

**THE EFFECTS OF PRE-TASK PLANNING TIME AND TASK
STRUCTURE ON SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNER'S
WRITING PERFORMANCE**

by

KEIVAN SEYYEDI

Thesis submitted in fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

July 2014

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, I would like express my deep and sincere gratitude to my supervisor, Dr. Shaik Abdul Malik for his detailed and constructive comments on every inch of my work. I am also grateful for his understanding, continuous support, moral encouragement and personal guidance throughout my PhD journey, particularly during those difficult as well challenging moments. His support has been the key to my success. It has been a real pleasure to work with him and I am deeply indebted to him.

I would also like to thank Professor Rashid and Dr. Hazri Jamil from the School of Educational Studies, USM who always encouraged me during my study in the School of Education. I would also like to thank my thesis examiners, for the insightful comments and reviews of my work.

I am obliged to the staff and students of Language School, USM, whose help and cooperation gave me the chance to operationalize this study.

Last but not least, my deepest gratitude goes to my wonderful mother, my amazing wife and my lovely children, Sana and Sani for their constant support and encouragement and for making my life easier.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	ii
TABLE OF CONTENTS	iii
LIST OF TABLES	ix
LIST OF FIGURES	xiii
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS	xv
LIST OF PUBLICATIONS	xvi
ABSTRAK (BM)	xvii
ABSTRACT (ENGLISH)	xx

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction	1
1.2 Background of the Study	2
1.2.1 English Language Teaching (ELT) in Malaysia	2
1.2.2 The Malaysian University English Test (MUET)	5
1.2.3 Writing in Malaysia	8
1.3 Statement of the Problem	10
1.4 Rationale of the Study	13
1.5 Objectives of the Study	18
1.6 Research Questions	15
1.7 Hypotheses	15
1.8 Significance of the Study	16

1.9	Limitations of the Study.....	19
1.10	Definition of Key Terms	21
1.11	Organisation of the Study.....	22
1.12	Summary	23

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1	Introduction	24
2.2	Approaches to Language Teaching.....	24
2.2.1	Grammar-based Approaches.....	44
2.2.2	Communication-based Approaches	45
2.2.3	Task-based Language Approaches	45
2.3	Task Definition.....	30
2.4	Task-based Syllabus.....	30
2.5	Task Types, Task Variables, and Task Dimensions	30
2.6	Narrative Tasks	33
2.7	Aspects of Production: Complexity, Accuracy, and Fluency	35
2.8	Measuring CAF.....	38
2.9	Tasks in Second Language Acquisition Research	43
2.9.1	A Psycholinguistic Approach to Interaction.....	44
2.9.2	A Sociocultural Approach to Interaction.....	45
2.9.3	Structure-focused Tasks.....	45
2.9.4	A Cognitive Perspective	48

2.10	Task Complexity	51
2.11	Limited Attentional Capacity Model and the Cognition Hypothesis.....	52
2.12	Allocation of Attention between Aspects of Performance.....	56
2.13	Task Characteristics	61
2.14	Task Planning Time	63
2.15	Types of Task Planning Time	68
2.16	Task Type and Output.....	70
2.17	Previous Research on Task Planning Time and Writing	75
2.18	Task Structure	81
2.19	Lessons Learned from Past Studies.....	85
2.20	Theoretical Framework	86
2.20.1	Information Processing Theory and Limited Attentional Capacity	87
2.21	Conceptual Framework	90
2.22	Summary	93

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

3.1	Introduction.....	95
3.2	Independent Variables.....	95
3.3	Research Design.....	96
3.4	Participants.....	97
3.5	Research Instrument.....	100
3.5.1	Narrative Task.....	100

3.5.2	Planning Conditions.....	101
3.6	Measures of Language Production (CAF)	102
3.7	Instrument Validity	105
3.8	Instrument Reliability.....	106
3.9	Statistical Analysis	108
3.10	Ethical Issues.....	109
3.11	Summary	109

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

4.1	Introduction	110
4.2	Data Analysis	110
4.2.1	The Effect of Planning Condition.....	110
4.2.1.1	Structured Task; Complexity Measure.....	111
4.2.1.2	Structured Task: Accuracy Measure	113
4.2.1.3	Structured Task; Fluency Measure.....	115
4.2.1.4	Unstructured Task: Complexity Measure	117
4.2.1.5	Unstructured Task; Accuracy Measure	119
4.2.1.6	Unstructured Task; Fluency Measure	121
4.2.2	The Effect of Task Structure.....	123
4.2.2.1	Planned Condition: Complexity Measure	123
4.2.2.2	Planned Condition: Accuracy Measure.....	125
4.2.2.3	Planned Condition; Fluency Measure	127

4.2.2.4	Unplanned Condition; Complexity Measure	129
4.2.2.5	Unplanned Condition: Accuracy Measure	131
4.2.2.6	Unplanned Condition: Fluency Measure	133
4.3	Summary	135
4.3.1	Descriptive Statistics.....	135
4.3.2	Summary of Hypotheses.....	140
4.4	Summary	143
 CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION		
5.1	Introduction	144
5.2	Discussion	144
5.2.1	The Effect of Pre-task planning Time.....	144
5.2.2	The Effect of Task Structure.....	147
5.3	Pedagogical Implications	150
5.4	Conclusion and Summary	152
5.5	Suggestions for Further Research	154
 REFERENCES		156
 APPENDICES		179
Appendix A: Studies Investigating the Effects of Rehearsal and Strategic Planning on CAF		179

Appendix B: Background Information about Participants.....	188
Appendix C: Instructions for Calculating CAF	193
Appendix D: Task Given to the Participants in Each Group	193
Appendix E: Instructions Given to the Participants in Each Group.....	195
Appendix F: Raw Scores of the Participants	196

