

**ENGLISH LANGUAGE WRITING PROFICIENCY AT THE  
PMR LEVEL: A NEEDS ANALYSIS STUDY IN A RURAL  
SECONDARY SCHOOL**

by

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## **ABSTRACT**

Students' writing ability should be imperatively studied since it reflects the overall performance in public examinations. Poor writing skills and other writing related problems are most prevailing in rural schools. Several issues like learning opportunities, classroom instructions, students' needs and completion of the syllabus must be properly addressed.

This study involves sixty-two Form Three students in a rural secondary school. The actual 1999 PMR English Language Paper was administered to them as a test in order to determine their performance in writing. An error analysis was then conducted on the students' written products. The results of the analysis were then compared to the Form Two Curriculum Specifications in order to identify the needs of the students in terms of writing.

The main contention of the findings of this study is poor writing skill causes poor performance in examinations. Respondents committed basic errors mainly in grammar, sentence structure and vocabulary. Elements of inappropriate classroom instructions were also detected which resulted in a mismatch between syllabus content and what was taught in class. Obviously, certain writing needs of the students are not fulfilled accordingly. This study, having identified the writing problems faced by the respondents, suggested some corrective measures and recommendations.

## **ABSTRAK**

### **Kemahiran Menulis Bahasa Inggeris di Peringkat PMR : Satu Kajian Keperluan Di Sebuah Sekolah Menengah Luar Bandar**

Kemampuan pelajar untuk menulis sepatutnya harus dikaji secara imperatif kerana ianya memberi kesan terhadap pencapaian keseluruhan di dalam peperiksaan awam. Kemahiran menulis yang lemah dan masalah-masalah berkaitan penulisan yang lain sangat ketara di sekolah luar bandar. Beberapa isu seperti peluang belajar, pengajaran di dalam kelas, keperluan pelajar dan penamatan sukatan pelajaran semestinya ditangani dengan berkesan. Kajian ini melibatkan enam puluh dua orang pelajar Tingkatan Tiga di sebuah sekolah menengah luar bandar. Kertas peperiksaan sebenar Bahasa Inggeris PMR 1999 telah diberikan sebagai ujian kepada pelajar-pelajar tersebut untuk menentukan kebolehan mereka dalam penulisan. Satu analisis erata telah dijalankan terhadap hasil penulisan mereka. Dapatan daripada analisis itu seterusnya dibandingkan dengan Huraian Sukatan Pelajaran Tingkatan Dua. Ini bertujuan untuk mengenalpasti keperluan para pelajar di dalam penulisan. Dapatan utama kajian ini ialah kelemahan di dalam penulisan menyebabkan kemerosotan keputusan peperiksaan. Responden didapati melakukan kesilapan-kesilapan asas terutamanya dari segi tatabahasa, struktur ayat dan perbendaharaan kata. Unsur-unsur pengajaran di dalam kelas yang tidak sesuai juga dikenalpasti. Ini menyebabkan apa yang diajar di dalam kelas dan kandungan Sukatan Pelajaran menjadi tidak selari. Ini menunjukkan sesetengah keperluan penulisan para pelajar tidak dipenuhi seperti yang sepatutnya. Kajian ini, selain dari mengenalpasti masalah-masalah penulisan yang dihadapi oleh pelajar-pelajar, juga telah mencadangkan beberapa langkah pembaikan dan cadangan-cadangan untuk mengatasinya.



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# **CHAPTER ONE**

## **INTRODUCTION**

### **1.0 Introduction**

Of late, the issue of the standard of English among Malaysian students has become a common topic. Ministers, educators and society at large have expressed concern over the declining standard of English especially after the announcement of each public examination results every year. Finger pointing as to who should take the blame is also common. This research will, among other things, try to examine this issue by focusing on arguably one of the most difficult aspect of language learning and teaching i.e. writing. In addressing this issue, we need to try to find the root cause of the problem and make the necessary recommendations rather than accusing one another for the failure. In other words we need to work hand in hand.

