

AN EMPIRICAL STUDY ON WRITER S BLOCK OF CHINESE EFL LEARNERS AT THE TERTIARY LEVEL

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Abstract

The present paper reports an empirical study on writer s block of Chinese EFL learners at the tertiary level in the mainland of P .R . China . Factor analysis approach was employed in the present study and the results of confirmatory factor analysis verified the model we gained . Three factors were found in writer s block of Chinese EFL learners : complexity , premature editing and attitudes . The results also showed that writer s block might be related to learners lack of strategies in the writing process . Meanwhile , the blocked writers did not hold appropriate feelings and beliefs towards writing and teachers evaluation on their writing . Accordingly , we suggest that we help develop learners writing strategies and the teachers evaluation be encouraging-oriented . Finally , suggestions for further research are raised .

Key words

writer s block ; Chinese EFL learners ; empirical study

1 . Introduction

Writer s block is “an inability to begin or continue writing for reasons other than a lack of basic skill or com mitment ” , or is “ periods people experience when , no matter how hard they try , they can produce little , if any , writing ” (Rose 1984) . Writer s block is an important variable to study , for it may increase learners writing apprehension and thus affect negatively the learners writing performance (Lee 2005) . Rose (1984) , who originated the research on students writing process and beliefs , designed a Writer s Block Questionnaire . By using the factor analysis method , he identified five factors of writer s block : 1) attitudes , i . e . , feelings and beliefs about writing and evaluation ; 2) lateness , i . e . , missing deadlines ; 3) premature editing , i . e . , editing too early in the composing process ; 4) complexity , i . e . , lack of strategies to interpret and write complex materials ; and 5) blocking , which is the main indicator of writer s block .

Lee & Krashen (2003) pioneered the studies of writer s block in the field other than the English language . They used a Chinese version of Rose s (1984) questionnaire and found that writer s block also occurred to Chinese students in Taiwan and it was also related to premature editing and to lack of strategies for dealing with complex writing tasks . In a further study on writer s block of Taiwanese EFL writers , Lee (2005) used the factor analysis method and identified five similar factors as those found in Rose (1984) . In addition , Lee (2005) found no significant correlation between writer s block and writer s writing performance .

Writer s block also occurs to Chinese EFL learners in the mainland of P . R . China . However , up until now , no study has been conducted on writer s block of Chinese EFL learners in the mainland of P . R . China . The present study aims to study writer s block of Chinese EFL learners at the tertiary level in the mainland of P . R . China and its relation with their writing performance . The research questions are :

- 1 . What factors constitute writers block of Chinese EFL learners in the mainland of P .R . China ?
- 2 . How do these factors relate to the writing performance of Chinese EFL learners in the mainland of P .R . China ?

2 . Method

2 .1 Subjects

The subjects of the present study were freshman undergraduates at Huazhong University of Science and Technology ,who were placed in four College English classes randomly chosen by the researchers .

College English ,a compulsory course for undergraduates in China ,includes comprehensive training in listening ,speaking ,reading ,writing and translation skills . All the subjects were finishing College English Band II when they were participating in the study . In the present study ,the subjects were assumed to have received certain English language writing training and have practiced writing within and after the College English class .

2 .2 Instruments

2 .2 .1 Writer s Block Questionnaire

The survey instrument employed in the present study was the Mandarin Chinese version of Writer s Block Questionnaire used in Lee (2005) ,which was translated from the English version designed by Rose (1984) . However ,when we administered our survey ,we changed Lee s version in traditional complicated Chinese characters into a version in simplified Chinese characters . The reliability of the simplified Chinese characters version of the questionnaire is satisfactory (Cronbach s alpha = .843) .

2 .2 .2 Writing performance

We randomly chose one essay writing task from the test papers of College English Test Band VI . Specifically ,we chose the writing task from the test paper of College English Test Band VI in January 1992 with the title " Film Is Giving Way to TV " and asked the subjects to finish writing the essay in one class hour (i. e. ,45 minutes) .

