# FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO STUDENTS' PERFORMANCE IN WRITING AMONG FORM THREE STUDENTS

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## UNIVERSITI PENDIDIKAN SULTAN IDRIS

## 2011

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## DISSERTATION SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF EDUCATION

## FACULTY OF LANGUAGES AND COMMUNICATION
## UNIVERSITI PENDIDIKAN SULTAN IDRIS

2011

**DECLARATION**

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

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# ABSTRAK

Penyelidikan ini telah dijalankan untuk mengenal pasti faktor-faktor yang menyumbang kepada prestasi penulisan pelajar. Tiga persoalan kajian telah dibentuk iaitu, apakah faktor-faktor yang menghalang prestasi penulisan pelajar; apakah faktor-faktor yang membantu pelajar untuk menulis karangan dalam Bahasa Inggeris; dan apakah persepsi pelajar terhadap penulisan dalam Bahasa Inggeris. Responden penyelidikan terdiri daripada lima belas (15) orang pelajar tingkatan tiga di sebuah sekolah agama di daerah Tanjung Malim, Perak. Pelajar dipilih berdasarkan pemerhatian awal, perbincangan dengan guru, analisis keputusan peperiksaan lepas dan pra-ujian. *Participant observation*, nota lapangan, temuramah kumpulan fokus, soal selidik dan analisis kandungan dijalankan bagi tujuan pengumpulan data. Data yang dikumpul melalui soal selidik telah dianalisis menggunakan perisian statistik, SPSS 18.0, untuk mendapatkan min dan sisihan piawai respon pelajar-pelajar dan guru. Analisis kandungan telah dijalankan untuk menganalisis maklumat yang diperolehi daripada permerhatian dalam bilik darjah, nota lapangan, hasil penulisan karangan pelajar, transkrip temubual. Dua kategori iaitu faktor pendorong dan faktor penghalang telah dikenalpasti melalui analisis data. Di bawah kedua-dua kategori ini, empat perkara iaitu prestasi pelajar; strategi, metod dan pendekatan; pengaruh bahasa pertama, kedua dan asing; serta kepercayaan dan keberkesanan pelajar dalam penulisan telah dikenalpasti menyumbang kepada pencapaian pelajar dalam penulisan. Dapatan penyelidikan menunjukkan bahawa faktor-faktor ini memainkan peranan penting bagi menghalang prestasi pelajar dalam penulisan dan mendorong pelajar menulis karangan Bahasa Inggeris.

# ABSTRACT

This research was conducted to identify factors that contribute to the students' performance in writing. Three research questions were formulated namely, what are the factors that hinder students' performance in writing, what are the factors that help students to write compositions in English, and what are the perceptions of students' towards writing compositions in English. The participants were fifteen (15) Form Three students of a selected private religious school in the district of Tanjung Malim, Perak. The students were selected based on preliminary observations, discussion with the teacher, analysis of previous examination results and pre-test. Participant observation, field notes, focus group interviews, questionnaires for both teacher and students, and content analysis were conducted for the purpose of data collection. Data collected from questionnaires was analysed using statistic software, *SPSS 18.0,* to obtain the mean and standard deviation of responses of the students and the teacher. Content analysis was carried out to analyse information collected through classroom observations, field notes, students' written compositions, and interviews' transcripts. Analyses of the data paved way for the emergence of two main categories of factors, promoting factors and inhibiting factors respectively. Under these categories, four aspects namely, writing performance; strategies, methods and approaches; influence of first, second and foreign language; and, students' beliefs and efficacy were identified to be contributing to students' performance in writing. Findings revealed that these factors played an important role to hinder students' performance in writing and also in helping the students to write compositions in English.

Dedicated with love to my *amma, appa*,

and to my beloved brother, Vishnu and my sister, Presna.

# Acknowledgement

Writing up this dissertation has been a memorable journey for me as it took me a long and laborious way. Along the way, various people contributed in one way or another to complete an important chapter of my life.

My deepest appreciation goes to my supervisor, YM Prof. Dato' Dr. Tunku Mohani Tunku Mohtar for her guidance, support and constructive feedback in the preparation of this research to its completion. Without her dedication and patience, this research might not have materialised.

I am also very grateful and thankful to the support and guidance of the research team (*Ministry of Higher Education's Fundamental Research Grant Scheme, FRGS/KPT 05-41-12-09*), Mrs. Charanjit Swaran Singh, Dr. Napisah Kepol and Mr. Ahmad Zainuri Loap Ahmad who assisted me in many ways.

