

DEVELOPING PRE-SCHOOL CHILDREN'S
WRITING SKILLS USING WRITER'S WORKSHOP

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DEVELOPING PRE-SCHOOL CHILDREN'S
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by

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**PENGGUNAAN PROGRAM ‘WRITER’S WORKSHOP’ UNTUK
MEMUPUK KEMAHIRAN MENULIS DALAM KALANGAN
KANAK-KANAK PRA-SEKOLAH**

ABSTRAK

Tesis ini berkaitan kajian masalah kemahiran menulis dalam kalangan kanak-kanak pra-sekolah di Malaysia. Kajian semasa ini memberi tumpuan kepada penggunaan program ‘Writer’s Workshop’ dalam kelas pra-sekolah. Kajian ini berkaitan langkah-langkah dalam program ‘Writer’s Workshop’ yang boleh digunakan untuk meningkatkan prestasi kemahiran menulis dalam kalangan kanak-kanak pra-sekolah. Tesis ini juga membincangkan tentang pemerhatian terhadap perubahan dalam tingkah-laku kanak-kanak pra-sekolah semasa menyertai program ‘Writer’s Workshop’. Tujuan utama kajian ini adalah berkaitan penyelidikan terhadap cara-cara yang efektif untuk meningkatkan prestasi kemahiran menulis dalam kalangan kanak-kanak berdasarkan langkah-langkah dalam program ‘Writer’s Workshop’. Langkah-langkah tersebut melibatkan ‘mini lesson’, ‘independent writing time’, ‘conferencing’ dan ‘sharing time’ yang mungkin dapat memberi impak kepada kanak-kanak pra-sekolah. Reka bentuk kajian ini termasuklah suatu penilaian kemahiran menulis kanak-kanak sebelum dan selepas menyertai program ‘Writer’s Workshop’. Sampel tulisan kanak-kanak yang diperolehi dianalisis dengan menggunakan konsep ‘Beginning Writer’s Continuum’ (NREL, 2010). Pada masa yang sama, data juga dikumpulkan melalui pemerhatian dan soal-selidik yang telah dijalankan secara serentak dalam kajian tersebut. Selain itu, kajian ini juga bertujuan untuk mencatat pemerhatian tentang perubahan terhadap tingkah-laku kanak-kanak pra-sekolah semasa menyertai program ini. Penyelidik berharap data yang dikumpul

boleh memberi gambaran yang lebih jelas tentang perubahan tingkah laku kanak-kanak yang melibatkan perengai, keyakinan, berdikari, idea dan produktiviti. Analisis terhadap perubahan tersebut boleh dilaksanakan dengan menggunakan konsep 'Writing Workshop Competence' (Calkins, 2003). Berdasarkan keputusan yang telah diperolehi, kajian ini dapat membuktikan bahawa prestasi kemahiran menulis dalam kalangan kanak-kanak pra-sekolah telah meningkat selepas menyertai program 'Writer's Workshop'. Pada masa yang sama, program 'Writer's workshop' juga boleh mempengaruhi tingkah-laku kanak-kanak semasa pengajaran menjadi lebih positif. Oleh itu, analisis kajian mendapati bahawa 'Writer's Workshop' boleh dijadikan satu model untuk memberi pengajaran yang efektif kepada kanak-kanak pra-sekolah.

DEVELOPING PRE-SCHOOL CHILDREN'S WRITING SKILLS

USING WRITER'S WORKSHOP

ABSTRACT

The focus of this study examined the use of 'Writer's Workshop' in a pre-school classroom in a Malaysian context. This study investigated the writing development of pre-school children according to the steps in Writer's Workshop as well as the changes in children's progress during the writing process. The main objective of this study examined how pre-school children developed their writing skills through the steps in Writer's Workshop. The steps included mini lesson, independent writing, conferencing and sharing time that might have impacted the writing progress of pre-school children. The research design of this study included a pre- and post- assessment of pre-school children's writing and the results were obtained through analysis of quantitative data collected using the 'Beginning Writer's Continuum' (NREL, 2010). Subsequently, qualitative data were also collected through observations and interviews during the process. The second objective of this study observed the changes in pre-school children during the process in Writer's Workshop. The researcher collected more in-depth information as how pre-school children changed their writing attitude, confident, independent and how these changes influence children's ability of generating idea for writing and productivity. The results were obtained through analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data using the 'Writing Workshop Competence' (Calkins, 2003). The findings of this study indicated that children's writing levels improved. Writer's Workshop could lead to improvement in children's writing skills and also, resulted in greater writing independence, higher confidence and improved attitude towards

