

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

This chapter provides the conceptual framework of this study on strategies for writing business letters among weak ESL learners. The review starts with a brief description of current views on writing followed by a model which explains the social psychological factors affecting strategy choice. This review forms the theoretical framework of the research. Relevant research findings on writing difficulties and writing strategies are also included to provide this research with a working knowledge of the problem being investigated.

2.1 VIEWS ON WRITING

This study aims to understand the strategies used and difficulties encountered by weak ESL learners in the process of writing business letters. Therefore, an understanding of current views on writing is necessary to guide the interpretation of the findings of this study. Three views on writing are presented here and together they may explain different perspectives of the problems encountered by weak learners.

2.1.1 Writing as a Cognitive Process

The cognitive model of writing proposed by Flower and Hayes (1981) has shaped the understanding of many studies on writing (e.g. Dauite and Kuidenier,

1985; Flower et al., 1989; Chandrasegaran, 1990; Winograd, 1993; Wong, 1993). In this model, writing is viewed as a problem solving act which involves a recursive interaction of three elements: the task environment, the writer's long term memory and the writing processes. Writing begins when the writer works on a representation of the task in his mind and creates a network of goals to achieve this task. To achieve these goals, writing processes which includes planning, translating and reviewing are then engaged with the monitor acting as a regulator (cited in Marohaini, 1993).

Two other models which have also often been referred to in research on writing processes are the knowledge-telling model and the knowledge-transforming model proposed by Bereiter and Scardamalia (1987). These two models were found to be helpful in explaining why some writers find a writing task easy while others find the same task difficult. Therefore, they were reviewed with the hope of informing possible differences in the writing strategies employed by weak learners.

The knowledge-telling model explains the process of writing which involves the mere assembly of readily available knowledge in generating appropriate content for a written text. The knowledge-transforming model, on the other hand, describes a more complex process which involves the writer re-analyzing his or her thoughts in the process of writing in search of a voice. This involves having to consider whether the goal of the composition would be achieved. Revision of the text in this process involves changes in the content based on the writer's belief and this process would continue until the writer is sufficiently convinced that the text would achieve its goal.

2.1.2 Writing as a Social Activity

From this perspective, writing is seen as an activity which is influenced by the discourse community. Bartholomae (1985) discussed the inadequacy of the cognitive model of writing which views writing only as a set of mental activities. He explained that learning to write involves more than merely mental processes and knowledge transformation as suggested by the cognitive models of writing.

Writing, in the social perspective, is viewed as attempts to “approximate” a specific discourse community where knowledge about acceptable writing (and thinking) is determined by the members of that particular discourse community. Therefore, from this perspective, problems are “understood in terms of their unfamiliarity with the academic discourse community, combined, perhaps with such limited experience outside their native discourse communities that they are unaware that there is such a thing as a discourse community with conventions to be mastered” (Bizzell, 1982 in Bartholomae, 1985 : p.135).

Johns (1997: p. 37) in the following excerpt explains this knowledge as shared genre knowledge in a text which affects both reading and writing of a text.

“A reader’s and writer’s knowledge of a text name, the conventional roles of readers and writers of a text in this genre, standard purposes, context, content, values, and intertextuality can result in efficient and effective processing of a text. When student readers share some or all of this knowledge with the writer of an assigned text, they comprehend, and we are happy with their text summaries. When writers share this knowledge, readers are often pleased with their ability to produce what is considered appropriate written products.”

This view of writing has shaped research attempts on writing in various discourse communities. For example, Donin *et al.* (1992) studied the writing strategies involved in writing instructions for computer procedures while Matsumoto (1995) studied the strategies used for research writing by university professors, and Jenkins and Hinds (1987) studied the different writing conventions of business letters in three different business communities.

