

**USING FOCUSED MARKING TECHNIQUE AS ONE OF THE
TEACHERS' MARKING STRATEGIES TO HELP SECONDARY
SCHOOL STUDENTS
TO IMPROVE THE ESSAY WRITING SKILL**

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ABSTRACT

This study was conducted in order to examine whether through the use of focused marking technique as one of the marking strategies by teachers in teaching essay writing, can lead to the improvement in secondary school students' essay writing skill. During the marking, the relevant features required for essay writing skill will be selected and focused by teachers based on the immediate need of students. Teachers could provide written comments and utilized them during the review session. It proposed the idea that teachers and students will have a focus in teaching and learning essay writing. Teachers will be able to assign more essay writing practices and students are expected to be more motivated to see those facilitative comments and less 'red ink' in their essay. This study employed a quasi-experimental research design. The samples were 10 secondary school English teachers and 100 form four students as the participants of the study. Three written assignments (essays) were given to them and marked by the teachers using the focused marking technique for the experimental group and the conventional marking method for the control group. Both groups were given pre and posttest. Besides that, there were informal interview and questionnaires for the teachers and the participants pertaining to their perceptiveness on teaching and learning essay writing. It is found that the experimental group has managed to perform better in comparison to the control group. Both the samples and participants realized the importance of teachers' marking feedback in improving the essay writing skill.

ABSTRAK

Kajian ini adalah bertujuan untuk melihat sama ada teknik pemeriksaan berfokus yang digunakan oleh guru-guru sebagai satu cara pemeriksaan dapat meningkatkan kemahiran menulis karangan di kalangan pelajar sekolah menengah. Ketika pemarkahan, komponen tertentu yang diperlukan dalam penulisan sesuatu karangan akan dipilih dan diberi fokus berdasarkan keperluan dan kelemahan pelajar. Disamping itu, guru perlu memberi komen bertulis yang juga akan digunakan dalam sesi perbincangan. Kajian tersebut berasaskan pandangan bahawa pelajar dan guru akan mempunyai fokus dalam pembelajaran dan pengajaran penulisan karangan. Ianya juga berkemungkinan dapat membantu guru-guru menjimatkan masa untuk memeriksa karangan pelajar-pelajarnya. Adalah dipercayai bahawa para pelajar akan mempunyai lebih motivasi melihat komen yang bernas dan hasil karangan yang kurang mempunyai 'komen berdakwat merah'. Kajian ini menggunakan kaedah quasi-experimental dengan 10 orang guru Bahasa Inggeris sekolah menengah sebagai sample kajian serta 100 orang pelajar tingkatan 4 sebagai peserta. Sebanyak tiga latihan penulisan karangan telah diberikan dan ianya diperiksa oleh guru-guru dengan teknik pemeriksaan berfokus bagi kumpulan rawatan dan kaedah pemeriksaan tradisional bagi kumpulan kawalan. Kedua-dua kumpulan ini telah diberikan pra-ujian dan pos-ujian. Sampel kajian juga ditemubual secara tidak formal dan peserta kajian pula telah diberikan soal selidik untuk mendapatkan maklumat mengenai persepsi mereka mengenai pembelajaran dan pengajaran penulisan karangan. Hasil kajian mendapati kumpulan rawatan menunjukkan perubahan dalam kemahiran menulis karangan melalui peningkatan dalam prestasi penulisan karangan.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the study

In recent years, ESL composition has begun to assume greater validity as a cognitive and communicative skill and thus became a part of ESL curricula (Teaching ESL Writing Joy M. Reid University of Wyoming, Prentice Hall Regents 1993:21-23). In Malaysian context, ESL writing is indispensable to academic success, thus greater emphasis has been put on developing students' writing abilities. The Secondary School English Language Syllabus emphasizes the writing skills and one of the objectives of the English language curriculum is to enable learners to present information and express ideas or thoughts imaginatively and creatively in written form (Curriculum Specifications for English Form 5, 2003). The writing skill is also tested in all the public examinations and in Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) or Upper Secondary Certificate Examination, heavy weight-age is given to writing. It comprises 145 from the total, 160 marks. The performance in Writing Component influences the overall achievement for English paper.

It is becoming increasingly difficult for ESL teachers today in preparing students to write effectively. An alarming number of students are still unable to string together a simple sentence even after nine years of formal education. There could be various contributing factors to the deteriorating standards of English language among students. However, it is undeniable that teachers are playing vital roles in affecting students' performance in English through their approaches, methods and techniques in imparting all the required skills and knowledge.

