AN ANALYSIS ON THE IMPACT OF SOCIOCULTURAL ELEMENTS UTILISED BY STUDENTS IN SCAFFOLDING ESL WRITING

THEVA MANOHARAM A/L PALANISAMY

SULTAN IDRIS EDUCATION UNIVERSITY

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AN ANALYSIS ON THE IMPACT OF SOCIOCULTURAL ELEMENTS
UTILISED BY STUDENTS IN SCAFFOLDING ESL WRITING

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The only true wisdom is in knowing you know nothing." – Socrates

Trotting my PhD journey in TESL was truly a humbling experience, especially pursuing a doctorate degree in my twilight zone after my retirement to fulfil my childhood desire. The desire to attain this vertex of education germinated within me when I was expelled from school in May 1968 for not having paid a monthly school fee of RM 7.50 Sen after the sudden demise of my late father in an accident. I worked in the estate for three months to gather RM 22.50 Sen and handed over to the headmaster to be readmitted back to school. Sadly, I was readmitted to the last class in Form 1G from my previous first class of Form 1A. That incident instilled a desire in me to scale higher in my life to prove that poverty is not a hindrance in life if one has a burning desire to attain goals. Richard Lovelace in 1642 in the poem 'Prison' in its final stanza's first line once wrote, "Stone walls do not a prison make, nor iron bars a cage". Likewise, no hindrance hampered me from progress despite thorns, hillocks and ropes of ash all along my poverty stricken life.

Even with the completion of this thesis, there remains a revelation within me that I have but plunged into one tiny corner in the vastness of human knowledge as mentioned in a Tamil proverb from the Thirukural, "The more you know, and the more you realize you do not know". "கற்றது கைமண் அளவு, கல்லாதது உலகளவு", "Katrathu Kai Mann Alavu, Kallathathu Ulagalavu", which means "Known is amount of sand in the fist, Unknown is total sand in the world"

My foremost acknowledgment goes to the Almighty God, without whose grace and benevolence this study to complete my doctorate thesis would have never been materialised. Acknowledgments and thanks go to many people who played an important role during the course of this study. Thanks to my nephew Thivagaren Silveraj who assisted me with computer related help.

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative case study is sought to gain deeper understanding on the impact of sociocultural elements utilised by students in scaffolding their ESL writing in the Malaysian context. The study was carried out for two months in an upper secondary school in Kuala Selangor town catering for large English as Second Language (ESL) population. The participants of this study included three MUET teachers and six Malaysian Upper Six MUET students comprising three females and three males from the three main ethnicities in Malaysia. The researcher documented data through three sources: classroom observation of MUET students, interviews with MUET students and teachers, and finally by analysing their written protocols which is in the form of weekly written reflections. Findings indicated that the utilisation of sociocultural elements in their extended writing sessions not only improved the students' written protocols but also gave them the confidence to write extensively with fewer errors. The study also implicated that sociocultural elements should be utilised by all the ESL teachers to enhance extended writing among the Malaysian ESL students.

SATU ANALISIS MENGENAI KESAN ELEMEN SOSIOKULTURAL YANG DIGUNAKAN OLEH PARA PELAJAR ESL DI DALAM PERANCINGAN PENULISAN MEREKA

ABSTRAK

Kajian kes kualitatif ini bertujuan untuk mendapatkan pemahaman yang lebih mendalam tentang kesan elemen sosiobudaya yang digunakan oleh para pelajar ESL di dalam perancingan penulisan dengan menggunakan elemen sosiokultural mereka untuk membangunkan kemampuan menulis di dalam Bahasa Inggeris sebagai bahasa kedua di dalam konteks Malaysia. Kajian ini telah dilakukan selama dua bulan di salah sebuah sekolah menengah atas di bandar Kuala Selangor yang menampung para pelajar Bahasa Inggeris yang besar. Para peserta kajian ini merangkumi tiga guru MUET dan enam pelajar MUET Tingkatan Enam Atas yang terdiri daripada tiga pelajar perempuan dan tiga pelajar lelaki dari tiga kaum etnik utama di Malaysia. Penyelidik mendokumentasikan data melalui tiga sumber: pemerhatian dalam kelas MUET, wawancara dengan pelajar dan guru MUET, dan akhirnya dengan menganalisis hasil penulisan para pelajar yang berada di dalam bentuk refleksi penulisan mingguan. Dapatan kajian ini menunjukkan bahawa penggunaan unsur-unsur sosiokultural di dalam sesi penulisan karangan bukan sahaja meningkatkan penulisan para pelajar, bahkan juga memberi kepada mereka keyakinan untuk menulis secara meluas dengan kesilapan yang sedikit sahaja. Kajian ini juga dikaitkan bahawa unsur-unsur sosiokultural haruslah digunakan oleh semua guru ESL untuk meningkatkan penulisan karangan di kalangan para pelajar ESL di Malaysia.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

EAP	English for Academic Purposes
EFL	English as a Foreign Language
ELL	English Language Learner
ESL	English as a Second Language
ESP	English for Special Purpose
L1	First language, the Native Language or mother tongue
L2	Second Language (ESL in this study)
LEP	Limited English Proficiency
MEC	Malaysian Examination Council
MKO	More Knowledgeable Other
MOE	Ministry of Education
MPM	Majlis Peperiksaan Malaysia
MUET	Malaysian University English Test
NES	Native English Speaker
PMR	Penilaian Menengah Rendah (Lower Certificate of Education)
RQ1	Research Question 1
RQ2	Research Question 2
RW	Reflection Writing
SCT	Sociocultural Theory
SPM	Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (Malaysian Certificate of Education)
STPM	Sijil Tinggi Pelajaran Malaysia (Higher School Certificate)
TESL	Teaching of English as a Second Language
TOV	Take off Value

