USING MODEL ESSAYS TO IMPROVE STUDENTS' WRITING

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ABSTRACT

This is a study on how to improve the writing ability of Form Three students in a secondary school in Ipoh, Perak. The use of model essay and process writing was applied to this research to find out their effectiveness in improving students' writing ability.

The data was collected from essays written by a Form Three student who was the sample for this research.

In my experience as an English teacher for 18 years, I found that many students were weak in writing essays due to the effectiveness when presenting points in essay. Students often committed grammatical errors in their essays. Insufficient knowledge, lack of exposure to reading materials and also lack of practice may have contributed to this weakness. Most of the time students were given guided essays and after a short discussion they were told to write the essay.

The study showed that the sample's essay has improved through the use of model essays aided by the process writing method. By using model essays, the sample was able to generate more points for her essay and the process writing method improved the overall presentation in her essay.

It is hoped that this study will provide an alternative way to teach writing for English language teachers consequently, fostering interest and also confidence in students during their writing tasks.

ABSTRAK

Kajian ini dijalankan bertujuan untuk meningkatkan kebolehan menulis esei pelajar-pelajar Tingkatan Tiga di sebuah sekolah menengah di Ipoh, Perak. Bagi tujuan kajian ini, penulisan berdasarkan contoh esei dan penulisan secara proses telah dipilih dan digunakan. Penyelidikan ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji sama ada dua kaedah tersebut dapat membantu pelajar dalam pencapaian objektif tersebut.

Data yang dikumpul dan dianalisa adalah berbentuk esei yang dihasilkan oleh seorang pelajar Tingkatan Tiga yang merupakan sampel dalam kajian tersebut.

Berdasarkan pengalaman saya sebagai guru Bahasa Inggeris selama 18 tahun, saya mendapati pelajar-pelajar lemah dalam penulisan esei kerana penyampaian isi karangan tidak cukup mantap dan sering melakukan kesilapan kemahiran dari segi tatabahasa di dalam karangan mereka. Ini mungkin kerana pelajar kekurangan pendedahan bahan rujukan dan tidak diberikan latihan kemahiran yang mencukupi dalam bidang penulisan. Kebiasaannya, pelajar hanya diberikan karangan berpandu dan selepas perbincangan ringkas, pelajar disuruh menulis esei.

Kajian ini menunjukkan rujukan contoh esei dan penulisan secara proses telah meningkatkan kebolehan pelajar dalam penulisan esei. Dengan menggunakan contoh esei, pelajar mendapat lebih isi untuk hasil penulisan dan dengan menggunakan penulisan secara proses, pelajar berpeluang meningkatkan penyampaian dalam penulisannya.

Dengan itu, diharapkan kajian ini dapat memberi kesempatan kepada guru-guru untuk menggunakan pendekatan contoh esei dan penulisan secara proses sebagai satu alternatif untuk mengajar penulisan esei dan seterusnya menanamkan minat dan keyakinan dalam diri para pelajar untuk menulis esei.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.0   Background of the study

Many students face difficulties when they are asked to write compositions. Palmer(1985) as cited in Tunku Mohani (1982) stated writing is a skill that does not arise naturally like the ability to speak a language. Students might feel demotivated if they commit numerous mistakes in their writing assignment. Providing students with necessary assistance and guidance will help them to improve on their writing skills. Reading materials before their writing tasks will perhaps help to alleviate students' fear on writing an essay. The reading materials provided will guide students to produce better essays as these reading materials can act as supplement for students' references when writing the essays concerned.

English is taught as a second language in Malaysia. Hence, the reading materials will act as reference for students to enable them to construct clearly written and recognizable English text. Eisterhold (1994) stated, "Reading in the writing classroom is understood as the appropriate input for acquisition of writing skills because it is generally assumed that reading passages will somehow function as primary models from which writing skills can

be learned or at least inferred." (Kroll, p.88). In the article, it was cited that Krashen (1984) theorizes that writing competence is derived from large amounts of self-motivated reading for interest and or pleasure. "It is reading that gives the writer the 'feel' for the look and texture of reader-based prose." (p. 20). By providing students with appropriate good quality reading materials, it is hoped students will be able to emulate these reading materials and present their written essays in the correct format as in narrative, descriptive, argumentative or expository using also the correct tenses required to answer the essay question itself.

