UNIVERSITI PUTRA MALAYSIA

**WRITING STRATEGIES OF SKILLED ESL WRITERS:
A PROTOCOL ANALYSIS**

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By

VIJAY KUMAR MALLAN

**Thesis Submitted in Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts in the Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication
Universiti Putra Malaysia**

October 1999

DEDICATION

DEDICATED
TO

MY FAMILY
WHO SUPPORTED ME IN EVERY
STEP OF MY ACADEMIC PURSUIT

MY WIFE
FOR HER CONSTANT ENCOURAGEMENT
AND MOTIVATION

AND

MY TWO SONS
VINOTH KUMAR AND VINESH KUMAR
WHO MADE THIS MONUMENTAL TASK WORTHWHILE

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October 1999

Chairperson: **Associate Professor Sali Zaliha Mustapha, Ph.D.**

Faculty: **Modern Languages and Communication**

This study presents the findings of the composing processes of four skilled ESL writers. The study first examines the theoretical perspectives about writing process. It then describes the writing strategies that skilled ESL writers in the TESL Matriculation programme of Universiti Putra Malaysia employ in the course of their writing.

Data collected was in the form of writers' think aloud protocols and their completed compositions. The writing strategies were identified and the results were examined with a writing taxonomy procured from the 3 models of writing put forward by Flower and Hayes' (1981) , Bereiter and Scardamalia (1987) and Biggs (1988).

This study confirms that composing is a non-linear process in which writers have the opportunity to be recursive writers. It was found that while some writing strategies were uniform among the four skilled ESL writers of this study, some writing strategies were used by one or two writers only.

It was also found that writers' cognitive abilities and cognitive approaches are much more critical than linguistic competence in writing. This paves way for the assumption that good writing strategies can be taught to less skilled writers.

The present study also indicates that some of the writing strategies of skilled Malaysian pre-tertiary level ESL writers identified in this study were similar to findings of previous related research involving unskilled writers.

Abstrak tesis yang dikemukakan kepada Senat Universiti Putra Malaysia sebagai memenuhi keperluan untuk ijazah Master Sastera.

STRATEGI PENULISAN PENULIS-PENULIS MAHIR ANALISA PROTOKOL

Oleh

VIJAY KUMAR MALLAN

Oktober 1999

Pengerusi: Profesor Madya Sali Zaliha Mustapha, Ph.D.

Fakulti: Bahasa Moden dan Kommunikasi

Kajian ini mengemukakan   dapatan proses-proses menulis karangan karangan 4 orang penulis yang mahir dalam bidang Bahasa Inggeris sebagai bahasa Kedua (BIK). Di peringkat permulaan , kajian ini menyelidiki perspektif teori proses penulisan. Ini disusuli dengan penghuraian strategi-strategi penulisan penulis-penulis mahir dalam BIK daripada program Matrikulasi TESL Universiti Putra Malaysia.

Data diperolehi dalam bentuk `penyuaraan fikiran spontan' serta hasil karangan penulis. Strategi penulisan yang dikenalpasti dianalisakan berdasarkan   Model Penulisan Proses Kognitif Flower dan Hayes (1981).

Kajian ini mengesahkan bahawa penulisan karangan tidak merupakan satu proses linear tetapi ianya adalah satu proses pengulangan strategi. Analisa kajian ini juga mendedahkan bahawa kebanyakkan strategi penulisan yang digunakan oleh keempat-empat penulis dalam kajian ini adalah serupa tetapi terdapat juga strategi penulisan yang digunakan oleh hanya seorang atau dua penulis kajian ini.

Dapat juga disahkan bahawa kebolehan kognitif penulis adalah lebih signifikan dariapada kemahiran linguistik dalam penulisan. Oleh itu boleh diandaikan bahawa strategi-strategi penulisan yang baik boleh diajar kepada penulis-penulis yang kurang mahir. Terdapat juga persamaan dalam strategi penulisan penulis-penulis mahir yang dikenalpasti dalam kajian ini dengan strategi penulisan penulis-penulis kurang mahir dalam kajian-kajian lain yang berkaitan.

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I am also indebted to the four participants of this study for their willingness and enthusiasm with which they co-operated in this study.

