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## THE EFFECTIVENESS OF USING WH-QUESTIONS IN IMPROVING THE WRITING SKILL OF UPPER PRIMARY SCHOOL STUDENTS IN MALAYSIA

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### ABSTRACT

Writing is one of the four English language skills taught and tested in the education system in Malaysia. At the upper primary school level students write a variety of text types, most of which conform to examination genres. The ultimate goal of the English language curriculum for schools is to help learners acquire the language so that they can use it in their everyday life, to further their studies and for work purposes. However, there are things that need to focus on as not all the students are good in English especially in the writing skill. WH-question is chosen to be as one of the ways in approaching the students and to help them to improve their performance in writing. This research is done based on the fact that many students are still unable to produce sustained accurate writing by the time they leave primary school. The performance of the students in writing is worryingly low. They were unable to perform well in their Paper Two of the *Ujian Penilaian Sekolah Rendah (UPSR)* examination. This is because writing has always been seen as a high priority in primary schools especially when the students have to write composition of guided writing in their *UPSR*.

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### INTRODUCTION

English is taught as a second language in all Malaysian primary and secondary schools in the country. In primary school syllabus components, the focus is on developing learners' writing ability beginning at the word and phrase levels and progresses to the sentence and paragraph level. Kern (2000) says that literacy traditionally is seen as the ability to read and write. These two skills are often emphasized at the beginner and intermediate levels of language learning and followed by literature and cultural knowledge at advanced level. However, the current perspective on literacy has shifted or transformed. Reading and writing are no longer considered as the determining factors on gauging one's literacy level.

Scholars from disciplines such as rhetoric, writing, educational psychology, sociology, linguistic and cultural theory challenge the notion of literacy that concentrates solely on reading and writing as limiting and suggest a more dynamic concept of literacy that incorporates cultural aspects in reading and writing practices in language learning (Kern, 2000). Even though there has been a paradigm shift in the notion of literacy, it is felt that efforts in improving on the two skills should still continue to better equip a language learner in becoming a literate person. This paper, however, will focus on one of the skills, specifically writing skill. For UPSR result, even though the students do not do well in the English Paper or the whole examination, they are still able to go to secondary school. Writing in English however is important because even though the students are guaranteed a place in secondary

school, they still need to master the skills of writing in order to prepare for higher education level. There are many types of writing taught but the most common is the guided writing. Although much of the writing at this level is guided, the amount of control is relaxed for learners who are able and proficient in the language. The teacher will let the students to write independently and creatively. However, when the students are given too much freedom, they will write without referring to the context. The students usually will just write without planning what to do first. The students' usually just write what is on their mind without planning what to write first or what comes later. Their ideas are not organized properly. For this purpose of organizing their ideas, the students must learn the pre-writing skill and the use of WH Questions so that they can organize the sentences. After they learn to organize their ideas, they can produce longer and more detailed writing. The researcher has noticed that students' writing, especially in primary schools is often sub-par. Writing skills need to be taught to the students. This is for them to develop their writing well. A major problem that the teachers of ESL faced is the fact that many of the students do not write creatively or elaborately past the most basic requirements. Given a prompt, they may write a few sentences; often they will struggle to do the minimum. The researcher needs to find ways to help the students elaborate, lengthen their writing, and become better writers.

### Upsr Examination

The UPSR English Language Examination Paper aims to assess pupils' ability in reading and writing. It consists of two papers namely Paper One and Paper Two. Paper One has forty Multiple Choice Questions (MCQ) and the full mark is 40. However the focus in this study is in the Paper Two. Paper Two consists of three sections, Section A, Section B and Section C. the full mark for this paper is 40. Section A requires the students to write five sentences based on a picture given. Section B assesses the pupils' writing skill in two questions, information transfer and the other question about giving reason based on the student's choice. The section that is used in this study is Section C where the students need to write an essay based on three given pictures.

There are usually three picture strips, each describing an event. Key words are provided to help the students to make good sentences. Writing is mainly at sentence or paragraph level. There are no restrictions on the number of words or sentences. However many English teacher expect their students to write at least 5 paragraph namely, the introductory paragraph, three paragraphs for three pictures provided and the closing paragraph. The students can write as many as they are able to. However, if the students are able to produce longer and more detailed essay, the students may get higher marks compared to writing a short essay. This is because the marks allocated for this section is 15, which is quite high. Furthermore, the length in writing is also caused by the writing strategy used by students. If they use the appropriate strategy, they could produce longer and more detailed writing compared to writing without a strategy. Therefore it is important to determine the accurate ways to teach the students to produce longer and detailed writing. For this study, the researcher will look into the role and effectiveness of using Graphic organizer and WH Questions to assists students in brainstorming. If we need to call up information and ideas, brainstorming can start them flowing.

### Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study is to analyze the progress in the students' writing skills by teaching them the WH Questions. For some teachers, it is easy to put the blame of their students' inability to write on the poor instruction that they received in Year One, Year Two, Year Three, Year Four and Year Five. Rather than pointing fingers, this study hoped to find a solution to help those illiterate in English so that not only can the students write in English but also improve their performance in the *English Language essays*. Through this study it is also hoped that schoolteachers, school administrators and curriculum developers will realize the importance of teaching writing using the right method. As discussed earlier, the researcher would like to see the effect of WH Questions in pre-writing. In addition, the intervention programs in schools have to be proactive and made to function in full sincerity. Furthermore, this study also hoped to be an eye opener to teachers that the students' performance in school reflects our dedication in improving them, no matter how little we have done or how hard to do it. The students' improvement, no matter how small, would become a proof that we have tried our best. It is also to offer insights into a pre-writing technique that will help improve students' writing performance.

### Literature Review

#### Approaches of Writing Instructions

Becoming a teacher is complex. A teacher not only teaches how to write but he must understand a theory in writing (Graves, 1991). In fact, in teaching writing, many teachers asked their students to produce composition without having enough guidance or steps on how to make good ones. Hansen (1987) and Harste et al, (1988) have found that most teachers are concerned with the final product of writing, but have a little understanding of the process that the successful writers use in creating that products. Therefore, as a writing teacher, we must understand the theories of writing because by understanding the theories, we can determine what approaches will be used. Zebroski (as cited in John, 1990) suggests "If we write and teach writing, we must have a theory of writing by definition" (p.24). In line with Zebroski, John (1990) says that: "Theory is reach in both history and substance, it is necessary to select one of several comprehensive models from which to work in order to classify essential component." In 1945, the beginning of the modern era of second language teaching in United States, there are four most influential approaches such as Controlled Composition, Current Traditional Rhetoric, the Process Approach and English Academic Purpose. Hyland (2007) proposes genre theory as one considerable approach for writing instructions as it better prepares the teachers in teaching second language writing and effectively responds towards students' writing. Genre pedagogies provide teachers more opportunities to develop supportive writing environment in classrooms. Moreover, teachers or instructors have the chance to not only teach the elements in writing, but they are also capable to facilitate, reflect and provide robust support. The overview of changes in policies and practices in the teaching of writing shows that writing instructions 30 years ago was relatively simple and less facilitating (Applebee and Langer, 2011). The practices have progressively changed to a more supportive and enriching approaches. Despite the continuous changes of approaches and practices in the

teaching of writing, the writing instructions used in teaching writing need to reflect the students' creativity and maturity in their writing products. On the other hand, teachers also need support and tools to prepare themselves to teach all the complex elements and different purposes of writing (Coxhead and Byrd, 2007).

### **The Process of Writing and English as a Second Language**

Second language learners' language competence relies heavily on their performance of the target language. Second language learners' repertoire requires all four of the language skills which are; reading, writing, speaking and listening in order to master the language. According to Nooreiny and Mazlin (2013), writing skills requires various strategies in which it involves with a complex cognitive activity. Most of the conducted researches focus on the problems faced by the second language learners involving with mastering the target language. Berman and Cheng (2001), stated that mostly non native speakers of english language faced difficulties in the productive skills of writing and speaking rather than listening and reading. These problems trigger researchers to seek for remedies. Thus, many educators and teachers implement new technique to suit the needs of their students. As Zhao (2015) mentioned in her contrastive study, writing skills is difficult as it requires a high level of cognitive skills; gathering information and ideas, organising information and ideas, structuring the sequence, expressing the information and ideas into written draft and editing. She proposed several effective technique to improve students writing skills. Her study is based on the Constructivism Theory in which it advocates that learning target language is influenced by experiences of the learners. This theory stands upon assimilation and accomodation. Therefore, educators and teachers are responsible in bringing the language aid to the classroom.