A special thanks to the students, teacher, and the administrators of Maahad Taufiqiah Al-Diniah, Behrang, Tanjung Malim Perak for their time, patience and help.

I wish to thank the lecturers and staffs of Faculty of Languages and Communication, Institute of Graduate Studies, Human Resource Division, and Tuanku Bainun Library for their support and guidance.

I would like to record my special appreciation to Juppri Bacotang, Samsu Ewang, and Amreet Kaur who were always there when I needed assistance.

I wish to extent my appreciation to my family, who have encouraged me with their everlasting care, love, moral support and motivation. Without them my life will never be the same.

Finally, my acknowledgement will not be complete if I do not give thanks to God who gave me the spiritual strength, faith and courage to complete what I have started.

Thank you.

*Sasigaran Moneyam*

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# CHAPTER ONE

# INTRODUCTION

## 1.0 Introduction

The ability to communicate well through writing is among the most basic skills expected of students in schools. Yet, learning to write in either a first, second or foreign language is one of the most difficult tasks that a learner can perform and one that few people can be said to fully master. In most English Language textbooks used in school there is a section for writing which is based on a particular grammatical topic in each unit. Thus, the writing task is much more concerned with the form rather than with the abstract thinking capacity to construct meaning and put it into words (Richardson, 2003 in Barnett, 2006).

Hawthorne (2008, p. 33) asserts that "…the process of moving from concepts, thoughts and ideas to written text is complex. A written text represents the product of a

series of complicated mental operations". Evidently, writing is a difficult skill to develop since it requires not only syntactic and lexical knowledge, but also the capacity to generate and organize ideas and thoughts in a way that can be clearly and coherently communicated to a potential reader.

Writing seems to be a difficult skill to master since it requires particular grammatical competences, the ability to form ideas and opinions and the ability to transform the ideas and opinions into complex written texts. Although developing writing skills among students is a complicated task, it is not an impossible task to achieve (Mazhan & Chen, 2007). Concerned with the issue mentioned above, this proposed research will focus on identifying factors that help students to write compositions in English, and the factors that hinder students' performance in writing.

## 1.1    Background to the problem

Writing is an important skill to be mastered by students throughout their formal schooling period. The ability to write formally and informally will help students to further their studies and to obtain lucrative employment in the job market. Besides, writing is a skill which enables students to express their feelings, thoughts, imagination, knowledge, ideas, and observations on any topic in an efficient and planned manner (Beyreli & Ari, 2009).

In order to be an effective writer, the learner should be able to use a variety of skills to create a consistent piece of writing. The learner must learn to develop effective composition skills together with the mechanics of writing. Moreover, efficient writers

must know how to plan, generate content and ideas, organise, address an appropriate audience, revise, and improve their written composition (Harris, Graham, & Mason, 2003 in Jacobson & Reid, 2010).

An analysis of the Form Three English Syllabus reveals that writing activities are given much attention. Each topic proposed in the syllabus is followed by at least one writing activity. In the syllabus, even though the writing skill is emphasised, it only focuses on a particular writing genre, particularly guided letter and report writing. Writing genres such as narrative, descriptive and free writing cover only a small portion of the overall writing activities.

An analysis conducted by the researcher on past years (2005 - 2010) *Peperiksaan Menengah Rendah* (PMR) English examination papers for Form Three students also showed that students were only required to write compositions using the information or pictorial notes given to them in the writing questions during the examination. This type of writing is guided in nature. The information and pictorial notes given in the questions were meant to help and guide the students to write compositions. No other genres of writing questions were given during the last five years period of lower secondary examinations. This is believed to be the result of the ministry's aim to broaden learners' English language proficiency in order to meet their needs for English in everyday life, for knowledge acquisition, and for future workplace needs (Ministry of Education, 2003, p. 1).

Ravichandran (1996) elucidates that students are not given sufficient time to write compositions in the classroom. Normally, the students are asked to write compositions at

home. This is due to the fact that the teachers have to teach a large number of students in the classroom. The teachers also do not have enough time to provide guidance to all the students. Furthermore, the teachers are competing against time to complete the syllabus so that they can spend more time to prepare the students for examinations (Chan, 2007). According to Shamshad and Faizah (2009), teachers find that teaching writing is not a task to be enjoyed but a tedious one. Only those committed teachers could handle this time consuming task.