My perseverance in completing this thesis is due mostly to the confidence, inspiration and encouragement given by my wife and sons, Vinoth and Vinesh.

APPROVAL SHEETS

I certify that an Examination Committee met on 27th October 1999 to conduct the final examination of Vijay Kumar Mallan on his Master of Arts thesis entitled "Writing Strategies of Skilled Writers: A Protocol Analysis" in accordance with Universiti Pertanian Malaysia (Higher Degree) Act 1980 and Universiti Pertanian Malaysian (Higher Degree) Regulations 1981.   The Committee recommended that the candidate be awarded the relevant degree. The Committee Members for the candidate are as follows:

SALI ZALIHA MUSTAPHA, Ph.D.
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Date: 3 1 DEC 1999

The thesis was submitted to the Senate of Universiti Putra Malaysia and was accepted as fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

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KAMIS AWANG, Ph.D.
Associate Professor/Dean of Graduate School
Universiti Putra Malaysia

Date: **10 FEB 2000**

DECLARATION FORM

I hereby declare that the thesis is based on my original work except for quotations and citations   which have been duly acknowledged. I also declare that it has not been previously or concurrently submitted for any other degree at UPM or any other institutions.

VIJAY KUMAR MALLAN

31st December 1999.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ESL   English as a Second Language

L1   One's mother tongue or first language

L2   One's second language

SPM   Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia

TESL   Teaching of English as a Second Language

UPM   Universiti Putra Malaysia

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Background to the Research Problem

Writing is a significant communicative skill because it is an important means of communicating and recording what has been communicated. To write effectively, writers need to be communicatively competent with a diverse range of mental strategies, which may not be easily acquired. Even if one is proficient in a target language, the process of acquiring these strategies is still arduous and painstaking for ESL writers (Fernadez, 1992).

Until recently, researchers have relied on the end product of writing to give them an insight as to how the teaching of writing should be approached (Mishra, 1992). The focus on current research, however, is on the mental and cognitive processes involved in the production of the writing product as it was obvious that writing teachers could not intervene to guide or respond to students' writing as they themselves are unaware of what writing actually entails. Barritt & Kroll (1978),

1

Bereiter & Scardamalia (1987), Bracewell (1981), Cooper & Matsuhashi (1983), Flower & Hayes (1981), Frederiksen & Dominic (1981), Gregg & Steinberg (1980) and Martlew (1983) have advocated looking at writing right from the moment of its conception. This would enable the comprehension of the processes that writers experience in producing satisfactory pieces of written discourse. This change in focus from product to process had a strong influence on the teaching of writing (Carrell, 1987; Hairston, 1982; Krashen, 1984; Kroll, 1990; Raimes, 1983; Spack, 1984; Zamel, 1982, 1985, 1987).

The scenario in the Malaysian Education System seems to reflect an adherence to the thinking that was formulated in the last decade. A closer look at the English language syllabus (1987) reveals that the focus is still on the conventional methods of writing. Emphasis is placed on sentence sequencing, word order and grammar and the curriculum appears to be devoid of any reference to the development of cognitive thinking skills in writing.

The current Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) English paper requires students to be well equipped to write summaries and compositions. In comparison with the other skills, writing seems to be given more weightage. The Minister of Education (1999) announced on the 1st April that there was a decline in the standard of English in the 1998 SPM

English. Since writing seems to be the pivotal point on which SPM English relies on, the decline in the standard of English seems to indicate that many students may not have the necessary skills to write effectively. Perhaps, teachers may not be fully aware of what writing entails and the absence of this knowledge could have had an adverse influence on the students' writing ability.

In-depth studies of the writing strategies and processes of Malaysian English as Second Language (ESL) writers are still lacking. An ERIC search and University Microfiche International search did not yield any results pertaining to current research dealing with Malaysian tertiary level students. This study is therefore envisaged to provide some useful insight into the writing strategies of a particular group of Malaysian ESL students studying at the pre-university level.

Statement of the Problem

Over the years, writing has been categorised as either `good' or `bad'. A student who is able to write without making any grammatical mistakes is considered to have mastered the art of writing. His writing would be classified as excellent if it "has the characteristics of correctness, conciseness and clarity..." (Cooper, 1977: 1). Writing was evaluated based

only on the final product without considering the numerous processes that the student went through to "give birth to the final product" (ibid).

