A Study on Writing Strategies used by Students of Different Levels of Proficiency at A University in Vietnam

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ABSTRACT: The primary purpose of the study was to measure the use of writing strategies of participants. The secondary purpose aims at finding out strategies mostly used by high level of proficiency students compared those of level of proficiency at different stages of writing, namely before, during and after the writing assignment. The study was conducted among 137 English majored students. The findings reveal that before writing high proficiency students used strategies more often than the other two groups, namely medium and low levels of proficiency. The mean of before writing strategies uses were M=3.48; M=2.30; M=1.98 respectively. The mean of during writing strategies uses were M=3.36; M=3.03; M=2.57 respectively. The mean of after writing strategies uses were M=3.55; M=1.99; M=2.06 respectively. Among the group of Before Writing Strategy (BWS), Students with high proficiency level often discuss what they were going to write with other students or with teacher before they write (M=3.86). The figure for low level of proficiency students was M=1.50. The high level students also do extra study outside the classroom to improve his/her writing (M=3.86), while the low level students was M= 1.32. The high level students reported that they think of the relationships between what they already know and new things that they learn (M=3.71). The use of this strategy for low level students were only M=1.68. Among the group of During Writing Strategy (DWS), students with low proficiency use native language first and then translate it into English most often (M= 3.86). The high proficiency students did not use this strategy while writing (M=1.57). The low proficiency students also reported that they used dictionary a lot when they write (M=3.25), the figure for high proficiency students was only M=1.29). Another strategy that was employed by most low level students was "I use a grammar book to check things I am not sure about when I write" (M=3.97) while the high level students used this strategy at low frequency (M= 1.29). Among the group of After Writing Strategy (AWS), students with high proficiency reported that they often go back to his/her writing to edit the grammar, vocabulary, spelling, and punctuation. (M=3.81) compared with M=2.80 of low proficiency students. High proficiency students also often record the types of errors he/she has made so he/she does not keep making the same (M=3.80), while the figure for low proficiency students were M= 1.20.

KEYWORDS: writing strategies, before writing strategies, during writing strategies, after writing strategies

INTRODUCTION

Background to the study

Writing plays an important role in all stages of life from early education to college and beyond. It allows students to communicate ideas, develop creativity and critical thinking, and build confidence. Effective writing skills contribute to academic success and are considered a useful asset in the workplace. Regardless of the efforts endeavoured to the written communication, writing in a foreign language classroom has long been considered a challenge for most language learners. In addition to linguistic knowledge, the socio-cultural nature of writing, involving prior knowledge, knowledge of genre and register, and cultural expectations may in fact hinder attempts to transfer competence in first language writing to another language (Hyland, 2003).

Research in teaching writing has developed many approaches. When writing is used as a support skill in the language classroom it is usually approached from a teaching orientation which is product centered, meaning that the teacher will immediately correct any mistakes in grammar and language form, therefore, not giving learners the opportunity to attend to their own weaknesses with either form or in conveying meaning. This approach not only ignores how meaning is developed, but it also fails to recognize that the writer, regardless of purpose or form, must go through a number of stages before producing a final text (Hyland, 2003).

It is the process approach which proposes that, since experienced writers go through the cognitive stages of planning, composing and revising in a manner that is recursive, so too should those hoping to improve their ability to write. The process approach encourages students to plan and draft and, as a consequence of revising, of deliberating over the extent to which the draft effectively conveys meaning, or in response to peer or teacher feedback, they may need to re-plan or re-draft what they have written (Flower and Hayes, 1981). However, one of the shortcomings of process writing, as identified by Swales (1990), is that it

puts too much emphasis on the cognitive processes of writing with too little regard given to the social forces, which help to shape a text. This weakness provides the ideal entry point for considering the use of the genre approach, in conjunction with process. This approach holds that writing is not simply an outcome of internal processes, but is also determined by purpose and context. So all writing is done with a purpose in mind, whether it is to write a postcard, a love letter, a newspaper article, or a university essay, and these various purposes influence the overall structure and features of a text such as coherence (Harmer 2004).

