Exploring Metacognitive Writing Strategies in the Writing Process using Think aloud Protocol: A Study across Gender

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ABSTRACT

ESL Writing is a learning skill that is considered as a challenge for ESL writers. To acquire this skill, ESL writers should actively involve in the writing process. This process requires them to apply some strategies. These writing strategies function as a writing controller that guides the writers to produce a good text. Metacognitive writing strategies is one of the writing strategies that comprises of three main components namely, planning, monitoring and evaluating. Hence, this study aims to explore metacognitive writing strategies used by students who are enrolled in an English course. The course is known as Integrated Language Skill (Writing). Three students from one public university in Johor, Malaysia are grouped according to their gender. This qualitative study used Think-aloud protocol (TAP) as the main method in collecting data. Findings revealed that both male and female ESL writers used a variety of metacognitive writing strategies in their writing process. The female writer used more strategies compared to the male writer. Results of this study provide useful implication towards teaching and learning of ESL academic writing.

Keywords: *ESL writing, Writing process, Metacognitive writing strategies, Think-aloud protocol, ESL writers, Gender.*

Highlights of this paper

- This study aims to explore metacognitive writing strategies used by students who are enrolled in an English course. The course is known as Integrated Language Skill (Writing).
- The findings of this study are revealed that both male and female ESL writers used a variety of metacognitive writing strategies in their writing process. The female writer used more strategies compared to the male writer.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Background of the Study

Writing is an essential skill in the second language (ESL) learning. Writing requires learners to develop language proficiency that helps them to produce letters, essays, journals, research papers and so on. Writing can be defined as a thorough skill that enables learners to stimulate their prior knowledge including vocabulary, grammar, and structure (Azizi *et al.*, 2017). This is because writing skill enhances cognitive and linguistic awareness.

In producing good writing, learners need to be taught at the early ages of their education. Although writing is a complex process and adapting this skill is a challenging task, learners should be introduced to this important skill. In the learning process, they should be encouraged to develop critical thinking skills which help them to organize the ideas in producing a comprehensible composition. Writing also helps writers express relevant thoughts to the readers. In the writing process, there are some features that influence learners' good writing and they are language proficiency, writing competence, the use of a cohesive, writing strategies and writers' personal characteristics. Maharani *et al.* (2018) stated that learners' writing is influenced by writing strategies used during the writing process. Chien (2012) also claimed that writers who use writing strategies in their writing process will excel in their writing performance.

There are five different groups of writing strategies in ESL writing which were pioneered by Mu (2005) and these strategies include rhetoric strategies, cognitive strategies, metacognitive writing strategies, communicative strategies, and social/affective strategies. However, among all the writing strategies, metacognitive writing strategies have been claimed to be frequently used by most ESL learners during their writing process (Raoofi *et al.*, 2014). Hence, the present study will carry out an exploration of the use of metacognitive writing strategies in the writing process on the perspective of gender.

1.2. Problem Statement

In the writing process, writers need a guideline that can help them control their writing. This guideline is called strategies, and strategies are the effective factors that contribute to a good quality of written text or essay. One of the most frequent strategies used by ESL writers is metacognitive writing strategies that are comprised of three main stages namely planning, monitoring and evaluating.

Although the use of metacognitive writing strategies is important, writers still lacked awareness in using these strategies during the writing process. This affected their final writing text in a negative way. In fact, many ESL writers do not know how to use this strategy appropriately as they do not realize that metacognitive writing strategies are helpful guideline during the writing process.

The study aims to explore metacognitive writing strategies used by ESL writers in their writing process on the perspective of gender by using Think-aloud protocol (TAP). Specifically, this study is done to answer the following questions;

a. How does gender influence the planning stage in the writing process?
b. How does gender influence monitoring stage in the writing process?
c. How does gender influence evaluating stage in the writing process?

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2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. ESL Writing and ESL Writers

Writing is a process of conveying information, ideas, and thoughts that writers plan in their mind. Guneyli (2016) described writing as a transferring process that involves emotions, opinions, thoughts, dreams, and experiences based on language rules and symbols called letters. In acquiring writing skill, the process becomes more challenging for second language (ESL) learners as it demands them to undergo a specific process and apply some strategies to ensure that the written text is effectively delivered as planned. Al-Sawalha and Chow (2012) also stated that the writing process in the second language is far complicated than writing in one's native language due to its complexity to acquire that skill.

