CHAPTER EIGHT

CONCLUSIONS

This chapter concludes the research by triangulating the findings of the three research questions together with theory. Prior to the writing course, the five teacher trainees faced the problem of not knowing what to do in writing classes. After the course, during simulated teaching and teaching practice, the problems concerned salient aspects of implementing ideas obtained from the writing course which are discussed in chapter six and chapter seven. The tables 5 to 9, shown on the following pages, show techniques used in the classroom to teach writing before and after the writing course.

From the tables it is clear that the five teacher trainees used a broader repertoire of activities after the writing course than they had done before. Most of the activities came from Mr. Lopez's genre-based approach. Although Mr. Lopez explained the use of the genre-based approach to help students develop and expand on ideas (see pp. 92 to 113), the manner in which the genre-based approach was used by the five teacher trainees was rigid and focussed on surface features (discussed in chapter seven). A number of activities were taken from the language-focussed activities suggested by Mr. Lopez (scrambled sentences being the most popular) but no one attempted the process writing approach, although aspects of the principles of the process approach (e.g., peer interaction and the movement towards student-centred lessons) were used. From comments made by the teacher trainees on the process writing (see p. 125), it was clear that they had no intention of using the adaptation of process writing for Malaysian schools as explained by Mr. Lopez.

Table 5

Techniques Used by Depat to Teach Writing Before and After the Writing Course

Past classroom techniques for ESL writing	Techniques during simulated teaching and teaching practice
• Parallel writing (imitation and substitution of key words) • Sequencing of sentences based on pictures • Answering questions to write a story • Guided composition requiring filling in the blanks	• Use of models before writing • Providing key content words • Explaining features of format • Sequencing pictures to form story • Questioning to elicit key words • Sequencing sentences strips • Using exercises of varying difficulty to cater for mixed ability. • Scrambled sentences • Skeleton text • Group work • Mind maps • Error correction of group work in front of class

Table 6

Techniques Used by Chee Leng to Teach Writing Before and After the Writing Course

Past classroom techniques for teaching ESL writing	Techniques during simulated teaching and teaching practice
• Discussion of topic before writing	• Use of models • Questioning to elicit key words • Explaining phrases commonly used for the genre • Discussing format for writing • Filling of blanks with suitable sentences • Use of pictures to tell a story • Scrambled sentences • Mind maps • Group work • Predicting conclusion of story • Peer error correction

Table 7

Techniques Used by Laura to Teach Writing Before and After the Writing Course

Past classroom techniques for teaching ESL writing	Techniques during simulated teaching and teaching practice
• Guided writing with the use of a series of pictures • Questions to elicit vocabulary needed • Jumbled sentences • Matching sentence halves • Matching pictures with sentences • Expansion of notes • Prediction of conclusion	• Mind maps • Questions to elicit content • Models • Pictures • Discourse markers • Filling in flow charts • Skeleton text • Peer correction • Group work • Pair work • Gathering information from reading text • Presentations by group leaders

Table 8

Techniques Used by Amreet to Teach Writing Before and After the Writing Course

Past classroom techniques for teaching ESL writing	Techniques used during simulated teaching and teaching practice
• Blank filling exercises • Substitution tables • Rearranging sentences • Matching sentence halves • Matching sentences with pictures • Writing simple sentences based on given words • Process writing (drafts before final essay) • Discussion of topics before writing • Questions to elicit content	• Making short notes based on listening to models • Use of pictures, postcards and drawings • Use of discourse markers • Expansion of short notes • Focussing on language, tense, vocabulary • Game-like activities • Scrambled sentences • Scrambled words • Eliciting key phrases and words • Use of poems • Mind maps • Group work • Pair work • Language games • Correction of group work in front of class • Use of jokes and stories • Use of exercises of varying difficulty to cater for mixed ability in classroom

