



# Writing Motivation, Strategy Use, and Proficiency of Chinese Non-English Majors

Zhang Jingya

Graduate School, Lyceum of the Philippines University, Philippines

Received: 13 Jun 2023; Received in revised form: 14 Jul 2023; Accepted: 20 Jul 2023; Available online: 27 Jul 2023

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**Abstract**— *This study investigates the interplay of English language motivation, writing strategies, and proficiency among non-English major Chinese university students. A mixed-methods approach reveals a moderate positive correlation between these factors, with both intrinsic and extrinsic motivations and translation strategies standing out as particularly impactful. The study further uncovers distinctive motivational, strategic, and proficiency patterns among different student groups, including sex, school type, academic year, and major divisions. Based on these findings, the Motivation-Strategy-Proficiency-based Writing Enhancement Program (MSP-WEP) is proposed to holistically improve academic writing skills. This research contributes to the understanding of factors affecting English academic writing proficiency in non-English major students and provides a practical program for educators, with a call for future research into the program's efficacy in diverse learning contexts.*

**Keywords**— *Non-English majors, MSP-WEP, Writing Motivation, Writing Strategies, Writing Proficiency.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

The continuous surge of globalization and international trade has underlined the necessity of English proficiency for students around the globe. China, with its rapid economic development, is no exception. English instruction in China's universities is of paramount importance, aiming to equip students with communicative competence for diverse settings, from the workplace to social interactions. Despite these lofty objectives, a significant problem persists: the existing educational paradigm overlooks the critical role of English writing.

As stated in the College English Curriculum Requirements (for Trial Implementation) issued by the China Education Ministry in 2004, the focus of English instruction should encompass both written and spoken English. However, the emphasis on written English is waning. Such a predicament is especially pronounced in College English classes, a mandatory course for non-English major students, where the curriculum design is

dictated by the requirements of the College English Test Band 4 examination (CET-4).

The examination itself, while aiming to holistically evaluate the English competency of students, allocates a disproportionate emphasis on reading and listening skills, assigning them 35 percent each of the total score, while translation and writing account for a mere 15 percent each. This skewed focus manifests in the classroom as well, where writing tasks are perceived more as a test-taking strategy rather than a means to foster creative thinking and articulate expression of ideas. This perpetuates a cycle of diminished motivation and stagnated growth in English learning, further exacerbating the existing problems.

Previous research in English writing has examined the intricate nature of this complex language skill from various dimensions. There have been studies focusing on individual language aspects like vocabulary, grammar, and style, acknowledging writing as a culmination of these elements that reveal information about language rather

than mere meaning creation (Hyland, 2016; Li, 2023). Studies have also underscored the influence of cognitive abilities, and individual's writing environment on shaping their writing proficiency (Li, 2023). Moreover, research has illuminated the challenges of developing writing proficiency in a second language, emphasizing the need for thoughtful translation of thoughts and abstract thinking (Zhang, 2013; Li, 2023). Furthermore, research has also brought to light the importance of source use and citation competence in academic writing, emphasizing the need for explicit instruction in these areas (Gui, Ma & Huang, 2016; Xu, 2016). Lastly, several studies have explored common errors, the impact of gender, the influence of information technology, and the relationship between L1 and L2 on writing proficiency. Together, these studies provide a comprehensive overview of English writing from various perspectives.

However, most of these studies often investigate these elements in isolation, limiting our understanding of their interrelationship and the collective influence they have on writing proficiency. The current research, by studying motivation, strategy use, and proficiency collectively, aims to address this gap in the literature.

While previous research has individually illuminated the significance of these three aspects, a comprehensive study synthesizing these elements can provide more nuanced insights into the writing process. This research would analyze how motivation fuels the use of learning strategies and how such strategies can effectively enhance proficiency. By doing this, it would contribute to a better understanding of the holistic process of English writing, thereby shedding light on the factors influencing non-English majors' writing proficiency levels and possible ways to enhance them. Furthermore, the research seeks to provide practical insights for curriculum design, teaching materials development, and classroom instruction to facilitate effective English writing. The outcomes of this study will be beneficial for EFL teachers, language education policymakers, and researchers working in the field of EFL education. The proposed Motivation-Strategy-Proficiency-based English Writing Program (MSP-WEP) will serve as a valuable resource for devising more efficient teaching strategies and educational policies, contributing to improved outcomes in English writing.