Over the years, research on the process approach in teaching writing across education levels and genres has resulted in many studies promoting more attention to the writing strategies in teaching writing (Brown, 2001; Hyland, 2003; Matsuda, 2003). Studies on the use of writing strategies have revealed their significant importance in determining learners' success in a writing course (Kim, 2020; Mastan et al., 2017; Raoofi et al., 2017). It is often argued that the how and when learners employ these strategies are the reflection of their competence as writers. Therefore, it is understandable that there have been some suggestions to promote their use in language classrooms. Some studies even encourage the benefit of implementing instruction that encourages students' use of writing strategies. Among these studies are the ones conducted by (Mastan et al., 2017).

Statement of problem

Language learning strategies have been proved to be indicators for successful language learners. Those who manage well with appropriate strategies deal with uncertainties effectively such as uncertainty about the requirements of a task, uncertainty about how to express their ideas or uncertainty about their own ability to do either. As Hyland (2003) comments, one of the problems for speakers of other languages is that they are learning to write while learning the language. The employment of strategies in general and of academic writing in particular has been neglected or even ignored especially by low level of proficiency learners. In the field of second/foreign language teaching and learning, the interests of practitioners and researchers have been geared to the language learning strategies selection and adoption of successful language learners. The suggestion that a good language learner may have some special strategies that others could learn from was initially introduced by Rubin (1975). Language learning strategies are believed to enhance in whole or in part the current situation of academic writing which is considered hinders or challenges for students at universities in Vietnam.

Purposes of research

As indicated by research studies, language learning strategies play a crucial role in facilitating language learning (Griffiths, 2013; Oxford, 2003, 2017). Learners use language learning strategies to regulate or control their learning (Wenden, 1991). Self-regulation refers to the degree to which individuals are active participants in their own learning (Dörnyei and Skehan, 2003), and Winne (1995) also includes strategies as one of the means used by learners to regulate their own learning. The first purpose of this paper is to explore the use of language learning strategies among students of English majored at Dai Nam University (DNU). Secondly, the study attempts to determine writing strategies used by high proficiency students in comparison with that of low proficiency students.

Research questions

With the above stated purposes, the paper addresses the following research questions
- What levels of learning strategy do DNU students use during their academic writing?
- What strategies are mostly used by high proficiency students compared with low proficiency students?

Significance of the study

Theoretically, the findings of the study would reconfirm the benefits of learning strategies for language learners. Practically, the research results could be used as references for students and lecturers to adjust their learning and teaching academic writing more effectively.

LITERATURE REVIEW
Academic writing at universities

Writing is a complex process, and most of the research literature recognizes the difficulty it poses for students. Carroll, 2002 and Soiferman, 2012 claim that "effective writing skills are important for academic success but not all students enter university with these skills." Academic writing is like trying to hold a slippery fish: you know it is there and it has actual, real consistency, but it is very hard to pin down and actually describe it in clear, uncontested terms. Lillis (1999) explained that "academic writing is 'mysterious'", and that it is commonly misunderstood by students and lecturers. The history of academic writing does not make it easier to find a tangible definition (Spack 1988; Horowitz 1986; Liebman-Kleine 1986). Thaiss and Zawacki (2006) reasoned that the concept academic writing is "used imprecisely yet almost always for what the user regards as a precise purpose; e.g., commonly by teachers in explaining what they want f from students." Furthermore, they contended that abstract definitions of academic writing are abundant and there are "differences in standards and expectations among disciplines and among teachers" (Thaiss & Zawacki 2006). Students need to be made aware of and able to use the basic rhetoric, linguistic aspects, form and the cognitive processes involved in academic writing at their specific level of education. Hofstee (2006) proposed that academic

writing has the following characteristics: clarity, accuracy, brevity, simplicity, and focus, whereas Thaiss and Zawacki (2006) listed the characteristics as follows: attention to the topic of study and reflective thought about it, that reason dominates emotion, and that an academic writer should display analytic ability. The main aim of writing about academic writing is to illustrate the competencies and skills that students are expected to master at tertiary level. The responsibility of the writing teacher is to expose students to various writing strategies which "include combinations of activities such as outlining, drafting, or free writing" (Lavelle & Bushrow 2007; Spack 1988) based on their level of general and academic writing experience.