Table 9

Techniques Used by Siti to Teach Writing Before and After the Writing Course

Past classroom techniques for teaching ESL writing	Techniques during simulated teaching and teaching practice
• Models and imitation of structures • Fill in the blanks exercises • Stories based on pictures • Questions to prompt • Key words • Short notes expanded to complete sentences • Outlines • Process writing (drafts on which she corrected obvious errors).	• Used models • Format for writing • Functions of writing - to complain, criticise, etc. • Pairs work • Identifying topic sentences, main points, supporting details • Attention on vocabulary and language • Expansion of notes • Use of picture series • Questions to elicit content and vocabulary • Creating titles for story • Outline of story • Organising paragraphs • Group work

This was because of preconceived notions about process writing which focussed on multiple drafts and the nature of teaching practice which was such that the teacher trainees needed to present a complete lesson to their mentor for evaluation. Thus, it was unsuitable to use Mr Lopez's adaptation of process writing, which was designed to be used over a series of lessons. Mr. Lopez himself said that he needed much more time than he was given to teach process writing. Time constraints (three hours per week for seven weeks to cover all four major areas) forced him to rush through process writing and the teacher trainees may not have internalised the approach.

The main concern of the teacher trainees during simulated teaching and the six-week teaching practice was the need to meet the expectations of their mentor who was evaluating their work. All five teacher trainees were anxious about obtaining good grades. The teacher trainees were required to have lesson plans and teaching aids for each lesson and all the five teacher trainees felt that this took up too much of their time. All five complained of the stress of working until the early hours of the morning preparing lesson plans, teaching aids and handouts for the students. Therefore, they had little time for reflection on their teaching. Prominent researchers in ESL now view reflection as an essential component in developing knowledge and theories of teaching, and a key element in professional development. (e.g., Bartlett, 1990; Richards & Lockhart, 1994; Nunan & Lamb 1996; Cochran-Smith, 2001). The five teacher trainees appeared more preoccupied with pleasing their mentor and obtaining good grades than with reflection on their teaching. Moreover, since the teacher trainees never knew when their mentor would drop in for evaluation, they felt that they had to be constantly prepared with an impressive lesson. This anxiety often resulted in too many handouts and hurried and

anxious mannerisms. Concerning the nature of the practicum, One of Johnson (1996)'s subjects blamed the practicum itself for the tension she was experiencing. She said,

> ...no matter what I do, I feel I will not have an effect on them...no control over what I teach, they aren't my students, they don't really know me, and I have no time to change things....This whole practicum thing is such a joke. It's not real teaching and there isn't anything I can do about it, so I'll just do my time and hope I survive. (p. 39)

Depat and Chee Leng complained during interviews that the mentor "ruined my confidence" and "spoilt my mood" by making negative comments about their lesson plans even before they could start teaching the lesson. Their mentor, on the other hand, complained that the teachers were not receptive to comments and suggestions. According to the mentor, the teachers were too sensitive and defensive. Chamberlin (2000) states, "...supervisors' good intentions may be influenced by time constraints or an overwhelming urge to give explicit directions. Even if verbal discourse is supportive, nonverbal behaviors could be sending another message" (p. 667).

I found it surprising that the teacher trainees seemed reluctant to use group work. Of the five teacher trainees, only those who had previous experience teaching in secondary schools, Amreet, and Siti, regularly used group work and encouraged peer interaction. Both Amreet and Siti had more than ten years' teaching experience and therefore could focus on the pedagogical issues explained by Mr. Lopez. Depat and Laura seemed, at least initially, to prefer traditional teacher-centred teaching methods. It was only towards the end of the six-week teaching practice, after much discussion with their mentor, that they allowed more interaction in the class through group work and pair work. Their concerns, unlike Amreet and Siti, centred on issues of classroom

