



EXPLORING WRITERS' BLOCK THROUGH RHETORICAL SITUATION

Noor Hanim Rahmatⁱ

Akademi Pengajian Bahasa,
Universiti Teknologi MARA,
Shah Alam, Malaysia

Abstract:

Students do experience writing blocks. Writers' blocks are caused by many reasons. When writers write, they face rhetorical problems. Past studies have shown that these problems are easily solved by skilled writers. However, less skilled writers may take a longer time to get out of the rhetorical problems. Rhetorical problems can be categorized into two. Firstly, many writers face problems due to their failure to attend to their own goals (writers' own goal). Next, writers also face problems with rhetorical situation. Rhetorical situations can be categorized as problems with the assignment and problems with the audience. This qualitative study explored the causes of writers' block among three different levels of writers. Findings revealed that the three levels of writers had different causes of writing blocks. Some were caused by paying attention to perfection, some feared not being understood by the readers.

Keywords: writers' block, rhetorical problems, rhetorical situation, assignment, audience

1. Introduction

1.1 Background of Study

In Malaysia, English is considered either a second or foreign language. However, for university students, lessons are mostly taught in English and students, this means written assignments are written in English. Time and time again students would complain of writers' block. Castillo (2014) reports that writer's block has been assessed in individuals who speak languages other than English. The most common causes cited for writer's block are lack of inspiration, illness, depression, financial pressure, and a sense of failure. During the writing process, writers may face rhetorical problems. Skilled writers are able to solve the problems and continue with the writing process, while less skilled writers may take a longer time struggling to solve the problem. Writers face problems with either the writing assignment (rhetorical situation) or with his/her writing ability (writer's own

ⁱ Correspondence: email patanim@gmail.com, noorh763@uitm.edu.my

goals). According to Flower and Hayes (1980), this rhetorical problem is categorized into rhetorical situation and the writers' own goal (Figure 1). Writer's own goals refer to the writer's effort to make his/her writing understood. This involves the writer's writing skills and writing style. Rhetorical situation refers to the writer's struggle with the needs of the assignment and also on audience awareness.

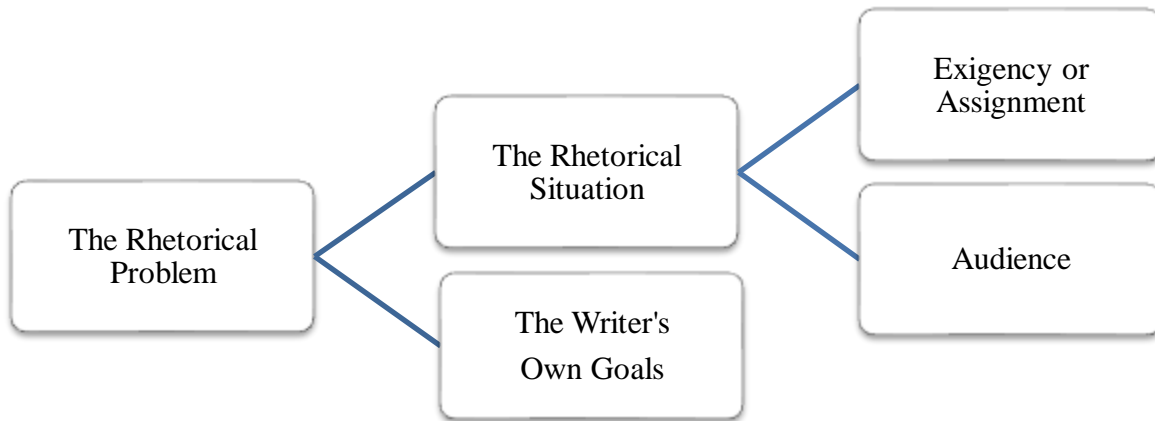


Figure 1: Rhetorical Problem (Flower and Hayes, 1980)

Writers' block is caused by external factors surrounding the writer and these factors are related to the rhetorical situation of the writing process. In addition to that, according to Sapiurka (2015), most who experience writer's block are not having trouble producing words – they simply cannot figure out what should happen next. So, writers' block could really be "creation block" and that is the inability to make the connection and the plans that allow writing to occur.

