

CHAPTER ONE : INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background to the Study

English is a language of international communication and is referred to as the *lingua franca* of the world. The need to use English for scientific, technical and commercial purposes is no longer an option. In Malaysia, too, English is an important medium of communication and has been accorded second language status. The development of international trade and communication, science and technology and information technology have all contributed towards sustaining English as a second language in Malaysia.

The development of English in the Malaysian education domain is vital. In the 70s, English medium schools were phased out and Malay became the medium of instruction in all national schools (Samuel 2005). Although English-medium schools were no longer available, the teaching of English was emphasized and made a compulsory subject in all schools. The aim of teaching English in Malaysian schools is to enable the learners to speak, read and write fluently, and to uplift the English proficiency level among students. However, according to Samuel (2005:37), twenty years after the implementation of Malay as a medium of instruction, the English language proficiency among school leavers and graduates can only be described as low. This is further supported by Nazeera (2007) who contends that there has been a decline in the standard of English and this has been a cause of concern. In the sixties, Malaysians were regarded as a society of

very good speakers of the English language, but today the status has deteriorated to a great extent. The low proficiency level could perhaps be the outcome of the changes made in the education system in the 70's.

The command of English has deteriorated to such an extent that many graduates are unable to get jobs due to their limited English language skills (The Star, 12th January 2002). One of the criteria for job selection appears to be proficiency in the English language as evidenced by it often being stated as a condition for employment in job advertisement columns daily in the English newspapers, thus the inability to communicate in the language, including the lack of proficiency in writing, appears to affect the employability of graduates. Inadequacy in the writing skill is probably because of several reasons: the complex nature of the writing process, students' attitude towards it, and the limited time and support it receives in the school curriculum.

Although all the four skills - listening, speaking, reading and writing - in the teaching of English in schools are emphasized, students find writing particularly challenging. The findings of a study conducted by Chan (2003) of ESL undergraduates enrolled in a writing course at Universiti Putra Malaysia confirm that students view writing as the most tedious skill. Her study revealed that the ESL writers were least secure in writing compared to the other language skills and writing was a skill that they liked least. This could be due to a lack of basic linguistic competence and adequate vocabulary. Similarly, a study conducted by Vimala (2005:54) on students pursuing a diploma level media course at Universiti Teknologi Malaysia showed that the college students lacked

practice in writing. They lacked ideas and depended on the teacher to contribute ideas and guide them as they lacked confidence in writing. Apart from that, the students worried about grammatical mistakes, thereby hindering their writing ability.

It is no surprise that Malaysian ESL learners find writing formidable. Byrne (1988:4) states that “writing is essentially a solitary activity and the fact that we are required to write on our own without the possibility of interactions or the benefit of feedback in itself makes the act of writing difficult”. Tessema (2005:202) explains that “one reason that writing is so difficult relates to the fact that in addition to knowing the appropriate grammar and vocabulary, a writer’s ideas must be presented clearly and in an organized fashion”. This is one of the reasons learners view writing as a painstaking task since they have to generate, develop and organize ideas and produce perfect sentences with the correct grammar and appropriate vocabulary.

Given that writing is a difficult task, it must be noted that the problems faced by ESL learners tend to differ from that of L1 writers. An ESL learner may be held back in writing because of his limited language proficiency. This may not be the case among learners whose first language or L1 is English as they may not have problems in language proficiency though they may lack ideas pertaining to the writing task. Zamel (1988), a prolific researcher of writing, highlights possible reasons for the problems faced by L1 students during the process of writing. She believes that these problems occur due to insufficient reasons for further exploration of ideas, lack of training in forming conceptual frameworks, lack of knowledge about the audience, and lack of feedback and

remedial help from the teacher. It must be noted that language proficiency has not been highlighted as a factor. ESL learners tend to face problems in writing due to their limited language proficiency, and therefore are often unable to express themselves fluently. Hence, to them, writing becomes an even more arduous task. The writing ability is closely linked to fluency in and familiarity with the conventions of expository discourse. L2 learners are in the process of acquiring these conventions, and thus need more instruction about the language itself. As a result, limited knowledge of vocabulary, language structure and content can inhibit an L2 writer's performance.

