CHAPTER ONE
THE STUDY

1.1 Introduction

The English Language Programme which is currently being utilized at the upper secondary school level in Malaysia is specifically aimed at "building and extending upon the proficiency of the student from the lower secondary level so as to equip them with the skills and knowledge of English to communicate in certain everyday activities and certain job situations; and also to provide points for take-off for various post-secondary school need." (English language Syllabus in Malaysia Schools For Forms 4 and 5, 1990: 1). As such, it is hoped that at the end of his upper secondary education, the student is expected to be able to listen, speak and write effectively in the target language. These present objectives are somewhat different from that of the recently-replaced English Syllabus of the 1980's which had placed great emphasis on a student's ability to read the abundant and diverse English reading materials available at the tertiary level of education. Perhaps this change is for the better as no one can deny the importance of being able to speak and write well in this language.
The need to be able to write in English in Malaysia is beginning to regain its importance. Indeed, here and elsewhere in the world, writing competence has proven to be essential and unavoidable in business transactions and international matters. An adequate ability to write in English is a sine qua non to enable us to make our contributions at the international level, particularly in the scientific, medical, technical and academic disciplines.

In addition, the ability to write well in English or in any other languages is pertinent to academic success as this overt manifestation of the written form is normally used to measure the amount of knowledge that has been learnt. Although the ability to write well in English is looked upon as being trivial to academic success in Malaysia because the medium of instruction used here is Bahasa Melayu, many professional disciplines may require it of their members. Moreover, the ability to write well in English not only ensures employability but also influences access to higher education locally (with reference to twinning programmes) and abroad. More often than not, first impressions formed about whether a candidate is deemed suitable for these purposes are based on their written products. In all likelihood too, the ability to write well in English is indeed inevitable in the context of the working world and of modern
civilization if we, Malaysians, want to stand at par with the rest of the fast changing world. In a nutshell, developing students’ ability to write well in English is not only relevant now but also a necessity.

On the other hand, writing in the first, second or foreign language is to many a student a formidable task. This is because writing is itself a complex and creative act in which the student has to discover what he intends to say and how to relay it accurately and appropriately. In addition to these, he also has to face linguistic difficulties of the language he is writing in and also observe content, structure, style and assumptions underlying these conventions that pertain to the genre he wishes to write in.

Many research studies have been undertaken in the west to study the complex nature of writing beginning with that of Emig’s in 1971. These have included such studies as those that attempted to examine the composing process in relation to factors like writing proficiency, age group, types of writing task, the context of writing, revision strategies and of late, the ethnographic studies of writing English for special purposes and those that pertain to genres. Most of these studies were carried out on first language learners. In comparison, those which involved ESL / EFL students were relatively limited. As a result, the
composing process in the first language seems to be quite well documented whereas this is not the case where composing in an ESL/EFL situation. In Malaysia in particular, research in ESL writing process is still in its infancy in terms of the number of studies done and the scope of these studies.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

As of 1995, the Malaysian Examinations Syndicate under the directive of the Malaysia Ministry of Education has collaborated with the University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate to produce the Joint 1322/1119 English Language Examination for Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia. This is a very important public examination for all Malaysian students as on it rests the decision as to whether they can or cannot pursue their education at the tertiary level. Although passing the English Language Papers in this examination is not a requirement in obtaining a full Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia Certificate, many higher institutions of learning in this country require at least a credit in the English Language Examination at this level as a prerequisite for entrance. Similarly, job seekers will also find that having a good pass in the English subject places them at an advantage compared to those without it. Such circumstances have served to become a compelling
reason for students to want to do well in the above mentioned English Language Examination.

The Joint 1322/1119 Examination in English Language consists of two papers and an oral test. The descriptions of the contents of each of the three papers can be seen in Appendix A.

Of the three papers, Paper 2 is considered the most difficult and challenging. This is probably because the same paper does not only have to be answered subjectively but that it also requires students to complete tasks expected of a skilled writer. This is especially true of Section C of the paper. It is in this section that students are tested on their ability to produce a piece of continuous prose in accurate Standard English and respond relevantly to any a task chosen from a number of alternatives, namely, narration, description, exposition and argument.