The Penilaian Menengah Rendah (PMR) Examination is a national assessment test for third year students of lower secondary schools. Students are required to take this test and their performances will determine their academic streaming to the upper secondary level i.e. whether they go to science, arts, technical or vocational streams. One of the papers in the PMR is the English Language Paper, which tests the students' basic skills in the language. According to the Malaysian Examination Syndicate, PMR candidates can pass the paper with a C or D grade if they can show some understanding of the basic skills of English (grammar, vocabulary and sentence structure). They can score an A or a B if they can also demonstrate some creativity and satisfactorily express themselves in the language (Refer to Appendix C).



The Malaysian Examination Syndicate, in its PMR Achievement Report for 1996, claims that almost 2/3 of the PMR candidates had difficulty in constructing sentences and failed to elaborate the points given in the writing section (Paper 2). Among the problems cited in that report are : (1) “*Kebolehan linguistik yang lemah*” (Poor linguistic ability) (p. 16), and (2) “*Isi-isi penting tidak dikembangkan dengan sempurna*” (The main points were not elaborated accordingly) (p.15). It should be more than obvious that the problems mentioned above have a common theme, which is, difficulties in writing.

Clearly, students’ ability to write good English is indispensable to ensure good grades in PMR. The PMR examination is used here because it is a reliable measurement of students’ performance. In Paper 2 of the PMR English Language paper, students have to answer two guided essay questions. For each question, a description of a task and a stimulus (a picture, a series of pictures, posters, short notes, etc.) are given and students have to creatively elaborate on them and produce the guided compositions coherently.

The aims of Lower Secondary English Language Programme as mentioned in the English Language Curriculum Specifications for Form Three (1992:1) are :

*...to build upon and extend the proficiency of the students from the primary schools, so as to equip them with the skills and knowledge of English to communicate in certain everyday activities and certain job situations; and also to provide points of take off for various post secondary school needs.*

It is very important for our students to master the writing skills. According to Mohd Azam Nair (2000:110), “the in-thing at present is that writing has become a very important tool for communication and a very important component in the process of education.” Thus, identifying and evaluating the students’ weaknesses and difficulties

according to the students’ needs, are challenges to be considered in order to upgrade the students’ performance in the English Language national examinations.

**1.1 Background of the Study**

The Kuala Muda Yan (KMY) District in Kedah has thirty-three secondary schools. However, in the year 2001, only thirty schools are involved in the PMR examination. This is because there are two technical schools while the other is a new school. These schools do not have form three students.

The overall performance of the students in this district in the PMR English Language paper has always been noted as being the best in Kedah. The results also show no significant difference between the district and the national level, as can be seen in Table 1.1. Furthermore, for the year 2000, the result of the KMY District was better than the national result.

Table 1.1  
PMR English Language Performance of KMY District, Kedah State  
and National Level

Level	Percentage of Passes	
	2000	2001
National	59.8 %	62.4 %
Kedah	53.7 %	56.9 %
Kuala Muda / Yan District	60.44 %	61.14 %

It must be stated that the results given are the overall result of both Paper 1 and Paper 2. Even though the data on the students’ performance for each paper is not

available, the teachers believe that the writing section (Paper 2) usually pulls down the overall score of the students' results. The differences of the performance in the PMR English Language Paper between urban and rural schools' students need to be highlighted because when further analysis was made, the data shows no significant difference between the urban and rural students' performances in the 2001 PMR examination (as can be seen in Figure 1.1). In fact, the rural students performed better in Bahasa Melayu (Malay Language) and History.