TSL   Thinking as a Second Language

ZPD   Zone of Proximal Development

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.0 Introduction

Mastering writing skills is important due to its need in almost all the professions which need documentation, especially in this competitive era. It is necessary to enter any modern workplace with good writing skills. According to Zhu (2004), business world requires and expect potential employers with good writing skills and they are seen as the clients of corporate world. Therefore, it is vital to equip oneself with good writing skills to get appointed and to disclose to more job opportunities. In other words, employees with good writing skills are seen as "hot commodities". Other than that, it is one of the most serious skills to be acquired in tertiary education. Academic writing in tertiary field is not just words but meaningful communication. Zhu (2004) added that academic writing includes understanding of distinctive procedures of ideas and interaction which needs basic or general writing abilities as a foundation. Besides

that, writing promotes creativity, imagination, and understanding. Writing is a thinking process which involves brain process, in order to organise ideas to write, writers need to imagine and be creative in putting their thoughts in words. Therefore, it is compulsory to incorporate teaching of writing skills in primary schools itself as it is an important skill in communication in this globalised world (Hyland, 2015). Due to its importance, many countries have made English to be learnt in school as a second language including Malaysia. In Malaysia, students learn English in all level of education starting from preschool to varsity level. In second language learning, learners are identified as second language learners or ESL learners. There are various methods and strategies used to suit the ESL learners to master the writing skills.

Writing has become popular as one of the most challenging language skills that learners are expected to master (Yah Awang Nik et. Al 2010). Despite spending many years developing their writing skills, most English as a Second Language (L2) learners face obstacles in their endeavour. These obstacles, among others, are due to the complexities of the ability to write (Celce-Murcia 2001). Writing, which is a complex and continuous process, is made even more difficult for L2 students in Malaysia due to sociological, sociocultural, linguistic and cognitive factors (White and Arndt 1991).

To alleviate the writing difficulties faced by L2 students in Malaysia, this current study adopted the sociocultural approach in scaffolding ESL writing by utilising the strategies of Vygotsky (1978) in reflective writing sessions to investigate whether student performance in the writing could be improved. Scaffolding is a term used for the process of helping a person perform a task that is unfamiliar or beyond

their ability. In this study, scaffolding is mainly derived from the common sociocultural elements that are found within their perimeter aided by the teachers and MKOs. Through the scaffolding process, students were helped to perform parts of the written tasks within their ability, and the more knowledgeable one did the rest.

In the scaffold theory, Holton and Clarke (2006) differentiated the scaffold into two aspects. The first is called domain and the next is agency. Furthermore, they divide the domain into two categories which are the conceptual scaffolding and the heuristic scaffolding. The scaffolding performed by the teacher to provide conceptual understanding and development is called conceptual scaffolding and the scaffolding provided to find ways to solve a learning problem is called heuristic scaffolding. They go on to suggest that in agency terms, three types of scaffolds were involved: expert, reciprocal, and self-scaffolding. The class teachers always provided expert scaffolds. On the other hand, a scaffold provided by a student or MKO working in a group, either face-to-face, is a reciprocal scaffold, and finally a self-scaffold is when a student finds himself or herself in a situation where the learner is capable of scaffolding on own with the prior knowledge. These three types of agency scaffolds like expert, reciprocal, and self-scaffold together with all the other appropriate scaffoldings were used in combined scaffolding strategies to produce better ESL written protocols in this study.

Writing in their native language or in a foreign language is a big challenge for many students. Nunan (1999) states, the most difficult task of language learning is to create coherent, fluent and detailed written text, which is more difficult for students of another language. Writing is seen as a constant process by which writers discover and

refine ideas when they try to make sense of them. This can be seen as a problem-solving action rather than a simple act of communicating through a written protocol. When it comes to writing, writers actually solve a variety of problems (Hyland, 2008). Therefore, writing is a complex cognitive activity that involves a series of constructive processes and the right approach. It is important for successful writing to use students' sociocultural elements in the scaffolding of their ESL writing. The key factors in producing good writing or essays relies on the types and amount of sociocultural elements that are injected accordingly, and on the regulation of these background knowledge for generating ideas or for revising what has been written (Riduan & Lim, 2009).

Writing is a basic skill that all students must master in the Malaysian English Language Curriculum (Malaysian Ministry of Education, 2000). Even after learning English for many years, many of these students remain weak in English, especially in their writing skills (Chitravelu, Sithamparam & Teh, 2005). They emphasized that writing is a skill in which most Malaysian students are less competent and do not know how to successfully complete their ESL written assignments by following the required protocols in a decent and understandable manner.

The final analysis of MUET performance during the National Examinations by the Malaysian Educational Council has reported the following in the third session of 2020 annual report to support the above notion that many students still remain weak in written English even after eleven years of compulsory education. Only 0.01% of the candidates obtained band 6, while 3.03% ended up with a band 5 and 28.63% scored band 4. Majority of the average writers totalling to 42.35% was able to secure

a band 3. The below average candidates of 22.42% managed to score band 2 as the most and the weaker students of 3.57% of the total candidates only obtained the lowest band 1 (Malaysia Examination Council, 2019). This poor performance may reflect the inability of Malaysian candidates to perform the writing task effectively, as required by the Malaysian Ministry of Education, for underlying reasons that would be explored during the investigation in the study. As the writing section Paper 4 of MUET represents a high percentage of total test marks, the low marks obtained for the writing task affected the general performance of the students for their MUET paper in general on the national examination performance.

The tasks given in MUET examinations are challenging and appropriate for the pre-university level students. They meet the test specifications and measure the language ability of university students as candidates are assessed on their mastery of not only grammatical and rhetorical devices, but also of conceptual and judgmental elements for ESL writing in Paper 4. The ability to analyse and synthesise information for Question 1 and the ability to discuss, explain and justify viewpoints, as well as to link ideas to the topic convincingly to answer Question 2 are the basic skills at post-intermediate to advanced level of writing. The topic given was familiar to the candidates and it demanded knowledge of the topic, maturity of thought, analytical-reasoning thinking, ability to present a stand, and thoughtful planning to secure a decent band as a criterion to graduate from the Malaysian local universities. Every student graduating from the local university must have the appropriate band accordingly to obtain their degree.

