

**THE EFFECTIVENESS OF SELECTED METACOGNITIVE STRATEGIES IN
ENHANCING THE WRITING ABILITY OF PRE-UNIVERSITY STUDENTS.**

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DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this study to my late father, Mr. V.P.N. Prasad, a God-fearing man who lived with principles and held on to them until his very last breath.

May his soul be guided towards peace by the Almighty.

‘Om Sai Ram’

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From the bottom of my heart, thank you once again and God bless.

DECLARATION

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

10.10.2005

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ABSTRACT

The SPM 2003 report and the national analysis on the MUET writing component indicated that pre university students who sat for the English paper did not fare well in Paper Four, the extended writing section. This illustrated that the majority of the candidates had yet to master the writing skills in English. Based on the reports above, the purpose of this study was to overcome the problem before hand by implementing a series of writing activities that incorporates selected metacognitive strategies that covered the areas of planning, monitoring, adapting and evaluating learning and learning outcomes. This study adopted the two-group, pretest-posttest quasi-experimental design, whereby a total of seventy pre-university students from a rural based secondary school in Sungkai, Perak were chosen as samples. As this study looked at the MUET Paper Four achievements, the research instrument used in this study was the October 2003 MUET Paper Four writing component. This question was chosen as it was in a national level examination that had gone through stringent reliability and validity testing by Majlis Peperiksaan Malaysia. (MPM) The overall results of this study showed that the selected metacognitive strategies incorporated during the process writing stages had helped the pre-university students in performing well in the given written test. Furthermore, the outcome also confirmed both of the Alternative Hypotheses (H_{a1} and H_{a2}) and rejected the Null Hypotheses (H_{o1} and H_{o2}) set for this study. On the whole, this study was able to verify that the metacognitive strategies used were an asset for any writing tasks. Similarly, this study also proved the importance of the process writing stages in ensuring a smooth flowing writing lesson. Finally, the researcher recommended that further research in the same area be conducted by looking at the four metacognitive strategies separately. The researcher also recommended that a larger group of students encompassing not only pre-university students but also students from the lower forms be used as subjects in future studies in order to obtain a more significant picture of the effectiveness of the metacognitive strategies during the writing tasks.

ABSTRAK

Laporan SPM 2003 berserta analisis komponen penulisan peperiksaan MUET peringkat kebangsaan menunjukkan bahawa pelajar prauniversiti tidak berjaya dengan cemerlang dalam bahagian penulisan esei. Pendekata ini menunjukkan dengan jelas bahawa majoriti calon MUET belum menguasai kemahiran menulis di dalam Bahasa Inggeris. Berdasarkan laporan di atas, matlamat kajian ini adalah untuk mengatasi masalah tersebut dengan pelaksanaan satu siri aktiviti penulisan yang mengandungi beberapa strategi metakognitif yang merangkumi aktiviti perancangan, pengawasan, adaptasi dan penilaian pembelajaran serta hasil pembelajaran. Kajian ini telah menggunakan reka bentuk kajian 'quasi experimental' di mana seramai tujuh puluh pelajar prauniversiti dari sebuah sekolah menengah luar bandar di Sungkai, Perak telah dipilih sebagai subjek kajian ini. Instrumen kajian yang digunakan ialah soalan Kertas Empat MUET Tahun 2003. Instrumen ini dipilih kerana ianya merupakan soalan MUET peringkat kebangsaan yang dikeluarkan oleh pihak Majlis Peperiksaan Malaysia (MPM) serta mempunyai reliabiliti dan validiti yang tinggi. Keputusan keseluruhan kajian ini menunjukkan siri aktiviti penulisan yang digabungkan dengan strategi metakognitif yang dipilih telah dapat membantu pelajar prauniversiti dalam menghasilkan penulisan esei yang bermutu tinggi. Keputusan ini juga telah menolak Hipotesis Null (H_{o1} dan H_{o2}) serta menerima Hipotesis Alternatif (H_{a1} dan H_{a2}) yang telah ditetapkan pada awal kajian ini. Secara keseluruhannya, keputusan kajian ini telah menunjukkan betapa pentingnya strategi metakognitif serta aktiviti penulisan dalam penghasilan esei yang bermutu tinggi. Akhir sekali, pengkaji telah membuat beberapa saranan bagi kajian di masa hadapan. Di antara saranannya ialah kajian di masa hadapan perlu melihat keberkesanan setiap strategi metakognitif secara berasingan. Di samping itu, pengkaji turut menyarankan agar kajian yang sama dijalankan ke atas kumpulan pelajar yang lebih ramai serta melibatkan pelajar dari peringkat menengah rendah agar keberkesanan strategi metakognitif dapat dilihat secara keseluruhannya.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

