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Writing Strategies for Argumentative Essay and Short Research Reports: The Case of Thai EFL Learners

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Introduction

Writing is a productive language skill that is essential for intellectual development and academic success (Gere, 1985). However, practicing writing in order to produce a good piece of writing is not an easy task. Writing is not only difficult for second language (L2) or foreign language (EF) learners, but also for native speakers of English (Hyland, 2003). One factor that contributes to the quality of writing is the use of writing strategies, which are actions or techniques that learners use to write and improve the quality of their writing (Oxford, 1990). Previous studies have indicated the significant relationship between the use of writing strategies and writing achievement (e.g., Raoofi, Binandeh, & Rahmani, 2017). Some studies have also shown the differences of the use of writing strategies between low and high achievers of writing (e.g., Chien, 2012; Sasaki, 2002) and highlighted that the use of writing strategies plays a significant role in the development of L2 writing.

Studies on writing strategies have been growing in the literature, yet there are still several questions that remain unanswered. On the one hand, the use of writing strategies across cultural contexts needs more research attention (Hu & Chen, 2007). In the Thai context, although research attention has been paid to L2 writing, studies have been extensively focused on investigating errors produced by Thai EFL learners (e.g., Sattayatham & Honsa, 2007; Sattayatham & Ratanapinyowong, 2008) and Thai interference in English writing (e.g., Bennui, 2016). In recognition of such gaps, this study explored writing strategies used by Thai EFL students and the relationships between the use of writing strategies and writing achievement. The research questions that guided this study are:

1. What writing strategies are employed by Thai EFL students?
2. Are there any differences in writing strategies employed by Thai EFL students when compared between the high and low achievers?
3. What is the relationships between the use of writing strategies and students' writing achievement?

Literature Review

Writing Strategies

Writing strategies, as defined by L2 scholars (e.g., Cohen, 1998; Oxford, 1990; Raimes, 2005), are actions or techniques that learners use to produce and improve the quality of their writing. Writing strategies have been classified in different ways (e.g., Arndt; 1987; O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1990). However, the classifications of writing strategies that have been influential and that have received much attention in L2 writing research are introduced by O'Malley and Chamot (1990) and Oxford (1990) (e.g., Baker & Boonkit, 2004; Zhang, Chen, & Yu, 2019). O'Malley and Chamot (1990) present four categories of writing strategies: cognitive, metacognitive, social, and affective strategies. Cognitive strategies refer to techniques used in the transformation or synthesis of incoming information. Metacognitive strategies are techniques used to plan, reflect, monitor, and evaluate writing activities/outcomes. Social strategies are strategies to involve other people by doing some interactions. Affective strategies are strategies used to control or get rid of negative feelings occurring in the process of writing. Oxford (1990) divides writing strategies into two main classes, direct and indirect strategies. Direct strategies consist of memory, cognitive, and compensation strategies, while indirect strategies are metacognitive, affective, and social strategies. The definitions of each strategy are presented in Table 1.

TABLE 1
Writing Strategies of Oxford (1990)

No	Strategies	Definitions
1	Memory strategies	Strategies to keep and retrieve new information
2	Cognitive strategies	Strategies to transform and synthesize the target language, such as translating, note-taking, etc
3	Compensation strategies	Strategies to make up the missing knowledge in the process of understanding or producing the target language, such as using a synonym
4	Metacognitive strategies	Strategies to manage the process of writing, such as planning, monitoring the writing progress, etc
5	Affective strategies	Strategies to control emotions, attitudes, and motivation in the process of writing, such as positive self-talk
6	Social strategies	Strategies to interact with other people, such as asking teachers' feedback, asking a friend for help during writing, etc

Writing Strategy Related Research

A review of the related literature has suggested that several attempts have been made to investigate L2/EFL learners' use of writing strategies, and different areas of writing strategies have been focused on. O'Malley and Chamot (1990), for instance, compared the use of different types of writing strategies by EFL/L2 learners and the results showed that cognitive strategies were the most frequently used by the participants (53%), followed by metacognitive strategies (30%), and social/affective strategies (17%). Another line of research compared the use of writing strategies by L2 learners with different writing abilities (e.g., Chien, 2012; Lei, 2016; Sadi & Othman, 2012). These studies showed that more skilled writers appeared to rely on writing strategies more often than the less skilled ones. The writing strategies which were used more frequently by the more effective writers include planning, generating ideas, revising, and editing their text, such as fixing grammatical or spelling errors. Another set of studies

investigated the effect of writing strategy instruction on writing performance (e.g., De Silva, 2015; NematTabrizi & Rajaee, 2016; Pitenoee, Modaberi, & Ardestani, 2017; Zhang, Chen, & Yu, 2019). The results showed that there was a positive effect of writing strategy instruction on writing performance. Some studies went further to explore the relationship between the writing strategy used and the writing performance (e.g., Bai, Hu, & Gu, 2014; Oh, Lee, & Moon, 2015; Raoofi, Binandeh, & Rahmani, 2017). These studies suggested that writing strategies such as planning, monitoring, evaluating, text-generating, and revising, were significantly correlated with students' English proficiency.