As the recent MUET as well as the previous reports reflect poor performance in their MUET examinations, the researcher has come up with an innovative teaching strategy by utilising the sociocultural approach to enhance writing among the Malaysian students. This approach has been used by some researchers earlier and its effective results have been proven. When considering theories of learning, ESL educators should also consider sociocultural perspectives and the role that culture, interaction, and collaboration have on quality learning. Modern social learning theories stem from the work of Russian psychologist Vygotsky, who produced his ideas between 1924 and 1934 as a reaction to existing conflicting approaches in psychology (Kozulin, 2002). Vygotsky's (1978) ideas are most recognized for identifying the role social interactions and culture play in the development of higher-order thinking skills, and it is especially valuable for the insights it provides about the dynamic "interdependence between individual and social processes in the construction of knowledge" (John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996, p. 192). Vygotsky's views were often considered primarily as developmental theories, focusing on qualitative changes in behaviour over time as attempts to explain unseen processes of development of thought, language, and higher-order thinking skills. Although Vygotsky's (1978) intent was mainly to understand higher psychological processes in children, his ideas have many implications and practical applications for learners of all ages including undergraduates who are struggling to master ESL writing in Malaysia.

Interpretations of Vygotsky's (1978) and other sociocultural scholars' work have led to diverse perspectives and a variety of new approaches to education especially in the field of ESL writing. Today, sociocultural theory and other related

approaches are widely recognized and accepted in psychology, education and are especially valued in the field of applied linguistics because of its underlying notion that language and thought are connected. Sociocultural approach is also becoming increasingly influential in the field of ESL education especially in written protocols

Strategically written second language, rhetorically and linguistically is different from L1 writing, and novice second language writers need to learn the ESL writing approach clearly (Mu & Carrington, 2007). However, students rarely receive guidance on how to use the writing approach in a fun and approachable way that can help them become competent writers. According to Mu and Carrington (2007), English teachers give their students little guidance on writing techniques because they may have less understanding of their students' writing knowledge and background. Therefore, English teachers need to better understand the approaches used by ESL students in the ESL written protocol to improve their writing skills.

While the Malaysian government is making progress with the aim of developing ESL in Malaysia, it has made remarkable progress in general and in English education for specific reasons to meet international standards. English is an international language used as a first and second language in many countries. In recent decades, it has become the most widely used language for international communication (Strevens, 1992). English becomes the language of knowledge because most of the innovations in scientific and technological research, mathematics, medicine, literature and all other related fields are mainly written and documented in English. English becomes a card for great career, a way to communicate well with others and gain greater knowledge, especially in international education. As a result,

teaching English as a second or foreign language in countries around the world has become a key indicator of the expansion and overall development of education.

The researcher's desire to initiate this qualitative case study took root when he began teaching at the FELDA scheme school in Pahang without basic amenities and services. While teaching there, he realized that English was like a foreign language to the students there. Therefore, he had no choice but to use a bilingual sociocultural approach to teach English to those poor children who were groping in darkness, which made the difference in accepting English as a second language. They appreciated and understood each time the researcher began to include their sociocultural elements to develop the teaching of English to these poor and weak students who were relocated under the FELDA scheme programme in the centre of thick jungle with wild animals even walking on the school grounds in the late 1970s. Since then, the researcher has been teaching primarily in rural schools and the last one was a suburban high school for Form Six students in Kuala Selangor, Selangor. Therefore, the researcher taught primarily in rural schools, which gave him vast experience in instilling this sociocultural approach to make ESL writing lessons fun to learn. The last school, which is also the research site, had a uniform ethnic distribution, made up mainly of Malays, Chinese and Indians. The students in most of the schools the researcher previously taught had weak students with low proficiency levels. He managed to maintain good results by trying this sociocultural approach with his Form Six students for approximately 16 years. Therefore, he decided to share his successful sociocultural approach by completing a doctoral thesis in TESL after his retirement from public service at age sixty to satisfy his desire to share his successful approach. The researcher who is a benevolent man believes that sharing is caring. Therefore, the

researcher hopes that this research thesis will help ESL teachers of the younger generation to become interested in teaching ESL writing using this sociocultural approach to produce independent ESL writers and make ESL writing interesting.

The introductory chapter discussed the main elements to provide readers with a broader overview of the research and the reasons why the researcher chose the topic. After placing the chapter in this context, the researcher provided with an introduction and context for the study itself through discussions explaining the problem statement, the purpose of the study, two research questions, the importance of the study, the limitations of the study, justification of the study and operational definitions and finally the summary of the first chapter.

1.1 Background of the Study

The area of writing in a second language has grown significantly in the last four decades, as mentioned by Silva and Matsuda (2005). These researchers noted that, "Once a neglected topic, second language writing today is arguably one of the most viable fields of inquiry in both second language studies and composition studies." In the twelfth annual survey of the International Reading Association, English as a Second Language / English Language Learners were the second topic on the list of "very hot" topics chosen by teachers, administrators, editors, and university professors (Cassidy, J., & Shaver, P. R, 2008). In general, teaching writing is a complex and continuous process, and teaching writing to ESL high school students is not as simple

as we think (Cassidy, J. & Shaffer, P. R, 2008). English as second language teachers must be proactive and creative.

The growing challenge facing ESL teachers in Malaysia today is how to improve English as a second language where comprehensible interactions between teacher and student can occur simultaneously, so that the optimal learning process completes writing in English as a second language. Some ESL teachers in Malaysia feel exasperated and dejected about the lackadaisical attitude of students towards learning English, especially in the writing skills. Unfortunately, according to Markham's (2000) qualitative case study, most teachers admit that working with students with limited English skills (LEP) was a tedious and time consuming process. To become an effective ESL learner, students must understand what is involved in writing L2. The important role of L1 in obtaining L2 is undoubtedly a major concern in the system of teaching English as a second language (Silva & Matsuda, 2005). Understanding the importance of this key role will help the Malaysian Ministry of Education, curriculum designers, researchers, teachers and ESL students to achieve their goals successfully, especially by learning to write good English. Therefore, it is very important for ESL teachers to understand the sociocultural background of their students before bulldozing their teaching of ESL writing to weaker and mediocre students. ESL educators should be an ideal ESL teacher like a chameleon, whose skin colour and texture can adapt to the environment. Similarly, a proactive and ideal ESL teacher should also adapt his / her teaching habits and methods according to the student's cup of tea and their environment. As such, a practical and strong English teacher can get ideal and marginal results from weak and middle class students by

tailoring classes according to their needs and understanding. ESL teachers need to understand that teaching is not an obligation but an art.

