

CHAPTER FOUR

PAST TEACHING EXPERIENCES

This chapter describes the past teaching experiences of five teacher trainees, undergoing the B.Ed. (TESL) programme at the University of Malaya (UM), who are the focal subjects of this study. The past experiences of the five teacher trainees in teaching ESL writing are necessary to understand the manner in which the five teacher trainees appropriate the instruction given during lectures on teaching ESL writing into their teaching strategies. The five teacher trainees, Depat, Chee Leng, Amreet, Siti and Laura (not their real names) were selected on the basis of their willingness to co-operate with me and their willingness to teach writing during simulated teaching (the teacher trainees were allowed to choose from any of the four skills, reading speaking, listening or writing, for their presentation during simulated teaching). Although their real names are not used, the names used do reflect their actual gender and the ethnicity. (Depat is a Sarawakian male, Chee Leng is a Chinese female, Amreet is a Punjabi female, Siti is Malay female and Laura is an Indian female). Amreet was particularly chosen because of her leadership qualities (she was looked upon as the class monitor and helped the lecturer with administrative duties) and Depat, being one of the few males in the class and hailing from Sarawak, East Malaysia, he would add to diversity. This chapter focuses on answering the first research question, given below.

1. What were the approaches and techniques in teaching ESL writing used by the five teacher trainees before they began the B.Ed. (TESL) programme and what were the problems they faced with these approaches and techniques?

To answer research question one, data collected through a questionnaire (Appendix B) and interviews conducted with the teacher trainees before and during the first week of the course on teaching writing skills were analysed. The questionnaire was used more to select the five teacher trainees as participants of this study. Most of the information gathered was from interviews. Through interviews I got the five teacher trainees to elaborate on what they had written in the questionnaires. The teacher trainees provided little information on approaches and talked mainly of techniques they had used.

Of the five teacher trainees, only Amreet and Siti had taught English at secondary level and only the both of them spoke with some measure of confidence on their past teaching techniques in teaching ESL writing. Amreet was outspoken. At times, she had strong opinions about what should be done in writing classes and at other times, expressed frustration because of problems. Both Amreet and Siti were quite elaborate in describing their techniques and Siti was the only one to provide some details about catering for mixed language ability in the classroom. Depat, Chee Leng and Laura taught only at primary (elementary) level and the writing tasks they gave their students were mainly at sentence level and focussed on grammar.

In sharp contrast to Amreet and Siti, Depat, Chee Leng and Laura seemed reluctant to discuss their techniques; they had difficulty recalling events, and even frequently fidgeted or tried to change the subject. They provided only one-word or one-sentence answers to questions and had difficulty with elaboration.

The following are the techniques used by each of the five and the problems each one faced. The techniques of Depat, Chee Leng and Laura, who taught only at primary

level, are first discussed before the techniques of Amreet, who taught at both primary and secondary level and Siti, who taught only at secondary level.

Depat

Depat is a 33 year-old male with six years of teaching experience (1991 to 1996). He described the school in which he taught as being a rural, primary school in a very remote area in Sarawak, East Malaysia. His first language and also the first language of the students he taught is Bidayuh, which he described as the mother tongue of the Land Dayak people of Sarawak. The medium of instruction during his primary and secondary education was English. He said that at home, he mostly spoke Bidayuh, but he also often spoke English with his elder brother. He managed to just pass the English Paper in the SPM examination, obtaining a P8, the lowest possible passing grade. At STPM level, he took English Literature as a subject but failed the paper. Depat holds a Certificate in Teaching with TESL as his main option. While training for his Certificate in Teaching, at a teacher training college in Kuching, Sarawak, he sat for the SPM 1119 English paper and obtained a Credit 4.

The classes he taught were Standard Four, Five and Six. Depat described the students he taught as being of very low English language proficiency except for the few who spoke English at home. His students were also poor in Bahasa Malaysia. They spoke Bidayuh most of the time. He himself spoke English with a heavy Sarawakian accent and at times, I had difficulty understanding what he was saying while interviewing him.