Changes concentrating mainly on the information and communication fields are hitting almost all nations in the world. This includes our country, Malaysia. With the new 'Information and Communication Age' sweeping across our country, the acquisition of knowledge has been given top priority in the fields of economy, employment, lifestyles and communication. With that in mind, the focus of our nation has also changed bearing in mind that if we do not join in with the pace of the changes, then we would be left far behind. In the wake of this information and communication age, the recognition of the importance of the English Language has become evident to many individuals and corporations.

Tun Dr.Mahathir Mohamed (2003), the former Prime Minister of Malaysia, in his speech during the closing ceremony of the three-day International Conference on Language and Nationhood organized by Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), had

stressed on the need of all Malaysians to master the English Language in order to enable Malaysia to become a global player in the international arena. He emphasized that Malaysians had to choose from either depriving themselves of new knowledge and consequently slowing down development, or striving hard for rapid development by aggressively acquiring ample knowledge through the use of English. Dr. Mahathir's statement had set the pace for the next generation leaders to fortify the need for every Malaysian to master the English Language in order to be a global player. The learning of English, being the language of the computer and the Internet, needs to be mobilized and intensified in order to reduce the gap that is based on the language's proficiency.

This indicates how great the emphasis on English learning is given in our country. However this emphasis is not only based on the need to have a progressive and well-developed country. It is also based on the recent state of affairs dealing with the dismal performance of our students in English proficiency tests (Naginder Kaur,2004).

It then became apparent that one of the social realities confronting every Malaysian in this millennium is the revival in the international recognition of the importance of English Language Literacy. Not being able to use, let alone master this language was seen as the beginning of a series of language related problems for a nation.

Herein the Malaysian government had continuously tried to make Malaysians increasingly aware of the need to master the language by instituting a number of projects to emphasize the importance of the language. Equally fundamental to developing language literacy was the aspect of language testing.

One of the projects is how the English Language Curriculum had undergone (or still is) major changes in the recent years to fulfill the emphasis portrayed and to provide greater exposure to the English Language. These changes had introduced numerous upgraded and diversified learning resources and an effective monitoring and progressive assessment system (Hannah Pillay, 1998). Another addition to effect changes in English proficiency and to upgrade the status of our students' adeptness in being able to master the English Language is the introduction of a compulsory English course cum test for the sixth formers.

In our National System of Education, English is taught and tested as a second language to all students right from their first year in preschool and throughout their primary and secondary education. However, before 1999, English was not taught or tested at the sixth form or pre-university level. During this time, upon entry into local public universities, these students are required to undergo a preset English Language proficiency course. According to Wan Norliza Wan Mustapha (2004), most undergraduates and those seeking entry to tertiary institutions still lacked mastery of the English Language. This had left them a step behind in their pursuit of academic excellence. Furthermore, she reiterated that many academicians had openly voiced their concerns about the inability of local undergraduates to converse and write effectively in the English Language.

It was with the dual purpose of filling the gap between secondary education, i.e. Form Five and the pre-university education, i.e. the Sixth Form; and that of arresting the declining levels of English Language literacy of the pre-university students, English was introduced in 1999 to offset problems of students entering university with low-level English proficiency (Khatija Mohd Tahir, 2003). The sixth formers have to undergo a

compulsory course in English Language proficiency and are required to sit for a test known as the Malaysian University English Test (MUET) towards the end of their course. The introduction of this course serves to focus on further consolidating and enhancing the English Language ability of the sixth formers after their more than 11-year affair with the language during their primary and secondary education.

