

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.0 Background of the study

The English language was brought through the processes of colonization and missionary works to Malaysian shores, where English schools were started (Asmah, 1994). Prior to Malaysia's independence from the British administration, however, there emerged an urgent need to form a national identity for purposes of nation integration and unity. The Razak Report (1956) built the foundation for the nation's education policy and emphasized the need for Bahasa Melayu to be a common medium of instruction across schools, amidst a society of diversified cultures and languages (Asiah, 1994). After independence, the implementation of this report was reviewed in the Rahman Talib Report (1960). Both these reports formed the basis of the Education Act 1961 which stressed Bahasa Melayu, the national language, as the main medium of instruction in schools. Beginning from the late 1960's, the medium of instruction in schools was slowly converted from English to Bahasa Melayu. By 1983, the medium of instruction in all levels of education from the primary to the tertiary levels had been changed to the national language (Asiah, 1994).

However, a number of years later the importance of English gained attention again as the level of English among graduates declined, and they could not manage the language as efficiently as their forerunners who were educated in English prior to the country's independence (Asmah, 1994). Steps were taken to re-establish it as the second most important language in the country, after Bahasa Melayu, through measures such as introducing more courses in the teaching of the English language and prioritizing the training of English language teachers. In 2003, the teaching of Mathematics and Science

in English was introduced at the primary and secondary levels and by 2008 schools at every level had implemented their teaching of the two subjects in English. However, recently the Ministry of Education in its circular published on 5 January 2010, decided to revert the teaching of Mathematics and Science to Bahasa Melayu (Alimuddin, 2010). This is to be implemented in stages at the primary and secondary levels but not at the tertiary level as English is still recognized as an important language.

It can be seen that through the years English has been important in the background of the nation's education system, even though Bahasa Melayu is the national language. Even so, some view the reversion as disheartening news and many Malaysians are concerned for fear that the level of English proficiency in our country will further decline (Hamdan, 2009). Their concerns are warranted as English is used in tertiary institutions both locally and abroad, and thereafter at the workplace. Graduates who have a solid foundation in English communication will be able to go far in their careers and be on par with other foreign colleagues.

English has been viewed as the lingua franca of business and there is increased academic awareness of the use of English for professional purposes. English is also the language of academia as research journals usually publish in this language. A recent study about the use of English in professional business in Hong Kong revealed the importance of this language as rank and experience increases (Evans, 2009). Questionnaires given out to more than 2000 business professionals in Hong Kong found that written English was most important in their professional lives. With a globalizing economy prevalent in our society, an upsurge in the importance of English is irrefutable. Even as far back as 16 years ago, Asmah (1994) had aptly described the "universality of English" (p.66) by which she meant that "... English is no longer identified with a single race or country. It is not only the language of international diplomacy and commerce, it is also a language of various cultures and subcultures..."(p.66).

The emergence of English as the language for education, research and business necessitates the ability to write well in English. Coupled with the rapid advancement in information technology, effective communication locally and globally is attained through good written English. Learning to write in English, which is the second language (L2) of Malaysian students, starts in school and as students advance in their school years, they learn different genres and rhetorical styles of writing. Writing continues in college and university, where students should already be proficient in the language, in preparation for the working world.

Writing is essential in enhancing the overall English learning experience as it helps learners to practise language structures learnt through reading and listening (Reichelt, 2005). According to Hayes and Flower (1980, as cited in Kellogg, 2001, p.176), the writing process involves planning, translating and reviewing. In the planning process, ideas are generated and organized. Results from the planning process are then translated into the written text (Kellogg, *ibid*). It is not sufficient to just be able to write in English; one has to be able to write in a fluent and accurate manner. To do so, planning plays an important role prior to the writing task and therefore it is significant in the process of producing a well-written text.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Since the main medium of instruction in schools was changed to Bahasa Melayu by the 1980's, the washback effect (Murugesan, 2003) saw the English language being sidelined. In recent years, there has been a decline in Malaysian students' proficiency in English and they are thought to have insufficient exposure to the language in school (Choy & Troudi, 2006). Choy and Troudi (2006) also suggested that a poor foundation in the language could lead to a disinterest in learning English. Moreover, differences in

the syntax and morphology between Bahasa Melayu and English have been said to be one of the reasons Malaysian students are weak in English (Jalaluddin, Awal, & Abu Bakar, 2008).