Teaching English to second language learners is characterized by three important factors: enhancing social interaction between teachers and students, implementing interactive social learning activities and using sociocultural elements in scaffolding written protocols to improve their writing skills. Researchers of second language acquisition (Ellis, R., 2008) suggest that interactions play an important role in language development. ESL students in Malaysian schools still have a great opportunity to hear English from English medium learners from the 1960s to 1980s, and these English teachers can speak the same language as native English speakers do. Speak to English as a second language student and allow them to speak by asking simple questions or thinking in detail about specific topics and teaching second language students to develop their listening skills to apply in their daily written protocols and to develop better writing skills in the future. According to Gibbons (2002), "A classroom programme that is supportive of second language learning must therefore, create opportunities for more varied and dialogic interactional patterns to occur (p.17)." Language learners definitely need encouragement and exciting ways to engage in conversation. One way to talk about ESL students is to encourage them to "use language for their own real reasons (Dragon, 2005, p. 59)." In this case, ESL students are not concerned with grammatical errors and mispronunciation; instead, they express themselves in a safe, risk-free and enthusiastic way. This practice will indirectly motivate them to speak more and then when sociocultural elements are used to develop their writing skills especially when ESL teachers encourage them to

improve their writing skills, they will gain confidence to write and express freely in their ESL writing.

Another important technique that is taught in ESL classes in Malaysia is collaborative learning. Farrell (2006: pp 48 & 148) suggests that for ESL students, a collaborative learning curriculum may provide more time and opportunities for students to practice English, "a focus on negotiating meaning rather than just talking about the weather." Involving English as a second language student in collaboration, cooperative structure, and other interactive social interactions is more likely to lead to conversations with peers, share stories, and become active learners in the classroom. Slavin (2013) noted that the use of interactive learning with English-speaking students as a second language increases their self-esteem and improves their personal relationships.

The use of sociocultural elements in ESL writing as a second language in scaffolding written protocols helped students to expand their writing further. Before going much further, it is better to know what is this sociocultural approach and scaffolding. In the sociocultural theory approach, learning is viewed as a social event happening as a result of interaction between the learner and the context. It needs to be noted that this framework formed the main theoretical support of the present study as we focused on how different patterns of interaction was defined by levels of proficiency that affected the writing quality of the ESL writers. In this study, scaffolding works together with the sociocultural elements as the foundation to support. Scaffolding is a process by which teachers or proficient learners provide the less proficient students with a temporary framework for learning. Students can

develop creativity and motivation if scaffolding is provided when required. When students increase their skills and knowledge, scaffolding is diminished completely and they no longer need it in their ESL writing. Sociocultural theory highlights the advantages of intervention in the process of learning. Intervention or mediation is a kind of the dynamic method of instruction which is built on the interaction among learners and the teacher to learn the language. Mediation can be interventionist, when the assistance is given using some predetermined clues for the students usually provided by a computer or software, or it can be inter-actionist. Scaffolding is based on the inter-actionist mode of instruction or assessment. One of the most well-known theories of interaction is Vygotsky's (1978) Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) which refers to the distance between the student's actual developmental level and the proximal level.

This study found that, in contrast to the traditional product approach that still exists in many countries, Malaysian ESL students learn that the goal of writing is to focus on message content and successful communication rather than grammatical and mechanical improvement. The primary assumption of this approach is to allow ESL students to slowly develop their ideas and write in a process in which they can plan, write, review, and edit their work (Seow, 2002). Adapting such an approach to learning to write English as a second language promotes as many ideas as possible on a topic that has been written through interactive social scaffolding activities such as polemic and brainstorming sessions. In addition, English as a second language student has the opportunity to completely change his or her words, phrases, sentences, and the overall direction of writing while reading to his or her friends to review and edit. The

following figure 1.1 shows the interactive social effects of sociocultural elements as an English-language psycholinguistic tool in scaffolding ESL students' writing.
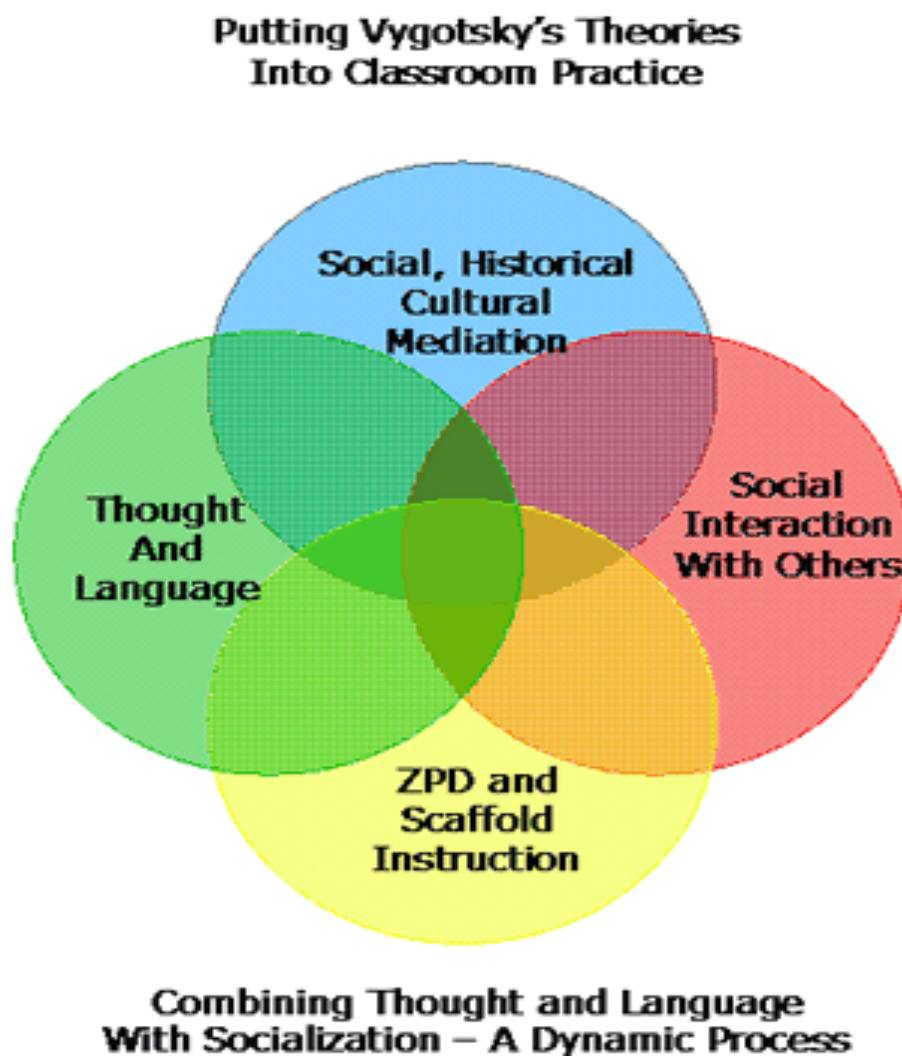
Figure 1.1. The Impact of Sociocultural Elements as a Psychological Language Tool in Scaffolding ESL Writing