1.2. Need for the Study

It is undeniable that English is a vital component of education in Malaysia. Being acknowledged as the second language of this country, it is important that everyone should have a certain degree of competency in this language. However, the low mastery of English amongst local students as mentioned by Wan Norliza Wan Mustapha (2004) has brought about contrasting views amongst the authorities and educators. In order to offset these views, a number of remedies have been suggested. One of the remedies implemented is the introduction of the MUET paper in 1999

The MUET syllabus aims to equip students with the appropriate level of proficiency in English in order for them to perform effectively in their academic pursuits at tertiary level. All in all this syllabus attempts to link the gap in language needs between the secondary and tertiary education by enhancing communicative competence and developing critical thinking through capable use of the language. The introduction of this course serves to consolidate what the sixth formers had acquired during their 11-year stint during their primary and secondary education and to prepare them to face the realities of the digital age.

There are altogether four language skills to be mastered by the students, namely listening, speaking, reading and writing. The focus of this study is on the writing skill that requires the students to write accurately and appropriately for a particular purpose and audience. In this context, students are tested on their ability to organize their thoughts logically, coherently and cohesively. Furthermore, they are also required to develop specific writing skills on a variety of academic genres such as formal essays, term papers, reports and summaries.

The Writing skills are evaluated in a form of a one hour and thirty minutes test which comprises of two tasks, namely a 100-word summary and a 250-word essay. The test is also widely known as Paper Four of The MUET examination or by its testing code; 800/4.

This study specifically looks into the students' ability in writing the 250-word essay. In this particular task, the students are required to write on a particular topic based on the given stimulus. In this sense, they are required to generate and develop ideas using the given parameters whilst ensuring the mechanics of writing and the use of appropriate language are well adhered to. Hence, the students face a task of presenting a 250-word essay in 50 minutes based on the given scope but with their own generated ideas.

Based on this revelation, plus details taken from readings and the experience of the researcher as an appointed examiner of this paper, this study looks at how the sixth formers could utilize strategic metacognitive based activities during their MUET lessons in school in order for them to produce essays with all the necessary requirements intact.

As mentioned earlier, this study plans to look at the Writing paper, specifically the essay writing task. Our students in the sixth form are products of more than eleven years

of an English syllabus that places communicative competence as its main objective. Their achievement in the English paper so far is nothing to be proud of. The 2003 SPM results show that the overall national passes for the English Language paper is below 60 percent. Based on the 2003 SPM Report prepared by the Malaysian Education Syndicate, on the whole, candidates did not fare well in the English Paper 2, which deals specifically with extended writing. A big proportion of them scored below the median while not many belonged to the top range. This illustrates that the majority of the candidates have yet to master the writing skills in English (Malaysian Education Syndicate, 2004).

The SPM 2003 Report indicates that students who entered the sixth form in 2004 are not fully competent in the English Language especially in the writing section. These are the same students who would be taking their compulsory MUET test in 2005. Hence, we are looking at a difficult task of preparing these students for the MUET Paper 4 test, whereby they would have to write a 250-word essay with a string of strict requirements attached to it. This task brings about the assumption that these students who are bound for the October 2005 MUET test would not be able to excel in their writing test if extra efforts are not put in to develop their writing skills. This assumption is based on past results of the MUET Writing Component Test as elaborated below.

Based on a simple analysis conducted by the researcher on the results obtained by his former Form Six students in a rural based secondary school, who sat for the MUET paper in May 2003 and May 2004, only a fraction of the students achieved a considerable good score for the writing component. Most of the other students were not able to achieve the required band (Band 3) of the writing test. (Refer to Table 1.1)

Looking at the analysis, it is noticeable that students who did not obtain the Band 3 and above set by MPM as the passing mark, represent the bulk of Form Six students who are unable to write successfully. In the May 2003 Writing Test, 72.22 percent of the students obtained Band 1 and 2. The same bands were obtained by 92.16 percent of the students in the May 2004 Writing Component test. The results indicate the low ability of these students to write effectively.

Table 1.1

Analysis of the MUET Writing Paper (800/4) Results of Form Six Students of a Secondary School for the Years 2003 and 2004

Year of Exam	Percentage of Students who obtained a Band 3 and above	Percentage of Students who obtained a Band 2 and below
May 2003	27.78 %	72.22 %
May 2004	7.84 %	92.16.7%

Note: Band 3 and above is considered as the bench mark for passing in this component

The analysis above may be gauged as being results obtained by a rural based school. In order to reinforce the analysis above and to prove that the alarming results are not geographically inclined, the researcher has provided the nationwide results of the Writing component for the years 2000, 2001, and 2002. (Refer to Table 1.2)

With reference to Table 1.2, the number of students who obtained Band 1 and 2 in their writing component for the four writing tests had exceeded 70 percent. This is a clear indication that there is a nationwide decline in competency in the writing component and it is not only evident in rural schools. This revelation further fortifies the researcher's assumption that the present set of students would also obtain the same results as their seniors.