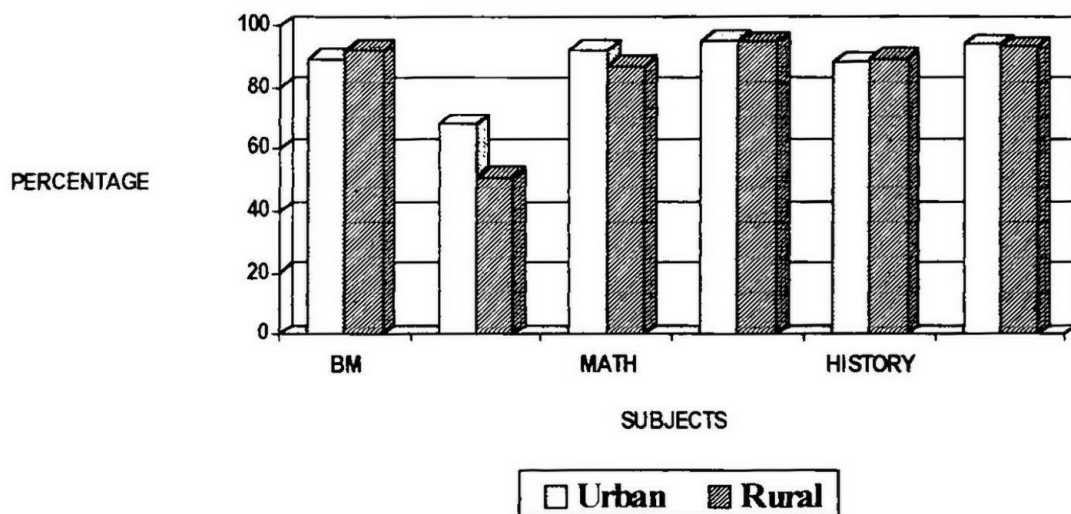


Figure 1.1 : PMR Results of Urban Schools versus Rural Schools in KMY District for the year 2001.

However, for the English Language Paper, both the urban and rural students' achievement are lower compared to the other subjects. In this case, Table 1.2 shows that the rural students scored lower.

Table 1.2  
PMR English Language Performance of KMY District :  
A Comparison Between Urban and Rural Schools

Type of Schools	Percentage of Passes	
	2000	2001
Urban Schools	76.27 %	68.03 %
Rural Schools	48.00 %	51.12 %

Therefore, to make an assumption that rural school students are not performing well in the PMR is incorrect. The poor results of these students in the PMR examinations are due to the English Language Paper (as shown in Table 1.3). The students had performed well in Bahasa Melayu, Science and Geography (more than 90% passed); and more than 85% passed Mathematics and History. The results of the English Language Paper pulled down the overall result of the PMR examination of the schools.

Table 1.3  
PMR Examination Results of Rural Schools in KMY District for the year 2001

Subjects	English Language	Bahasa Melayu	Math	Science	History	Geography
Percentage of Passes	51.12 %	92.40 %	87.36 %	94.73 %	89.28 %	93.27 %

## 1.2 The Problem

The poor performance of rural school students in Kuala Muda Yan District in writing contributes significantly towards the overall dismal performance in the PMR English

Language paper. Since Paper 2 of the English Language paper tests students' writing skills, we can conclude that the poor performance in this paper (Paper 2) is due to the students' poor writing skills.

If we are concern with the students' proficiency in the language, especially in writing, it is crucial for the English Language teachers to know why the students are not performing well in writing. It is also equally important to look at how the students are taught writing. It is possible that the students are weak in certain aspects of writing because they were not taught the skills that are required to master it. Therefore, the cause of these problems has to be unearthed in order to know the needs of our students.

### **1.3 Rationale of the Study**

It is common knowledge among administrators and teachers that the English Language paper is the cause of the rural schools' poor performance in the PMR. English Language teachers are also aware that the students' failure to master the writing skills is the main contributing factor to this dilemma.

Unfortunately, knowing is one thing, rectifying the problem is another. Teachers are aware that the main cause of their students' poor performance in the PMR English Language paper is mainly due to the writing component. However, without proper research, we will not be able to pinpoint the students' specific problems in writing or which writing sub skills is causing the most difficulty. This study hopes to illuminate the difficulties faced by students and teachers in learning and teaching writing and the reasons why these difficulties have become a problem and hopefully the

study will be able to give some suggestions and recommendations on how to improve the situation.

In the learning of writing, some of the problems are common and some are individualistic. Therefore, if teachers can deal with the common problems, they can focus on other important aspects of teaching. In this research, realizing the need to reconcile the common problems faced by students, the researcher will utilize error analysis, needs analysis, test, interviews, questionnaires and classroom observations as instruments.

#### **1.4 Significance of the Study**

In our Malaysian context, many teachers in our schools are the obedient followers of the syllabus set by the Ministry of Education. They have to have such a commitment because they are responsible to finish the syllabus. In their haste to complete the syllabus they may fail to take into consideration their students' existing state of knowledge, readiness to learn and potential to internalise knowledge to be learned. When teachers are not aware of these aspects, both teachers and students will head for different directions. According to Spencer (1983:4), "very few of the teachers were able to say that they themselves had any major part in planning the course in their subject." Hence, effective and meaningful teaching and learning will not take place.