2.1.3 Writing as a Knowledge-Intensive Skill

Writing has also been explained from the perspective of the knowledge brought to use in this process. Hillocks (1986) explains writing as a cognitive skill which is affected by four major types of knowledge used. They are: i) declarative knowledge of substance which refers to prior knowledge of subject matter; ii) procedural knowledge of substance which refers to knowledge of how to recall, select and organize content; iii) declarative knowledge of form which refers to knowledge of different forms, parts and their relationships; and iv) procedural knowledge of form which refers to knowledge of how to produce examples of particular forms

This view is based on Anderson's Adaptive Control of Thought (ACT) Model (1976) which defines declarative knowledge as the knowledge of what and procedural knowledge or skill as the knowledge of how. Unlike declarative knowledge, which can be acquired quickly, procedural knowledge is acquired and developed through a lot of practice (cited in Ellis, 1994). This view helps to explain the learning of writing and writing strategies as a gradual process of transition from declarative knowledge to procedural knowledge.

Anderson (1995) explained that a skill or procedural knowledge is acquired in three stages. In the first stage, the cognitive stage, the learner learns from “instructions or an example of how the task is to be performed” (p. 319). The learner is said to have declarative knowledge about what to do, and he or she may be able to verbalize what to do but is unable to perform it.

In the second stage, the associative stage, the learner starts converting the declarative knowledge into procedural knowledge by forming production rules which are “condition-action pairs postulated to represent procedural knowledge” (p. 333). Here, mastery of a skill is achieved by compressing and grouping parts of the skill for performance. This reduces the time and attention taken to perform the skill. In this process, errors are most prominent, but practice plays an important role in proceduralizing this knowledge efficiently.

In the final stage, the autonomous stage, procedures become increasingly automated. When a learner reaches this stage, he or she is able to perform the skill with greater speed and accuracy. It is at this stage that the learner may sometimes lose the ability to verbalize their knowledge of how it is done unless he or she is asked to consciously observe the process.

2.2 Problems Encountered in Writing

A review of studies on composing uncovered various dimensions of problems which can block the writing process. Among weak learners, one of the major difficulties encountered is in understanding the task demands. Raimes (1985) in her study of unskilled writers reported a learner who spent 17.5 minutes

reading the topic 11 times before she began writing because she couldn't understand the word "unexpected" in the topic given. Similar observations were made by Abraham and Vann (1987) and Leki (1995) where learners sought clarification for the task by either asking a teacher or by using a self-questioning strategy to cope with this linguistic gap.

The other problem which was often reported in studies of unskilled writers was the concern of getting the right word or expression to convey meaning accurately. This has often been interpreted as an "over-concern" with the surface level demands of the writing task (Zamel, 1983; Raimes, 1985; Lee, 1990). In comparison, skilled writers were found to be able to pay more attention to higher level demands of the task.

While the above researchers have viewed these problems as linguistic in nature, others (e.g. Shaughnessy, 1977; Bartholomae, 1985) feel that these are caused by the writer's ignorance of or unfamiliarity with the demands of the discourse community, which is often unspoken. Shaughnessy (1977) as quoted by Bartholomae (1985) found that unskilled writers often adopt words and phrases from the discourse community to "fabricate their own messages". Bartholomae (1985: p. 158) described such attempts as mimicking "the rhythm and texture, the sound of academic prose" to establish their authority of the subject. Leki (1995) also found learners looking up professional models to help them understand the unspoken demands of the discourse community.

Getting started and being overwhelmed by anxiety were other problems often encountered by learners according to Flower (1981) in her book: *Problem-*

Solving Strategies for Writing. She also identified a few ineffective strategies often used to cope with these problems. These strategies included adopting a trial and error approach in producing sentences, writing with the expectation of getting a perfect draft, using words to look for an idea and subscribing to the myth of waiting for inspiration.

Harris (1985) in her study of learners' problems in writing explained that some problems could be related to the personality or character of the learner. For example, in one case, she identified problems in writing that were attributed to the learner's indecisive nature. However, Selfe (1985) in a case study of an apprehensive writer, found that problems in writing could also be attributed to a limited repertoire of composing strategies, or the mismatch between writing instruction and habitual tendencies in writing.

While most studies seemed to have understood the writer's block as a problem encountered in writing, Murray (1985) explained that it may be an essential experience in writing. He explained that the five things that a writer would need before writing are information, insight, order, the need to write and a voice.