Although many previous studies aimed particularly to investigate L2 learners' use of writing strategy, these studies were carried out in contexts other than the Thai one. Taking into account that strategy use is unique and context-specific (Hu & Chen, 2007), this study was therefore set out to investigate Thai EFL learners' use of writing strategies and their relationship to their writing performance.

Method

This present study employed a quantitative research design aimed at exploring the use of writing strategies by Thai EFL students and examined the relationship between the use of writing strategies and students' writing achievement.

Participants

Sixty-one 3rd year undergraduate English majors at one university in Thailand were invited to take part in this study. However, after data cleaning, the total number was reduced to 55 students (82% female; 18% male). All of the students were enrolled in an English academic and professional writing course. They were purposefully selected to participate in this study because they were assigned to write/revise an academic piece of work every week during the course duration.

Research Instruments

To be informed about the participants' writing achievement, an exam paper of the English academic and professional writing course was used. The test, which was scheduled for three hours, required the participants to complete three tasks: one argumentative essay of 200 – 250 words based on the topic given and two sections of the research report: methodology and results. In the latter part, key information such as a list of participants' details and instrument and graphs were provided. Two-course teachers then marked the test responses separately, and the scores obtained from the two were averaged to indicate the participants writing achievement scores.

To explore the use of writing strategies, a writing strategy questionnaire adapted from Oxford (1990), and O'Malley and Chamot (1990) was used. This questionnaire consisted of four sub-scales of writing strategies, namely, metacognitive (7 items), cognitive (6 items), affective (6 items), and social (6 items) strategies. Together with the statements aimed to tap into the use of strategies, a 5-point Likert scale: 1 (never), 2 (seldom), 3 (sometimes), 4 (often), and 5 (always) were provided. To ensure the validity of the questionnaire, an IOC (Item Objective Congruence) was investigated. In this manner, the questionnaire was given to three EFL student-teachers, and the data obtained were calculated. The results showed 2 items (Items 10 and 12) needed to be revised because they received scores lower than .5. After revising the items, the questionnaire was piloted with 64 first-year undergraduate English majors at this university for its reliability. The analysis shows Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of .84, suggesting an acceptance of the questionnaire's reliability. To collect data for the main study, the questionnaire was administered to the participants one week after they had an exam for their writing scores.

Data Analysis

The questionnaire data were analyzed using SPSS. To explore the use of writing strategies by Thai EFL students, descriptive statistics: frequency, means, and standard deviation were analyzed. The frequency of strategies use for each strategy in the writing strategies questionnaire was identified by the frequency ratings (Oxford, 1990), as shown in Table 2.

TABLE 2
Frequency Ratings for Strategy Use

Frequency of use	Responses	Mean
High	Always	4.5 – 5.0
	Often	3.5 – 4.4
Moderate	Sometimes	2.5 – 3.4
	Seldom	1.5 – 2.4
Low	Never	1.0 – 1.4

To examine the use of writing strategies across levels of writing achievement, the data were analyzed using an independent t-test. Moreover, to investigate the relationship between the use of writing strategies and writing achievement, the Pearson correlation was used.

Results

Writing Strategies Used by Thai EFL Students

To answer the first research question, which aimed to explore writing strategies employed by Thai EFL students at a university level, the writing strategies questionnaire were analysed. The results (see Table 3) showed that cognitive strategies were the most frequently used ($M = 3.83$; $SD = 0.53$), followed by metacognitive strategies ($M = 3.43$; $SD = 0.60$), and affective strategies ($M = 3.31$; $SD = 0.69$). Social strategies ($M = 2.86$; $SD = 0.61$) were the least used.

TABLE 3
Writing Strategies Used by Thai EFL Students

Writing strategies	Mean	*SD*	Skewness	Kurtosis	Rank of use	Level of frequency use
Metacognitive	3.43	.60	-.016	1.57	2	Moderate
Cognitive	3.83	.53	-.36	.48	1	High
Affective	3.31	.69	.019	-.010	3	Moderate
Social	2.86	.61	-.40	-.43	4	Moderate
Overall	3.36	.45	-.30	.73		Moderate

Looking into cognitive strategies specifically, the students reported using a dictionary to check things that they were not sure about when they wrote the most often ($M = 4.51$, $SD = 0.71$). The next most-used strategy was using their background knowledge to help them develop ideas for writing ($M = 4.16$, $SD = 0.60$). The complete results for each item of cognitive strategies were shown in Table 4.

