

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.0 Background to the Study

“Instructions on how to write a composition must be presented in writing” (Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia, 1991:4).

Nevertheless, research has revealed that learners have only a vague sense of what is expected of them in writing (Spencer, 1979). This is because:

It seems that ESL writing teachers view themselves primarily as language teachers, that they attend to surface - level features of writing ... they are so distracted by language - related problems that they often correct these without realizing that there is much larger, meaning related problem that they have failed to address (Zamel, 1983:170).

According to Britton et al., (1975:27) students are asked to write effectively but very little help is given on how to arrive at a “formally structured and coherent product.” At this point it is necessary to mention that in the last decade or two, there has been a major shift of focus in the theory and practice of writing instruction, a shift from a focus on the written product and form of writing toward an emphasis on the process of writing (McCartney, 1994).

In the context of the Malaysian Education System, the teaching of writing as a second language is greatly emphasized in the English Language Programme. The syllabus clearly states that:

Writing requires students to write clearly and relevantly, and to organize materials logically. Students will be introduced to the techniques of writing so that they are able to write coherently and cohesively in a manner suitable to the audience and the purpose intended (Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia, 1991: 12-13).

Thus, in order to produce good written products, ESL learners must be familiar with the rhetorical structures and conventions of the English Language and the need to apply these structures appropriately (Hughey et al., 1983). Therefore, the crucial part of writing instruction is to equip learners with the knowledge and understanding of the rhetorical conventions of the target language.

Research by Schumacher et al., (1984) reinforces the view that rhetorical knowledge of written discourse produces quality writing. Furthermore, Bereiter (1980) and others who view writing as a process also acknowledge that deliberate planning and organization might endow the writer with a sense of purpose, which he or she might otherwise lack. Flower (1980) agrees that organizational skills are requisites to effective writing and a knowledge of these skills is necessary if a reader is to transform his writer-based prose into a reader-based prose.

The organizational patterns or rhetorical conventions in a text are referred to as the structure of the text or the logical relationships among the ideas in a text. Hence, guidelines providing knowledge of text structure is essential to good or effective writing. According to Barnett (1989), there are two advantages of having knowledge of text structure. First, the ability to access such knowledge helps define readers' expectations of the order of textual information as well as its inter-relationship. Second, the organization of ideas in a text facilitates the organization of ideas in memory.

Previous research points out that text structure instruction can improve native English speakers' reading and writing ability in an integrated and in separate contexts. On the other hand, researchers, like Raphael, Englert and Kirschner (1989), provide useful data on the facilitative effects of text structure instruction on only the expository performance of native English speakers. In recent investigations involving ESL learners, instruction focusing on text structure has been found to improve expository reading comprehension (Barnett, 1984; Carrell, 1985; Heng, 1992) and writing (Chelliah, 1993) in separate contexts, Fatimah Dinna's (1997) study involving tertiary level of ESL learners found that knowledge of text structure improves both reading and writing abilities. Thus, a study on text structure instruction is essential and necessary to examine the effects it would have on ESL learners while composing expository prose. This study seeks to provide evidence on whether teaching text structure might differentially enhance the writing ability of good and poor ESL learners.

1.1 Rationale of the Study

There are many difficulties faced by the ESL learners in composing expository prose. These difficulties often arise from an inadequate understanding of how texts are organized. Previous research has shown that ESL learners often produce incoherent texts because they have employed a rhetoric which violates the expectations of the readers (Kaplan, 1972; Onaka, 1984; Raimes, 1985). With the above in mind, the present study seeks to examine the effects of text structure instruction namely the comparison/contrast structure with the use of a graphic organizer and transitional expressions, as a pedagogical tool to help ESL learners overcome some of their writing difficulties.

In fact, there are two major reasons for this study. First, there is a need to have more knowledge on the role of text structure instruction in composing expository prose. Second, it is most important to examine the effects of text structure instruction on the upper secondary students in schools, focusing on making a comparison between good and poor ability learners.

According to Carrell (1987), there is a positive effect on writing when learners are taught top-level rhetorical structures of texts and the signals of a text's organizational plan through linguistic devices. Carrell and Eisterhold (1987) have also reported improved writing by learners who are taught to identify and use top-level

structure and types along with appropriate signalling words. However, Chelliah (1993) has shown positive effects of using model texts with text structure cueing on guided writing that has the comparison/contrast structure. In addition, Witherells's (1993) finding suggested that the direct instruction of expository text structure through the use of graphic organizers, is an effective method to improve the expository writing ability of second grade students.

It is hoped that this study will provide a better understanding on whether teaching text structure might differentially enhance the writing of expository prose by ESL learners.