writing. In addition, the children have shown improvement in their ability to generate better ideas in writing and subsequently, increased their productivity level during the process. The results of this study found that Writer's Workshop is a model, which can be used to effectively teach writing to pre-school children.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.0 Introduction

This study is conducted as a case study approach for a group of pre-school children in a local K2 pre-school classroom. K2 refers to intermediate students, 6 years of age, who are at their final year in pre-school. These children will be entering formal education in primary schools in a year's time. The purpose of this study examines how pre-school children develop their writing skills through 'Writer's Workshop'.

1.1 Background of the Study

The Ministry of Education Malaysia (MOE) has given serious attention to the development of pre-school education in the nation. Since 2010, all the pre-schools in Malaysia follow a similar National Preschool Curriculum Standard (NPCS; MOE, 2010). Pre-school education aims at developing the potential of children aged four to six years by nurturing their potential in all aspects of development that include mastering basic language skills and positive attitudes as preparation to enter primary school. Writing is considered as one of the important aspects of literacy development for pre-school children, according to the standard curriculum of 4M: reading, writing, counting and reasoning (MOE, 2010).

National Preschool Curriculum Standard (NPCS; MOE, 2010) is a form of achievement indicator for pre-school children (MOE, 2010). Based on the standard of learning writing as stated in NPCS (MOE, 2010), children of aged 5 and above are required to master the skill of writing letters (upper-case and lower-case) and the ability to copy words and sentences correctly. The curriculum has clearly emphasized the importance of good writing skills, even though the children are still at pre-school level. Hence, writing becomes one of the most important objectives to prepare children for primary schools.

Graves (1983) pointed out that, children want to write and they want to write from the beginning of school. Although the children's writing may not look like words or just some scribbles, their attempts to write are part of the literacy learning process. Children's introduction to writing begins in the pre-school years and they can develop writing skills by getting a head start with some simple activities (Graves, 1983). Pre-school provides the environment for children to embark on the writing-learning process (Jacobs, 2007).

Writing is important to young children according to Wood (2004). Many preschool teachers recognize the importance of early writing by making writing materials available in their classrooms and provide children the opportunities to write during the school day (Gerde & Bingham, 2012). Calkins and Parsons (2003) stated that it is necessary to engage children to write daily and if the lessons meet children's current instructional needs, their development as writers will be astonishing.

However, promoting early writing skills at pre-school is a great challenge to many early childhood educators. There has been a growing emphasis on structured learning in today's pre-school that intends to follow a more demanding curriculum than in the past. Appropriate instructional methods are necessary to meet these academics demands, which include the need for children to engage in writing. The increased academic expectations have raised concerns about literacy instruction practice in pre-school (Joyce et al., 2003).

Based on the preliminary report of the National Education Development Plan (MOE, 2012a), only 12% of 125 observations of teaching have implemented in best instructional practices, while 50% indicate that instruction imparted is not satisfactory. This is because the lessons delivered by teachers are uninteresting and passive. Teachers should be creative in preparing or selecting appropriate teaching materials and know the right contents to deliver to children (Abdul Rasid et al., 2012; Sharifah Nor and Aliza, 2011).

In Malaysia, although there is a growing concern on the quality of writing among children, but studies on pre-school children's writing achievement are still lacking especially on English language. Most of the studies focused on issues related to pre-school children's poor reading skills and their inability to recognize alphabets (Nor Hashimah and Yahya, 2003; Felicia Michael 2009; Ai and Noor Suriani, 2012), and the language of their interest are mainly on Bahasa Malaysia which is the main language for Malaysia.

