

Are Writers Metaconscious when they Write? A Look at Genders

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Abstract

Writing is a demanding skill which entails writers to sync and blend with some writing elements such as vocabulary, syntax, grammar, sentence structure, strategies and lexical. This skill requires the ESL writers to be adequately proficient and expressive in using the language while writing the essays. In the ESL writing, writers rely on some strategies to regulate them the entire writing process. One of the known strategies that helps the writers to compose is Metacognitive writing strategies. Metacognitive writing strategies establish three main components namely planning, monitoring, and evaluating and they function as helpful writing regulator, enabling the ESL writers to excel in their writing. However, there are some variations in the act of using planning, monitoring, and evaluating by male and female writers. Hence, this study was conducted to explore on how male and female writers plan, monitor, and evaluate their writing and to see how these strategies assist them completely. It is a crucial for the writers to get acknowledged of these three components and know on how to apply them in their writing. To obtain the pertinent data, a male and a female student were selected from one public university in Johor to participate in the study. This qualitative study used semi-structured interview as the main method in collecting pertinent data. From the findings, it was found that both male and female ESL writers had different ways and techniques when planning, monitoring, and evaluating their writing. Results of this study have given a great impact on teaching and learning of ESL academic writing.

Keywords: ESL Writing, Writing Process, Writing Strategies, Metacognitive Writing Strategies, Planning, Monitoring, Evaluating, Semi-Structured Interview, ESL Writers, Gender.

Introduction

Background of the Study

Writing urges writers to develop a comprehensible text or essays with a decent language use. In a different view, a writer should concern on vocabulary, coherent and cohesive, spelling, grammar and other writing mechanics besides applying critical thinking during a writing process. Academic writing is not only about presenting the ideas and thoughts, but

the writers should be proficient and skillful in using the language. Azizi *et al* (2017) define writing as a systematic skill that allows learners to inculcate their knowledge including vocabulary, grammar, and structure. This shows that writing is a difficult task as the writer is not only conveying thoughts and ideas, but they are required to develop language proficiency that helps them to compose well.

To begin with, writing skill should be instilled in each writer at the early stage of their age. Obviously, the process is not easy as there are challenges to deal with during the learning process. In learning writing, the writers do not only learn the mechanism of writing, but they must be good at using the language too. This process must be challenging for most of second language writers (ESL) as they do not only strive themselves to think creatively and critically but at the same time, they need to be mindful about the language use. The situation will alleviate them from expressing appropriate thoughts to the readers besides organizing the ideas coherently.

Additionally, it is very important for the writers to present clear ideas and persuade the readers to accept the proposed ideas. There are several types of features that help the writers during the writing process including language proficiency, writing competence, the use of a cohesive, writing strategies and writers' personal characteristics. Among these features, writing strategies are said to influence the writers' writing process and writing performance as claimed by Chien (2012), writers who use writing strategies in their writing process will excel in their writing performance.

In ESL writing, writing strategies are categorized into five types which are rhetoric strategies, cognitive strategies, metacognitive writing strategies, communicative strategies, and social/affective strategies. Among all these writing strategies, metacognitive writing strategies have been claimed to be frequently used by most ESL learners during their writing process (Raofi *et al.*, 2014). Additionally, writers are known to use metacognitive strategies sub-consciously. This writing strategy consists of three major components namely planning, monitoring, and evaluating. Therefore, the study aims to explore metacognitive writing strategies used by ESL writers, exclusively to see how the writers plan, monitor, and evaluate in the writing process.

Problem Statement

Writing strategies are used as a writing regulator that guides writers to compose. The most common writing strategies that help the writers to produce good essays is metacognitive writing strategies. This strategy involves three main elements; (1) planning, (2) monitoring, and (3) evaluating that work to control the writers from the beginning of their writing until the end of the process.

It is obvious that metacognitive writing strategies could guide the writers to write well when they know on how to plan, monitor, and evaluate their writing. However, many writers do not realize the significance of applying these three major elements as a helpful guideline due to lack of awareness. Besides that, the writers are clueless about benefits of having a proper planning, monitoring, and evaluating the written text during and after the writing process. Hence, this has caused them to have a disorganized text which has resulted to poor writing performance.

