

Original Paper

English Writing Strategies among Non-English Major Students in China: An Activity Theory Perspective

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Abstract

In recent years, in the context of increasing research on second language (L2) writing strategies, scholars have focused on the writing strategies of L2 learners in different writing tasks. In China, researchers pay more attention to the tendency of English majors' writing strategies in different writing tasks. However, Chinese non-English majors receive relatively little attention. Therefore, under the guidance of the Activity Theory (AT) framework (Engeström, 1987), this thesis adopts a mixed research design combining quasi-experimental method and semi-structured interview to investigate the writing strategies of 60 non-English majors from two Chinese universities. The results show that students use tools, rules, communities and role-mediated strategies when completing writing tasks, and learners' strategy choices are not only influenced by individual cognitive and emotional factors, but also by a broader social and cultural background. This study integrates activity theory into the research category, which is helpful to the dynamic understanding of language learning strategy use and provides enlightenment for English teaching practice in higher education in China.

Keywords

English learning strategies, non-English majors, Activity Theory, socio-cultural factors

1. Introduction

With the shift from the cognitive paradigm to the socio-cultural paradigm in SLA and writing research, it provides a new perspective on L2 writing and its relationship with strategy choice (Lantolf, 2006). In the field of second language acquisition, writing strategies have become an increasingly prominent research field. Researchers try to understand how learners deal with and manage various writing tasks. Over the past few decades, English majors have received a lot of attention, especially in the Chinese context. The study explores their strategic behaviors in different genres and writing conditions. However, there are far fewer studies on non-English majors. Due to their limited contact with English

writing and different teaching focuses, their writing challenges and strategies may be very different. This disconnection between expectation and preparation highlights the need for more in-depth research on the strategies they adopt in English writing.

To fill this gap, this study adopts the activity theory as the guiding framework. The activity theory provides a sociocultural perspective through which language learning is viewed as a mediated, goal-oriented activity influenced by the interaction of learners (subject), goals (object), tools (artifacts), rules, communities and division of labor (Engeström, 1987). The advantage of activity adjustment is that it is relatively closely related to classroom teaching, because classroom teaching is carried out through activities. It is achieved through activities (Wu, 2019, p. 13) By applying this framework, this study aims to go beyond the individualistic interpretation of strategy use and consider how learners' choices are influenced by a broader institutional and social environment. This study investigated the English writing strategies of 60 non-English majors from a Chinese universities through a mixed method of quasi-experimental design and semi-structured interview. The results of the study contribute to a deeper understanding of the use of writing strategies by this under-researched group, and provide pedagogical implications for how to better adjust writing teaching to meet their needs according to the social and cultural reality of higher education in China.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Activity Theory and L2 Writing Strategy Research

Vygotsky first proposed the AT. This is a research result in the field of social and cultural activities and social history. Vygotsky believes that human changes in the natural and spiritual world are indirect and need to be achieved through tools. These tools are 'cultural objects, concepts and activities', in which cultural objects include material, symbolic and linguistic systems (Rantov & Thorne, 2006, p. 62). Later, the development of Soviet psychologists Leontief and Ruria made it mature. Finnish scholars Engels Trom (1987) and Engels Trom and others added the three elements of rules, division of labor and community in the regulation theory (see Figure 1).

