UNIVERSITI PUTRA MALAYSIA

# ASSESSMENT OF DIRECT WRITING IN ESL CLASSROOMS IN SELECTED MALAYSIAN SECONDARY SCHOOLS

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FBMK 2006 9

# ASSESSMENT OF DIRECT WRITING IN ESL CLASSROOMS IN SELECTED MALAYSIAN SECONDARY SCHOOLS

By

NORMAH BINTI OTHMAN

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Thesis Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies Universiti Putra Malaysia, in Fulfilment of the Requirement for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

May 2006

## DEDICATION

Dedicated to my husband Haji Mohamed Sharif bin Haji Ab Rahim,

my beloved son Mohd Yusof bin Abdullah,

my mother Hajah Aishah binti Mohd Yunus,

my late father Othman bin Awang,

my brothers and sisters and their spouses,

my nephews and nieces.

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Abstract of thesis presented to the Senate of Universiti Putra Malaysia in fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

**ASSESSMENT OF DIRECT WRITING IN ESL CLASSROOMS IN SELECTED MALAYSIAN SECONDARY SCHOOLS**

By

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**May 2006**

**Chairman: Professor Chan Swee Heng, PhD**

**Faculty: Modern Languages and Communication**

The main aim of the present study was to investigate the use of classroom-based assessment procedures to test the efficacy of three scoring methods. The three scoring methods were tested on the scoring of direct writing. To obtain the data three phases of study were conducted in this research. The first phase was a survey research, the second phase was a correlational research, and the third phase was an ethnographic research. Each phase employed different methods of obtaining data. The results of the first phase showed that Malaysian ESL teachers who responded to the open form questionnaire did not refer to any specific scoring method for classroom assessment of guided writing, summary writing and continuous writing. Their main reference was the scoring method adopted from the Malaysian Examinations Syndicate, which was meant for the nationally standardised SPM Examination. The correlational research conducted in the second phase of the present study showed that there was a positive relationship of



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scores obtained from the 45 ESL teachers who used the three scoring methods to assess the three types of students' direct writing with the scores obtained from six expert raters. Apart from that the strengths and weaknesses of the scoring methods as verbalised by the 45 ESL teachers while they were assessing the writing samples, showed that each scoring method used had its own unique features for classroom assessment of direct writing. The results of the ethnographic research conducted in the third phase showed that all three ESL teachers who referred to three different scoring methods gave corrective feedback to their students. There was no significant difference in the effectiveness of the written feedback and feedback lessons given by these teachers. Students who responded to the questionnaire found that their teachers' feedback lessons had their own uniqueness depending on the scoring methods used. The findings from the third phase showed that classroom-based assessment of direct writing produced a beneficial backwash effect, for example there was a positive reaction shown by the students towards their teachers' feedback lessons.

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Abstrak tesis yang dikemukakan kepada Senat Universiti Putra Malaysia sebagai memenuhi keperluan untuk ijazah Doktor Falsafah

**PENTAKSIRAN BERASASKAN BILIK DARJAH HASIL PENULISAN PELAJAR DI BEBERAPA BUAH SEKOLAH MENENGAH DI MALAYSIA**

Oleh

**NORMAH BINTI OTHMAN**

**Mei 2006**

**Pengerusi: Professor Chan Swee Heng, PhD**

**Fakulti: Bahasa Moden dan Komunikasi**

Tujuan utama kajian ini ialah untuk menguji keberkesanan tiga skema permarkahan dalam pentaksiran berasaskan bilik darjah. Tiga skema permarkahan tersebut diuji ke atas hasil karangan pelajar. Untuk memperoleh data tiga fasa penyelidekan dijalankan. Fasa satu ialah kajian soal-selidek, fasa dua ialah kajian korelasi, dan fasa tiga ialah kajian etnografi. Dapatan dari fasa satu menunjukkan bahawa guru Bahasa Inggeris di Malaysia tidak menggunakan skema permarkahan yang spesifik untuk pentaksiran karangan berpandu, ringkasan karangan dan karangan esei di peringkat bilik darjah. Sebaliknya mereka hanya menggunakan skema permarkahan yang di cedok dari Lembaga Peperiksaan Malaysia, yang sepatutnya digunakan untuk menilai peperiksaan SPM. Dapatan dari fasa dua kajian ini pula menunjukkan bahawa terdapat hubungan positif antara skor yang diperoleh dari 45 orang guru Bahasa Inggeris yang menggunakan skema permarkahan holistik, analitik dan tret primer untuk