1.1 Statement of Problem

According to Sapiurka (2015), writers' block is manageable. Many have suggested what writers can/should do to overcome writers block. Some suggested writers focus on the writing task, some suggest writers focus on the themselves as writers. However, there has been many cases where writers quit writing after the writing block episode.

There are some writers who quit writing after the block period. Many writers did not realise that their "non-writing" period after/in the midst of active writing (writing preparation) is temporary and if they (the writers) recognize this temporary, measures can be taken to overcome writers' block. This study is done to identify the characteristics writers' block so that measures can be taken to rectify this temporary block

1.2 Limitation of the Study

This study explores a section of rhetorical problem by Flower and Hayes (1980) which is "the rhetorical situation". During the writing process, writers face problems that can be categorized into two, the writer's own goals and rhetorical situation. Writer's own goals focus on the problems that writers face that involves themselves as writers. On the other hand, rhetorical situation deals with the writers' respond towards the situation that

surround their writing activity. This research deals with this situation. According to Last and Neveu (2019), writers' block can also be caused by external factors related to the writing activity.

1.3 Objective

This study explores how writers' block is influenced by rhetorical situation. Specifically, this study investigates the effects of exigency/assignment and audience awareness on writers' block. This research is guided by the following questions:

- 1) In what ways do the exigency /assignment influence writers' block?
- 2) In what ways do the audience awareness influence writers' block?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

This section presents the theories and elaboration for rhetorical situation, audience awareness, writers' block, writing fear, past studies as well as theoretical framework of the study.

2.2 Rhetorical Situation

When a writer is faced with a rhetorical situation, he or she is trying to communicate through either the oral or written form. Last and Neveu (2019) listed five components of the rhetorical situation (refer to Figure 2).

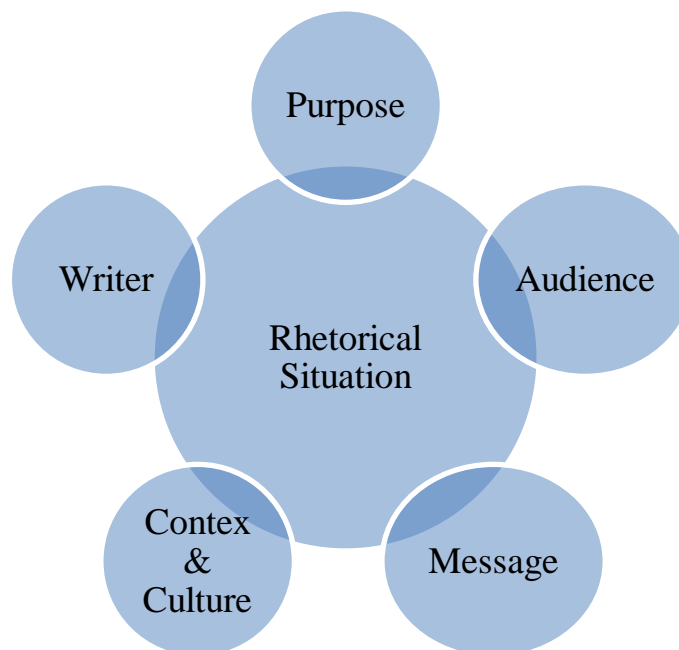


Figure 2: The Rhetorical Situation (Last and Neveu, 2019)

- Purpose - Purpose refers to the “why” the writer is writing. There are three purposes for communication, and they are (a) to create a record, (b) to give a request information, and (c) to persuade.
- Writer - Writer would take into consideration past experiences, and also the knowledge he /she can bring into the situation.
- Audience-A good writer conducts an audience analysis before beginning the writing process.
- Message - This refers to what information the writer wants to communicate.
- Context/Culture - Context helps creates the need for the writing. In other words, what has happened or needs to happen that creates the need for communication? The context is influenced by timing, location, current events, and culture, which can be organizational or social.

On the other hand, Bitzer (1968) found, the three elements that comprise a rhetorical situation are exigence, audience and constraint (figure 3). Exigency refers to a kind of hurdle that the writer needs to attend to urgently. Next, constraints comprised of people, events, or object relative to any given situation that are capable of delaying the exigency. Audience refers to the people whom the writer would be communicating with. Good writers consider their audience when they write. According to Rahmat (2019), what differentiates between an experienced writer and a non-experience one is that the former was more concerned about communicating well with their audience.