## II. METHODS

This research employs a descriptive research method. Data was collected using the corresponding questionnaires pertaining to writing motivation, strategy, and proficiency. As part of the descriptive correlational method, the

correlation between two variables or multiple variables within the same subject group was analyzed.

### 2.1 Participants

In this study, a robust sample of 404 EFL non-English majors was carefully chosen from four categories of Chinese universities, namely the C9 League, Project 211 and 985, and government public and private schools. This representative sample size was determined using a Raosoft sample size calculator, factoring in an error margin of 5 percent, a 95 percent level of confidence, and a response distribution of 50 percent, with reference to the total student enrollment in these universities. The selected participants are a diverse cohort, majoring in areas ranging from liberal arts, science, engineering, medicine, to arts, business, and laws. All participants share a similar linguistic profile, having studied English as a foreign language for at least ten years and taken or are preparing for various English proficiency examinations. However, they lack firsthand experience with English-speaking cultures, with no exposure to studying abroad or intimate interaction with native English speakers.

### 2.2 Research Design

The study implemented a questionnaire-based approach, subdivided into three sections on Writing Motivation, Writing Strategy Use, and Writing Proficiency. The questionnaire, provided in both English and Chinese, contained 82 items for an extensive understanding of the respondents' profiles, capturing their sex, school type, year level, and major. Each section was built upon proven designs and scales from previous studies and authoritative international benchmarking frameworks. The Writing Motivation Questionnaire was developed with inspiration from a validated motivation questionnaire by Graham et al. (2022). Drawing from Aluemalai and Maniam's (2020) work, the design of the Writing Strategy Use Questionnaire collected information about planning strategies, writing strategies, and revising strategies. To assess the writing proficiency of the respondents, the Writing Proficiency Questionnaire was developed following the guidelines of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR, 2018), an esteemed international benchmark for language assessment and teaching.

The responses, rated on a four-point Likert scale, were used to measure and categorize the three principal variables of the study. To ensure reliability, a pilot study was conducted, yielding acceptable Cronbach Alpha coefficients. The questionnaire was disseminated via Questionnaire Star to the participants, and upon data collection, statistical analysis was performed using SPSS 27.0. The data analysis process employed the weighted

mean, Spearman correlation analysis, and t-tests to examine the relationships between writing motivation, writing strategy use, and writing proficiency, ultimately leading to valuable conclusions and recommendations.

### III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

#### 3.1 Writing Motivation, Strategy Use and Proficiency

Table 1 delineates the participant agreement with two types of motivation: intrinsic and extrinsic, in English writing. Intrinsic motivation, with a higher weighted mean of 2.69, suggests that participants enjoy writing for its inherent satisfaction or pleasure. Conversely, extrinsic motivation, having a lower weighted mean of 2.54, indicates writing behavior driven by external rewards or recognitions, like grades or approval. Although both forms of motivation are recognized by participants, intrinsic motivation shows a slightly higher impact on writing behavior.

Table 1 Summary Table on English Writing Motivation

| Indicators              | Weighted Mean | Verbal Interpretation | Rank |
|-------------------------|---------------|-----------------------|------|
| 1. Intrinsic Motivation | 2.69          | Agree                 | 1    |
| 2. Extrinsic Motivation | 2.54          | Agree                 | 2    |
| <b>Composite Mean</b>   | <b>2.62</b>   | <b>Agree</b>          |      |

Legend: 3.50 – 4.00 = Strongly Agree; 2.50 – 3.49 = Agree; 1.50 – 2.49 = Disagree; 1.00 - 1.49 = Strongly Disagree

