

**CLASSROOM INTERACTIONS,
INSTRUCTIONAL ACTIVITIES AND LEARNING
AFFORDANCES OF AN UNDERGRADUATE
TECHNICAL WRITING CLASSROOM:
A SOCIOCULTURAL STUDY**

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UNIVERSITI SAINS MALAYSIA

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by

CHEAH SWI EE

**Thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy**

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'Tis of great use to the sailor to know the length of his line, though he cannot with it fathom all the depths of the ocean. 'Tis well he knows that it is long enough to reach the bottom, at such places as are necessary to direct his voyage, and caution him against running upon shoals that may ruin him. (John Locke, 1965, An Essay Concerning Human Understanding)

What I have learnt from this journey brings to mind the above extract. If I had been the sailor, I certainly began my PhD uncertain of how long my line was. For that, I am most grateful to my main supervisor, Assoc. Prof. Dr. Tan Kok Eng, whose goodwill, wisdom, and supreme patience have enabled me to learn to direct my own voyage. Her careful readings of my multiple drafts and sharp comments on my work assure me of her concern and guidance. Her selflessness and commitment to my study motivate me to do beyond my best. This journey with Dr. Tan has truly benefitted me beyond that of just avoiding shoals that may ruin this piece of work.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	ii
TABLE OF CONTENTS	iv
LIST OF TABLES	xiii
LIST OF FIGURES	xiv
ABSTRAK	xv
ABSTRACT	xvii
CHAPTER 1 - INTRODUCTION	
1.0 Introduction	1
1.1 Background of the Study	4
1.1.1 The Setting	7
1.1.2 The Students	8
1.1.3 The Subject Matter	10
1.2 Statement of Problem	11
1.3 Purpose of the Study	15
1.4 Research Objectives	16
1.5 Research Questions	17
1.6 Conceptual Framework	17
1.7 Significance of the Study	20
1.8 Operational Definitions of Terms	21

1.9	Organization of the Thesis	23
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CHAPTER 2 – LITERATURE REVIEW

2.0	Introduction	26
2.1	Technical Writing and Technical Report	27
2.2	Approaching L2 Writing in Higher Education	30
2.2.1	Traditional Skills Approach	31
2.2.2	Academic Socialization Approach	32
2.2.3	Academic Literacies Approach	33
2.2.4	The Learning Context of L2 Writing.....	34
2.3	Understanding Writing Practices through Classroom Talk	36
2.3.1	An Overview of Classroom Talk	37
2.3.2	Methodological Approach to Classroom Talk	38
	<i>Discourse analysis approach</i>	38
	<i>Communicative approach</i>	40
	<i>Variable approach</i>	41
	<i>Ad hoc approach</i>	42
2.3.3	IRF/E as a Dominant Classroom Talk Feature	44
2.4	An Overview of Activity Theory	45
2.4.1	Principles of Contradictions in Activity Theory	49
2.4.2	Second Language Learning from the Activity Theory Perspective...	50
2.4.3	Unpacking Research with Activity Theory	52

2.5	The Theoretical Framework	54
2.6	The Practical Realities of L2 Writing Class	56
2.6.1	The Nature of L2 Writing	56
	<i>Issues on audience in L2 writing</i>	57
	<i>Issues on plagiarism in L2 writing</i>	59
2.6.2	The Students in L2 Classroom	61
2.6.3	The Relationships in L2 Classroom	63
2.7	Language Learning Affordances	65
2.8	Conclusion	67

CHAPTER 3 – RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.0	Introduction	68
3.1	Philosophical Assumptions	69
3.1.1	Ontological Assumptions	69
3.1.2	Epistemological Assumptions	71
3.2	Positioning of the Study	73
3.3	Case Study Approach	74
3.4	Site of the Study	77
3.4.1	Accessibility to the Site	78
3.5	Participants of the Study	79
3.6	Pilot Study	81

3.6.1	Research Methods and Instruments Tested	82
3.6.2	Information Gathering	84
3.6.3	Lessons Learnt	86
3.7	Data Sources	88
3.7.1	Classroom Observation	88
	<i>Collection of observation data</i>	88
3.7.2	Interviews	90
	<i>Collection of interview data</i>	90
3.7.3	Artifacts Analysis	91
	<i>Collection of artifacts</i>	92
3.7.4	Informal Observation	92
	<i>Collection of informal observation data</i>	93
3.7.5	Informal Discussion	93
3.8	The Research Instruments	94
3.8.1	Classroom Observational Protocol	94
3.8.2	Classroom Talk Features	97
3.8.3	Interview Protocols	99
3.9	Data Analysis	101
3.10	Towards Credibility and Trustworthiness	105
3.10.1	Methodological Reliability	106
3.10.2	Triangulation and Member Checking	106

3.10.3	Researcher’s Reflexivity	108
3.11	Conclusion	110

CHAPTER 4 - DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

4.0	Introduction	112
4.1	The Field and its Participants	113
4.2	An Overview of how Writing was Taught	114
4.2.1	The First Fifteen Minutes: Warming up and Settling Down	118
4.2.2	The Second Fifteen Minutes or More: Housekeeping	120
4.2.3	Most of the Time: Multi-tasking	123
4.2.4	The Last Fifteen Minutes or Less: Finishing off	132
4.3	Busting the Myth Through Classroom Talk	135
4.3.1	Teacher Dominance	137
4.3.2	Turn Taking	139
4.3.3	Repair and Correction	146
4.3.4	Student Independence	151
4.3.5	Making Sense of Phases, Modes, and Talk Features	155
4.4	The Acceptability of Technical Reports	156
4.4.1	Criteria of a Good Technical Report	160
	<i>Content</i>	160
	<i>Structure and format</i>	162