Teachers' feedback is one of the most widely used techniques in assisting ESL students to enhance their proficiency level either in spoken or written skills. A variety of feedback techniques to students could be provided. The most common forms are commentary, minimal marking, rubrics and others. All aspects of students' texts;

structure, organization, style, content, and presentation should be utilized (Hyland 2002).

1.2 Statement of the problem

The main two major issues addressing in this study which are concerning with writing essay in English are; students reluctance to write essay and teachers' fear of correcting almost every sentences in the essays (almost rewriting those essays), a time consuming chores. For many students, writing is an intricate task that requires numerous practices; for most teachers, figuring out the most effective method to comments on their students' texts is no easier.

Learning the process of writing is a difficult skill for ESL or even EFL (English as foreign language) writing ,where exposure to English is limited to a few hours per week. In Malaysian ESL classrooms English is taught 5 times a week incorporating all the skills (Listening, Reading, Speaking, Writing, including Literature Component).A single lesson is allocated 40 minutes, nevertheless though writing will be conducted in double periods most of the time. Students in learning compositions struggle with many structural issues including selecting proper words, using correct grammar, generating ideas, and developing ideas about specific topics.

In addition, not many teachers relish the thought of giving a lot of practices in writing. They have to spend hours dealing with the students' compositions and often wonder to what extent that precious time is being wasted. Besides, marking can be very tedious and demanding especially when dealing with weak students (Cimcoz, 1999). Some of the general components or main areas of writing skill for language use; the ability to write correct and appropriate sentences , mechanical skills; the ability to use correctly those conventions peculiar to the written language for example punctuation, spelling; treatment of the content, vocabulary and organizations (Gray, 2004). Writing requires conscious effort and much practice in composing, developing, and analyzing ideas. Writing also involves composing, which implies the ability to tell or retell pieces of information in the form of narrative or description or to transform information into new texts, as in expository or argumentative writing.

By employing focused marking technique, there will be a focus for teachers in marking essays on the selected items which are required for essay writing for example

any linguistic features, grammatical items, etcetera. Teacher then will be able to direct students to have a focus in revising their work , provide them comments either written form during marking and verbally during the review session with the hope that these comments will be more focused and facilitative. Zamel (1985), has stated that there is evidence that students find teacher's feedback beneficial in improving their writing. By exercising focus marking, a considerable amount of work can be given to students which can be beneficial for the students (Edge,1980) and the focused comments facilitate students revision and improvement (Dunn, Florio-Ruane & Clark, 1989) and Hyland (1990), Hyland and Mahili, 1999). At the same time teachers will be able to assign more writing practices to students with less burden of marking.

1.3 Purpose Of The Study

In order to overcome the two major issues, the study will look at one of the feedback forms, marking strategy by teachers in teaching essay writing. The focus marking technique will be based on ZDP theory. It is essential however to also understand the model of Basic Model Of Discourse Processing For Written Production to produce better essay writing among students or to enhance the writing performance .

1.4 General Objective

This study intends to examine whether through the use of focused marking technique as one of the marking strategies by teachers in teaching essay writing, can lead to the improvement in secondary school students' essay writing skill or essay writing performance.

1.5 Specific Objective

This research intends to meet the following objective:-

1. to examine whether through the use of focused marking technique as one of the marking strategies by teachers in teaching essay writing can lead to an increase in the performance of essay writing in terms of the total score points in the posttest.

1.6 Research Questions

To be able to achieve the purpose of this study, the following questions have been formed as guidelines to the study. The questions are;

1. Does the focused marking technique employed by ESL teachers as one of the marking strategies in teaching essay writing can help secondary school students to improve their essay writing skill ?
2. Does the focused marking technique employed by ESL teachers as one of the marking strategies can lead to an increase in the performance of essay writing in terms of the total score points in the posttest?

1.7 Research Hypotheses

Three hypotheses are constructed to answer the research questions.

1. There is no significant difference in the percentage and means scores in the essay writing between the pretest and posttest of the experimental group.
2. There is no significant difference in the percentage and means scores in the essay writing between the pretest and posttest of the control group.
3. There is no significant difference in the percentage and means scores in essay writing between the experimental and the control group.