This qualitative study is intended to explore meta-conscious writing strategies used by ESL writers by looking at how they plan, monitor, and evaluate their writing process on the perspective of gender by using notes from semi-structured interview.

Specifically, this study is done to answer the following questions.

- a. How do male and female writers plan their writing?
- b. How do male and female writers monitor their writing?
- c. How do male and female writers evaluate their writing?

Literature Review

ESL Writing and ESL Writers

Writing is a complex skill as it requires writers to undergo social and cognitive process. Rahmat *et.al* (2018) define writing as a social-cognitive process as the writers should ensure that the written ideas are conveyed and successfully understood by the readers. In fact, writing is said as a skill that promotes social interaction between writers and readers. Instead of sharing ideas, writers are also capable to share feelings and convince others through their writing (Aluemalai and Maniam, 2020). Besides connecting the writers to the readers, writing is also known as a process of transferring ideas, information, and thoughts that the writers plan in their mind. Guneyli (2016) describes writing as a process where the ideas are transferred by involving writers' emotions, opinions, thoughts, and past experiences based on language rules and letters.

ESL writing on the other hand demands ESL writers to communicate their ideas through writing using their second language. As such, this process becomes complex when the language proficiency of the writers becomes a matter. Al- Sawalha *et al* (2012) also state the complexity of learning writing in the second language as they claim that the process is much more complicated than writing in one's native language. The process demands ESL writers to learn and apply some specific processes and strategies to produce good text. The most important thing is the writers must ensure that the written text should be successfully delivered to the readers.

From the previous studies, it shows that ESL writers struggle to write in English due to some difficulties. In learning writing, common difficulties faced by ESL writers are limited vocabulary (Liu, 2013; Mastan , Maarof and Embi, 2017), unable to use appropriate words and phrases, inability to generate ideas using English language (Mastan *et.al*,2017), lacking of writing strategies (Liu, 2013; Ismail, 2011; Abdullah, 2015); problems in language use such as grammar (Mastan *et.al.*, 2017; Ghabool *et al.*, 2013) and interference of L1 (Ghabool *et.al.*, 2013; Jagabalan *et al.*, 2016).

In addition, ESL writers can be categorized into two main groups: skilled writers and unskilled writers. Skilled writers are those who manage to control and direct the entire writing process, while unskilled writers usually do the opposite. Raoofi *et al* (2014) found that skilled writers manage to present the ideas in an organized way and then able to produce a review upon their final composition.

Moreover, it is believed that writing competency of the ESL writers is measured by the strategies that they use and attitudes and behavior when writing. Skilled writers who excel at

writing can use writing strategies in their writing process compared to less-skilled writers. Maharani *et.al* (2018) in their study found that skilled writers use writing strategies often compared to less-skilled writers. Azizi *et.al* (2017) affirm that writers who apply strategies are said to perform better than those who write without any guideline.