	<i>Language</i>	166
	<i>Style of writing</i>	168
4.4.2	Beneath the Surface of Interpretations	172
	<i>Whatever and whenever you write: The traditional skills approach</i>	172
	<i>General versus technical: The academic socialization approach</i>	174
	<i>Writing we can learn ourselves: The academic literacies approach</i>	175
4.5	Affordances in the Classroom and Beyond	178
4.5.1	Language Affordances in the Classroom	180
	<i>“What Madam really wants”</i>	180
	<i>The power of the grader</i>	182
	<i>Consulting Madam in private</i>	183
	<i>Classroom talk affords learning or otherwise</i>	185
4.5.2	Language Affordances Outside the Classroom	186
	<i>Funds of knowledge</i>	187
	<i>Editing from online sources</i>	190
	<i>Language affordances in disguise: The Internet</i>	192
4.6	Theoretical Analysis of the Findings	195

4.6.1	Primary Contradictions Within an Element in the System	197
4.6.2	Secondary Contradictions Between Elements in the System	199
4.6.3	Tertiary Contradictions Between Systems	202
4.6.4	Quaternary Contradictions Among Systems	206
4.7	Conclusion	210

CHAPTER 5 – CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

5.0	Introduction	212
5.1	Recapitulating Major Findings and Discussions	213
5.1.1	The Teaching of Technical Report Writing	213
5.1.2	Interaction of the Writing Class Through Talk	215
5.1.3	Technical Reports Viewed by the Participants	216
5.1.4	Language Learning Affordances Relooked	219
5.2	Insights of Major Findings	220
5.2.1	The Reality of Technical Report Writing in the English Class	221
5.2.2	Talk Matters in Writing	222
5.2.3	Recognizing Students as Active Agents in the Writing Class	222
5.3	Theoretical Contributions of the Study	223

5.4	Implications for Practice and Policy	227
	5.4.1 Future Possibilities in Practice	228
	5.4.2 Future Possibilities in Policy	230
5.5	Limitations of the Study	232
5.6	Recommendations for Future Research	233
5.7	Conclusion	235
	<i>Epilogue</i>	236
	REFERENCES	238
	APPENDICES	
Appendix A	Letters of Consent and Explanatory Statements	259
Appendix B	L2 Classroom Modes (Walsh, 2006)	265
Appendix C	Classroom Observational Protocol	267
Appendix D	Key to Classroom Talk Features	271
Appendix E	Teacher Interview Protocol	272
Appendix F	Student Interview Protocol	275
Appendix G	Classroom Observation Field Notes	279
Appendix H	Interview Transcriptions	281

Appendix I	Informal Discussion Field Notes	289
Appendix J	Document Analysis of Marked Students' Technical Reports	291
Appendix K	Samples of Students' Technical Reports	294

LIST OF TABLES

		Page
Table 2.1	Research questions with theoretical-based considerations	53
Table 3.1	Lessons learnt from the pilot study	86
Table 3.2	Analysis of classroom talk features	98
Table 3.3	Mapping between interview questions and research questions	100
Table 3.4	Summary of documents reviewed and purposes	104
Table 3.5	Verification of data using triangulation	107
Table 3.6	Research matrix of the study	111
Table 4.1	Participants' details	113
Table 4.2	Schedule of fieldwork during the main study	115
Table 4.3	Students' perceptions of an acceptable structure for technical reports in different settings	165
Table 4.4	Teacher and students' interpretations of the criteria of technical reports	171

LIST OF FIGURES

		Page
Figure 1.1	The conceptual framework of the study	19
Figure 2.1	A three-way view of context	35
Figure 2.2	The structure of human activity	47
Figure 2.3	The theoretical framework of the study	55
Figure 3.1	Checklists for the pilot study	84
Figure 4.1	Classroom handouts	141
Figure 4.2	Connection between phases of classroom activities, classroom modes, and talk features	156
Figure 4.3	The central activity system of learning technical report writing	197
Figure 4.4	Secondary contradictions in the teacher's activity system	200
Figure 4.5	Tertiary contradictions between the teacher and the students' activity system	203
Figure 4.6	Tertiary contradictions between the students' activity systems	204
Figure 4.7	Quaternary contradictions in the classroom talk activity systems	207
Figure 5.1	A design unit of writing activity system	225

**INTERAKSI DALAM KELAS, AKTIVITI PENGAJARAN DAN
KESEMPATAN PEMBELAJARAN DALAM SATU KELAS
PENULISAN TEKNIKAL PERINGKAT SISWAZAH:
SATU KAJIAN SOSIOBUDAYA**