In addition, the writing process demands learners to use their critical thinking besides inculcating their previous knowledge that they have in their mind. Some researchers (Jennifer and Ponniah, 2017; Mastan *et al.*, 2017) stated that the writing process is related to cognitive process, cultural, motivational and social factors. Having said that, it is true that writing in the second language (ESL) is a demanding process that requires writers to incorporate specific skills, language ability, and knowledge.

In ESL writing, writers can be categorized into skilled writers and less-skilled writers. Writers' writing skill is determined by their writing proficiency or their language use. ESL writers who excel at producing a good composition are labeled as skilled writers, for they manage to apply their prior knowledge on any topics and use writing strategies in their writing compared to less-skilled writers. 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.

In addition, writers' writing performance can also be measured by the strategies used during the writing process. Writers who apply strategies are said to perform better than those who write without any guideline. Writing with strategies will guide the writers to write accordingly which helps them to produce a well organized written text. Azizi *et al.* (2017) revealed that students who have greater awareness concerning the strategies they use in the writing process are considered as successful writers.

2.2. Writing Strategies

Mu (2005) pioneered a taxonomy of ESL writing strategies which turned 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. These strategies have been explored by many researchers and they have come out with different findings on the composing strategies.

2.3. Metacognitive Writing Strategies

Metacognitive writing strategies have been highlighted as a beneficial writing strategy among ESL writers. These strategies are considered as the most frequently used strategies by the ESL writers during their writing process. Metacognitive writing strategies 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). Metacognitive writing strategies are comprised of three main components which are (1) planning, (2) monitoring and (3) evaluating.

Table-1. Types of Writing Strategies in ESL writing.

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

Source: (Adapted from Mu (2005)).

2.3.1. Planning

Planning is a crucial part of the writing process. According to Bai *et al.* (2014) planning is the most prominent strategy chosen by primary learners in Singapore than other strategies. At this initial stage, writers will talk about arrangement and preparation before they start writing. There are some aspects that they consider during this planning stage such as they will ensure that they have a clear goal and plan. Some writers plan their draft in their mind, while some prefer proper planning by writing the ideas out as an outline.

2.3.2. Monitoring

Monitoring is known as a controller. During the monitoring stage, writers will control their writing process through regular checking and verifying many aspects such as content, organization, grammar, and mechanics. At this stage, writers will transfer the ideas onto a paper, simultaneously checking on language, contents, and format.

2.3.3. Evaluating

Evaluating, on the other hand, takes place after the writing process is complete. At this stage, learners will reread and reconsider the product to see if there are any changes or amendments needed. Learners will get themselves familiar with peer and self- editing skills.

2.4. Past Studies

In a recent study on the use of writing strategies on the perspective language proficiency and gender by Maharani *et al.* (2018) they found the types of writing strategies used by the students covered the six strategies proposed by Oxford and the dominant writing strategy used by male student was memory strategy, whereas the female students was metacognitive strategies. It was also found that the students who have good writing production used metacognitive strategies in their writing process. the study also revealed that male students chose their writing strategies based on the purpose of learning language, motivation, degree of awareness, learning style

and belief, while female students chose their writing strategies based on the purpose of learning language, motivation, degree of awareness, learning style, belief, and learning environment.

In another study by Raoofi *et al.* (2017) the researchers reported that ESL Malaysian students used writing strategies at a moderate to a high level. They made a claim that learners' preference in using writing strategies was generally related to their English language proficiency. The results showed that the higher the proficiency level, the greater was the strategy use. In term of the type of strategy use, learners had a prominence to use metacognitive strategies more than other writing strategies. The result also disclosed that the proficiency groups differed in their overall use of strategies. The highly successful students employed more monitoring and planning strategies than unsuccessful writers. This indicates that metacognitive strategies are the main contributor to the development of L2 writing skill.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research Design

This qualitative study is conducted to explore the use of planning, monitoring and evaluating as components of metacognitive writing strategies by male and female writers in the writing process. The selected sample for this study is a male and a female writer from a public university in Johor ,Malaysia who attended an English course called Integrated Language Skill III(Writing). Meanwhile, the instrument used for this study is Think-aloud Protocol (TAP). The aim of employing Think-aloud Protocols is to urge the participants to reveal what they are thinking about during the writing process. Alkhatnai (2016) found that think-aloud protocols (TAP) reveal the benefits of first language use in second language writing as the researcher has implemented TAP to understand the writing habits of Saudi EFL/ESL learners and to examine the Arabic speakers' experience when writing compositions in English.

