

STIGMA AND PROTECTIVE FACTORS: A STUDY OF RESILIENCE AMONG YOUTH WITH DISABILITIES

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**THIS ACADEMIC EXERCISE IS SUBMITTED
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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that the work in this study is my own except for quotations and summaries which have been duly acknowledged.

Date: 31.12.2010

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DEDICATION

Dedicated to my beloved Mother,
SHE always inspires and motivates me to reach for the stars.

"A mother is someone who dreams great dreams for you,
but then she lets you chase the
dreams you have for yourself and loves you just the same."





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ABSTRAK

Kajian ini bertajuk “*Stigma and Protective Factors: A Study of Resilience Among Youth With Disabilities*” dan ia telah dikendalikan ke atas 10 pelajar perempuan Cina Tingkatan Lima yang menuntut di SMJK Ave Maria Convent, Ipoh selama empat bulan. Kajian ini bertujuan untuk menyelidik apakah yang tersirat dalam fikiran kumpulan remaja yang berusia tujuh belas tahun ini melalui penulisan jurnal secara reflektif. Ini adalah kerana apa yang pelajar tulis dalam jurnal mereka akan mencerminkan kebimbangan dalam diri mereka. Hasil kajian mendapati bahawa kebimbangan remaja adalah tentang perkembangan diri mereka, diikuti dengan pelajaran, rakan-rakan, aktiviti ko-kurikulum di sekolah dan akhirnya, tentang keluarga mereka. Kajian ini juga ingin mengetahui sekiranya penulisan pelajar di dalam jurnal harian mereka boleh diklasifikasikan sebagai reflektif. Dapatan kajian menunjukkan bahawa tahap refleksi setiap pelajar berbeza mengikut individu. Terdapat pelajar yang berupaya untuk membuat refleksi dengan kadar yang tinggi dan sesetengah pelajar pula sebaliknya. Akhir sekali, kajian ini juga ingin mengetahui sekiranya pengalaman menulis di dalam jurnal selama empat bulan ini akan berupaya untuk mengembangkan minat untuk menulis dalam Bahasa Inggeris dalam kumpulan pelajar ini. Kajian mendapati bahawa semua sampel pelajar berminat untuk menulis di dalam jurnal kerana penyelidik memberi perhatian terhadap isi kandungan jurnal pelajar.



ABSTRACT

The research “*Stigma and Protective Factors: A Study of Resilience Among Youth With Disabilities*” was carried out on ten Form Five students from SMJK Ave Maria Convent, Ipoh over a period of four months. This research was conducted to gain an insight into the minds of students through journal writing. The study aimed to find out what students chose to write about in their journals. What the students write about in their journals would be a mirror to their inner concerns as the journal entries are a reflection of their inner states. The research concluded that five most frequent concerns written by the students in their journal entries were regarding their personal growth, followed by education, friends, co-curricular activities and lastly, about their family. This study also examined whether the students’ writing could be described as reflective and the results were; students differ considerably in the extent to which their journal entries showed evidence of reflectivity. Different students engaged in different levels and degrees of reflectivity. This research also wanted to find out if the journal writing experience developed the students’ attitude towards writing in English. All the ten respondents were in agreement that the journal writing experience was interesting, fun and made them feel important as they shared a special bond with the researcher. In their opinion, if their English language teachers listened to them and paid attention to their writing, they would enjoy learning the language more. It did develop in them a more positive attitude towards journal writing with the researcher.