TABLE 4
Cognitive Strategies Used by Thai EFL Students

Cognitive strategies	Mean	SD	Level of Frequency Use
I use my background knowledge to help me develop my ideas.	4.16	0.60	High
I use a dictionary to check things I am not sure about when I write.	4.51	0.71	High
I use a grammar book to check sentence structure that I am not sure about when I write.	3.36	1.20	Moderate
I simplify what I want to write if I don't know how to express my thoughts in English.	3.64	0.95	High
If I don't know a word in English, I write it in my native language and later try to find an appropriate English word.	3.44	1.21	Moderate
I try to use effective linking words to ensure clear and logical relationship between sentences or paragraphs.	3.87	0.74	High

For metacognitive strategies, the students reported that they always revised and edited their writing twice or more before submitting it to the teacher ($M = 3.85$, $SD = 0.89$). They also always looked at writing examples from more proficient writers ($M = 3.82$, $SD = 0.88$), reviewed their notes, handouts, and assignment requirements before beginning to write ($M = 3.62$, $SD = 1.02$), and brainstormed and wrote down ideas before starting to write ($M = 3.55$, $SD = 0.97$). The complete results for each item of metacognitive strategies were shown in Table 5.

TABLE 5
Metacognitive Strategies Used by Thai EFL Students

Metacognitive strategies	Mean	SD	Level of frequency use
I make a timetable to finish my writing.	2.60	1.06	Moderate
I review my notes, handouts, and assignment requirements before beginning to write.	3.62	1.02	High
I look at writing examples from more proficient writers.	3.82	0.88	High
I collect relevant literature based on my writing topic.	3.47	0.79	Moderate
I brainstorm and write down ideas before I begin to write.	3.55	0.97	High
I revise and edit my writing two or more times before I submit it to my teacher.	3.85	0.89	High
I monitor and evaluate my progress in writing.	3.11	0.93	Moderate

Two of affective strategies, which were used frequently are encouraging themselves to write even when they were afraid of making mistakes ($M = 3.62$, $SD = 0.80$) and trying to relax whenever they felt afraid of writing ($M = 3.60$, $SD = 1.01$). The complete results for each item of affective strategies were shown in Table 6.

TABLE 6
Affective Strategies Used by Thai EFL students

Affective strategies	Mean	SD	Level of frequency use
I tell myself to enjoy writing.	3.07	1.08	Moderate
I tell myself not to worry when writing an English composition.	3.44	0.99	Moderate
I try to write an essay with confidence and ease.	3.38	0.87	Moderate
I try to relax whenever I feel afraid of writing.	3.60	1.01	High
I encourage myself to write even when I am afraid of making mistakes.	3.62	0.80	High
I give myself a reward when I have finished writing.	2.78	1.34	Moderate

Lastly, for social strategies, the students reported the most-used strategy was that they asked their friends for help when they had difficulty in writing (*M* = 3.55, *SD* = 1.06). The complete results for each item of social strategies were shown in Table 7.

TABLE 7
Social Strategies Used by Thai EFL Students

Social strategies	Mean	*SD*	Level of frequency use
I ask my teacher for help when I have difficulty in writing.	2.71	0.76	Moderate
When I have difficulty in writing, I ask my friends for help.	3.55	1.06	High
I ask my family members for help when having difficulty in writing	1.42	0.80	Low
After revising and editing my essay thoroughly, I ask my friend to read and comment on it.	3.04	1.10	Moderate
I ask my teacher for giving feedback on my writing.	3.04	0.99	Moderate
If I do not understand a comment when getting feedback, I ask the person to explain it to me.	3.44	0.97	Moderate

The Use of Writing Strategies across Writing Achievement

The second research question compared the use of writing strategies across students' writing achievement levels. The students were divided into two groups with different scores of their writing. The first group (*N* = 27, high writing scores) had a mean of 42.36 (*SD* = 13.97). The second group (*N* = 28, low writing scores) had a mean of 16.35 (*SD* = 4.01). Across writing achievement, the results of independent t-test (see Table 8) showed that there were no significant differences between high and low groups in using metacognitive strategies (*t* = -860, *p* = .246), cognitive strategies (*t* = -1.83, *p* = .389), affective strategies (*t* = -.974, *p* = .604) and social strategies (*t* = -.864, *p* = .059).

