

## **CHAPTER 1**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Writing is an integral part of education. It has stretched its influence beyond the confines of the language classroom. Educators acknowledge the role that writing plays in the acquisition and development of knowledge. Gage (1986: p24) illustrates this role by defining writing as “thinking-made-tangible, thinking that can be examined ... thinking that can be stopped and tinkered with”. He explained that “a clearer understanding of one’s own thoughts is travelled on paper ... through the attempt to find words ... and ... patterns for ourselves in which to express related ideas”, hence, the support for writing as the tool to develop thinking skills for the discovery of knowledge.

The development of research on writing and writing instruction since the 1940s also shows how writing has evolved from being merely a “service activity” for reinforcement of language structures in the language classroom to a production of prose that fits the “standards and requirements” of a particular discourse community. Recent studies on writing have shown that “writers in different communities produce texts of similar structure in quite different ways because of the demands and customs

of the particular communities in which they participate” (Smagorinsky and Smith, 1992: p. 288).

For example, Conner and Johns (1989) found that businessmen and engineers do not approach argumentation in the same way (cited in Johns, 1990: p. 29). Similarly, studies by Fahnestock and Secor (1991) on literary criticism and Stratman (1990) on legal brief writing also suggest that different discourse communities approach argumentation in very different ways (cited in Smagorinsky and Smith, 1992). These findings also support the assertion by Bizzell (1985) that different kinds of thinking may be demanded in different disciplines and this may cause the writing process to vary from the process which the student is accustomed to. This supports the need for more studies on the writing processes involved for different types of writing in various discourse communities.

Numerous studies have looked at writing in the academic community, for example, college composition (e.g. Zamel, 1983; Raimes, 1985; Chandrasegaran, 1991; Leki, 1995; Wong, 1993), research writing (Matsumoto, 1995; Nelson, 1988, 1992), but very few have studied letter writing in the business context (e.g. Jenkins and Hinds, 1987). However, more insight is needed on this type of writing, which is quite different from other types of writing. For one, business letters are often written promptly for a specific purpose and the style adopted is often influenced by the values on interpersonal communication of that particular culture. Jenkins and Hinds

(1987), for example found that American business letters are written with a reader-orientation, while French letters are written from a writer-orientation, and Japanese business letters, from a non-person orientation.

Another recent development in the research of writing instruction is the shift from research on teaching methods to learner characteristics and their possible influence on the learning of writing (Wenden, 1987; Cook, 1993; Ellis, 1994). These studies which have focussed primarily on identifying factors influencing individual learner differences and learning strategies (e.g. Rubin, 1975, 1981; Abraham and Vann, 1987; Vann and Abraham, 1990; Oxford and Nyikos, 1989; Wong, 1993) aim to inform efforts at empowering language learners in the classroom to self-direct their learning endeavour.

Studies on language learning strategies have found differences among successful and less successful learners (e.g. Wesche, 1979; Abraham and Vann, 1987; Vann and Abraham, 1990) where successful learners were found to be more flexible and more capable of shifting cognitive styles for learning (Tyacke and Mendelson, 1988). Studies have also shown that strategy training incorporated in writing classrooms had a positive effect on students' writing of stories (Danoff et al., 1993). Nevertheless, more insight is still needed on the nature of strategy training suitable for autonomous learning of business letter writing since learner training syllabi need to be task-specific as suggested by research evidence (Wenden, 1995).

## **1.1 Statement of the Problem**

Writing is a complex process. Teaching writing is no less complex in nature. For the past few decades, various approaches and methods of instruction for writing have emerged, leaving the writing teacher with the task of matching the correct approach or method with the problem faced by the learner.

In the case of weak learners, this is often not an easy task, as such learners often have a multidimensional problem. In the past, the onus was often on the teacher to decide for the learners what was to be learnt. However, of late, there is a shift from being teacher-centred to being learner-centred - a shift which encourages learners' involvement in directing their own learning processes.

Earlier studies on language learning strategies have focused on identifying learning strategies of good learners (cited in Ellis, 1994). However, the ability of good learners may not necessarily reflect the need of weak learners. In fact, later studies suggest that weak learners and good learners differ in their use of strategy (e.g. Abraham and Vann, 1987; Oxford and Nyikos, 1989; Vann and Abraham, 1990; Wong, 1993).

Anderson (1995), in explaining the process of skill acquisition as a transformation from declarative knowledge to procedural knowledge mentioned that in the autonomous stage (the final stage of this three stage process), the learner may sometimes lose the ability to "verbally describe the skill" (p.319) unless prompted to consciously observe and verbalize the process involved. He explained that "when a

skill becomes totally automated, it can be performed without engaging the cognitive system” (p. 338). Writing strategies reported by good learners, therefore, may not necessarily include strategies which have been proceduralized or automaticized. This therefore strongly suggests that there is great value in studying weak learners’ writing strategies to form a clearer understanding of their problems and needs.