To meet the purpose of the study, a male writer and a female writer were selected to perform a writing test for an hour. The whole writing process was videotaped by the researcher. Before the test was conducted, the writers were briefed on the whole procedure and they were in the know that all the processes and procedure were recorded. The writing process took about an hour and along the process, the writers were requested to say every single word out loud. They were also be permitted to use gestures, expressions and body movements. The obtained video was later tanalysed by the researcher to determine the application of three-stage of metacognitive writing strategies; planning, monitoring and evaluating along the writing process including writer's spoken words and body language. The gathered information from the TAP was then interpreted by the researcher to attain the findings for the study.

4. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

4.1. Introduction

This section discusses the findings of the study based on the transcription gathered from think-aloud protocol procedure. The findings are discussed according to the three stages of metacognitive writing strategies used by both writers during an hour of writing process. The elaboration for each stage

4.2. Planning

Table-2. components of Planning used by a male and female writer.

Male writer	Female writer
(1) knowledge on the specific writing task, its difficulties, and skills needed for it,	(1) evaluate the necessity for writing,
(2) being aware of the task assigned	(2) understand the necessity of writing
(3) identifying the goal and identifying the necessity for developing a specific plan.	(3) applied knowledge on the specific task, aware of writing difficulties and skills needed for it.
	(4) aware of the task assigned,
	(5) identified the goal and the necessity for having a specific plan
	(6) prepared for drafts.
	(7) knew when, where, how and what is to be written for the introduction stage.
	(8) recall her prior knowledge during the planning stage.

Source: (Adapted from Kodituwakku (2013)).

(a) Female Writer

As shown in Table 2 above, during the planning stage, the female writer applied eight methods to assist her for smooth and good writing. At this stage, the methods practiced by the female writer before she started her writing were (1) evaluate the necessity for writing, (2) understand the necessity of writing, (3) applied knowledge on the specific task, aware of writing difficulties and skills needed for it. She was also being (4) aware of the task assigned, (5) identified the goal and the necessity for having a specific plan and (6) prepared for drafts. Besides that, she (7) knew when, where, how and what is to be written for the introduction stage. Finally, the female writer was also able to (8) recall her prior knowledge during the planning stage. The example of using prior knowledge mentioned by the female writer during the planning stage is illustrated below;

"Okay, Umm…sebab haritu madam ada ajar, start dengan soalan, okay…"

(Okay, umm..previously, madam taught us that we can start our writing with a question, okay…")

(b) Male Writer

Based on Table 2 presented above, male writer applied three methods during planning stage namely (1) knowledge on the specific writing task, its difficulties, and skills needed for it, (2) being aware of the task assigned and (3) identifying the goal and identifying the necessity for developing a specific plan. At the beginning of the writing, the male writer took a long pause because he had no idea with the meaning of 'youth' that was mentioned in the instruction. To guess for the meaning, the male writer asked himself a few times about the meaning of the word and he tried to get the clue as close as he could. This shows that the male writer aware of the necessity of having good vocabulary knowledge. The example of his writing behaviour is presented below;

"Today's youth, orang ni (today's youth…I guess it must be a person) …orang kot (perhaps, it is). Today's youth spend…today's youth spend …too much time on the computer surfing the internet for hours…Ha, orang lah ni..orang belia ni (ya!I think it is! teenagers could be..)"

4.3. Monitoring

Table-3. Components of Monitoring used by a male and female writer.

Male writer	Female writer
(1) transformation of writing	(1) Transformation of writing
(2) Awareness on the facts and grammar needed for writing	
(3) Using the writing format effectively	(2) Awareness on the facts and grammar needed for writing
(4) Reflecting on the writing task	
(5) Self-monitoring of progress	(3) Using facts and instructions learned previously
(6) Organization of facts	
(7) Checking again while engaged in writing	(4) Thinking of the writing process
	(5) Using writing effectively
	(6) Using the writing format effectively
	(7) Reflecting on the writing task
	(8) Self-monitoring of progress
	(9) Making changes for a better document while engaged in writing
	(10) Organization of facts
	(11) Checking again while engaged in writing
	(12) Adjusting beginning, middle and end of the writing while writing.