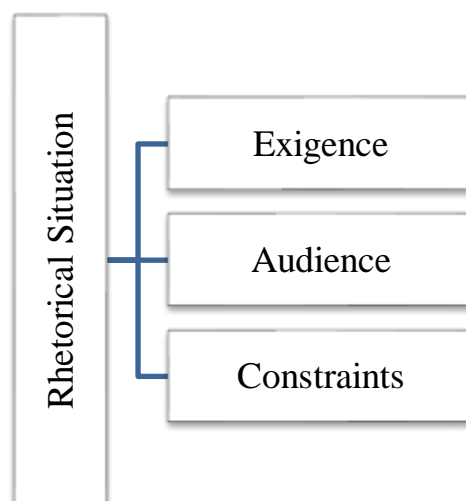


Figure 3: Rhetorical Situation (Bitzer, 1968)

2.3 Reason Why Students Avoid Writing

The first stages of writer's block are to avoid writing and ignoring writing activities, to name a few. Some started and ended up avoiding, while some totally avoid any writing activities. According to Rahmat (2020), good writing is coupled with critical reading skills. Perhaps one reason why writing is not a favourite among some, especially students, is that in order to write academic topics, the writer needs to read first. This is also agreed by Rahmat, Syed Abdul Rahman, and Hassan (2018) who found that millennials and genZ do not read as much as we had hoped they would/should.

There are many reasons students avoid writing. According to Richards (2020), some primary reasons for avoidance of writing may be one or more of the following:

- They have a hard time getting started and feel overwhelmed by the task.
- They need to concentrate to form letters: it is not an automatic process.
- They struggle to organize and use mechanics of writing.
- They are slow and inefficient in retrieving the right word(s) to express an idea.
- They struggle to develop their ideas fluently (poor ideation).
- They struggle to keep track of their thoughts while also getting them down on paper.
- They feel that the process of writing on paper is slow and tedious.
- They feel that the paper never turns out the way they want.
- They realize that the paper is still sloppy even though substantial time and effort were spent.
- They are dysgraphic, which causes multiple struggles at the basic processing levels.
- They are dyslexic, which causes very poor spelling and interferes with automatic use of writing mechanics.

2.4 Writers' Block

There are many definitions of what blocked writers are. Some blocked writers are known to edit prematurely, and this premature editing may lead to their anxiety about their writing even as they write. However, there are reports to show that problems in writing is not the lack of competence of the writer, but lack of competence in composing (Rahmat,2019). Lachs (2018) listed some origins of writers' block.

A. Fear

Most writers struggle with fear. They fear putting themselves and their ideas out there. Fear of others judging or not understanding them or even criticising their work. Fear of being rejected by publishers or their readers.

B. Perfectionism

One of the most common blocks for writers and creatives of all walks is perfectionism. Many writers use perfectionism as a protection mechanism, to protect themselves from harsh critique or failure. Unfortunately, trying to write the perfect sentence, paragraph, or novel will lead most writers to never write a single word.

C. Self-criticism

Excessive self-criticism is often what holds writers back from actually writing. Most writers compare their work with that of other, more successful writers or even to their own earlier work.

D. External pressure

In other cases, the person experiencing writer's block are reluctant to write by factors outside their writing activities or writing communities.

2.5 Skilled and Less Skilled Writer

There are differences in writing behaviour between skilled and less skilled writers. According to Rahmat (2011), skilled and less skilled writers behave differently during the three main stage sin the writing process (table s1-3).

A. Planning

Stage	Less Skilled Writers	Skilled Writers
Planning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Short time to plan • Started writing first sentence almost immediately • Choose the easiest topics-avoid difficulties • Did not like to do mind–mapping, drafting, as it would make her/him stuck in writing • Finds it difficult to elaborate points from a mind map as it can make her/him disorgained in writing • Prefers to write until she runs out of ideas, before taking a break to think. And find ideas 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Plans writing based on <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a) Generating ideas (search of memory/prior knowledge) b) Organizing ideas (setting the ideas into a coherent structure), c) Goal-setting • Makes notes and organized notes • Writes and scribbles ideas (considers aspects of the rhetorical problems) • Has a clear picture of the rhetorical problem-knowing WHAT and HOW to write

Table 1: Less Skilled vs Skilled Writers: Planning
(Rahmat, 2011, p 9)

With reference to Table 1, less skilled writers planned in different ways than skilled writers. Less skilled writers concentrated on details while skilled writers had more global type of planning.