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1.1	MUET Bands and Descriptions	7
Table 2.1	The Triadic Componential Framework for Task Classification Categories, Analytic Procedures, and Characteristics	55
Table 2.2	Task Characteristics and Influence Upon Performance and Research Basis	62
Table 2.3	Kellogg's (2001) Model of Working Memory in Writing	92
Table 3.1	Tasks and Their Design	97
Table 3.2	Participant Characteristics	98
Table 3.3	Test of Homogeneity of Variances for Planned and Unplanned Groups	104
Table 4.1	Group Statistics for Comparing Complexity of Structured Task in Planned vs. Unplanned Conditions	111
Table 4.2	Independent Samples Test to Compare Complexity of Structured Task in Planned vs. Unplanned Conditions	112
Table 4.3	Group Statistics for Comparing Accuracy of Structured Task in Planned vs. Unplanned Conditions	113
Table 4.4	Independent Samples Test to Compare Accuracy of Structured Task in Planned vs. Unplanned Conditions	114
Table 4.5	Group Statistics for Comparing Fluency of Structured Task in	116

Planned vs. Unplanned Conditions

Table 4.6	Independent Samples Test to Compare Fluency of Structured Task in Planned vs. Unplanned Conditions	116
Table 4.7	Group Statistics for Comparing Complexity of Unstructured Task in Planned vs. Unplanned Conditions	117
Table 4.8	Independent Samples Test to Complexity of Unstructured Task in Planned vs. Unplanned Conditions	118
Table 4.9	Group Statistics for Comparing Accuracy of Unstructured Task in Planned vs. Unplanned Conditions	119
Table 4.10	Independent Samples Test to Compare Accuracy of Unstructured Task in Planned vs. Unplanned Conditions	120
Table 4.11	Group Statistics for Comparing Fluency of Unstructured Task in Condition of Structured vs. Unstructured Tasks	121
Table 4.12	Independent Samples Test to Compare Fluency of Unstructured Task in Planned vs. Unplanned Conditions	122
Table 4.13	Paired Samples Statistics for Comparing Complexity in Planned Condition of Structured vs. Unstructured Tasks	124
Table 4.14	Paired Samples Test to Compare Complexity in Planned Condition of Structured vs. Unstructured Tasks	124
Table 4.15	Paired Samples Statistics for Comparing Accuracy in Planned Condition of Structured vs. Unstructured Tasks	125

Table 4.16	Paired Samples Test to Compare Accuracy in Planned Condition of Structured vs. Unstructured Tasks	126
Table 4.17	Paired Samples Statistics for Comparing Fluency in Planned Condition of Structured vs. Unstructured Tasks	127
Table 4.18	Paired Samples Test to Compare Fluency in Planned Condition of Structured vs. Unstructured Tasks	128
Table 4.19	Paired Samples Statistics for Comparing Complexity in Unplanned Condition of Structured vs. Unstructured Tasks	129
Table 4.20	Paired Samples Test to Compare Complexity in Unplanned Condition of Structured vs. Unstructured Tasks	130
Table 4.21	Paired Samples Statistics for Comparing Accuracy in Unplanned Condition of Structured vs. Unstructured Tasks	131
Table 4.22	Paired Samples Test to Compare Accuracy in Unplanned Condition of Structured vs. Unstructured Tasks	132
Table 4.23	Paired Samples Statistics for Comparing Fluency in Unplanned Condition of Structured vs. Unstructured Tasks	134
Table 4.24	Paired Samples Test to Compare Fluency in Unplanned Condition of Structured vs. Unstructured Tasks	134
Table 4.25	Descriptive Statistics for the Complexity of the Four Conditions	135
Table 4.26	Descriptive Statistics for the Accuracy of the Four Conditions	137

Table 4.27	Descriptive Statistics for the Fluency of the Four Conditions	139
Table 4.28	Summary of Hypotheses	141

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 2.1	Types of Task Planning Time (Ellis, 2005)	69
Figure 2.2	Information Processing Theory (Huitit, 2003)	88
Figure 2.3	Baddeley's (2007) Working Memory System	89
Figure 2.4	Theoretical and Conceptual Framework of Pre-task Planning Time and Task Structure Effects on Written Performance (CAF)	93
Figure 4.1	Mean Differences in the Rate of Structured Task Complexity between Planned vs. Unplanned Conditions	113
Figure 4.2	Mean Differences in the Rate of Structured Task Accuracy between Planned vs. Unplanned Conditions	115
Figure 4.3	Mean Differences in the Rate of Structured Task Fluency between Planned vs. Unplanned Conditions	117
Figure 4.4	Mean Differences in the Rate of Unstructured Task Complexity between Planned vs. Unplanned Conditions	119
Figure 4.5	Mean Differences in the Rate of Unstructured Task Accuracy between Planned vs. Unplanned Conditions	121
Figure 4.6	Mean Differences in the Rate of Unstructured Task Fluency between Planned vs. Unplanned Conditions	123
Figure 4.7	Mean Differences in the Rate of Complexity between Structured vs. Unstructured Tasks under the Planned Condition	125

Figure 4.8	Mean Differences in the Rate of Accuracy between Structured vs. Unstructured Tasks under the Planned Condition	127
Figure 4.9	Mean Differences in the Rate of Fluency between Structured vs. Unstructured Tasks under the Planned Condition	129
Figure 4.10	Mean Differences in the Rate of Complexity between Structured vs. Unstructured Tasks under the Unplanned Condition	131
Figure 4.11	Mean Differences in the Rate of Accuracy between Structured vs. Unstructured Tasks under the Unplanned Condition	133
Figure 4.12	Mean Differences in the Rate of Fluency between Structured vs. Unstructured Tasks under the Unplanned Condition	135
Figure 4.13	Mean Differences in the rate of Complexity under the Four Conditions	136
Figure 4.14	Mean Differences in the rate of Accuracy under the Four Conditions	138
Figure 4.15	Mean Differences in the rate of Fluency under the Four Conditions	140