The above three unique characteristics that make English a second language in Malaysia is something special and different, as it is now a foreign language. As such, ESL educators are encouraged to use appropriate techniques or methods, such as applying a sociocultural approach, to encourage students to learn ESL writing effectively. Based on the above, these existing characteristics would provide the basis

for this research on the impact of the sociocultural elements used by ESL students on the scaffolding of their ESL writing.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Limited data and research materials regarding the teaching of English to undergraduate students in Form 6, despite the declining proficiency in English and the lack of materials pertaining to the acquisition of English in general encouraged the researcher to do research on this issue. As we know, MUET is an important test for Form Six students entering local universities in Malaysia. A former associate professor of UiTM, Dr Koh Soo Ling stressed that students must be equipped with a good basic command of the English language, as she stated: "It is not only to be able to get by, but it's to be able to communicate effectively, to be able to understand what you read or hear and to write down what you know. It's about having an acceptable level of spoken and written English" (News Straits Time, 2016). Undergraduates who fail to score well in the MUET test may adversely affect their university performance as they may not be able to meet the requirements of most courses that include reading reference books mainly written in English. As such, a creative teaching method called a sociocultural approach is devised in this study to enhance their level of written English and finally get higher bands in the MUET test.

Writing in ESL is an important skill that all students in Malaysia must learn (Ministry of Education, 2000). Chitravelu, Sithamparam, and Teh (2005) noted that writing is a skill in which most Malaysian students are less competent and do not

know how to write a written protocol solution without an appropriate method or second language guide. Today, most Malaysian students are weak in English because they think that learning English is only for interacting with tourists, taking general exams or studying abroad. Furthermore, the English language is no longer the medium of instruction in Malaysia as it is replaced by the Malay language. According to Schuetze and Slowey (2002), when the target language does not play an important role in society due to lack of exposure and reduced use of the English language, especially in Malaysia, which is a non-native English speaking environment, it will affect the students' oral proficiency in English and will decrease slowly.

At one point, the level of English proficiency in Malaysia was very encouraging during British colonialism and even in the following years. However, after the country's independence, the Malaysian language was granted the status of the country's national and official language, which made English the second language (Jamaliah Mohd Ali, 2000). However, there is still a minority of Malaysians who have learned English as their first language and have spent much of their time communicating in English at home and at work. Nowadays, the Malay language is the medium for teaching all subjects, including Science and Mathematics in Malaysian schools, although these courses are often offered in English in institutions of higher education. However, the lack of exposure at the primary and secondary education levels will further reduce the dominance in ESL skills. As a result, undergraduate and graduate students will find it difficult to write in the English language and express themselves freely and without errors. Additionally, they may not qualify to graduate, because the MUET pass is one of the main requirements for enrolment in local

universities. Undergraduate students must have the appropriate bands required by faculties to graduate from local Malaysian universities.

Teaching extended writing in English as a second language is no easy task as English is only a second language in Malaysia. In addition, Malaysian Ministry of Education does not require a compulsory pass in PMR English examination to be promoted to a higher level, although it was necessary to go to Form Four in the 1960s and early 1970s. Writing stems from two main factors, namely the nature of writing itself and the nature of the classroom as places to teach (Dyson & Freedman, 2003). Unlike speaking and listening, learning to write in another language needs to be learned more effectively. Oral communication of English as a second language learner can have a more effective impact if the meaning is conveyed correctly.

However, with regard to extended writing; students should take into consideration the vocabulary, syntax and morphology, content and consistency of their ESL writing. Presumably, the use of their sociocultural elements in scaffolding their ESL writing may help students to produce better reflective writing. According to Wood, Bruner and Ross (1976), the utilisation of sociocultural elements in scaffolding writing is a social process to support learners with an aim towards helping their future independence. Scaffolding using sociocultural elements is only a temporary, specific, meaningful and interactive process. Donato (2000), as cited in Cotterall and Cohen (2003), explained that scaffolding is a social interaction between the knowledgeable and the novice. Walqui (2006) described scaffolding as contingent, collaborative and interactive process. Through the social interaction, the knowledgeable or the MKO

provides support to the novice by explaining using their sociocultural elements and their prior knowledge to enhance their understanding of the given topic.

As such, we need to use the appropriate sociocultural elements and scaffolding skills to improve their ESL writing because the results of MUET writing have always shown poor performance. So far, the only predictable thing about the Malaysian University English Test has been the poor performance of the students who have taken it. Since the introduction of the test in 1999, less than 1% of students have obtained the highest score in band six. In the November 2002 test, only 0.08% of students obtained band six, while in the May 2003 results, it increased to 0.13%. When MUET was first introduced in November 1999, it was mandatory for students enrolled in Form Six classes to take the test, but they did not have to "pass" it to enter the public universities. Students are classified according to six groups or success levels ranging from very good user (band six) to extremely limited user (band one). Many people assume that band three (modest user) is sufficient for MUET students, but MUET officer of the Malaysian Examinations Council (MEC), Khatija Mohd Tahir (The Star Online, 2003) says this is not the case. The results show that students who fail the test are simply unable to use ESL to handle research at university level since most of the university reference books and international journals are all written in English. In order to use English effectively in their university studies, Khatija Mohd Tahir says undergraduate students must have a minimum of band four as a skilled user in certain demanding studies.