Giridharan & Enriques (2004) suggested that the low level of English among ESL learners can be attributed to the general lack of readership among students which further heightens their lack of proficiency, especially in writing. The reading writing-connection is indeed powerful. To become competent writers, students need guidance, practice and extensive exposure to appropriate examples of reading texts in English. Reading develops a person's knowledge. Reading texts provide good models for English writing. Prior knowledge of content and text structure for writing purposes can be obtained through reading. Christina (2003:165), too, acknowledges that simple knowledge is highly lacking because of poor command of the English language and non-reading habits among students. Pandian's (2000:6) study on the reading habits of secondary and tertiary level students in Malaysia reveals that 80.1% of university students are reluctant readers of English language materials. Similarly, a study conducted by Kalaimathi (2005) reveals that students' knowledge of different topics of discussion is limited as they seldom read and explore various sources of materials. As such, their content knowledge

is limited. Grabe & Kaplan (1996:143) too agrees that “limited knowledge of vocabulary, language structure and content constrains a writers’ performance”. This explains largely the lack of language proficiency among students and graduates. Learners’ weakness in the second language could be due to their lack of exposure to written materials at the early stage of L2 development. Therefore, L2 learners must be exposed to a large supply of reading materials in order to be able to grasp vocabulary and linguistic skills.

The L2 learners’ limited exposure to the language deprives them from acquiring the linguistic competence and this, in turn, affects their writing skills. On the other hand, LI learners of English are competent in rules which are applied during linguistic activities such as reading, enabling the speaker to anticipate information that is being relayed. Therefore, it is important to emphasize and encourage L2 students to read widely; at the same time, the teaching of writing skills for L2 learners needs to be reviewed in order to help these students produce writings of high quality. In line with this, the Ministry of Education has made significant changes to the English language teaching syllabus to prioritize the development of English language proficiency among students.

1.2 Changes in the education system

With the objective of arresting the declining standard of English among students in schools, the Ministry of Education has implemented many changes to its policies. In 1999, the Ministry introduced the Malaysian University English Test (MUET). The aim of this test is to “consolidate and enhance the English Language ability of pre-university students to enable them to perform effectively in their academic pursuits at tertiary level” (MUET syllabus, 1999:13). The syllabus seeks to bridge the gap in the language needs between secondary and tertiary education by enhancing communicative competence. The MUET syllabus is designed to provide the context for language use that is related to tertiary academic experience and to develop critical thinking through the competent use of language skills.

Changes were also made in the English language teaching syllabus from Form 1 to Form 5 with the implementation of the ‘smart-school’ concept in 2002. The syllabus was revised by adding a new component - language use for interpersonal, informational and aesthetic purposes. Language for interpersonal purposes is to enable collaboration among peers by responding to different texts and expressing ideas creatively in the spoken and written form. Language for informational purposes enables learners to use language in the process of receiving and giving information, and language for aesthetic purposes enables learners to express ideas, thoughts, beliefs and feelings creatively and imaginatively. Thus, social skills during interaction among members enable students to communicate and socialize among peers, and this will enable students to sharpen their listening and speaking skills.

In 2003, the Ministry of Education implemented a policy involving a shift in the medium of Mathematics and Science instruction from Malay and vernaculars (Mandarin and Tamil) to English. English was made the medium of instruction for both Mathematics and Science involving students in Year 1 in the primary school and Form 1 and Lower 6 in the secondary schools. This is in line with the government's initiative to promote Malaysia as an industrialized nation by developing science and technology . The two subjects are taught in English to enable students to access global knowledge via the internet. These changes were carried out in the belief that the exposure to the English Language will be an added advantage and thus increase the students' proficiency level. However, the decision to continue teaching Science and Mathematics is currently under review. The Ministry is also planning to increase the teaching hours of English in primary and secondary schools. Perhaps, the extra hours will enable teachers to have sufficient time for teaching the writing skill. This will eventually allow students to enhance their writing skill.

It was highlighted earlier that proficiency in English opens the door to greater opportunities for further education, especially at tertiary level, and allows one to gain access to the vast amount of information in most fields of learning, particularly in Science and Technology. This is in line with the earlier suggestion to teach Mathematics and Science in English as the rationale for doing so is to expose students to a wider scope of English usage which is essential in improving one's proficiency level. The use of Information Technology in the educational system has also impacted the English language as students gain access to the use of the internet which is made possible with the

concept of 'smart schools'. In the teaching and learning of English in schools and at tertiary level, students are exposed to the electronic media to gain information. The vast exposure to the English language is an opportunity for students to improve their language skills.