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

No.	Abbreviations	Full Form
1	CAF	complexity, accuracy, fluency
2	CLT	communicative language teaching
3	CPU	central unit processing
4	EFC	error-free clauses
5	EFL	English as a foreign language
6	ESL	English as a second language
7	IL	interlanguage
8	IP	information processing
9	L1	first language
10	L2	second language
11	LTM	long-term memory
12	MOE	Ministry of Education
13	MUET	Malaysian University English Test
14	SLA	second language Acquisition
15	SR	sensory register
16	STM	short-term memory
17	TBLT	task-based language teaching
18	TBT	task-based teaching
19	TSLT	task-supported language teaching
20	USM	Universiti Sains Malaysia
21	VSSP	visuo-spatial sketchpad

LIST OF PUBLICATIONS

JOURNALS:

1. Seyyedi, K., Mohamed Ismail, S., Orang, M., & Sharafi Nejad, M. (2013). The Effect of Pre-Task Planning Time on L2 Learners' Narrative Writing Performance, *6*(12), pp. 1-10.
2. Seyyedi, K., & Mohamed Ismail, S. (2012). Task-based instruction. *International Journal of Linguistics*, *4*(3), pp. 242-251.
3. Seyyedi, K., & Mohamed Ismail, S. (2012). Grammar from context: The effect of explicit focus on form instruction in learning English question formation. *Language in India*, pp. 485-495.
4. Raftari, S., Seyyedi, K., & Mohamed Ismail, S. (2012). Reading strategy research around the world. *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science Invention*, *1*(1), pp. 24-30.

**KESAN MASA PERANCANGAN PRA-TUGASAN DAN
STRUKTUR TUGASAN TERHADAP PENCAPAIAN
PENULISAN PELAJAR BAHASA KEDUA**

ABSTRAK

Tumpuan utama kajian ini adalah untuk mengkaji bagaimana masa perancangan pratugasan mempengaruhi prestasi penulisan pelajar bahasa kedua (L2) apabila melaksanakan tugas berstruktur berbanding tugas tidak berstruktur. Peserta kajian ini terdiri daripada 50 orang pelajar ijazah pertama yang sedang mengikuti pengajian di Universiti Sains Malaysia, Pulau Pinang. Semua peserta memperolehi band empat dalam peperiksaan MUET (Malaysian University English Test). Peserta kajian dipilih secara rawak dan dibahagikan kepada dua kumpulan yang mempunyai bilangan peserta yang sama jumlahnya, iaitu kumpulan yang melaksanakan masa perancangan pratugasan dan kumpulan yang tidak melaksanakan masa perancangan pratugasan. Setiap kumpulan diminta bercerita dua jenis cerita yang berbeza, iaitu secara berstruktur dan tidak berstruktur di dalam dua keadaan iaitu melaksanakan masa perancangan pratugasan dan tidak melaksanakan masa perancangan pratugasan. Peserta dalam kumpulan yang melaksanakan masa perancangan pratugasan dikehendaki merancang persembahan selama 10 minit dan membuat catatan sebelum menulis tugas utama penulisan. Sebaliknya, kumpulan tanpa masa perancangan pratugasan memulakan penulisan dengan segera. Prestasi penulisan peserta diukur dari aspek kekompleksan ketepatan dan kelancaran (complexity, accuracy, and fluency, CAF). Bagi menguji cara bagaimana dua variabel tidak bersandar daripada masa perancangan pratugasan dan struktur tugas memberi kesan terhadap variabel bersandar, skor kasar peserta dimasukkan ke

dalam perisian komputer SPSS (versi 20). Kesan daripada perancangan, pemboleh ubah antara-peserta, dianalisis menggunakan ujian t sampel tak bersandar Ujian t sampel berpasangan digunakan untuk menentukan impak daripada struktur tugas, pemboleh ubah antara peserta pada prestasi peserta. Keputusan menunjukkan bahawa masa perancangan pratugasan secara signifikan telah menggalakkan kelancaran dan kompleksan antara kumpulan apabila peserta melaksanakan tugas berstruktur tetapi aspek ketepatan tidak menunjukkan keputusan yang signifikan. Senentara itu, keputusan analisis statistik menunjukkan bahawa pelajar tidak mendapat faedah daripada masa perancangan pratugasan dalam aspek kompleksian, kelancaran dan ketepatan apabila melaksanakan tugas tidak berstruktur. Akhirnya, analisis statistik menunjukkan bahawa struktur tugas mempunyai kesan yang signifikan terhadap ketepatan dan kelancaran daripada prestasi penulisan pelajar apabila dirancang terlebih dahulu. Sebaliknya, kekompleksan daripada prestasi penulisan pelajar tidak ditingkatkan oleh struktur tugas yang dirancang. Manakala, struktur tugas tidak menjejaskan aspek kekompleksan dan kelancaran, di samping menggalakkan ketepatan walaupun dilaksanakan tanpa perancangan. Dapatan kajian ini menguatkan pengetahuan tentang proses kognitif L2 yang dicadangkan oleh teori pemrosesan maklumat. Selanjutnya, ia mencadangkan pelaksanaan dan teori dalam prestasi penulisan L2 pedagogi bagi para pelajar dan juga para guru. Operasi masa perancangan pratugasan dan struktur teks membolehkan ia diadaptasi dengan mudah bagi konteks pengajaran. Berdasarkan tugas ini dalam konteks pedagogi akan menggalakkan kelancaran, kekompleksan dan ketepatan. Apabila tugas dilakukan pada situasi yang berbeza, maka radikal yang terhasil juga berbeza. Faktor lain yang boleh mempengaruhi prestasi senasas pengujiannya adalah: tahap kemahiran pelajar atau situasi komunikasi, dan ciri-ciri tugas, yang telah ditunjukkan dengan jelas

pengaruhnya terhadap prestasi. Dapatan kajian ini juga boleh menyumbang maklumat berguna dalam bidang pengujian berdasarkan tugas.