That is why this study finds it crucial to examine how the teaching and learning of writing is actually materialized in the classroom. By doing so, the researcher can find out what the dependent and interdependent variables are, which contribute to students' poor performance in writing.

The data analysis of this research can be considered authentic since they originate from students' own works. Ultimately, measures can be taken to improve the teaching of writing, at least in the district where the study is conducted.

### **1.5 Objectives of the Study**

The objectives of this study are :

- 1.5.1 to test the respondents' (2002 PMR candidate) performance using the 1999 PMR English Language paper, in order to examine their performance in :
  - a) Paper 1 – Reading Comprehension
  - b) Paper 2 : Question 1 – Cloze Passage
  - c) Paper 2 : Question 2 – Guided Writing
  - d) Paper 2 : Question 3 – Guided Writing
- 1.5.2 to conduct an error analysis on the respondents' written work specifically Paper 2 : Questions 2 and 3 in order to find out the common areas of writing difficulties faced by respondents in mastering of writing skills (e.g. grammar, sentence structure and vocabulary);
- 1.5.3 to observe the process of teaching and learning writing in the classroom with regards to :
  - a) teacher's preparation;
  - b) teacher's mode of instruction;
  - c) respondents' reception;
  - d) respondents' activities;
  - e) teacher's mode of evaluation; and

f) amendments of the writing made by respondents.

1.5.4 to conduct a needs analysis in order to find out the disparity between the respondents' performance and expected performance.

## **1.6 Research Questions**

The study will be guided by the following research questions:

1.6.1 What is the level of the respondents' performance in the 1999 PMR English Language paper ? Specifically;

a) what are the respondents' performance in Paper 1 (Reading Comprehension)?

b) what are the respondents' performance in Paper 2: Question 1 (Cloze Passage) ?

c) what are the respondents' performance in Paper 2: Question 2 (Guided Writing)?

d) what are the respondents' performance in Paper 2: Question 3 (Guided Writing)?

1.6.2 What are the common areas of writing difficulties faced by the respondents ? Specifically;

a) what are the grammatical errors commonly committed by the respondents ?

b) what sentence structure errors are frequently committed by the respondents ?

c) what vocabulary errors are frequently committed by the respondents ?

1.6.3 What transpires in the process of teaching and learning writing in the classroom? Specifically;

a) does the teacher plan the writing class ?



- b) how does the teacher teach the writing skills ?
- c) how do the respondents receive the instructions given ?
- d) what are the respondents' activities in the classroom ?
- e) how does the teacher evaluate the respondents' written work ?
- f) does the teacher correct their work ?
- g) what kind of amendments do the respondents make ?
- h) how do they make the amendments ?

1.6.4 What are the respondents' writing needs ? Specifically;

- a) what are their levels of performance ?
- b) what is the expected level of proficiency ?
- c) what is the disparity between the levels of performance and the expected levels of performance ?

## **1.7 Overview of Research Methodology**

The research will explore issues regarding students' poor performance in writing. In trying to do this, one needs to look at not only the writing product but also the teaching process in order to address the issues comprehensively.

The study will be conducted in SMK X, a rural secondary school in the Kuala Muda Yan District, Kedah. Sixty-two form three students from two of five classes will be chosen as respondents for this study. All the English Language teachers in the school will also be involved.

The following research instruments will be used to gather the relevant data :

**a. a test**

The researcher will get the cooperation of the SMK X English Language Department to administer the 1999 PMR English Language Paper to all the form three students as a monthly test. Detail results will be recorded and Questions 2 and 3 of Paper 2 will be used by the researcher to conduct error analysis and needs analysis.

**b. questionnaires**

Two sets of questionnaires will be prepared; one for the English Language teachers in SMK X and the other for the students involved in this study.

**c. classroom observations**

The researcher will conduct twenty classroom observations during the writing lessons.

**d. semi-structured and unstructured interviews**

Unstructured interviews will be conducted with all the English Language teachers in SMK X; while semi-structured interviews will be conducted with about 16 % of the respondents that is ten out of sixty-two students.