According to Tan and Miller (2008) as cited in Ghabool & Kashef (2012), writing is an intentional social communication that also includes literacy when considered as a method of social practice, through participation patterns, gender preferences, networks support and collaboration, time patterns, place, tools, technology and resources applied correctly. Writing for ESL students remains a challenge in Malaysia, as writing in Malaysian classes remains structured and teacher-oriented (Chow, cited in Abidin & Fong, 2012).

First, students can come from different sociocultural backgrounds where they depend entirely on teachers and textbooks that focus only on teacher-centred teaching. Learners have not been trained to be critical thinkers and may have lower expectations than their teachers because they consider themselves less efficient because of their low proficiency in English as a second language. With this concept integrated into the minds of the learners, poor mastery of the language will hamper writing. Ghabool, Edwina & Kashef (2012) stated that this state of mind could be a setback for students in their writing skills, especially when learner writers find it difficult to establish an effective discussion in the target language ((Shafie et al, 2010). Other causes that can lead to writing difficulties are innate interference of their mother tongue or first language, lack of sociocultural scaffolding and difficulty understanding teachers' instructions, especially when it is in English (Chou, 2011). Regarding the unclear instructions received for the task, Chou (2011) concludes that the participants in his study admitted that they feel shy and not very confident asking their ESL teachers for clarification. This low level of self-efficacy among our ESL students is very common in the Malaysian classrooms due to the influence from the

negative cultures of the society, especially when certain quarters are not paying much attention to the learning of ESL due to some reasons.

The low performance of students of English has been a frequent and major topic of concern in the Malaysian education system. Students at both primary and secondary schools, and at higher education institutions have very weak levels of English language (EL) proficiency, especially in oral communication, even after 11 years of learning English formally in school and many years' of effort and exposure to acquire the knowledge and skills to communicate in the language. Previous studies, for example Gaudart (1987), Hassan and Selamat (2002), Mohd Asraf (1996), Muniandy, Nair, Krishnan, Ahmad and Mohamed Noor (2010), Mustapha (2008), OECD (2013), Pandian (2002), Selvaraj (2010) and Shakir (2009), show that basically Malaysian students lack the ability to communicate effectively in the English language and have poor analytical skills. The introduction of various types of approaches to and methods of language instruction, through innovations and reforms in education, to improve the quality of English language learning and teaching in Malaysia has not successfully produced students who are able to communicate in English competently and effectively (Mohd Radzi, Azmin, Zolhani & Abdul Latif, 2007).

In view of the above predicament, the researcher took a strong interest in this question to make it a reality with the support of the MOE when the study is completed. The current education system in Malaysia is particularly exam-oriented and focuses only on individual results (Ngan & Phoon, 1999). Although many schools in several countries have already practised this sociocultural approach in scaffolding

ESL writing in teaching and learning English, this instructional approach has not yet been widely implemented and successful in Malaysian schools because studies on this sociocultural approach are insufficient and yet to prove its success in teaching ESL writing. Finally, the results of this study are expected to contribute significantly to our understanding of the importance of teaching writing skills by using sociocultural elements in scaffolding ESL writing skills. These acquisitions of writing skills should help them to write better English in the future and perform well at the international scene, especially in the private sectors.

1.3 Purpose of the Study

The overall objective of this qualitative case study is to analyse the sociocultural elements exhibited by MUET students in their weekly written reflections and to analyse the impact of the sociocultural elements used by students in scaffolding their ESL writing. In addition, the study would also explore the positive impact created by sociocultural elements when students used them in their writing in the Malaysian context. There are two objectives to achieve:

1) To analyse the sociocultural elements exhibited by the MUET students in their writing.

2) To identify the impacts on writing when the MUET students utilised their sociocultural elements.

1.4 Research Questions

This case study mainly analysed the effects on ESL writing when MUET undergraduates used their sociocultural elements on their scaffolding to write English as a second language and also to identify the impacts on writing when the MUET students utilised their sociocultural elements in their written protocols. The scope of the research in this study was mainly limited to the analysis of reflection writing samples from the six MUET students. The additional analysis is based on observation in the classroom and on the information obtained during the pre-interview and post-interview sessions for the students, and focuses mainly on the impacts of their ESL writing as a result of using the sociocultural elements and also to analyse the sociocultural elements students demonstrated in their ESL written protocols. Additional details were also obtained from the researcher's classroom observations and the teachers' interview. Therefore, the qualitative case study examined and answered the following two research questions:

1) What are the sociocultural elements demonstrated by the MUET students in scaffolding their ESL writing?

2) What are the impacts on ESL writing when the MUET students utilised their sociocultural elements?

1.5 Significance of the Study

Writing is recognized as an essential tool for students to communicate and develop their ideas to succeed academically and become productive members of society. The aim of this study was to shed light on the positive impact of sociocultural elements that students encapsulated in their ESL writing and to analyse the sociocultural factors mediated by MUET students while scaffolding their ESL writing.

Writing ability is one of the most important components of English for a second language student to be successful in academic and social circles. This study also investigated the role of ESL teachers and the approaches they used to help their students to become legitimate writers for life and the positive outcome of the investigation can help the researcher to strengthen his findings. Raimes (1985) noted that, the ESL teacher should pay more attention to teaching their weak and below-average students how to think in English rather than how to write. "We are not dealing with ESL but rather TSL, 'Thinking in a Second Language.' If we can get our students to do that we have surely taught them something (p.92)." Once ESL teachers believe in writing as "process-centred and student-centred pedagogy (Matsuda, 2003, p.67)," they can develop an effective strategy, such as its social-cultural elements in shaping its writing in English as Second language and what would motivate ESL students to develop their academic writing skills and allow independent writing to be explored for themselves without the hassle of ESL teachers. Further, this study would provide ESL teachers and policy makers with real-world experiences and conclusions to develop an effective ESL programme and instructional tools within the ESL

programme. This study is expected to contribute significantly to the field of second language writing in general and to extended writing among ESL students.