management. This could possibly be due to their lack of experience handling secondary students. Chee Leng was the most reluctant to use group work and to encourage classroom interactions. Coming from a science and mathematics background, her concerns were on her own language proficiency and on stress and anxiety over the mentor's negative comments about her teaching. Figure 35 shows the concerns of the teachers from different levels of experience. This point about the less experienced teachers focussing on classroom management is brought up by Nunan (1996), "...this tendency to focus on classroom management rather than pedagogy was something that distinguished less experienced teachers from more experienced ones" (p. 46).
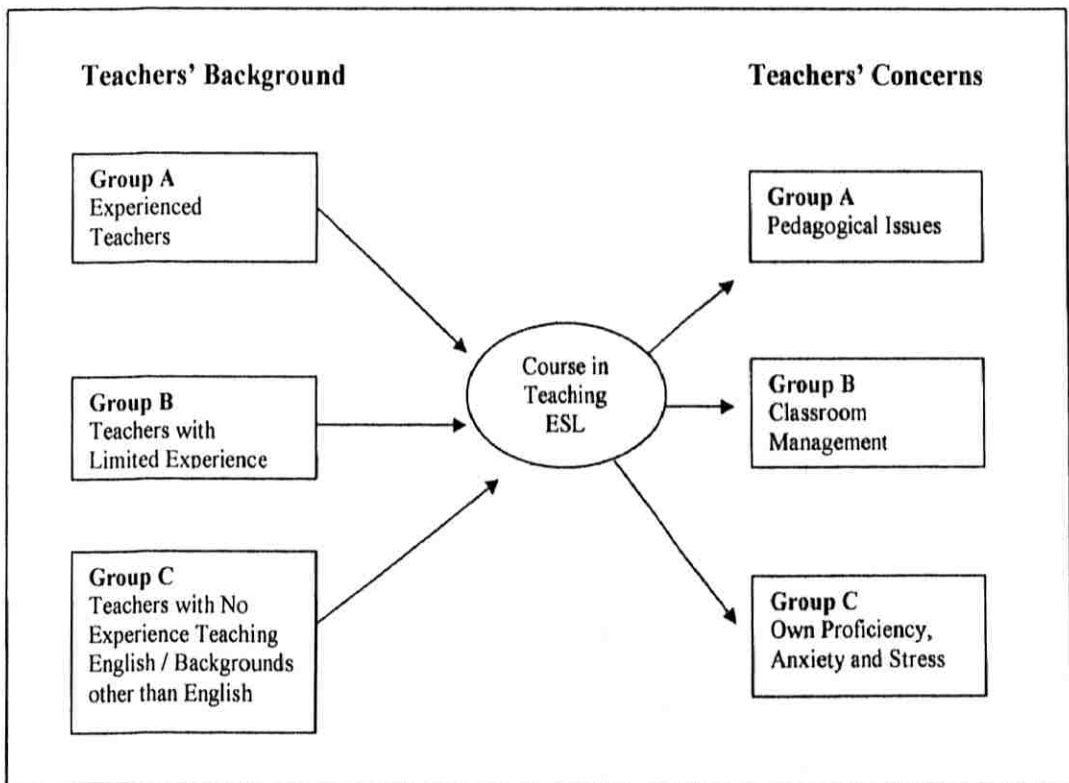

Figure 35. **Model Depicting Concerns of Different Teachers after the Course**

The significance of this model is that it may be more appropriate to group incoming teachers for training courses according to their experience, allowing lecturers to focus on their particular needs. In the B.A. (TESL) programme which this study investigates, teachers were put into groups at random (see p. 39). Redondo (2000) states, "Homogenous groups can allow teachers to target and match resources, teaching styles and pace to students' needs more easily and effectively" (p. 125).

When I asked Chee Leng whether she was using the ideas suggested by Mr. Lopez, she said, "I left my lecture notes at home." Chee Leng explained that she had moved to a rented room in Shah Alam so as to be near the school and had forgotten to bring along her lecture notes taken during the lectures on teaching writing. Moreover, about a year had passed since those lectures with Mr. Lopez and she found it difficult to remember his suggestions. Although she may not have been conscious of it, Chee Leng did use a number of ideas suggested by Mr. Lopez (see Table 6, p. 224) and there was a significant improvement in the variety of activities she used to teach writing. Prior to enrolling in the programme she could hardly say anything about the way she taught writing (see p. 61).