Table 1.2

National Results of MUET Students for the Writing Component

Year of Exam	Percentage of Students who obtained a Band 3 and higher.	Percentage of Students who obtained a Band 2 and below.
Dec 2000	28.9 %	71.1 %
June 2001	13.46 %	86.54 %
Dec 2001	13.82 %	86.18 %
May 2002	21.6 %	78.4 %

Adapted from Wan Norliza Wan Mustapha (2004). MUET: The Need to Develop Competent Writers. In Sarah Abedi Abdullah (Ed.) *Preparing Students for the MUET* (1st ed., pg. 93-99). Petaling Jaya: Sasbadi-Melta ELT Series.

Wan Norliza Wan Mustapha (2004) in her article titled '*MUET: The Need to Develop Competent Writers*', mentions that these discouraging results portray that the number of students who can write well is very limited. She adds that these students' essays were incoherent and undeveloped and that they had the tendency to not only make severe structural and grammatical errors but also had the inability to understand the given tasks.

Based on the analysis above, the researcher believes that there is a serious need to check on the disappointing results achieved by the MUET bound students in the writing paper. The researcher regards the failure of the former students to produce a good essay symbolizes the failure of the whole writing process.

On a similar note, many writing practitioners emphasize the need to develop students' critical thinking skills in order for them to write effectively. Ballard (1996) highlights the importance of developing such analytical approaches to learning, where students are expected to show that they can systematically organize their ideas and subsequent arguments intellectually as desired by the tasks before hand. As for teachers, they would want their students to generate appropriate ideas and to express and clarify them efficiently. The researcher considers Ballard's (1996) views as representing of what is required of the present pre-university students.

After scrutinizing the situation before hand, the researcher views this problem as being caused by the students themselves, whereby they are unable to generate ideas and organize them appropriately based on the given context. This statement is further supported by Bereiter and Scardamalia (cited in Zubaidah Ibrahim, 1990), who clarified that student writers have serious problems in generating ideas due to the fact that they do not know much about the topic and do not know how to draw on their existing knowledge. Furthermore, these students, who are deemed poor writers by Daly (1977), are also unable to present their ideas critically and fail to ensure the cohesiveness of each piece of work. The problems mentioned here show the importance of the writing process, especially the pre-writing stage. Furthermore, Murray (1982) also reinforces the importance of this stage by stating that seventy percent or more of writing time should be

spent in pre-writing. Therefore, the researcher believes that the problems faced during the writing process especially the pre-writing stage are caused by a number of reasons.

Firstly, the researcher believes that the current system on planning lessons fails to meet the instructional needs of our fast moving society. According to Jacobsen (1998) at present the inability of the students to compose well and effectively shows that the current system is in dire need of modifications in order to keep pace with the current technological advancement of society. Teachers who follow the present system, i.e. the writing process, tend to ignore the importance of the prescribed stages especially the pre-writing stage. This statement is further supported by Tompkins (2000), who stressed that even though the pre-writing stage is the getting-ready-to-write-stage, it is probably the most neglected stage in the writing process. This researcher believes at most times; this stage is converted into an unsupervised group brainstorming session where the students are required to think of ideas that are related to the task. At present, lesson plans on the process writing are quite rigid and provide only five to ten minutes for pre-writing. These sessions are held as a pre-requisite to the process writing session without taking into consideration the aspect of metacognition. This is because; students are normally left alone to discuss a particular topic without any proper guidelines.