**e. document analysis**

- English Language Syllabus
- Form Two English Language Curriculum Specifications
- Form Three English Language Curriculum Specifications
- Teacher's Record Book
- School files : school's PMR examination results

- PMR examinations results for Kedah and national from Unit Penilaian dan Peperiksaan (Assessment and Examination Unit), Kedah State Education Department.
- PMR examinations results for KMY District from KMY District Education Office.
- Respondents' English Language composition exercise books.

These instruments will be used to gather the relevant data needed in order to meet the objectives of the study and to answer the research questions.

### **1.8 Limitation of the Study**

Like most studies this study too has its limitations. In terms of population and sampling, the study is limited to five English Language teachers and sixty-two form three students of SMK X in Kuala Muda Yan District in Kedah during the 2002 school year.

For the instruments, the assessment examination paper used for the study (PMR English Language Paper for 1999) will be given a few months before the actual 2002 PMR Examination. Thus, the students have less preparation time, which might affect the results of the assessment examination given. Furthermore, as for the data analysis, interpretations of the classroom observations are based on researcher's perceptions, which could be clouded by her knowledge and previous experience. Finally, in terms of data 'purity', there is no way to know whether subjects answered honestly during the interview and behave as they normally do in the classroom.

However, the researcher is confident that these limitations will not discredit the findings of this research. As a matter of fact, being aware of the limitations, the researcher will be able to control the situation better thus increasing the reliability of the data gathered.

### **1.9 Delimitation of Study**

Among the delimitations of this study are firstly, the study will not concentrate on students' motivation and attitude towards the target language. The focus of this study is narrowed down to examine linguistic element of writing difficulties. Secondly, this study does not intend to focus on contrastive analysis (CA). This study focuses on what the errors are, not the sources these of errors.

### **1.10 Definition of Terms**

Listed below are definitions of key terms as they are used in this study :

*'A' Schools* : These schools are defined by the Education Ministry as schools with more than 800 students and 60 or more certified teachers.

*'B' Schools* : The Education Ministry defines these as schools with less than 800 students and less than 60 certified teachers.

*Error Analysis (EA)* : The study and analysis of errors made by second and foreign language learners.

*Errors* : The production of regular patterns of linguistic form that consistently differ from the target language model.

*First Language (L1)* : the language acquired first in early childhood.

*Grammar* : The rules of the language concerning the way in which you can put words together in order to make sentences (Cobuild, 1987)

*Language Acquisition* : A natural unconscious process similar to first language acquisition.

*Language Learning* : the development of conscious knowledge – rules and forms

*Needs Analysis (NA)* : An analysis of students' language needs (which can be used to plan a course syllabus and content)

*PMR* : Penilaian Menengah Rendah (Lower Secondary Assessment)

*Proficiency* : The intuitive mastery of the forms, linguistic, affective and socio-cultural meanings of the language

*Rural schools* : Rural schools are defined as day schools that are situated outside the town area. With regard to this research, they are schools that are situated outside the area of Sungai Petani Municipal Council.

*Second Language (L2)* : Any language acquired or to be acquired later than the native language.

*Second Language Acquisition (SLA)* : A study of the way in which people learn a language other than their mother tongue, inside or outside of classroom.

*Sentence Structure* : A way or system in which sentence components or words are put together to build a sentence.

*Target Language (TL)* : The language that a learner is trying to learn.

*Urban schools* : Urban schools are defined as day schools that are situated in the towns and cities. With regard to this research, they are schools that are situated in the vicinity of Sungai Petani Municipal Council.

*Vocabulary* : The total number of words a person knows.

*Writing skills* : Writing skills are defined as the ability to write in accordance with grammar, sentence structure and discourse markers.

## **CHAPTER TWO LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.0 Introduction**

In this chapter, the researcher reviews literature related to the issue at hand and in particular English Language Teaching in Malaysia; learners' perspective of learning writing as well as the teachers' perspectives in terms of teaching writing. This review will also include the analysis of learners' errors and needs in learning the target language. Finally, it will look at issues surrounding classroom instructional methodology.

