

THE EFFECTS OF TIME CONSTRAINTS AND  
PROFICIENCY ON ESL ESSAY WRITING  
PERFORMANCE

CHAN WENG FATT

UNIVERSITI SAINS MALAYSIA

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by

**CHAN WENG FATT**

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for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy**

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ANOVA	Analysis of Variance
BLR	Binary Logistic Regression
CD	Composed Draft
ESL	English as Second Language
GRE	Graduate Record Examination
H	Proficient
HiLo	High Low
Ho	Null Hypotheses
HXE	High English
ILLC	International Language Learning Conference
L	Less Proficient
L1	First Language
L2	Second Language
LD	Long Draft
MR	Multiple Regression
MUET	Malaysian University English Test
N	Sample Size of Respondents
ND	Note Draft
OD	Organized Draft
P	Proficiency
R	Rater
RD	Revised Draft
RST	Rhetorical Structure Theory
SD	Short Draft

SPM	Malaysian Certificate of Education
T	Time
Time LS	Longer Time and Shorter Time

# KESAN KEKANGAN MASA DAN KECEKAPAN TERHADAP PENCAPAIAN PENULISAN ESEI BAHASA INGGERIS SEBAGAI BAHASA KEDUA

## ABSTRAK

Kajian ini menyelidik kesan kekangan masa dan kecekapan terhadap pencapaian penulisan esei oleh subjek yang merupakan penutur bahasa Inggeris sebagai bahasa kedua. Subjek kajian terdiri daripada dua kumpulan prasiswazah, yakni yang cekap dan yang kurang cekap berbahasa Inggeris. Untuk mengkaji kesan masa dan kecekapan bahasa Inggeris terhadap pencapaian penulisan, setiap subjek diminta menulis sebuah esei dalam masa 45 minit dan 30 minit. Esei dan draf prapenulisan ini merupakan korpus utama kajian ini. Untuk menyokong data yang didapati daripada esei mereka, kajian ini juga menggunakan soal selidik berstruktur untuk mendapatkan maklumat tentang penulisan mereka dan kaitannya dengan kecekapan bahasa dan kekangan masa.

Kajian ini menggunakan reka bentuk faktorial dua kali dua sebagai metodologinya untuk memastikan kesan interaksi di antara masa dan kecekapan dan juga kesan utama terhadap skor esei, komponennya dan draf prapenulisan. Reka bentuk faktorial digunakan kerana reka bentuk ini tepat dan berkesan dalam kajian multifaktor seperti ini yang melibatkan interaksi di antara masa dan kecekapan dengan penulisan esei dan komponen esei.

Analisis menunjukkan bahawa skor keseluruhan esei dan skor tiga daripada lima komponen esei dalam esei yang ditulis dalam masa 45 minit adalah lebih tinggi berbanding esei yang ditulis dalam masa 30 minit. Keputusan analisis soal selidik mencadangkan subjek beranggapan lebih masa, yakni 15 minit bagi esei yang ditulis

dalam masa 45 menit merupakan penyebab peningkatan skor keseluruhan esei dan skor komponennya.

Kajian ini juga mendapati bahawa penuntut yang cekap mendapat skor yang lebih tinggi berbanding penuntut yang kurang cekap dalam skor esei dan komponennya. Walau bagaimanapun, hasil dapatan menunjukkan tidak terdapat kesan interaksi yang signifikan antara kecekapan dan masa. Dapatan ini disokong oleh keputusan analisis *chi-square* terhadap respon soal selidik kecekapan bahasa.

Kajian ini juga mendapati bahawa masa dan kecekapan tidak menunjukkan statistik yang signifikan dengan bentuk draf prapenulisan yang digunakan oleh subjek. Ini mencadangkan bahawa subjek kajian tidak berkemahiran dalam prapenulisan. Keadaan ini dicerminkan oleh keputusan ujian tambahan yang menunjukkan bahawa tidak banyak jenis draf prapenulisan adalah signifikan terhadap skor keseluruhan esei dan skor komponen esei, sama ada esei tersebut ditulis dalam masa 45 menit atau 30 menit.

Tesis ini membincangkan implikasi daripada dapatan-dapatan tersebut and menyarankan kajian selanjutnya yang boleh dilaksanakan.