In the 1970's, researchers began looking beyond the product of writing to the different processes involved in writing. It was then discovered that there was more to look at in writing rather than the final product itself. It was found that writing was recursive in nature and that the writer had to go through a number of writing processes before producing a text. With this knowledge, researchers began a new era of research in composition.

The Malaysian scenario unfortunately seems to go back in time given that the English teacher appears to be still looking at the text and giving grades based on the end product. Students are seldom given guidance on the process of writing to enable them to become better writers. The lack of guidance on the part of the teachers however is understandable as teachers themselves have generally not been exposed to the concept of process writing and therefore are somewhat unaware of the different writing strategies that skilled writers use to produce pieces of writing.

Cognitive psychologists who see writing as a form of problem solving believe that writers should have the freedom not only to write what they want but also how they want to write it without any set patterns to follow.

If teachers understand the complexities involved in writing and the insights given by cognitive psychologists, (Bracewell, 1981; Cooper and Matsuhashi, 1983; Faigley et al., 1985; Gregg and Steinberg, 1980; Flower and Hayes, 1981; Martlew, 1983) they would be in a better position to impart effective writing skills to students.

In most classroom writing activities, teachers have been concerned with helping students to produce error-free writing that they have ignored another important aspect of writing: the purpose of writing - that is, "expressing ideas and conveying meaning" (Raimes, 1983: 261). Students have, therefore, come to view writing,

> only as a classroom exercise, something done to satisfy the English teacher and then tossed aside. Thus for most student-writers, writing becomes an isolated act, or a single audience and for the sole purpose of being graded, collected back and forgotten.
>
> (Hughey, et al., 1983:33)

It is essential for teachers to be acquainted with the strategies and skills that a writer essentially requires in producing a text. The student who aims to write effectively, needs guidance to organise his thoughts in a cohesive manner fusing both his ideas and language, particularly between meaning and his communicative goals. To write effectively, the writer needs to have the knowledge of the written language and also consciously

manipulate this knowledge. There is a need for the students to be aware of the cognitive and metacognitive skills involved in the writing task. As Martlew puts it:

> Metacognitive abilities reflect an ability to think and act deliberately. Metacognitive skills involve reflecting upon the properties of language, and in communicative terms, being able to select, evaluate, revise, and reject what is inappropriate in terms of a given situation.
>
> (1983:306-307)

It is also imperative that teachers of English familiarise themselves with cognitive and metacognitive strategies to assist and guide students to write effectively.

Research Questions

Based on the researcher's own classroom observation, writing in the Malaysian classroom appears to be an activity which is still not properly understood by most teachers. As such, this study tries to answer the following research questions:

1. What type of writing strategies do skilled writers use during composing?

2. What similarities and/or differences exist in the strategies used by these skilled writers?

3. How may the differences and/or similarities be classified and explained?

Objectives of the Study

The study aimed at describing the writing strategies of four skilled ESL writers of the 1997/98 first semester Teaching of English as a Second Language (TESL) Matriculation students. The participants of this study had completed their Form 5 and were acquainted with the new format of the English SPM examination that gives emphasis to writing. All the participants of this study had a distinction in their English at the SPM level, as this is one of the criteria needed to pursue a course in TESL. As such, for the purpose of this study, they were labelled as skilled writers by the researcher.

The objectives of the present study are:

1. to identify the strategies that skilled TESL Matriculation writers use while composing;

2. to ascertain if any similarities and/or differences exist in the strategies used by these skilled writers;

3. to classify the data and to compare it with existing taxonomies of writing strategies.

It is hoped that the findings of this study will provide some insight into the strategies of good writers and this knowledge could be used to assist the weaker writers. By knowing and understanding these strategies, teachers would be able to play a collaborative role as partners in guiding students to write effectively.

Theoretical Framework

In writing research, cognitive perspectives on learning and performance yielded models of writers' thinking during composing. These, have critically guided both research and classroom practices. The most influential of these is the one created by Flower and Hayes which suggested that writing is non linear and it flows recursively through a set of sub processes. This model and other cognitive models of composing by Bereiter and Scardamalia (1987) and Biggs (1988) have served as frameworks for research on the composing process.