Language learning strategies (LLS)

Research on LLS has increased significantly since the 1970s. Areas of research interest include how learners go about learning something, what makes learners successful at learning something, and why some people are more effective at learning than others. LLS as Williams and Burden (1997) point out, investigating learning strategies (LSs) will answer these questions. Research suggests that training learners to use LLS can help them to become successful language learners and that is what make LLS are important. LLS enable learners to take more responsibility and to improve their progress in developing L2 skills. In other words, LSs are procedures that facilitate learning tasks (Chamot, 2005). They also enable learners to become autonomous, lifelong learners and independent, (Little, 1991). LLS represent steps that learners take to manage their learning and achieve their goals. They LLS are important for SL/FL learning and teaching because they develop learning autonomy and language competence and are tools for active, self-directed involvement. Effective LLS can also help "unsuccessful" learners to realise why they are "unsuccessful", and assist learners to plan their learning (Brown, 1994; Chamot, 1999; Gregersent, 2001). They also help teachers plan their teaching (Oxford, 1990; Cohen, 1998; Murat, 2000; Kumaravadivelu, 2003).

Writing strategies used by proficient learners

Writing and speaking belong to productive skills. However, they are not similar in terms of production. Writing includes thinking, drafting and revising, which requires an individual's specialized skills (Brown, 2001). As writing is a language skill, a person must learn what and how to write and apply certain grammatical rules in writing. A person's language capability is reinforced when thoughts or ideas are expressed through writing (Xia, 2011). Carroll (1997) disclosed that successful language learning depends on several factors. A human's intelligence is needed in learning. A person must have an understanding of grammatical rules and usage of language elements. A person needs spend much time, patience, & effort in learning a language. Importantly, a person must know what and how to use certain and suitable strategies in language learning. Oxford (2003) defined language learning strategies as "specific behaviors or thought processes that students use to enhance their L2 learning." A strategy will be useful if it is practicable to language tasks and suits a learner's learning style preferences. Meanwhile, a learner can effectively use and link it with other strategies. Outside of the language learning field, research comparing experts to novices indicates that experts use more systematic and useful problem-solving and wider range of strategies. A similar finding occurs with more successful language learners as compared to less successful ones. Better language learners generally use strategies appropriate to their own stage of learning, personality, age, purpose for learning the language and type of language (Oxford and Nyikos, 1989). Ellis (1994) summarizes the results of various "good language learner studies" into five major aspects of successful language learning. The first aspect of successful language learning is a concern for language form. Researchers found that good language learners treat language as a system by making effective cross-lingual comparisons, analyzing the target language, and using reference books. Good language learners also pay attention to meaning, searching for it in the L2 data they are exposed to and trying to engage in real communication by seeking out opportunities for natural language use. Thirdly, good language learners show active involvement in language learning. Rather than developing dependence upon the teacher, they take charge of their own learning by identifying and pursuing goals and by trying to introduce new topics into conversations. The fourth characteristic concerned their metacognitive awareness of the learning process. Successful language learners are thoughtful and aware of themselves, make conscious decisions and follow their own preferred learning style. These are the learners who have the ability to write effectively about their language learning because they have a well-developed meta-language with which to do it. Finally, Ellis concluded that successful learners are flexible and appropriately use learning strategies, demonstrating the ability to choose those that were appropriate for particular tasks.

METHOD

Participants

The participants in this study consist of 137 second year students of English majored at Dai Nam University (DNU). These students have been studying academic writing for the second semester. Convenience sampling was used to select participants. These consist of 21 high level of proficiency students, which is accounted for 15.3%; 56 medium level of proficiency (40.9%), and 60 low proficiency students (43.8%). The level of proficiency of the students is calculated by their writing results obtained from the previous end-of-semester test (year 2021-2022). Details of the participants can be found in the Table 1 below.