Scaffolding technique is used by Ilya Azliana (2015) in her study of report writing. There were 56 students of form 6 students involved in the research. The students were randomly put into two groups; experimental groups and control group. Both of the groups were taught with two different approaches of teaching. The experimental group were taught with scaffolding technique whereas the control group received traditional method of teaching. The study consists of 4 instruments; questionnaires, pretest, posttest and semi-structured interviews. Students from the experimental group show better performance compared to the control group. The result shows that the technique improves students' understanding towards producing their report writing. While Iris (2017) conducted a research to examine students' perception on writing process. The study was carried out on 75 students of english native speaker in Sacramento State University. The students are aged between 18 and 19 and in English 5 (accelerated academic literacies) course in which a required writing composition course for freshmen. She used survey and interview instrument in order to gain the data. The writing process mentined in this study are pre-writing, writing(drafting), revision and peer workshopping. The result obtained shows that most of the students find that writing process is helpful in their writing task.

Punctuation and grammar use are the main problems second language learners faced when writing in English. A study conducted by Ghabol, Mariadass and Kashaf, (2012) pointed out that the interference of the first language of the second

language learners influence their writing. 30 ESL students and 10 teachers from a secondary school were involved in answering the questionnaire and also examine a sample of essay writing entitled "The place I wish to visit". The researchers suggest that the educators should apply some practical methods in order to deal with the students' difficulties in writing. The study conducted by Nooeiny and Mazlin (2013) indicates that 50 students of form 4 in a secondary school moderately used the writing strategies. The students are divided into two groups which are high-intermediate proficiency and low proficiency. The result suggested that most of the students are affected by their language proficiency in using the writing strategies. Students with high intermediate level of language proficiency found that they prefer to think and plan their writing compared to lower level of language proficiency.

### **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

In this paper, the Convenience Sampling is implemented in getting an inexpensive approximation of the truth. The target population of sample respondents is from ESL learners from Year Five in Sekolah Kebangsaan Siputeh, 06100 Kodiang, Kedah. The group is mixed of eleven -year -old ESL learners. The students are twenty males and twenty females from average level. The average level refers to the class where they are placed. For this research, 32 students from Class 5 Cemerlang and 8 students from Class 5 Arif are chosen. They are chosen as participants because of their English performance, which is average. Furthermore, these students are in failure or pass group. It means that, sometimes the students were able to pass their English test and sometimes they failed. The research instrument will include pre- test and post -test while interview is used as a method to see the respondents' feedback towards the use of Graphic Organizer and WH Questions. In pre-test, students will have thirty- five minutes during class time to complete this essay. The respondents will do the pre-test in the classroom. When introducing the assignment, teachers will tell students that grammar and spelling are not important. They should write as much as they can and focus on writing an essay that makes sense and discusses the topic in detail. So, the purpose is to look into how many number of words and number of sentences the students are able to produce.

### **FINDINGS**

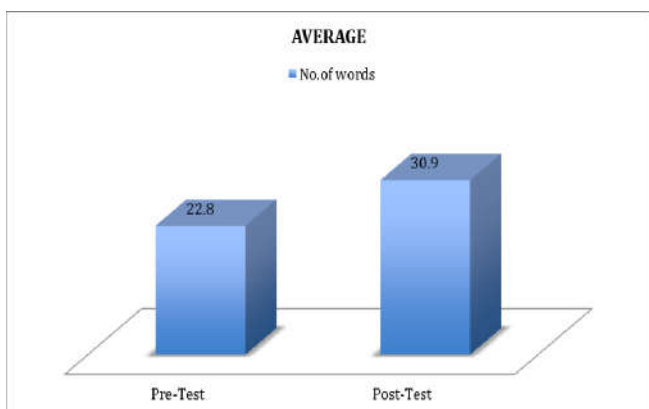
The data was collected and analyzed in order to determine if the use of WH Questions can assist students to better develop their ideas and resulting in longer and more detailed writings. A pre-test and post- test was done. During the pre-test, the number of words written ranged from 15 to 27 words. The average for number of words written is 22.8 per student. This is considered as low achievement according to the standard marking. Then, students were given the post-test four weeks after the pre-test was done. This prompt was the same one used in the pre-assessment and procedures were identical. The students used paper and pencil to answer the 2011 UPSR Paper 2 (Section C). The researcher told students to write essay in Section C UPSR Paper 2. As in the beginning, the researcher told students to focus on length and details instead of grammar and punctuation. However, students were not given explicit strategy instructions nor they were reminded of the 5WH Questions. Once the timer reached thirty minutes students were notified. When the timer went off after thirty-

five minutes, the researcher told them to stop writing and hand in their papers.