B. Translating (Drafting)

Stage	Less Skilled Writers	Skilled Writers
Translating (Drafting)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Elaborates using narrative and descriptive • Every now and then checks on the grammatical errors • Rehearsed or tried out ideas from memory as he/she mumbled during writing • stopped writing many times- tried to find more ideas, hesitated about the ideas many times 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • focused on grammar -constantly checking on the draft • also focused on ideas and arguments and organization of the essay as a whole • kept referring to the first/previous draft while writing • finds the difficult part of writing is the ideas, how to write them, and the overall flow of ideas

Table 2: Less Skilled vs Skilled Writers: Translating/Drafting
(Rahmat, 2011, p 10)

With reference to Table 2, the behaviour of less skilled writers during the translating stage is not similar to the behaviour of the skilled writers. Less skilled writers had a micro view compare to the skilled writers' macro view.

C. Reviewing

Stage	Less Skilled Writers	Skilled Writers
Reviewing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • did not edit own work • refused to check because he/she was afraid to encounter mistakes and could not correct 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • no evidence. Of editing or proof reading- is satisfied of his/her work. Is confident that he/she has done a good job

Table 3: Less Skilled vs Skilled Writers: Reviewing
 (Rahmat, 2011, p 10)

Table 3 presents the differences in writing behaviour of skilled and less skilled writers. Skilled writers showed more confidence compared to less skilled writers.

2.6 Past Studies

Writer's block can be caused by writers' perception of writing is. This perception of fear can become a never-ending cycle of fear towards writing. A pilot study was done by Rahmat, Othman, Mohd Kassim, Khairuddin, and Aripin, (2019) on 108 respondents to find out the influence of perceived difficulties, reasons for writing and writing anxiety on ESL academic writing. The instrument used is a 56-items survey with 5 likert scales. Findings of the study displayed an interesting self-prophecy towards writing. The results of the study revealed that many learners' perception of writing difficulty started in semester one of their study. This fear can be aggravated by a non-supporting learning environment by the writing teachers. Next, cognitive anxiety such as low self- esteem added on to the negative feeling on writing. This negative feeling can be rooted from the learners' past experience (somatic anxiety) on the learning of writing. Finally, learners may end up showing avoidance behaviour such towards learning writing. They would only write essays in English if they were not given any choice. The study by Phinney (1991) examined changes in writing apprehension and blocking behavior among first and second language writers in first year composition classes using computers. Findings suggested that for first language writers, using the computer for proofreading and editing did not seem to affect blocking behaviour as measured by the WAQ. The findings also suggested that the second language writers benefitted from using computers for proofreading and editing to write more than first language writers.

Next, writers' block can begin with writing fear. Bastug, Ertem, and Keskin (2017) investigated the causes, processes of writer's block experienced by a group of classroom teacher candidates and its impact on them. The phenomenological design, which is a qualitative research design, investigated the causes, processes of writer's block experienced by a group of classroom teacher candidates and its effects on the students. Findings found that the problems in writing stems from the writers' early school experiences. Back then writing activities were usually followed by assessments. In

another study, Rahmat (2019) investigates problems in writing among three writers (undergraduate, masters and doctoral) from different levels of studies. The qualitative study looked into the problems that writers face in their composing process. rhetorical problems, writer's own goals. Findings revealed that writers at different levels faced different writing problems. This was because different levels of studies focused on different aspects of writing. The study by Mohamed Alfaki(2015) to identify university students' writing problems in English language and to suggest ways of solving those problems. The study was conducted in the Teachers' College, and the College of Education, Nile Valley University, North Sudan in 2014. The research method used was the descriptive research method. A sample of 20 English language students were selected using a simple random sampling procedure. They were instructed to write a composition of about 250 -300 words on "A description of my own home town/village". The students' compositions were reviewed twice by 10 English language instructors. The aim was to identify the errors and mistakes made by the students. The findings reveal that those university students have various writing problems: language problems at the levels of morphology and syntax; usage errors, and mechanical mistakes, that is, spelling, punctuation and capitalization, lack of several writing development skills, cognitive problems and graphomotor problems.