**THE EFFECTS OF PRE-TASK PLANNING TIME AND TASK
STRUCTURE ON SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNER'S
WRITING PERFORMANCE**

ABSTRACT

The main focus of this study is investigating how pre-task planning time influences the writing performance of second language (L2) learners when performing structured vs. unstructured tasks. Fifty first year undergraduate students studying at Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM), Penang served as the participants of this study. All the participants achieved band four from Malaysian University English Test (MUET). They were randomly selected and divided into two equal groups of those with pre-task planning time and those without pre-task planning time. Each group was asked to narrate two different types of stories, structured and unstructured, under the two different conditions, with and without pre-task planning time. Participants in the pre-task planning time group were required to plan their performance for 10 minutes and take notes before they performed the main task of writing, whilst the participants in the group without pre-task planning time began writing immediately. Their writing performance was measured for complexity, accuracy, and fluency (CAF). To test the way the two independent variables of pre-task planning time and task structure affect the dependent variables, the raw scores of the participants were fed into the computer software SPSS (version 20). The effect of the planning conditions, the between-participants variable, was then analysed, employing an independent samples t-test. The paired samples t-test was adopted to determine the impact of task structure, the within-participants variable, on the participants' performance. Results indicated that pre-task planning time significantly promoted fluency and complexity in learner writing performance across the groups

when participants performed the structured task, but the accuracy measure did not yield significant results. Meanwhile, the results of the statistical analysis showed that learners did not benefit from pre-task planning time with respect to complexity, fluency, and accuracy while performing the unstructured task. Finally, the statistical analysis revealed that task structure had a significant effect on the accuracy and fluency of learner writing performance when planned, but complexity of learner writing performance was not enhanced by the task structure of the planned condition. Meanwhile, task structure did not affect complexity and fluency, while promoting the accuracy without planning. The findings of this study strengthen the knowledge regarding the cognitive process of L2 production proposed by information processing theory. Furthermore it suggests pedagogical and theoretical implications in L2 writing performance for both learners and teachers. The operationalizations of pre-task planning time and task structure make them easily adaptable to instructional contexts. Using these tasks in pedagogic contexts can be easily manipulated to promote fluency, complexity, and accuracy. The different conditions under which tasks are performed have shown to generate radically different results. Beyond other factors that may influence performance during testing, such as the learners' level of proficiency or the communicative stress of the situation, task characteristics have been clearly shown to influence performance. Hence, the findings in this thesis may also contribute useful information to the area of task-based testing.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

For decades, teaching and learning of language has been an area of interest to many researchers, syllabus designers, teachers, and evaluators. As a result, a number of approaches, based on different theories, have emerged in the field (Schmidt, 2001). As a researcher, the growing interest in TBLT motivated me to conduct research in order to determine the role of “task” in second language (L2) writing performance. As I went on with my studies, I realized that according to Skehan (2003) tasks can have different characteristics (e.g., +/- task structure; +/- familiar information)¹ and can be performed under different conditions (e.g., +/- pre-task planning time; +/- within task planning time (Ellis, 2005)). Although there has been progress in the influence of different task characteristics and task conditions on oral performance (Samuda & Bygate, 2008), fewer studies have been undertaken into how these characteristics and conditions influence the written performance of L2 learners (Kuiken & Vedder, 2008; Ong & Zhang, 2010).

Consequently, this study used a task-based approach to explore how task implementation features and task conditions (in this case task structure and pre-task planning time) influence Second Language (L2) learner’s writing production during task performance.

¹ A component which may be present or absent in a characteristic is represented by +/-.

1.2 Background of the Study

1.2.1 English Language Teaching (ELT) in Malaysia

Malaysia is a multi-racial and multilingual community. The country's national language is Bahasa Malaysia and is used throughout the primary and secondary education as the main means of teaching. Vernacular schools such as Chinese and Tamil schools are allowed to use their ethnic languages as the language teaching as a medium to maintain diversity of cultures and languages. However, at the tertiary level, Bahasa Malaysia and English language are used as the medium of teaching. In Malaysia common languages of Malay, Chinese, and Tamil are spoken according to the three main racial communities. Almost all Malaysians have a certain amount of proficiency in the spoken Malay and it is the language used in daily relations among members from different ethnic communities (Musa, Lie, & Azman, 2012).

The education system in Malaysia is essentially divided into three levels: primary, secondary and pre-university. Children are registered in primary school when they are 7 years old. Primary level education which consists of 6 years starts with Primary 1 and ends at Primary 6. In lower primary (Primary 1-3) English is taught for 240 minutes per week, and in the upper primary (Primary 4-6) for 210 minutes per week. At the end of primary school, students sit for the Primary School Assessment Test, known as *Ujian Penilaian Sekolah Rendah (UPSR)*². English is a

² At the end of the six years of primary schooling, pupils are required to sit for a common public examination called the Ujian Penilaian Sekolah Rendah (UPSR)/Primary School Achievement Test (PSAT).

compulsory subject in the *UPSR* examination (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2009).

Secondary education consists of two levels, lower secondary (Form 1 - Form 3) and upper secondary (Form 4 and Form 5). In the secondary level, English is taught for 200 minutes per week. At the end of Form 3, students sit for the Lower Secondary Assessment, known as *Penilaian Menengah Rendah (PMR)*³ and the Malaysian Certification of Education the end of Form 5. After two years of upper secondary education, students sit the public common examination known as *Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM)*⁴ (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2009).

The pre-university level consists of Lower Form 6 and Upper Form 6. Matriculation programs are also part of pre-university education. Approximately 240 minutes per week are allocated for Malaysian University English Test (MUET) coaching with the sixth form classes. The students sit for MUET which is a mandatory requirement for admission into public universities in Malaysia (Lee, 2004).

In Malaysia English is considered as an L2 in terms of its significance in the educational system and international interactions. English language is taught as a subject in schools and tested in the school and national examinations. The changes of

³ At the end of the third year at the lower secondary level, students will be required to sit a public examination called the *Penilaian Menengah Rendah (PMR)/Lower Secondary Assessment Test (LSAT)*.