1.8 Rationale Of The Study

Learning to write in a second or foreign language is undoubtedly quite daunting as the learners not only has to grapple with the task of writing itself, but also the complexities of a language which he is trying to master. Preparing students with sufficient knowledge in order to study and interact using spoken and written is becoming very challenging as the native languages of ESL students influence the acquisition of English. These students are usually surrounded by their heritage language when they leave the classroom (Morais, 2002). To the researcher's knowledge, the research literature to date, provides limited reference and information regarding the use of focused marking technique in marking essay writing of the Malaysian secondary school language learners especially in Sabah. It is hoped that this study will provide some insights so that the ESL essay writing can be taught and learned more effectively. The findings of the study may

contribute to ESL teaching and learning writing mainly of similar setting in Sabah, Malaysia.

1.9 Significance Of The Study

This study is significant because it can provide some insight into the use of focused marking technique among ESL teachers to enhance the essay writing performance among ESL students. The results from this study will reveal how a marking strategy like focused marking technique can affect the students' performance of essay writing, who have been accustomed to being assessed based on error analysis 'hunting for errors', 'scribbling papers (essay) with a lot of red ink' or using holistic or impression marking leaving students with no focus in revising or improving.

The results from this study could prove how the focused marking technique as one of the marking strategies employed by ESL teachers in teaching essay writing could improve teachers' marking strategies. The results from this study could suggest to teachers to diversify or improve the marking techniques or strategies in teaching essay writing and to help them to lessen the burden of marking and enable them to give more practices of essay writing to the students that might lead to the improvement in the essay writing skill and performance.

1.10 Definition Of Terms

1.10.1 English As A Second Language (Esl)

In this study, English is more of a foreign language despite the recognition as the second language after the first language (mother tongue) and the national language Bahasa Melayu. English is used in more limited ways as Bahasa Melayu is mostly used in almost for all the formal affairs as well as for communicating with others who have different primary languages.

1.10.2 Focused marking technique

It refers to one of the marking strategies employed by ESL teachers in teaching essay writing. Marking is one of the feedback techniques which is commonly practiced by teachers in teaching essay writing namely in evaluating students' work. The focused

marking technique enable teachers to guide students by providing a focus or direction in improving the essay writing skill. In the process of marking, teachers will choose the items or features needed for essay writing based on the students' need and areas that required immediate attention. Teachers may focused on only a few aspects at a time and provide facilitative comments instead of correcting or highlighting all the errors. Those comments will be utilized by students when they are doing their own reflection or revision. Similarly for teachers to have a focus to guide those students. Apart from that there will be possibilities for teachers to assign more essays writing practices to students as there will be no requirement to deal with all the errors appear in students writing at a time.

The focused marking technique resembles the primary trait marking techniques which is based on holistic score to one particular feature of writing, such as organization or vocabulary usage, that has been identified in the writing assignment. However, the focused marking technique is based on analytical score; gives specific attention or response to the students' essay which may include content, organization, vocabulary, language use, and mechanics. (Omaggio 1986 in Teacher's Handbook Contextualized Language Instruction, Judith L. Shrum & Eileen W. Glisan, Heinie and Heinle Publishers Boston, USA 1994 pg 188).

1.10.3 The holistic marking or Impression Marking

The holistic marking is based on the overall impression of the entire text: may include clarity, effectiveness of message, support of main idea, etc. (Omaggio, 1986 in Teacher's Handbook Contextualized Language Instruction, Judith L. Shrum & Eileen W. Glisan, Heinie and Heinle Publishers Boston, USA 1994, pg: 188).

1.10.4 Primary trait marking

It is based on holistic score to one particular feature of writing, such as organization or vocabulary usage that has been identified in the writing assignment. (Omaggio, 1986 in Teacher's Handbook Contextualized Language Instruction, Judith L. Shrum & Eileen W. Glisan, Heinie and Heinle Publishers Boston, USA 1994, pg: 188).

1.10.5 The analytical marking

Analytical approach refers to examining or tending to examine thing very carefully.

It is based on the grading of various components of the essay separately and gives specific responses to the students usually employed the error analysis method; identifying all the errors and indicating them by using symbols and at times correction will be provided mostly on grammatical aspects.

1.11 Limitations of the study

It is necessary to point out that the study does have some limitations and the findings will not be applicable in different contexts. The limited number of subjects, only 10 ESL teachers do not reflect the perception of all the ESL secondary schools' teachers in teaching essay writing specifically the marking technique. The duration of the research will take about 3 to 4 months as students need to be exposed, educated and trained on the required skills for writing. Due to the above situation, the results obtained could be influenced by extraneous factors which are beyond the control of researcher such as personal tuition, students' improvement in other skills such as reading and etcetera. In addition, the time taken to carry out this study was too short to see tremendous improvement in detailed specific areas of language, grammar and length of essay writing. The written assignments (essay) used as instruments for this study is basically the descriptive and narrative type of writing as requested by the teachers. There is possibility for students to perform otherwise if different types of essays and genres are given to them, for instance argumentative, factual essays or report writing, diary entry, summary writing and etcetera.