Depat said, "I was exposed to a few methods of teaching writing while studying at the teacher training college in Kuching and also during a three-day, in-service course in

1994.” In the teacher training college, he learned to use guided composition, parallel writing and expansion of notes. Parallel writing, he explained, meant imitation in the following manner. Two or three sentences were given, for example, in the present continuous tense. Students were required to replace the underlined words based on the cues given as in the following example that Depat provided.

He is playing football. (play, badminton)
(sing / a song)
(draw / picture)

Students merely had to follow the structure provided. The following are the techniques he used to teach writing.

Techniques Used by Depat to Teach Writing

The tasks that Depat gave his students when teaching writing were mainly at sentence level. He usually used parallel writing, sequencing of sentences based on a given picture or picture series, and answers to a given set of questions to help students write a story. The topics he usually gave his students were on writing stories about their experiences and on writing informal letters because these were common topics asked in the SPM examination.

Depat also used models in his previous teaching. He explained that models were “mainly in the form of guided composition where students had to fill in the blanks.” Depat said, “I gradually relaxed controlled writing as my students became familiar with the sentence patterns.” When I asked him how he gradually relaxed controlled writing, he elaborated that from filling in the blanks with single words he moved to making students

fill in blanks with phrases. But he said he never really reached the stage of letting students write freely on a topic.

Depat learnt about process writing during a three-day, in-service workshop conducted in Kuching in 1994 after having taught for three years. He explained that during the workshop, participants had to write an essay on the topic, "The worst experience in my life". No guidance was given. When they finished the essay they were told to exchange their essays with the other participants. The participants made comments on the essays they received and gave suggestions on details that needed to be included. Essays were then returned to the writers to make improvements. A number of drafts had to be produced, checked and commented on by different participants. Finally, the final drafts were displayed on a flannel board. Participants were later told to compile their final drafts with the earlier drafts. That was the only instruction that he received on process writing. Depat did not try process writing with his students because according to him, "I had too many students in my classes. There wasn't time to go through drafts". This statement epitomises Depat's understanding of process writing. It focussed on the writing of multiple drafts.

Problems Faced by Depat When Teaching Writing

Depat complained of many problems when teaching ESL writing. "My students lacked interest in learning English and had a poor basic foundation," he said. He further complained of the lack of knowledge of subject matter for writing and the lack of creative ideas among the students. But there were often one or two good students in his classes. "They were the ones who spoke English at home. But when it came to writing, even the

good students made errors with subject-verb agreement and tenses,” he said. Depat felt that he had a good rapport with his students. His students were “responsive, co-operative and obedient”. He said,

One particular class that I vividly remember was way back in 1991 when I was first posted to a school in Sarawak. I gave my Standard Six students the freedom to write anything they wanted about their family and themselves. Students wrote interesting essays. One student was able to express himself well; he knew a lot of adjectives, which were effectively used. There was also good usage of linkers and flow of ideas. However, he made a number of grammatical errors.

Depat tried to correct grammatical errors as soon as he spotted them in an essay but he found that very difficult because there were too many errors. He was mainly concerned with grammatical errors in his students’ written work and was unsure about how to deal with the many errors.

In the light of his concerns, he hoped that the B.Ed. (TESL) programme he was enrolled in would provide appropriate and interesting ideas, models and exercises to activate students’ interest in ESL writing.

Chee Leng

Chee Leng is a 36 year-old Chinese woman who had 11 years of teaching experience. She taught English in a primary, urban school and the classes she taught were Standard One, Standard Two, Standard Three and Standard Four. Chee Leng holds a Certificate in Teaching obtained from a teacher training college. Her highest English Language qualification is a credit 6 at SPM level. Chee Leng had never been trained to teach English. Chee Leng stated bluntly at the start of the interview that she did not know how to teach writing. She made it quite clear to me that she was trained to teach science

and mathematics. She said that she was forced to teach English because there were not enough English language teachers in her school.