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menilai ketiga-tiga jenis karangan berbanding dengan skor yang diperoleh dari enam penilai pakar. Selain itu protokol lisan yang direkod ketika 45 orang guru Bahasa Inggeris memeriksan ketiga-tiga jenis karangan tersebut menunjukkan bahawa setiap skema permarkahan mempunyai keunikannya tersendiri untuk pentaksiran ketiga-tiga jenis karangan diperingkat bilik darjah. Akhirnya dapatan dari fasa tiga ini juga menunjukkan bahawa ketiga-tiga guru Bahasa Inggeris menggunakan teknik pembetulan apabila memeriksa dan mengajar dalam bilik darjah. Tiada perbezaan ketara dari segi keberkesanan pengajaran ketiga-tiga guru tersebut. Pelajar memberi respon bahawa setiap guru yang mengajar menunjukkan keunikannya tersendiri bergantung kepada skema permarkahan yang digunakan. Dapatan kajian ini juga membuktikan bahawa penilaian bilik darjah menyumbang kepada kesan rentetan positif, misalnya pelajar memberi respon yang positif terhadap pengajaran guru.

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS/NOTATIONS/GLOSSARY OF TERMS

| | |
|---|---|
| ESL | English as a Second Language |
| UPSR | Ujian Pencapaian Sekolah Rendah. This is a standardised national examination for Year Six primary school students in Malaysia |
| PMR | Penilaian Menengah Rendah. This is a standardised national examination for Form Three students at the lower secondary schools in Malaysia |
| SPM | Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia. This is a standardised national examination for Form Five students at the upper secondary schools in Malaysia |
| STPM | Sijil Tinggi Pendidikan Malaysia. This is a standardised national examination for Form Six students at the upper secondary schools in Malaysia |
| MUET | Malaysian University English Test. This is a test made compulsory for students who want to enter the universities in Malaysia |
| Lembaga Peperiksaan Malaysia | Malaysian Examinations Syndicate |
| Form Four ESL students | Upper secondary school students in Malaysia. These students have taken the PMR examination when they were in Form Three a year before. They will be sitting for the SPM examination when they are in Form Five a year later. |
| ESL teachers | Teachers who teach English as a Second Language in Malaysian schools |
| Expert Raters | ESL teachers who have experience teaching and assessing students' writing for more than ten years. They were also trained by the Malaysian Examinations Syndicate to assess the English Language Papers in the SPM Examination. Teachers at schools always referred to them for guidance and consultation in the assessment of writing. They are the professional cadres in the assessment of students' written work. |



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| | |
|---|---|
| Classroom-based tests | Classroom teachers conduct these kinds of tests for their own students and in their own time. Normally they are instructed by their school administrators to conduct these tests monthly. |
| School-based examination | Standardised examination at the school level, which is the fourth highest level, immediately after the classroom tests. In this type of examination, all classes in the school sit for the same examination at the same time. Normally, it is held at the end of the year or at the end of a semester. |
| District-based examination | Standardised examination at the district level in Malaysia, which is the third highest level. The district consists of many schools. In this type of examination all schools in the district sit for the same examination at the same time. |
| State-based examination | Standardised examination at the state level in Malaysia, which is the second highest level. The state consists of many districts in Malaysia. In this type of examination all schools in the same state sit for the same examination at the same time. |
| Nation-based examination | Standardised examination at the national level in Malaysia, which is the highest level. The standardised examinations at this level are the UPSR, PMR, SPM, STPM and MUET. |
| Head of English Panel | The ESL teacher who heads the other ESL teachers in a school. He or she is not referred to as the head of department because a language department in a school also represents other languages besides English |
| Key personnel | ESL teachers who are appointed by the district or state Education Officers in Malaysia to provide extra training for new ESL teachers and to conduct courses related to ESL. They are the experts who are specially selected based on their outstanding performance in teaching |
| Daily exercises | Daily written or oral tasks and practices that classroom teachers give to their students in their classrooms' activities |