ABSTRAK

Tesis ini dihasilkan menerusi satu usaha akademik untuk menerokai amalan menulis di institusi pengajian tinggi di Malaysia. Kajian ini berdasarkan pandangan sosiobudaya dan mengambil pendekatan terhadap amalan menulis sebagai pengajaran, pembelajaran dan perlakuan penulisan. Interaksi dalam kelas, aktiviti pengajaran, interpretasi peserta kelas terhadap tahap penerimaan laporan teknikal dan kesempatan pembelajaran bahasa merupakan aspek amalan menulis yang dikaji dalam kajian ini. Kajian ini merupakan satu kajian kes kualitatif yang berciri penerokaan dan penaksiran. Kajian kes ini dijalankan selama sepuluh minggu melibatkan satu kelas penulisan teknikal di mana siswazah belajar untuk menghasilkan laporan teknikal. Peserta kajian ini terdiri daripada 28 orang siswazah dalam bidang teknikal dan seorang pensyarah Bahasa Inggeris. Sumber utama data bagi kajian ini adalah pemerhatian dalam kelas, temuramah dan perbincangan secara tidak rasmi dengan pensyarah dan pelajar, dokumen institusi yang berkaitan dengan kursus dan hasil penulisan pelajar. Analisis data dilaksanakan mengikut prosedur penyelidikan yang meliputi penggunaan instrumen penyelidikan yang konsisten, pembacaan dan perbandingan data yang berulang kali, analisis tema, triangulasi dan semakan data oleh ahli. Dapatan utama kajian ini menunjukkan bahawa penulisan dalam konteks sosiobudaya adalah tidak statik dan tidak unilateral. Konteks

sosiobudaya juga memainkan peranan penting dalam pembentukan amalan penulisan pelajar dalam kelas. Amalan menulis pelajar secara kolektif boleh menjadi norma yang membentuk konteks sosiobudaya di mana penulisan berlaku. Analisis data menghasilkan empat ciri pertuturan yang utama dalam interaksi kelas, empat tema dalam aktiviti pengajaran, persetujuan antara pensyarah dan pelajar mengenai kriteria laporan teknikal yang baik serta interpretasi yang berlainan terhadap setiap kriteria laporan teknikal, dan kesempatan pembelajaran yang menunjukkan kepentingan mengintegrasikan kesempatan pembelajaran di luar kelas sebagai sumber mengajar penulisan dalam kelas. Di sebaliknya aktiviti pengajaran dan interaksi kelas yang boleh dinampak, tersiratnya faktor yang mempengaruhi amalan menulis dalam kelas. Teori Aktiviti digunakan sebagai alat untuk memberi penjelasan dan kefahaman yang mendalam mengenai domain yang tersembunyi ini. Kajian ini juga menunjukkan kepentingan mempertimbangkan penulisan dalam bahasa kedua sebagai amalan sosiobudaya yang lebih daripada penguasaan kemahiran bahasa dan kecekapan linguistik. Hasil kajian ini memberi sumbangan kepada penyelidikan dalam bidang penulisan dalam bahasa kedua dan pertuturan dalam kelas yang sedia ada. Khususnya, kajian ini telah cuba merapatkan jurang antara penyelidik dan pengajar melalui kajian silang modaliti yang melibatkan pertuturan dalam kelas dan penulisan. Juga diharapkan bahawa kaedah pengumpulan dan analisis data yang intensif dalam kajian ini boleh diulangi dalam situasi yang lain.

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TECHNICAL WRITING CLASSROOM:
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ABSTRACT

This thesis is the result of an academic venture to explore writing practices in the Malaysian higher education. The study assumes a sociocultural view and approaches writing practices as the teaching, learning, and doing of writing. Classroom interactions, instructional activities in class, participants' interpretations of an acceptable technical report, and language learning affordances are investigated as aspects contributing to writing practices. This study is a qualitative case study, exploratory and interpretive in nature. This case study was conducted for ten weeks in a technical writing class of undergraduates as they learnt to accomplish the technical report. The participants were 28 students from the technical discipline and their English language lecturer. Data sources were mainly formal classroom observations, interviews and informal discussions with the teacher and the students, institutional documents related to the course, and the students' written products. Data analysis followed the research procedure that included consistent use of research instruments, multiple readings, constant comparison, thematic analysis, triangulation, and member checking of the data. The main finding of the study indicates that writing in the sociocultural context is neither static nor unilateral. The sociocultural context plays an important role in shaping the students' writing practices in class. Collectively, the students' writing practices can become a norm that gives shape to

the sociocultural context where writing takes place. Four dominant talk features that characterized the classroom interactions, four common themes that arose from the instructional activities, the teacher and students' agreement on the criteria of acceptable technical reports but differing interpretations on each criterion, and language learning affordances pointed to the importance of integrating affordances outside the classroom as a resource of teaching writing in the classroom. Beneath the surface of observable classroom activities and interactions, there are underlying factors that affect writing practices in class. To unravel the complexities of these hidden domains, Activity Theory was used as a tool to provide explanations and insights. The findings implicate the importance of considering L2 writing as a sociocultural practice that requires more than language skills and linguistics competence. This study has contributed to existing works on second language writing and classroom talk. Specifically, this study has attempted to bridge the gap between researchers and practitioners through cross-modality research between classroom talk and writing. It is hoped that the research methodology comprising intense data collection and analysis can be replicated in other settings.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.0 Introduction

Writing is a complex activity, influencing the orientation and activities of minds located in historical, social, and physical worlds; through the creation, distribution, and reception of signs through various technologies and organizational systems; and as a consequence establishing an archive of thought, action, and events for further social use.