3. Theoretical Framework of the Study

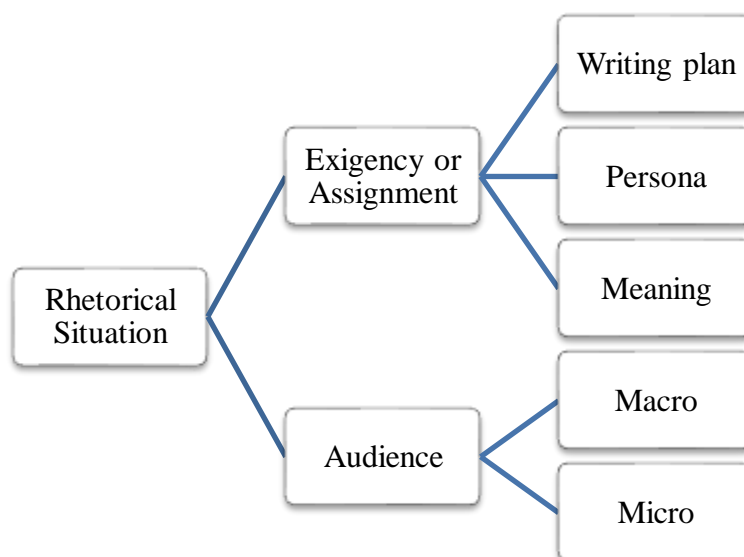


Figure 4: Theoretical Framework of the Study
(Flower and Hayes, 1980; Lachs, 2018)

Figure 4 above presents the theoretical framework of the study. The theoretical framework used rhetorical situation by Flower and Hayes (1980) as the main template and includes characteristics of blocked writers by Lachs (2018) as elaboration. According to Flower and Hayes (1980), the rhetorical situation is categorized into two; exigency or

assignment and audience. When it comes to writing assignment, writers are worried about the writing plan, persona and making meaning in their writing. In addition to that, one of the good habits of good writers is the awareness of the audience. This awareness can either be at micro or macro level.

4. Methodology

4.1 Introduction

This section discusses the research design, population, sample, instrument, method of data collection and analysis.

4.2 Research Design, Population and Sample

This qualitative case study explored students' difficulties in writing. This case study explores difficulties in essay writing which occurred in natural events, i.e. teaching and learning process in the classroom. Therefore, the researcher administered open ended questionnaire results in order to reveal students' problems in essay writing. The population of this study is academic writers from different levels of study. Purposeful sample was done on three writers: undergraduate, postgraduate pursuing a master programme and postgraduate pursuing a doctoral programme.

4.3 Instrument, Method of Data Collection and Data Analysis

The instrument used for this study is a set of open-ended questions. There are five questions and the questions are constructed to mirror the main components in Flower and Hayes (1980) rhetorical problem. And Lachs (2018). Data is collected from the students' written responses in the open-ended questions. The responses will be categorized into five themes: writing plan, persona, meaning, audience-macro level and also audience -micro level. In addition to that, data presented is categorized into problems in writing faced by (a) undergraduate, (b) postgraduate-masters and (c) postgraduate-doctoral students.

5. Findings

5.1 Introduction

This section discusses the findings based on the two research questions presented. Data is presented according to the level of the writers (undergraduate, postgraduate-masters and postgraduate- doctoral). The data is also sub-categorised based on the five themes.

5.2 Exigency/Assignment

RQ1: In what ways do the exigency/assignment influence writers' block? This question is answered in three parts. Writers' block is caused by how writers made writing plans, how they attend to the persona and how they create meaning to the essay.

Level of Students	Undergraduate	Masters	Postgraduate-Doctoral
Writing Plan	The writer focuses on the "topic", "meaning of the topic" and then proceed to "search for articles" for the content.	Look for materials	"what" to write, think of potential ideas, "planning", plan "objective of writing", "significance"

Table 4: Writing Plan

Table 4 above shows some responses by different levels of students face their writing problems in different ways. The undergraduate student focused on the "topic" and "searching for articles" at the initial stage. Both the undergraduate and postgraduate-masters' students focused on "looking for materials". However, the postgraduate-doctoral student chose to approach the assignment from a bird's eye view. She preferred to make plans about the assignment from the beginning.