Since not much is known about how ESL school students write, the problems they are facing, their concerns and preoccupations when they are involved in producing the above mentioned piece of continuous prose be it a narration, description, exposition or argument, it is pertinent that research in these areas be carried out. By
doing so, it is hoped that teachers would be able to better assist students in developing their writing abilities. Teachers who wish to teach the skills of writing well should themselves first understand the basic issue about writing, that is, how does a person write. After acquiring the answer to this question, they then should go further to find out whether genres such as narration, description, exposition and argument have any effect on the way a person composes. Teachers of today are fortunate as there are research studies which have been undertaken to explore the composing process in relation to the multiplicity of factors such as age level, language proficiency in English, demands of the writing tasks, prior knowledge of the subjects, time allocated for writing, and other factors which may influence the composing process. Besides these, of late there exists a shift in attention and interest of researchers to ethnographic as well as laboratory studies involving the composing processes in different genres. Unfortunately, the bulk of these studies were carried out on first language learners. As such, there is a pressing need to have similar studies that involve second and foreign language learners so that these findings could give a more accurate and clear picture of the local situation.
In view of the above situations, this study is but a modest attempt at addressing the current lack of research on the composing processes of ESL learners in Malaysia. It is also hoped that this undertaking could also serve to enlighten local ESL upper secondary school teachers and aid them in their effort to prepare their students for the Joint 1322/1119 English Language Examination, particularly with regard to the writing of essays in the narrative and argumentative genres.

1.3 Purpose of the Study

This current study is an exploratory comparative investigation of the cognitive writing strategies used by ESL Malay upper secondary school students in Malaysia when composing in two different genres, namely the narrative and the argumentative modes.

The selection of four ESL Malay upper secondary school students is made based upon the researcher's own job-related needs to improve her understanding of cognitive processes involved in the writing of narrative and argumentative compositions among her present students.
In addition to the above aims, through this, qualitative study the researcher seeks to discover the following:

i) The processes that take place in the minds of the above mentioned students when they are engaged in compositions in the narrative and argumentative genres. The processes that are referred to here are those that occur from the moment each of the topics is presented to the students till it reaches its final emergence in written form where no further changes are made.

ii) The students concerns and preoccupations while they are undertaking the tasks of producing the two essays.

iii) Similarities and differences between composing in the narrative genre and composing in the argumentative mode.

Simultaneously, the researcher also intends to verify her own hypothetical allegations listed below:

i. A writer has to undergo the same composing process irrespective of whether he is involved in producing a narrative or an argumentative essay.
ii. While a writer struggles to compose a story or an argument, the writer also experiences linguistic constraints of converting unexpected thoughts into understandable language output that demands spontaneous language production while at the same time maintaining coherence, grammar correctness and topic focus.

iii. As the L2 writer wrestles with the linguistic problems referred to in (ii) he also has to apply his knowledge of the narrative and the argumentative genre's unique combination, audience traits and knowledge, reader's expectations, structure and format options and other questions about the rhetorical situation.

iv. Thus, in order for the L2 writer to be able to write well in the narrative and argumentative genres, he has first to overcome all of the hurdles mentioned in (i), (ii) and (iii).

1.4 Definition of Terms

i. Composing process - the entire process that encompasses all the behaviours which occur from the moment a topic is presented to
the writer to the time when he gives an indication that he is ready to hand in his draft.

ii) Pre-drafting - or pre-writing is the phase between the presentation of the topic of an essay to the time when the writer writes the first word in his initial attempt to produce a draft. It includes time spent on outlining, diagramming, listing, free-writing et cetera.

iii) Composing - or writing or drafting is the phase during which the writer is actually engaged in the task of producing a draft in response to a given topic. It stretches from the moment the writer writes his first word in his attempt to produce the draft to the time when he ceases to do all forms of writing. It takes into account false starts, partially written drafts and time the writer spends reading through his final draft and making changes while he does so.

iv. Revising - the act of making all kinds of corrections and changes to what was originally written. The classifications of revisions are based on:

a) When they occur - which can further be subdivided into:
1. In process revisions which refer to those changes that are
done throughout the entire process of composing.
2. Polishing or revisions that are carried out on the final
product.

b) The nature of the revisions themselves. These are also
divided and further subdivided into:

1. Surface-level changes - these are changes that have little
effect on the meaning of what is written. These changes
can further be classified into:
   i) formal - changes - these changes involving syntax
   (tense, verb-forms, number, modality et cetera) and
   also include, copy-editing operation like spelling,
   abbreviations, punctuation, format and so on.
   ii) meaning - preserving changes - are changes that
   reword the concepts in the text, however, have no
   significant effect on them.