### **2.1 English Language Teaching in Malaysia**

Most children who enter schools in Malaysia are from families in which English is not spoken at home. This situation is not limited to certain schools or certain parts of the country. According to Chitravelu *et.al* (2001:3), understanding students' differences must be the starting point for all efforts in teaching English in Malaysia. They also stated that it is important for teachers to have knowledge and understanding of how people learn a second language and what processes are involved. They then went on to make a distinction between urban and rural pupils. 'Urban' pupils are said to have greater exposure to English because they have more opportunities to hear it being used and to use it themselves in shopping centers, restaurants, offices, etc. They are also likely to have a more positive attitude towards English. Some of them may come from homes where English is spoken at all times or most of the times, whereas 'rural' pupils

usually have limited exposure to English. Their only source of English may be the television and radio.

Moreover, since Malay is the medium of instruction in schools and public universities, many Malay students may feel that their survival in the education system is secured. Therefore, it beats the purpose for them to learn English. In other words, they have developed a 'comfort zone' which echoes the conviction that English is something they can live without.

In Malaysian schools, as far English is concerned, five periods of English are allocated per week. This is the standard policy of the Ministry of Education. The duration of each period is usually 40 minutes. However, in the 200 minutes of teaching/learning English, how long is spent on writing ? In other words - how much exposure to writing is given to the students formally ? Are students provided with enough models of writing in the language ? Chitravelu *et.al* (2001:143-144) mentioned three reasons why provision of models is important.

- To give students an idea of what is expected of them

Through reading (the models), students will unconsciously learn about different kinds of writing and what is expected in each type.

- To provide organizational framework and language

A carefully chosen model can provide the organizational framework as well as the language the students may require to express his own ideas – this is the basis of parallel writing.

- To provide a model for imitation

The theory is that when a student attempts to imitate a text, he becomes sensitive to many features of writing which are not given prominence in other approaches to the teaching of writing.

-- Teaching ESL in Malaysia is very challenging. Teachers not only have to cope with students' weaknesses in the language but also their attitude towards it. However, as a helping hand, teachers should always be in contact with the curriculum and the syllabus as it provides the framework teachers should work on.

## **2.2 Language Curriculum and Syllabus**

The Malaysian school's curriculum is organized on a national level. The Malaysian system of education is presently using the New Primary School Curriculum (KBSR) for Primary School level and the Integrated Curriculum for Secondary Schools (KBSM) for Secondary School level.

The KBSR English Language Syllabus aims to teach English as an effective second language in Malaysian schools. The intention is to equip pupils with communicative ability and a competency to perform language functions using the correct language forms and structure. As a continuation of the KBSR syllabus, the KBSM English Language Syllabus seeks to extend these skills among secondary school students and is aimed at enhancing students' communicative competence.

However, starting in year 2000, the Curriculum Development Centre has revised the English Language Curriculum for all forms in secondary schools. This revision is to strengthen the existing curriculum. According to the Sukatan Pelajaran KBSM Bahasa



Inggeris (English Language Syllabus) 2000, three new learning outcomes have been incorporated in the curriculum, namely Language Use for Interpersonal Purposes, Language Use for Informational Purposes and Language Use for Aesthetic Purposes.

Language Use for Interpersonal Purposes refers to language used for conversation, correspondence and interaction with others. It requires students to speak intelligibly by using correct pronunciation, stress and intonation and to write with good grammar.

Language Use for Informational Purposes involves obtaining information for various purposes, processing the information and presenting it to a variety of audiences. It requires students to search for information from spoken form, print and multimedia texts. This is to develop critical thinking and independent information-seeking skills.

As for Aesthetic Purposes, it involves the ability to enjoy literary texts appropriately. Learners are expected to be able to express ideas, thoughts, beliefs and feelings creatively and imaginatively.

Despite the above-mentioned changes in the curriculum, this study will scrutinize the correspondence between what transpire during classroom teaching and the curriculum with regard to writing.