Intrinsic and extrinsic motivations, critical in contexts such as job satisfaction and learning, have distinct roles in writing, with intrinsic motivation typically being more significant. Studies such as Kirchhoff (2016) emphasize these motivational concepts in fostering student writing motivation, while Mursidi and Maulan (2020), using Self-Determination Theory (SDT), highlight the importance of intrinsic motivation, driven by personal interest and values. Similarly, De Smedt et al. (2020) verify the interconnectedness of reading and writing motives in their research. Hence, while both motivations are integral to writing, the personal enjoyment and interest associated with intrinsic motivation often dominate.

Table 2 ranks the three strategies of cognitive process theory of writing - translating, planning, and reviewing - based on their weighted mean scores. Translating, securing the highest score of 2.71, emerges as

the most crucial strategy, as it encapsulates the manifestation of ideas into comprehensible forms. Planning, following closely with a score of 2.70, serves as a preparatory stage that guides the writing process but does not exclusively determine the quality of a written piece. Reviewing, with a slightly lower score of 2.69, is a refining process considered less immediate but integral in enhancing the quality of writing.

While these three strategies are fundamental to writing, their relative importance differs. Translating is perceived as the most critical, stemming from its immediate impact on communication. Planning, although essential, often takes a backseat due to the contingent nature of its contribution. Lastly, reviewing, though an essential refining process, is less preferred due to its indirect impact on the overall quality and its inability to fix fundamental content or structural issues originating from translating and planning stages. Thus, these strategies, while interconnected, bear distinct roles and levels of significance in the writing process.

Table 2 Summary Table on English Writing Strategies

| Indicators            | Weighted Mean | Verbal Interpretation | Rank |
|-----------------------|---------------|-----------------------|------|
| 1. Planning           | 2.70          | Agree                 | 2    |
| 2. Translating        | 2.71          | Agree                 | 1    |
| 3. Reviewing          | 2.69          | Agree                 | 3    |
| <b>Composite Mean</b> | <b>2.70</b>   | <b>Agree</b>          |      |

Legend: 3.50 – 4.00 = Strongly Agree; 2.50 – 3.49 = Agree; 1.50 – 2.49 = Disagree; 1.00 - 1.49 = Strongly Disagree

Table 3 showcases six facets of writing proficiency based on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) standards, with propositional precision ranking first, implying that participants perform best in expressing propositions or arguments accurately.

This proficiency could be attributed to an emphasis on argumentative writing in their education and proficiency tests, fostering good critical thinking skills, logical reasoning, or effective instruction in academic writing. The second rank is shared by overall written production, vocabulary control, and coherence, indicating balanced competencies in producing comprehensive writing, employing effective vocabulary, and ensuring logical flow. However, these areas might still encounter occasional challenges in crafting comprehensive texts,

employing diverse vocabulary, or ensuring coherence. Lastly, vocabulary range and grammatical accuracy are areas that need further improvement. Despite these aspects being prioritized in Chinese English education, the lack of exposure to authentic English language input and the complexities of English grammar rules contribute to these challenges. While participants excel in clarity of ideas, attention should be directed towards expanding vocabulary and honing grammatical accuracy for a more rounded writing proficiency.

Table 3 Summary Table on English Writing Proficiency

| Indicators                    | Weighted Mean | Verbal Interpretation | Rank |
|-------------------------------|---------------|-----------------------|------|
| 1. Overall Written Production | 2.69          | Agree                 | 3    |
| 2. Vocabulary Range           | 2.62          | Agree                 | 5.5  |
| 3. Grammatical Accuracy       | 2.62          | Agree                 | 5.5  |
| 4. Vocabulary Control         | 2.69          | Agree                 | 3    |
| 5. Coherence                  | 2.69          | Agree                 | 3    |
| 6. Propositional Precision    | 2.74          | Agree                 | 1    |
| <b>Composite Mean</b>         | <b>2.68</b>   | <b>Agree</b>          |      |