Raimes (1983, p.261 in Chan, 2007, p.44) asserts that,

…writers need time to decide, to toy with ideas; time to write and rewrite sentences for new emerging lines of thoughts and arguments. Writers also need time to try out new words and make changes. Everything is in a state of flux, and time should not be a factor restricting revision, which is part and parcel of the writing process. Hence for any curriculum planning, sufficient time should be provided to allow students the freedom to explore and take risks in order to develop as writers. Given time for such activities, students will likely be able to produce an interesting piece of writing, which is organized and accurate.

Furthermore, when students are given writing tasks as homework, the students tend to make a lot of errors in their writing because there is no one to monitor or to guide them. Teachers are also facing difficulties in marking students' written compositions due to the amount of errors made by the students. Correcting students' compositions is time-consuming and many teachers refused to do it although making errors is a part of learning process. Murphy (1997) expresses that teachers habitually spend hours dealing with students' compositions, and precious time is being wasted mainly on correcting errors in students' writing.

## 1.2 Problem statement

English is regarded as the second most important language in Malaysia and it is formally taught in Malaysian ESL classrooms. About two hundred minutes or five periods per week are allocated for English lessons at the lower secondary school level and language skills, particularly writing is given much attention (UNESCO-IBE, 2007).

In spite of this allocation, students are still not performing well in writing in terms of sentence construction, grammar, lexical items and syntax although ample time is apportioned for writing lessons in school. A recent report issued by the Ministry of Education on the analyses of the writing achievement of students from Form 3 to Form 5 shows that the writing skills of many secondary school students are no better than that of many primary school students (Ministry of Education, 2008).

Students need to be able to express their thoughts and knowledge effectively in writing if they are to participate actively in the modern society particularly. If students are reluctant to write in school, they may find themselves unable to engage fully in a society that requires proficiency in many written genres. According to Hawthorne (2008), English teachers discern that as second language learners advance through primary to secondary school their liking for English declines significantly. This decrease in positive views about writing is of apprehension because it affects student engagement, achievement and performance.

For the purpose of this research, the researcher has looked into the performance of students who are relatively weak at writing. This research was conducted because it

would help teachers identify factors that contribute to their students' performance in writing. Apart from that, it would be an eye opener for future teachers to be aware of the factors that influence their students' performance in writing and the development of their students' writing skills.

## 1.3    Purpose of the research

The purpose of this research is to identify the factors that contribute to the students' performance in writing. In spite of the time, energy and resources invested in developing writing skills among the learners of ESL, many still fail to perform well and to achieve the expected level of competence.

It is necessary to carry out this research because by identifying the factors that influenced the students' performance in writing, a better and an in-depth knowledge of their problems that hinder students from achieving the expected level of proficiency in the language can be understood. It can also offer insights into the factors that help the students to write English compositions in the ESL classroom. Besides that, it can also provide room for the creation and emergence of new strategies that are useful in the process of developing writing skills among the students.

## 1.4    Objectives

The objectives of this research are,

(i)      to identify the factors that hinder students' performance in writing.

(ii)     to identify the factors that help students' to write compositions in English.

(iii)    to investigate the perceptions of students towards writing compositions in English.

## 1.5    Research questions

Three research questions are formulated to act as guidance in collecting relevant information and data. The three research questions are,

(i)      what are the factors that hinder students' performance in writing?

(ii)     what are the factors that help students to write compositions in English?

(iii)     what are the perceptions of students towards writing compositions in English?

Table 1.1: Research questions, theory (s), instruments and data analysis

| Research Questions | Theory (s) | Instruments | Data Analysis |
|---|---|---|---|
| i) What are the factors that hinder students' performance in writing? | - Social Constructionist Theory <br> - Cognitive Development Theory | - Participant observations <br> - Field notes <br> - Content Analysis <br> - Interviews | - Content analysis *(Thematic)* |
| ii) What are the factors that help students to write compositions in English? | - Social Constructionist Theory <br> - Cognitive Development Theory | - Participant observations <br> - Field notes <br> - Content Analysis <br> - Interviews | - Content analysis *(Thematic)* |
| iii) What are the perceptions of students towards writing compositions in English? | - Social Constructionist Theory <br> - Cognitive Development Theory | - Questionnaires <br> - Interviews <br> - Content Analysis | - SPSS 18.0 *(Descriptive analysis)* <br> - Content analysis *(Thematic)* |

## 1.6　Terminology

The terms that are significant to this research and used throughout are,

(a)　Writing

Writing is the mind's work of discovering ideas, thinking about how to communicate them, and developing them into statements and paragraphs comprehensible to a reader

(Mariam and Abdul Halim, 2007, p. 1). In this research, the term 'writing' is used to describe the composition written by weak second language learners of English. The composition is guided in nature and is usually written in fewer than 120 words. The time limit of 40 minutes is given as is required in the PMR examination.