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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

SMJK	Sekolah Menengah Jenis Kebangsaan
PMR	Penilaian Menengah Rendah
ESL	English as a Second Language
SPM	Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia
BPKP	Bahagian Pengurusan Kemasukan Pelajaran



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CHAPTER ONE

The Study

1.1 Introduction

How do our ESL students feel about having to write? How much practice are they given in the ESL classroom to write? Do they tend to view a writing project as a challenge or as a chore? Or is it merely a dull duty, one that they have no strong feelings about at all? Whatever their attitude may be, one thing that is certain is that how they feel about writing both affects and reflects how well they can write. As ESL teachers, there are many methods and principles of teaching and learning of English as a Second Language (TESL) available for practices in classrooms in Malaysia. There is no one correct or perfect method that can or should be used. As dynamic language teachers, we have to recognize that methods link thoughts and actions because teaching is not entirely about one or the other. Larsen-Freeman (2003) stated that as a teacher of language, we have thoughts about our subject matter - what language is, what culture is; and about our students – who they are as learners and how it is they learn. We also have thoughts about ourselves as teachers and what we can do to help our students learn. It is very important for us to be aware of the thoughts that guide our actions in the classroom. With this awareness, we will be able to examine why we do what we do and choose to think about or do things differently.





Prabhu in Larsen-Freeman, (2003) stated that whatever methods we practice in our classroom teaching today reflect a diversity of views on the teaching and learning processes. By confronting such diversity, by viewing the thought-in-action links that others have made, we will be able to arrive at our own personal conceptualizations of how thoughts lead to actions in our teaching and how, in turn, our teaching leads to learning in our students. The main aim of the English Language Curriculum is to enable pupils to acquire proficiency in the language so as to equip them with positive communication skills and knowledge of English that will enable them to widen their networks of interpersonal relations and to have direct access to information for general knowledge and leisure-based purposes (Huraian Sukatan Pelajaran KBSM, 1998).

As English teachers, we are always asking ourselves how best we can help our student learn the target language more effectively and how best we can help them become autonomous learners. We wish to know the learning needs and difficulties of individual students. We want the students to benefit from our activities and improve their learning by examining their own performances. One of the ways to achieve the above goal is to engage the learners in reflective writing activities. Thus, we have to do our best to make sure our students achieve the aims of the curriculum.

The researcher has decided to use journal writing as a means to teach the language to a group of students and make them become active and critical learners. Therefore, this study aimed to investigate what the students' main concerns were, if the journal experience developed the students' sense of reflectivity and if the journal writing experience developed students' attitude towards ESL writing. The developmental aspects



to be focused on are not only in students' journal entries, but also in the attitude of students towards writing in English as the relationship between them cannot be neglected.

1.2 Background of the Study

The process of conversational journal writing is clearly an effective way to get English language learners thinking and expressing themselves in the language. It is a small task that goes a long way and should be a regular part of any ESL curriculum. Journaling is a valuable tool which teachers have that will help students hone their writing skills. In the world of ESL, journaling can be even more indispensable for teachers trying to help their students learn how to express themselves in another language. One of the barriers for anyone learning a second language is that people naturally process thoughts in their native language. Journaling is a way to break down that barrier as it forces students to organize their thoughts in English. By writing about different topics, students not only improve writing skills, but they also get the opportunity to explore their thoughts without being chastised for grammar, usage, or other errors. Journals are idea books; they are places where writers are free to 'think' in writing. The written entries and responses from the journals serve as a personal, written conversation between the teacher and student throughout the journaling process. The eagerness on the part of the students to the responses feeds enthusiasm for the task.

When we look at the context of our students in the Malaysian classrooms, how can teachers engage ESL language learners in meaningful communication and make them become more proficient writers? Peyton (1990) suggested that teachers allow language



learners to explore their own thoughts and practice writing through journaling. She offered a variety of ways that journal writing can stimulate learners to read and write with greater confidence and interest. She also noted that this form of interactive writing holds the interest of most learners, promotes self-confidence in writing and contributes to the overall writing skill for academic and personal purposes. Journal writing focuses on “meaning rather than form and it is a means for developing learners' linguistic competence, their understanding of course content and the ability to communicate in written English”. In short, language learners and their teacher become engaged in meaningful, non-threatening dialogue through the written page.