Legend: 3.50 – 4.00 = Strongly Agree; 2.50 – 3.49 = Agree; 1.50 – 2.49 = Disagree; 1.00 – 1.49 = Strongly Disagree

### 3.2 Profile-based Differences in Writing Motivation, Strategy and Proficiency

Differences in English writing motivation were segmented by Sex, School Type, Academic Year, and Major. Significant gender differences exist, with males showing higher motivation levels in both aspects, potentially due to their preference for independent and competitive learning environments. It could be due to their different learning styles (Moneva, Arnado & Buot, 2020). School type also significantly influences motivation, with students from C9 Universities, a group of elite Chinese universities, exhibiting greater motivation likely due to access to high-quality resources, superior teaching strategies, and highly skilled teachers (Chiu, 2021). When considering the Academic Year, intrinsic motivation significantly increases as students progress, possibly due to a deeper understanding of the importance of English writing for

future careers or personal growth, while extrinsic motivation remains relatively constant (Tsao et al., 2021). Lastly, the study found significant differences in intrinsic motivation across various majors, potentially resulting from the varying importance of English writing in their respective fields. However, extrinsic motivation remains relatively consistent, given the general academic and potential career value of English writing skills.

Writing strategies such as planning, translating, and reviewing were also influenced significantly by these factors. Men showed better planning strategies compared to women, potentially due to inherent gender-based differences in goal-oriented task approaches (Lieberman 2016). School type significantly influenced all writing strategies, suggesting the learning environment's crucial role in shaping these skills, especially among students from elite C9 League institutions who have access to robust resources and a culture of academic excellence (Mo, 2012; Rose et al., 2020). Academic year also played a significant role, with freshmen needing time to adapt to complex writing tasks and develop their strategies (Kim et al., 2021). Lastly, the participant's major significantly impacted their writing strategies, with Liberal Arts majors leading due to their emphasis on critical and creative thinking, which are vital for effective writing. These results emphasize that while broad writing strategies can be taught, individual factors can shape how they are applied, and educators must consider these variables in their teaching approach.

Furthermore, this study demonstrated significant variations in English writing proficiency. Males exhibited better grammatical accuracy, while students from top-tier C9 universities displayed superior skills due to access to better resources. As students progressed through academic years, proficiency improved, except in vocabulary range. Science students showed more proficiency in overall written production, coherence, and propositional precision, likely due to rigorous writing requirements in their field (Sağlamel and Kayaoğlu, 2015). Besides, both intrinsic and extrinsic motivations were correlated with effective writing strategies, highlighting the role of motivation in language learning.

In summary, the study identified significant variations in English writing motivation, strategy, and proficiency based on participants' sex, school type, academic year, and major. Males demonstrated higher motivation and better grammatical accuracy, while students from elite C9 Universities exhibited greater motivation and superior writing skills, likely due to their access to superior resources and teaching. Freshmen and non-Liberal Arts majors struggled more with developing effective writing strategies, whereas Science students

excelled in overall written production, coherence, and precision due to rigorous discipline-specific writing demands. As students advanced, proficiency generally improved, except in vocabulary range. The importance of motivation, both intrinsic and extrinsic, was emphasized, as it significantly correlated with effective strategy usage. These findings underscore the need for personalized teaching approaches considering these influential individual and institutional factors.

### 3.3 Correlation Between Writing Motivation, Strategy and Proficiency

This research presents a compelling correlation between English language motivation, strategy usage, and writing proficiency, especially within the context of non-English majors in China. Fig. 1 visually represents this correlation, illustrating how heightened motivation leads to the more effective application of writing strategies, which in turn enhances overall writing proficiency. This cause-and-effect chain showcases that motivated students, driven by intrinsic or extrinsic factors, are likely to endure the challenges of academic writing, and invest the necessary time and effort.