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# CHAPTER 1

# INTRODUCTION

Direct writing requires students to write in reasonable length, which teachers often use to assess their language performance. This is different from indirect writing, which could involve the use of multiple-choice questions, in which students are not required to write at length. Guided writing, summary writing and continuous writing are the three types of direct writing that require students to write differently. These three different types of writing test students' ability to understand and use correct grammar, to apply language skills for interpersonal purposes, to apply language skills for informational purposes, and to apply language skills for aesthetic purposes (Malaysian Examinations Syndicate, 2004).

Students need to do well in the three types of direct writing as these three writing tasks require skills that can be applied to real life needs. As stated by Takala (1988), written language has always played a dominant role in formal education. Typically, the acquisition of literacy (expressed through written means) is considered to be one of the most important tasks of the school, not only as a vehicle of learning, but as a means of achieving other goals as well. Students through their school life are assessed on their writing ability, both at school level and also in national standardised examinations. Various assessment systems are used depending on the writing task and the type of examinations.

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At the *Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia* level, the fifth form standardised exit examination, selected ESL teachers assess the English papers. The Malaysian Examinations Syndicate trains these teachers to assess the papers and they use a specific scoring method. In schools the assessment is naturally left to the classroom teachers who teach and assess writing. They also prepare their students to sit for the SPM Examination. These teachers are not given any specific scoring methods to assess their students' writing carried out as classroom activities.

There are, in fact, many types of scoring methods available for teachers to refer to when they assess their students' writing tasks. Each scoring method is different from the other in the sense that each has different criteria for assessing students' writing product. For example, the holistic scoring method looks at a student's written product generally and does not analyse the student's performance in detail, whereas the analytic scoring method looks into the details of the writing performance. ESL teachers can make use of both scoring methods for classroom-based assessments to assess their students' writing performances with different scoring perspectives in mind.

Since different scoring methods have different ways of looking into students' writing performances, the present study designed three scoring methods for classroom-based assessments of guided writing, summary writing and continuous writing in order to examine the efficacy of each method. The three scoring methods designed were the holistic scoring method, the analytic scoring method



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and the primary trait scoring method. The subjects chosen for the present study were ESL teachers who taught at secondary schools in Malaysia. The present study investigated how these ESL teachers assessed guided writing, summary writing and continuous writing during classroom-based activities. The backwash effect of the assessment was examined by observing how these teachers gave written feedback, how they conducted feedback lessons based on their assessment, and how their students responded to the feedback lessons from their ESL teachers.

### 1.1 Background of the Study

There is no specific scoring strategy implemented specially for a classroom-based assessment of direct writing in Malaysian secondary schools. As it is now, ESL teachers currently use a scoring method adopted from the Malaysian Examinations Syndicate. There is a need for a validation of classroom assessment especially when there is a move to decrease emphasis given to formal examinations. This is to ensure that optimal learning environment is provided for students in the classrooms.

Rabinowitz (2001) analysed the observations made by Koehler, who was a policy director of education in America, on the ideal relationship between state and local assessment procedures in America. Koehler had reported that "neither the state nor the local district fully appreciates the pressures and responsibilities the other faces". Hence, Koehler had insisted that the state and the local assessment systems should fully understand each other's roles and limitations, instead of



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being at odds with each other. He had added that both systems should try not to replicate each other, but should build systems that complemented each other. Rabinowitz took into consideration the observations made by Koehler and suggested that both assessment systems should contain certain attributes that complemented each other.

Stiggins (2002), who shared the same opinion as Rabinowitz, found that the differences between local and state assessments had caused an assessment crisis. They supported the implementation of specific assessment tools for classroom-based activities. The present study took the suggestions given by these two researchers into consideration in proposing a validation of scoring strategies for a classroom-based assessment of direct writing in Malaysian secondary schools (see Figure 1.1). This is for the improvement of classroom-based assessments and thus also for students' learning process.