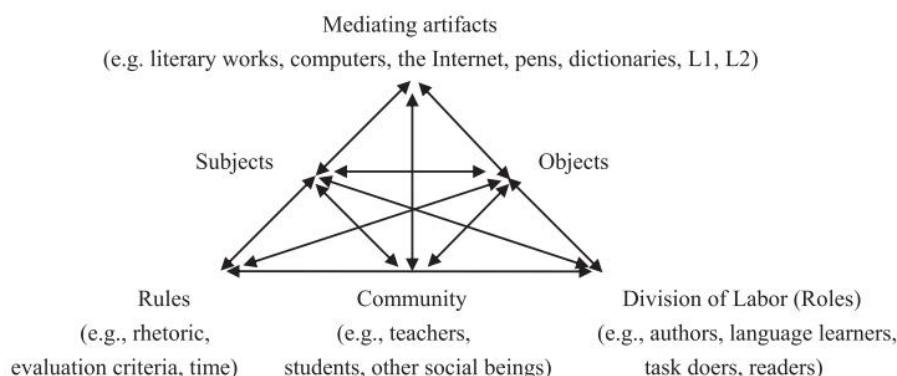


Figure 1

The present study argues that L2 learners' strategies are highly relevant to AT (Ren & Zhu, 2023, p.2). That relevance is demonstrated as Table 1:

Table 1

Elements	Forms
Subject	Students (non-English majors)
Object	Completion of English writing tasks and improvement of writing quality
Tools	software, dictionaries, templates, feedback forms, etc.
Rules	Expectations of the school system, grading rubrics, language norms, etc.
Community	Fellow classmates, teachers, group members
Division of Labor	Distribution of roles and responsibilities in writing
Outcome	Writing output, competence improvement, change in learning strategies

In recent years, AT has provided a new perspective for understanding writing strategies and guided more and more studies on second language writing strategies (Ren & Zhu, 2023, p. 2). How to integrate these theories into the design of writing courses, especially how to realize the simultaneous development of language ability, subject literacy and critical thinking skills in specific course teaching practice, is still under exploration (Zhang & Sun, 2014, p. 3). Based on the AT framework, Lei Xiao's research analyzes the writing process of two English majors in China and identifies four core writing strategies. Writing strategies are defined as intentionally adopted mediating behaviors to facilitate the author's practice in the community (Lei, 2008, p. 220). It can be seen that writing is not only an individual cognitive process, but also a dynamic activity system shaped by tools, rules, communities and roles.

Writing strategies can be understood as a regulatory behavior, or the use of regulatory resources within an activity system (Lei, 2008). This study examines the strategic ecology and dilemmas faced by Chinese English majors in their graduation thesis writing, emphasizing that writing is not only a display of language competence, but also the result of the interaction between social roles, academic norms and available resources. Therefore, AT provides a three-dimensional framework of 'system-dynamics-contradiction' to analyze writing practice, and provides theoretical guidance for improving academic writing teaching and building a supportive learning environment.

AT emphasizes the social and cultural dependence of human behavior and the dynamic relationship between the components of the activity system. Both Song and Fan used Engels Trom's activity system model to study the motivation mechanism in language learning. Their research aims to explore how research subjects such as South Korean teachers of English as a foreign language and Vietnamese non-English majors use intermediary tools.

Both scholars emphasize that internal contradictions within the activity system function as key drivers

of motivational development. Tensions between learner goals and institutional expectations, or between available resources and desired outcomes, can stimulate adjustments in learning behaviors and motivational orientations. Their findings suggest that motivation in language learning is dynamic and multidimensional, shaped by the continuous interaction between internal factors (such as self-efficacy, identity, and emotional states) and external influences, including classroom environments and broader sociocultural contexts (Song & Kim, 2016, p. 144).

Motivation plays a central role in sustaining learner engagement and persistence when facing linguistic and cognitive challenges. Intrinsic motivation, which stems from personal interest and autonomy, is particularly important for long-term commitment to language learning, whereas extrinsic motivation tends to have more limited and short-term effects. Moreover, motivation is sensitive to contextual variables such as instructional methods, assessment practices, and sociopolitical factors influencing language learning opportunities.

These studies also show that participants actively adjust their activity system to cope with various tensions. For example, Korean teachers adjust their teaching philosophy to resolve rules-related conflicts, while Vietnamese students engage in online community activities to compensate for limited social support. These cases illustrate that learners' initiative enables them to reconstruct the environment to enhance their learning motivation. In order to optimize language education, it is necessary to strengthen the coordination between the elements of the activity system, such as enriching mediation tools and fostering supportive communities, in order to promote sustainable intrinsic motivation and reduce systemic constraints.

