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USE OF LEXICAL CHUNK APPROACH IN TEACHING WRITING

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By

RAZALINA ISMAIL

**Thesis Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies, Universiti Putra Malaysia,
in Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Science**

September 2015

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Abstract of thesis presented to the Senate of Universiti Putra Malaysia in fulfilment
of the requirement for the Degree of Master of Science

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RAZALINA ISMAIL

September 2015

Chairperson : Habsah bt. Hussin, PhD

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The objectives of this study were to investigate how the lexical chunk approach can be used in teaching writing to KPTM students, improve their performance in writing skill and determine students' perception of the lexical chunk approach in writing. This is a descriptive study that combined both qualitative and quantitative designs. A total of 48 students taking diploma courses at Kolej Poly-Tech Mara, Bangi were selected as sample using purposive sampling method. The field work carried out for twelve weeks. The instruments used in this study include written test taken from question bank, interview and demographic questionnaire which had been validated by two experienced lecturers. Prior to the actual research work, a pilot study was carried out using 15 KPTM students. In answering the first research question, thorough explanation on how the lexical chunk approach was taught in writing class was given, including the teaching materials used in accomplishing the mission. For the second research question, it was clear that the students managed to write good and comprehensible sentences using lexical chunks, apart from being exposed to new chunks of words and other useful words and phrase for their essay. The ferment treatment using the lexical chunk approach taught to the students was found to have successfully helped them give good input in their essays. To answer the last research question on the students' perception in the use of the lexical chunk approach in writing, two students were randomly selected from each group (low, average and high scores). All the interviewees gave good and positive feedback on the lexical chunk approach introduced to them although some of them claimed that they had difficulties in learning to use this approach at the beginning. The thesis is concluded by giving implications and suggestions for future study.

Abstrak tesis yang dikemukakan kepada Senat Universiti Putra Malaysia sebagai memenuhi keperluan untuk Ijazah Master Sains

PENGGUNAAN PENDEKATAN ‘*LEXICAL CHUNK*’ DALAM PENGAJARAN PENULISAN

Oleh

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Objektif kajian ini adalah untuk menyiasat bagaimana pendekatan ‘lexical chunk’ boleh digunakan dalam pengajaran penulisan kepada pelajar KPTM, meningkatkan prestasi mereka dalam kemahiran menulis dan menyiasat persepsi pelajar terhadap pendekatan ‘lexical chunk’ dalam penulisan. Kajian ini merupakan kajian deskriptif yang menggabungkan kedua-dua reka bentuk kualitatif dan kuantitatif. Seramai 48 pelajar yang mengambil kursus diploma di Kolej Poly-Tech Mara, Bangi telah dipilih sebagai sampel dengan menggunakan kaedah persampelan bertujuan. Kerja lapangan dijalankan selama dua belas minggu. Instrumen yang digunakan dalam kajian ini ialah ujian yang diambil dari bank soalan, temu bual dan soal selidik demografi yang telah disahkan oleh dua pensyarah yang berpengalaman dalam pengajaran Bahasa Inggeris. Sebelum kerja-kerja penyelidikan sebenar, kajian rintis telah dijalankan dengan menggunakan 15 orang pelajar KPTM. Dalam menjawab persoalan kajian yang pertama, penjelasan menyeluruh mengenai bagaimana pendekatan ‘lexical chunk’ telah diajar di dalam kelas penulisan telah diberikan, termasuk bahan-bahan pengajaran yang digunakan dalam mencapai misi. Bagi persoalan kajian kedua, ia adalah jelas bahawa pelajar berjaya menulis ayat yang baik dan mudah difahami menggunakan pendekatan ‘lexical chunk’, selain daripada terdedah kepada ‘lexical chunk’ dan kata-kata lain dan frasa yang berguna untuk esei mereka. Dengan pendekatan ‘lexical chunk’ diajar kepada pelajar didapati telah berjaya membantu mereka memberi input yang baik dalam karangan mereka. Untuk menjawab persoalan kajian yang terakhir iaitu persepsi pelajar dalam penggunaan pendekatan sebahagian leksikal secara bertulis, dua pelajar telah dipilih secara rawak daripada setiap kumpulan (skor rendah, skor sederhana dan skor tinggi). Semua yang ditemubual memberikan maklum balas yang baik dan positif kepada pendekatan ‘lexical chunk’ diperkenalkan kepada mereka walaupun ada antara mereka mendakwa bahawa mereka mempunyai kesukaran dalam pembelajaran untuk menggunakan pendekatan ini pada permulaan. Tesis ini membuat kesimpulan dengan memberi implikasi dan cadangan untuk kajian masa depan.