# THE EFFECTS OF TIME CONSTRAINTS AND PROFICIENCY ON ESL ESSAY WRITING PERFORMANCE

## ABSTRACT

This study investigated the effects of time and proficiency on ESL writing performance. The subjects of the study were two groups of undergraduates, namely proficient and less proficient speakers of English. To test the effects of time and English proficiency on their writing performance, the subjects each wrote a 45-minute essay and a 30-minute essay. These essays and the prewriting drafts form the basic corpus of the study. To complement the data from the essays, the study also employed structured questionnaires that tapped relevant information from subjects concerning their writing with regard to their English proficiency and time constraints.

The study employed a two by two factorial design in its methodology to determine the interaction effects of time and proficiency, and the main effects on essay scores, component scores and prewriting drafts. The factorial design was used because it was appropriate and effective in multi-factored studies such as this which involved the interaction of time and proficiency with essay writing and essay components.

The analyses reveal that the total essay scores and three of the five component scores of essays written in 45 minutes were significantly better than those written in 30 minutes. The analyses of the questionnaire responses suggest that the subjects viewed the adequacy of time due to the extra 15 minutes, as the reason for the increase of essay scores and component scores in the 45 minute essays.

The study also found that proficient students fared significantly better than the less proficient students on the composite and component scores of essays. With regard to this finding, the results show that there is no significant interaction between proficiency and time. The finding that there is no interaction effect of time and proficiency on essay scores and component scores is further supported by the results of the chi-square analyses of the questionnaire responses on proficiency.

The study also found that time and proficiency did not register statistical significances for types of prewriting drafts, suggesting that the subjects were least adept in prewriting. This is reflected in the results of the supplementary tests that show that few types of prewriting are significant to the essay scores and component scores of both 45-minute and 30-minute essays.

The implications of the findings are discussed and suggestions for educators, as well as recommendations for future research are proposed.

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### 1.0 Introduction

Writing is a difficult skill to acquire as it involves more than just putting correct grammatical forms together. While second language learners in schools are learning the complex skills involved in writing there is a need to know how second language writers in Malaysia write and learn to write under time stress. In view of this, the present study is an investigation of the effects of time and proficiency on the writing performance of ESL students. Essentially, it is a study on essay writing determinants in the context of second language writing research.

This chapter discusses the importance and the need to conduct a study on timed writing. Given the background to the study, three core hypotheses are postulated and their related research questions stated. The scope and significance of the study are then presented.

#### 1.1 Context of the Problem

Teaching second language learners of English to acquire writing skills is by no means easy. Caudery (1990:122) points out "that the teaching of writing skills involves more than training in producing grammatically correct sentences or in the use of cohesive devices," it involves the formulation and manipulation of ideas and putting

those ideas in the most appropriate language. As Kroll (1990:140) aptly puts it, ESL students have to "create written products that demonstrate mastery over contextually appropriate formats for the rhetorical presentation of ideas as well as mastery in all areas of language, a Herculean task given the possibilities for error." Indeed, it is partly the many and varied skills involved that makes the task rather daunting. Collins and Gentner (1980:67) express the same sentiments about writing:

Much of the difficulty of writing stems from the large number of constraints that must be satisfied at the same time. In expressing an idea the writer must consider at least four structural levels: overall text structure, paragraph structure, sentence structure (syntax), and word structure... Clearly the attempt to coordinate all these requirements is a staggering job.

More importantly and underlying all these is the *time* allocated, which is a crucial element in the teaching and learning of the writing process. According to Raimes (1983), writers need time to decide, to toy with ideas; time to write and rewrite sentences for new emerging lines of thoughts and arguments. Writers also need time to try out new words and make changes. Everything is in a state of flux, and time should not be a factor restricting revision, which is part and parcel of the writing process. Hence for any curriculum planning, sufficient time should be provided to allow students the freedom to explore and take risks in order to develop as writers. Given time for such activities, students will likely be able to produce an interesting piece of writing, which is organized and accurate. This is because given time student writing has the chance to move from inchoate and vaguely defined thinking to more organized, coherent, and polished presentation of ideas and subject matter.

Both Chenoweth (1987) and Zamel (1983:174) confirm the need for more time for teaching such long drawn-out writing techniques. This poses problems for ESL teachers teaching these time-consuming writing skills for they have limited time in the curriculum to teach English writing.

In Malaysia the English class is allocated 200 minutes per week for teaching English as a subject in the curriculum including writing (Pillay, 1998). With such a short time given to learn the language and with limited opportunity for immersion in the target language, one cannot expect a high level of competence among students (Manickam, 2004). This limited time situation may be one of the reasons why learners of English fail to achieve an acceptable level of competence in the language in spite of having studied it from the very first year of school.