2.3 Studies on Writing Processes

Researchers have studied the nature of L2 writing and they found that writing is a recursive process which involves a number of sub-processes like reading, rereading or reviewing, transcribing, translating, planning, revising or

editing (e.g. Silva, 1993; Raimes, 1985; Zamel, 1983; Lim, 1990; Chandrasegaran, 1993).

Some studies on effective writers have found that the writing process demonstrated does not necessarily reflect their competence in writing. Harris (1989), for example, found that while some efficient writers preferred to begin writing with a clear goal in mind, others preferred to discover their focus while writing. This preference shapes this process as those with the former preference tended to plan before they write, either mentally or by writing brief notes while those with the latter preference were observed to “plunge into writing before the topic is clear” and plan as ideas emerged from the text.

In another study, Torrance et al. (1994) found that while some students found writing from a plan to be an effective writing strategy, others found that it was “neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for writing success” (p. 379). Therefore, this study will look more closely at the types of writing strategies used by weak ESL learners and how they use these strategies.

Studies on effective and ineffective writers have found that they display different writing processes (e.g. Zamel, 1983; Raimes, 1985; Lee, 1990; Wong, 1993; Vann and Abraham, 1990). This could either mean that these two groups of writers have a different repertoire of writing strategies or that they have a different representation of the task. For example, Lee (1990) in a comparative study of writing processes of skilled and unskilled ESL undergraduates found that unskilled writers were more concerned with the surface level demands of the

task, particularly grammar, while skilled writers focused their attention on “fulfilling the rhetorical demands of the writing task” (p. 147).

Chandrasegaran (1993) supports this view by explaining that ineffective writing might have stemmed from a simplified representation of the task. He explained that learners might have been considered as ineffective because they had not “internalized a more sophisticated script” required by the discourse community (p. 123). These inexperienced writers are not aware of the importance of some features in the discourse community which their simplified script lacked.

2.4 Writing Strategies

Many researchers have studied the use of strategies for writing (e.g. Hull, 1987; Vann and Abraham, 1990; Wong, 1993; Torrance et al., 1994; Leki, 1995; Swain and Lapkin, 1995; Porte, 1995). In the naturalistic study Leki (1995) conducted, she examined strategies used by ESL students in learning to write for their regular courses across the curriculum. She identified ten categories of strategies which included among others, searching for a model, relying on past writing experience and current or past ESL writing training, focusing strategies (defined as directing attention in Chamot et al., 1988), clarifying task demands with teachers and friends (defined as social strategies by Oxford, 1990; Chamot et al, 1988) and accommodating or resisting teacher’s demands.

In a similar study, Matsumoto (1995) interviewed four Japanese university professors to elicit strategies used for writing a research paper in English. The study found that all the professors used the word processor for

planning and invention. They also found that these plans were usually tentative and the professors often altered the original plan completely during the composing process. As for revising strategies used, these professors employed the “pay-attention-to-content” strategy and the “multiple-revision” strategy. This study also highlighted the use of resourcing, as seen in the following excerpt, and the use of an asterisk on the computer screen to solve vocabulary problems.

“... reading papers you are planning to quote and include in the reference section will solve the vocabulary problem. There are certain expressions that are useful and frequently used in research paper writing such as ‘The purpose of this paper is to ...’ and ‘Given the findings of this study, we can conclude that ...’ (p 22).

In another study, Torrance et al. (1994) conducted a survey of 110 social science research students on the use of writing strategies. The study identified three groups of strategy users: planners, revisers and mixed strategy writers using cluster analysis of the survey findings. Writers who were clustered as Planners were found to prefer having their ideas clearly mapped out before starting to write while those clustered as revisers tended to discover and develop content while writing. Writers who decide on content prior to writing and revised ideas while writing were categorised as Mixed Strategy Users. The study found significant difference in productivity for planners compared to the revisers and the mixed strategy writers.

Wong (1993: p. 291) in her study of the use of “meaning-construction strategies” among good and poor writers in English and Chinese found that both writers use metacognitive strategies to address concerns with content and form. Poor writers who had difficulty identifying and solving rhetorical problems were reported to have also used metacognitive strategies in coping with these

problems. Other strategies which were identified in this study were substitution (with L1), projecting ideas prior to writing them down (defined as rehearsing in Raimes, 1985), re-reading, leaving blanks, code-switching for idea generation, and word association to trigger memory.