Finally, this qualitative case study is important to encourage students to use sociocultural elements to build their enhanced ESL writing skills to contribute to the knowledge of teaching and learning ESL writing in the classroom. Such an understanding would be useful for the researcher, ESL teachers and programme designers in the search for ways to maximize the effectiveness of teaching writing in Malaysia. Although the results cannot be generalized and may not be applicable to all concerned on a holistic scale, but the conclusion may be relevant and could be used as a paradigmatic reference on issues related to the teaching of writing and practices, in particular in the acquisition of ESL writing in Malaysia.

1.6 Limitations of the Study

This research had two limitations. First, this proposed study was limited to only six students taking Form Six courses in a coastal town from Kuala Selangor in Selangor. The small useful sample of the six MUET students in this study is not intended to be generalized, but to inform productive patterns and provide information for future research. Secondly, not all six MUET students entered English literacy at the same time, some who attended elementary school in city schools wrote well while others who attended low-level schools in villages and estates had low levels of competence in ESL writing. Thus, studying a larger population of MUET students who began their studies in cities, suburban and rural areas can present different perspectives and

findings. Although this study examined the influences on ESL writing when MUET students used their sociocultural elements and also the sociocultural elements that MUET students demonstrated in the scaffolding of their ESL writing, by examining on their written reflections, an additional form of data, including specific interview transcripts, provided distinct perspectives to the study findings.

Finally, the researcher was fortunate to have at least one high school in Kuala Selangor that had Form Six classes to conduct this useful research on extended writing which had not been deepened in all these years although only six students had been involved in this research. As such, the current results cannot be generalized to the general population, but they can serve as a guide for future educators and programme designers to pursue a national study in the future.

1.7 Justification of the Study

English is a global language for general development in all areas. Likewise, the increasing importance of English as a global language of information and communication technology in general supports the general need for this study. Given the growing importance of English, especially among undergraduates, the Malaysian Ministry of Education introduced a subject called MUET mainly to Form Six students, undergraduates and college students to encapsulate them with good ESL bases to face the challenging world.

MUET is an ESL subject that is compulsory for all Form Six students in Malaysia. Private and college students wishing to continue their studies at local universities are expected to pass with bands according to the specified field of study for which they aspire. For example, medical and law students studying at the University of Malaysia and the Malaysian University of Science must obtain at least a minimum of band 5 before entering university. Malaysian students must learn English which is the target language as well as L2 in Malaysia. Nowadays most of the subjects are being taught in Malay language, and as such the interference of this language in ESL is high. The same goes for Chinese and Tamil vernacular school students who transfer their skills in L1 to learning ESL. The impact and interference of their mother tongue (L1) and sociocultural elements is ESL writing is much greater. As such, the proactive researcher decided to use it positively and appropriately to develop ESL writing among these weak and mediocre students. In the current era, especially in the new millennium, ESL has been found to be more of a foreign language as exposure to that language is limited (Nabiah, 2007). This problem requires immediate attention before the level of English deteriorates further.

As such, this qualitative case study is intended to analyse the sociocultural elements like culture, mother tongue, values, celebrations, practices, prior knowledge and social norms that can be used in scaffolding their ESL writings. The study would also analyse the sociocultural elements that are exhibited by the MUET students in their writing and how such prolific use of these sociocultural elements can be transformed into positive transfers to improve their ESL writing. Consequently, this study would analyse the effectiveness of the sociocultural approach in ESL writing among students. At the same time, this study will also examine how the sociocultural

approach is implemented by teachers of English as a second language and how it is applied and practised by students in their ESL writing, which led to their development in writing English as a second language.

Therefore, this case study will be a valuable addition to the limited review of the literature available in the sociocultural approach to teaching ESL writing. The outcome of this study should help teachers focus on the specific approach that is workable for suburban and weaker students rather than learning ESL writing with the conventional method, which has not yielded encouraging results in these years.

1.8 Operational Definition

The following abbreviations and terms have been defined for this study to clarify this qualitative case study:

1) EFL: Usually English as a foreign language is the study of English in a country that is not the dominant language.

2) ESL: ESL stands for "English as a Second Language." It is mainly used to talk about learning English to international students living in an English-speaking country.

3) ESP: English for a Specific Purpose is part of English as a second or foreign language. Generally speaking, teaching English to college students or those already employed by referring to specific vocabulary and skills needed. ESP focuses only on one profession or job: technical English, scientific English, English for healthcare professionals, English for waiters, tourism and English.

4) Inter-language: The term inter-language was first used by American linguist, Larry Selinker (1992). It is the unique linguistic system because it is neither L1 nor L2 but at the same time bears resemblances to both, which functions as a relatively systematic transition from initial knowledge of a language to native proficiency during the process of language acquisition, is always regarded as an unstable set of language characteristics produced by learners. Fossilization in inter-language is significant in English learning. It is a universal phenomenon in Second Language Acquisition and it derives from multiple factors. In this research inter-language theory would see if there was a continuum in the internal grammar of further language learning in ESL and to confirm that the learner acquired L2 in much the same way as L1 by utilising sociocultural elements.

5) Internalization: A social perspective to teaching and learning a second language in the field of SLA utilizes the notion of internalization to capture both the social origin of learning, even in private settings and the non-mechanistic or simplistic quality of the processes involved in learning and communicating in new languages (Lantolf & Thorne, 2015; Lantolf & Poehner, 2015). Previous research on internalization explains how the sociocultural elements act as the starting point to construct new meanings when we learn a second language. When learning a new language, our social communicative activity is the origin for noticing and understanding words and phrases. These words and phrases, which we encounter in oral and written discourse in our daily lives, are then transformed into personal meanings; and at the same time, our personal meanings are again transformed into social communication tools. As such, in this study is going to analyse the continuous

transformation of social meanings into private meanings and private meanings into social ones partly explains the richness and complexity of the second language learning processes.

6) L1: L1 is the individual's native language or mother language. Therefore, the person becomes the native speaker of the language. Every healthy human development has a first language that is usually born. Often this is the language learned in childhood until puberty and is the most widely used and most comfortable language for a given person. The first language will last a lifetime with little effort from the average person's point of view. This is because early languages are often woven with individual and sociocultural elements and native identities. Thus, L1 speakers use language to think and interact with other members of the family and social culture or ethnic groups. In some countries, the term native language or mother tongue refers to the language of one's ethnic group rather than one's first language. Sometimes, the term "mother tongue" is used for the language that a person learned as a child. Children growing up in bilingual homes can, according to this definition, have more than one native language. The first language of a child is part of that child's personal, social and cultural identity. Another impact of the first language is that it brings about the reflection and learning of successful social patterns of acting and speaking.