(Bazerman, 2011, p.8)

In our literate world today, writing is a tool that can be used to gather, further and generate knowledge. It serves as a platform for various purposes, such as enabling thoughts unseen become visible as well as preserving events or ideas in recorded documents. On professional ground, writing can become an assertion of identity; it expresses our expertise as well as conveys the quality of our work, learning and intellect to the readers. The better mastery of writing we have, the more influential we are in interacting with others. Inadvertently, we are also influenced by the written knowledge we come into contact with. Hence, writing not only bears an “overarching significance” in our lives, but also to the extent of “determining our life chances” (Hyland, 2009, p. 2) personally and professionally. Following these points then, writing is a social practice upon which our social systems are shaped.

The nature of writing, however, has evolved into many facets and complexities along with the advent of technologies and digital communication that have brought about great changes and diversities in education. This can be evidenced by the vast numbers of studies on writing that have been carried out over the last 40 to 50 years. While research on writing is often associated with the teaching and learning of English, research subjects of writing have covered the range from preschool to adulthood (e.g., MacArthur & Lembo, 2008; Mason, Kubina, Valasa, & Cramer, 2010; Schunk & Zimmerman, 2007; Tolchinsky, 2006), native speakers to non-native speakers (e.g., Mirahayuni, 2002; Strauss, 2011), and even learners with learning disabilities (e.g., Graham & Harris, 2009).

Research contexts have also expanded from school and non-school contexts (e.g., MacArthur, Graham & Fitzgerald, 2006; Tan, Ng, & Saw, 2010) to include digital contexts where digital tools like wikis, blogs and emails are explored for the purposes of teaching and learning of writing (e.g., Biesenbach-Lucas, 2007; Mark & Coniam, 2008; Razaee & Oladi, 2008; Warschauer, 2010). From a predominantly cognitive perspective between the 1970s and the early 1980s, writing theories and research have evolved towards a socio-cultural perspective (Carson & Nelson, 1994; Leki, 1995; Sperling & Freedman, 2001). In short, the significance of writing is well acknowledged in the various studies undertaken.

Moreover, the global expansion of higher education since the nineteenth century has further established writing as a key factor in a student's academic life and future professional pursuits. This is because the English language is most often the medium of instruction and communication in institutions of higher learning. Here, writing and written knowledge are perceived as crucial instruments in defining and differentiating disciplines (Street, 2004). Such a notion is closely related to the term discourse community that also suggests people belonging to the same social group share similar language patterns, norms, or practices which are shaped through their interaction and identification with one another (Swales, 1990). For instance, engineering documents are written in such a specific way that characterizes the disciplinary specialization and can be easily understood by readers in the same field. Students are thus expected to master writing in English as part of their formal academic or disciplinary requirements.

For second language (L2) learners who are writing to learn or learning to write, the challenges they face are insurmountable. To write for various academic and disciplinary purposes, learners need to have a fair understanding of the various evaluation criteria from their teachers and institutions. In other words, they need to cope with the academic expectations on them as writers. These expectations are generally bounded by the context in which writing takes place and may differ greatly from what they are previously accustomed to. If learners are able to grasp with the conventions and interactional rules within their classroom, discipline, and institution, they may achieve better writing.

In sum, the challenges L2 students face in writing are beyond those involved in the mastery of mere functional skills. Conversely, writing as described above indicates a social orientation; how students write and how they get their writing done are affected by their context socially and culturally. Iteratively, students' practices will also have effects on the sociocultural context where writing occurs.

The study thus was conceived upon the interest in understanding how a group of L2 learners dealt with the demands of writing in the formal context of classroom instruction to produce a piece of technical writing product. The ensuing section provides the background of study that was considered in building a case for the present study.

1.1 Background of the Study

In Malaysia, technically- and vocationally-based programmes were traditionally offered at the certificate and diploma levels in technical and vocational colleges, polytechnics, and community colleges (Pang, Narunan, & Sim, 2010). In the mid 2000s, these technically- and vocationally-based programmes were offered as degree programmes in the local universities. This was evidenced by the offer of Bachelor of Engineering Technology programmes with different specializations in local private universities like Universiti Kuala Lumpur (UniKL) and TATI University College (TATiUC), and later under the Malaysian Technical University Network (MTUN), in Universiti Teknikal Malaysia Melaka (UTeM) and Universiti Malaysia Pahang (UMP) (UniMAP, 2009).

The technically- and vocationally-based degree programmes stemmed from an education model that placed a strong emphasis on practical skills. An explanation is these programmes are mainly targeting diploma holders from vocational and technical colleges who are commonly known as academically low achievers compared to those who manage to get enrolled in the public universities (Mohd Zain, 2008). It follows then to assume that these students are generally weak in their English proficiency. A better understanding of their English and writing level can be achieved by looking into the English entry requirement in the following discussion.

To gain enrolment in the local universities, students are required to have met a certain entry requirement of English proficiency. While the Malaysian University English Test (MUET) has since been a requirement for admission into public universities, private universities and colleges may have preferred IELTS or TOEFL as their entry requirements. Some private universities assess their new students' English proficiency using their own placement tests. Generally in all these tests, writing never fails to be included as an important item to evaluate students' mastery of the English language, most of the time in the form of essay writing. Upon entering university, students' writing abilities are further put to the test as they are required to perform a wide range of writing tasks.

Writing tasks in the university setting may differ from school writing in that it requires more depth, reading and research. There is also a greater adherence to the norms of specific discourse community. A common writing task in higher education is that of academic writing which requires students of all fields to abide by specific rules and conventions. Not only do students need to learn what to write and how to write, they also have to figure out what their lecturers and the institution expect from them in order to score the grade they desire. Additionally, the students also face the challenge of trying to make sense of how they can relate their learning to meeting the needs of the industry they will be joining upon graduation.