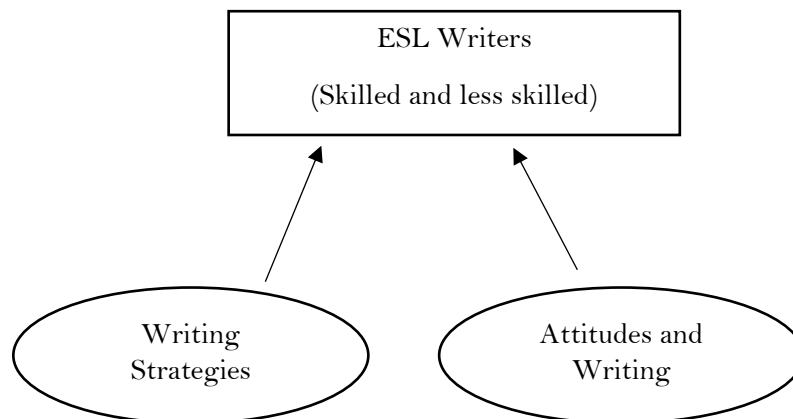


Figure 1: Types of Writers and Factors that Influence Writing Competency

Figure 1 presents types of ESL writers and the two main factors that influence their ability to write. Being able to use writing strategies in the writing process is a privilege to any writer. Nevertheless, proficient writers are said to have a higher tendency to use strategies in their writing as they are more strategic when applying the writing strategies compared to weak writers or less skilled writers. Grabe and Kaplan (2014); Raofi *et.al* (2014); and Zhan (2017) claim that skilled writers manage to use a variety of strategies as they construct the paragraph and manage to present the ideas in an organised way and then made a review upon composition. They also affirm that less competent writers have a weak command on writing besides showing negative performance in using writing strategies in their writing.

Writing Strategies

ESL writing strategies has been explored since 1980s. Writing strategies is a part of ESL writing, whereas writers' capabilities of using the language to deliver the information becomes the main concern during the writing process. It is believed that writers who are language excel manage to manipulate the strategies when writing. Penuelaz (2012) in her research found that proficient writers used a wide range of writing strategies with women as prominent users.

In ESL writing, numerous studies have been conducted in varied areas of writing strategies. A taxonomy of ESL writing strategies is pioneered by Congjun Mu which turns out to be a major reference for many researchers. According to Mu' (2005), there are five types of writing strategies identified and derived from ESL writing theories. The five writing strategies are rhetorical strategies, metacognitive strategies, cognitive strategies, communicative strategies, and social/affective strategies. The categories of ESL writing strategies initiated by Mu (2005) are illustrated in table 1.

Table-1. Types of ESL Writing Strategies

<i>Writing strategies</i>	<i>Sub-strategies</i>
<i>Rhetorical Strategies</i>	Organization Use of L1 Formatting/Modelling Comparing
<i>Meta-cognitive strategies</i>	Planning Monitoring Evaluating
<i>Cognitive strategies</i>	Generating ideas Revising Elaborating Clarification Retrieval Rehearsing Summarising
<i>Communicative strategies</i>	Avoidance Reduction Sense of readers
<i>Social/affective strategies</i>	Resourcing Getting feedback Assigning goals Rest/deferral

Source: (Adapted from Mu, 2005)

Metacognitive Writing Strategies

Manifold studies have explored writing strategies that are developed by Mu (2005). Among these writing strategies, metacognitive writing strategies have been highlighted as the most frequent strategies that are commonly used among ESL writers in the writing process. These strategies are claimed to help learners to reach a higher level of writing content (Pitenoee *et al.*, 2017); reach desirable goals and have better control over the behaviour and their learning, allow the learners to be more confident and efficient in their writing (Rahmat and Ismail, 2014) have a proper guideline to regulate materials that they have learned (Azizi *et al.*, 2017). There are three main components in the metacognitive writing strategies and the details of these components are presented in the following section.

Planning

Planning is a crucial part of the writing process. At this initial stage, writers draft, plan, sketch and talk about their thoughts and ideas either verbally or non-verbal. During the planning stage, the writers plan and recall their prior knowledge to construct the draft or outline. According to Silin and Chan (2015), 70% of writing time should be spent at the planning stage. A study by Bai *et al.* (2014) found that planning is the most prominent strategy chosen by primary learners in Singapore than other strategies. The researchers state that at the planning stage, the writers talk about arrangement and preparation before they start with actual writing.

Monitoring

Monitoring is a writing controller as it regulates the transferring process. This while-writing process allows writers to convert their thoughts and ideas into language. According to Al-Jarrah et.al (2018), monitoring controls the process of transferring ideas during the while-writing stage. At this stage, the writers will check and identify problems, besides verifying many aspects such as content, organisation, grammar, and mechanics.

Evaluating

Evaluating is the final stage of metacognitive writing strategies and it is conducted once the writing process is complete. This stage demands the writers to check and evaluate their writing to see whether the posed writing goals have been achieved and how well the progress has been carried out. This stage also guides the writers to carefully proofread and revise their written text. Likewise, ESL writers will repeatedly proofread the text to recognize grammatical mistakes and inappropriate use of phrases or words. After scrutinizing the text several times, writers will reconsider to see if there are any changes or amendments needed.