Writing is one of the central issues in second language learning. The importance of writing is clearly explained by Raimes (1983:3). She says,

*First writing reinforces the grammatical structures, idioms and vocabulary we have been teaching our students. Second, when our students write, they also have a chance to be adventurous with the language, to go beyond what they have learned and to take risk. Third, when they write, they necessarily become very involved with the new language.*

In other words, writing provides the ‘test ground’ for all the linguistic skills learned by learners. Besides, our education system in Malaysia is still very much examination-oriented. In our public examinations like Penilaian Menengah Rendah (PMR), Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) and Sijil Tinggi Persekolahan Malaysia (STPM), students not only have to read for the examination but most importantly, they have to write adequately, creatively and convincingly to score high marks. Thus, the pressure to have good writing skills is tremendously high on our students. Unfortunately, writing skill is the area that most of our students fail miserably. It is therefore crucial to study the weaknesses in students’ writing from both the students and the teachers’ perspectives.

The ‘Huraian Sukatan Pelajaran (HSP) Bahasa Inggeris’ (English Language Curriculum Specifications) for Form Three of the Integrated Secondary School Curriculum (KBSM) by the Ministry of Education (1989:ix) spells out the aims of English Language education in Malaysia as such :

*English is taught in both the primary and secondary schools in Malaysia. Its position is that of a second language. It is a means of communication in certain everyday activities and certain job situations. It is an important language to enable Malaysia to engage meaningfully in local and international trade and commerce. It also provides an additional means of access to academic, professional and recreational materials.*

The HSP describes the position of English as a second language. The term ‘second language’ refers to two things :

- a. English as the second most important language used in Malaysia after Bahasa Melayu.
- b. The first foreign language learnt after the mother tongue.

According to Rod Ellis (1997:3), 'second' can refer to any language that is learned subsequent to the mother tongue. Therefore, it can refer to the learning of a third or fourth language.

As for writing, the syllabus clearly states the main objectives and its specifications for Form Three as taken from the English Language Curriculum Specifications for Form Three (Ministry of Education:1989). The general objectives are:

- Writing words, phrases, sentences, and paragraphs;
- Using correct punctuation;
- Taking dictation;
- Filling in forms;
- Presenting in graphic form information received;
- Making and expanding notes;
- Writing summaries;
- Writing instructions; directions; messages; stories; letters; opinions; descriptions of people, occupations, means of transport, scenes, events, processes and procedures; and poems.

The specific objectives are :

- Write simple and compound sentences.
- Write sentences in correct sequence to make paragraphs.
- Use correct punctuation : capital letters, full stop, comma, question mark, apostrophe, quotation marks and semi-colon.
- Take dictation of seen words, phrases and sentences from instructions, directions, messages, stories, descriptions, letters, forms, talks, opinions and poems.
- Write instructions on how to use public amenities, such as the telephone and the recreation park.
- Write directions to places of interest in the country, such as the zoo and the museum.
- Write stories on moral values, such as patriotism, neighbourliness and gratitude.
- Present information in graphic form, such as the pie-chart and the bar graph.
- Fill in application forms, such as job application forms and passport application forms.
- Describe Malaysian leaders, such as Tunku Abdul Rahman, Tun Tan Cheng Lock and Tun V.T. Sambanthan, and their contributions to the nation.

- Describe occupations in the armed forces, such as that of a pilot and an infantryman.
- Describe means of transport by air, such as the aeroplane and the helicopter, and the services they provide.
- Describe scenes, such as those at the seaside and in a factory.
- Describe places of interest in the country such as the zoo and the museum.
- Describe national events, such as the National Day celebrations and the Children's Day celebrations.
- Describe processes and procedures, such as pineapple canning and batik printing.
- Write informal letters on common interests to friends and relatives.
- Write formal letters of application for jobs.
- Write poems.
- Write messages expressing appreciation, encouragement, and concern.
- Make notes of talks on topics of common interest, such as sports and entertainment.
- Expand notes of talks on topics of common interest, such as sports and entertainment.
- Write a short summary of talks on topics of common interest, such as sports and entertainment.
- Present opinions on current issues, such as drug abuse and pollution.

Clearly, the syllabus emphasizes on writing. The specific objectives, if adhered to, can help the students to embark on second language writing. Noticeably, these objectives not only focusing on linguistic skill but also on self-expression, interpersonal skill, social skill, current issues and appreciation of literature. This once again, clearly shows that the curriculum specification intends to develop students' writing skills in all areas.