Amreet's past teaching experience favoured well for her. Her proper use of many features of Mr Lopez's instruction and her own innovations, together with exuberant mannerisms, won her much praise from her mentor. Depat too impressed his mentor with his diligent work and elaborate teaching aids. I wondered at first if his heavy Sarawakian accent would be a problem. It was not. This was because in front of the class he spoke slowly and clearly unlike during his conversations with me when I often had to ask him to repeat. It was clear to me that Depat was constantly referring to his lecture notes from

Mr. Lopez's class and was struggling to implement Mr. Lopez's ideas. Table 5 (see p. 223) shows that he used many of the key ideas of Mr. Lopez's course.

With the exception of Amreet, the teacher trainees seldom paid attention to the manner in which students grouped themselves. Often groups formed were not racially mixed. As a result, conversations were conducted in Chinese, Tamil or Malay. This was something that did not arise during simulated teaching. If it had, the mentor would have helped the teacher trainees with ways of dealing with this problem. I never heard any teacher encouraging students to speak in English during group discussions. Although some studies have indicated the usefulness of planning in the first language (e.g., Freidlander, 1990), Zamel's subjects scorned such a procedure with one of her subjects saying, "It would be like being pulled by two brains", (cited in Krapels, 1990, p. 47). Leong (1999) concurs, reporting that students did not benefit from planning in the first language. On the few occasions when the teacher trainees did mix the races and sexes in groups, students appeared more serious in their work. Moreover, I feel that the mixing of races and sexes in group work helps students develop social skills. However, of the five teacher trainees, only Amreet made an effort to mix the races and sexes.

I noticed that in all three schools (Siti, Laura and Chee Leng taught in the same school) that I visited, the permanent teachers were carrying canes as they walked into classrooms. Moreover, discussions about indiscipline among students dominated all conversations in the staff rooms between the permanent teachers and the teacher trainees. In the school that Amreet taught, I noticed canes on every teacher's desk and caning of students was done everyday, openly, in the staff room. Therefore, it is not surprising that

students appeared to be in fear of teachers. The students seemed to have been trained to open their mouths only when asked a question and that too, to just answer the question.

Moreover, the questioning techniques used by the five teacher trainees were of such that one-word answers sufficed and the five teacher trainees appeared satisfied with the one-word answers. The questioning techniques suggested by Mr. Lopez (p. 107 and p. 129) were either forgotten or were not internalised through enough practice.

When discussing their previous teaching techniques, all five complained about error correction being "indeed tedious" and "a burden for teachers". It was then surprising that during teaching practice, the five teacher trainees chose to correct individual work in the traditional manner. Even when group work was given, all five attempted to correct all errors that they could see on the work displayed by the groups. This often took up too much time and resulted in the teacher trainees giving feedback on only some of the work of the students. It also resulted in the teacher trainees being unable to complete the lesson as planned. Mr. Lopez had repeatedly stressed the importance of whole class error correction, peer corrections, correction of selective errors, responding to errors, dialogues with individual students and immediate feedback. Peer correction was sometimes done in a hurried and superficial manner. The rest of the ideas suggested by Mr. Lopez, concerning error correction, seemed to have fallen on deaf ears.

It was even stressful for me just watching the five teacher trainees attempt to correct all errors that they could see on a written piece. They later explained to me that they were correcting all errors and giving individual written work as homework because headmasters and parents expected that of them. All five teacher trainees expressed fears of not showing that they were giving homework and marking all errors. Mr. Lopez's

suggestion on dealing with the expectations of headmasters and parents is given on page 139 and this too appeared ignored. More practice and more reflection on the ideas of Mr. Lopez may have been needed to provide the confidence needed to implement them. However, time constraints prevented further practice and reflection, a fact lamented by Mr. Lopez himself.

During the writing course, Mr. Lopez stressed that students needed to experience success. Many of the exercises, he recommended, had this in mind. However, none of the teacher trainees attempted exercises in which the students would definitely experience success. The teacher trainees reported that designing such exercises demanded diligent planning and reflection for which they had no time, during their six-week teaching practice.

I felt that the six-week period allotted for teaching practice was also too short a time for the teacher trainees to build up a rapport with the students. A good rapport with students and a more relaxed atmosphere, with time for reflection, could have resulted in a better implementation of the ideas suggested by Mr. Lopez. Furthermore, if Mr. Lopez himself was supervising the teacher trainees while they were teaching writing (as was his desire) he could have provided further guidance and improvement in the implementation of his ideas.

