

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.0 Introduction

Composition writing has always been an integral part of the English Language curriculum in all schools in Malaysia. However, writing is arguably the most difficult of the four language skills to learn and teach. This can be attributed to the fact that writing is a complex process, which requires the mastery of various sub-skills. According to Raimes (1983) in order to produce a piece of clear fluent writing for effective communication, one has to have a reasonable knowledge regarding purpose, audience, content, organization, process of writing, linguistic structures like grammar, vocabulary and finally, mechanical skills. Often in the process of writing, the writer has to struggle in the act of integrating these sub-skills of writing, which are at different levels of maturity. Many other linguists like Byrne (1982) and Chomsky (1965) are congruent in their views regarding the fact that the writing task requires both thinking and language abilities. As such, writing has been referred to as a high order language skill. Unlike the speaking skill, which can be acquired naturally, the writing ability has to be learnt formally through a process of instruction (Chance, 1973, Phelps-Gunn and Phelps-Terasaki, 1982, Bryne 1982).

Besides that, it is also to do with the nature of writing itself (Hedge, 1989). Harold Rosen (1981: 5) writing about a school curricular project on writing in Britain, explained it in this

way: " The writer is a lonely figure cut off from the stimulus of listeners. He must be a predictor of reactions and act on his predictions. He writes with one hand tied behind his back, being robbed of gesture, body movement, facial expression, pitch and tone of voice, stress, and hesitations. A speaker can backtrack, or clarify and revise ideas as listeners question or disagree." Furthermore, speech is the natural and normal medium of communication for us in most circumstances and accustoms us both to having someone physically present when we use language and to getting feedback of some kind. A writer, however, has to compensate for all of these disadvantages. Besides, effective writing requires a number of things : a high degree of organization in the development of ideas, and information; a high degree of accuracy so that there is no ambiguity of meaning; the use of complex grammatical devices for focus and emphasis; a careful choice of vocabulary, grammatical patterns and sentence structures to create a style which is appropriate to the subject matter and the eventual readers. Thus, it is these demands upon our students when they write that make writing such a difficult skill to learn and teach. Having said that, it cannot be denied that ESL schools students especially those from Chinese Independent Schools where English is taught as the third language will be at a disadvantage. This is because in these schools, the medium of instruction is Chinese. Besides, students from these schools only begin learning English in primary three. Furthermore, all communication outside the English classroom is conducted in Chinese. Bilingual teachers and especially those graduated from Taiwan have a tendency to teach English in class using the grammar-translation method. These environmental factors have contributed negatively to their exposure to the English Language. Needless to say, their exposure to English texts will be very much lessen.

1.1 Background to the Study

1.1.1 School

The school under study is Chong Hwa Independent High School situated at Jalan Ipoh, Kuala Lumpur. The premier school is one of the 60 Independent Chinese schools in Malaysia. It has a student population of more than 4,600 students. It is a single session school with 83 classes. The classes are very big with an average of more than 60 students per class. There are more than 250 teachers serving in the school and among them are 30 teachers of English. The school emphasizes the importance of English and much effort has been directed at cultivating students' interest in spoken and written English.

The school prepares students to sit for a common English Language paper in the Junior Unified Examination at the end of the 3rd year and the Senior Unified Examination at the end of the 6th year. The school also prepares her students for the government examinations, namely, the PMR and the SPM.

1.1.2 Students

The students in this school have to master three languages – Chinese, Bahasa Malaysia and English. All students in the school have to sit for the above mentioned examinations. According to a recent survey by the school Counselling Department, it was reported that more than 85% of the students pursue further education overseas or in local colleges. Owing

to this, a good command of the English Language with a firm grounding in writing skills, is pertinent for them to be able to perform well in their written English paper.

In the junior section (Junior 1 to 3) which is equivalent to Form 1 to 3, there are 7 periods of 40 minutes each of English per week, whilst for the Senior Section (Senior 1 to 3), equivalent to Form 4 to Lower 6, there are 8 or 9 periods per week depending on whether students are from the Arts or Science Stream. Thus, compared with national schools throughout the country, this Chinese school students have more English periods.