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This thesis was submitted to the Senate of Universiti Putra Malaysia and has been accepted as fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of Master of Science. The members of the Supervisory Committee were as follows:

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

English is a global language used widely around the world. In the present situation, with economic development and cultural globalisation, English is important for self-expression (Johnstone, 1996; Jerry, 2009; Xuesong, 2010), self-development (Wismono, 2013; Olusoji, 2012; Gebhard, 2006), and mutual communications (Morreale, Osborn, & Pearson, 2000; Ingram & Sasaki, 2003; Thanky, 2014).

The present education system of this country requires that a student starts his basic education at the age of seven and above for six years in primary schools and subsequently another five years in secondary schools. Although Malaysian students have been exposed to English language from the age of seven, they still have problems using and learning this language (Isarji, Ainol, Mohamed Sahari, & Mohd Azmi, 2008; Nor Hashimah, Norsimah, & Kesumawati, 2008). This can be attributed to the fact that most students fail to understand the importance of the English language as their medium of communication (Nor Azmi, 2002). English is a very important language as it is the second most widely used communicative language in Malaysia (Gill, 2002; Jantmary & Melor Md Yunus, 2014).

The establishment of national-type schools comprising schools teaching in native language not only focuses on teaching the native language but also places the importance of English language in their syllabus. The importance of the English language has been given further consideration when the government outlines it as a compulsory subject for all levels of education in Malaysia (Vinodini, 2003). The use of English as the second language at universities in Malaysia is strictly emphasised (Tollefson & Tsui, 2009). Most of the subjects and courses in universities and colleges are taught and conducted in English to prepare students for the long journey in securing jobs once they graduate (Kadzrina Abdul Kadir & Wan Shakizah, 2015). Although English language is important, it remains unpopular among some students who have no interest to master it. Meanwhile, efforts by the government to popularise the English language are ongoing and done through various methods of implementation (Mohd Faisal, 2004).

1.1.1 Importance of Writing

Basically, listening, writing, reading and speaking are the four important skills required in mastering a second language. From all these skills, more focus needs to be placed on the writing skill as it is a very difficult one to master (Chitravelu, Sithamparam, & Teh, 2005; Yanfeng, 2009; Cheah, 2009; Abdel Hamid, 2010; Haiwen, 2012; Yuru, 2012). According to Kress (1997), writing is a two-step process; initially second language learners need to figure out the meaning before

comprehending the language by figuring out what they want to say and finally how to put it into writing.

In Malaysia, examinations in schools are held at different levels of education to determine the next step in a student's educational quest and one of the main examinations in Malaysia is Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) examination, in which form five secondary school students are assessed. The SPM examination is a stepping stone for a student to continue his or her studies at Sijil Tinggi Persekolahan Malaysia (STPM) level or to seek admission to higher learning institutions. The SPM examination is a barrier and a standard set by the Ministry of Education for all students to cross in order to continue their studies at higher education institutions. In SPM English examination paper (English 1119), writing carries a larger percentage. Accordingly, paper 1 of SPM English 1119 is divided into two parts; the first part is focused on directed writing, which carries 35% of the total mark, and the second part is continuous writing task that carries another 50% of the total mark. So, the low score combined from the marks obtained for writing will definitely affect the overall performance for the English 1119 paper (Nooreiny & Mazlin, 2013). Overall, the SPM examination in Malaysia is important as it determines a student's future academic studies in higher institutions.