(b)    Performance

This term is used in this research to indicate students' level of competence in writing English compositions. It is also used to indicate students' production or participation within the process of writing. Apart from that, 'performance' is used to show whether a student is able to write based on the criteria given in the PMR examination marking scheme for writing. The researcher is able to see the performance of the students by analysing the end product of their writing based on the marking scheme (refer to Appendix A) delineated by the Ministry of Education.

(c)    ESL

'ESL' is commonly used as an abbreviated form for 'English as a Second Language'. Brown (2001, p. 3) defines ESL in two ways: (a) as a generic acronym to refer to instruction of English speakers of other languages in any country under any circumstance, and (b) to refer to English as a Second Language taught in countries (such as the United States of America, the United Kingdom, or India) where English is a major language of commerce and education, a language that students often hear outside the walls of their classroom. In this research, the term ESL is used to refer to the second language of learners of English in the Malaysian context.

(d)    Efficacy

Self-efficacy refers to the beliefs about one's capabilities to learn or perform behaviours at designated levels (Bandura, 1986 in Rahil et al., 2006). In this research, the term efficacy describes the students' beliefs about their capabilities to write English compositions as required in the PMR examination.

## 1.7    Theoretical/Conceptual framework

For the purpose of this research, two learning theories namely the Social Constructionist Theory and Cognitive Development Theory were selected to provide fundamental theoretical support for the research.

### 1.7.1    Social constructionist theory

The Social constructionist theory is an educational approach that is derived from social constructivism (Mu, 2007). Vygotsky asserts that social constructivism is a process of meaningful knowledge learning by an individual which is constructed through interaction with others and with the environment they live in (Kim, 2001). The social constructionist theory involves both social and affective strategies as aid for learners to achieve their learning target.

From the perspective of writing instruction, social or affective strategies are strategies that writers use to interact with the target discourse community for support and

to regulate their emotions, motivation, and attitude in the process of writing (Carson and Longhini, 2002, in Mu, 2007). The Zone of proximal development and scaffolding are among essential social approaches and strategies applied within the range of Vygotsky's social constructionist theory. Verenika (2003, p.2) asserts that notionally the zone of proximal development is at the heart of scaffolding.

### 1.7.1.1    Zone of proximal development (ZPD) and scaffolding

Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development and scaffolding are considered important aspects in a writing classroom because the learners need selective guidance and interaction from more capable adults or peers and materials in order for the learners to write and to advance to the expected level of proficiency. In general, scaffolding is subsumed under ZPD. The process of scaffolding, that is through guidance of and interaction with the teacher, the students are able to learn and improve their writing performance. Hence, their ZPD is extended.

The reasons why ZPD and scaffolding have been selected in this research is because preliminary observations conducted on the students during writing lessons at the school showed that they mostly interacted and obtained help from their peers and teacher in order to understand the writing topics, instructions, format and meaning of words. They often asked questions and made non-verbal gestures such as pointing and nodding. The students also tried to get help from the researcher.

Besides interacting with their peers, teacher and the researcher, the students used the bilingual, English – Malay, and trilingual, Malay –English – Arabic dictionaries to comprehend the topics, instructions and meanings of words. The students also used reference books on model essays to figure out the format of their compositions. Furthermore, based on the observations, the students were able to develop better understanding and confidence when they interacted with those in their social circle. By taking all these matters into consideration, ZPD and scaffolding were selected to be used in this research.

The scaffolding in writing is provided through the adapted process approach to writing. The adapted process approach enables the students to write using selective systematic steps which guide the students to write.