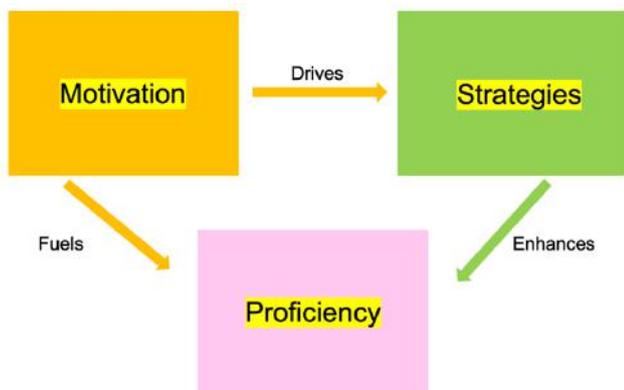


Fig.1. Correlation Among Three Variables

Moreover, as motivation amplifies, students engage more profoundly with the English language. This deepened engagement promotes enhanced vocabulary, improved grammar, and the ability to think critically and analytically. The coupling of this motivation and strategic learning - particularly planning, translating, and reviewing - significantly bolsters writing proficiency. Fig. 2 delves deeper into this relationship, breaking down these core aspects into 11 sub-dimensions. This dissection highlights the strongest correlations, such as the significant impact of intrinsic motivation on the translating process and overall written production.

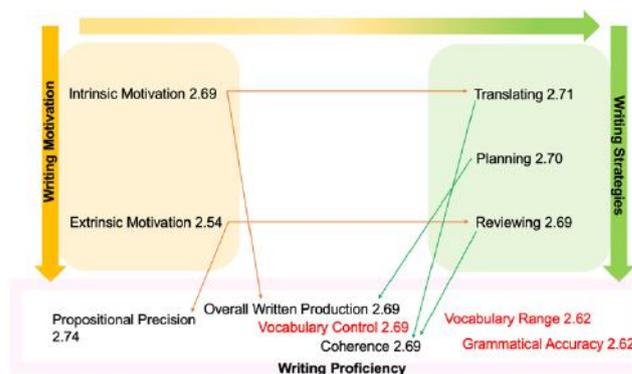


Fig.2. Correlation Among Sub-dimensions

The correlations uncovered in this study not only shed light on the interconnectedness of motivation, strategy, and proficiency, but also help identify potential roadblocks in enhancing writing proficiency. Fig. 3 portrays this academic writing growth pattern for non-English majors, emphasizing lower-ranked dimensions like extrinsic motivation, and the planning and reviewing processes, as areas requiring particular attention. Instructors, therefore, should prioritize stimulating student curiosity and interest, aligning assignments with tangible rewards, teaching effective writing strategies, and implementing specific methodologies to enhance various aspects of writing proficiency.

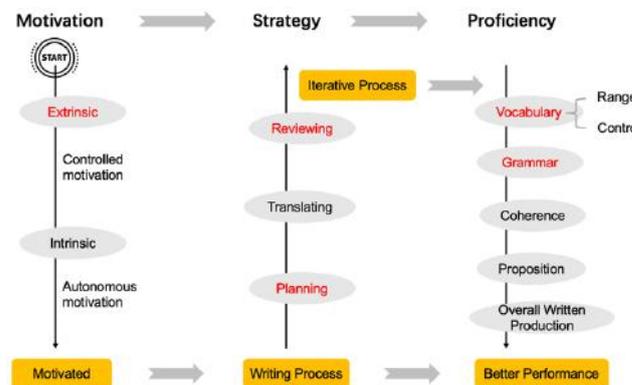


Fig.3. MSP-based Writing Process

Overall, the evidence captured in these figures underscores the importance of a holistic approach to teaching English writing to non-English majors in China, emphasizing the intertwined roles of motivation, strategy, and proficiency.

#### IV. PROPOSED MSP-WEP

Consequently, this research culminated in the development of the Motivation-Strategy-Proficiency Based Writing Enhancement Program (MSP-WEP). This program is

designed to enhance the academic writing skills of non-English majors, considering the integrated roles of motivation, strategy, and proficiency in the writing process. Thus, it provides a comprehensive and tailored program to improving the English writing proficiency of non-English majors.