The grading of the essays was done by one of the researchers and one of his colleagues ,as both of them are qualified and experienced raters for College English Test Band IV /VI . The two raters respectively graded each of the essays under the writing scoring system of College English Test Band VI , with 15 points as the full mark . A rater grading an essay does not know the score the other rater has given to the same essay . When both raters finished grading the essays ,Pearson correlation of the scores given by both raters was calculated with $p = .608$ (sig . < .001) ,which meant the scores given by the two raters were significantly correlated and the inter-rater reliability was satisfactory . Lastly ,the mean score of the two scores for each essay was taken as the writing performance of each subject .

2 .3 Procedures of the survey and statistical analysis

The questionnaire survey was administered during the College English class hours and the class teachers were helping the researchers in situ while the survey was done . All together 195 questionnaires were received and the data of 170 questionnaires out of them were valid and analyzed in this research . Questionnaires with missing values were dropped .

As for the statistical analysis ,we conducted exploratory factor analysis to extract factors concerning writer s block of Chinese EFL learners at the tertiary level . According to the suggestions by Lei & Wei (2005) ,we adopted the following approaches in the exploratory analysis :1) For the factor extracting model ,we used maximum likelihood for its powerful function in analyzing latent variables out of manifest data ,2) For the rotation methods ,we adopted Promax out of the oblique rotations ,3) We suppressed the absolute values less than .40 ,because the variable loadings must be more than .40 to prove the significance in construct validity ,and deleted the variables whose crossloadings were more than .40 (Nunnally 1978 ;Stevens 1996) . The statistical software we used for exploratory factor analysis was SPSS 12 .0 .

After exploratory factor analysis ,we conducted confirmatory factor analysis to examine the

goodness of fit of the model we gained from exploratory factor analysis . Modification of the model was also employed to better the model . The statistical software we used for confirmatory factor analysis was AMOS4.0 .

Lastly ,Pearson correlation analysis was done to see the relationship between the factors of writer s block and their writing performance .

3 . Results and discussion

3.1 Exploratory factor analysis

The results of exploratory factor analysis showed that KMO value was .865 with Bartlett's test of sphericity significance less than .000 ,which meant factor analysis could be employed . Five factors were extracted with eigenvalue more than 1 as the approach to determining the number of factors extracted (Kaiser 1956) and 58.778 % of the variance was explained . It is commonly recognized that one factor should include at least three variables ,so we excluded one factor which contained only one variable . Therefore ,we set the number of factors extracted to four and conducted exploratory factor analysis once again .

This time 53.943 % of the variance was explained ,from which we could see that the loss of variance explained was tiny . Whereas ,Factor II held one variable (Variable No .19) which bore crossloading more than .40 (crossloading = .470 on Factor III) and thus was deleted from the factor (Nunnally 1978 ;Stevens 1996) .

After the two rounds of exploratory factor analysis ,one model of writers block of Chinese EFL learners was gained ,with four factors extracted .

3.2 Confirmatory factor analysis

We conducted confirmatory factor analysis to confirm the statistical significance (i. e. goodness of fit) of the model we gained from exploratory factor analysis . The results of confirmatory factor analysis on the preliminary model were in Table 1 .

Table 1 . Results of confirmatory factor analysis on the preliminary model

X ²	X ² /df	IFI	TLI	CFI	RMSEA
358.983	1.962	.858	.834	.855	.075

To achieve a satisfactory goodness of fit ,X² should be small ,X² /df value should be less than 2 ,the values of IFI ,TLI ,CFI near or more than .90 and the RMSEA value less than .05 or .06 ,which indicates that the data within the model fits well (Byrne 2001) . From the results in Table 1 ,the data within the model did not fit well and modification of the model was needed .