7) L2: The second language is usually the official or social dominant language required for education, use or other primary purposes. For example, in Malaysia, English is taught in a second language that is not widely used in the learner's immediate social context or is studied as a curriculum requirement in a social environment, but has no immediate or practical application.

8) LEP: Students who lack English proficiency.

9) Mediation: According to the sociocultural theory of education, learning is social, that is, we learn through interacting with others, through a meaningful exchange of ideas, concepts, and actions. This premise of Vygotsky's theory has been applied to the field of SLA and has challenged the behaviorist approach that claimed that learning was a passive and individual activity (Lantolf & Appel, 1994). The original idea of Vygotsky in relation to human mediation stated that the child should be assisted by an adult in achieving a task he/she could not do alone. This intervention would help the child move towards their zone of proximal development, defined by Vygotsky (1978: 86) as "...the distance between the actual development level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" This study would also analyse how mediation can assist the ESL learners to write better English by utilizing their sociocultural elements with the help of teachers and peers as mediators.

10) MKO: Refers to someone with more knowledge or a more competent colleague. Vygotsky defined those who are to teach as the "More Knowledgeable Other." The MKO is anyone who has a better understanding or a higher ability level than the learner, particularly in regards to a specific task; concept or process. Traditionally the MKO is thought of as a teacher or an older adult. However, this is not always the case. Other possibilities for the MKO could be a peer, sibling, a younger person, or even a computer. The key to MKO is that they must have more knowledge about the topic being learned

than the learner does. Teachers or more capable peers can raise the student's competence through the zone of proximal development (ZPD)

11) Peer tutoring: Peer tutoring is a teaching strategy that students use as teachers. Pairs of students can engage in academic, social, behavioural, technical or social skills. There are many ways to connect students, such as skill level, skill level or age. Peer tutoring is a very successful and effective practice methodology to help students increase their academic and social skills. Peer-tutoring programmes are important in today's classrooms. They have proven to be objective, empirical, and replicable; in addition, they have been substantiated by valid and reliable data, across research designs and undergoing rigorous data analysis. Many teachers working with students with disabilities use teacher-guided instruction in class-wide programmes directed toward the mastery of specific skills. By using peer tutoring, they can include all students in inclusion programs with high rates of engagement. These authors believe peer-tutoring programs can be successfully utilized and maximized (L.J. O'Shea, D.J. O'Shea, 2010). Teachers have the burden of trying to meet the needs of all students and the task of creating a positive working environment where all students can collaborate and share in learning. With the use of a peer-tutoring program, competency levels of both students with and without disabilities can benefit. A class-wide peer-tutoring program can improve levels of academic responding and decrease levels of competing behaviors. Peer-tutoring programs are effective to use across all ages and abilities. They help students to make marked improvements throughout various disciplines while increasing their socialization skills and accelerating their confidence and motivation. Programs are positive and effective to use

with diverse populations, across all age levels, and for different types of subject matter. Additionally, peer tutoring enables teachers to teach strategies and give students time to practice these strategies through tutoring sessions (Copeland *et al*., 2004; Davenport *et al*., 2004; Mastropieri *et al*., 2001; McDonnell *et al*., 2001). Finally, peer tutoring makes so much sense in this age of inclusion. It has been research proven and its pedagogical benefits are impressive.

12) Scaffolding: Scaffolding is a term used for the process of assisting a person to carry out a task that is beyond one's ability. In the instructional scaffolding process, learners are encouraged to carry out parts of tasks that are within their ability. Tasks that are not within their ability are assisted by an adult. In education, it is the instructional scaffoldings that refer to the different educational techniques used to help students better understand the learning process and ultimately gain independence. Vygotsky coined a definition of instructional scaffolding that focused on teacher practices. He defined this as, 'the role of teachers and others in supporting the learner's development and providing support structures to get to that next stage or level' (Raymond, 2000). Wells (1999) believes that the outcome of successful scaffolding constructs for learners the ability to do the task they have done, or similar types of task, on their own. Hartman (2002) emphasizes these and mentions that the unique property of scaffolding as a teaching strategy is to make learners self-regulated and independent. To look at the aims differently, one needs to reflect on the writings of Dewey (2004), in which he fundamentally takes the aim of education in general as learning to learn. Learners should not be considered as storehouse of knowledge, but have to be able to deal with

their world on their own, to experience their surroundings, and to discover things independently. The next type of Well's (1999) list of aims achieved by scaffolding refers indirectly to this idea that the independent individuals at the end of the task have gained experience of learning to learn.

13) Sociocultural elements: Some of the common sociocultural elements that make up an individual culture are symbols, language, values, celebrations, practices, prior knowledge and social norms. The symbol is everything used to indicate something different. People who share culture often give certain meanings to objects, gestures, sounds, or images.

14) Written Protocols: It means the weekly written reflections by the selected MUET students for two consecutive months. These are extended writing which allows students to express freely their reflections by utilising their own sociocultural elements to scaffold the written protocols.

15) ZPD: The gap in the current level of development, where the level of potential development is determined by solving the problem under the guidance of an adult or with the help of more competent colleagues. Vygotsky (1978: 86) defined the ZPD as 'the distance between a child's actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers'. Wells (1998: 345; in press) has summarized how recent analyses extend the notion of the ZPD beyond simply an 'attribute of the learner' or something of 'relatively fixed dimensions' to conceptualize the ZPD as 'task-specific, reciprocal, and open-ended' and thus essentially 'emergent', depending on the 'manner in which the interaction unfolds as much as on the developmental stage reached by the participants'.

1.9 Summary

In conclusion, this chapter introduced the background to studying the role of English as a second language in the Malaysian context and the statement of problem of this qualitative case study. It also defined the purpose of the study and presented two research questions designed to guide the study. This chapter also discussed the importance of this study and the limitations of it. Finally, the chapter explained the rationale for the study, the functional definition of the key terms, and the chapter summary.