Past Studies

In a recent study by Al-Jarrah et.al (2019), the researchers investigate the role of metacognitive writing strategies in the writing. The researchers found that, by employing metacognitive writing strategies, writers' writing skill can be improved, besides helping to reduce the writers' fears to write in English.

In addition, a study on the use of writing strategies on the perspective language proficiency and gender by Maharani *et al.* (2018) found the types of writing strategies used by the students covered the six strategies proposed by Oxford namely memory, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive affective and social strategy. Among these six strategies, the researchers claim that the dominant writing strategy used by the male students is memory strategy, whereas the female students are more prone to use metacognitive strategies. The finding also reveals that the students who use metacognitive strategies in their writing have good writing production process and some of the underlying factors of the writing strategies are the condition and situation of the students when they write.

Meanwhile, another study is conducted by Yan (2018) who investigates the correlation of metacognitive writing strategies and writers' writing anxiety in EFL writing. Even though the correlation between these two variables is vague in this study, the researcher suggested the future researchers explore how metacognitive writing strategies are used to relieve writers' writing anxiety.

Methodology

Research Design

This qualitative study aims to explore how ESL writers plan, monitor, and evaluate their writing in the perspective of gender. Besides that, the study is intended to determine the significant variations on the use of planning, monitoring, and evaluating by male and female writers. The selected sample for this study is a male and a female writer from a public university in Johor, Malaysia who have attended an English course called Integrated Language Skill III(Writing) for a semester. In addition, the instrument used for this study is semi-structured interview. The aim of employing this instrument is to urge the participants to reveal their thoughts and actions during planning, monitoring, and evaluating. According to

Hyland (2003), interviews allow the subjects to freely share their experiences, opinions, feelings, and perception as writers. Hence, the researcher believes that this research tool is useful to provide the researcher with additional information for the study.

To meet the purpose of the study, a male writer and a female writer are selected to perform a writing test for an hour. After the writing session is done, the researcher conducts an interview session with each participant and each interview session took about 30 to 40 minutes. The interviews are conducted to obtain additional information about metacognitive writing strategies and writing anxiety. The questions (see appendix 1) are basically about their personal feeling during the writing process, their thoughts about having planning, monitoring, and evaluating while writing, their choice and ways of using metacognitive writing strategies and so forth. The recorded videos and audiotape were transcribed and narrated by the researcher to answer the objectives of the research.

Findings and Discussion

Introduction

This section presents the findings of the study based on the transcription gathered from semi-structured interview procedure. The findings are discussed according to the three research questions.

- (i) How do male and female writers plan their writing?
- (ii) How do male and female writers monitor their writing?
- (iii) How do male and female writers evaluate their writing?

Findings for Planning

This section attempts to answer Research question 1:

(i) How do male and female writers plan their writing?

Question	Female writer	Male writer
1. Did you prefer to plan verbally or in writing (e.g; mind map or draft) before you started writing?	<i>"For planning, I prefer to use both ways. Usually, I will plan what I am going to write in mind before transferring it onto a paper"</i>	<i>"I will write the ideas on a paper because I am worried, I might forget them."</i>
2. How did you plan your writing each time you write?	<i>"Usually, I write down all the points on a paper, sometimes I provide the elaboration and examples for each point altogether"</i>	<i>"After I get the topic, I will draft as many points as possible and then I choose the best three. After that I will think of examples for the points."</i>
3. (3) What did you do to make sure that you stick to your initial plan in writing your essay?	<i>"What would I do whenever I forget the proposed ideas is that I always remind myself to stick to the plan. However, if I found new ideas while writing, I will add on to the plan or change it whenever needed"</i>	<i>"I will just follow my draft"</i>