1.1 Purpose of the study

Many students have problems in producing the correct form and contents of the essay unless they have acquired certain knowledge about the form and the contents of the essay concerned. Providing students with reading materials which consists of model essays before the writing task would perhaps manage to alleviate students' fear of writing, boost their confidence and perhaps mould them into competent writers. Smith as cited in Heinemann (1983), stated children must learn to read like writers in order to write like writers. According to Saccardi (1996), children quickly detect patterns in predictable and repetitive books which they imitate as they write themselves. In her article, Saccardi (1996) describes that children will be able to write a dialogue after reading a dialogue from a story or write a description of a setting for an essay after reading about a similar setting from another text.

Providing students with the appropriate reading materials will aid them in their writing. This is proven by Stotsky (1983) in the survey research on reading-writing which found that there is a correlation between reading and writing as better writers read more than poorer writers. However, the extent of the influence of reading materials over the students' written composition needs to be examined and that is the reason why this research is carried out.

1.2   Statement of the Problem

Writing a composition is not an easy task for students especially when they have to produce written texts not in their first language. In the writing process, students would often encounter difficulty such as the inability to generate ideas for their composition besides facing problems like lacking a strong command of vocabulary, grammar and the mechanics of writing. A survey on problems faced by students when writing essay was carried out on a class of Form 3 students (Appendix 1) whose proficiency of the English language range from average to weak. The results (Appendix 2) of the survey showed that fifteen out of twenty students faced problems sometimes when they are writing essays. Thirteen to seventeen students found it difficult to generate the appropriate points, use the correct words and apply correct punctuation when writing some essays. From the survey, fourteen to seventeen students found it difficult to write descriptive and expository essays. The survey showed that students do face difficulty in writing essays especially in the form of descriptive and expository essays as they encountered problems

in articulating points for their essays using the appropriate vocabulary and also using the correct punctuation in their essays.

Giving students model essays related to their written tasks beforehand will initiate students to write their composition through the provision of ideas and examples of proper usage of vocabulary, grammar and mechanics of writing. Nair   (2007), noted that students need to build up their confidence before they can write and this can be achieved through a lot of reading. According to Nair (2007), studies have shown that students who have exposed themselves to a lot of reading, will find it less a burden when it comes to writing. Furthermore, students who read a lot would be able to generate ideas smoothly during writing unconcerned and unhampered about grammatical errors. The model essays will enrich students to produce better written composition in terms of language and content. How effective the model essays are in helping students to compose well-written composition will be the basis for this research project.

1.3 Objectives of the study

The objective of this study is to find out whether the use of selected model essay in either the form of a narrative essay, a descriptive essay,   an argumentative essay or an expository essay will enable a student in a Form 3 class to write an essay based on one type of genre . Through this procedure, the researcher can rate the influence of the selected model essays on written essays as the student was requested to write an essay similar to the structure of the selected model essays. Before the research was conducted, the researcher had compiled the biodata, language spoken and types of reading materials

of a student in a Form 3 class (Appendix 3). The profile of the participant was to determine the type of model essays to be selected for the student reference in the research.

1.4   Research Questions

This research put forward these questions:

1. Does the selected model essay enables a student to use the correct language structure or rhetoric when writing in the specific genre?

2. Which aspect of writing did the student improve most after referring to the expository model essay ?

1.5   Significance of the Study

The aim of this research is to examine the effects of model essays on students' written composition. If providing model essays is beneficial to help students in their written composition, this act can be recommended to the relevant authorities to be implemented in various learning institutions for the development of writing in English and improvement in the current teaching methods found in the KBSM writing syllabus. In addition, this research pinpoint to the teachers of English, the usage of supplementary materials to teach writing instead of the usual chalk-board method to teach writing.

The model essays which are essay samples in this case are easily available in UPSR, PMR, SPM and other books on writing. Overall, the students who are involved in the writing tasks are the ones who benefit the most as when they have guidance in the form of reading materials, students will not find writing as an arduous and laborious task. They will be able to write on more difficult topics with model essays as a source of guidance and reference.