After the post-test was carried out, the results are as follows:

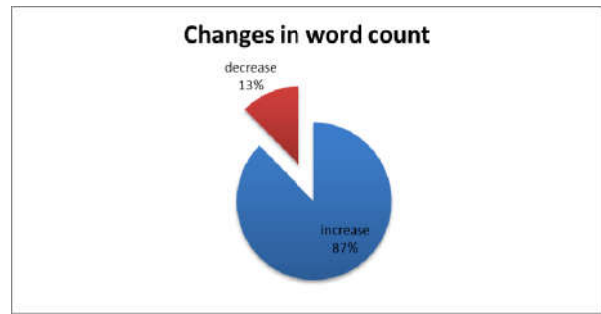
**Table 1. Pre-test and Post-test Result**

Respondents	Pre-test	Post-test	Differences	
	No of Words		Increase/ Decrease	Percentage (%)
1	24	37	13	54
2	20	30	10	50
3	19	25	6	31.5
4	20	38	18	90
5	25	24	-1	- 4
6	21	32	11	52.3
7	15	38	23	153.3
8	19	40	21	110.5
9	18	33	15	83.3
10	22	37	15	68.1
11	23	35	12	52.1
12	22	38	16	72.7
13	21	30	9	42.8
14	18	28	10	55.5
15	24	32	8	33.3
16	19	25	6	31.5
17	20	34	14	70
18	21	25	4	19
19	19	24	5	26.3
20	18	23	5	27.7
21	16	20	4	25
22	25	24	-1	- 4
23	22	29	7	31.8
24	27	34	7	25.9
25	19	29	10	52.6
26	19	35	16	84.2
27	17	27	10	58.8
28	18	29	11	61.1
29	12	36	24	200
30	26	34	8	30.7
31	24	30	6	25
32	26	25	-1	- 3.8
33	33	37	4	12.1
34	30	29	-1	-3.3
35	35	38	3	8.5
36	30	32	2	6.6
37	32	31	-1	-3.1
38	27	26	-1	- 3.7
39	33	31	-2	- 6.1
40	31	30	-1	-3.2



**Figure 1. Average number of words in pre-test and post-test**

Based on figure 1, the average number of words used in pre-test is 22.8 words per student while in post- test are 30.9 words per student. A total of 8.1 words per student increased. Basically the increase of word count among the students occurred due to the usage of WH Questions.



**Figure 2. Changes in word count**

Figure 2 shows that the children, as a group, improved from pre-test to post-test where 35 of them manage to increase their word count in their essay. While another 5 participants seem to have lesser words in their essay. The graphic organizer that uses the WH questions actually acts as a clue-guide to the respondents. They use this organizer to form a draft on what to write. Then, the respondents’ rearrange these words to form better and suitable answers based on the pictures given. A decrease in words occurred among the respondents too. This is due to the respondents’ lack of knowledge when utilizing the graphic organizer. They seem not to know how to use the organizer to the utmost to produce a whole and complete essay. Besides that, the respondents are also poor in focusing the task. Related to it, they cannot imagine the whole situation as one. Therefore, they can’t write properly and only uses the words given.

**Conclusion**

Learning to write is a challenge for primary school children. This study explored whether WH-Question could be used as a tool to increase word and sentence count and also for detailed writing. The WH-Question was used during intervention to provide a guide to students, enabling them to generate complete sentences and to combine sentences prior to writing. It is also remained in view during writing, providing visual support for producing more complex written sentences, as well as for organizing the sentences. The research was carried out in a rural school on a group of respondents from the average achievement group with minor exposure to the usage of English. They were relatively weak in many areas of the language including grammar, structure and vocabulary. In this research, repetitions come into practice. Fun activities such as using WH-Question were also used to make them familiar with the techniques of writing especially in pre-writing stage. In conclusion, it is hoped that the research suggested above would throw some light on the different learning strategies used by students. Consequently, teachers may have to explore and make adjustments to the ways in which they teach writing to their students.

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