4. Why do you think planning is a useful strategy?	<i>“For me yes. Based on my experience, I rarely plan my writing, so I always have problems to write, and I’m lost. Planning helps me to organise my writing besides providing me relevant ideas to write. basically, plan guides the whole process of my writing”</i>	<i>“Planning guides, me to write, whenever new ideas came across, I will add on to the initial plan”</i>
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Table-2. Planning Components Used by a Male and Female Writer

Table 2 presents four interview questions to obtain writers’ answers about using planning stage during the writing process. From the interview, it was found that both male and female writers were keen to have a proper plan before they started writing. However, the female writer preferred to plan the ideas verbally and in writing, compared to the male writer who decided to have a simple draft. In addition, when planning, the female writer wrote down all the possible points on a paper with some elaborations and examples for the points. Meanwhile, the male writer drafted as many points as possible and then he selected the best three to be developed. He would only think about the example for the points soon after. Besides that, the female writer stated that she would remind herself to stick to the initial plan, but she was fine to add on new ideas to the initial plan whenever needed. The male writer on the other hand stated that he would just follow the initial draft. Moreover, both writers agreed that planning is a useful strategy as they found that planning guides and organise their writing.

Findings for Monitoring

This section presents data to answer Research Question 2:

(ii) How do male and female writers monitor their writing?

Question	Female writer	Male writer
1. How did you monitor your own writing during the writing process?	<i>“When I’m writing, I must make sure that I will write the main ideas, provide some elaboration and examples and then summarise each paragraph. So, while writing, I will try to recap what I’ve written, besides checking it time by time to make sure that my writing is well organised. in fact, if I notice some lacking parts when writing, I will finish up writing the whole essay first,</i>	<i>“I will check the organization of my essay because I am worried about the marks”</i>

before returning back and check the lacking parts”

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|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 2. What were the things that you check during the monitoring stage? | <i>“Usually I check on my grammar, because I know my grammar is not that good, so my focus would always be on grammar.”</i> | <i>“I keep on checking on contents to ensure whether the contents are relevant or not”. I also check on grammar.</i> |
| 3. How did you ensure that the content of your essay relevant to the topic? | <i>“When writing my essay, I love to re-read my writing for several times. During that time, I will recognise whether the supporting details are relevant to the ideas or not. So, checking from time to time is important”</i> | <i>“I will make sure I provide appropriate examples for each point.”</i> |

Table-3. Monitoring Components Used by a Male and Female Writer

Based on Table 3, the female writer stated that she monitored her writing by regularly checking her written ideas. While writing, when she noticed any errors or some lacking parts in the essay, she would return and recheck after she finished writing the essay. While monitoring the writing, the female writer concerned much on checking the grammatical errors. She believed that, during monitoring stage, checking the writing from time to time is important because she could figure out mistakes and amended them. Since monitoring is considered as a controller that guides the writer to compose wisely (Goctu,2017), the female writer allocated more approaches to produce a good text. On the other hand, the male writer monitored his writing by checking the organization of the essay. While monitoring, his concern was much more on the grade or marks. The male writer stated that two main elements that he monitored in the essay were contents and grammar parts. So, while checking on the content, he would make sure that he provided appropriate examples for the proposed points.

Findings for Evaluating

This section presents data to answer Research Question 3:

(iii) **How do male and female writers evaluate their writing?**

Question	Female writer	Male writer
1. Did evaluate your essay? Why is it important to evaluate your essay?	<i>"For evaluation part, I rarely revise or evaluate my essay. After I finish writing the essay, I will re-read the whole essay, count the number of words written. Then I will just submit my essay. In my opinion, evaluating is important but in my situation, I always have issues with time besides I don't really know how to evaluate my essay. The fact is I have done my best."</i>	<i>"If I have extra time then I will evaluate and revise my essay. "Evaluating helps me to improve my confidence."</i>
2. What were the things that you considered when evaluating or revising your essay?	<i>"I will evaluate the main ideas to see whether they are relevant or not. I also check on the elaboration for the ideas, but my main concern would always be grammar"</i>	<i>"Normally I check on the ideas because after evaluating I will get more new ideas. I also fix grammar errors."</i>