According to the MI (Modification indices) ,we knew that the values of MI (i. e. Chi square or error covariances) between Error 7 and Error 6 ,between Error 11 and Error 18 and between Error 21 and Error 18 were exceptionally high . Thus ,we set the above -mentioned three pairs of error covariances to be freely estimated (i. e. correlated) in order to modify the model . The results of confirmatory factor analysis on the modified model were presented in Table 2 .

Table 2 . Results of confirmatory factor analysis on the modified model

X ²	X ² /df	IFI	TLI	CFI	RMSEA
295.517	1.642	.907	.889	.905	.062

After the modification ,the values of X² and X² /df were lowered with X² /df value less than 2 and the values of IFI ,TLI and CFI were good enough ,though the value of RMSEA was not that satisfactory . That is to say ,the data within the modified model fits well and the model can be accepted .

The modified model was similar to the model Lee (2005) gained in her study on the Chinese EFL

learners in Taiwan except for that in Lee (2005) ,variable No .13 and 14 were independently extracted as one factor named Lateness .Therefore ,we named the factors in our model as those in Lee s (2005) .(See Table 3 for detail)

Table 3 . Factors of writer s block of Chinese EFL learners

Factor	Variables	Loading
Factor I Complexity	v11 To write essays on books and articles that are very complex is difficult for me .	.825
	v10 I have trouble deciding how to write on issues that have many interpretations .	.795
	v8 I m not sure ,at times ,of how to organize all the information I have collected for a paper .	.789
	v12 I have trouble with assignments that ask me to compare or contrast or to analyze .	.588
	v9 Writing on topics that can have different focuses is difficult for me .	.563
	v20 At times ,I find it hard to write what I mean .	.521
	v3 I think my writing is good .	-.475
Factor II Blocking	v1 My teachers are familiar with so much good writing that my writing must look bad by comparison .	.442
	v23 At times ,I sit for hours unable to write a thing .	.856
	v14 I have to hand in assignments late because I can t get the words on paper .	.637
	v22 Starting a paper is very hard for me .	.530
	v24 Estimate how often you experience writer s block .	.528
Factor III Premature editing	v13 I run over deadlines because I get stuck while trying to write my paper .	.510
	v21 At times ,my first paragraph takes me over two hours to write .	.472
	v18 My first paragraph has to be perfect before I ll go on .	.744
	v16 When I write ,I ll wait until I ve found just the right phrase .	.461
Factor IV Attitudes	v15 Each sentence I write has to be just right before I ll go on to the next .	.422
	v17 I find myself writing a sentence ,then erasing it and trying another sentence ,then scratching it out .I might do this for some time .	.412
	v7 I like having the opportunity to express my ideas in writing .	.771
	v6 I enjoy writing ,though writing is difficult at times .	.673
	v5 Writing is a very unpleasant experience for me .	-.556

Besides blocking ,the main indicator of writer s block ,EFL learners in the mainland of P .R . China self reported three factors of their writer s block ,i .e . ,complexity ,premature editing and attitudes . Compared with Lee (2005) ,in which variable No .13 and 14 were independently extracted as one factor named Lateness ,Lateness factor was not found in our research . This might be because the subjects in the present study took lateness as one part of Blocking factor ,the main indicator of writer s block .

We conducted Pearson correlation analysis between scores of blocking ,the main indicator ,and those of the other three factors (complexity ,premature editing and attitudes) and obtained significant correlations between all of them (See Table 4) .

Table 4 . Pearson correlation between blocking ,the main indicator ,and the other three factors

		Complexity	Premature editing	Attitudes
Blocking	Pearson Correlation	.594	.579	-.249
	Sig . (2 tailed)	.000	.000	.001

Rose (1984) and Lee (2005) also found significant correlations between blocking and complexity and between blocking and premature editing in their studies on American and Taiwanese students ,and it was proposed that the significant correlations indicate that the blocked writers lack strategies in the writing process ,though actual strategies used were not specified in “dealing with complexity ” (Stephen & Lee in press) . The explanations can count for the results in this study that the blocked writers in the mainland of P .R . China also lack strategies in the writing process as their American and Taiwanese counterparts do .