Also the problem of insufficiency of time allocated for English writing in the curriculum is compounded by obsolete methods of teaching and old beliefs held by teachers. In fact, some undesirable practices in language teaching die hard (Penaflorida, 1996 & 1998). For example, the giving of an exercise that requires students to imitate a model essay is one practice that curbs creativity. Correcting all errors in an essay is another practice that emphasizes form over substance. Yet another practice among teachers is to treat the writing handed in by students for correction as a final product, and not as a stage in the process of improvement and completion. All these practices hinder progress in writing and serve to befuddle students. In consequence, they cannot communicate properly; they lack the skill to express their thoughts in writing. For some students good writing means accuracy of grammar and sentence structures (Puvenesvary et al., 2004). In fact, many programmes still emphasize grammatical accuracy. This emphasis on grammar stunts student development as writers and

restricts their ability to express their thoughts clearly and effectively. Given the above, unless research establishes a relationship between writing performance under time constraint and under "normal" conditions for typical students taking examinations, the validity of the essay as a test of candidates' writing ability is questionable.

Even though "little is known about the effects of time restriction on writing performance of students" (Caudery, 1990:123), many international examinations in English continue to include essays that have to be written under severe time constraints. In fact, essays written under timed conditions become a key criterion for establishing the level of proficiency of the students' written language. And this practice is gaining currency. The essay tests in the American Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) examination, the Test of Written English (TWE) and the Malaysian University English Test (MUET) in Malaysia are examples of essay writings which work against the process trend.

In the essay writing portion of the TOEFL examination, students are required to write an impromptu essay of about 250 words in 30 minutes; whereas in the MUET the essay section is allotted 50 minutes for writing the same number of words. Such time constraints, Braddock et al. (1963:9) argue, are "ridiculously brief for a high school or college student to write anything thoughtful". Even if the examiner merely wants to assess grammar and mechanics, he or she should ensure that sufficient time is given to students for planning and organizing main ideas with supporting details. Then sentences and mechanics for assessment will not be produced under abnormal situations of time stress. Sanders and Littlefield (1975) commenting on this state of affairs further add that this tightly-controlled essay test condition deviates extremely from "normal" writing condition. Thus such writing is unlikely to be a sample of the writer's best effort (Kroll,

1990:141). Cooper (1984:6) also agrees by summarizing the views of critics of the limited-time essay tests and compares such writing test conditions with that faced by the most "procrastinating and desperate of students."

For Malaysian ESL teachers, this situation puts them in a quandary. All along they have been contending with large classes, with limited English teaching time and little contact time. Now with the greater emphasis on the written word they have to endure the additional workload of teaching writing for assessment. To date, there is precious little research from which teachers can get help and guidance for teaching writing for assessment under restricted time. Ruth and Murphy (1988:153) emphasize this point and call for additional research to study the effects of time on writing performance in testing situations. Without such specific localized studies, teachers lack the information on how to go about effectively teaching essay writing skills for examinations. They are uncertain about what aspects of ESL writing need focusing when subject to time constraints. Some choose methods based on their personal experiences and their ideas of what teaching of writing should be. Others make the decision based on what methods to use depending on what a textbook author says, rather than upon concrete diagnosed needs of the student population.

The situation is exacerbated when ESL composition teachers have to further prepare students writing essays for examinations. Writing essays for examinations is timed writing for assessment measures, which solely focuses on the product of writing. This contradicts the natural process of writing. In the process approach, students are taught to understand the composition process, to build their repertoire of strategies for the prewriting, writing, and rewriting stages. For the prewriting stage, students need to gather, explore, and organize ideas. For the writing stage, students are assisted in

arranging their ideas into a piece of linear discourse. And for the rewriting stage, students need revising, editing, and proof-reading skills. The focus of this approach is the process that ultimately brings about the written product. In this process approach, students are given time to rewrite, to clarify what they want to say, and to make what they say as good as what they mean. In this respect, revision is vital. Throughout the composition process, the teacher intervenes rather than react only to the final product.

Some teachers grope along teaching a “truncated” version of *writing-as-process* for *writing-for-assessment*. In fact, teachers are diffident when there is hardly anything valid to rely on. Adopting a teaching method where the efficacy of a specific pedagogy is unsupported by research, they are easy targets for sceptical and over-concerned parents who have been brought up in the traditional mode of writing. “And of all the experts that they [parents] mistrust, language teachers are the most vulnerable” (Das, 1984:ix). Parents, according to Das, have “definite views about language teaching which rarely conform to expert opinion” (Das, 1984:ix).