1.1.3 Teachers

Most of the teachers of English in this school teach 3 classes or 24 periods of 40 minutes each of English per week. Out of the 8 or 9 periods per class, the English teacher will set aside a double period or 2 periods for writing whenever she sets composition writing. Almost all the teachers of English possess a basic degree but most of them do not have professional teaching qualification. Where the teaching of English in general is concerned and in particular in composition writing, the teachers' approach is very product-orientated and very heavily grammar-based. The great amount of time devoted to the teaching of correct grammar and usage clearly implies the belief that a knowledge of grammar will have appreciable effects on the improvement of students' composition writing. Owing to this, it has given rise to an undesirable trend on the part of most English teachers having limited time to devote to the teaching of composition skills.

In general, the composition lesson, for which a double period is normally used, is taught only once a fortnight or in 3 weeks, alternating with comprehension lesson, with grammar lesson taking up many of the remaining periods. Composition topics are specified in the scheme of work, however, changes can be made at the teachers' discretion. However, the fact remains, the topics are assigned by the teachers and the students are expected to write on a specific number of topics, about 8 to 10 compositions a year. The normal practice by most teachers of English in this school is that students' compositions are usually written and completed during the double period. Most of the teachers require their students to submit their composition for evaluation at the end of the period. After having corrected and graded the compositions, students are expected to do their corrections that is to rewrite those parts in the composition that have been edited by the teachers.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Students' performance in writing is an area of great concern for teachers. This is partly because the proficiency of students in English is often based on student performance in a writing test. According to most of the English teachers in the school, of the four English Language skills, writing is often cited by students as the most difficult to acquire, yet, this is the skill students earnestly seek to develop so as to enable them to perform well academically. Teachers, too, recognizing that much of their students' "success" in their English paper in the examination depend on writing composition, are greatly concerned that their students acquire the necessary writing skills.

Researchers such as Muller have acknowledged the importance of the writing component in any curriculum concerning the learning and teaching of the English Language. The importance of writing is best summed up by Muller (1967 : 19) when he remarked. " I suppose there is no real question that something like composition is essential. It is a practical necessity because all students have to do considerable writing in other courses, as on papers and tests and still more in college. In later life almost all will have to do some kind of writing for their business or professional purposes. More important, by his effort students learn more about language, something about how to express various kinds of ideas, and so about how to think. "

Acknowledging its importance in the curriculum of the writing component in the learning and teaching of the English Language, it is therefore rather disturbing, to find that many students in this school, despite having 7 or 8/9 periods of English per week and with an emphasis on basic grammar grounding, many students at the senior/upper secondary level, still encountered great difficulty in writing effective compositions. Students find it very difficult to construct an organized and coherent written text in English. When they do write a connected text or a composition, difficulties at the discourse level occur. Some of the difficulties are on the organizational level; others involve poor topic continuance, inadequate use of examples and details, limited vocabulary and the poor or inadequate use of cohesive devices. From the point of view of the teacher, teaching students the ability to write well seems to be an extremely difficult task. Many students do not seem to like writing and view it as a boring activity, while many teachers dread the long hours of marking their compositions, which contain numerous errors.

In addition, from the researcher's general observation, teaching students writing skills seems to be an extremely difficult task. This is not due to a lack of effort or commitment on the part of teachers. Indeed many of the teachers have tried out a variety of teaching approaches in the classroom, all aimed at improving students' competence to write. For example, following the general principles of teaching and learning a language, many teachers have attempted to teach composition using the "building blocks approach" on the assumption that students should learn to write grammatical sentences before proceeding to paragraphs and by extension, to full compositions. This cumulative approach is in fact recommended for language teaching but does not seem to work well in the composition class. Some teachers have also attempted to teach composition using the "prose model or form bound approach". Using whole class instruction, teachers discuss with students the external features of various modes of discourse like narration, description, exposition and argumentation, show them mature models of these forms and then ask them to imitate these models when writing the different genres of compositions.

Another approach used by teachers is the "outline approach" in which students are taught to structure their writing experiences in cookbook fashion. After getting a topic for the composition, students expand it into a number of main ideas or topic sentences and then elaborate on these ideas using paragraphs and finally constructing an introduction and a conclusion for the composition.

In addition, many teachers also attempt intensive correction of compositions and insist on students' correction of every faulty sentence, conduct remedial lessons to rectify the apparently common errors and even give students more frequent written assignments.

All these well-intentioned pedagogic efforts have, unfortunately, met with little or no visible improvement in students' composition. Instead, there is a tendency for both student and teacher to go through the motions - students writing their composition because it is a compulsory activity for them and teachers correcting these compositions because that is an institutional requirement.