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Table 1. Levels of Proficiency

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	High level	21	15.3	15.3	15.3
	Medium level	56	40.9	40.9	56.2
	Low level	60	43.8	43.8	100.0
	Total	137	100.0	100.0	

Research instruments

A quantitative descriptive research design was employed to answer the research question. Data were collected through a self-perceived writing strategy survey adapted to suit the teaching and learning practice at DNU. The inventory consists of 30 items (10 items for before writing strategies, 10 items for during writing strategies and 10 for after writing strategies). The rating bases on a 5-point Likert scale (1: never; 2: rarely; 3: sometimes; 4: often and 5: most often). (See appendix).

FINDINGS

For the first research question "What levels of learning strategy do DNU students use during their academic writing?" the descriptive statistic which is conducted to measure the levels of the uses of before writing strategies among the participants reveals that high proficiency students used strategies more often than the other two groups. The mean of before writing strategies uses were M=3.48; M=2.30; M=1.98 respectively. The mean of during writing strategies uses were M=3.36; M=3.03; M=2.57 respectively. The mean of after writing strategies uses were M=3.55; M=1.99; M=2.06 respectively. Details were in the Table 2 below.

Table 2. The uses of writing strategies by level of proficiency

Level of Proficiency		Before Writing strategies	During Writing Strategies	After Writing Strategies
High level	Mean	**3.48**	**3.63**	**3.55**
	N	21	21	21
	Std. Deviation	.458	.390	.346
Medium level	Mean	**2.30**	**3.03**	**1.99**
	N	56	56	56
	Std. Deviation	.670	.565	.294
Low level	Mean	**1.98**	**2.57**	**2.06**
	N	60	60	59
	Std. Deviation	.250	.310	.326
Total	Mean	**2.92**	**2.34**	**2.26**
	N	137	137	136
	Std. Deviation	.706	.574	.639

For the second research question "What strategies are mostly used by high proficiency students compared with low proficiency students?" The findings are as followed;

- **Among the group of Before Writing Strategy (BWS)**

Students with high proficiency level often discuss what they were going to write with other students or with teacher before they write (M=3.86). The figure for low level of proficiency students was M=1.50. The high level students also do extra study outside the classroom to improve his/her writing (M=3.86), while the low level students was M= 1.32. The high level students reported that they think of the relationships between what they already know and new things that they learn (M=3.71). The use of this strategy for low level students were only M=1.68. Details can be found in the Table 3 below.

Table 3. Before Writing Strategies used by and low proficiency students

	Level of Proficiency	N	Mean	Std. Dev.
I consider the task or assignment and instructions carefully before writing.	High level	21	3.43	1.028
	Low level	60	1.80	.708
I review my class notes, hand-outs, and assignment requirements before beginning to write	High level	21	3.52	.928
	Low level	60	1.00	.000
I discuss what I am going to write with other students or my	High level	21	**3.86**	.854

teacher.	Low level	60	**1.50**	.504
I brainstorm and write down ideas before I begin to write.	High level	21	3.43	.746
	Low level	60	1.62	.940
I make plans and notes in my native language before writing.	High level	21	3.24	.995
	Low level	60	2.88	1.075
I do extra study outside the classroom to improve my writing.	High level	21	**3.86**	.910
	Low level	60	**1.32**	.930
I think of the relationships between what I already know and new things that I learn.	High level	21	**3.71**	.902
	Low level	60	**1.68**	.770
I notice vocabulary related to a topic that I will write about and try to remember the words.	High level	21	3.33	1.111
	Low level	60	1.38	.490
I make an outline or plan in English.	High level	21	3.38	.973
	Low level	60	2.42	1.476
I use a dictionary to check things I am not sure about before I write.	High level	21	3.33	.966
	Low level	60	2.38	1.617

