a private Islamic university in Kendari. From the result and the discussion of this study, it revealed some conclusions. First, the use of writing strategies for this particular sample fell in the medium level, which means the students sometimes used the strategies in their writing activities. In addition, more strategies were employed by students in the whilst writing stage compared to other stages. This is in line with the importance of this stage in writing process, which involved more activities of drafting as well as revising, since they are time consumed, need more patience and trained instruction. Second, all writing strategies were employed by all participants. However, different types of writing strategies were employed by certain participants more frequently



than others. So, the difference was only found in the type of strategies used in every writing stage. Despite the lack of writing strategies used in both pre-writing and revising stage, the participants perceived that the writing strategies were useful in their writing activities. Therefore, it is important to promote the students to use more strategies in every writing stage. However, the teachers also need to be aware of the students' difficulties in writing and allow the students to try out appropriate strategies that work for them.

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