The changes made in the education system are a stepping stone towards improving the English language proficiency among students in schools. However, despite implementing all these changes, the proficiency level among students is still worrying. This is particularly obvious in the case of writing proficiency among tertiary level students as this is evident in the recent (2007) MUET results (this will be discussed later in Section 1.3). One of the reasons for the poor performance of students in the writing component could probably be the students' lack of proficiency in the language. Another reason could be that the teaching of writing needs to be reviewed to cater for students of varying levels of proficiency. With the advancement in science and technology, students are able to access information from various sources. Therefore, the teaching method should be tuned to cater for learning which will inculcate the interpersonal, informational and aesthetic purposes in line with the smart school concept. As such, teachers should employ methods which suit the needs of the learners and at the same time enable them to improve their level of proficiency.

1.3 The Teaching of Writing in Secondary Schools

In Malaysian schools, the writing task is normally given at the end of a chapter or topic, thus writing is often regarded as an end product. This is done in the belief that students would have acquired sufficient knowledge and vocabulary pertaining to the theme of the topic as the teacher would have covered the listening, speaking and reading aspects pertaining to it. Therefore, writing is given as an end task as students would be able to recall facts related to the theme studied and have gained enough content for writing essays which have a similar theme. Despite having the content for the writing task which students may have obtained from the tasks covered, students seem unable to refine their writing.

In teaching writing, teachers still adopt the product approach. They tend to serve a text-oriented purpose rather than a communicative one (Mesana 2004). In the product approach, the students' final piece of work is highlighted. The written essays are judged on the basis of the final product which encompasses content as well as grammatical and linguistic accuracy. Students need to have adequate content and appropriate language to write an essay. In the process of writing, the whole process as to how to generate ideas for writing is often neglected, thus students find it difficult to gain content for their essays. Consequently, the students have to struggle with both the generation of ideas and text organization (Chen 2002).

The current set up in the schools does not encourage social interaction. The classroom learning environment is compounded by the traditional structure and culture whereby the

seating of students and the teacher-dominated lessons hinder interaction among students as well as between the teacher and students. Montero (2005) contends that writing is viewed as an isolated activity, and isolation restricts students from fostering interaction as students work individually with their writing pieces. Furthermore, discussion skills are undeveloped due to large class size, students' level of proficiency and time constraints (Green 1997). In addition to that, in the teaching and learning of writing, the skills and strategies are relatively neglected (Byrne 1988:23). The process involved in producing the written product is given little importance and the errors made in the written pieces and the need to do correction is given less emphasis.

As mentioned in Section 1.1, Malaysian students' poor proficiency in English is most evident where the writing skill is concerned. This can be seen in the results for the MUET 2007 (see Table 1.1).

Table 1.1
Analysis of MUET examination scores for the year 2007

Band	1 %	2 %	3 %	4 %	5 %	6 %
Listening	2.16	11.47	25.77	26.83	20.70	13.07
Speaking	33.98	27.31	22.71	12.40	2.98	0.61
Reading	16.54	35.28	22.05	16.52	7.88	1.72
Writing	60.99	23.83	11.20	3.17	0.78	0.03
Total	23.90	34.63	24.06	13.24	3.88	0.29

Malaysian Examination Syndicate – MUET Mid-Year Exam 2007 (Government School Candidates)

As can be seen in Table 1.1, among the four skills, the listening component has the most number of students (13.07%) who scored the highest band (Band 6). This is followed by

reading (1.72%), speaking (0.61%) and lastly writing (0.03%). The writing test scores have not been encouraging either, as a high percentage of candidates fell into the lower bands, namely Bands 1 (60.99%), 2 (23.83%) and 3 (11.20%). A small percentage of candidates managed to make it to Bands 4 (3.17%), 5 (0.78%) and 6 (0.03%) in the writing component. This points to the fact that the majority of the MUET candidates are still not competent users of the English language, especially where the writing component is concerned, for those who scored Band 6 comprised the smallest percentage (0.03%), while the highest was for Band 1 (60.99%). (Appendix 1 contains a detailed analysis of the MUET examination scores.)

This is a clear indication that the writing component is the most difficult task and steps should be taken to rectify the problem. One of the reasons could be that students lack ideas for content and are unable to relate to the essay topic due to limited vocabulary and poor command of English. The essays in MUET are marked and graded according to content and language. Therefore, it is important to emphasize and encourage students to read widely; at the same time, the teaching of writing skills needs to be reviewed in order to help students produce essays of higher quality.