2. Text-based changes - These are those which alter the
original intended meaning of the message to be relayed to
readers. According to the extent to which the meaning is
affected, these changes can be subgrouped into:
i) micro-level changes - these are changes which affect part of meaning but the overall thrust is maintained.

ii) macro-level changes - are changes which affect the overall meaning or the focus of the text.

v. Genre Theory - the theory which states that conscious knowledge of a genre can help writers make more sense of a text which can be used to help them to write better.

vi. Genre - is a typified form of discourse or way of organizing or structuring discourse, shaped by and in response to recurring situational context.

vii. Narrative Genre - the telling of a story where ideas are developed chronologically.

viii. Argumentative Genre - is the structure of facts and ideas logically arranged to arrive at a conclusion so as to persuade a reader to take up side with the writer. In this present study, the term argumentative genre is used interchangeably with persuasive genre.
ix. Schema Theory - with regard to how a writer learns to write in a new genre states that in order for the writer to be able to write in a new genre, he has first to acquire knowledge about and understand the genre's unique combination of purposes, audience traits and knowledge, reader's expectations, structure and format options, and other questions about the rhetorical situation. The writer then analyzes this information, after which he filters this new genre knowledge through existing knowledge or schemata of others, perhaps similar genres. In doing so, the writer is actually making comparisons, trying to determine how and why the new genre is different from the others he had seen in the past. Subsequently, he either modifies an existing schema or creates a new one for this new genre, into which the writer files all the pertinent data about the new genre. Once this schema is active, with enough knowledge to be useful, the writer starts to plan to write in the genre. However, if he finds that he does not have enough knowledge to do this, he will go back to the stage where he gathers more information about the genre till he can do so. On the other hand, if the writer has reached the stage where his schema is active, he begins to write in the genre and keeps on checking whether what he has written conforms to his image of the new genre.
1.5 Significance of the Study

The question of how ESL school students in Malaysia compose in different genres has long fascinated and puzzled teachers and educators alike. In so far, unfortunately, there is as yet no published study in this aspect of composing. As such, it is hoped that this current study would be able to shed some light on this prevailing mystery that has baffled them all these years.

Besides, this study may add in some measure to the field of ESL composing processes in Malaysia in particular and in the world in general. To date, many of these studies have been carried out on ESL / EFL students in the West who are immersed in an English dominant environment. Such an environment is absent in Malaysia where exposure to English for most students is limited to five or six classroom periods of 40 minutes each at the secondary and upper secondary school level. Moreover, with the emphasis on Bahasa Melayu as the language of communication, administration and education, the role of English has been significantly reduced. In view of these differences in situations, it is quite conceivable that there might be differences between the findings of this study and those undertaken in the West.
Perhaps from a more practical point of view, this study may have some relevance or use in the designing of the ESL writing curricula that are meant to promote writing. Some understanding and awareness of the complexity of the act of writing in English as a second or foreign language are needed to guide teachers towards setting up more realistic writing objectives and designing more appropriate writing task. What is more, teachers and other people in the education line would be equipped with better knowledge to devise strategies that may facilitate writing after gaining insight into the writing difficulties experienced by students at this level. Information about the nature of these problems which are derived from the analyses of their written products may be useful but not necessarily illuminating.

Other than that, it is also hoped that the findings of this study may have important ramifications for ESL writing pedagogy. This is because at present many educators are of the opinion that writing difficulties in English stem from students' own lack of proficiency in the language rather than the complexity of the task of writing itself. The assumption underlying this belief is that students should be able to transfer the writing skills which they have learnt in their first language. Since the problem perceived here is language proficiency in English thus it is of
no wonder that ESL writing materials are heavily grammar-focused instead of meaning-oriented.

This focus on correctness of form is, undoubtedly, very clearly seen in the writing classroom where students are instructed to parallel given models of different types of texts. Drills such as these are thought to produce mastery in writing. Contrary to many educators' belief this emphasis on correctness of form may well be the hindrance in the effort to develop students' creativity as in the case of less-proficient students. Perhaps the reason why these students are unable to handle writing is because they are unable to cope with the linguistic aspect of it.

Information on how school students handle writing in the narrative and argumentative genres can be utilized by teachers and educators to devise techniques and strategies to teach students to write well in each genre. Then there is no need for them to fear the argumentative genre anymore and limit themselves to essays in other genres.

In all, the researcher hopes that the findings of this study may rekindle the dying interest of both teachers and students to produce beautiful
pieces of writing in English which for their pleasure as well as secure excellent result in the 1322/1119 examination.