1.6   Definitions of Terms

a. Reading materials: Refer to pedagogical tools that are supplied by the researcher to be used as references by the students for their written composition. Reading materials also represent instruments of research in this study. The reading materials in this research consists of essays in the form of narrative, descriptive, argumentative and expository.

b. Narrative essay: Teele (2004, p. 100) explained that narrative is a form of speaking or writing that tells a story. A story has seven main elements: beginning-middle-end, repetition, characters, setting, plot, point of view and theme (Johns & Lenski,2001; Thompson & Nicholson, 1999).

c. Descriptive essay: Vijayarajoo and Choy (2004) stated descriptive essays involve description of location, places, people and events.

d. Argumentative essay: Involve the presentation of one's viewpoint, discussion on the pros and cons of the topic and also detailed solutions to problems.

e. Expository essay: Teele (2004) stated that an expository text is nonfiction and provides an inteipretation or explanation of the information in the text. An expository text is more complex than a narrative text and has a different organizational pattern. There exists several different structures in the expository texts which are description,sequence,comparison, cause and effect and problem solution (Johns & Lenski, 2001; Thompson & Nicholson, 1999).

f* Written composition: Known also as essay and is a written arrangement which includes all aspects of letter, word and line spacing, line justification, indentation and hyphenation. It is the art of composing in written form or forming a whole structure by placing together and uniting different parts.

g. Model essays: Samples of writing that are used for pedagogical purposes.

1.7   Limitations of the Study

This study has several limitations.

a. The research involved participant observation, standardized open-ended interview and document analysis on a student's written essays. In the observation process, the observer can be a threat to the reliability of the research. Researchers own values, feelings, attitudes will perhaps distort their observations because there is a presence of bias in the

researcher which is a type of error that occurs because of the background,expectations or perceptions of the observer (McMillan, 2000, p. 164).

b. The possible observer effects that are present are   *contamination* and *halo effect.* McMillan (2000,p.l65) explained that contamination occurs when the observer has knowledge of one or more aspects of the study and this knowledge affects subsequent observations. Halo effects occurs when an observer allows an

initial impression about one aspect of a person or groups to influence observations on other aspects.

c. To counter participant observation effects in this study, observation is systematically planned and the data of the observation about the student's progress after reference from model essay and guidance from teacher is recorded in the free writing/ conferencing/editing data sheet under the comments section(Best & Kahn, 1998, p. 299). Recording of data for observation are also done immediately after observations to encourage objectiveness by eliminating observer biases and to prevent errors occurring during the course of the study.

d. During the interview, interview effects or interviewer bias can happen in the interview such as the interviewer skill to elicit the accurate response in an interview. The use of standardized open-ended interview or semi-structured questions in the interview reduce the interviewer effects as the structure of the questions are reasonably objective and the sample answered the same questions repeatedly for several times. Although, the

questions in the interview are reasonably objective, there is room for the samples to answer the questions in their own words to provide greater depth of response.

e. The structure of standardized open-ended interview promote validity and reliability for the interview. Questions in the interview are reasonably objective but open-ended as well. Best & Kahn (1998, p.322) stated validity is greater when the interview is based on a carefully designed structure which ensure the significant information elicited are from the subject present during the interview. This kind of validity is called content validity. In the interview, reliability, or the consistency of response is present by restating a question in slightly different form at a later time in the interview. Repeating the interview at different time provide consistency of response thus ensuring reliability in the interview. The questions are asked repeatedly for all the eight essays.

This study employs the use of internal sampling and is limited to only a student in one class whose command in English range from weak to average. In internal sampling, twenty Form 3 students who are of low to average proficiency in English were involved in the survey to find out about their problems in English. From this group of students, a student was chosen as a sample for in-depth case study in this research. Mc Millan (2000, p.268) state it is better to be selective in the choice of sample for qualitative study as the goal of qualitative study is to generate in-depth description and understanding of the selected sample. Focussing on a smaller sample will provide more amount of information rather than a large number that would be studied superficially. Therefore, results from the research do not represent an overall population. Due to this, there will be a large

magnitude of sampling error. There *is* presence of time restriction in which the sample have to complete all the tasks in a specific allocated time and the data is only collected at this specified period; not consistently for a longer period. Hence, it is difficult to ascertain whether other types of reading materials rather than the model essay used in this research will have the same effect in students written compositions.