The challenges faced by students in writing are demanding and complex as each challenge poses demands that include not only of the language aspect but also of the interactional and social facets. Students' writing in the formal context of university is therefore multifaceted and definitely presents writing beyond study or communication skills. There is thus a need to understand writing in its natural setting surrounded by contextual complexities.

Drawing from the discussion above, the study directed its interest to investigate how writing took place and was developed within the complex setting of a formal academic context as mentioned above. For this, details on the site of the study, the students and the subject matter are further explored and presented in the following sections.

1.1.1 The Setting

To recapitulate from the above discussion, the study was set to explore the writing of undergraduates who were pursuing technically- and vocationally-based programmes in a local private university. The university targeted for the study was established in 2002 and at the time of the study, owned 12 institutes that were located all over Malaysia. Each institute has its individual specialized disciplines such as, information technology, marine engineering, automotive and aviation. This study focused on one of these institutes due to constraints of time and resources. The institute, which was the site of the present study, offered Bachelor of Engineering Technology in six areas of specialization. They were Tool & Die, Manufacturing System, Industrial Design, Product Design, Supply Chain and Engineering Business Management.

Lea and Stierer (2000) assert a new discipline striving to gain academic respectability tends to cover many disciplines. This is evidenced in the discipline of Engineering Technology, which comprised Engineering, Pure Science (e.g. Physics), Applied Science (e.g., Mathematics and Statistics), Management (e.g., Operation Management and Entrepreneurship), and practical machining and laboratory skills. Such a combination of many different disciplines inevitably complicated the demands of writing in its academic setting (Baynham, 2000; Lea & Stierer, 2000) as academics of different disciplines have varied expectations based on their own discourse community.

How these expectations come together in shaping the students' writing practices has remained unknown.

Good quality in writing products is often regarded as a key to attain academic status. Apart from written assignments and examinations, technical students are expected to produce a formal report of their final year projects. These final year project reports are the equivalent of undergraduate theses and usually are allotted with a heavy weightage of credit hours. As in the case of this study, a final year project report carries up to a maximum of eight credits while other subjects carry an average of between two to six credits only. The researcher has observed from her nine years of teaching in a similar context that often, students will suffer in their grades if they are unable to produce a report that can effectively and soundly present their final year project to the readers.

However, much of what and how writing is taught and gets done in this emerging context has still remained understudied. To illuminate the complexities of the writing demands and how students went about writing in this setting, the students' background in the following section was considered.

1.1.2 The Students

As mentioned earlier, the specific site of the study was an institute belonging to a private university that offered degree programmes in Engineering Technology. Students here

consist mostly of those who are post diploma holders from technical and vocational colleges or polytechnics.

In this case study, the university entry requirement for STPM holders is a minimum of Grade C in three subjects with no specific requirement on English proficiency. While for post- matriculation/ foundation and diploma students, the basic requirement is a minimum of only CGPA 2.0 with no specific requirement for English. It is therefore not surprising to find that most of the students enrolled here are of moderate or limited proficiency in English.

Among these students, there is a minority group of Malaysian Higher School Certificate (*Sijil Tinggi Persekolahan Malaysia*, STPM) holders, post matriculation or foundation students who are unable to gain entrance in foreign universities, and international students mainly from the Middle Eastern countries.

In short, most of the students here are not high achievers either academically or where their English proficiency is concerned. Although English is a university compulsory subject, the students considered English as a supporting subject of less significance and interest compared to their technical subjects. Learning writing in the English class is therefore tedious to these students, particularly so if they do not see the relevance of their language learning and writing to their discipline. For those who do,

they perceive the importance of English writing as a preparation towards Final Year Project report, the equivalent to an undergraduate thesis.

Given the background discussed above, it is next considered important to better understand the subject matter of their writing in class as follows.

1.1.3 The Subject Matter

For students of the technical or specifically the engineering discipline, it is common for them to engage in the writing of the technical manual, technical business proposal, laboratory report, and technical report (Roy, 2010). This form of writing is also known as technical writing, a purposeful writing that aims to communicate specific and factual information to specialized groups of audience and sometimes to the general readers (Shelton, 1994). An engineering technical report is therefore expected to consist of technical information following a strict organisation so that when other engineers read it, they know where to locate the information quickly (Writing@CSU, n.d.). Guidebooks and handbooks that provide forms and mechanics of technical report writing are available in abundance (see e.g, Gerson & Gerson, 2000; Gould & Losano, 2008; Shelton, 1994) but exactly how technical report writing gets done in the academic context still lacks adequate understanding.

On the site of this study, technical report writing is taught in a general English course. Here, it is taught for basically two purposes. First, to help prepare students for

the writing of final year project (FYP) reports, the equivalent to an undergraduate thesis. Second, to equip students for future workplace or future study writing demands. How the English teacher teaches this seemingly discipline-specific form of writing and how the students learn to accomplish the technical report in this context pose much interests and concerns for inquiry.

The above sections have considered three areas crucial in forming the background of the study: (i) setting (ii) students, and (iii) subject matter. Next, the motivation to conduct this study is further explicated by the issues in the following section.