Certainly there is useful information which writing teachers would find relevant regarding writing under different time limits. For instance, they would like to know which aspects or dimensions of compositions show weaknesses under the stress of increasing time constraints. What happens to the total essay score? What is the correlation of essay test scores under different time conditions? Is there a change in the ranking order of students? Then again is there a change in the mode and type of written prewriting? Do students abandon prewriting strategies in the rush to complete their essays under time stress? There is hardly any research done comparing written prewriting strategies under different time restrictions. Even on the predrafting time period, “so little work has

been done" (Baiocco and Sharon, 1985:22). Certainly, the teacher's job is not made easier with nagging uncertainties and unanswered questions.

A few past studies analyzed the prewriting drafts of timed essay writing. A case in point is the study carried out by Chiste and O'Shea in 1990. They examined the characteristics of prewriting activities of unsuccessful writers of the Alberta Universities' Writing Competence Tests and found that the unsuccessful writers' prewriting activities were limited and ineffective. In fact, these very prewriting activities interfered with the writers' ability to generate and develop ideas. In consequence, students' weaknesses are shown in the global aspects of writing—content, structure and paragraphing—more than in matters of correctness or convention.

Both Chiste and O'Shea (1990) found no correlation between written prewriting and grades students obtained for content, structure, and paragraphing. In fact, those using the strategies of generating ideas and ordering them obtained negative correlations with structure, and this means failure in this assessment category.

Another study by Piolat and Roussey (1996) analyzed the prewriting drafts of two groups of students during an examination. They found only 2/3 of both groups of students attempted written prewriting. These prewriting drafts were mostly composed drafts and note drafts. Very few consisted of organized drafts. And yet these very organized drafts obtained the highest grades for the students. The research shows that only few students used efficient drafting (organized draft) even though the prospect of getting high scores with this strategy was good.

In an earlier study, Kellogg (1988) investigated how the techniques of outline and rough draft affect the efficiency of the writing process and the quality of the written text. He conducted two experiments. The results of one experiment indicate that using a written outline, compared to not using one, yields high scores for the documents, implying quality texts. Kellogg also found that using a rough draft rather than a polished draft brought no quality improvements to the text. His experiments also revealed that a mental outline fared as well as a written outline in improving the quality of the text, and that the written outline was in no way acting as an external memory aid to the writer. He concluded that both the written and the mental outlines lessened the attention overload, thereby helping the writer to concentrate on processing time but not cognitive effort during the process of translating ideas into text.

With regard to timed essay writing, some relevant studies have been conducted to compare the effects of different time allotments on writing performance. Researchers like Biola (1982), Hale (1992), and Younkin (1986) have found that on the one hand, increasing time allotment results in higher scores. On the other hand, Livingston (1987) found no significant difference while Caudery (1990) and Kroll (1990) obtained small or non-significant effects even when comparison involved large differences in time allocations. Both Caudery and Kroll allowed essays to be written in class and to be completed at home over the course of several days or weeks.

## **1.2 Statement of the Problem**

The investigations reported above on the effects of time constraints on writing essays conducted with first language (L1) learners in some cases, and in others with L1 and second language (L2) learners, have turned out very mixed findings, and have come

nowhere near the point of consensus. And the effect of different time restrictions on writing performance has remained a standing issue. Evidently, there is a research gap and in consequence, a dearth of empirical evidence that can only be rectified by more empirical studies.

In the Malaysian context this dearth of knowledge is a cause for concern. This is because the nation's educational system is examination-oriented. Thus there is a pressing need to know more about timed writing and the variables involved, to gather data in quantifiable form relating to learner variables such as essay scores, sub-scores, and essay scores preceded by prewriting types. Such data would help to gauge, with confidence, such issues as: the writing performance of Malaysian students and how it is affected by time constraint, the relationship between proficiency and time constraints in writing, and how prewriting activity is affected by time and proficiency. There is thus a greater urgency to look at the time constraint problem to get an understanding of how the process works. Primarily, therefore a study on second language (L2) learners is needed to gain a greater insight into students' response to writing under time stress.

There is also the need for more information for school administrators, educators, and policymakers who want to know how to address the challenge of improving the timed writing of students at all grade levels. There is also the need to examine current trend, research, and issues in the teaching of writing, how writing can be fairly and authentically assessed and taught. In short the school administrators, educators, and policymakers need to present a vision of how Malaysian schools can help students meet that need of improving their writing.