Journal writing in an ESL class conveys a meaningful message and the use of written English as well, but the message is more important than correct presentation. If one can understand the message or even part of it, the students have succeeded in communicating on paper and should be praised for that. For many ESL learners in the Malaysian classrooms, writing skills are not used much outside the class. This does not mean that they should not be challenged to write, and they cannot or do not like to write but teachers should consider their needs and balance the class time appropriately.

The study aimed to find out what students chose to write about in their journals. What the students write about in their journals would be a mirror to their inner concerns as the journal entries are a reflection of their inner states. This study also examined whether the students' journal writing experience helped them to reflect and if journal writing as an ESL extension activity developed students' attitude towards writing in the ESL classroom.



1.3 Statement of the Problem

As an English Language teacher with more than twenty years of teaching experience, the researcher agrees that journaling is indeed very much underused as a teaching or learning tool by most ESL teachers in our Malaysian classrooms. The main reason is because journal writing takes up a lot of time in the classrooms and teachers face a shortage of time to complete the syllabus and to prepare students for their examinations. Another reason is because of the heavy task of reading and commenting on the students' writing as the enrolment of students in most classrooms in Malaysian schools is quite big. Thus, teachers do not have the time to do journal writing with their students. There are teachers who will encourage their students to do journal writing, but the teachers themselves do not provide any comments or feedback as it is very time consuming. Thus, teachers will merely give the students a 'tick' to acknowledge the work which the students have done. There are also teachers who promote journal writing to students but the emphasis is on language and grammar correction instead of content and listening to the inner voices of the students. Therefore, when students face difficulty in learning the language, they develop a negative attitude towards the language. Students speak and write only when it is necessary, especially when it is required for them to pass the examinations or for homework purposes or when they are being evaluated. Teachers do an excellent job of transmitting the content of their respective academic disciplines, but teachers often fail to teach students how to think effectively about this subject matter, that is, how to properly understand and evaluate it.



The researcher is aware that the opportunity for students to write freely using the target language was limited to classroom learning and in most cases, their writing were guided by the teacher and graded for examination purposes. Students were mostly taught what to write and what to think. Bello (1997) stated that writing is a continuing process of discovering how to find the most effective language for communicating one's thoughts and feelings. It can be very challenging for students to write in English, as English is not the first language for most students in Malaysia. Nevertheless, as ESL learners put their thoughts to paper, see their ideas in print, and share them with others, they find that they develop a powerful voice in their new culture. It is the belief of the researcher that students in the Malaysian classrooms can write and will develop a positive attitude to write in English if their writing is not graded or evaluated only on grammar errors by the teachers. With the practice in journal writing which focuses on content rather than language, and the confidence that they build up over time, students' writing could lead to learning because it reinforces language use as the writing practices gave learners time to think and the opportunity to think about the language rules (Harmer, 2004).

Tan (2006) stated that in Malaysian classrooms, ESL writing should be taught as a developmental process in which the students can enjoy self-expression in a variety of genres and learn to make meaning within certain constraints. This is consistent with the social practice discourse perspective of writing identified by Ivanic (2004) in Tan (2006). His research has shown the impact of the discourse of English language use and the regulatory power of the discourse of examinations in Malaysia on a group of secondary school students doing school writing. The discourse of examinations that narrows school





writing to what is expected by examiners resulted in compliance and tactical or strategic responses from the students. Their approaches to the writing tasks include manipulating vocabulary and length, playing off grammar against content and writing within sanctioned topics.