1.2 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to examine whether explicitly teaching students about the organization of expository prose can improve their compositions or writings. In particular, this study aims to identify whether teaching students to recognize and use comparison/contrast of the organizational structure can enhance writing ability.

The ability to write expository prose has been chosen as the focus of this study because in general, children experience greater difficulty when comprehending and writing expository material. Also, it is necessary to point out that students come across expository material especially in textbooks more frequently than narrative material (Spiro & Taylor, in press; Taylor & Berkowitz, 1980). Generally speaking, children

experience greater difficulty in following a text - specific hierarchical organization of ideas in expository material than a sequence of events following a conventional story structure in narrative material. This difficulty with organization may in turn contribute to children's relative difficulty in writing material.

Another reason for focusing on the effects of teaching text structure or the organizational pattern of expository text is primarily because readers and writers cannot remember or organize everything in a coherent text and therefore must make an effort to form a macrostructure or gist, of the important ideas in the text to remember text content (van Dijk, 1977; Kintsch & van Dijk, 1978). Thus, the reader must be sensitive to the text-specific hierarchical organization of a text in order to apply macrorules to form a macrostructure. In other words, the general outline of ideas in a particular expository text or the text structure, is used by a reader and in the case of this study, a writer, to form a macrostructure for the text that retains the main ideas of the text in the correct sequence (Taylor, 1982). However, this does not apply to the narrative text. In narrative texts, the effects of teaching text organization could be confounded by such other variables as the readers' familiarity with the stereotypical characters and knowledge of the structure of human actions in stories (Davis, Lange and Samuels, 1983).

In this study, the effects of text structure instruction on writing performance will be examined in free writing. The comparison/contrast structure will be examined in terms of pre-test, post-test and delayed post-test of the good and poor ability writers in

composing expository prose. The number of transitional expressions used will also be recorded in every test. The writing will be examined in terms of pre-test, post-test and delayed post-test on a) the five elements of ESL Composition Profile b) the types of transitional expressions used c) the overall writing performance and d) the residual effect between the pre-test and the delayed post-test.

1.3 Research Questions

This study addresses the following research questions:

- 1) Does a graphic organizer help students in composing their essays writing?
- 2) Does transitional expressions help students in improving their essays writing?
- 3) Is there any residual effect of the teaching of the graphic organizer and transitional expressions on students?

1.4 Significance of the Study

A study on the effects of text structure instruction has several implications for the teaching of writing in our language classrooms. Teachers of ESL learners need to be aware of the important role of text structure instruction in composing expository prose in order to ensure effective writing. With that in mind, it is important that ESL language teachers who attempt to develop the writing skills of their students need to be cognizant of the text organization and should teach students to recognize and use text structure in composing expository prose. This study provides empirical evidence that

instruction in text structure and signalling devices all function to make ESL writing more effective.

Knowledge of the structure of prose can be a valuable tool in organizing any composition writing when a person is attempting to write his thoughts and arrange them in a piece of coherent text. Thus, if ESL learners understand the principles involved in the organizational structure of prose, they may gain insights as to how transitional expressions are linked to form a coherent prose. Future studies may compare other types of expository text organizations.

The findings from this study will be beneficial in the ESL context especially at the upper secondary school level, where attention and emphasis, have not been adequately focused on text structure instruction of free expository writing.

1.5 Definition of Terms

For the purpose of the study, the following terms are used.

1.5.1 Expository Prose

This is used to refer to written prose that explain or clarify a particular topic. The expository prose in this study consists of the comparison/contrast structure.

1.5.2 Text Structure

The term “text structure” refers to the organization of ideas (Taylor, 1982; Arbuster, Anderson & Ostertag, 1987) and the logical connections among ideas in terms of subordination and coordination of the information in the text (Meyer et al., 1980; Meyer, 1984). McGee and Richgels (1985) refer to the term as “the scheme by which the content is organized.” The text structure provides organizational patterns that help writers identify and tie together the most related propositions by using signalling devices such as “however”, “on the other hand” and “but” for comparison/contrast structure.

1.5.3 Comparison/Contrast Structure

The comparison/contrast structure refers to the text organization where the elements or information in the texts are organized on the basis of opposing view points. The structure discusses oppositions, similarities, differences, advantages and disadvantages between two or more items, objects or people.

For the purpose of this study, a graphic representation of the structure or patterns of expository prose called “graphic organizer” (McGee & Richgels, 1985; Richgels et al., 1987) is used. The graphic organizer helps learners to visualize the organizational patterns with the help of transitional expressions. Signal words like “both”, “in addition” and “although” are used as transitional expressions.

1.5.4 Free/Continuous Writing

Free/continuous writing refers to writing freely within the context of a given topic.