While many studies have looked at the writing strategies used in writing for an academic context (e.g. Chandrasegaran, 1991; Matsumoto, 1995; Leki, 1995) as well as in a general context (e.g. Lee, 1990; Chamot, 1990), very few have focused on strategies used in the business context (e.g. Jenkins and Hinds, 1987). Hence, this study is an attempt to look at the strategies used and difficulties encountered by weak ESL learners in the process of writing business letters.

## **1.2 Objectives of the Study**

This study hopes to describe the writing strategies used by weak ESL learners in writing business letters. It also hopes to describe the problems encountered and the effect these strategies have on the writing of business letters. In other words, it seeks to answer the following questions:

- a. What are the writing strategies used by weak ESL learners in writing business letters?
- b. What are the problems encountered by weak ESL learners in the process of writing business letters?
- c. How does strategy use affect the process of writing business letters?

### 1.3 Significance of the Study

There is a substantial amount of studies done on second language writing which have focused on composing processes and writing strategies (e.g. Zamel, 1983; Raimes, 1985; Silva, 1993; Lee, 1990; Abraham and Vann, 1987; Vann and Abraham, 1990; Matsumoto, 1995). However, most of these studies have concentrated on generating a comprehensive list of writing behaviour or strategies. They have discovered what learners do while composing, but not much is known about why learners do what they do. Also, very few studies have focused on weak learners (e.g. Raimes, 1985; Abraham and Vann, 1987; Vann and Abraham, 1990; Porte, 1995) and business letter writing (e.g. Jenkins and Hinds, 1987)

In Malaysia, although there are studies that have investigated language learning strategies using Oxford's SILL instrument among Malaysian ESL learners, (e.g. Chan, 1995; Hashim et al, 1994) an in-depth study on the use of writing strategies among weak ESL learners has so far not been done. While there are studies done on the composing behaviour of ESL learners in Malaysia (e.g. Lee, 1990), more insight is still needed on the difficulties faced by weak ESL learners. Furthermore, as Wenden (1995) suggests, more needs to be known about the type of strategies that affect different writing tasks.

This study will therefore provide valuable insight into the problems faced by weak ESL learners at the Faculty of Economics and Management of UPM with the task of writing business letters. At the same time, it will also contribute to the existing body of knowledge on L2 writing processes and writing strategies of ESL

learners. The description of the problems faced by these learners and the strategy used could also complement findings from other studies to provide guidelines for the design of a suitable training programme that caters to the needs of working adults and weak ESL learners for autonomous learning of business letter writing.

## **1.4 Definition of Terms**

This section will deal with definitions of some concepts or constructs that are utilized in this study.

### **1.4.1 Weak learners**

Weak learners, in the context of this study, are those who have failed or obtained a pass (P7 or P8) in their Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) English examination, and those who did not perform well in the writing assignments given in the course *BB1 2407: Written Communication for Business*.

### **1.4.2 Writing Strategies**

Writing strategies in this study refer to the “operations or steps” taken by the learner in the process of writing (Rubin, 1987: p. 23). They include three categories of strategies: cognitive, metacognitive and social strategies. The definitions of these categories and strategies in each of these categories were adapted mainly from Chamot et al. (1988) cited in O'Malley and Chamot (1990) and Rubin (1987). Other sources of references were Ting (1995), Cohen (1990) and Raimes (1985, 1987).

### 1.4.3 Cognitive Strategies

Cognitive Strategies refer to strategies used that involve “direct analysis, transformation, or synthesis of learning material” (Rubin, 1987: p. 23). In this particular study, fourteen cognitive strategies were identified. Three of these definitions were the researcher’s own definitions, i.e. scanning, skimming and drafting. Examples of these strategies are available in section 4.3.1.

**1.4.3.1 Scanning (Sc)** : refers to reading written text closely and carefully.

**1.4.3.2 Skimming (Sk)**: refers to reading through a text quickly to glean for important information. In some cases only certain words from the text are verbalized.

**1.4.3.3 Translating (T)**: refers to a verbatim translation of written text from English to Malay and translation of ideas from Malay to English.

**1.4.3.4 Summarizing (Su)**: refers to extracting important facts or main points of a written text orally.

**1.4.3.5 Making Connections (Co)**: refers to relating new information to available information to make sense of it. This involves a bottom-up approach in problem solving.