Their research results show that motivation in language learning is dynamic and multidimensional, shaped by the continuous interaction between internal factors (such as self-efficacy, identity and emotional state) and external influences (including classroom environment and broader social and cultural background) (Song & Jin, 2016, p. 144). Motivation plays a vital role in maintaining learners' engagement and persistence in the face of language and cognitive challenges. Intrinsic motivation stems from personal interests and autonomy, which is particularly important for long-term involvement in language learning, while the influence of extrinsic motivation is limited and short-term. In addition, motivational opportunities are influenced by environmental variables such as teaching methods, assessment practices, and socio-political factors that influence language learning opportunities.

2.2 Theoretical Hypothesis on Writing Strategy

Under the guidance of AT, this study argues that Chinese non-English majors' second language writing strategies are not merely the result of individual cognitive processing or metacognitive awareness, but are shaped by social and cultural factors. Specifically, it is assumed that learners' strategy selection in English writing tasks stems from the dynamic interaction between the elements of the activity system.

In addition, it is also assumed that the internal contradictions within or between these components, such as the inconsistency between institutional expectations and learners' perception of writing ability, will generate tensions and prompt learners to adopt specific writing strategies. These strategies may include

cognitive strategies, metacognitive strategies or social strategies, depending on the context and the available mediations.

In essence, this study is based on the theoretical hypothesis that L2 writing strategies are socially mediated, context-dependent and dynamically constructed by participating in goal-oriented and rule-constrained activity systems.

3. Methods

3.1 Research Questions

1. What types of writing strategies do Chinese non-English major students employ in English writing tasks within the framework of AT?
2. How do socio-cultural factors influence the strategy choices of non-English majors in English writing?

3.2 Participants

Sixty students from two non-English major classes in a Chinese university participated in this study. All students are preparing for CET-6 and are studying in the same course called ‘College English Writing’, which is taught by the same teacher. This arrangement ensures the consistency of teaching environment, course content and teaching methods, so as to minimize possible teaching differences in the process of data collection.

Before the study, a questionnaire was distributed to the participants to collect background information, including age, gender, English learning experience, learning habits and previous English test scores. Participants included 43 males and 17 females, aged between 18 and 22 years old. All the students have about ten years of English learning experience.

In addition, 6 students were randomly selected from the sample to participate in semi-structured interviews. Table 2 shows the demographic information of participants.

Table 2. Background Information of the Survey Participants

Gender (%)		Major (%)		Years of studying English
Male	Female	E	CE	10
71.7	28.3	50	50	

Notes. E= Economics; CE= Civil Engineering

3.3 Procedures

3.3.1 Writing Test

The writing task used in this study is CET-6 writing. The reason for choosing this task is that 60 non-English majors who are going to take CET-6 have about ten years of English learning experience - similar in language ability and learning background. The grammatical and textual requirements of

CET-6 writing (such as lexical scope, grammatical complexity and organizational structure) are matched with participants' proficiency and learning objectives, which helps to reduce measurement bias and improve the internal validity of the research. The use of CET-6 writing tasks also ensures the consistency between the research background and the students' actual learning objectives. The scoring criteria for CET-6 writing (assessing content development, language accuracy and organizational coherence, etc.) provide a standardized framework for quantitative analysis.

During the experiment, all the participants completed a time-limited classroom writing task, which required them to write an English article with about 150 words in 30 minutes. No external resources are allowed. The standardized test conditions simulate the real test environment and ensure the consistency and reliability of the data collection process.

3.3.2 Semi-structured Interview

The stratified sampling method was adopted. According to the results of the previous writing test, the participants were divided into three performance levels: high (score > 85), medium (score 60-84) and low (score < 60). Of the total 60 student participants, 5 were in the high performance group, 46 were in the middle group, and 9 were in the low performance group. Two students were selected from each of the 60 students according to the high, medium and low performance levels, a total of 6 people. Stratification can ensure that students at different levels are represented and avoid sample bias; the sample size of each layer is the same, the operation is simple and the results are intuitive, which meets the needs of small sample research.