Source: (Adapted from Kodituwakku (2013)).

(a) Female Writer

Based on Table 3, the female writer used several methods during her while- writing process. Since monitoring is considered as a controller that guides the writer to compose wisely (Goctu, 2017) the female writer allocated 12 different methods to guide her while-writing.

(b)Male Writer

During the writing process, the male writer applied only (7) seven sub-categories in the monitoring stage to assist his writing. The sub-categories applied by a male writer is presented in Table 3.

4.4. Evaluating

Table-4. Evaluating Components used by a male and female writer.

Male writer	Female writer
(1) summarizing/paraphrasing,	(1) summarizing/paraphrasing,
(2) awareness on the necessity of revision, (3) checking the effectiveness of the approached solution,	(2) awareness on the necessity of revision, (3) checking the effectiveness of the approached solution,
(4) deep level revising to produce better writing,	(4) making surface-level changes to produce a better document,
(5) evaluating the quality of writing,	(5) deep level revising to produce better writing,
(6) taking action to collect extra information.	(6) evaluating the quality of writing,
	(7) taking action to collect extra information.

Source: (Adapted from Kodituwakku (2013)).

(a) Female Writer

The final stage in a writing process which is called evaluating phase in which the writers are expected to check, revise and amend the whole process. For the female writer, there were seven (7) evaluating methods used after

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completing the writing process. From the table above, the seven methods are (1) summarizing/paraphrasing, (2) awareness on the necessity of revision, (3) checking the effectiveness of the approached solution, (4) making surface-level changes to produce better document, (5) deep level revising to produce a better writing, (6) evaluating the quality of writing, (7) taking action to collect extra information. One of the examples of the female writer's data transcribed during the monitoring stage is illustrated in Table 4.

(b)Male Write

During the evaluating stage, the male writer applied six (6) methods after completing his writing process. The six methods were (1) summarizing/paraphrasing, (2) awareness on the necessity of revision, (3) checking the effectiveness of the approached solution, (4) deep level revising to produce a better writing, (5) evaluating the quality of writing, (6) taking action to collect extra information. From the data gathered to figure out the methods applied by both writers during the evaluating stage, we can conclude that both writers were alike to apply similar methods after completing their writing process.

4.5. Discussion

4.5.1. How Does Gender Influence Planning Stage in the Writing Process?

To recapitulate, from the analysis derived from the data of both genders, it can be observed that the female writer applied more methods during the planning stage compared to the male writer. This can be concluded that the female writer plans better during the planning or before writing compared to the male writer. Arrastia *et al.* (2016) have reported that female writers seem to frequently use strategy in learning English. In addition, Mutar and Nimechisalem (2017) found a significant difference between female and male students in using writing strategy. They discovered that female students use writing strategies more than male students.

4.5.2. How Does Gender Influence Monitoring Stage in the Writing Process?

Referring to both tables, it shows that the female writer used more methods during the monitoring process compared to the male writer. This can be supported by Raoofi *et al.* (2017) finding that the highly successful writers employ more monitoring and planning strategies than unsuccessful ones. However, all the methods applied by the male writer in this study were also applied by female writers. This shows the similarity in terms of the method applied by both genders during the monitoring phase.

4.5.3. How Does Gender Influence Evaluating Stage in the Writing Process?

From the data gathered to figure out the methods applied by both writers during the evaluating stage, we can conclude that both writers were alike to apply similar methods after completing their writing process. According to Goctu (2017), At this stage, learners will reread and reconsider the product to see if there are any changes needed. Learners will get themselves familiar with peer and self- editing skills.

5. CONCLUSION

5.1. Summary of Findings

ESL writers, be it male writers or female writers use metacognitive writing strategies in their writing process. However, the use of subcategories in metacognitive writing strategies throughout the process is different across gender. It has been proven in the study that female writer applied more subcategories of metacognitive writing strategies in their writing process compared to male writers. From the planning stage until evaluating stage, female

writer performed more strategies as compared to the male writer. Hence, this can be summarized that metacognitive writing strategies are practiced differently across gender that depends on how the writers plan, transfer and evaluate their ideas and facts to meet the goal for their writing.

5.2. Suggestions for Future Research

Future research should explore a more thorough investigation of the implications of using these 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 interview would help researchers to probe deeper on writers' use of writing strategies in the writing process.

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