While the above studies have looked at strategy use in general in the writing process, others have focused on specific aspects of the process (e.g. Hull, 1987; Torrance et al., 1994; Flower et al., 1989). Hull (1987), for example, examined three editing strategies (i.e. consulting, intuiting and comprehending) which were used by skilled and less skilled college writers to correct errors in their own writing and essays written by other students. She found that the use of these strategies varied with task and condition.

The consulting strategy which requires the use of grammar rules was used most frequently when students were given feedback on the location of the error, particularly by the less skilled writers. The comprehending strategy which detects errors by analyzing the meaning of the text, was used more often by less skilled writers as compared to the skilled writers when the location of errors was not revealed and when they worked on their own essays. Although the scope of this study was very narrow, it showed how strategy use in writing can be affected by the task and the availability of feedback.

Flower et al. (1989), on the other hand, studied the cognitive processes involved in planning strategies among expert and novice writers. They identified five critical areas in planning which distinguishes constructive planning from

other planning strategies such as knowledge-telling, schema-filling and opportunistic planning.

The above review of related research showed that studies have looked at different types of learners, different writing tasks, different aspects of the writing process using various methods of analysis. Most of the studies found on writing strategies focused on academic writing tasks (e.g. Leki, 1995; Matsumoto, 1995; Torrance, 1994; Wong, 1993). None so far was found for business letter writing. Therefore, the present study aims to shed more light on strategy use for this type of writing.

It was also shown that the findings of the studies reviewed were analyzed by various methods. Some described the strategies using an available strategy framework. For example, Abraham and Vann (1990) categorized writing strategies of students based on a modified scheme proposed by Rubin (1981), while Wong (1993) based her analysis on Langer's (1986) classifications and others came out with their own categories based on the data analyzed (e.g. Leki, 1995; Matsumoto, 1995; Torrance et al., 1994; Hull, 1987). Although a comparison of the results across studies in a parallel manner would not be possible, this review has provided a basic understanding of the various dimensions of studies on writing strategies.

The following section describes three categories of writing strategies using the framework from O'Malley and Chamot (1990) which was used as the main reference for strategy identification in this study.

2.4.1 Cognitive Strategies

Raimes (1987) and Wong (1993) found that writers do a lot of re-reading in the process of writing. They may re-read the topic assigned or the text that they have written in an attempt to source for ideas to move forward. Cohen (1990) explained the latter process as “going back to go forward” (p. 107).

O'Malley and Chamot (1990) found the use of resourcing, translating, deducing, substituting, elaborating and summarizing as favoured cognitive strategies for writing tasks in a longitudinal study. In a different study, Swain and Lapkin (1995) found that when young adolescent learners were faced with production problems, they employed cognitive strategies to cope with the gap in their linguistic knowledge. Among the cognitive strategies employed by them are: i) relying on their sense of hearing to judge the correctness of the word or phrase written; ii) relying on their own comprehension or understanding of what they have written; iii) applying a grammatical rule; iv) sourcing for suitable words; v) translating from a more familiar language; vi) relying on their knowledge of spelling and conventions for style (p. 381-382).

On the use of prior knowledge, Leki (1995) found that ESL learners would rely on their past experience of writing as well as their past training on ESL writing to help them cope with their current writing task. However, this does not mean that they are inflexible. She found that some students were more conscious than others of their strategies, and that they were able to abandon a less effective strategy and take on an alternative strategy. She also found that students tended to resource from models to help them cope with the task. Her study

suggests that there is a need to understand what learners already know about their writing strategies before attempting to teach them anything new.

2.4.2 Metacognitive Strategies

Chamot et al. (1988) identified three metacognitive strategies used in the process of writing. They are organizational planning, self-monitoring and self-evaluation (cited in O'Malley and Chamot, 1990: p. 142). Organizational planning included sub-categories like "proposing strategies for handling a task; generating a plan for the parts, sequence, main ideas or language functions to be used in handling a task" while self-monitoring included comprehension monitoring, production monitoring, auditory and visual monitoring, style monitoring, strategy monitoring, plan monitoring and double-check monitoring. As for self-evaluation, similar sub-categories were also identified, i.e. production evaluation, performance evaluation, ability evaluation, strategy evaluation and language evaluation.