In an effort to explore why writing has not been properly taught to children in Malaysia, several local studies are found. Siti, Rohaty and Zamri (2015) revealed that pre-school teachers have no specific approach in the teaching of writing to pre-school children. Their findings show that pre-school teachers often use copying, drills and questions as the main strategies in teaching writing and this condition can cause imbalance in the level of literacy in pre-school.

Similarly, Ng and Yeo (2014) pointed out that most teachers are lacking of adequate knowledge on the use of different instructional strategies to teach children. The method of teaching writing was found to be lacking. Early intervention in pre-school is definitely better than later remediation (Ng and Yeo, 2014). Siti, Rohaty and Zamri (2015) suggested that teachers should adopt variety of methods, techniques and activities in the teaching of writing, in order to achieve the goal of building quality education. There is a need to find possible solutions to bridge the gap.

Most of the children's writing activities in the pre-schools are drilling and repetition exercises which seem to be the common practices like most of the pre-school teachers, as mentioned earlier (Siti, Rohaty and Zamri, 2015). It is found to be uninteresting and passive (MOE, 2012a). This type of writing activities become routine and daily practices in the classroom. Eventually, the children will not find any enjoyment in writing and may not be progressing well.

It has been the researcher's objective to find an effective writing program that can help pre-school children. The challenge to establish a strong writing foundation to K2 pre-school children is crucial because they will be entering to primary school level in a year's time. Opportunity to write on regular basis is limited due to time constraint in the children's daily learning schedule. Therefore, finding a suitable writing program for the benefits of pre-school children becomes vital.

1.2 Problem Statement

In this section, problems in writing among Malaysian school students are presented. Writing can be considered as a difficult skill to acquire among children as compared to the skills of reading, listening and speaking (Berman and Cheng, 2010). Nesamalar, Saratha and Teh (2001) agreed that in the context of Malaysia, writing is the skill that most students are least proficient in.

In Malaysia, local studies on pre-school children's writing development are very limited (Hashim Othman et al, 2006; Mahzan Arshad, 2003). Due to limited resources, teachers might have neglected to include proper writing instruction for the children and the results could be rather worrying (Calkins, 1986). As a consequence, children may suffer in writing development and conventions (Wohlwend, 2008). Writing, as one of the four important skills that has been emphasized in standard curriculum of 4M (NPCS; MOE, 2010), it becomes an important aspect that early educators should not ignore.

Learning experience at pre-school level has been stressed by MOE (2010) as an early preparation for children before entering formal education of primary one. Writing is a difficult skill to acquire and it impacts all children particularly pre-school children who may not be ready. Early writing is one of the best predictors of children's later reading success (National Early Literacy Panel (NELP), 2008). Therefore, providing pre-school children with rich writing experiences can lay foundation for literacy learning; and helping them to take ownership of writing as they gained confidence with each writing milestone became essential (Richgels, 2003).

Although the Ministry of Education in Malaysia has provided a commendable platform for the development of writing skills as one of the important objectives in pre-schools, but it appeared that the results of pre-school's writing skills as expected were not encouraging. The data in 2008, as reported in The Star dated 5th September 2012, revealed that there were 54,000 year-one primary students that primarily completed pre-school identified with low literacy skills and they needed to attend the early intervention reading and writing classes as a remedy.

In 2013, the reported data in The Star dated 5th September 2015, revealed that there were still 29.80% of the year-one primary students who had yet to acquire some basic English literacy skills. The results were considered rather disappointing because there were still many children who had not been properly taught of their basic literacy skills, although most of them had already gone through the pre-school education. This situation is alarming, and indicates that pre-school children's writing was still below the MOE's (2010) standard and they need remedial action.

Che Zanariah and Fadzilah (2011) highlighted that teachers should act positively towards the importance of writing skills and adopt better teaching strategies. The growth of literacy skills is a vital part of a child's overall development. It is the foundation for doing well at school, socializing with others and developing independence.

The ability to read and write does not develop naturally without careful planning and instruction (IRA and NAEYC, 1998). Writing is a complex process for children and they need adult guidance to support the acquisition of it (Vygotsky, 1978). According to Olness (2005), teaching writing is a structured situation where children are guided through the steps correctly. Abdul Rasid (2011) agreed that high ability and achievement in writing skills and reading can improve pre-school children learning proficiency in language. Teaching writing can help pre-school children to build awareness of language literacy (Mahzan, 2012).