⁴ After two years of upper secondary education, students sit the public common examination *Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM)/Malaysian Certificate of Education (MCOE)*.

method and methodological approach to language instruction in the West have also impacted the language teaching approach in Malaysia (Rohani Mohd Zain, 2007). In Malaysia, the English language program for the primary school is aimed at providing pupils with critical language abilities to allow them to employ the language and communicate successfully in any circumstances (Wan Mohd Zahid, 1998 cited in Rohani Mohd Zain, 2007). This aim is evidently specific in the English language syllabus. To provide Malaysian students with necessary abilities and knowledge of the English language and to enable them to communicate, both orally and in writing, in and out of school English language teaching is based on the Communicative Approach (Rohani Mohd Zain, 2007). As communication can be attained by means of grammatical sentences or series of sentences reasonably connected (Close, 1991 cited in Rohani Mohd Zain, 2007), then the significance of grammatical competency in communication cannot be underestimated. Hence, if the aim of English language program is to be accomplished, English language instructors are entrusted with a task of assisting students to gain grammatical competency apart from communicative competency and proficiency (Rohani Mohd Zain, 2007).

English language instructors have the liability to develop in learners the knowledge and skills of grammar. These instructors are required to choose 'appropriate' and 'effective' strategies and methods to teach grammar in English language classrooms within the Communicative Approach to language teaching. Their personal understandings and insights of the syllabus are impacted by their personal beliefs and assumptions about the nature of grammar and its learning and teaching, the role of teachers and learners as well as the teaching context. The various views and beliefs about grammar and its teaching and learning lead to

diverse views about the critical skills of teaching grammar and different approaches to teaching grammar (Rohani Mohd Zain, 2007).

1.2.2 The Malaysian University English Test (MUET)

Malaysian University English Test (MUET) is a compulsory requirement for admission into public universities in Malaysia (Lee, 2004). Before the year 2000, Malaysian universities had to rely on students' English language grade in the *SPM* examination as a measurement of their overall command of language or in technical words 'English language proficiency' for university admission. Nevertheless, it was thought that such practice has created administrative problems in identifying students' actual proficiency for placement purposes (Chan & Wong, 2004). Since there was a two-year gap at the pre-university stage during which English was not taught as a subject, many researchers and academics believed that there should be a standardized English proficiency test similar to IELTS and TOEFL, which could be used as a measure to determine students' language proficiency level in English. Consequently, MUET was introduced by the Ministry of Education in late 1999 and fully implemented in 2000. MUET is administered by the Malaysian Examination Council and it specifically aims to "bridge the gap in language needs between secondary and tertiary education" (Chan & Wong, 2004, p. 35). The MUET syllabus tries to strengthen and enhance the English language ability or language proficiency of pre-university students to enable them to perform effectively in their academic pursuits at tertiary level, in line with the goals of the National Education Policy.

The MUET evaluates candidates' ability in four language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. The MUET scores achieved by the candidates are

reported in a six-band scale with corresponding aggregated band score that ranges from 0-300. Candidates' performances on four language skills or sub-test is scored separately and then averaged to attain the overall band score. Each band has descriptions which explain the candidate's overall command of language, communicative ability, understanding and task performance. A summary of the MUET format and weighting is given in Table 1.1 on page 7.

In most Malaysian universities, undergraduates who obtained bands 1, 2 and 3 in MUET are required to go through remedial courses with the objective of providing them with sufficient proficiency in order to proceed to other advanced English proficiency courses. For example, in Universiti Sains Malaysia, undergraduates in the category of band 1 to band 3 are required to go through the Preparatory English course and achieve a minimum grade C before they are allowed to sign up for other English language courses such as English for Business and Communication, Creative Writing and Effective Reading. This measure is deemed necessary to ensure that the undergraduates are able to cope with the advanced English language courses.

Table 1.1

MUET Bands and Descriptions

Aggregated Score	Band	User, Command of language, Communicative Ability, Understanding, and Task Performance
0-99	1	Extremely limited user. Poor command of the language. Unable to use language to express ideas: inaccurate use of the language resulting in frequent breakdowns in communication. Little or poor understanding of language and contexts. Hardly able to function in the language.
100-139	2	Limited user. Limited command of the language. Lacks expressiveness, fluency and appropriacy: inaccurate use of the language resulting in breakdown in communication. Limited understanding of language and contexts. Limited ability to function in the language.
140-179	3	Modest user. Modest command of the language. Modestly expressive and fluent, appropriate language but with noticeable inaccuracies. Modest understanding of language and contexts. Able to function modestly in the language.
180-219	4	Competent user. Satisfactory command of the language. Satisfactory expressive and fluent, appropriate language but with occasional inaccuracies. Satisfactory understanding of language and contexts. Functions satisfactorily in the language.
220-259	5	Good user. Good command of the language. Expressive, fluent, accurate and appropriate language but with minor inaccuracies. Good understanding of language and contexts. Functions well in the language.
260-300	6	Very good user. Very good command of the language. Highly expressive, fluent, accurate and appropriate language: hardly any inaccuracies. Very good understanding of language and contexts. Functions extremely well in the language.

1.2.3 Writing in Malaysia

Language is a medium of interaction that can be in oral or written forms. In the modern world of information, communication, and technology we need to convey our ideas and achievements to other people through writing. Writing, even in someone's first language, can be a difficult and complex activity for language learners. For many language users, learning how to write accurately, fluently, and communicatively requires great effort regardless of whether the language in question is first, second or an entirely foreign language (Nunan, 1989). Hinkel (2006) considers writing to be a highly complicated process which can be difficult for many L2 learners. Ferris (2002) believes that writing is the most difficult part of a language to acquire, because the improvement and mastering of writing skills can take years.

For the second and foreign learners, writing is difficult to the extent of spelling, limited vocabulary, grammar, and specific structures for each genre and text as well as the writing skills, i.e. cohesive devices, coherence, punctuation and organization. In spelling they usually miswrite words like "excelent" instead of "excellent" or "tomorow" instead of "tomorrow". As to grammar, they usually put V2 after modal, such as "She must worked hard yesterday" or in some cases they use V1 after verb to be as in "I am agree with you". In syntax, the learners sometimes do not follow the rules of grammar used for well-formed ordering of phrases and sentences. An example of the wrong vocabulary use is using the word "eat" instead of "drink" or "breast" instead of "chest". Sometimes, there is no close semantic or grammatical relationship between different parts of a sentence (cohesion). In some other cases, there is no consistency or reasonable and natural connection between the parts of their writings (coherence) (Shokrpour and Fallahzadeh, 2007).