- **Among the group of During Writing Strategy (DWS)**

Students with high proficiency reported that they make up new words if they do not know the right ones in English when they are writing (M=4.43) compared with M=1.98 of low proficiency students. High proficiency students also often used the strategy of editing ideas while writing (M=3.81), while the figure for low proficiency students were M= 2.98. On the other hand, the strategy of using native language first and then translate it into English was used most often (M= 3.86). The high proficiency students did not use this strategy while writing (M=1.57). The low proficiency students also reported that they used dictionary a lot when they write (M=3.25), the figure for high proficiency students was only M=1.29. Another strategy that was employed by most low level students was "I use a grammar book to check things I am not sure about when I write" (M=3.97) while the high level students used this strategy at low frequency (M= 1.29). Details of the comparisons can be found in the Table 4 below.

Table 4. During Writing Strategies used by high and low proficiency students

	Level of Proficiency	N	Mean	Std. Dev.
I use my background knowledge (world) knowledge to help me develop my ideas.	High level	21	3.52	1.078
	Low level	60	2.77	1.140
I like to write in my native language first and then translate it into English.	High level	21	**1.57**	.926
	Low level	60	**3.68**	1.000
I edit for content (ideas) as I am writing.	High level	21	3.67	.483
	Low level	60	1.97	.712
I edit for organization as I am writing.	High level	21	3.81	.873
	Low level	60	2.98	.813
I like to change, or make my ideas clearer as I am writing.	High level	21	3.57	1.028
	Low level	60	2.05	1.096
I use a dictionary to check things I am not sure about when I write.	High level	21	**1.29**	.956
	Low level	60	**3.25**	.437
I use a grammar book to check things I am not sure about when I write.	High level	21	**1.62**	1.024
	Low level	60	**3.97**	.748
If I can't think of an English word, I use a word or phrase that means the same thing.	High level	21	3.62	1.024
	Low level	60	1.70	.462
I make up new words if I do not know the right ones in English when I am writing.	High level	21	**4.43**	.676
	Low level	60	**1.98**	1.112
I encourage myself by telling myself that I can do well.	High level	21	3.24	.995
	Low level	60	1.85	.860

- **Among the group of After Writing Strategy (AWS)**

After writing, students with high proficiency reported that they often go back to his/her writing to edit the grammar, vocabulary, spelling, and punctuation. (M=3.81) compared with M=2.80 of low proficiency students. High proficiency students also often record the types of errors he/she has made so he/she does not keep making the same (M=3.80), while the figure for low proficiency students were M= 1.20. They also reported that "I make notes or try to remember feedback I get so I can use it the

next time I write" (M=3.71), the compared figure for low proficiency students with this strategy was only M=1.68). High proficiency students often go back to his/her writing to revise the content and make his/her ideas clearer after writing (M=3.57). The low proficiency students did not do this very much (M=1.67). Details of the comparisons can be found in the Table 5 below.

Table 5. After Writing Strategies used by high and low proficiency students

	Level of Proficiency	N	Mean	Std. Dev.
I go back to my writing to revise the content and make my ideas clearer.	High level	21	**3.57**	1.076
	Low level	60	**1.67**	.951
I go back to my writing to revise and improve my organization.	High level	21	3.52	.814
	Low level	60	1.20	.403
I go back to my writing to edit the grammar, vocabulary, spelling, and punctuation.	High level	21	**3.81**	.750
	Low level	60	**2.80**	1.117
I use a dictionary after I finish writing a draft.	High level	21	3.43	.746
	Low level	60	2.78	.691
I use a grammar book after I finish writing a draft.	High level	21	3.38	1.024
	Low level	60	2.00	1.008
I discuss my work with other students to get feedback on how I can improve it.	High level	21	2.90	1.300
	Low level	60	1.30	.462
I discuss my work with my teacher to get feedback on how I can improve it.	High level	21	3.38	1.117
	Low level	60	2.12	1.195
I evaluate others students' writing and give them feedback on how they can improve it.	High level	21	3.57	1.207
	Low level	60	2.77	.673
I make notes or try to remember feedback I get so I can use it the next time I write.	High level	21	**3.71**	.956
	Low level	59	**1.68**	.955
I record the types of errors I have made so I do not keep making the same types of errors.	High level	21	**3.80**	.889
	Low level	59	**1.20**	.406