Simulated teaching and the discussions that followed did bring about much improvement. However, the realities of the classroom (e.g., students speaking in their native tongues, group disintegration, unruly chatting, one-word answers, mixed ability) were not reflected in simulated teaching and as a result teacher trainees with less experience struggled with classroom management and the need to come up with different

materials suitable for different types of students. If it was possible for Mr. Lopez's presence during both simulated teaching and teaching practice, much of the difficulties of the teacher trainees may have been dealt with in a more effective manner. For example, the mentor praised Laura's use of a mind map (see p. 170) although it was only the first stage of the development of mind maps explained by Mr. Lopez. Possibly, the mentor was unaware of the development as explained by Mr. Lopez and thus could not bring in a discussion on developing mind maps during the post-teaching conferences.

An Explanation of What Happened Drawing from Theories of Teacher Change

In the light of the theories of teacher change, the outcomes of Mr. Lopez's instruction (i.e., the manner in which the teachers implemented changes) are not surprising. Markee (1997)'s diffusion of innovations theory, Fullan (1991)'s and Kennedy (1988)'s discussion of socio-cultural factors and Kennedy (1988)'s normative-re-educative concept of change, explain that several important factors may have contributed to the surface level, mechanical and restrictive implementation of Mr. Lopez's innovations. Mr. Lopez was not around after his lectures so he can hardly be termed as a "collaborator". Neither can the mentors be termed as collaborators since they were evaluating the teachers for examination purposes. Time constraints (seven weeks for the whole course) prevented proper understanding, appreciation, practice and the acquiring of "ownership" of the innovations. The style of learning of the teacher trainees (generally passive listeners), the time lapse between the instruction and the implementation (almost a year), ingrained beliefs about teaching and learning (teacher-

centred, quiet students), values and attitudes of the society (focussed on indiscipline and caning, all errors should be corrected, the need to follow the prescribed syllabus, same sex grouping of students), the lack of administrative support (Mr. Lopez's contract to teach was not renewed after his lectures) are factors which (theory explains) contributed significantly to the poor diffusion of Mr. Lopez's innovations.

The Importance of the Choice of Topics

The choice of topics is an area that needs much improvement. Neither the teacher nor the students decided on topics because topics are suggested in the syllabus, (see Appendix P). Describing places and giving directions dominated the topics covered during teaching practice because the teacher trainees felt that they had to use the suggestions in the prescribed syllabus. The mentor pointed out a number of times that the topics the teacher trainees were using were not suitable for the urban teenagers they were teaching (see p. 198).

Drawing from critical pedagogy (described in Chapter Two, p. 37), I believe that topics of social concerns will not only add excitement to ESL writing in Malaysia, it will also help bring about awareness for change and improvement. Critical pedagogy draws features from process writing (ideas more important than language competency), genre theory (focus on the social and cultural) and reflective teaching (teachers and students decide on changes). Hairson (1992) has taken an extreme view by criticising critical pedagogy as a political platform for "self-styled radical teachers" to take advantage of the "huge captive enrollment of largely unsophisticated students" (p. 185). Furthermore, she states, "We have no business getting into areas where we may have passion and

conviction but no scholarly base from which to operate" (p. 186). However, Hairson

(1992) also points out,

> I believe all topics in a writing class should be serious ones that push students to think and to say something substantial. But the topic should be their choice, to be sure, but not what someone else thinks is good for them. (p. 189)

In contrast, Jones (1998) states,

> Although some freedom of choice to choose topics in a writing class may be appropriate, too much can become confusing, annoying, and even debilitating, particularly when anxious students waste their precious time groping in vain for topics about which to write a paper. 'I can't think of anything to write about' is the lament writing teachers often hear from novice writers who have been given too much freedom and too little guidance. (p. 340)

I feel that in Malaysia there are abundant topics on social issues that teachers can help

students find from the local newspapers. The following is a list of topics I have put

together from local newspapers. In line with the genre approach (Sydney School Model),

writing on these topics can be structured to first define the problem, then discuss causes

and finally seek solutions or action that can be taken (in line with critical pedagogy).