Techniques Used by Chee Leng to Teach Writing

Chee Leng said, "First I discussed the topic with the whole class and tried to get ideas from the students. After that I just asked the students to write." The topics she usually gave her students were "My hobbies", "My experience of the first day in school", "How I spent my holidays" and "My favourite teacher". Chee Leng said such topics of a personal nature were the only topics that her students could write on. "They did not have the knowledge to write on other topics," she said. Like Depat, Chee Leng was unaware of ways to help her students gather knowledge needed for writing.

Problems Faced by Chee Leng When Teaching Writing

Chee Leng said that she felt at a loss when her students complained that they did not know how to write and what to write. "Most of my students," she said, "felt that writing was too difficult and even refused to try." She had not heard of any particular way of teaching writing and did not know how to help students gather information about a topic. To compound the problem, when the class was composed of students of mixed ability, she did not know how to guide the slow ones and those who did not know how to read and write. She said, "I always found it a problem to teach writing because it is a difficult skill, so these students suffered with my method of teaching," According to her, they "suffered" because they were not improving and were not doing well in

examinations. Although she empathised with her students' predicament, she did not have the knowledge, skills, and training to help her students.

Chee Leng also complained that marking was "indeed tedious" and "a burden for teachers". Like Depat, she said that she tried to correct all errors in an essay. She felt that correcting all errors was expected of her by the students, parents and school authorities. Like Depat, Chee Leng did not know how to respond to students' writing. She said that she did have a good experience with one student who "was well-read and interested in writing". "This student came to me for extra tuition classes after normal teaching hours and he was daring enough to ask questions," she said. She explained that the student was "daring" because her other students were generally afraid to ask questions.

Laura

Laura is a 33 year-old Indian woman with eight years of teaching experience. She taught English at the primary level in both rural and urban areas in Malaysia and her classes were from Standard Two to Standard Six. Like Depat and Chee Leng, Laura taught English only at the primary level. However, unlike Depat and Chee Leng, Laura holds a Diploma in TESL and a Certificate in Teaching with TESL as the main option. She also obtained a distinction, A2, for English at SPM level and for the English SPM paper 121 (an advanced level paper), she obtained a credit 3. Laura also sat for the English Literature paper at STPM level and obtained a Principal E. Thus, Laura was more confident of teaching English than Depat or Chee Leng and spoke more fluently and clearly. Unlike Depat and Chee Leng, Laura was not bogged down with worries about her own language proficiency.

Techniques Used by Laura to Teach Writing

Laura listed some of the activities she used with her students. She explained that with average or poor students she usually used guided writing by providing a series of pictures and asking students questions about the pictures. Through her questions, she elicited the vocabulary needed to write the story. She also used sequencing of jumbled up sentences, matching of sentence halves and matching pictures with sentences. At times, she used expansion of notes. She said, "With good students, I allowed free writing after a lengthy discussion which provided the content for the topic and sometimes I made students predict the conclusion of a story."

Laura said that she found it useful and interesting to use newspapers in the classroom. When I asked her how she used newspapers in the classroom, she had difficulty recalling and said that one weak student was very glad when Laura told her to find words beginning with the letter "A" from a newspaper. Laura said, "She was very happy to look for those words even if she didn't know the meaning." That was all Laura could say about using newspapers in the classroom.

The topics Laura usually gave her students were "Animals", "Places of interest", "How things are made", "Hobbies" and "My ambition". Laura felt that these were topics that her students seemed to enjoy. Laura asked students to write individually on the topics.

In contrast to Depat and Chee Leng, Laura used more and a greater variety of activities in her writing classes. However, similar to Depat and Chee Leng, Laura's approach to the teaching of writing focussed on writing at the sentence level; she

focussed on vocabulary, matching parts of sentences and matching pictures with sentences.