Each interview lasted about 20 minutes and was conducted in Chinese with the prior consent of the participants. The interview follows the pre-designed guidelines, but can be flexibly asked based on the answers of the participants, so that rich and in-depth data can be collected.

In order to protect the privacy of participants, we strictly follow the ethical research guidelines. All personal identification information was deleted during transcription and data processing. Participants use coded identifiers (n01, n02... n06) instead of real names for anonymous processing to ensure the neutrality of data analysis and the confidentiality of personal answers. In addition, all data is stored on encrypted and restricted-access devices and is only used in this study to ensure data security and participant privacy.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Artefact-mediated Strategy

A considerable number of participants said that they mainly relied on their mother tongue to express in the planning and drafting stages. Students usually translate their thoughts from Chinese into English, which helps them organize their thoughts more clearly. For example, one participant mentioned:

"I first think about what I want to say in Chinese, and then translate it into English with simple words." (n05)

This strategy reflects the mediating role of mother tongue in reducing cognitive load and promoting

thought generation. However, this also leads to some Chinglish expressions and unsmooth sentence structures in the final text.

Another significant mediation strategy is the use of memorized composition templates specially designed for CET-6. These templates are usually provided by the preparation books or teachers, including the beginning, transition and end of the fixed expression. Although these templates help students effectively manage time and organize the structure of articles, they also limit creativity and topic-specific expression. For example, more than 60 % of the students used similar opening statements, such as “As vividly depicted in the picture...” or “In my opinion, we should take immediate action.”

“If I don’t prepare some template sentences in advance, it will be very difficult for me to write excellent sentences in the exam.” (n03)

These strategies suggest that students’ writing is influenced not only by their personal knowledge and preferences, but also by the external tools embedded in the sociocultural learning environment which is consistent with the principles of action theory. Both the first language and the standardized writing model act as intermediary tools, which support or restrict writing activities.

4.2 Rule-mediated Strategy

Many students show a strong tendency that their writing will align with the criteria they perceive. This includes the deliberate use of transitional words, complex sentences and compound sentence structures, as well as the employment of formal vocabulary. For instance, over half of the students will use fixed expressions such as “With the rapid development of society, more and more people are beginning to...” at the beginning of their essays. This is a common pattern recommended in the preparation materials. Students often refer to the writing frameworks introduced by their teachers, such as the “three-paragraph argument structure” (introduction, body, conclusion). As one student said:

“Our teacher told us that as long as we follow this structure and use some linking words, we can get a good score.” (n01)

This illustrates the influence of pedagogical rules on writing strategy choices.

Given the strict time constraints of the CET-6 exam, students reported prioritizing the completion of grammatically correct and structurally sound essays over original content. This time-pressure rule shaped their preference for using memorized templates and avoiding complex or unfamiliar vocabulary.

“Every time it comes to the formal exam, I feel that the writing time passes particularly fast. I want to think carefully and write a good article, but time doesn’t allow me to come up with complex sentences.” (n02)

4.3 Role-mediated Strategy

4.3.1 Performing as an “Exam Candidate”

One of the roles that participants generally show is as test participants, aiming to meet the set scoring criteria. The students said that they would consciously adjust their writing content to meet the model they thought the examiner expected. These adjustments are reflected in many aspects. On the one hand, students tend to avoid expressing controversial views or innovative ideas because they worry that

non-traditional views may lead to lower scores.

I do not dare to write controversial or new point of view, because of being afraid of being too special...so it is safer. I will also recite some fixed sentence patterns and templates, and use them directly in the exam, which is easier to get scores. (n03)

They are more inclined to present neutral and widely accepted views to ensure safety in the assessment. On the other hand, the use of recited sentence patterns and prefabricated language segments is common practice.