1.2 Statement of Problem

The issues to this study are conceptualized at both the macro and micro levels. The macro level presents issues that call for more academic research to improve the command of English among graduates of technically- and vocationally-based disciplines. For decades now, academics and stakeholders still lament if not complain about the declining standards in students' literacy both at school and in higher education globally and locally (e.g., Azizan & Lee, 2011; Dass, 2011; Lea & Street, 1998). In the local scene, graduates' weak command of the English language skills, such as speaking, writing, and communication, has constantly been cited as one of the main reasons of their failure to get employed (Azizan & Lee, 2011; Cheong, 2005). The Human Resource Minister of Malaysia has also been quoted in highlighting some 30,000 Malaysian graduates could only managed to secure temporary jobs like cashiers and

workers in restaurants as a result of their poor English proficiency (New Straits Times, 2005). In view of the more than two million jobs that will be generated by 2020, the sense of urgency in ramifying the situation is further escalated as half of the job offers are for candidates with Technical Education and Vocational Training (TEVT) qualifications who are generally known to be weaker in terms of academic performance and English proficiency (Mohd. Zain, 2008; Performance Management & Delivery Unit, 2011).

With an expected increase of enrollments in technically- and vocationally-based programmes in future, the problems of English language learning will naturally evolve as new learning contexts emerge. As noted by Lea and Stierer (2000), emerging learning contexts no longer reflect the traditional subject boundaries. The issues become more challenging locally as, TEVT is commonly held as a discipline catering to students who are less academically or theoretically inclined (Mohd Zain, 2008). Yet, very few academic studies have been conducted on TEVT in Malaysia (Mohd Zain, 2008) and even fewer have looked into researching second language writing in the context of emerging TEVT-based disciplines in higher education. Where Malaysian TEVT is concerned, very little is known about the writing practices in this context and the state of such knowledge against the backdrop of second language writing in higher education.

At the micro level of the L2 classroom, a fundamental issue is found in the teaching and learning of writing and how writing is commonly treated as a skill or competence. This can be seen in the deficit model often adopted to explain writing problems. The concept of deficit model originated from an early view on bilinguals which claims that linguistics deficits such as, size of vocabulary and correctness of language constitute the reasons why bilinguals may not acquire full competence in any of the languages they speak (Skutnabb-Kangas, 1981). By assuming that students do not write well because they have linguistics deficits puts the blame on the students for their learning limitations (Lea & Stierer, 2000; Lea & Street, 2006). The model thus confines the explanation of educational success and failure to students' individual capability while fails to consider how teachers and students work together within the social settings of learning may also have an impact in the learning outcomes.

From the sociocultural perspective, learners are social beings of “a unique capacity for communication and whose lives are normally led within groups, communities and societies based on shared ‘ways with words’, ways of thinking, social practices and tools for getting things done” (Mercer, 2004, p.139, inverted original). Assuming writing as “largely a matter of learning and mastering universal rules” (Lea & Stierer, 2000, p.3) through explicit teaching of genres and rules conveys a context-free approach and may be problematic. It appears to neglect the teacher and students as complex social beings with individual understandings and needs thereby discounting the importance of context and its effects on how writing takes place socially and culturally.

This could have persisted the low quality in students' writing products despite the teachers' concerted efforts in teaching. Moreover, another practical problem in the case of this study is that of the technical students, who tend to see English as secondary and a supporting subject to their technical subjects. This problem is further compounded by the students' limited English proficiency, low performance, and low quality of writing products as observed in the case of this study. Despite the teachers' efforts, the quality in students' writing products is relatively slow in improvement. While the struggle for better quality in students' writing products remains a pertinent issue for teachers and students, practical problems related to academic writing like plagiarism and reader awareness have further complicated writing demands.

The situation seems to call for an understanding towards writing practices that reflect the sociocultural aspects of the learning context. From the teacher's marking of students' essays, Tan (2005) observes that it is common to find that poor writing is often associated with surface features like mistakes in grammar, spelling, and punctuation. Studies conducted on writing in the local universities tend to focus on learners' anxiety (e.g., Lau & Rahmat, 2014; Mahyuddin, Yaakub, & Elias, 1994) and apprehension in second language writing (e.g., Huwari & Aziz, 2011; Ismail, Elias, Perumal, & Muthusamy, 2010). These studies have contributed to a better understanding on cognitive, somative, and behavioral factors (Cheng, 2004) that affect writing performance among second language learners in the local universities, the

socio-cultural and historical background of the learners or that of the learning context still remain understudied.

To understand learning from the sociocultural perspective, it is necessary to look at the use of language as a social mode through the study of classroom talk (Mercer, 2004). Studies on classroom talk have traditionally been undertaken to analyse talk between the teacher and the students, and among students in order to understand how spoken language in the classroom affects learning (Hinkel, 2006). Various studies on classroom talk have established talk as a reliable and valid source of data for understanding the quality of learning (Launspach, 2008; Soter, Wilkinson, Murphy, Rudge, Reninger, & Edwards, 2008). Yet how talk can be used as an interface for speech and written text, or cross-modality between talk and writing specifically in the academic setting of higher education needs further exploration.

This section has thus far presented the issues at macro and micro levels to establish the need for a focused research. With these issues and needs in mind, the study aims to achieve the following purpose and objectives.