Secondly, the researcher believes that activities conducted during the writing stages especially the pre-writing stage are superficial in nature. This is based on the statement made by Sommers (cited in Tompkins, 2000), that at present the focus of the pre-writing stage is more to polishing the students' writing rather than developing excellent ideas. Furthermore, she reiterated that due to teachers' behaviour, excessive importance is placed on the mechanics of writing, while the need to establish and

generate worthwhile ideas for the writing task is ignored partially. Moreover, Flower and Hayes (cited in Tompkins, 2000) found that these less successful student writers have a limited repertoire of alternatives for solving problems as they write. Bereiter and Scardamalia (cited in Tompkins, 2000), also noted that even though these students participated in the activities organized by their teacher, they are less capable of monitoring the need to move from one activity to another. This situation causes the average and below average students to be left with a list of ideas which needs further development in order to prepare a good essay. The researcher believes all these factors show that the students' ability to think beyond the prepared list is limited and usually this situation leads to their inability in producing a good piece of writing.

Thirdly, the writing process is considered as time consuming. According to Bowen (2004), it is probably fair to say that in many English language lessons, less time is devoted to the skill of writing. This is because; during normal school hours in Malaysia only five lessons are allocated for English each week. A writing lesson may take up to ten lessons, which makes the other skills being side tracked. Based on this factor, teachers would try to skip certain aspects of the writing process in order to complete the whole task in the required period of time. This situation gives the students limited time to think critically and generate good and creative ideas, and eventually this leads to many aspects on goal setting, monitoring and self-assessing not being carried out by the learners. Furthermore, these students are not given ample time to conceptualize on their abilities to control a wide variety of cognitive enterprises that occur through the actions and interactions of the four classes of metacognition, which are, metacognitive knowledge,

metacognitive experiences, goals (or tasks) and actions via the writing strategies chose (Flavell,1979).

Finally, it is also worth mentioning here that these students are vulnerable to writer apprehension or writer's block. This situation occurs when the 'affective filter' is at its peak and the writer is unable to fully utilize any comprehensible input. The symptoms that contribute to this situation are namely lacking in self-confidence, being unmotivated, anxiousness and being on the 'defensive' (Krashen, 2001). This situation is based on Krashen's affective filter hypothesis which states that a student's acquisition of second language skills is directly linked to his or her attitude towards acquiring them. According to Krashen (2004), if students have low anxiety, high motivation, or high self-confidence, they are said to have low affective filter. This in turn assists with allowing in more information and providing a fertile venue for learning. On the contrary, if a person has high anxiety, lower motivation, or a lower self-esteem, the affective filter will be higher (at its peak) and this does not provide the students with effective learning opportunities. In this instance students will be affected with writer apprehension that affects the writing process.

Based on the four reasons given above, this study would like to look at how to overcome the problem before hand by implementing a series of writing activities which are based on selected writing strategies that covers the areas of planning, monitoring, adapting and evaluating learning and learning outcomes.

1.3. Statement of the Problem

This study looks at the problems faced by Form Six students from a rural based secondary school, who are facing difficulties in producing good essays. The researcher describes this situation as the inability of these students to generate critical and progressive ideas based on the instructions given. On top of that, the researcher, based on his experience in teaching MUET for the last four years, notices that these students were unable to use relevant methods and strategies to overcome this problem.

Basically, this is the main concern of this study. Hence, this study sets out to prove that by using the selected writing strategies; these students would be able to prepare themselves to write essays of various themes and genres effectively.

1.4. Purpose of the Study

The main purpose of this study is to investigate whether with the use of the selected writing activities, would help the sixth formers to write effectively in their writing assignments. This in turn may help them to obtain considerably better results in the Writing component of the MUET examination. This intellectual inquiry would also be able to determine the effectiveness of the selected writing activities in helping the students organize their writing task successfully.

However, it must be stressed that this study does not look at ways on how the Form Six students could write excellent essays during the examination proper. The intention of this study is to show how the students could use the selected metacognitive

strategies that are incorporated in the writing activities to prepare themselves in writing well organized drafts during their writing lessons.

1.5. Research Question

The following research question has been derived to pave the way for this study to be successful.

1. How effective are the use of metacognitive strategies during the writing stage in helping pre-university students to enhance their writing abilities?

1.6. Hypotheses

Based on the Research Question mentioned above, the following are the research and null hypotheses for this study:

Null Hypothesis 1 (H₀1)

Students who use metacognitive strategies during the process writing stages will not produce better essays compared to students who do not use the strategies.

Alternative Hypothesis 1 (H_{a1})

Students, who use metacognitive strategies during the process writing stages, will produce better essays compared to students who do not use the strategies.