The present study was concerned about ESL students' direct writing performance at Form Four and Form Five levels. At these levels the students are preparing to leave school to continue their further studies at higher institutions of learning. Since it is important for the students to do well in the writing tasks, it is also important for ESL teachers to assess their students' writing efficiently and accurately to ensure that their assessments depict correctly the students' performance in writing.



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**Figure 1.1**
**Improvements for Classroom Assessment**

| | Rabinowitz's (2001) suggestions | Stiggin's (2002) suggestions |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | Upgrade classroom-based assessment | Understand that it is necessary to teach the achievement targets that students are to hit |
| 2 | Provide information about more detailed assessments to all students | Inform students about the learning goals that they would need to perform well |
| 3 | Provide alternative assessment tools to support teaching and learning | Become assessment literate in order to transform expectations into assessment exercises and scoring procedures that accurately reflect students' achievement |
| 4 | Devise classroom-based assessment regardless of the instruments chosen | Translate classroom assessment results into frequent descriptive feedback for students |

*Source: Adapted from Rabinowitz (2001) and Stiggins (2002)*

ESL teachers' assessment of students' writing can greatly influence students' attitudes for future learning because students can be easily confused by unclear, vague or ambiguous responses and can become frustrated with their writing progress and their preparation for their examinations. Alternatively, students can be positively motivated if the assessments given to their classroom written work can help predict their actual performance in the national level examinations. Unfortunately, a clear set of universal guidelines does not exist that guarantees such a supportive and positive experience for all students. In a given context for writing instructions, students will differ, and tasks, topics, and responses will differ (Grabe and Kaplan, 1996: 377).



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Schoolteachers may be using different ways and methods to assess their students' writing tasks, depending on the instructions given by their school authorities. Cohen (1994:312) stated that writers or students and teachers or raters differed in many notions related to the assessment of writing. He quoted Ruth and Murphy who said that student writers would differ in their notions about the significance of particular features of the topic. Hence, student writers might construct different writing tasks for themselves at different stages in their development. Apart from that, students and their teachers (raters) differed in their recognition and interpretation of salient points in a writing topic (with teachers having a wealth of professional experience in the evaluation of writing while students had only their own experience as test takers).

A study, which looked into different assessment of writing performance and their score relationship was carried out by Swartz, Hooper, Montgomery, Wakely, et al (1999). The researchers used the generalisability theory to estimate the reliability of writing scores derived from holistic and analytical scoring methods. Hayes, Hatch and Silk (2000) studied the consistency of student performance on holistically scored writing assignments and Johnson, Penny and Gordon (2001) studied score resolution and the inter-rater reliability of holistic scores in rating essays. The details of these studies are discussed in Chapter Two. Despite the many studies conducted that pertained to the relationship between writing assessment and scoring, Crehan and Hudson (2001) who compared two scoring strategies for performance assessments, stated that unresolved concerns remained



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for the more basic issues of objective and reliable scoring of performance assessments, especially for writing products.

The present study was concerned about the scoring procedures used for classroom-based assessments of direct writing in Malaysian secondary schools. It proposed three scoring methods for classroom-based assessments of guided writing, summary writing and continuous writing. The three scoring methods chosen were the holistic scoring method, the analytic scoring method and the primary trait scoring method.

**1.2 Statement of Problem**

There had been complaints about the education system in Malaysia being too exam-oriented. The education system is so exam-oriented that it has forced many students into rote learning and memorising just to score. This is said to have greatly reduced creativity and our ability to understand and analyse things (Darshan and Ong, 2003). One of the ways to lessen the formal examination emphasis is through the introduction of school-based oral assessment for all levels of secondary and primary schools. This was announced by the then Director-General of Education, Datuk Abdul Rafie Mahat, after the closing ceremony of the National Assessment Seminar, which was held in May 2003, organised by the Malaysian Examinations Syndicate.



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