1.3 The Purpose and Scope of Study

As noted, the inability of most Chinese students in the school to write an effective composition, even with much assistance and advice from teachers has caused deep concern and frustration among both teachers and students. This exploratory study is undertaken to investigate their writing problems. The study is aimed at identifying their problems in three specific areas, namely their content-based problems, their process-based and their language-based problems.

The study employs a questionnaire survey to elicit the requisite data from both teachers and students. For in-depth study and to further verify responses from the questionnaire, a structured interview is conducted, and to substantiate the responses from the questionnaire and interview, an analysis of students' composition scripts is also

undertaken. The population sample consists of 50 Form Four students and 10 teachers of English.

1.4 Research Questions

The study aims to find answers to the following questions

- 1) What are the students' content-based problems in composition writing?
- 2) What are the students' process-based problems in composition writing?
- 3) What are the students' language-based problems in composition writing?

1.5 Definition of Terms

The following are the general terms used in this study. They need to be defined because they are used in their specialized senses for the purpose of this study.

- 1) Content-based problems are defined as those which involve organization of ideas and topics for writing
- 2) Process-based problems are defined as those, which involve the different stages and strategies, employed by students in writing their compositions.
- 3) Language-based problems are defined as those which involve grammatical items, spelling, mechanics of writing, vocabulary and sentence structure and paragraphing.

1.6 Significance of the Study

To the best of the researcher's knowledge, there is as yet, no published study or documentation of a study of the problems of composition writing in Chinese Independent

High Schools in Malaysia, although interest in this area is growing. A couple of research studies carried out in the past on Chinese Independent Schools students centered mainly on analysis of their oral English. (Lim 1987, Wong 1992) Lim's research study "ESL And The Chinese Speaking Students" was aimed at identifying the problems of these Chinese speaking students' in their mastery of the oral aspect of the English Language. Wong conducted a study on the problems faced by Mandarin-speaking Chinese students in learning English in general. Thus, the composing skills and the problems these independent Chinese schools have in writing composition remain unanswered. The present study would be able to shed some light on the composing processes of these students.

At Chong Hwa Independent High School, the study is significant in that for the first time a systematic study is done to identify the problems of teaching and learning of composition writing in the school. The findings of the study may also have some implications on the teachers' instructional approaches, responses and attitudes towards students' composition writing.

On a practical level, the study may have some relevance in the designing of writing curricular for the school in specific and in general, to other Chinese Independent schools in the country. Teachers of English in Chinese Independent School would then be in a better position to devise strategies that may facilitate writing after coming to grips with the difficulties faced by the students. In addition, the findings of this study may also have some implications on teachers' response to students' writing. It is not an exaggeration to state that at present in this school, teachers are more concerned with students' errors in their written products.

Confronted by a seemingly endless display of errors, it is not surprising if teachers become “error-hunting machine” and entirely oblivious to what their students are trying to communicate. This study would help to shed light on this issue. As remarked by Lee (1989) mere speculating on the nature of problems in students writing may not prove as illuminating as from systematic and formal study of the problems.

The findings of the study may also have important ramifications for ESL writing pedagogy. Much of the present writing pedagogy is governed by the assumption that writing difficulties in English are due to the students' lack of proficiency in the language rather than on the appropriate instruction and the complexity of the task of writing itself (Lee, 1989).

In addition, a knowledge about composing process and writing difficulties among Chinese students would be invaluable where designing ESL writing materials is concerned

1.7 Limitation of the Study

One limitation of this study is the small sample size. Only one school of fifty students and 10 teachers were involved in this study. As such, the findings drawn are tentative and cannot be generalized beyond the scope of this study, as the subjects might not be truly representative of all the Chinese Independent Schools in the country. However, it is not the intention of this study to make a generalization. This study is an exploratory case study on the composing skills among Chinese learners in a school. It is hoped that

this study will lead to questions related to composing skills among the Chinese learners from other schools for further research.

It should also be pointed out that since the sample involved only students with problems in writing composition, the conclusion may have limited applicability in terms of other aspects of language learning. It would be interesting to investigate other language problems faced by this group of students.

The study faced time constraint and other constraints and thus certain aspects in the research methodology had not been conducted adequately. The case in point was the inability of the researcher to conduct a pilot test for the questionnaire. Ideally, a pilot test should be conducted to obtain feedback concerning any vague, ambiguous or context-bound statements to which an accurate response would be either difficult or impossible. However, the questionnaire was developed from a review of the related literature as well as from personal experience and intuition.