Problems Faced by Laura When Teaching Writing

Laura complained of limited vocabulary, lack of interest and poor command of language among the students. She said, “Students don’t know what to write, they have no motivation, it’s like a boring task, they lack basic foundation.” Like Depat and Chee Leng, Laura was unaware of ways to help students gather knowledge. She also said that there was insufficient time to teach writing and she was unable to mark students’ essays because of the large number of students (about 40) in each class and too many classes to teach (five or six classes). Laura said,

Although there were problems teaching writing, I have always liked and enjoyed my language classes. Especially the slow learners are my challenge. I tried my utmost best (sic) in making them communicate. I moved with them as a friend, a confidante and a guide. I have enjoyed their presence.

Laura said that not all her students were weak in the language. She recalled that one of her students who wrote an essay entitled “Coconut trees in Malaysia” won a consolation prize in the “Commonwealth Essay Writing Competition”. Laura explained,

It was a good piece of work. I discussed several aspects with the student and how to go about presenting her essay. Due to her excellent command of the language and a wide usage of vocabulary, she wrote an interesting piece.

However, Laura said that having a number of students with better language proficiency in a class was also a problem because she was uncertain about what to do with students of mixed language ability in the same class. She hoped that this concern would be addressed in the course on teaching writing.

Amreet

Amreet is a 36 year-old Punjabi woman with 13 years experience teaching English. She has taught both in primary and secondary schools and in both rural and urban areas. She is the only one of the five teacher trainees to have taught in both primary and secondary schools. She taught all primary level classes and Form Four and Form Five classes at secondary level. She holds a Certificate in Teaching with TESL as her main option and a Diploma in TESL. The Certificate in Teaching was obtained from a teacher training college while her Diploma was obtained from the University of Malaya. Amreet obtained an A1 for English at SPM level, A2 for the English paper 121 at SPM level and a Principal D at STPM level for English Literature. Among her peers in this B.Ed. (TESL) programme, Amreet was outstanding, confident and outspoken and was looked upon by both the teacher trainees and lecturers as the class leader. Of the five teacher trainees chosen for this study, Amreet was the only one who fell into a different group, with a different mentor, for simulated teaching and teaching practice (see p. 30 for the structure of the programme).

Techniques Used by Amreet to Teach Writing

Amreet explained that she used mostly “blank-filling” exercises. Other activities, she said she used for teaching writing, were “substitution tables, rearranging sentences, matching halves, matching sentences with pictures, parallel paragraphs, writing simple and compound sentences using given words and writing on the basis of information provided”. These were ideas she gained during her years at the teacher training college and also during an in-service course from January to June 1981. Amreet said that the

training on guided writing she received from the in-service course “was our bible”. Her usual topics were about visits and hobbies. Like Depat, Chee Leng and Laura, Amreet felt that students could only write on personal topics because they did not have the knowledge to write on other topics. Once again, the problem was that Amreet was uncertain of ways to help students gather knowledge.

Amreet found that writing sentences based on pictures was very helpful in getting students to write. “Of course, the pictures were discussed first,” she said. Amreet stated that she did not limit students to writing one sentence per picture. “The better students could write more and this should be encouraged,” she said. She also told her students to write daily weather reports and write about specific incidents in her Standard One to Standard Three classes.

Amreet said that she tried process writing a few times with her secondary level students. She said that she heard about the term “process writing” from a colleague who returned from an in-service course and from reading articles on process writing. According to her, “Process writing is not necessary for good students because their first drafts are good enough, exciting and did not need revisions. If we insist on revisions, then the students will be demoralised.” When asked about how she conducted process writing, Amreet stated that she asked students to write drafts of an essay and she commented on the drafts before accepting the final essay. Her comments were on giving students ideas on how to expand on what they had written and on grammatical errors. Like Depat, Amreet’s understanding of process writing was focussed on getting students to write multiple drafts.

Amreet said that she sometimes held discussion of topics before writing or held brainstorming sessions in groups. “This was very useful because they resulted in a lot of input, built students’ confidence and took away their fears,” she said. By “brainstorming sessions” Amreet explained that she made students discuss about a topic in groups of four or five students and then ask her questions if there were doubts. She said that she would also prompt students with questions to help them improve their knowledge on a topic. It is significant that Amreet was the only one of the five teacher trainees to encourage peer interaction by giving students tasks to be done in groups. Students were thus able to share knowledge needed for writing.

