

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Studies on writing had previously been more focused on the written products or text analysis. Researchers then placed more emphasis on errors, grammar and form. However, evidence derived from text analysis alone was unreliable which led to a shift from product to process-based research. In a process research, emphasis is placed on content, communication, meaning and creativity (Dryden, 1987). Researches on composing processes were spearheaded by the classic research conducted by Emig in 1971. Other researchers such as Perl (1979) and Sommers (1980) followed suit and findings from researches on first language composing processes revealed that composing was a non-linear and recursive process, that is, writers in these studies were found to move back and forth in the various stages of writing such as planning, drafting, rehearsing and revising tasks.

Soon after, researchers began to look at L2 composing processes using the L1 research methodologies and compared their findings to L1 researches. Researchers such as Zamel (1982, 1983), Lay (1982), Arndt (1987) and Raimes (1987) reported the similarities between L2 and L1 writers and that composing behaviors cut across languages. Another common finding from these researches was the usage of first language while composing in English as reported by Lay (1982), Edelsky (1987), Dryden (1987) and Friedlander (1991).

Most of the studies on composing processes of L1 and L2 writers were conducted in other countries and very few studies were conducted using the Malaysian context. Therefore, the present study using a case-study method would look at our students in the local context. By collecting data through think-aloud protocol which was audio and video taped, semi-

structured questionnaire, retrospective interview and analysis of written products, the researcher would trace the similarities and differences in the composing processes of pre-intermediate ESL students writing in their first language and the English Language. The other aspect of this research was to test the hypothesis that pre-intermediate ESL students use L1 as the dominant language to think when writing in their first language and the English Language, which is suggested in the findings of many researches on L2 composing processes (Lay 1982, Ardnt 1987 and Friedlander 1991).

### **1.1 Background to the Study**

Writing in English is a necessity for students pursuing higher education in Malaysian private colleges where English is used as the medium of instruction. Students are usually required to present project papers and reports for their course of study. However, many teachers can attest that the majority of our students at college level are unable to write effectively in English. Most of their academic writings are inundated with both lexical and syntactic errors that make them difficult, if not impossible, to comprehend.

Most Malaysian students who are pursuing further studies in local private colleges have gone through a minimum of eleven years of both primary and secondary education where they have been taught the rudiments of writing. Some of these students bring with them writing knowledge in both their first language and the English Language.

For instance, Chinese students who are educated in Chinese-medium primary schools are taught how to write in Chinese. Under The New Primary School Chinese Language Program, which is planned in accordance with the New Primary School Curriculum,

primary pupils are expected to be able to write compositions, letters and fill out forms for practical purposes upon completion of six years of primary education. In addition to writing in Chinese, the pupils are also exposed to the English Language from Year Three onwards (Lim, 1997).

Whilst at the secondary level, writing in English is taught in accordance with The Secondary School English Language Program which is part of The Integrated Curriculum for Secondary School (ICSS) or the Kurikulum Bersepadu Sekolah Menengah (KBSM). If we refer to the writing component of the English Language Program for Form 1 (see Appendix A), the pupils are taught to write on similar topics learned in primary school but from different perspectives. These topics are dealt with in greater depth so as to build upon what is familiar to the pupil and to add to the pupils' store of knowledge (Sarada, 1990).

## **1.2 Purpose of the Study**

According to Leki (1991), researches conducted by Hendrikson, Senke and Robb et al. found that teachers' written comments on errors in L2 writing were not helpful to student writers, in fact the errors still persisted. Zamel (1985) in her study "Responding to Students' Writing" found that corrections made on students' writing undermined the development of students as writers. She added that students should be made to understand the recursive nature of writing. These findings have motivated the researcher to do a study on the composing process instead of relying totally on the written product. Moreover, Faigley et al. (1985) contend that analysis of the written product offers only indirect evidence about composing processes and the evidence is often unreliable.

Researches on the composing processes of L2 writers have revealed that there are similarities between L2 and L1 composing processes although L2 writers have to contend with additional linguistic burden of learning L2. Researches conducted by Edelsky (1982), Zamel (1983), Ardnt (1987) and Noorchaya (1994) have reported that L2 writers transfer their L1 writing abilities and strategies to L2 writing. Therefore, the researcher will attempt to study the pre-intermediate ESL students' composing processes in their first language in comparison with their composing processes in the English Language to determine whether findings from this study conducted in the local context would be similar to the findings mentioned earlier.

A number of studies on L2 writers indicated the usage of L1 when composing in English. For example, Lay (1982), Cumming (1989) and Friedlander (1991) found that L2 writers use their first language to help them retrieve topic information, whilst Dryden (1987) and Lee (1989) reported that their subjects used their first language when facing difficulty in their L2 writing. In view of this common finding amongst these researchers, another aspect of the present study is to test the hypothesis that pre-intermediate ESL students use L1 as the dominant language to think when writing in their first language and the English Language.

### **1.3 Research Questions**

The researcher will attempt to answer the following questions, which were partially adapted from Noorchaya (1994):

- a) Are there similarities in the composing processes and/or behaviors of pre-intermediate ESL students when writing a descriptive essay in their first language and in the English Language? If yes, what are the similarities?
- b) Are there differences in the composing processes and/or behaviors of pre-intermediate ESL students when writing a descriptive essay in their first language and in the English Language? If yes, what are the differences?
- c) Are there composing processes and/or behaviors that are unique only to one language? If yes, what are the processes and/or behaviors?