In the Malaysian education programme, the English papers in the national examinations such as *Ujian Penilaian Sekolah Rendah (UPSR)*, *Penilaian Menengah Rendah (PMR)*, *Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM)* or *Sijil Tinggi Persekolahan Malaysia (STPM)*⁵ focus on the writing skills of the students; including sections requiring them to write either guided or unguided essays. The results of these examinations indicate whether the students have completely accomplished the essential language aspects of writing skills, their lack is clearly seen among the low proficiency learners (Malaysian Ministry of Education (MOE), 1998). According to the studies and analysis of national examinations conducted by the Examination Division of MOE, most low and intermediate proficiency level students seem to have difficulty with writing English (Puteh, Rahamat, & Karim, 2010). Some Malaysian students write in simple sentence structures which do not reflect their level of thinking as a university student (Rahim, Abdullah, & Ishak, 2008). In some cases students write very short and incomprehensible narrative, employ the national language (Bahasa Malaysia) or even just copy from those who do have the ability of writing longer narrative (Puteh et al., 2010). At the tertiary level some students have problems in generating ideas for writing (Rahim et al., 2008).

Furthermore, Hiew (2012) outlines some impediments encountered by Malaysian L2 learners in different stages of writing task (pre-writing, writing, and revising). She suggested that learners spend a longer period writing on a given topic when they experience difficulty in thinking of ideas to outline in the pre-writing stage. Others, especially those with low proficiency, need more time to write in the

⁵ The Sixth Form (Lower and Upper Form for one and a half years) prepares students for the common public examination, namely, *Sijil Tinggi Persekolahan Malaysia (STPM)* which is equivalent Malaysian Higher School Certificate (MHSC).

writing stage since they have to make sentences in their first language (L1) before converting into English, and their speed in writing will therefore be decreased. Finally in the revising stage, some learners have to be certain that they write logically and grammatically as well as ensuring that their ideas, sentences and paragraphs are organised coherently and cohesively.

According to Manchon and Larios (2007) some of the writing problems are related to planning for writing. Manchon and Larios (2007) asserts that the significance of conducting planning studies for writing can be easily understood if attention is paid to the complex nature of composing which consists of different kinds of rhetorical and linguistic knowledge which might be in competition for limited attentional resources, and there is a need for a kind of planning that might help learners to overcome these problems. Furthermore, Skehan (2003) claims that every kind of task given to the learners can have different affects on their writing performance.

Therefore, it appears necessary to conduct different studies regarding the effects of pre-task planning time and task structure on learner's writing skill to ascertain as to whether it can be as a solution that might affect learner's writing performance.

1.3 Statement of the Problem

In Malaysian education students spend 11-13 years learning English (6 years in primary school and 5-7 years in secondary school), but a large number of students have been unable to master English writing skills upon completing secondary school

(Hiew, 2012). Malaysian students consider writing English to be one of their greatest weaknesses (Michael, 2003). Chitravelu, Sithamparam, and Teh (2005) have described that most Malaysian students are less proficient in their writing skills and do not know how to carry out their written assignments satisfactorily.

There are various factors that could have contributed to this failure. One of these factors is related to the methods and approaches towards teaching grammar that have been adopted by Malaysian English language teachers (Maros, Tan, & Salehuddin, 2007). Koo (2008) writes on the importance of national examinations, which make the teachers to adopt Grammar-Translation Method which is mainly grammar based and focuses only on teaching language through translation and neglects teaching other language skills such as speaking and writing. Therefore, the translation mode is the primary means utilized in the writing processes and this invariably contributes to the production of poor quality written output containing communicative failures and grammatical errors (Yarmohammadi, 2002; Birjandi et al., 2004). Although grammar is “a necessary component of any language teaching program” (Rutherford, 1987, p.9), and plays a key role in language teaching; however, focusing on grammar can draw learner attention away from meaning and eventually communicative competence will be diminished. On the other hand where English language teaching is based on the communicative approach in Malaysia (MOE, 2003) some teachers try to emphasize on meanings and neglect forms, which causes students to have difficulty using the correct English grammar in their writing (Maros, Tan, & Salehuddin, 2007).

As a result, these two extremes towards teaching grammar discourage students from having a good command of English writing. On the one hand, paying attention to grammar will impede the effort to achieve fluency. On the other hand, paying too much attention on communication and less on grammar will impede accuracy (Garrett, 1986 cited in Rohani Mohd Zain, 2007). Although the communicative approach focuses on fluency, one cannot be fluent without some degree of accuracy. So, it is required to help students to achieve accuracy and at the same time promote fluency in writing.

In Malaysia educational system English language has an important role as a compulsory subject and means of instruction (Chow, 2007). Students who have the capability and proficiency in writing in English will have more privilege when applying for any job compared to other students mainly in private companies and that are sectors involved at international level. There is therefore an urgent need to find effective ways for improving learner writing performance. A lot of techniques and procedures have been used for teaching writing, most of which have not been practical or communicative or have not yielded good results. As a result, many researchers and teachers have demanded for a move towards task-based language teaching (TBLT) as a new and validated approach to the teaching of writing which giving attention to all aspects of language, complexity, accuracy, and fluency (CAF) (Izadpanah, 2011).

As mentioned in section 1.1 tasks can have different characteristics (e.g., +/- task structure; +/- familiar information) and can be performed under different conditions (e.g., +/- pre-task planning time; +/- within task planning time (Ellis,

2005; Skehan, 2003)). Hence, taking into account the importance of writing in Malaysia context, and due to the fact that little is known regarding the impacts of task in writing performance (Kuiken & Vedder, 2008; Kormos, 2011; Ong & Zhang, 2010), this study intends to explore the effects of +/- pre task planning time and +/- task structure on L2 learner's narrative writing performance in three language aspects of CAF.