According to a report compiled by the Ministry of Education in 2002, many Malaysian students cannot write well in English (as cited in Samuel & Zaitun, 2007, p.1) despite the fact that they score many A's in public school examinations. A student who gains knowledge through many subjects but is unable to communicate efficiently in an important language diminishes the value of the acquired knowledge. Furthermore, a study conducted on some 25 undergraduates found that they faced difficulties in using correct personal pronouns in English (Setia, Ghazali, Mustapha, Jusoff & Abdullah, 2009). Undergraduates who have difficulties in grammar are handicapped when they want to communicate effectively in the workplace when they graduate, especially in the private sector. A leading Asia-Pacific online recruitment company stated that fresh graduates are not employed primarily because of their weak grasp of English (Samuel & Zaitun, 2007). Clearly, these students are not measuring up to the language requirements of the professional working world, where good written communication is required. All these reports highlight the poor command of English among learners and further accentuate the need to arrest the current situation.

One of the aspects of communicative competence is the ability to write well. There is a need to address this lack of ability to write well in schools and one crucial aspect of being able to write well is to plan well. A good writer focuses not just on the organization and overall meaning of a written text but also engages himself in planning the writing activity, and this entails giving careful thought to the purpose of the text (Hedge, 2002, p.305). Mental representations are drawn up during the planning process so that one thinks about what one knows and wants to say (Flower, 1998, p.72).

1.2 Objectives of the Study

As highlighted above, the level of English competency in schools has declined and learners are not able to write well in the language. Writing well is an essential tool in the workplace and one important task prior to writing is the planning process. The current study aims to understand how planning contributes to the quality of the narrative writing of undergraduates by investigating the impact of planning on the narrative writing of these undergraduates, evaluating the effects of planning on their written performance and how they perceive their written performance in relation to planning.

1.3 Research Questions

The study attempts to investigate written performance in terms of fluency, complexity and accuracy. It seeks to identify the effects of planning on the fluency, complexity and accuracy of written narratives under different task conditions, and hence to increase the understanding of how students perform their writing process. The study will analyze the written narratives of students to address the following questions:

1. How do students perform in narrative writing in terms of fluency, complexity and accuracy of language under different planning conditions?
2. How do students perceive their performance in narrative writing under different planning conditions?

These research questions will be further elaborated in Chapter Three.

1.4 Theoretical Framework

The current study is based on Kellogg's model of working memory in writing (1996, as cited in Ellis & Yuan, 2004, Hayes, 2006 and Galbraith, 2009). Kellogg's model proposed three main systems that guide the process of text production. Under each of the systems are two processes that further explain the model. Kellogg relates each of these processes to parts of the working memory.

As seen in Figure 1.1 below, formulation involves planning and translating. Planning is where the author thinks about the goals of the writing and generates ideas for it. The ideas are organized during this stage. Translating is where the ideas are encoded into linguistic units in preparation for the next stage of the process. The execution system is made up of programming and executing processes. Under programming, what was produced from the translation stage is converted into structures ready for written output form, either in handwriting or in typing. Executing then is the actual performance of writing or typing. Executing then is the actual performance of writing or typing.

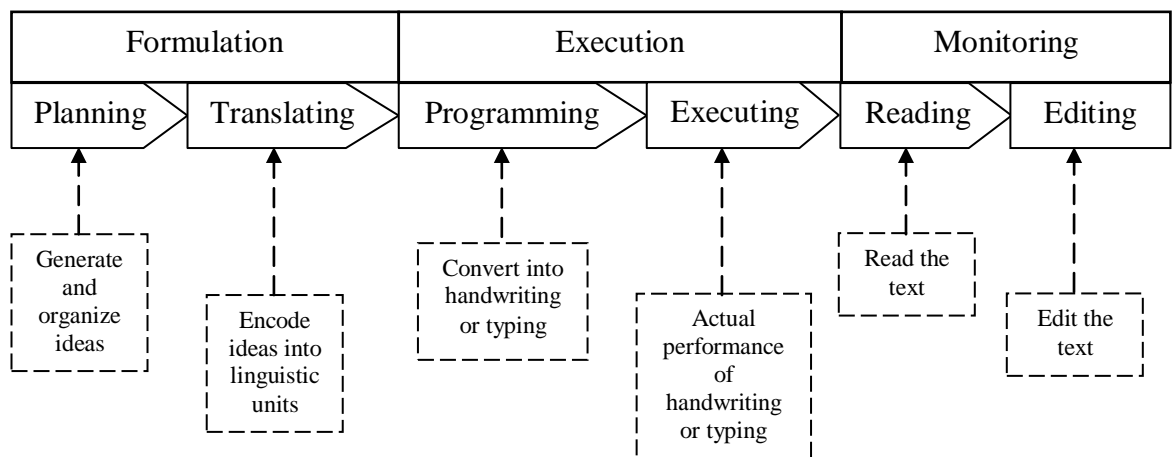


Figure 1.1 Basic systems and processes involved in Kellogg's model (adapted from Ellis & Yuan, 2004)