### **1.4 Hypothesis**

As mentioned earlier on, researches conducted by Lay (1982), Dryden (1987), Cumming (1989), Lee (1989) and Friedlander (1991) reported the usage of L1 by their subjects when composing in English. How true this situation in Malaysia is will be tested by the researcher in the present study using the following hypothesis:

Pre-intermediate ESL students use L1 as the dominant language to think when writing in their first language and the English Language.

## 1.5 Significance of the Study

There are still very few comparative studies done on our local students' composing processes in the local context. While Dryden (1987) and Noorchaya (1994) did conduct studies on Malaysian students, their research was done in the United States where circumstances were different from the local situation. In the United States, their subjects were literally immersed in an English environment which might have had a bearing on the findings of their studies. This study will be carried out in the local context where the subjects are still very much exposed to their first language while trying to grasp the use of English for their academic courses. In doing so, the present study will ascertain the findings made by both Dryden and Noorchaya.

The few studies on composing processes conducted in the local context were more focused on the composing processes of students in the English Language, for instance, Lee (1989), Sarada (1990) and Jayakaran (1993). This study, on the other hand, is a comparative study looking at how students compose in their first language as well as in English. A comparison of the students' composing processes in their first language and English may provide us additional information on how they approach writing. It is hoped that this would provide ESL teachers with an insight into the students' composing processes in their first language in contrast with their composing processes in the English Language. This would also enable teachers to develop strategies for teaching writing skills with a consideration of the students' knowledge of writing in their first language.

The other aspect of this study is to test the hypothesis that pre-intermediate ESL students use L1 as the dominant language to think when writing in their first language and the

English language. The findings will provide an insight for ESL teachers on the extent of L1 usage and how to formulate strategies in their lessons to assist students in their L2 writing.

## **1.6 Assumptions and Limitations**

The present study is conducted on the assumption that subjects would display their natural composing behaviors in the environment created for this study i.e. a secluded room with audio and video tape recorders to capture the subjects' verbalizations and actions. Other studies on composing processes have used a similar setting, for example, Raimes (1987) collected her data in a quiet room whilst Noorchaya (1994) used one of the rooms in her house. In order to provide a naturalistic setting for the subject, the researcher was not present when the subjects were writing.

The other assumption is that verbalization obtained from the study would provide information on the subjects' composing processes. Verbalization is acknowledged as a useful tool to trace cognitive processes as contended by Ericsson and Simon "that the major purpose for using verbal report protocols is to reveal in detail what information is attended to while performing tasks" (Cohen (1998:p.38). Moreover, other researchers like Lay (1982), Cumming (1989), Raimes (1989) and Noorchaya (1994) who used think-aloud protocol had good responses from their subjects

One of the limitations to this study is that subjects were asked to write descriptive essays. As there are different modes of writing such as argumentative, persuasive and expository, subjects may use different processes in different modes of writing. The study conducted by

Jayakaran (1993) has shown that writers displayed different composing processes in terms of intellectual processes when asked to write different types of essays. However, the descriptive mode of writing was chosen for the present study because the subjects were familiar with the task and purpose since this mode of writing is taught in both schools and colleges.

Another limitation is that the subjects were given one topic to write on in both their first language and in English composing processes. This may affect the processes and/or behaviors used in the second writing. However, when writing in a more demanding language i.e. the English Language, the subjects may have to employ whatever composing processes and/or behaviors that are necessary to write the essay.

One other limitation to this study is the small number of participants which Cumming (1989) contends that small number of participants inhibit meaningful statistical analyses or substantive generalization. The researcher for the present study was unable to recruit more participants due to the small number of local students enrolled in the pre-intermediate English course at the time of the study. Moreover, the participants have to meet the criterion of having the ability to write in both their first language and the English language. Therefore, no generalization will be made beyond the number of subjects in this study.



## **1.7 Definition of Terms**

In the present study, the terms that are used will be defined as follows:

### **Composing Process and/or Behavior**

In Flowers and Hayes Model of Composing (Faigley, 1985), composing processes constitute planning, generating, organizing, goal setting, translating, reviewing, evaluating, revising and monitoring. All these processes are recursive in nature and occur throughout the act of writing. In this study, processes include idea generation, global and local planning, rehearsing, repeating, revising, questioning and translating since these are mentalistic activities. In contrast, behavior is observable and this includes reading, rereading, editing, looking at topics or notes, jotting down ideas, pausing, saying and writing and saying idea without writing it down.

### **First language or L1**

The first language is the language acquired by the students at home. The students use their first language in most aspects of their lives especially in communication with friends and families. In this study, the subjects' first language is Chinese which they acquired at home in the form of dialects and later learnt the writing system in the form of Chinese characters in primary school.

## **Chinese-medium and Malay-medium schools**

In the Malaysian context, schools are generally divided into two categories according to the language used as the medium of instruction. For the purpose of this study, Malay-medium schools refer to schools that use the Malay language as the medium of instruction. Chinese-medium schools refer to schools that use Chinese as the medium of instruction. English Language is taught as a second language in both types of schools.