Concern with the quality of students' timed writing has been a perennial feature of the Malaysian educational landscape. There is a need to bring exemplary writing instructions to Malaysian schools. The stakes for learning to write have changed. In today's increasingly diverse society, writing is a gateway for success in academia, the new workplace, and the global economy, as well as for our collective success as a participatory democracy.

Effective writing skills are important in all stages of life from early education to future employment, where time is of the essence. In the business world, as well as in school, students must convey complex ideas and information in a clear, succinct manner and within a specified time frame. Poor writing skills retard achievement across the curriculum and affect adversely future careers. Proficient writing skills help students convey ideas, deliver instructions, make incisive analysis of information, and motivate others.

Today, more and more educators as well as leaders in all areas of society have realized that writing to meet the deadline is central to success in and out of school. The country's education is making efforts to realize its potential as an engine of opportunity and economic growth by helping its citizens to learn to communicate and write. And writing is no longer only about putting pen to paper. As Zinsser (2001) points out, "the new information age, for all its high-tech gadgetry, is finally writing-based. E-mail, the Internet, and the fax are all forms of writing, and writing is, finally, a craft with its own set of tools, which are words. Like all tools, they have to be used right." If students are to make knowledge their own, they must struggle with details, assimilate the facts, and transform raw information and dimly understood concepts into language they can

communicate to someone else. In short if students are to learn, they must write, and write in good time.

### **1.3 Objectives of the Study**

The main objectives of the study are:

1. To investigate the effects of time and proficiency on performance or essay scores of Malaysian ESL learners.
2. To find out whether proficiency plays a role in determining the effects of time limits on essay scores, component scores and written prewriting drafts.
3. To examine the effects of time and proficiency on prewriting.

### **1.4 Research Questions**

Given the above mentioned objectives, the study specifically attempts to find answers to the following questions:

1. Do different time limits and proficiency levels have an effect on the performance of ESL written composition?
2. Do different time limits and proficiency levels have an effect on the ESL composition components of content, organization, vocabulary, grammar and mechanics?
3. Do different time limits and proficiency levels have an effect on the prewriting drafts of ESL compositions?

## **1.5 Hypotheses**

In line with the research questions, below are the hypotheses formulated to be examined.

### **A. The First Set of Research Hypotheses on Total Essay Scores**

- A1. Time limits have statistically significant effects on the total scores of essays.
- A2. Proficiency levels have statistically significant effects on the total scores of essays.
- A3. The interaction of time and proficiency statistically and significantly affects the total scores of essays.

### **B. The Second Set of Research Hypotheses on Essay Sub-Scores of Content, Organization, Vocabulary, Language, and Mechanics**

- B1. Time limits have statistically significant effects on the individual essay sub-scores.
- B2. Proficiency levels have statistically significant effects on the individual essay sub-scores.
- B3. The interaction of time and proficiency together statistically and significantly affects the individual essay sub-scores.

## **C. The Third Set of Research Hypotheses on Written Prewriting Drafts Preceding Essay Scores**

Individual essay scores are preceded by each of the nine prewriting drafts—note draft [ND], composed draft [CD], organized draft [OD], mixed organized note draft [OD+ND], mixed organized composed draft [OD+CD], mixed note draft and composed draft [ND+CD], long draft [LD], short draft [SD] and revised draft [RD]. (Refer to section 1.8 of this chapter for explanation of types of prewriting drafts).

- C1. Time limits have statistically significant effects on the individual essay scores that are preceded by the different prewriting drafts.
- C2. Proficiency levels have statistically significant effects on the individual essay scores that are preceded by the different prewriting drafts.
- C3. The interaction of time and proficiency together statistically and significantly affects the essay scores that are preceded by the different prewriting drafts.

### **1.6 Significance of the Study**

Since limited research has been done on writing under time stress and for different proficiency levels, this investigation is expected to contribute towards filling a research gap and providing a better understanding of the effects of time and proficiency on writing performance and prewriting strategies.

The results of the study are expected to confirm or refute existing research findings or hypotheses. The study also expects that for similar groups of different proficiency levels under similar settings, the results of this study may be applicable. More importantly the study may stimulate more interest and may lead to more

investigations with findings that can disseminate knowledge that helps to improve learners' writing skills.

Furthermore, an experimental study of this nature may reveal information about learners' needs, their writing strategies, and factors which affect their language writing and learning ability. All these provide useful information important for curriculum design and teaching methodologies.