The teaching of writing can be improved. The learning environment should give opportunities for students to be actively engaged in the learning process. When students interact with each other, they begin to utilize the knowledge they possess and exchange ideas which eventually lead to deeper understanding. Therefore, as Bruffee (1993) strongly suggests, the traditional method of teacher dominating the classroom should be

changed and collaborative learning in the teaching of writing should be given emphasis. Encouraging students to work collaboratively will ease the teaching and learning process as the teacher's focus will be on groups of students rather than individuals. By incorporating collaborative learning in a writing class, students will be able to enhance their interaction and improve their writing skills by merging the ideas and opinions gained in the process of discussing during collaborative learning.

1.4 Collaborative Learning in the Teaching of Writing

Collaborative learning is a learning method that uses social interaction as a means of knowledge building. Students work in groups of two or more to achieve a common goal by working jointly on the same problem rather than on different components of the problem. (This is not to be confused with cooperative learning (Dillenbourg 1996) where the focus is more on individual contributions to the whole. See page 18 for a definition of the term.) “Collaborative learning, along with other types of peer based, small group instruction, is a commonly used teaching strategy in many classrooms” (Fawcett & Garton 2005:157). As mentioned earlier, collaborative learning has the potential of improving learning through interaction among group members. Collaborative learning promotes higher achievement, higher level reasoning, more frequent generation of ideas and solutions and greater transfer of learning than individual or competitive learning strategies (Johnson, Johnson & Smith, 1991). Therefore, collaboration among peers enables students to work collaboratively towards processing and solving problems in order to achieve an ultimate goal (Kumpulainen & Kaartinen 2003:333). Davis (1993) suggests students learn best when they are actively involved in the process of learning.

By incorporating collaborative learning in writing lessons, students will be able to work together through dynamic interaction with group members which can lead to effective writing.

In the collaborative learning classroom, the teacher is a facilitator who sets up an environment for students to work together. During the process of learning together, the students work as a group for gaining, contributing and organizing ideas. In such an environment, the line between the teacher and learner is minimal, as everyone is viewed as a teacher and learner. As such, the learning process is viewed as a collaborative effort as the students teach one another. This is in line with the Ministry's suggestion of including interpersonal skills in the concept of smart schools where interpersonal skills enables students to express ideas in the spoken and written form. Bejarano (1987) claims that in his study, students performed better when they worked in small groups compared to those who studied as a whole class. As such, learning to write can be made easier and more meaningful when students work collaboratively in groups. In view of this, the writing skill can be taught in a collaborative environment as interaction promotes better understanding, and eventually learners get to socialize and their interpersonal skills will be enhanced through communication. This learning process which occurs in interactional groups will be of great help as students will be able to gain and exchange ideas which will help them gain content for the writing task.

The dynamic interaction and interweaving of ideas among group members during collaborative learning can enable students to improve their writing skills. Hedge (2005:13) contends that as students work in groups, they are able to brainstorm, organize

and sequence ideas which inevitably generate discussion and thus lead to an effective process of writing. During discussions, students will be able to work with peers to discuss the essay topic and expand their thoughts and ideas through collaborative learning. As such, students will be able to interact and develop ideas and knowledge which is appropriate and include these input gained as content in their essays. Ideas gained through group discussions in collaborative learning can be fully utilized and further expanded and elaborated in the written essays. The purposeful and meaningful process of communication and collaborating encourages a more proactive and cognitive effort by the learner to employ useful strategies in achieving his goals.

The development of writing would vary between different groups of learners as they could be at different stages of proficiency. A handful of students may lack knowledge of what language is appropriate, and thus they will be able to gain input through collaborative learning. As members discuss and express ideas, the other students will benefit by exchanging their thoughts, and in the process of discussion, students' proficiency level can also be improved.

1.5 Statement of the problem

As students advance from school to university, greater demands are made on writing effectively. At university level, students will be immersed in research, and cognitive

processing and producing materials in writing is given great emphasis. The need to be equipped with the writing skill is essential. Furthermore, most of the reading materials are in English and students need to master the language before they embark on their careers.

The researcher believes that the teaching of the writing skill among pre-university students needs an in-depth study as these students will be furthering their studies at tertiary level before joining the work force where English proficiency is vital. Therefore, the researcher decided to study how the teaching of writing can be improved among pre-university students who are taking the MUET. The main purpose of this study is to investigate how collaborative learning can help students to improve their individual writing skills. While previous studies have been conducted on the effects of collaborative learning in group writing, very few have focused on the impact of such learning on the individual writing performance. Therefore, this study will focus on collaborative learning and how students can gain sufficient content and improve their language in their individual writing performance.