On strategies for idea generation, assessment and selection, Wong (1993) reported the use of personalized schemata, and genre or text schemata, where ideas were developed or explained based on students' personal judgment (personal schemata) or on their knowledge of the context of the written task.

As for the effects of monitoring strategies on writing performance, a study by Jones (1985) suggests that monitoring is not necessarily an effective strategy for second language learning. Jones found that monitor overusers tend to pause frequently and for longer periods and that they wrote in shorter chunks which

suggests that the process of monitoring may have prevented the writer from keeping track of her developing ideas as monitoring often drew attention away from content to form, thus leaving little processing capacity for checking production against initial content plans. On the other hand, a comparative study by Ting (1995) on comprehension strategies found a greater frequency of metacognitive strategies being used by proficient readers and this suggests positive effects of such strategy use on comprehension.

Since current studies on metacognitive strategies seem to yield conflicting findings about the effects of such strategies on different tasks, particularly monitoring strategies, it is hoped that the current study would be able to shed more light on the effects of strategy use for business letter writing.

2.4.3 Social Strategies

Wong (1993) also found that students used a self-questioning strategy when they were stuck and unsure of the direction they were heading with their writing. Self-questioning was also found to be a strategy that enhances revision among students as it engaged students in reading their own written text closely and in revising more extensively (Daiute and Kruidenier, 1985).

Leki (1995) identified a few social strategies to help students cope with writing tasks across the curriculum. She found that students were involved in some form of negotiation on the demands of the task with themselves and their teachers. While some students chose the strategy of accommodating the teachers' demands, other students resisted or compromised with such demands.

2.5 Weak and Good Learners

Studies on language learners' strategies (e.g. Bialystok, 1981; Abraham and Vann, 1987; Oxford and Nyikos, 1989; Vann and Abraham, 1990) suggests that weak and good learners differ in their use of strategy.

Abraham and Vann (1987) found that while both weak and good learners used cognitive strategies, they differed in the quality of the strategies used. For instance, in their study where both writers were found to revise their work during and after writing, the good writer made extensive changes to his piece of work while the weak writer spent only ten seconds revising his work. In another instance, while both writers were found to clarify and verify meanings of new vocabulary found in the given task, the weak writer merely asked for the meanings while the good writer spent more time trying to delineate the meaning of the word in the given context.

Wong (1993) found that both effective and ineffective writers use metacognitive writing strategies to attend to content as well as language demands of a written task. She highlighted that both groups of learners used rather similar strategies but the effects of strategy use appeared to have been affected by the writers' assessment of the task demands.

Although the focus of this study is not to compare the writing strategies of weak and good learners, it is worthwhile to note that other studies have found possible differences in the choice of strategies used among weak and good

learners. It is hoped that this study would reveal a better understanding of the circumstances leading to this difference in strategy use.

2.6 A Model of Strategy Use

Studies on language learning strategies suggest that there are many factors that can affect the choice of a particular strategy. Some of these factors, include the “language being learned; duration; degree of awareness; age; sex; affective variables such as attitudes, motivation level or intensity, language learning goals, motivational orientation, personality characteristics, and general personality type; learning styles; aptitude; career orientation; national origin; language teaching methods; and task requirements” (Oxford, 1989: p. 236).

A model of Strategy Use (shown in Figure 1) which takes into account the social psychological influences on the process of deciding for or against the use of a particular strategy was proposed by MacIntyre (1994). He explained that four conditions determined the use of a particular language learning strategies. These four conditions are awareness of the strategy, motivation, absence of negative emotions, and positive reinforcement for the use of the strategy (p. 190).

Since this study examines strategies use for writing business letters, this model serves as a guide for the analysis of strategy choice. It also helps to explain how strategy choice affects the writing process in this study. In particular, it was used to guide the direction of questions asked in the post-session interviews.

Figure 1 : Social Psychological Influences on Strategy Use (MacIntyre, 1994: p. 192)