TABLE 8
The Results of Independent t-test (N = 55)

Writing strategies	High group (*N* = 27)		Low group (*N* = 28)		t-test	*Sig.*
	Mean	*SD*	Mean	*SD*		
Metacognitive	3.35	.688	3.50	.510	-.860	.246
Cognitive	3.69	.510	3.95	.543	-1.83	.389
Affective	3.22	.690	3.40	.698	-.974	.604
Social	2.79	.717	2.93	.507	-.864	.059
Overall	3.26	.498	3.44	.403	-1.49	.312

Relationships between Writing Strategies and Writing Achievement

Overall, no significant relationship was found between the use of students' writing strategies and their writing achievement (*r* = -.203, *p* = .137) (see Table 9). However, some significant relationships were found between different types of writing strategies used. Metacognitive strategies had moderate positive relationships to cognitive strategies (*r* = .584, *p* = .000) and social strategies (*r* = .562, *p* = .000). On the other hand, these strategies showed weak positive relationship to affective strategies (*r* = .362, *p* = .007). Cognitive strategies had no significant relationship to affective strategies (*r* = .176, *p* = .199) but showed a weak relationship to social strategies (*r* = .481, *p* = .000). Moreover, a weak relationship was found between affective and social strategies (*r* = .319, *p* = .018).

TABLE 9
The Results of Pearson Correlation (N = 55)

		Writing scores	Metacognitive strategies	Cognitive strategies	Affective strategies	Social strategies	Overall
Writing scores	r		-.086	-.135	-.164	-.215	-.203
	p		.533	.325	.231	.114	.137
Metacognitive	r			.584**	.362**	.562**	.829**
strategies	p			.000	.007	.000	.000
Cognitive	r				.176	.481**	.716**
strategies	p				.199	.000	.000
Affective	r					.319*	.659**
strategies	p					.018	.000
Social strategies	r						.786**
	p						.000
Overall	r						1
	p						

**$p < .01$, * $p < .05$

Discussion

The main objectives of the present study were to explore writing strategies used by Thai EFL students and examine the relationship between the use of writing strategies and students' writing achievement. The results suggest that cognitive strategies were the most often used writing strategies of Thai EFL students. This result is in line with the findings of previous studies (e.g., O'Malley & Chamot, 1990), showing that most of the foreign or L2 learners mainly used cognitive strategies in their language tasks. As previously discussed, cognitive strategies are strategies that help student writers to transform and synthesize ideas to the target language, such as translating (Oxford, 1990). Therefore, one of the strategies they frequently employed in writing was using a dictionary to check meanings that they were not sure about. This strategy is usually done by EFL or L2 students whose English is not their native language.

When comparing the use of writing strategies across different levels of students' writing abilities, the result showed that there were no significant differences between the writing strategies used by the low and the high writing achievers. This finding does not lend support to previous studies indicating that students who relied heavily on metacognitive strategies performed better than those who used cognitive strategies more often (e.g., Bailey, 2019; Chien, 2012; NematTabrizi & Rajaee, 2016; Pitenoee, Modaberi, & Ardestani, 2017). In other words, the study does not show that high achievers employed metacognitive strategies more frequently than other writing strategies, as has been suggested in other studies, e.g., Sadi and Othman (2012). The findings supposed the results of previous studies (e.g., Baker & Boonkit, 2004). With regard to the relationship between the use of writing strategies and students' writing achievement, the findings were also different from previous studies (e.g., Raoofi, Binandeh, & Rahmani, 2017; Teng & Huang, 2019). No significant relationship was established between the use of students' writing strategies and writing achievement. However, this study confirmed that metacognitive strategies had moderate positive relationships to cognitive strategies and social strategies but weak positive relationships to affective strategies. These findings showed that although some writing strategies were significantly correlated with each other, we can not assume that there will also be significant relationships between these strategies to students' writing achievement. In the case of Thai students who were assigned to write an argumentative essay and a short research report in this study, their writing achievement may be influenced by other factors, not related to the use of their writing strategies.

Conclusion, Limitations, and Recommendations

Based on the findings mentioned in the previous section, there are three conclusions of this study. Firstly, cognitive strategies were writing strategies employed by most Thai EFL students. Secondly, there was no significant difference in writing strategy use between the low and the high group of writing achievers. Thirdly, positive relationships were found among the writing strategies, but no significant relationship was established between the use of students' writing strategies and their writing achievement.

Although this study was carefully designed, it has limitations in terms of methodology. That is, one reason that explains why no significant relationship between the use of writing strategies and writing achievement was found could be due to a research instrument used to collect data. This study used a self-report questionnaire that can provide data on writing strategies but may not guarantee the successful use of the strategies (Rukthong & Brunfaut, 2020). Students may use many strategies, but they may not get satisfying results in their writing performance. Therefore, to better understand the relationship between strategy use and learning achievement, it is recommended to collect data on participants' thinking processes while they are performing the tasks to understand better what strategies they use and analyze the outcome of their performance to identify the extent to which they can successfully perform the tasks based on those strategies.

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