1.4 Rationale of the Study

The rationale of the study is based on four overlapping reasons. First, in TBLT the significant role of the learner is highlighted. Study regarding TBLT attempts to clarify the proposition that undertaking a task can cause interlanguage (IL) change by having learners engage with and retain information about the L2 when using it (Swain, 1995). Second, TBLT is a theory-oriented syllabus in the field of second language acquisition (SLA) research that engages cognitive processes (Ellis, 2003). In this syllabus learners employ cognitive processes such as classifying, reasoning, and evaluating information in order perform a task. Third, tasks are considered an appropriate component for identifying learner needs and designing courses for specific purposes. Studies regarding task characteristics and discovering their influence on learner's language processing help to provide sound principles for syllabus design empirically rather than through more intuition-based reasoning (Bygate, 1999; Tavakoli and Foster, 2011). Finally, research sheds light into the argument that task design, and the conditions of performing a task, can be selected deliberately by teachers to help learners focus their attention on the language aspects being learned (Samuda, 2001; Skehan, 1998).

1.5 Objectives of the Study

So far numerous studies have been carried out on the influence of pre-task planning time and other tasks on different aspects of language performance in speaking output (Ellis & Yuan, 2004; Maboodi, 2006; Ortega, 1999; Sangarun, 2001; Yuan & Ellis, 2003). However, the number of examined variables to date is not adequate to lead to the establishment of accurate generalizations on the effects of pre-task planning time on learner's aspects of performance in written output. Most of these studies have examined the effects of different kinds of tasks on oral performance and the results have showed benefits for complexity and fluency while remaining accuracy controversial (Ellis & Yuan, 2004).

The objectives of the current study are to find out the influences of pre-task planning time and task structure on L2 English learner's complexity, accuracy, and fluency of written task performance. The writing performances will be measured based on the three aspects of language, i.e., complexity, accuracy, and fluency. Hence, more particularly the objectives of the present study are as listed:

1. To examine the effects of pre-task planning time on L2 learner's complexity, accuracy, and fluency of narrative writing performance in structured task.
2. To examine the effects of pre-task planning time on L2 learner's complexity, accuracy, and fluency of narrative writing performance in unstructured task.

3. To examine the effects of task structure on L2 learner's complexity, accuracy, and fluency of narrative writing production in planned condition.
4. To examine the effect of task structure on L2 learner's complexity, accuracy, and fluency of narrative writing production in unplanned condition.

According to Weigle (2002), a rating scale with multiple categories increases the reliability of the findings. Therefore, in congruence with the findings of earlier studies, numerous of the most common methods that are utilized for measuring complexity, accuracy, and fluency have been selected and employed in the current study (Ellis & Yuan, 2004; Mehnert, 1998; Ortega, 1999; Rouhi, 2006; Skehan & Foster, 1999; Yuan & Ellis, 2003) (see Appendix C).

1.6 Research Questions

Based on the issues related to planning time and task structure and in order to investigate whether these characteristics, as the independent variables, have a considerable effect on L2 learner narrative writing performance as the dependent variable, the researcher had raised the following questions:

1. What effect does pre-task planning time have on L2 learner's complexity, accuracy, and fluency of narrative writing performance in structured task.

2. What effect does pre-task planning time have on L2 learner's complexity, accuracy, and fluency of narrative writing performance in unstructured task.
3. What effect does structured task have on L2 learner's complexity, accuracy, and fluency of narrative writing performance in planned condition.
4. What effect does unstructure task have on L2 learner's complexity, accuracy, and fluency of narrative writing performance in unplanned condition.

1.7 Hypotheses

In the light of these purposes, and based on the stated research questions, the following hypotheses are proposed. Research hypotheses proposed for research question number one:

1. Pre-task planning time will have a significant effect on the complexity of L2 learner narrative writing performance in structured tasks.
2. Pre-task planning time will have a significant effect on the accuracy of L2 learner narrative writing performance in structured tasks.
3. Pre-task planning time will have a significant effect on the fluency of L2 learner narrative writing performance in structured tasks.

Research hypotheses proposed for research question number two:

4. Pre-task planning time will have a significant effect on the complexity of L2 learner narrative writing performance in unstructured tasks.
5. Pre-task planning time will have a significant effect on the accuracy of L2 learner narrative writing performance in unstructured tasks.
6. Pre-task planning time will have a significant effect on the fluency of L2 learner narrative writing performance in unstructured tasks.

Research hypotheses proposed for research question number three:

7. Task structure will have a significant effect on the complexity of L2 learner narrative writing performance in planned conditions.
8. Task structure will have a significant effect on the accuracy of L2 learner narrative writing performance in planned conditions.
9. Task structure will have a significant effect on the fluency of L2 learner narrative writing performance in planned conditions.

Research hypotheses proposed for research question number four:

10. Task structure will have a significant effect on the complexity of L2

learner narrative writing performance in unplanned conditions.

11. Task structure will have a significant effect on the accuracy of L2 learner narrative writing performance in unplanned conditions.

12. Task structure will have a significant effect on the fluency of L2 learner narrative writing performance in unplanned conditions.

1.8 Significance of the Study

How +/- pre-task planning time and +/- task structure affect L2 performance is significant to SLA researchers and language teachers both theoretically and empirically (Ellis, 2005). For SLA researchers, planning helps answer questions about how a balance is achieved in learner CAF, given that limited attentional resources lead learners to focus on one language aspect at the expense of others. It explains the role of attention in language learning. Investigating the effects of planning on L2 performance therefore enhances our understanding of the cognitive processes engaged in L2 performance.

The pedagogic, practical importance of the present study is classroom-based. The important problem from which TBLT has always suffered is in establishing the relevant grading and sequencing criteria for designing and classifying tasks for task-based syllabi (Long & Crookes, 1992; Robinson, 2003, 2007b; Salimi, Alavinia, & Hosseini, 2012). Thus, Robinson (2007b) raises the following question: “How do teachers design and deliver a sequence of tasks that sustains a learner effort to use the L2, from beginning to end, which simultaneously leads to L2 learning and

development?” To answer this question, Robinson (2003, 2007b) argues that empirical research in the field of TBLT can provide a feasible and empirical basis for decision making regarding L2 task design and sequencing.