By using these readily available language resources, students aim to demonstrate their proficiency in grammar and structure, even if it means sacrificing the natural fluency and uniqueness of writing. This kind of role performance is deeply rooted in the students' anxiety about the test results and the pressure of pursuing high scores. The pursuit of scoring criteria-oriented writing not only shapes students' writing habits, but also may hinder the development of critical thinking and creativity. Such practices may lead to writing samples becoming uniform, making it difficult for examiners to accurately assess students' actual language proficiency and intellectual potential.

4.4.2 Acting as a "Social Commentator"

Some students assumed the role of objective social observers, presenting their opinions on societal issues in a formal and analytical tone. For instance, in essays on environmental protection or technological development, students often wrote from a third-person perspective to maintain neutrality and authority.

"If I'm commenting on something, I find it very difficult. I'm afraid I don't have enough opinions to support the article." (n05)

4.4.3 Positioning as a "Responsible Citizen"

Another recurring identity that emerged prominently across participants' narratives was that of a socially responsible youth, a role deeply intertwined with their self-conceptualization as active contributors to societal well-being. In deliberate and thoughtful response to essay prompts that centered on moral values, ethical dilemmas, or civic duty, students consistently articulated a profound and unwavering sense of obligation, weaving into their discourse frequent and earnest expressions such as "We as a collective should take responsibility for fostering positive change in our communities" or "As college students endowed with knowledge and privilege, we must actively contribute to societal progress, addressing pressing issues with compassion and critical awareness," thereby positioning themselves as agents of moral accountability and communal development.

4.4.4 Writing from the "Student Perspective"

When issues related to college life or youth culture arise, students play the role of insiders. When their role becomes the author of the article, they will answer the question posed by the commentator, explain the sentence meaning in the article to the commentator, and clarify their writing intention, etc., to seek appropriate feedback from the commentator (Zhang & Cheng, 2018, p. 61). They share personal experiences or summarize students' concerns, which makes their arguments more relevant and

authentic.

Participants reported this kind of role-shifting in their own writing practices. As one student reflected:

“When I describe campus life or the things that young people truly care about, I feel as if I am speaking as one of them.” (n02)

These different roles are not explicitly designated, but strategic choices that are gradually formed with the influence of classroom norms, examination culture, and students' inherent expectations of academic discourse. From the perspective of AT, these roles reflect the “division of labor” in the writing activity system. Students not only write, but also shape their corresponding identities according to the task situation and the expected audience.

5. Conclusions

This study adopts a mixed-method design within the framework of activity theory to investigate the writing strategies of 60 Chinese non-English majors who are going to take CET-6. The results of the study confirm that students' writing behavior is influenced by tools, rules and roles, which indicates that L2 writing is not a only individual cognitive process, but a dynamic activity embedded in social and cultural background. Students often use the CET-6 template of mother tongue translation and memory to reduce cognitive pressure and meet structural requirements, but these practices often limit the creativity of language and lead to rigid expression. At the same time, the rule-oriented strategy reflects the strong obedience to the scoring criteria, standardized paragraph structure and examination time limit, indicating that institutional norms and classroom requirements profoundly affect students' strategy choices. In terms of role performance, students can flexibly switch multiple identities, such as test participants, social commentators, responsible citizens, and internal peers, which constitute the division of labor in the writing activity system and adapt to different task situations and expected audiences.

These results enrich the understanding of writing strategies of non-English majors who have not been fully studied, and verify the explanatory power of activity theory in revealing systemic contradictions, including the tension between test-oriented safety and authentic expression, and the conflict between time pressure and authentic communication. These contradictions prompt students to constantly adjust their strategies. From the pedagogical perspective, this study suggests that college English teachers should encourage authentic expression, and design diversified writing tasks. Future research can use longitudinal design to explore the development and changes of students' writing activity system, and further study how digital tools and peer communities reshape writing strategies.

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