CONCLUSION

The findings of the study reveal that strategies play important roles in enhancing the academic writing performance for the students at Dai Nam University. Those who employ less strategies or applying the inappropriate strategies before, while and after their writing often receive low achievements in academic writing at university in general and in Dai Nam University in particular. The high level proficiency students often employ cognitive and meta-cognitive in their writing, while low proficiency students waited more time in looking for words in dictionary while writing. These students also spent less time practising writing outside classroom and in their free time. It is suggested that university lecturers should pay more attention to the teaching of appropriate strategies for low proficiency students so that they can improve their academic writing at university.

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APPENDIX

Use of Learning Strategies

Please rate your use of each learning strategy below on a scale from 1 to 5. Circle your choice.

1= never

2= rarely

3= sometimes

4= often

5= most often

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Before Writing Strategies	Rating
I consider the task or assignment and instructions carefully before writing.	① ② ③ ④ ⑤
I discuss what I am going to write with other students or my teacher.	① ② ③ ④ ⑤
I brainstorm and write down ideas before I begin to write.	① ② ③ ④ ⑤
I make plans and notes in my native language before writing.	① ② ③ ④ ⑤
I make an outline or plan in English.	① ② ③ ④ ⑤
I do extra study outside the classroom to improve my writing.	① ② ③ ④ ⑤
I think of the relationships between what I already know and new things that I learn.	① ② ③ ④ ⑤
I notice vocabulary related to a topic that I will write about and try to remember the words.	① ② ③ ④ ⑤
I use a dictionary to check things I am not sure about before I write.	① ② ③ ④ ⑤
I use a grammar book to check things I am not sure about before I write.	① ② ③ ④ ⑤

During Writing Strategies	
I use my background knowledge (world) knowledge to help me develop my ideas.	① ② ③ ④ ⑤
I like to write in my native language first and then translate it into English.	① ② ③ ④ ⑤
I edit for content (ideas) as I am writing.	① ② ③ ④ ⑤
I edit for organization as I am writing.	① ② ③ ④ ⑤
I like to change, or make my ideas clearer as I am writing.	① ② ③ ④ ⑤
I use a dictionary to check things I am not sure about when I write.	① ② ③ ④ ⑤
I use a grammar book to check things I am not sure about when I write.	① ② ③ ④ ⑤
If I can't think of an English word, I use a word or phrase that means the same thing.	① ② ③ ④ ⑤
I make up new words if I do not know the right ones in English when I am writing.	① ② ③ ④ ⑤
I encourage myself by telling myself that I can do well.	① ② ③ ④ ⑤

After Writing Strategies	
I go back to my writing to revise the content and make my ideas clearer.	① ② ③ ④ ⑤
I go back to my writing to revise and improve my organization.	① ② ③ ④ ⑤
I go back to my writing to edit the grammar, vocabulary, spelling, and punctuation.	① ② ③ ④ ⑤
I use a dictionary after I finish writing a draft.	① ② ③ ④ ⑤
I use a grammar book after I finish writing a draft.	① ② ③ ④ ⑤
I discuss my work with other students to get feedback on how I can improve it.	① ② ③ ④ ⑤
I discuss my work with my teacher to get feedback on how I can improve it.	① ② ③ ④ ⑤
I evaluate others students' writing and give them feedback on how they can improve it.	① ② ③ ④ ⑤
I make notes or try to remember feedback I get so I can use it the next time I write.	① ② ③ ④ ⑤
I record the types of errors I have made so I do not keep making the same types of errors.	① ② ③ ④ ⑤
I read the feedback from my previous writing and use this feedback in my next writing.	① ② ③ ④ ⑤