Besides the above -mentioned two correlations ,the present study also found significant correlation between blocking and attitudes ,in comparison to the results in Rose (1984) and Lee (2005) . That is to say ,blocked writers in the mainland of P .R . China do not hold appropriate feelings and beliefs towards writing and evaluation , which means they seldom enjoy writing because writing is always a hard experience for them ,and they do not think their writing is satisfactory because the teachers evaluation on their writing performance would not be good .

To sum up ,the EFL learners in the mainland of P .R . China feel blocked when 1) they feel lack of strategies to deal with writing complex materials 2) they pay too much attention to the form of writing in the early editing stages and 3) they hold less appropriate feelings and beliefs towards writing and teachers evaluation on their writing . Thus ,we propose that 1) we emphasize trainings of certain writing strategies in EFL teaching to reduce the blocking degree of the students and 2) teachers always encourage students to write by assigning them relatively easy writing tasks and teachers evaluation on students writing be encouragement-oriented . As long as the learners are equipped with certain writing strategies and hold positive beliefs on writing and teachers evaluation ,the writers would be less blocked in writing .

3.3 Correlation between blocking factors and writing performance

Pearson correlation analysis between the four blocking factors and writing performance was done and no significant correlation was found between any of them (See Table 5) .

Table 5 . Pearson correlation between blocking factors and writing performance

		Blocking	Complexity	Premature editing	Attitudes
Writing performance	Pearson Correlation	-.032	.073	-.035	-.049
	Sig . (2 tailed)	.683	.345	.654	.531

Lee (2005) gained the same results in her research on Taiwanese students . She proposed two reasons to explain the results : 1) the self-reported writers block by the EFL learners might not be consistent with the blocking factuality and 2) the writing task might not be challenging enough to distinguish the writers with high writing apprehension from the ones with low writing apprehension ,while writing apprehension would cause writers block . The explanations by Lee (2005) could also explain the above results in this present research . However ,we would like to put forward another reason for this phenomenon :the student writers may have adopted some strategies while writing to improve their writing performance , which makes the writing task seem not that “challenging ” ,though we have suggested that the students

may lack some strategies in the writing process. Some examples would support our opinion. For instance, Liu (2002) found that L1 strategies positively functioned in editing, content producing, text organizing, writing styles, etc., in the Chinese learners' writing process. Another good example goes to He (2004) in which he found that various strategies in the selection of words were used if the writer met with some troubles while writing, which were avoidance, mental translation, paraphrase, transfers, coinage, and retention of some linguistic chunks, etc.

4. Conclusion

In this study, we conducted an empirical study on writers' block of Chinese EFL learners at the tertiary level in the mainland of P.R. China. Factor analysis approach was employed in the present study and the results of confirmatory factor analysis verified the model we gained. Three factors were found in writers' block of Chinese EFL learners in the mainland of P.R. China: complexity, premature editing and attitudes. Correlation analysis results showed that the main indicator was positively correlated with the former two factors, which meant the Chinese EFL learners lacked strategies in the writing process. Meanwhile, the main indicator was negatively correlated with the attitudes factor, which indicated that blocked writers did not hold appropriate feelings and beliefs towards writing, as well as teachers' evaluation on their writing.

Pedagogical implications of this research lie in the following two aspects: 1) teachers should help develop certain writing strategies learners need in the writing process, and 2) teachers should encourage students to write by assigning them relatively easy writing tasks. In addition, teachers' evaluation on students' writing should be encouragement oriented.

However, writing performance was not correlated with any factor of the writers' block, which indicated that the Chinese EFL learners might have used some strategies while writing. Therefore, we suggest that further research be conducted to study which specific writing strategies the Chinese EFL learners need when they feel blocked in writing. The relationship between those strategies and writers' block and between those strategies and writing performance should also be explored.

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