- 1.4.3.6 Deducing (De):** refers to decision making which involves a top-down approach in problem solving often seen through the use of reasoning, rationalizing or application of rules.
- 1.4.3.7 Repeating (Rp):** refers to reading words, phrases repeatedly while reading and voicing ideas repeatedly while writing or rehearsing ideas.
- 1.4.3.8 Guessing Meaning (Gu):** refers to assigning meaning to a difficult word or phrase by chance.
- 1.4.3.9 Revising (Rv):** refers to editing written product either by erasing, adding or changing words and phrases in the written product.
- 1.4.3.10 Resourcing (Rs):** refers to the act of looking up dictionaries, textbooks and memory for help on meanings of words, or language structures, letter writing plans.
- 1.4.3.11 Drafting (Df):** refers to writing down very quickly or without much interruption whatever that comes to mind for the task.
- 1.4.3.12 Paraphrasing (Paph):** refers to rephrasing content using different words, but with the same meaning to aid understanding and to consolidate ideas.

**1.4.3.13 Note Taking (Nt):** refers to writing down key words and concepts to assist comprehension and retention of details.

**1.4.3.14 Transcribing (W):** refers to the physical act of writing.

#### **1.4.4 Metacognitive Strategies**

Metacognitive strategies refer to strategies that are used to “oversee, regulate or self-direct” the writing process (Rubin, 1987: p. 25). These strategies often involve “thinking about the (writing process), planning for (writing), monitoring the (writing) task, and evaluating how well one has (written)” (O’Malley and Chamot, 1990:p. 137).

In this particular study, nine metacognitive strategies were identified and the definitions for these strategies were adapted from Chamot et al. (1988) cited in O’Malley and Chamot (1990: p.137). Examples for these strategies are available in section 4.3.2.

**1.4.4.1 Rehearsing Ideas (RHI):** refers to talking to oneself about the ideas to be included in the writing task.

**1.4.4.2 Rehearsing Structure (RHS):** refers to practising suitable words or phrases to structure ideas in the target language.

**1.4.4.3 Monitoring Comprehension (Mc):** refers to attempts to check the accuracy of one's understanding of the task.

**1.4.4.4 Monitoring Production (Mp):** refers to attempts at checking the suitability of ideas and language used.

**1.4.4.5 Monitoring Style (Ms):** refers to attempts to assess or make judgement of a situation or idea.

**1.4.4.6 Evaluating Task (Vt):** refers to judgement made on the level of difficulty of the task.

**1.4.4.7 Evaluating Production (Vp):** refers to attempts to assess the completeness and accuracy of product written.

**1.4.4.8 Evaluating Comprehension (Vc)** refers to attempts to assess one's understanding of the task.

**1.4.4.9 Evaluating Ability (Vab):** refers to statements made on one's ability to comprehend or to complete the task.

#### **1.4.5 Social Strategies**

Social strategies refer to strategies that involve interaction with oneself or with another person to seek for assistance to complete the task (adapted from

Chamot et al. (1988) cited in O'Malley and Chamot (1990: p. 139). Please refer to section 4.3.3 for examples.

**1.4.5.1 Questioning Others (Qo):** refers to questions or non-verbal distress signals directed to the researcher seeking clarification or help.

**1.4.5.2 Questioning Self (Qs):** refers to directing questions to oneself to brainstorm for logical solution to a task. Here the writer is interacting with himself or herself.

**1.4.5.3 Answering (A):** refers to attempts to answer self-directed questions.

**1.4.5.4 Directing Self (Ds):** refers to verbal instructions directed at oneself to direct or focus one's attention on the next step in the process of writing.

## **1.5 Limitations of the Study**

This study is a qualitative case study which involved six participants. They were the only weak students whose performance had aroused the researcher's curiosity and interest in particular in the way they have learnt to write business letters. Although this restriction may render the findings of this study not

generalizable, it certainly provides insight into how weak learners learn to write, and hence, why they are weak.

The use of think-aloud as a data-collection method has its limitations too. This procedure is quite a tedious process, and the students might not have been able to verbalize everything that was happening in their minds while writing. It has been noted that students would stop verbalizing when they became too engaged in the cognitive demands of the task. Therefore, the think-aloud protocols are still dotted with short and long pauses as the participants might not have verbalized everything. This shortcoming is acknowledged by the researcher and no attempts were made to uncover more than what was optimally available from the think-aloud protocols as getting participants to observe what they normally do not pay attention to may alter the natural process they go through (Ericson and Simon, 1987: p. 39).

Therefore in this study, the participants were not required to pay particular attention to anything which they normally would not and careful measures were taken in the selection of participants to ensure that those selected were comfortable with the think-aloud procedure. Furthermore, training sessions were also conducted with the aim of familiarizing participants with this procedure and with the researcher to eliminate discomfort during the data collection sessions. All these measures were taken to ensure the validity of the data collected.