### 1.7.2    Cognitive development theory

Piaget's Cognitive development theory is concerned with the nature of knowledge and with the structures and processes by which it is acquired (Mu, 2007). It also concerned with how these thought processes influence and how we understand and interact with the world. Fundamentally, cognitive development theory involves both cognitive and metacognitive strategies. Metacognitive strategies are defined as strategies writers use to control writing process consciously and cognitive strategies are those that writers use to implement actual writing actions (Carson and Longhini in Mu, 2007, p. 7). Mohd Sahandri and Saifuddin (2009, p. 678) define metacognitive strategies as higher order

executive skills which enable students to approach learning in systematic, efficient and effective way by using the elements of planning, monitoring and evaluating.

In terms of writing instruction, Flower and Hayes (1981 in Mu, 2007, p. 7) proposed a recursive process model in which planning, generating, translating, and editing need to be juggled.

### 1.7.2.1 Process approach

The process of writing in which the students involved while they were writing was viewed in relation to the model proposed by Flower and Hayes (1981). Flower and Hayes's process approach model incorporates both cognitive and metacognitive strategies. However, the model proposed by Flower and Hayes was not suitable to be fully implemented within the limited time of 40 minutes allocated for writing as outlined in the PMR examination requirement. Hence, a modified and simplified form of process approach is constructed.

As observed during the classroom observations, the students planned and brainstormed for ideas. The teacher guided the students by asking leading questions and occasionally supplied them with vocabulary items. A mind map was constructed on the board to assist the students in planning the compositions. Hence, the students wrote the compositions without going through the process of drafting, editing, revising and reviewing as suggested by Flower and Hayes (1981), and White and Arndt (1991). Figure 1.1 shows the modified and simplified form of process approach.
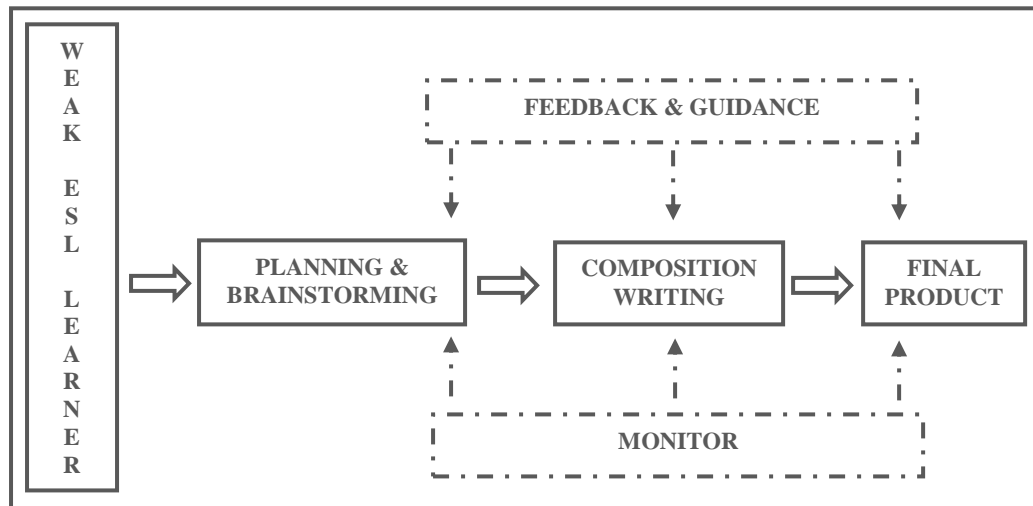
Figure 1.1: Simplified and modified form of process approach
(Adapted from Flower & Hayes, 1981)

Besides that, according to Bereiter and Scardamalia (1987 in Mu, 2007, p. 7), Flower and Hayes's model assumes there is a single writing process for all writers in which skilled writers do the same things as less proficient writers. Thus, this model has not been able to account for the differences between good and poor writer.

### 1.7.3 Conceptual model

A conceptual model is used in this research to merely act as a mental representation or graphic organiser to help the researcher to understand the underlying learning theories and the process of how both intrinsic and extrinsic factors affect students' performance in writing.