Siti, Rohaty and Zamri (2015) as well as Ng and Yeo (2014) highlighted that most of the pre-school teachers are not sure of the appropriate strategies used in teaching writing to pre-school children. Most of them use direct instruction such as drilling and copying. Siti, Rohaty and Zamri (2015) commented that the level of school readiness before entering formal schooling is important for pre-school children because it depends on their experiences at the pre-school.

Siti, Rohaty and Zamri (2013) further claimed that teachers have not provided sufficient opportunity for pre-school children to practice what they have learned through writing activities. According to Browne (1993), opportunity should be given to pre-school children to write so that they can form letters, build words and sentences. The quality of children's writing in pre-school has a great effect on their future writing ability during the elementary years (Kissel, 2008).

From the above discussions, lacking of appropriate strategy to teach writing could be one of the determining factors that may have deterred children's writing development. The findings (Che Zanariah and Fadzilah, 2011; Siti, Rohaty and Zamri, 2015) suggested that teachers should explore various teaching strategies for the benefits of children. The current study becomes viable as there is a need to explore alternative approach to teach writing to pre-school children.

A primary goal of this study is to increase opportunities for children to write through a structured and guided writing process (Olness, 2005). During the writing process, adult guidance will be needed to support children (Vygotsky, 1978). When children write on regular basis, their writing skills will show improvement (Calkins, 1986), and this becomes the purpose of this study.

Many research studies in recent years have focused on children's literacy development and several writing instructions emerged such as 'Writer's Workshop' and 'Interactive Writing'. These are the two most frequently recommended writing instructional methods, which build on the importance of writing in early literacy (Johnson, 2010; Mester, 2011; Jentzen, 2010; Boroski, 2004).

The major differences of these two methods are the role of teacher and the degree of support given to children during writing process. For this study, Writer's Workshop is more appropriate. It is a writing technique that can build children's fluency in writing through continuous, repeated exposure to the process of writing, which is very much needed for this study. Moreover, this approach supports adult guidance which is an important element for children's development in this study. Most importantly, the implementation of writer's workshop has received numerous positive findings from researchers: Behymer, 2003; Calkins, 2006; Johnson, 2010; Mester, 2011; Jones, 2014.

Some of these research studies on Writer's Workshop that primarily focus on pre-school children (Johnson, 2010; Mester, 2011) have concluded that Writer's Workshop is an effective framework which can be used to teach writing to younger children. Dorn and Soffos (2001) believed that Writer's Workshop is a place where children can learn the processes of how to write, and through meaningful interactions with knowledgeable adults, children can learn to become writers. Their findings have strengthened the researcher's determination to experiment this writing workshop with pre-school children and how they can benefit from it.

Implementing Writer's Workshop into pre-school classroom can be a possible solution to address the gap by incorporating daily writing activities for pre-school children. Through the implementation, the researcher hopes this process will create a new writing experience to the children, and at the same time, the researcher hopes to see changes, enjoyment and development in the children's writing progress.

Subsequently, the researcher also hopes teachers will gain a better understanding of the method and how this can influence the writing skills of the pre-school children which can benefit to both teachers and children.

The focus of this study is to examine the progress of pre-school children's writing according to the steps in Writer's Workshop and to determine how it can influence pre-school children's writing skills during the process. There is a question of whether Writer's Workshop provides the similar result if it is conducted in the Malaysian context for pre-school children. The goal is to use this information to effectively assist pre-school children in developing their writing skills. The outcome will serve as a reference for early childhood educators, especially in the Malaysian context.

1.3 Purpose of the Study

The main purpose of this study is to examine how pre-school children develop their writing skills through Writer's Workshop and how it influences the children during the process. The research objectives of this study are listed as below:

1. To investigate the progress of pre-school children's writing according to the steps in Writer's Workshop:
 - (a) Mini Lesson
 - (b) Independent Writing
 - (c) Conferencing
 - (d) Sharing Time

2. To examine the changes in pre-school children during the process in Writer's Workshop:
 - (i) Children's attitude towards writing.
 - (ii) Children's confidence level in writing.
 - (iii) Children's ability to generate ideas for writing.
 - (iv) Children's ability to write independently.
 - (v) Children's productivity in writing.