Through an investigation of the performance profile and of the strategies of student writers of different proficiency levels, it could be possible to identify those aspects of writing and strategies related to instructional information for teachers of writing, parents, and students. In addition, knowledge of strategies could facilitate diagnostic/prescriptive remediation for problem or weak writers.

### **1.7 Limitations of the Study**

This study on timed writing as conceived and carried out within the experimental framework is limited in its scope by a number of factors.

Firstly, the two samples comprising 56 students per group were used in the study. One sample consists of proficient students, the other sample consists of less proficient students. Students of average proficiency were not included in the study. Hence the generalizability of the findings is limited.

Secondly, the study the study did not consider whether the effects of time limits vary for students of different backgrounds. Sampling the students in large enough

numbers by areas or language groups would allow a proper test. Such an investigation would be valuable in determining whether students of different backgrounds would benefit differentially by the allotment of more time.

Thirdly, the study adopts the holistic measure to gauge the five dimensions or sub-categories of an essay, which are content, organization, vocabulary, language and mechanics. The sum of these five scores forms the total or composite score of the entire essay. This type of measurement is based purely on the product of writing. There is no protocol study assessment which would make the study more comprehensive. A protocol is a description of activities, ordered in time, which a subject engages in while performing a task.

Fourthly, the current study uses the argumentative type of essays. Since only a single type or genre of writing was focused, this gave limited value for understanding a writer's overall strengths or weaknesses or developmental needs that can be obtained when students write in multiple genres.

Lastly, for this study whatever prewriting strategies used for the compositions, the assessment of prewriting strategies is based on the related essay scores obtained by the students.

## **1.8 Definition of Terms**

For a clearer discussion of the effects of amount of time on written compositions, the definitions of a number of important terms used are provided below to remove ambiguity.

*Compositions, essays and papers* – these terms are considered synonymous and are used interchangeably throughout the thesis. Each term refers to the expository writing of a student.

*Proficiency* - The term proficiency in second language refers to the “levels of proficiency, the different degrees of actual or required mastery of the second language, or the progression from a basic to a near-native level” (Stern, 2001:357). This interpretation involves rating scales, tests and interlanguage studies.

The term also refers to the “essential characteristics or components of proficiency” (Stern, 2001). The first component or single concept of proficiency concerns expectancy grammar (Oller, 1976), error analyses and interlanguage studies. The second component involves the twofold concept, the academic and a more communicative component or linguistic and communicative competence. Then there is the threefold concept taking into account linguistic, sociolinguistic and strategic competence. A fourfold interpretation deals with the traditional division of proficiency into listening, speaking, reading and writing. Most language tests and rating scales suggest a fourfold or multiple concept of proficiency. Language is complex and it is reasonable to assume that proficiency in it is multifaceted. To understand proficiency there is a need to draw on two or more components rather than one.

Since the MUET, a public diagnostic test of proficiency, adopts the fourfold concept of proficiency involving listening, speaking, reading and writing, the researcher in this study utilized the scores of MUET results to gauge the proficiency of the students. He also divided the students into a proficient group and a less proficient group based on the MUET scores. The MUET results were chosen because they were recent. As such

they provided a good indication of the current proficiency levels of the students for effective differentiation into groups.

Also the MUET was the most appropriate yardstick available for proficiency evaluation for the study. In fact the MUET has been a competency test of English proficiency of students wishing to pursue degree courses in Malaysia. The test is compulsory for entry into institutions of higher learning for a degree course. It is a prerequisite for a degree programme. Preparation for the test helps a student to consolidate and enhance his/her English language skills. For more information on MUET, please refer to Appendix J.

*Proficient students* – for this study, this term is defined as students having an average MUET score of 188. These students had higher MUET scores than the less proficient students. These proficient students had also completed at least one English course at the time of the study. The terms proficient students, students of high proficiency, high proficiency students and more proficient students are used interchangeably in this study. In this investigation, the placing of students into a proficient group based on proficiency scores was somewhat similar to that of Hale (1992) in his study of the effects of time allowed on the test of written English. Hale used the more proficient students, the academic English students, as one group, and the less proficient and intensive English students as the other. These students were earlier separated on the basis of their TOEFL scores. Students with higher TOEFL scores were placed in the proficient group, and those with lower scores were placed in the less proficient group.