1.4 Rationale for the Study

Journal writing is a writing exercise that students practise in the classroom with their English Language teachers in SMJK Ave Maria Convent, Ipoh. English Language is taught five periods with a total of one hundred and seventy-five minutes a week. The language skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing form the core of the English Language curriculum. For the writing skill, it will enable learners to present their ideas creatively in a logical and organised manner. The learning outcomes in the syllabus states that there are three areas of language use which require learners to perform tasks and achieve outcomes both in oral and written form. The three language areas are language use for interpersonal purposes, language use for informational purposes and language use for aesthetic purposes. The interpersonal use of language prepares learners for harmonious personal and work relationships after they leave school. The informational use of language helps learners to develop their critical thinking skills and information-seeking skills so that they become independent in acquiring knowledge throughout their lives. Lastly, the aesthetic use of language allows learners to express their ideas, thoughts, beliefs and feelings creatively and imaginatively (Huraian Sukatan Pelajaran KBSM, 1998).





The researcher noted that the literature on journal writing makes several claims about the role of journals in promoting reflective thinking and the practice in writing. Researchers have examined how journal writing impacted business students' listening behaviours and related thoughts about how they could improve those skills (Johnson & Barker, 1995). Journal writing can improve students' writing, enhance critical thinking skills, encourage observational skills, and develop creative skills. Journal writing helps students develop their writing skills as they are encouraged to “experiment with writing, to experience, perhaps for the first time, writing that may be highly personal, relatively unstructured, speculative, uninhibited, tentative, in process, in flux” (Anderson, 1993). From an environmental perspective, journals can help students develop intimate connections with the more-than-human world as they learn to observe and record patterns and processes in the natural world. Thus, journal writing would give students the practice in critical reflection, the opportunities to write in English about topics that are relevant to their lives and to feel that their writing has value. Schafersman (1991) commented that all education consists of transmitting to students two different things. The first is the subject matter or discipline content of the course; that is, what to think, and the second is the correct way to understand and evaluate this subject matter, meaning how to think.

1.5 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study conducted by the researcher was to catch the inner concerns of adolescents through reflective journal writing in English language. The researcher was also interested to find out if the students would be able to write





reflectively in English and whether the extension activity of journaling outside the ESL classroom developed the students' attitude towards ESL writing.

Given the problems faced by Malaysian students in English writing, there is a need to analyze the factor that can develop students' attitude towards writing skills. Even though the educational research on English achievement is prevailing, past studies have not addressed them adequately by not looking at the affective and social factors in writing. Learning theories (socio cognitive and socio-cultural theory) have pointed out that students' attitude is an important component in the writing process and contribute to the improvement of the writing skills (Chitravelu, 2005). Nevertheless, to the researcher's knowledge, there has been limited local study which investigated how students' attitude affected their perception towards writing. Thus, in this research, the researcher will seek to find out if journal writing is an effective language tool in an ESL classroom. Journal writing entries from the respondents would allow the researcher to know the inner concerns of the students, whether the students were able to write reflectively in the target language and if journal writing can develop students' attitude towards ESL writing in the classroom.

1.6 Research Questions

This study will answer the following questions:

- a. What do students choose to write about in their journals?
- b. Could the students' writing be described as reflective?



- c. Did the journal writing experience help students to develop a positive attitude towards writing in English?

1.7 Significance of the Study

Educators need to be provided with substantiated findings on the benefits of journal writing and how it will help our students to verbalize their thoughts, think reflectively and also develop a positive attitude towards writing in English. Journal writing is a good avenue for teenagers to vent their anger and frustration, share their happiness and also reflect upon their actions. Teachers can help ESL students to find their own voices in their second language and develop the ability to communicate effectively in different contexts and with different audiences.

Journal writing helps students to express their emotion, realize a vision and share a talent they are cultivating publicly or just to pass their time. Motivation to write is stronger when it comes from a personal desire to communicate than from a determination to meet the demands of the teacher's assignment. Transition to academic writing can be linked to journal practice. Journal entries can be precursors to academic writing. In their research examining students' positive emotions in academic settings, Pekrun et al (2002) found that positive emotions have many beneficial effects. For example, the emotions of enjoyment, hope and pride were positively correlated with students' motivation to learn. In addition, Pekrun and his colleagues proposed that positive emotions are associated with academic self-efficacy and achievement, and that positive emotions facilitate flexible and creative ways of thinking, problem solving, and coping. Apart from that,



students' attitude is one of the main factors that determine their success in language learning. Attitudes towards the target language, its speakers and the learning context may all play some part in explaining their success or failure (Candlin and Mercer, 2001). Hence, when students feel better about themselves and the target language, they would develop a more positive attitude towards the target language. And this can be achieved through journaling.