1.4 Research Questions

In order to achieve the objectives of this research study, the following research questions are considered in the study:

RQ 1: How do pre-school children progress in their writing skills according to the steps in Writer's Workshop?

- (a) To what extent does the first component, *mini lesson*, help to improve pre-school children's writing progress?
- (b) To what extent does the second component, *independent writing time*, develop pre-school children's writing skills?
- (c) To what extent does the third component, *conferencing*, improve pre-school children's writing skills?
- (d) To what extent does the fourth component, *sharing time*, help to develop independent writers among pre-school children?

RQ 2: How do the pre-school children improve during the process in Writer's Workshop?

- (i) To what extent do the children improve their writing attitudes?
- (ii) To what extent do the children improve in their confidence level in writing?
- (iii) To what extent do the children improve in generating ideas for writing?
- (iv) To what extent do the children improve in their independence in writing?
- (v) To what extent do the children increase the productivity in writing?

1.5 Assumptions, Limitations, Scope and Delimitations

1.5.1 Assumptions

The researcher assumes that the selected participants are representative of the total enrollment of 6 years old pre-school children. The researcher involved in the conduct of this study is knowledgeable about Writer's Workshop and its components. It is also assumed that mini lesson, independent writing, conferencing and sharing take place in the allocated classroom for three days at 45 minutes in each session.

The researcher assumes that all the selected participants worked to the best of their ability while engaged in Writer's Workshop. It is assumed that mini lesson was adequately taught to the participants with sufficient time for independent writing. During conferencing sessions, the participants are assumed to share in an open and honest fashion. Some of the participants who have difficulty expressing orally of what they wanted to say due to their limited English proficient, their efforts would be focused on their writing or drawing as an evidence of their progress. Lastly, the researcher assumes that the participants are willingly to participate in the sharing time.

1.5.2 Limitations

This study is limited to studying the progress of pre-school children's writing according to the steps in Writer's Workshop which include mini lesson, independent writing time, conferencing and sharing time. The writing workshop competence studied is also limited to explore the changes in children's writing attitude, confidence level, ability to generate ideas for writing, independence in writing and increase in productivity of their writing work.

A major limitation of this study is time. The experiment is conducted for a period of ten weeks due to time constraints of the study. The tight schedule of the children's daily programme at pre-school did not allow a longer time frame for this study. Writing is a complex skill that developed gradually, and this may be difficult to measure children's improvement in writing after a short period of time.

Another limitation is the sample size, which may have little impact of the overall results. Variables other than instructional strategies, such as English proficiency, family's education background or home environment of the participants, may have also impacted the results.

1.5.3 Scope

The scope of this study involves pre-school children at a local private pre-school. This pre-school provides an English medium environment to the children. The K2 pre-school children, aged six years, contributed to almost 30% of the total enrollment of students in this pre-school. There are four classes of K2 children in this pre-school with a total of 42. The demographic of this K2 group of children are 38.10% Chinese students, 28.60% Malay students and 33.30% Indians.

The participants for this study are chosen from the four classes of K2 pre-school children who were registered with this pre-school. The classes are Class A, Class B, Class C and Class D. The researcher has used purposive sampling to select the sample group of this study. The researcher wants to select a sample group with the characteristics that are relevant to the objective of this study.

The researcher needs this type of sample group to examine the impact of Writer's Workshop on the writing development of children with a range of needs and understandings. The selected group includes children who are struggling in writing, children who are average in their writing skills and lastly, children who can write above average. Most importantly, these participants have no previous knowledge about Writer's Workshop as the requirement for this study.

1.5.4 Delimitations

This study is limited to the implementation of Writer's Workshop into a local K2 pre-school classroom. K2 refers to the children of aged six, who are at their final year in pre-school education. The researcher limited this research to focus on the use of four components in Writer's Workshop to develop pre-school children's writing skills as well as their dispositions towards writing during the process. The four components involve mini lesson, independent writing, conferencing and sharing time.