*Less proficient students* – for this study, this term is defined as students obtaining an average MUET score of 165.2. These students' performance in the MUET test was lower than the proficient group, and they attended no English course in the university prior to registering for the course they were then pursuing. The terms less proficient students or students of low proficiency or low proficiency students are all synonymous in this study. Again the differentiation of students into a less proficient group followed the manner carried out by Hale (1992) in his study.

*Holistic measure* – this means categorical scoring which depends on recording for an impression of the quality of writing of each dimension of an essay, like content or organization, and assigning a score to the dimension. The essay score or the composite score would then be the summation of all the individual sub-scores or dimension scores. The essay score represents the performance of writing.

*Predrafting* - this is defined as the time period that begins with the receipt of an assignment of a writing task and ending with the completion of a rough draft. It involves "planning activity that helps the writer invent content and generate ideas, images, viewpoints, and so on, to be developed into a piece of writing" (Nagin, 2006:26).

*Written prewriting, rough work, drafting, rough draft and draft* – the first three terms – written prewriting, rough work and drafting - are Chiste and O'Shea's (1990) terms. They were used by the researchers to refer to predrafting works in their study. The last two terms – rough draft and draft - are Piolat and Roussey's (1996) terms. These terms were used in the researchers' investigation of students' drafting strategies and text quality. They are synonymous and they refer to the products of predrafting in

the researchers' studies. The students' rough drafts are assumed to be at least partially reflective of their underlying processes (Piolat and Roussey, 1996).

*Type of draft* – this is determined by “analysing the linguistic and the non-linguistic items it contains” (Piolat and Roussey, 1996:116). Both Piolat and Roussey categorized the written prewriting as types and sizes of drafts in their study of students' drafting strategies and text quality. The researcher in this study adopted Piolat and Roussey's classifications and descriptions of written prewriting as indicated below:

*Note drafts (ND)* – these have note-like items showing the search for ideas. Items in them are not explicit. These items are unorganized lists of words or groups of words either in columns or spread randomly across the page. The items are non-linear in format.

*Organized drafts (OD)* – these have arrows and signs of indexing with circled words or sentence fragments with arrows, sequences of symbols, listing of ideas and so on. Such drafts can also depict the beginnings of an outline format (1, 2, 3 or A, B, C) next to the ideas. Ideas, however, are not lucidly stated. Items are non-linear in format.

*Composed drafts (CD)* – these are drafts in linear format. Ideas are written out in compliance with the conventions of language. Composed drafts can be exact copies of the final essay.

*Mixed drafts* – they are mixed organized note draft (OD+ND), mixed organized composed draft (OD+CD), and mixed note draft and composed draft (ND+CD). Each mixed draft possesses dual characteristics contributed by each component type of draft.

*Draft size* – this is an important variable because it reflects the amount of knowledge possessed by the writer on the topic. As it was difficult to count the number of words in a draft with abbreviations, cross-outs, and incomplete words, the researcher resorted to using a spatial measure. Two size categories were defined. Short drafts refer to prewriting drafts of one-third of a page. Long drafts refer to prewriting drafts of more than one-third of a page.

## **1.9 Conclusion**

The introduction chapter has provided the background to the research, the statement of the problem, and the purpose of the research which was to investigate the effects of time and proficiency on the writing performance of students. Accordingly, three research questions were put forward, and the hypotheses arising therefrom were presented. Next, the significance of the study was also presented, after which the chapter ended with definitions and deliberations of important terminology used in the study.

## CHAPTER 2

### REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

#### 2.0 Introduction

The present chapter begins by reviewing related literature on writing in general and L2 writing in particular. The review is followed by a discussion on the various related writing theories which then leads to a report on previous research studies related tangentially or directly to the study. The findings of these studies provide the rationale for the study, whilst the theories that are reviewed will be the basis for the framework of the study. This theoretical framework shows a confluence of supporting writing theories which provide explanatory value for understanding the results of the investigation.

#### 2.1 From the Product to the Process of Writing

The literature of classroom teaching of English composition over the last four decades shows that beginning in the early 1970s there was a clear shift of focus from the product to the process approach to teaching of writing. This “paradigm shift” was motivated by the work of a host of influential researchers, foremost among them are Braddock, Lloyd-Jones and Schoer (1963) who in their review in the book *Research in Written Composition* asked “What is involved in the act of writing?” (1963:53).

The dramatic shift came in the early 1970s when researchers analyzed what writers do when they write and tried to place their studies within a wider theoretical framework (Beach and Lilian, 1984:3). Prior to this, most studies were contingent

responses to classroom problems that needed resolving immediately. Others too have contributed no less to this new trend in understanding of writing especially Emig (1967, 1971), Murray (1968, 1972), Elbow (1973), Diederich (1974), Britton (1975), Shaughnessy (1977) and others.