Figure 1.2 shows the conceptual model in which the learning theories, and factors, intrinsic or extrinsic, affect the students indirectly or directly and consequently, influence their performance in writing.
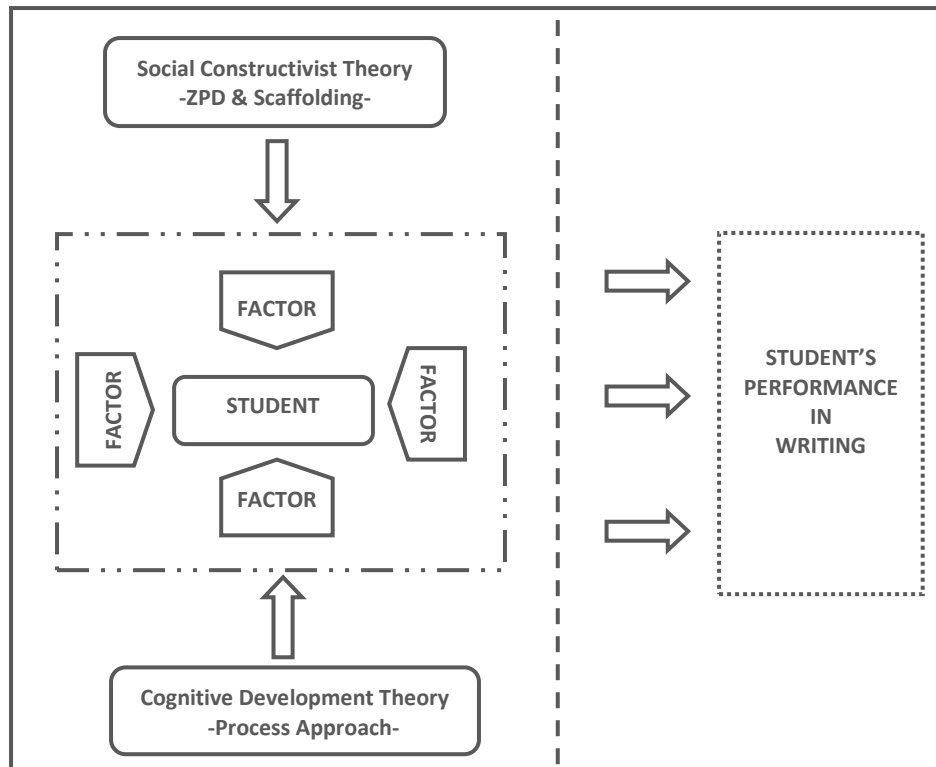
Figure 1.2: Conceptual Model

In this conceptual framework, the researcher viewed social constructivist theory and cognitive development theory together with the zone of proximal development, scaffolding, and process approach as underlying theoretical basis for the teacher to gradually teach and guide the students to learn to write English compositions and to help the students to reach the expected proficiency level in the target language.

## 1.8    Significance of the study

This research provides an insight for students, teachers, and other relevant parties into the factors that contribute to the students' performance in writing.

Students will benefit from this research when they are able to know the factors that contribute to their performance in writing. When the students are aware of the factors that contribute to their performance in writing, they would be able to find ways to improve their performance in writing and language with the assistance and guidance from the teacher or more knowledgeable people.

This research has provided the teacher trainees, teachers and other relevant parties the notion that when the factors that contribute to the students' performance are identified it would be easier for them to select, design and produce materials and activities that will be used to develop students' writing skills. Moreover, the research also offered an insight on how important it is for the students to master the writing skills during the course of teaching and learning in the language classrooms.

The teachers will also gain multiple benefits by knowing the factors that contribute to their students' performance in writing. By knowing these factors, teachers will be able to select and utilise the teaching methods, strategies and approaches that best suit their students. Selecting appropriate teaching methods, strategies and approaches is essential in order to ensure that students understand the contents of the lesson to enhance their knowledge.

Apart from that, knowing the factors that contribute to the students' performance in writing will allow teachers to provide suitable language activities and materials that will help them develop students' writing skills.

## 1.9　　Limitation of the study

The main problem faced in this research was time. This research was carried out for a duration of six weeks due to the limited time the students needed to focus on other language skills.

This research was conducted in only one school as it met the requirements of the research. Hence, the case study approach was used. This approach was selected after various aspects were taken into consideration namely, views of the students, teacher and administrator, location and type of school and the facilities available. Based on the classroom observations and discussions conducted with the teacher and administrator, this approach was used because it provided an extensive and focused data collection on the students whose English Language proficiency level was low.

**Summary**

This research was conducted to identify the factors that help students to write compositions in English, to identify factors that hinder students' performance in writing, to examine the current pedagogical practices in the second language classroom during writing lessons and to investigate the perceptions of students towards writing compositions in English and current pedagogical practices in language classroom. Vygotsky's Social Constructionist Theory and Piaget's Cognitive Development Theory were used as a theoretical framework of this research together with zone of proximal development, scaffolding, process approach, and a conceptual model.