In the literature review, the studies are limited to cover on the importance of writing, emergent writing instruction, authentic approach in writing, the origin and components of Writer's Workshop as well as the theoretical perspectives and previous studies that supported this study.

The researcher has chosen a mixed method for this study, involved both qualitative and quantitative studies, to collect data from different perspectives to provide a better understanding of the research problems. The researcher has limited the use of purposive sampling to select the sample group for this study, compared to other sampling methods. This sampling method is appropriate in this study to select the sample group that has the characteristics relevant to the research questions.

The selection of sample group is limited to a sampling of four K2 pre-school classes who were registered with this pre-school. Experimental group is not considered in this study as this is a case study approach for a selected sample group. In this study, the researcher has limited to a total of ten participants who can demonstrate the most balanced range of writing abilities. The sample group includes those who are struggling in writing (below average), those in the average level and those who can write above average for this study.

The collection of data, both quantitative and qualitative, are limited to three times in a week for 45 minutes per session during the duration of ten-week study. The researcher has conducted observation checklists, under the supervision of two pre-school teachers, in each week during the ten-week study to avoid any unfairness in the data collection. To ensure confidentiality, the researcher referred to each participant using an alphabet letter throughout the study.

1.6 Conceptual and Operational Definitions

For the purpose of this study, the following terms have been defined as follows:

- i) **Writer's Workshop:** It is defined as a writing technique that build children's fluency in writing through continuous, repeated exposure to the process of writing. It has been developed from the early work of Donald Graves (1985).

In the current study, the teacher guides the pre-school children through a writing process in a writing workshop (Calkins, 2003) that includes four major components: mini lesson, independent writing, conferencing and sharing time. In the daily writing workshops, children engage in the creation of a variety of written products with instructional assistance from the teacher.

- ii) **Writing Skill:** It is defined as the knowledge and skills needed for writing proficiency at pre-school level. These specific abilities help writers to put their thoughts into words in a meaningful form to convey message.

In the current study, the writing skill is evaluated as the ability to express oneself through writing in an organized way of producing ideas, clear content and word choice, sentence fluency with proper conventions.

- iii) **Writing Development:** It is defined as the writing growth that a child has developed from the initial stage until the end of the writing process.

In the current study, it is a variable that measured using the 'Beginning Writer's Continuum' (NREL, 2010). Each child's writing development in the pre- and post-test is compared to find out how much the child has improved based on six important criteria. A rating score, from the scale of 1 to 5, is assigned to the pre-test and post-test of each child's writing sample for evaluation of the writing growth.

iv) **Writing Workshop Competence:** It is defined as an assessment of a child's writing competence based on five characteristics during the writing workshop.

In the current study, it is used to measure the changes in a child's writing competence during the writing workshop. Each characteristic or variable is measured according to the level of improvement with a rating scale of 0 to 3 using the 'writing workshop competence', which is adapted from Calkins (2003). The scorings of each variable that collected over a period of ten weeks are evaluated to measure the changes.

1.7 Summary

This chapter presents an overview of the current study. In this study, the background of the current study and statement of problems related to the use of Writer's Workshop in developing pre-school children's writing skills have been explored. This chapter provides statement of the problem in depth that highlighted the issue and factors that may hinder the development of children's writing skills.

A primary goal of this study is to increase opportunities for children to write through a structured and guided writing process. Implementing Writer's Workshop into pre-school classroom can be a possible solution to address the gap.

With Writer's Workshop being integrated into daily practices in pre-school classroom, the researcher hopes to observe and gain insights into whether Writer's Workshop that promoted effective learning in a teacher-learning environment and at the same time, allowing children to improve their writing skills with regular practices. This is followed by the research objectives and questions that the study set out to answer.

Therefore, it is hoped that educators in early childhood can have a better understanding of Writer's Workshop that may serve to be an alternative teaching strategy to them in pre-schools. Finally, the key terms used in the study are defined at the end of the chapter. The following chapter is devoted to the discussions on literature review for the current study.