Prior to the landmark study of Emig and her introduction of the concept of process writing, the orthodox notion of writing is that, it is a linear activity, which sets down ideas in sequence along a rigid rhetorical outline to obtain the desired end-product. "Students begin with a given topic sentence and thus lock themselves into a semantic and rhetorical prison" (Raimes, 1983:261). Basically, this form of writing an essay is an exercise of fitting sentences into a pre-planned format or pattern. It is akin to pouring content into a fixed mould. The dominant mode for this writing is for style, discourse, syntax and mechanics. When models from well-known writers are used, students are compelled to follow closely the organization and style with the topic sentence at the beginning of each paragraph. They have to produce a parallel text using their own information. Invariably, they lose interest when the subject materials they work on are dull, and their standard, despite their effort, falls far below that of the models.

Indeed it is this preoccupation with the product that gives rise to a whole gamut of teaching theories and approaches which are product-based and language-based. Writing, as Kelly (1984) puts it, is not "seen as a goal of language learning in itself but as an adjunct of grammar" (1984:82). This was the prevailing situation of the 1950s and early 1960s when the popularity of the audio-lingual approach was at its height after it replaced the grammar-translation method in the 1940s and 1950s. A writing lesson became an exercise in habit formation with the resultant text as a showpiece of linguistic artefact. A lot of time was spent in grammar drills and combining other people's

sentences in the mistaken belief that this would improve style. Less time was devoted to students writing their own expressions and sentences.

The teacher, as expected, played a central role and was overtly more concerned with linguistic features and with the level of cosmetic adjustments than with the quality of content or expression. According to Zamel (1985), teachers gave more attention to lower concerns and accuracy than meaning-related concerns. They often indulged in the practice of looking for errors, especially errors in grammar and mechanics. This is because grammar and mechanics are areas "easiest to respond or the ones that are most conspicuously in need" (Cohen 1987:67). The larger elements like content, organization and vocabulary may take time and require a higher degree of judgment. More often than not the teachers "view themselves as language teachers rather than writing teachers, and seem to read and react to a text as a series of separate sentences or even clauses rather than as a whole unit of discourse" (Zamel, 1985:86). Cumming (1983:6) in explaining this stance of the teacher points out that "Error-identification appears to be ingrained in the habitual practices of second language teachers who perhaps by reasons of perceiving their role solely as instructors of the formal aspects of 'language' therefore restrict their activities to operate exclusively within the domain of formal training rather than that of cognitive development". And in being unduly distracted by linguistic and local problems teachers tend to overlook the larger meaning-related problems – a classic case of not being able to see the wood for the trees.

Furthermore, as is often the case with classroom teaching of writing, the teacher takes the dominant role of arbitrator-reader eclipsing and appropriating that of the student-writer in the developing of composing skills. Composing becomes "a matter of writing texts that conform to the models and paradigm imposed by the teacher..."

(Zamel, 1985:95). Students therefore write to please the teacher and are unwilling to take the risks essential for their development as writers.

When teachers choose to respond to the linguistic features in student writing and regard learners' writing as if it were a final draft, they cannot expect students to revise their text beyond the surface level. In fact such responses to text on the part of teachers nurture in students a limited notion of writing and even mislead them into thinking that these lower concerns are "as important as, if not more important than meaning-related concerns. And this is the impression that stays with the students" (Zamel, 1985:82). Collins (1981:202) expressed similar concern, saying that "by worrying about mistakes in writing before we have helped students with the more important problem of adequately representing meaning ... we may be teaching students to do the same".

In reaction to the product-based approach and language-oriented methods other researchers concentrate on how the writer arrives at the final product. They believe that knowing the features of the finished product will not help learners to produce quality product. What is important is the process of writing. Unfortunately "process cannot be inferred from a product anymore than a pig can be inferred from a sausage" (Murray, 1980:3).

Overlooking the process of writing, in the opinion of Flower and Hayes (1977), is what past researchers erred. And in arriving at this conclusion both researchers were no less perceptive in their terse commentary on the intransigence of practitioners for the scant attention paid to process writing in classroom pedagogy.

In the midst of the composition renaissance, an odd fact stands out: our basic methods of teaching are the same ones English academies were using in the seventeenth century. We still undertake to teach people to