1.8   Summary

Students considered writing to be difficult as when they are writing, every facets of the language in their written product is examined in terms of presentation of the contents, the organization of ideas, fluency of language which include the correct usage of grammatical items. It is no wonder that many students shrink when they are told to write. This is especially so when the situation involves non-native speakers of English. Providing students with a source of reference as in this case, model essays, will perhaps lessen students' fear of writing compositions besides guiding them on what to write and how to write essay. With the aid of the model essays, hopefully students will produce good materials of writing.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW   OF THE LITERATURE

2.0   Introduction

Today the role of English in Malaysia has changed from its earlier status as the prestige

language of colonial era   and   the decade   after World War Two. This significant

transformation was due to the implementation of the Education Enactment Bill in 1971.

In accordance with this Bill, the Malaysian government replaced   English with the

national language, Bahasa Malaysia as the medium of instruction with the aim of uniting

the various races   through a common educational system. With this, the role of English

has been relegated as a second language although taught as a compulsory subject in all

primary and secondary school curriculum.

The language conversion program from English to Bahasa Malaysia has

inevitably affected the amount and quality of English used with English taught only as a

subject in schooL For the majority of young Malaysian students, exposure to the language

is limited to ' English ' classroom and its relevance alsodiminished as the position of

Bahasa Malaysia is firmly established as the language in which all official transaction are conducted throughout the public sector including the education system.

Of late, the leaders in the Malaysian government have been supportive of English language again as Malaysia has emerged as one of the major trading nations in the world. The effort to promote tourism to the world, the rise towards technology industrialization especially focussing on the sector of Biotechnology, space exploration and ICT are among the steps undertaken by the government towards that direction.

The KBSM English language syllabus 2000 has provided guidelines in its objectives to include the use of English for ICT in its curriculum as recommended by the government through CDC as the realization of the importance of English as a global language in information and communications technology. This move to reestablish English and promote English is seen by the allowance of using English for the teaching of scientific and technological subjects as in Chemistry, Biology and Physics in upper secondary school. This came with the belief that English   no longer poses a threat to national unity and to the position of Bahasa Malaysia.

As specified in the English KBSM syllabus (2000), the English language will be taught with the purpose to educate students the rubrics of daily interactions, language for students to access information and respond to literary works using the English language. For this purpose, the four language skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing are incorporated in the syllabus in the hope that at the end of their secondary school

education, students will be able to listen, to read and respond to different texts then express ideas, opinions, thoughts, feelings in spoken and in written form. The learning outcome in the syllabus has been set out to cater for these skills by assigning tasks which are distributed to Level 1, Level 2 and Level 3. Level 1 represented simpler skills which consisted of aural-oral skills. Level 2 consisted skills that included reading and Level 3 consisted of tasks which involved written activities. These written activities were extension from the tasks in Level 1 and Level 2. Level 2 skills which mostly consisted of reading skills preceded Level 3 writing skills as reading is regarded as apprenticeship to writing. A person who reads a lot unconsciously learns a lot about different kinds of writing and what is expected in each type. Malaysians generally are not avid readers as shown in the STAR (16 July 2006) which stated that 98% of 10 ten year old still only read two books a year, a number unchanged since a 1996 survey. It was reported in Sunday Star (25 November 2007, p. 10) that one-third of a Malaysian free time was spent on watching television and only 22% of the time was spent on reading which include the newspaper column. It was also reported a Malaysian spent only an average of RM200 a year on reading materials. Malaysian students therefore cannot be expected to know different kinds of writing and what is expected of them in writing tasks. Providing students with chosen model of reading materials can provide students with organizational framework as well as language so that students can express their ideas to accomplish the tasks given to them.

Reading activities provide models for identifying syntactic, semantic and organizational structures that are meaningful and signal how ideas are related (Aulls,

1975). Providing students with model essays in Level 2 for references before their writing tasks would make students better writers as better writers read more than poorer writers as in Stotsky's (1983) survey which showed correlations between reading achievement and writing ability. Better writers tend

to be better readers who produced more syntactically mature writing than poorer readers. Model essays provided before any writing tasks would act as catalyst to guide students to write effectively in the assigned written tasks.