Level of Students	Undergraduate	Masters	Postgraduate-Doctoral
Persona	When faced with difficulty to use accurate words, writer will consult friends, or the Thesaurus, and also online	Use words synonym to represent intended word, properly define the word	Problem to choose relevant words, to solve-look for synonym, refer to related text as reference (scaffolding)

Table 5: Persona

Table 5 presents the findings about problems related to persona. All three writers found that the main problem was finding the relevant words- "accurate words", "intended word", "relevant words" and they preferred to look for synonym of the words.

Level of Students	Undergraduate	Masters	Postgraduate-Doctoral
Meaning	Focus on writing clear thesis statement and conclusion	By stating point of view, elaborate each point	Proper planning helps, be mindful about language and sentence structures, arrangement of ideas,

Table 6: Meaning

When asked what the writers did to get meaning across (Table 6), the undergraduate writer focused on improving aspects of the writing-for example the "thesis statement and conclusion". The postgraduate-masters focused on "elaboration of the points" while the postgraduate-doctoral writer focused on "language and sentencing skills as well as arrangement of ideas".

5.3 Audience Awareness

RQ2: In what ways do the audience awareness influence writers' block? The way writers consider the audience can be done form a macro or even micro level.

Level of Students	Undergraduate	Masters	Postgraduate-Doctoral
Macro	The writer uses "attention grabber"	Be neutral when writing	Be creative, focus on how to expand idea, use simple and easy language

Table 7: Macro Level

A summary of problems at macro level by all the three writers is portrayed in Table 7 above. Both the undergraduate ("attention grabber") and postgraduate-doctoral ("be creative") writers used creativity to capture the attention of their audience. However, postgraduate writers chose simple and neutral use of language.

Level of Students	Undergraduate	Masters	Postgraduate-Doctoral
Macro	To avoid using "words that are too heavy or complicated", shorten sentences	Making thesis statement clear	Have proper "plan", sketch ideas, for reader to understand-clear-cut introduction

Table 8: Micro Level

When the writers were asked what they did in their writing to consider their reader (Table 8), the undergraduate writer focused on using less complicated words and shorter sentences. The postgraduate -masters writer focused on making the thesis statement clear; while the postgraduate-doctoral preferred to make a "proper plan".

6. Conclusion

6.1 Summary and Discussion

Findings of this research reveal interesting causes of writers' block among different levels of students. During the writing plan, persona, and meaning stages, both undergraduate and postgraduate-masters writers focused on content generation while the postgraduate-doctoral writer concentrated on the overall plan.

According to Rahmat (2011), the behaviour of the undergraduate and postgraduate-masters writers are similar to that of less skilled writers-focusing on topics. The behaviour of the postgraduate-doctoral mirrors the behaviour of skilled writers (Rahmat, 2011), by concentrating on the overall plan. Paying attention to details is not a good strategy as Lachs (2018) reported that one cause of writing block is over reliance of perfection.

Again, at the audience awareness stage, postgraduate -doctoral writers made plans (micro level) to make their readers understand what they wrote compared to the undergraduate and postgraduate-masters writers who again concentrated on word and sentence levels (micro level) issues. This "fear" of readers not understanding them is also reported by Lacks (2018) who also agreed that writers' block began with fear of not being understood and criticised.

6.2 Implications

Some reasons for writers' block are striving for perfection and also fear of not being understood. Lachs (2018) suggested some ways on how to overcome writers' block. They ways suggested are;

- a) Exercise;
- b) Switch tasks;
- c) Change scenery;
- d) Try free-writing;
- e) Set a "Do not disturb" time/space;
- f) Change the rhythm of work;
- g) No more binging (avoid work binges-break down work , break down writing;
- h) Be bored-so you have to only write;
- i) Strive for progress, not perfection.

6.3 Suggestion for Future Research

It is suggested that future research explore more reasons for writers' block. Surveys can be carried out to find the relationship of these causes to writing block. Interviews can also be done to gain insight view on the causes on different categories of writers.

About the author

Noor Hanim Rahmat is an associate professor at Akademi Pengajian Bahasa (Academy of Language Studies) at Universiti Teknologi MARA, Shah Alam, Malaysia. She had more than 5 years of teaching at primary school level in Singapore and more than 26 years of teaching experience at university level in Malaysia. She teaches degree and masters programmes and supervises masters and PhD students at the university. Her research interest includes teaching and learning of writing, educational psychology, sociolinguistics, language proficiency and language studies. She has presented at international conferences, written journal articles, written chapters in books as well as written books.

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