1.6 Objectives and Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to examine the effectiveness of collaborative learning on individual writing performance among pre-university students sitting for the MUET

examination. This study also seeks students' perceptions regarding collaborative learning as the researcher aims to investigate if the ideas gained through brainstorming and discussion in groups during the process of collaborative learning help learners to produce better essays. It is the researcher's belief that interaction among peers will lead to constructive and meaningful ideas being developed through engagement of social verbal skills, thus enabling students to improve their writing skills. In this study, students work in small groups to brainstorm and discuss content related to the essay topic which eventually leads to individual writing. Students work as a team during discussions but the written essay is done individually.

As mentioned earlier, the present study was inspired by the deteriorating standard of English among students, undergraduates and graduates, especially their poor performance in writing. As such, the aim of this study is to determine to what extent, if any, collaborative learning can help students improve their writing performance. A second aim of the study is to examine how students of differing proficiency perceive the effect of collaborative learning on their writing performance. As discussed earlier, ESL learners unlike their L1 peers, are likely to face an additional burden in the form of language proficiency where writing is concerned. Hence, this study looks into how collaborative learning affects learners of differing proficiency in English.

1.7 Research Questions

This study is guided by the following research questions :

1. To what extent does collaborative learning help ESL students to improve their writing skills?
2. How do students of differing proficiency perceive the effect of collaborative learning on their writing performance?

1.8 Significance of the Study

The present study is in line with the current development in the teaching of English as a second language in Malaysian schools. The researcher strongly believes this study will provide some insights on the effectiveness of collaborative learning on individual writing performance among students who are preparing for the MUET examination. In collaborative learning, students are given ample opportunity to manipulate language through meaningful and relevant communication. As students work in groups by voicing opinions, exchanging ideas, agreeing and arguing constructively, they will be able to incorporate information gathered throughout their discussions, thus enabling them to produce essays of higher quality. If the study shows there is an improvement in the writing component, the language teachers will have access to an alternative method of teaching writing by incorporating collaborative learning to improve writing skills among students.

1.9 Definition of terms

1.9.1 Collaborative Learning

Collaborative learning is undertaken by partners who work jointly on the same problem rather than on different components of the problem (Dillenbourg 1999). Collaborative learning promotes higher achievement, higher level reasoning, more frequent generation of ideas and solutions and greater transfer of learning than individual or competitive learning strategies (Johnson, Johnson & Smith 1991).

1.9.2 Cooperative Learning

Cooperative learning is a generic term used to describe a situation where students work together in small groups to help themselves and others to learn. Cooperative learning is “accomplished by the division of labour among the participants” (Dillenbourg 1996:190), where each student is responsible for a part of the information required to solve the problem.

Dillenbourg (1996:11) reiterated that “in collaboration, partners do the work together”, whereas “in cooperation, partners split the work, solve sub-tasks individually and then assemble the partial results into the final output”.

1.9.3 Individual Writing Performance

Students produce individual essays as opposed to one joint product per group. After collaborative learning discussions, students are required to write essays using all the ideas they obtained and write essays on their own to be handed over to the teacher.

1.9.4 Peer collaboration

Peer collaboration involves students working together to complete a task that represents the shared meaning and conclusions of the group during discussions.

1.9.5 Communicative functions

The interactions which take place during collaborative learning discussions are categorized under various communicative functions. The functional analysis of the peer interaction focused on the purposes for which verbal language is used in a given context. This is to investigate which communicative function is frequently used during collaborative learning discussions.

1.9.6 Interaction during discussions

Communicating and exchanging ideas pertaining to the essay topic during collaborative learning discussions.

1.9.7 Interactive data

Data comprising communicative functions pertaining to different modes of conversation during collaborative learning discussions.

1.10 Limitations of the Study

This study which examined the effects of collaborative learning on individual writing performance of ESL students was limited to one classroom of Form Six MUET learners.

As the study dealt in depth with only ten Form Six learners, the findings cannot be applied to the rest of the student population in the school.

1.11 Framework of the Dissertation

This dissertation consists of five chapters. The introduction provides the necessary overview of the study, and is followed by the second chapter which reviews literature pertaining to the research. The third chapter discusses the methodological framework used in this study while the fourth presents the analysis and discussion of the findings. The fifth and final chapter summarizes the findings and discussion, highlights the implications of the study and suggests some recommendations.