Problems Faced by Amreet When Teaching Writing

Amreet explained that she had problems teaching writing mainly because of time constraints. She felt that there were too many things to teach in the syllabus and like Depat, Chee Leng and Laura, she said that her students lacked motivation and confidence in writing. According to Amreet, “Students got tenses all mixed up, made too many grammatical errors, did not know how and what to write about or had jumbled ideas and poorly organised paragraphs.” Amreet said that she did not find teaching writing interesting and did not have time to prepare materials. Amreet said,

I did not know how to bring out the best in students and usually ended up bringing out their worst. Students were making too many errors and when I pointed them out, it deflated students’ confidence. With the advent of UPSR (public examination for primary level), teachers don’t focus on writing anymore. It is too time consuming for both the teacher and the students.

Although Amreet used guided composition, she felt, “It does not lead students to being independent writers”. She was also not in favour of using process writing. She said,

“Very often the weaker students reproduced the same material despite giving them suggestions on how to improve on their essays.” She felt that her rapport with students was good although she was strict. “They knew I meant serious study,” she said. She elaborated that students appreciated her stern attitude but they were not afraid to approach her with questions whenever they had to.

Due to her experience and qualifications, Amreet used a wider variety of writing activities and was more confident and vocal in her opinions than Depat, Chee Leng or Laura. She was respected by her peers and often helped them with advice and ideas.

Siti

Siti is a 37 year-old Malay woman with 15 years of teaching experience. She was the most experienced of the five teacher trainees and she was the only one of the five teacher trainees to teach only at the secondary level. Like Laura and Amreet, Siti holds a Diploma in TESL and a Certificate in Teaching with TESL as her main option. However, unlike Laura and Amreet who had distinctions in English at SPM level, Siti obtained a credit 4 at SPM level. This is significant because, at times, she made obvious grammatical errors while speaking. Siti stated that she had never received any training in teaching ESL writing but she spoke quite confidently about her techniques in teaching writing and said she developed her techniques through her years of teaching.

Techniques Used by Siti to Teach Writing

Siti explained that for lower secondary students, she usually provided a model of an essay before giving students written work. For example, she would provide a model

essay on the topic “A Market”. Then, she would go through the essay with her students, discussing and explaining the vocabulary and verb forms. Next, she would ask her students to write on a topic that was quite similar, for example, “A supermarket” or “A school”. She would tell students to use the same structures found in the model. Siti stated that she preferred to make students write stories. She said, “It is freer and they could use their own creativity to make the story more interesting.” Siti also used pictures and elicited key words about the picture from the students. She then used the key words to help students make short notes. Siti said,

Usually I prompted the students by asking them a lot of questions like: What do you see in the picture? What are they doing? What’s happening here? and so on. We expanded the notes further into complete sentences. Then I would ask students what tense we were supposed to use.”

Siti encouraged good students to write after these steps. For poorer students, she said, “I would give them an outline or a few questions and tell them to write one paragraph.” For very weak students, Siti explained that she would give them “fill in the blanks” exercises after explaining the words and phrases needed to fill in the blanks.

For upper secondary students, Siti said that she first gave them a topic and then “carried out a discussion and a brainstorming session on the topic.” By “brainstorming session”, Siti explained that she meant she asked students a lot of questions about the topic in order to elicit the content and vocabulary needed for writing on the topic. Siti said that she did not receive any training in process writing but believed that she used aspects of process writing. Siti elaborated that she would then tell her students to write a draft of an essay while she went around checking their progress. Siti explained that she would collect these drafts, correct obvious errors and ask students to rewrite the essays. Like Depat and Amreet, Siti’s idea of process writing centred on writing drafts.

Problems Faced by Siti When Teaching Writing

Siti complained of marking essays being a “big job”. “Asking students to do corrections is useless. Some do, some just forget about it. Even corrections contain errors that did not occur earlier and we are back at the beginning,” she said. Concerning her rapport with students, she explained,

I think my rapport with the students was good. I don’t like to treat them as children. I tend to give them a lot of leeway. I like to communicate with them. Ask rather than tell them what to do. And I do not like to be so serious with them.