Table-4. Evaluating Components Used by a Male and Female Writer

The final stage in a writing process is called evaluating stage where writers will scrutinize, proofread, and revise their finishing product. At this stage, writers usually read the text several times to identify grammatical mistakes and inappropriate use of phrases or words. Based on Table 4 presented above, both writers mentioned that they rarely evaluated their writing after they completed. At evaluating stage, the female writer only read the whole text and counted the number of words. Her focus while evaluating was detecting grammatical errors. However, she agreed that evaluating the writing is important, but she did not spend much time to evaluate her essay due to time constraints. Besides, she claimed that she did not know the best approach to evaluate her own writing. Meanwhile, the male writer stated that he would only evaluate his essay if he had extra time and his main concern was also checking on the grammatical errors.

Discussion

Based on the analysis derived, it can be observed that female writer are more details at using planning, monitoring, and evaluating in the writing process. For example, when planning, female writer had a proper plan as she sketched the ideas in her mind before transferring them onto a paper. Besides that, the writer properly chose and affirmed the main points that she wanted to write in her essay by providing elaboration and examples for each point. On the other hand, the male writer did not finalize the points for his writing as he just rambled as many points during planning. He decided the main points after a while and then only he would think of appropriate examples for the selected points. Arrastia *et al.* (2016) and Maharani *et.al* (2018) report that female students are most likely to use strategy in

learning English compared to male students. In addition, Mutar and Nimechisalem (2017) in their study found a significant difference between female and male students in using writing strategy as they discover that female students have more variations when using writing strategies more than male students.

When monitoring, it can be recapitulated that both writers monitored their writing by checking on certain parts such as organization, contents, and grammar. However, from the findings obtained, female writer was more precise when monitoring her written text. The writer recapped her writing besides checking the sentences from time to time. She also amended and added ideas to the text during the monitoring stage. Compared to male writer, his concern was more on the organization as he worried about getting low grade for his writing. Moreover, during evaluation stage, both writers were alike to apply similar methods after completing their writing process. They agreed to check on the elaboration of ideas and grammatical errors. According to Goctu (2017), At this stage, learners will reread and reconsider the product to see if there are any changes needed.

Based on the findings presented and discussed above, it can be concluded that both male and female writers are aware and use the three elements of metacognitive writing strategies which are planning, monitoring, and evaluating in their writing process. What makes the difference was the technique they use and their main concern when writing their essays.

Conclusion

Summary of Findings

In the writing process, ESL writers, be it male writers or female writers take metacognitive writing strategies as their writing regulator by planning, monitoring, and evaluating. However, the way they plan, monitor, and evaluate along the process is varied and different across gender. It has been proven in the study that female writer plan, monitor and evaluate precisely compared to male writer. From the planning stage until evaluating stage, female writer performed more techniques, and the writer was particular and concern about the quality of the essay. Although both writers applied different techniques during planning, monitoring, and evaluating, it can't be denied that these strategies guided them to have a proper writing practice and to produce organized essays. Hence, this can be summarized that metacognitive writing strategies are practiced differently across gender.

Pedagogical Implications of the study

Based on the discussion of findings, it was notified that both male and female writers used metacognitive writing strategies as their writing regulator when they plan, monitor, and evaluate the written text. Although there were differences and variations on how the writers used these three elements in their writing process, these strategies are still regarded as a helpful writing method by both genders. Moreover, the differences that were discovered from the findings will provide new data and information to writing teachers and educators in terms of understanding the writing pattern and style of their students. Besides that, writing teachers and educators can provide a proper guideline for the students on how to systematically plan, monitor, and evaluate their writing. Hence, the students will be more metaconscious and aware of having the three elements in their writing process, which help them to produce organized essays.

Suggestions for Future Research

Future research should explore a more thorough investigation of the implications of using these strategies and the factors that influence ESL writers to use strategies in the writing process. In fact, writing strategies can also be studied by comparing metacognitive writing strategies with other strategies in ESL writing. Besides that, the use of other instruments to collect the data such as observation, narrative enquiry and think-aloud protocols would help researchers to probe deeper on writers' use of writing strategies in the writing process.

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