1.3 Purpose of the Study

This case study was primarily motivated by an interest to discover the meaning of technical report writing to the participants and how they made sense of technical report writing. Drawing from the background and the statement of problem discussed, the

purpose of the study is expanded to explore the writing practices of undergraduates from a technically- and vocationally-oriented discipline in a local university. As described earlier, the technically- and vocationally-oriented programmes being an emerging discipline in the local scene of higher education clearly has its own unique issues and challenges. By addressing the specific context stated, this study hopes to illuminate writing practices in an area that is understudied.

1.4 Research Objectives

Based on the purpose outlined above, writing is approached as a contextualized social practice, expanding on the notion of writing as merely a study skill or learning support tool depending on rules and strategies. Adopting this perspective, this study was carried out with the main objective of understanding, describing and explaining writing practices within the sociocultural context where the teaching and learning of writing took place.

Based on the main objective, four specific objectives are induced as follows:

- (i) To describe how technical report writing was taught in the writing class
- (ii) To describe writing practices among a group of undergraduates through their interactional patterns in the writing class
- (iii) To understand teacher's and students' interpretations towards technical report writing and its level of acceptability

- (iv) To discover the roles of sociocultural context in constituting affordances that affect writing practices in the writing class

1.5 Research Questions

The following research questions have been derived to gear the study towards the objectives intended:

- (i) How did the teacher go about teaching technical report writing in the writing class?
- (ii) What were the patterns of classroom talk that characterize interactions in the writing class?
- (iii) How did the teacher and her students interpret the level of acceptability of students' writing products?
- (iv) What were the roles of sociocultural contexts in constituting affordances in the writing class?

1.6 Conceptual Framework

Consistent with the research questions, the study is conceptualized in terms of context and practices. Writing is understood as practices situated within the micro-context of a single event or single occurrence. A single event or occurrence is further conceptualized as a mode of classroom interaction. The study conceives that every lesson in class consists of different phases of activities and as each phase progressed, different modes of interaction will take place. These modes of interaction are characterized by the

teacher's pedagogic goals. Modes as the micro-contexts will be discussed further in Chapter 2.

The micro-context of learning is further recognized as an embedded unit within the L2 classroom context and the institutional context. The study thus posits that the relationships of these contexts are inter-related and dimensional. Writing practices in the micro-context may be impacted by the classroom and institutional requirements. Conversely, classroom and institutional practices may be changed by the micro-context practices that are becoming norms among a group of people.

The term writing practices is conceptualised by referring to Hermes Schmidt (1999) who defines practices as “ways of doing” (p.8) drawing from approaches to writing in higher education. The researcher also draws upon Tsui and Ng's (2010) assertion that people's engagement in practices is largely influenced by their own concerns and these concerns will determine what is seen but sometimes unknown to the participant themselves in their practices. Writing practices is then translated into four areas of inquiry. These areas are instructional discourse, classroom talk, acceptability of writing products, and language learning affordances as indicated in Figure 1.1 below.

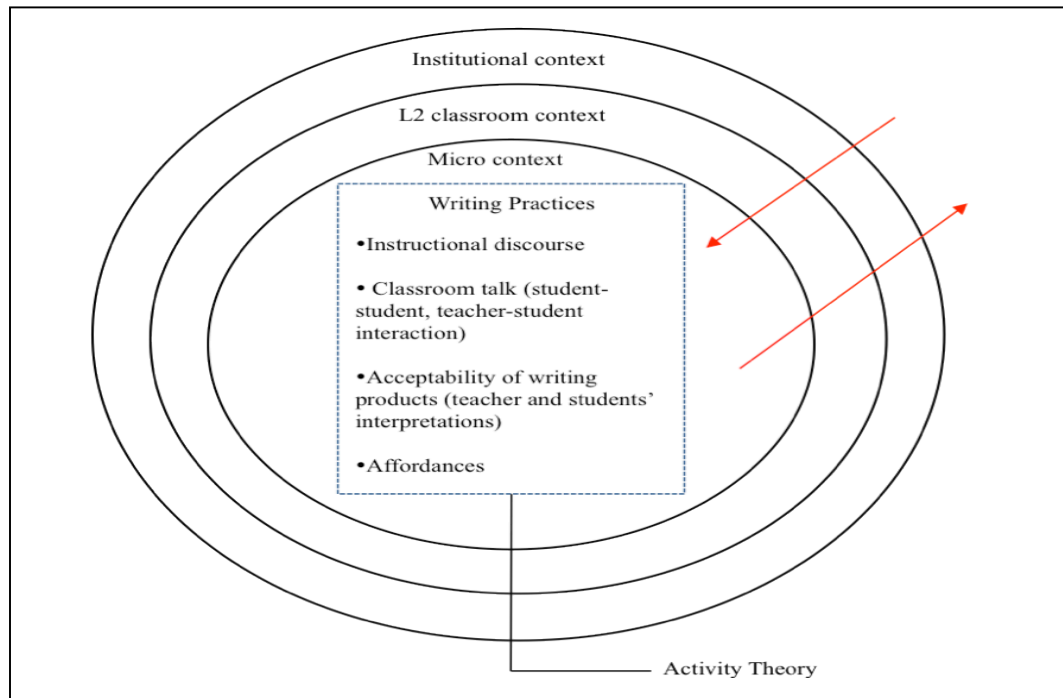


Figure 1.1 The conceptual framework of the study. Drawn from the research questions and Seedhouse (2004) three-way view of context.