After this, the writer takes time to monitor his written text, which comes under the final system, monitoring. This is where the writer reads and edits his text. The editing task encompasses detailed as well as general editing of the text. Correcting grammatical errors, restructuring sentences and organizing the paragraphs are examples of the editing phase.

These processes require the central executive, visuospatial sketchpad and the phonological loop of the working memory (Table 1.1). The central executive, which supervises the entire system, is supported by the visuospatial sketchpad and the phonological loop. The visuospatial sketchpad is responsible for the manipulation and storage of visual and spatial information, whilst the phonological loop maintains verbal information in active memory (Galbraith, 2009).

The visuospatial sketchpad is needed in planning and editing. The central executive is involved in all of the processes with the exception of executing and editing. Lastly, the phonological loop is required in translating and reading. It can be seen from Kellogg's model that the central executive takes on an important role during the writing task. If there is a time pressure, the writer needs to make a decision on which sub-process to emphasize.

Table 1.1 Kellogg's model of working memory in writing (adapted from Galbraith, 2009)

Basic systems	Writing processes	Working memory components		
		Visuospatial sketchpad	Central executive	Phonological loop
Formulation	Planning	X	X	
	Translating		X	X
Execution	Programming		X	
	Executing			
Monitoring	Reading		X	X
	Editing	X		

1.5 Definition of Terms

The following terms will be used in this study:

- Fluency - the ability to access and use language knowledge promptly in an efficient manner and with a focus on meanings. Higher fluency results in more words and structures produced (Wolfe-Quinteron, Inagaki & Kim, 1998; Skehan & Foster, 1999).
- Complexity - the capacity to expand the scope of language, use different and more highly structured language readily (Skehan & Foster, 1999).
- Accuracy - the capability to avoid language errors where the learners apply a cautious approach to language use, using language that is already familiar to them (Skehan & Foster, 1999; Ellis & Barkhuizen, 2005).
- Working Memory - short-term memory which temporarily stores mental structures and maintains them as they are used in processing tasks (Kellogg, Olive & Piolat, 2007).

1.6 Scope and Limitations

The participants are 30 non-science undergraduates of average proficiency (MUET Band 4) mostly from the arts background in secondary school. Thus, results from this study cannot be generalized to students of different proficiencies and educational backgrounds because the sample is not representative of the whole population of Malaysian undergraduates.

The written texts of the participants are analyzed in terms of fluency, complexity and accuracy, using measures adapted from the framework of Ellis and Yuan (2004) which will be discussed in the methodology chapter. There are other different ways to measure the fluency, complexity and accuracy of the written texts (Ransdell,1995; Storch,1999; Ellis & Barkhuizen, 2005) which might yield slight variations in the analysis. This study pertains only to narrative texts and the results are not indicative of other types of writing such as persuasive, descriptive or argumentative writing. Moreover, the written texts are not assessed holistically to evaluate the overall quality and content produced.

1.7 Significance of Study

A study into the effects of different types of planning on the fluency, complexity and accuracy of the written text of ESL students will help to give an insight into how students perform their writing tasks. By analyzing the effects of different types of planning on students' written text, it is hoped that the study can contribute towards effective teaching and learning of English writing in tertiary institutions which can in turn train students for the workplace. Insights gained from this study may also help future researchers manipulate the planning conditions to assess ESL writers.

1.8 Organization of Dissertation

The current study is presented in five chapters. The first chapter gives the introduction to the study. Chapter Two presents a review of related literature pertaining to theories of writing, previous research conducted on planning and writing together with their effects on fluency, complexity and accuracy. Chapter Three outlines the methodology, which includes a description about participant criteria, instruments used

and the procedure of the study. The research findings are presented in detail in Chapter Four, where data obtained from participants' written text are analyzed. Data from questionnaires and interviews are used to support the data analysis. The final chapter gives an interpretation of the results by answering the research questions posed. Suggestions for further research are also discussed.

1.9 Conclusion

The introduction has given a brief background to the current study. Definition of terms and research questions are presented together with the scope of the study. The following chapter presents a review of related literature.