Consequently, the present research is conducted with the purpose of providing an empirical basis for selecting, grading, and sequencing tasks while developing a task-based syllabus which will consequently facilitate language learning and result in faster language development. In the other words, if we understand how our variables, +/- pre-task planning and +/- task structure, can be manipulated to have an effect on CAF, it will be more practicable to design an order of pedagogical activities that equilibrates improvement among these three aspects (Farahani & Meraji, 2011; Robinson & Gilabert, 2007).

1.9 Limitations of the Study

There are limitations related to this study which should be acknowledged. These are connected with the need to incorporate information from learner variables and with the need to extend the hypotheses to other task types and task conditions.

In the first place, this study mainly deals with the manipulation of two variables and largely excludes other variables that may also explain differences in performance. Hence, the study tries to isolate the effect of cognitive variables by using a measures design, in which the participants experience four different conditions. It is quite possible that different levels of aptitude and intelligence have some kind of impact on learner production. As suggested by Robinson (2002) and Skehan (1989), much more research is needed in the area of individual differences.

Even if information about learner affective and ability variables cannot be used for syllabus design purposes, future research should incorporate instruments that will measure individual differences more accurately in order to achieve a wider picture of what goes on with L2 performance.

Secondly, the statements in this research only refer to a particular type of task and a particular kind of condition. This research will use narrative tasks that learners narrate in a monologic fashion in an experimental setting. Questions remain as to whether the hypotheses and results advanced by this study would hold for different task types (e.g., opinion or information-gap tasks) and under different conditions of performance, such as in two way fashion, in other environments, such as classrooms, or in computer-mediated communication. Future research should aim to extend the theoretical constructs, hypotheses, and findings of this dissertation to other contexts in order to confirm or reject their validity.

In spite of all these limitations, the writer believes that it is worth carrying out such research because every teacher should be a researcher, at least within their own classes. Altogether, these self-confined experiences may provide a comprehensible view of the issue, but the provision of such a view requires a multitude of studies carried out in different situations. It can be claimed that each situation is particular in itself while having some characteristics in common with other situations.

1.10 Definition of Key Terms

Task: A piece of work or an activity in which the focus is on meaning to attain an objective. It requires learners to use language in real-life context (Ellis, 2003).

Narrative Task: Writing or telling the story of something or reporting an event that is happened (Kiernan, 2005).

Pre-task Planning Time: The opportunity given to learners prior to their performance in order to be prepared for their performances (Wendel, 1997).

Structured vs. Unstructured Tasks: Structured tasks are narrative tasks which contain a problem-solution with logical relationships between the elements of the story. In this type of narrative a series of events is unfolded over time, and the story has a conventional beginning, middle and end. On the other hand, unstructured tasks lack all these characteristics, so that the elements of the story are loosely related to each other, and it's possible to reorder the elements without changing the story (Tavakoli & Foster, 2011).

Complexity: Complexity is associated with testing the boundaries of the underlying interchange language by attempting to produce new vocabulary and structures that have not been well integrated into interlanguage system. It is also the capacity to use more advanced language lexically and structurally (Skehan, 1996; Skehan & Foster, 1999).

Accuracy: It is the ability to avoid error in performance, possibly reflecting higher levels of control in the language, as well as conservative orientation, that is, avoidance of challenging structures that might be provoke error. It is also the extent to which the language produced conforms to target language norms (Skehan, 1996; Skehan & Foster, 1999).

Fluency: It is defined as the number of words that are produced in a limited time span, on the condition that the writer's meaning is comprehensible (Fellner & Apple, 2006).

1.11 Organisation of the Study

The present thesis consists of five chapters. Chapter One deals with the background, statement of the problem and significance of the study. Chapter Two will provide the theoretical background and rationale for the study. Thus, a brief history of TBLT will be dealt with. This will be followed by an explanation of the role of task-based planning in L2 teaching and learning, along with some of the studies conducted to examine the impact of planning on L2 performance. Next, studies described in the literature concerning task structure will be reviewed. Finally, the conceptual and theoretical framework for this study will be listed. Chapter Three will focus on the empirical part of the project. It will present the methodology of the study and will include sections in which research design, participants, instruments used to collect data, procedures for data collection and statistical analysis will be discussed. Chapter Four will be devoted to the statistical procedure, both descriptive and inferential, figures and tables. Chapter Five will primarily deal with the discussion and conclusions. This will be followed by the

pedagogical implications and finally, a few suggestions will be put forward for further research.

1.12 Summary

Chapter One briefly introduced the main themes addressed in this study, including the importance of TBLT as a new and validated approach to teaching writing. This was followed by a consideration of the significant role of pre-task planning time and task structure in L2 writing. Chapter Two reviews the literature on pre-task planning time and task structure.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to provide a description of related literature, past studies and conceptual and theoretical background for the present study. To this end, different approaches to language teaching will be discussed. Then, task-based teaching (TBT) and the significance of tasks in the grading and sequencing of pedagogic tasks will first be discussed. This is followed by reviewing and highlighting the studies in the literature concerning planning time and task structure. Finally, the conceptual and theoretical framework for this study will be shown.

2.2 Approaches to Language Teaching

2.2.1 Grammar-based Approaches

For many years grammar was considered highly important in language instruction. It was believed that the major obstacle in learning a foreign or second language is learning its structures. Grammar rules were assumed to be the main components of language and knowledge about those rules was adequate for language learners. Therefore teaching grammar received special attention and the whole curriculum was based on grammar instruction (Celce-Murcia, 2001). Grammar-based or traditional approaches to language teaching were characterized by their emphasis on form at the expense of meaning. Teachers adopting such approaches tended to teach specific linguistic forms, and designed uncontextualized drills and exercises to practice these forms.