1.8 Limitations of the Study

The research was conducted within the framework of the regular teaching hours in the identified school based on purposive sampling. The sample is limited in terms of the location covered. Time factor is also another limitation. As the researcher had to conduct the study in a period of five months, the time for the actual observation was rather short. A longer observatory term would be better to determine a more reliable feedback. This study investigated students' perceptions based only on structured interviews, the written journal entries and a feedback checklist. Though every effort was made to ensure that respondents gave true and honest responses, the validity of their views cannot be established. It is difficult to ascertain whether all ten respondents provided socially-acceptable responses or if they were able to verbalize and articulate their feelings honestly and accurately.





1.9 Definition of Terms

adolescents	The ten Form Five female students of SMJK Ave Maria Convent, Ipoh who are sixteen to seventeen years old.
concerns	An uneasy and burdened state of mind of the students; it also implies an anxious sense of interest in something that is happening in their daily life.
journal writing	It is a learning tool based on the ideas and concerns that students write. Students use the journals to write about topics of personal interest, to note their observations, to imagine, to wonder and to connect new information with things they already know.
reflective writing	It is largely concerned with looking back but with a view to the future. The student is encouraged to think about his personal knowledge or skills in a particular area in order to establish a baseline from which he can gauge his learning.
reflection	It allows students to analyze their experiences, make changes based on their mistakes, keep doing what is successful, and build upon or modify past knowledge based on new knowledge.
attitude	The way a person views something or tends to behave toward a subject matter, often in an evaluative way.
critical thinking	A situation whereby the respondents pause and ask appropriate questions about what they are writing, gather relevant information, efficiently and creatively sort through the information and reason logically from the information in their writing.





1.10 Summary

The best way to teach ESL writing is to require that students write and also to enjoy what they are writing. Writing forces students to organize their thoughts, contemplate their topic, evaluate their data in a logical fashion, and present their conclusions in a persuasive manner. Good writing is the epitome of good reflective thinking. Thus, this research is important because much has been said about the performance of students that the education system in Malaysia is churning out; students who are not proficient as they are unable to write and vocalize their thoughts in English.

It is the objective of the English Language Curriculum Specifications for teachers to use a variety of writing tasks at all levels in the classroom to help our students. Writing, in addition to being a communicative skill of vital importance, it is a skill which enables learners to plan and rethink the communication process. It therefore provides the learners with the opportunity to focus on both linguistic accuracy and content organization (Celce-Murcia, 1991). Thus, journaling can be carried out in the classroom with students as this type of writing activity can reflect the learner's proficiency level.

It is also important for the teachers to 'offer thorough and detailed feedback'. Teachers who want to capitalize on the potential of journal writing must be willing to spend the time and effort to offer students feedback on the substance of their journal entries (Anderson, 1993). This is because all feedback from the teacher will help students to identify their own areas of strengths and weaknesses through reflective thinking, especially when students face problems and need a listening ear and a supportive shoulder. Reflective thinking skill is nothing more than problem solving skill that results





in reliable knowledge from the teacher. Journal writing is a good way to use the language learned in the classroom as it is an avenue for students to express their ideas and opinions freely without being dictated by the teacher on what to write and how to write them. This is because there are three basic writing principles in any ESL classroom. Firstly, writing is thinking. Secondly, practice builds fluency in writing and the motivation to write and lastly, students value journal writing when it is fully integrated into the course objectives and structure (Stevens & Cooper, 2009). When all those are fulfilled, the attitude that students develop towards writing in English would be more encouraging.