2.1   Background on the usage of model essays in TESL.

Initially when the teaching of writing in a TESL classroom started in 1940s, writing was seen as an activity which aimed to provide a language environment for writers to construct text that was recognizable as written English. The focus was on sentence structure, paragraph development and rhetorical patterns. The issue in the ESL classroom was what constituted the relevant language input in order for second language learners to construct their hypothesis about second language written text. (Eisterhold, J. C. as in Kroll (1994), p. 88- 100). The writing that took place was not meant to elicit interpretative comments on text but was meant to serve as reinforcement of language principles and the writing task was tightly controlled in order to reduce possibility for error (Kroll, 1991 : 246). Raimes (1993) stated the most dominant mode of instruction when TESOL was first founded in 1966 was the audio-lingual method (ALM). ALM was based on the behaviorist work of the psychologist BF Skinner. ALM required the teacher to provide students with oral model language which have correct grammatical

structures and patterns for students to repeat the patterns with correct pronunciation. This was the design of controlled writing.

The philosophy behind controlled writing was based on ALM. In controlled writing, students were expected to write in correct structures after practice with the structures to prevent errors from existing during writing. Silva as cited in Kroll (1994, p. 12) stated controlled writing employed the use of model passages which were carefully constructed, graded for vocabulary and sentence patterns which students would imitate for their writing purpose in order to avoid errors and to reinforce the usage of proper language during writing. The provision of model essays in second language writing was based on the principle of ALM which employed rigid control of systematic practice of fixed language patterns that was habit forming. Providing model essays to students was according to the aims of the writing program in Malaysian schools. According to the ^cGaris Panduan Menulis Teks KBSM' (1986), the writing course must provide instructions on how to write a composition.

> *These instructions must be presented step-by-step so that students can often be going through the steps; be able to write a composition. It is important then to provide models of the expected product followed by various activities and exercises on grammar and vocabulary. Only then should the students be expected to write the composition.*

The 'Huraian Sukatan Pelajaran Tingkatan V',Kementerian Pendidikan (1990)as in ELT Methodology, Principles And Practice (Chitravelu, Sithamparam and Teh 1997, p. 142) also states that " *Students should be guided through the planning, drafting, editing and the final writing of the composition.* "

The usage of model essays in ESL writing class would act as guidance for students to write their essay.

2.2 Theoretical Background

2.2.1 How Model Essays aid students in an ESL writing class.

Model essays provided to ESL students would overcome their apprehension to write their essay as students would be able to create a paraphrase of the model essays in their mind during their reading session before the writing assignment. Students would have confidence in imitating the model essays as they knew the model essays provided to them were designed to prepare them for their writing tasks. Watson (1982:8) found that model essays provide exposure to the convention of language especially discourse, also lexical items and structural patterns. Model essays demonstrate many modes of rhetorical organization and served communicative purpose. Model essays can be windows on culture, revealing customs, values, assumptions and attitudes toward the world. Rhetorical models focus attention on how writers handle units of discourse. Watson (1982:13) stated that students are to treat the model as a resource exploring it and comparing it to their products at various stages *in* their writing to realize a particular communicative purpose. Watson (1982:13) suggested that,

> *Exploration and analysis of models should involve students actively working together, in expectation that shared discoveries and reactions will result in genuine composition. When models are used within the writing process, students can easily perceive their purpose and utility. The student writers thus control the total process of writing including the recourse to the model*

Chitravelu, Sithamparam and Teh (1997, p 143-144) listed the many benefits of providing model essays. Model essays would give students guidance and ideas to write for their written tasks. Reading the model essays would help the students to understand the techniques and recognized the important features the writer employed in the written prose. This would expand students writing competence by building their awareness of different options in writing. During the process of imitating the model essays, students will be sensitive to the stylistic features, the organizational framework which enabled students to learn the ways of organizing ideas during writing and the language that should be used to express the ideas during the writing process. Paulston (1972) has stated that the use of models served as an initial basis for students to elicit the framework of theoretical structures and stylistic characteristics of a particular discourse, language forms or content and later for producing a parallel piece of writing. He further stated that model essays made significant contribution to the teaching of rhetorics to second language learners as some learners had difficulty coping with English rhetorics due to cultural differences in rhetorics. Familiarization with the different types of rhetorical structures will form a schemata in the students' mind to enable them to understand and interpret English rhetoric.

In writing tasks that teach rhetorical forms, teachers would provide the content and use model essays as stimuli for writing. Students would imitate the rhetorical and syntactic forms by following the chosen model passage. Writing guided composition in which the content and organization were given by a teacher, reading a passage, writing a