

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Background to the Study

As I entered my English Proficiency class in Institut Bahasa Melayu Malaysia (IBMM), I announced to my students that I would be giving them a writing assignment in fulfillment of their Basic English Proficiency course. A chorus of moans greeted my announcement. "Here we go again," I thought to myself, "another semester, another batch of students, but the problem remains." To these students, writing a composition is a formidable task. They are uncertain about how to generate ideas, how to organize their writing cohesively and coherently and how to use rhetorical categories like cause and effect. The pressure to express themselves fluently, to punctuate correctly, and to be grammatical is often paralyzing, to say the least. There is a pressing need for an effective writing instruction technique that works for these students. The need was there in the defeated look on their faces each time they were given a writing task to handle. What had gone wrong? After eleven years of schooling where English was taught as a Second Language in 40-minute periods five to six times a week, why did they continue to be inhibited in their writing?

When I think back to my early memories of school and writing, I remember book reports and essays on topics such as "What I did during My School Holidays." Writing lessons meant being told what to write, how much to write, and to make sure it was legible. Our essays were then corrected and returned, and we rewrote them by correcting

the grammar and spelling errors that were highlighted throughout the pages in red. Merely giving students a topic with key words to write in a composition class is *testing* them whether they could write, not *teaching* them how to write; how to *teach* them to write - that is the problem.

This was the situation that challenged me in IBMM, a teacher training college where I am currently teaching English Proficiency to student teachers majoring in Malay Studies. Writing, as we all know, is a comprehensive ability involving grammar, vocabulary, conception, rhetoric, and other elements. Students with a low level of English proficiency, such as those in my writing class, have limited knowledge of the target language. Also, they have little experience in reading in it. Furthermore, there is cultural interference due to differences in the literary style and rhetorical patterns of expression in their native language and the target language. Consequently, when these students write in English, they do not create the text themselves, they merely translate their thoughts word for word from their native language into English, often with disastrous results.

It has been my hope to be able to come up with an effective technique that will enable me to get nearer to the goal of helping my students write compositions of one kind or another with as few mistakes as possible. A large body of research on writing instruction has emerged since the 1960s to inform and support a battery of teaching techniques and approaches for the writing classroom (Raimes, 1991). Battles have been pitched between traditional and current approaches to determine which is the more effective mode of writing instruction (Dyer, 1996; Hillocks, 1986; Horowitz, 1986a, 1986b; Long, 1992). Disillusionment with one approach would trigger off the quest for a

'new' approach or, sometimes, cause the pendulum in L2 composition theory to swing back to a more traditional approach, or to construct a compromise that combines the two.

In IBMM, the process approach has not been able to help the students in their composition writing. The main reason for this, I believe, is the students' low language proficiency - their limited knowledge of and experience with the target language. This invariably results in a lack of self-confidence, which hampers them from progressing successfully and effectively through the cycle of prewriting, writing, peer feedback and revision. The situation is further compounded by the fact that they receive practically no supportive supervision from the teacher. The students are left very much on their own to engage in the discovery and expression of meaning. The result is a mess of errors in their compositions, a disappointment to both the teacher and the learners.

"Where do I go from here?" the teacher in me despaired. One of their main flaws, I observed, is not so much the lack of content as the writers' tendency to translate their thoughts word for word from their native language into English, often with disastrous results. To check this pervasive problem, the students need to acquire a repertory of useful expressions, sentence structures, and a host of other writing elements in the English Language so that they could become less dependent on their native language and minimize the word-for-word translation habit. As I see it, they need to be weaned from the rhetorical patterns of their first language and to become more familiar with rhetorical and syntactic forms of their target language. Supportive supervision by the teacher, such as by demonstrating 'good' writing with models or assigning grammar exercises, is, I feel, invaluable in helping the ESL student through this 'weaning' process. On the other hand, merely using grammar exercises in the traditional way to acquire control over language

patterns needed to write a coherent composition, does not guarantee successful compositions (Edwards, 1975). What they need is a technique that enables them to learn the principles of good writing inductively through skillfully prepared exercises.

My quest has led me to conduct a classroom study to investigate whether the use of model passages as support for writing could help to improve the writing performance of ESL students in my writing class in IBMM. The investigation would be limited to the teaching of one type of writing - expository writing - through a "reading → analyzing → writing" approach (Kang, 1993:32-33).

Statement of the Problem

My goal for my ESL students at IBMM is to get these students with limited language skills to write with minimum hesitance and errors. The "reading → analyzing → writing" approach based on model passages, which I had chosen for my writing class, is a modified pattern of a similar technique carried out successfully by Kang Shu-min in her ESL writing class at Qufu Teachers University in People's Republic of China (Kang, 1993).

When reading or text models become meaningful, they can become sources to imitate (Williams, 1989). Reading, analyzing and writing from a model will enable the students to become familiar with the desired rhetorical and syntactic forms, and to eventually internalize the structure. It will allow the students to extend "their writing resources by temporarily taking over somebody else's, and in due course they begin to use some of these resources for their own purposes" (Britton, 1970:38, cited in Jett-Simpson, 1981:293). In other words, models may provide a source of genre familiarity.

This approach capitalizes on the reading-writing connection which has become the latest buzz phrase in ESL composition pedagogy (Kennedy, 1994). Several studies have indicated that reading has a positive influence on writing ability. According to Bossone (1979), learning to write is largely a process of learning to think more clearly. Hence, by recognizing logical thinking in what they read, students will be able to use this knowledge to organize and develop ideas in their own writing. To accelerate language acquisition and aid the students' writing, they must be exposed to extensive comprehensible written input and encouraged to employ syntactic and rhetorical patterns from these texts in their own writing (Pica, 1986).

Purpose of the Study

This classroom-based study seeks to investigate whether the writing performance of low proficiency ESL learners can be developed through reading a model passage and analyzing its organization and language patterns, and rewriting the passage on a related topic using parallel writing technique

Research Questions

The classroom-based project aims to answer the following research questions:

- i. To what extent do learners using the "reading → analyzing → writing" approach based on model passages improve in their writing performance?
- ii. To what extent does this approach help meet the learners' writing needs?

Significance of the Study

This study was carried out with the hope that it could inform on whether the "reading → analyzing → writing" approach based on model texts could help improve the writing performance of low proficiency ESL learners at IBMM. This information is important especially to the *Pusat Perkembangan Kurikulum* (Curriculum Development Center) and the *Bahagian Pendidikan Guru* (Teacher Education Division) in planning the teacher-training curriculum, particularly with regard to the teaching of writing. It is also hoped that the study would help English Language lecturers at IBMM plan effective strategies in the teaching of writing, such as integrating reading into writing activities.

Definition of Terms

Models

These refer to texts that are selected and reused to exemplify a genre, for example, expository texts of the cause and effect type. They are used to show rhetorical conventions of expository writing and to demonstrate principles of good writing.

Low Proficiency students

In this study, low proficiency students refer to those who scored less than 50% in the End-of-Semester Examination English Paper.

Writing performance

For the purpose of this study, writing performance refers to the ability to write a coherent and meaningful text with minimum hesitance and errors.