Data or findings will be based on the writing assignment of the selected upper secondary students of this particular school. Therefore, the findings cannot be generalized to students of other secondary schools. In addition, the test items and instruments (essays) might not be exhaustive enough to test students' ability or actual level of performance. It is quite hard for the teachers to allocate too much time as there is a need to teach other skills. Therefore, there will be still some areas left unquestionable.

1.12 Conclusion

Chapter 1 of this research has covered the following aspects : the background of this research, statement of the problem, purpose of the study, the general and specific objectives, research questions, research hypotheses, rationale of the study, significance of the study, definitions of terms related to study and finally some limitations encountered in the process of carrying out this research.



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CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

Writing has both clear purpose and specific audience. There seems to be an agreement amongst ESL researchers and teachers that there are two main reasons for writing (e.g. to get things done) and writing for educational purposes (e.g: to fulfill academic obligations) (Freedman et al. 1983, 1994: Macdonald & Shaw 1993). Beginning in 1970's, there has been a rapid shift of research and practice in language teaching, the focus in language teaching had shifted to a more humanistic approach, based on L1 acquisition and cognitive psychology. Rather than expecting error-free language, teachers should create an atmosphere, which encourages communication. Just as young children produce errors in L1, so too are errors expected from L2 students. Hendrickson (1980); pointed out that there had been " a shift in pedagogical focus from preventing errors to learning from errors". Savignon makes clear that "communication cannot take place in the absence of structure, or grammar, a set of shared assumption about how language works..." Therefore, as she continues, Canale and Swain (1980) included grammatical competence into their model of communicative L2 teaching.

However, a review of the research starting from 1970's (Ellis, 1997), shows that communicative L2 was perceived as a departure from grammar in favor of focusing on the meaning only. Comparison of communicative (also referred as meaning-based) to form-based (also referred as structure-based) approaches in L2 teaching shows that communicative language teaching enables student to perform spontaneously, but does not guarantee linguistic accuracy. On the other hand, form-based approaches focus on the linguistic and grammatical structures, which makes the speech or written work grammatically accurate. The question then rises, what method is the most effective? It has become popular these days to refer to the goals and needs of students. Therefore, if students need grammar for communication, it should be taught communicatively, that

is meaning-based. On the other hand, if students need the grammar knowledge to be able to translate from L2 to L1, and that is what they are going to be graded on, then the form-based approaches will be more appropriate.

In learning an L2 grammar, students face a dilemma. On the one hand, students need to know the rules, as that is what they are tested on at schools. On the other, there is a need to look at the ways of combining form and meaning in teaching foreign languages. (Sysoyev, 1999). A possible solution, integrative grammar teaching should combines a form-based with a meaning-based focus, Spada and Lightbrown (1993) have also argued "that form-focused instruction and corrective feedback provided within the context of communicative interaction can contribute positively to second language development in both short and long term" (p.205). Kumaravadivelu calls this as a 'principled communicative approach" (cited by Celce-Murcia, Dornyei and Thrurrel, 1997). Of course, depending on the students and their particular needs.

However due to tradition or inexperience, teachers and students may still preoccupied with linguistic correctness or deal with demands of composing simultaneously. The results is that they may be frustrated or discouraged when they fail to yield the desired product. In providing feedback on their students' written work, ESL teachers will take the trouble to hunt for every error that students make. Despite all the efforts, the teacher sometimes misses errors, and sometimes corrects minor errors while serious ones that can cause ambiguity in meanings go uncorrected. Keh (1990) points out that it is difficult for teachers to give effective feedback as they tend not to have focus in marking their students' work especially when they mark for the "Low Order Concern" or mechanical errors when sometimes the issues of content and text organization is ignored completely (Zamel, 1985). The crux of the problem of teachers as error-hunters is that 'what the teacher says about the pieces of writing can have no influence on the content, form or accuracy of the text (Raimes, 1983 : 139). In essence, effective feedback is that which can help students merely the mechanical and grammatical errors, but most importantly, the issues of organization, content and form of the text.

The present focus encourages 'creative self expression' and does not insist on error free communication. Knap (1972 : 273) describe ideally a teacher should avoid the role of errors hunter or penalizing judge. Instead a teacher should adopt a co-operating