In this study, instructional discourse refers to how the teacher went about teaching technical writing. Classroom talk consists of teacher-student and student-student interaction in the writing class. Acceptability level of writing products refers to students' and teacher's interpretation of the acceptability level of the students' writing products. Finally, language affordances are explored to understand what and how properties from the sociocultural context can promote the students' learning of writing. Activity Theory is used to underpin the study and more on this will be discussed in Chapter 2.

1.7 Significance of the Study

The findings from this study will contribute towards a better understanding of writing practices in the emerging discipline in higher education that is understudied. The significance of the study is two-fold.

First, this study fills the gap resulted by the “lack of critical, sociocultural, and qualitative approaches to research in ESL writing in Malaysia” (Tan, 2005, p.8). Findings from the study contribute to establishing a design unit of writing system complemented by a sociocultural flavour which has not been privileged before. The inclusion of the sociocultural aspect in the curriculum as well as teaching instructions will enable students to be recognised as active social participants in their learning and help to promote learners’ autonomy more effectively.

Second, using classroom talk as an instrument to shed light on writing practices contributes to establishing a design of study on writing in higher education. This design of study can be of use to future research on classroom discourse and writing pertaining to the sociocultural perspective. In studying classroom talk to understand writing, the study also contributes to the body of cross-modality research i.e., the intersection and relationship between verbal and written discourses in second language teaching and learning. Findings on classroom talk also contribute directly to existing works on classroom teaching practices, bridging the gap between practitioners and researchers (Mercer and Hobkinson, 2008).

1.8 Operational Definitions of Terms

For clarity purposes, several key terms that will be used throughout this study are defined as follows:

(i) **Technical Education Vocational Training (TEVT)**

Technically- and vocationally-based programmes refers to Technical Education Vocational Training (TEVT) that is also known as Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET). The study will confine its use to TEVT or technically- and vocationally-based programmes to keep the consistency and avoid unnecessary confusion. In Malaysia, TEVT-based programmes are formally offered at certificate and diploma levels in technical or vocational colleges, polytechniques, and community colleges as well as degree level at higher education (Pang, Narunan, & Sim, 2010). TEVT is an education model that places a strong emphasis on practical skills as compared to the emphasis on theoretical knowledge in traditional engineering programmes. A distinctive feature of TEVT-based programmes can be seen in the structure of the curriculum where commonly more than 60% of the technical subject content consists of practical training in the workshop or lab. Prior to graduation, TEVT students are required to have completed their industrial placement training and submitted a final year project report in addition to meeting the required credit hours for their programme.

(ii) Technical writing

Technical writing is a purposeful writing that aims to communicate specific and factual information to specialized groups of audience, such as engineers and medical doctors, and sometimes to general readers (Shelton, 1994). On the site of this study, technical writing is considered a form of formal writing in higher education. It is a main component that consists of various writing tasks packed into the English subjects namely, Professional English 1 and Professional English 2. Some examples of writing topics given under these subjects are proposal writing, formal letters writing, technical report writing, and industrial report writing. From these topics, it can be seen that technical writing is aimed at preparing students for two purposes: (i) the writing of final year project report which in the site of this study is the equivalent to an undergraduate thesis and (ii) future work place writing demands.

(iii) Technical report writing

Technical report writing is a major topic of technical writing offered under the subject named Professional English 2. According to the course outline, this topic occupies seven out of the 14-week duration of Professional English 2. The conventions and mechanics of a technical report taught here is similar to a mini thesis. The topic and content of the report depend largely on the English lecturers (termed as teachers in this study) and sometimes, negotiation between the

students and the lecturer. The report is hence not necessarily technically based as they may sometimes include study on social problems.

(iv) Practices

The term practices as used in this study refers to the teaching and learning of writing, and how teacher and students go about getting writing done. In short, the term is used to encompass the doings related to writing and how participants are engaged in these practices. Tsui and Ng (2010) emphasize that people's engagement in practices is largely influenced by their own concerns and interestingly, these concerns will determine what is seen but sometimes unknown to the participant themselves in their practices.

1.9 Organization of the Thesis

Chapter 1 commences with an introduction on the importance of writing. This is followed by a description of the background in three aspects: The setting, the students, and the subject matter. Next, a discussion on the problems carves out the purpose, objectives and research questions of the study. The conceptualization of the study is further shown in a framework in Figure 1.1. The chapter concludes with the significance of the study.

Chapter 2 reviews how writing in higher education can be approached in various models. The review proceeds to include the literature pertaining to classroom talk with

an emphasis on the different approaches and methods. The principles and related studies on Activity Theory are reviewed, research questions are sharpened and the theoretical framework is explained. Finally, the review is focused on language affordances for a broader perspective to be adopted in the study.

Chapter 3 focuses on the research methodology. The chapter begins with a discussion on the ontological and epistemological beliefs that lead to the positioning of the study and the research approach. Next, a discussion on the research methodology is included to provide the research procedure, sampling, data sources and research instruments. Finally, the chapter explains how data will be analysed and the measures taken to achieve credibility and trustworthiness in the study. In sum, the research methodology was adopted in search of answers to the research questions identified for this study.

Chapter 4 presents and discusses the findings of the case study in accordance to the research questions. The chapter precedes with an overview of how writing is conducted in class, followed by the dominant classroom talk features that characterized the interaction in the writing class. Next, findings of the teacher and students' interpretations of what makes an acceptable technical report and language affordances in the sociocultural context are presented and discussed. Finally, Activity Theory is used to explain the underlying tensions of writing issues and problems.