1. Maid abuse – (In Malaysia there are a large number of foreign maids from Indonesia and Philippines and there have been numerous reports of them being abused by employers.)
2. Abandoned babies
3. Battered wives
4. Pregnant teenagers
5. Dating – (choosing partners, what is important in marriage, avoiding rape)
6. Violence in schools – (gangsterism, appropriate ways of disciplining students)
7. Pornography – (the Internet, chatting, dangers of meeting partners through the Internet).
8. The spread of AIDS in Malaysia
9. High rate of divorce
10. Women rights – (single mothers, child prostitution)
11. Human cloning
12. Euthanasia – (pro-life / pro-choice movement)

Many of these topics are still considered taboo in Malaysia because sex is not openly discussed although statistics indicate that AIDS is spreading fast in Malaysia. Issues like battered wives, women rights and divorce rates also need to be addressed more openly in our male-dominated patriarchal society. Students will appreciate being respected enough to be allowed to voice their opinion on such topics in contrast to the usual topics of describing places and giving directions. These topics not only bring life and excitement to ESL writing classes, what is more important is that they may also bring about social and cultural changes for the betterment of our society.

Recommendations

1. Headmasters, inspectors of schools, district administrators, parents, whoever has some authority in the running of schools, need to be kept informed of innovations and encouraged to provide the support needed by the teachers.

2. If at all caning has to been done, it has to be done in the privacy of the headmaster's or discipline teacher's room. Innovations of the nature suggested by Mr. Lopez cannot be carried out if students are in fear of teachers.

3. The lecturer of the course on teaching writing should continue to guide his students through the simulated teaching and teaching practice components of the programme.

4. Genre theory needs to be explained to the teacher trainees in the light of recent research. (Mr. Lopez explained genre in the traditional sense of the term, see p. 92).

5. More experienced teachers should be separated from the less experienced when division into groups is done. If there is a substantial number of teachers from backgrounds other than English (for example, Chee Leng who was trained to teach

Science and Mathematics), they should be placed into a separate group. A questionnaire, given out at the beginning of the programme, will provide the information needed for the divisions. This will allow the lecturers to focus on their different needs.

6. The teacher trainees need to be given more practice, guidance and support to acquire a sense of ownership with innovations such as mind maps, group work and the various methods of error correction suggested.

7. A longer time is needed for teaching practice. The six weeks allotted was too short. Moreover, to reduce the anxiety level, observation of teacher trainees should not be done during the first week. This is to allow the teacher trainees to become familiar with students and build a rapport with them, before a supervisor sits at the back of the class.

8. The teacher trainees should be encouraged to decide or discuss topics with students and deviate from the prescribed syllabus when necessary.

9. There should be better collaboration between mentors and teacher trainees (see p. 12 for Freeman (1989)'s explanation of this point) and also better collaboration between the teacher trainees themselves, for example, the sharing of ideas, teaching aids, materials and handouts, could reduce the anxiety level during teaching practice and save time, money and energy.

Limitations of the Study

I followed the students through three semesters of their programme to collect data needed for this study but I was unable to go further to see what happened when they returned to their "real" classrooms. This was because of the fact that the teachers returned to their own schools in various states in Malaysia after the programme. Another problem I faced was the difficulty of getting the teachers to reflect on their teaching while I was interviewing them during their teaching practice. One-word or one-sentence answers were common. They often seemed to be in a hurry and worried about their next lesson. I believe that this was due to the high anxiety level during the teaching practice component of the programme.

Suggestions for Further Study

A comparison of what teachers do during teaching practice and what they do when they return to their own "real" classrooms would make an interesting study. This would reveal how much actually filters into real classrooms. I also feel the need, after numerous visits to the three public schools, for a study of how discipline problems are handled in Malaysia, how punishment is meted out, what effect that has and how far government guidelines are followed concerning the handling of discipline problems.