To enhance intrinsic motivation, the program advocates for lessons promoting personal interests, challenging topics, and goal-setting activities. Success in this area can be measured by an increase in self-reported motivation, engagement, and the frequency of independent writing tasks. On the other hand, to boost extrinsic motivation, the program suggests implementing a reward system including grades, academic recognition, and performance incentives. The effectiveness of this approach can be quantified through an increase in assignment completion and noticeable improvement in writing assignment quality.

Further, the program seeks to cultivate proficient pre-writing skills through workshops on effective brainstorming, outlining, and structuring methods, and to enhance the translation of cognitive processes into textual output through tasks that require active engagement with vocabulary, grammar rules, and sentence structures. Development of self-regulatory skills in revision is also targeted, with the introduction of self and peer-review activities guided by checklists and rubrics. Successful implementation of these strategies can be measured through improved logical flow and structure, decreased pre-writing time, nuanced vocabulary usage, and decreased surface-level errors in written works.

Finally, the program aims to improve overall writing proficiency across several dimensions including overall written production, propositional precision, vocabulary range, vocabulary control, coherence, and grammatical accuracy. This is achieved through a progression of complex writing tasks, activities promoting precision in language use, vocabulary-building activities, focused vocabulary lessons, tasks promoting the use of transition phrases, and targeted grammar lessons. Success indicators include improved grades on writing assignments, increased clarity and precision in writing samples, increased variety and sophistication of vocabulary, fewer inappropriate or inaccurate vocabulary uses, and fewer grammatical errors. The responsibilities for implementing this program lie with instructors, curriculum developers, school administrators, writing coaches, language specialists, peer reviewers, and external evaluators.

## V. CONCLUSION

The study underscores the impact of both intrinsic and

extrinsic motivations on English writing proficiency among non-English major students in China, with intrinsic motivation slightly more prevalent. The importance of writing strategies was affirmed, with “translating” ranking first, followed by “planning”, and “reviewing”. As per proficiency, respondents reported highest proficiency in propositional precision, while they faced challenges in executing complex language tasks or maintaining a consistently high vocabulary range. Significant differences were observed in grammatical accuracy based on sex, and in overall written production, coherence, and propositional precision based on the major. The study discovered a moderate positive correlation between English language motivation, application of writing strategies, and enhanced English proficiency. The study also introduced an MSP (Motivation-Strategy-Proficiency) Writing Enhancement Program, designed to aid non-English majors in improving their academic writing proficiency.

The study suggests non-English major students may actively engage in language learning activities that foster both intrinsic and extrinsic motivations, apply effective writing strategies, and maintain consistent writing practice to enhance proficiency in critical aspects of academic writing. Educators may adapt teaching methods to meet student needs, introduce activities targeted at improving writing skills, and cultivate a learning environment that nurtures motivations by offering intellectually stimulating tasks and external rewards. Schools may strive to cultivate an environment that is engaging and relevant to students’ interests, promotes independent learning, and incorporates a system of rewards. Simultaneously, they may offer support to educators to incorporate efficient writing strategies in their instructional techniques. Future research may delve deeper into academic writing strategies and motivation among diverse student groups, and test and refine the proposed MSP-WEP across different educational settings.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am deeply grateful to my adviser, Dr. Precy I. Guerra, whose guidance, expertise, and encouragement have been instrumental in the realization of this paper. I also extend my appreciation to Dr. Arnie Christian D. Villena, Dr. Beverly T. Caiga, Dr. Chona D. Andal, Dr. Dolores D. Borrás and Dr. Analie Pateña. I remain deeply appreciative of their collective wisdom and steadfast support. My heartfelt gratitude goes to my family, especially my parents, for their steadfast support and sacrifices, as well as to my friends, colleagues, and classmates, whose encouragement and advice greatly enriched my academic journey. The unwavering belief and ceaseless support of

all have been pivotal in navigating this challenging process.

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