Siti tried hard to make students enjoy her lessons. She said, “I think I’m more jovial now and I have a good sense of humour. This I think helps me a lot in dealing with students.” The lecturer of the writing course would later emphasise the importance of making lessons interesting, communicating with students and using humour. Siti was the only one of the five teacher trainees who talked about making lessons interesting for the students and also the only one to discuss catering for students of different language ability.

Concluding Discussion of Chapter

At SPM level both Amreet and Laura obtained distinctions in the English Language paper while Depat, Chee Leng and Siti passed the English Language paper with credits. This is significant because Amreet and Laura spoke confidently and clearly without worrying about their own fluency in the language. I often had difficulty understanding what Depat was saying because of his thick Sarawakian accent and because of his use of phrases which seemed awkward. Chee Leng and Siti appeared uncertain and hesitant at times concerning words and phrases they were using.

Only Amreet and Siti had had prior experience teaching writing at the secondary level. As a result, techniques between the two of them differed from the techniques of the other three. While Amreet and Siti used a variety of techniques including brainstorming, pre-writing activities and peer interaction, the techniques employed by the other three were limited to writing at the sentence level with little or no pre-writing activity. This had implications for the five as they are now being trained to teach in secondary schools. The techniques introduced to them, like peer interaction, were more familiar to Amreet and Siti than to the others. Amreet and Siti were therefore most receptive to moving towards student-centred and communicative writing activities as espoused by their lecturer while the other three were resistant to letting go of control and were even reluctant to put students into groups.

Common complaints the five teacher trainees had about teaching writing were the large number of students in the classes, poor English language proficiency, lack of ideas, lack of interest and lack of motivation among the students to do writing. Other problems they faced in teaching writing concerned having too many classes to teach, the lack of ideas and materials to use in the classroom, and being burdened with error correction. Whatever ideas they had on process writing were focussed on writing multiple drafts thus process writing appeared to them as adding to the “burden”.

All five hoped for, as in the words of Depat, “appropriate and interesting ideas, models and exercises” from the course on teaching ESL writing. Table 1 summarises the background information of the five teacher trainees of this study. It also lists defining techniques that these teacher trainees engaged in to teach writing before they entered the B.Ed. (TESL) programme.

Table 1: Summary of Teachers Trainees' Background and Techniques Before Entering the B.Ed. (TESL) Programme

Name	Experience	Qualifications	Past teaching techniques
Depat	6 years Primary Sch.	SPM English - P8 SPM - 1119 English - Credit 4 Cert. in Teaching (TESL)	Guided composition, Parallel writing, Expansion of notes, Sequencing of sentences based on pictures, Models, Process writing.
Chee Leng	11 years Primary Sch.	SPM English - Credit 6 Cert. in Teaching (Science and Mathematics)	Discussion of topic.
Laura	8 years Primary Sch.	SPM English - A2 STPM English Lit. - Principal E Cert. in Teaching (TESL) Diploma in TESL	Guided composition, Discussion of pictures, Use of questions, Jumbled sentences, Matching sentence halves, Matching pictures with sentences, Expansion of notes, Free writing after discussion, Prediction of conclusion, Use of newspapers
Amreet	13 years Primary and Secondary Sch.	SPM English - A1 SPM English Paper 121 - A2 STPM English Lit. - Principal D Cert. in Teaching (TESL) Diploma in TESL	Blank-filling, Substitution tables, Jumbled sentences, Matching Halves, Matching sentences with pictures, Parallel paragraphs, Simple and compound sentences, Process writing, Brainstorming sessions, Question prompts.
Siti	15 years Secondary Sch.	SPM English - Credit 4 Cert. in Teaching (TESL) Diploma in TESL	Models, Pictures and elicited key words, Short notes, Question prompts, Expansion of notes, Focus on tense, Outlines, Fill in the blanks, Brainstorming sessions, Process Writing