### **2.3 Second Language Writing**

Teaching English as a second language (ESL) writing especially in Malaysian context is undoubtedly a very challenging task. This is due to students' lack of exposure and motivation to acquire the English Language. Since the exposure and motivation towards English vary for each ESL learner, teachers must be prepared with the variety of

approaches in teaching writing in order to cater for different learning styles and needs of the learners. This is crucial since there is no absolute prescription on how to teach L2 writing (Harris, 1993).

Writing, for ESL learners, serves more of their academic or instrumental purpose rather than for personal creativity. Hence, for learners to succeed in writing, they must have the understanding of the genres, the ability to engage in the process of writing and a strong motivation towards the act of writing itself (Harris, 1993). Thus, writing can sensitise ESL learners to the stylistic dimension of everyday language where they have the opportunity to develop intuitive feel for the language which is not part of the second language instructions and also to discover the possibilities and potentialities of language manipulations (Gaffield-Vile, 1998).

It is important to understand that writing skills are “complex, requiring mastery of not only grammatical and rhetorical devices but also of conceptual and judgement elements” (Azam Nair, 2000:103). The assessment should involve grammatical skills (the ability to write correct sentences), stylistic skills (the ability to manipulate sentences and use language effectively) and mechanical skills (the ability to use correctly convention peculiar to the written language –punctuation and spelling) and judgement skills (the ability to write in an appropriate manner for a particular purpose or audience).

It is also important for ESL learners to think and write as completely as possible in English. In other words, intervention of learners’ L1 should be kept to a minimum. This is to elude the negative transfer from L1 especially in terms of grammar and sentence structures. In the same development, Kroll (1991:110) comments that,

*if ESL writers retrieve information about a writing topic from memory of their L1 and then have to translate in English before writing anything down, this act of translation can lead to an overload of their short term memory and a diminishment in the quality of the content of their writing.*

Apart from intervention of L1, there are other constraints which contribute to poor ESL writing performance. Silva (1993) in summarizing his findings claims that (1) L2 writers do less planning, less goal setting and less successful in generating materials, (2) L2 writers transcribing is more laborious, less fluent and less productive, and (3) L2 writers do less reviewing, rereading and reflection on written text.

Inasmuch, all the findings mentioned so far should be construed as a sign that our ESL learners really need all the help they can get to assist them in their writing. Raimes (1985) states that L2 writers need to have more of every aspect – declarative knowledge (language rules and grammatical system), and procedural knowledge (to use language for communicative purposes).

## **2.4 Issues in Teaching Writing**

Writing is often considered a difficult skill to acquire due to its complex characteristics which involve not only knowledge of linguistics but also sociolinguistic. According to Hughey et al. (1983), the complex and dynamic process of transforming thoughts into language demands an active involvement of the writer at several level of activities both solitary and collaborative, conscious and unconscious, physical and mental – all working in harmony with one another. In other words, becoming a writer is a complex and ongoing process and becoming a writing teacher is no less complex.

Be that as it may, to our surprise, there are many teachers in schools who feel that teaching writing is ‘a piece of cake’. In helping students to plan their compositions.

some teachers resort to ready-made outline which students are expected to follow religiously. In fact, as Lee (1992:17) points out, “writing a composition from someone else’s plan is hardly the kind of catalyst to spark off the creative act.”

Another assumption regarding writing is that apart from the need to build up an adequate store of vocabulary, students must master the rules of grammar and syntax before they can produce a piece of respectable work.

To this assumption, Elbow (1973:138) refutes that “ it is no accident that so much attention is paid to grammar in the teaching of writing. Grammar is the one part of writing that can be straightforwardly taught.” In the same breath, Raimes (1983: 267), in rejecting this assumption says “students must be taught the skills but producing correct grammar forms is ‘a parallel activity to composing’. It should not be allowed to interfere.”

When excessive focus on grammar and syntax are stressed upon students in teaching writing, we tend to lose sight of the lesson or purpose of writing. Students therefore perceive writing as classroom exercise or something to satisfy the English teacher and then forgotten.

Furthermore, writing in ESL is even more sticky and difficult. This is because “a second language writer has to face an additional problem of writing in another language and culture” (Zaharah Pilus, 1992:22). Thus, it is not surprising that many Malaysian students find writing in English a difficult task. They have to comply with all the conventions and cope with the language at the same time.