Writing plays a significant role in a student's life, particularly for the preparation of essays, texts, and resumes for jobs. Equally important is that the writing skill also helps them prepare for interviews for their future career. Furthermore, writing skill is necessary for writing notes and attending meetings, preparing reports and other commitments that are required in the working environment. Most of the correspondence, mail and meetings in the working sector are written in English as the main language for communication between agencies, and this further emphasise the important role of writing in getting works done apart from the communication skills (Ong, Leong, & Singh, 2011).

It is a known fact that most foreigners seeking jobs in Malaysia are from poor countries with most of them speaking only a bit of English and that the only option to communicate with them is in English. Without the necessary writing skills that are needed in the working environment, it may be difficult for professionals to communicate ideas with colleagues or give presentations efficiently. The importance and proper use of writing in English is a major skill that high technology companies are looking for in their new hires (Siti Hamin Stapa, Tg. Nor Rizan, Rosniah Mustaffa, & Saadiyah Darus, 2008).

In finding new challenges for students to excel in their writing skills, effective measures need to be taken to help students to improve their writing. A simple grammatical or a wrong choice of vocabulary can give a wrong impression of a written sentence, leading to misinterpretation or wrong information of a text (Nadia Hanim, 2012; Somchai & Siriluck, 2013). When there are less activities and poor methods are used for teaching writing with dependence on outdated text-books,

lessons can be less interesting and boring for students and thus slow down their pace for progress in writing (Moulton, 1994).

1.1.2 Students at Kolej Poly-Tech MARA (KPTM) Bangi

Kolej Poly-Tech MARA (KPTM) was established as a private higher educational institution in September 2003. KPTM is a wholly owned subsidiary of Majlis Amanah Rakyat (MARA). KPTM has nine branches in Malaysia.

KPTM Bangi offers Diploma in Accounting and Business. In order to gain admission into KPTM, students need to have at least three credits in any subjects in their *Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia* (SPM). Most of the students at KPTM Bangi are Malays (98%).

The subjects taught at KPTM are mostly conducted in English; therefore, it is important to put these students on the right track in learning the English language before commencing the long journey in seeking the best education from this college. As all correspondence and instructions are also done in English, there is a need to prepare them in acquiring the English language.

The problem with these students is that they have low proficiency in English language especially in writing. Based on the analysis of students' marks for Proficiency English II (HPE1023) for two semesters [Appendix 1A (i-iv)], the results can be regarded as unsatisfactory. The average grade obtained in July 2002 was grade 'C+' and this was grade 'C' in January 2013. Moreover, according to KPTM lecturers who marked students' HPE1023 past final essays, the proficiency of most students is below the level of English being taught at the college. They also added that these students have poor knowledge of English vocabulary, simply translate from Malay to English and they lacked the knowledge of proper use of grammar, vocabulary and words; therefore, there is an urgent need to help these students to improve on their writing skills.

1.1.3 The Lexical Chunk Approach in Teaching Writing

Lexical chunk is basically an approach that involves the use of chunks of words in our daily life. Ever since Michael Lewis wrote and published a book entitled, 'Lexical Approach' in 1993, many parties have come out with a perfect notion of the lexical chunks, but to no avail. It is in fact another strategy to the many strategies used in the teaching of the second language.

With so many problems in English writing, the lexical approach has proven to be a new, effective and beneficial way to guide and improve students' writing (Runjiang, Zan, & Yan, 2012). The lexical approach works as an ideal memory model to increase the knowledge of the number of words stored at any time that in turn helps students in storing these words longer for use in vocabulary teaching and learning

(Wu & Wang, 2002). Nonetheless, lexical chunks may help learners in enhancing their language accuracy and fluency (Ying, 2009).

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Most Malaysian students possess low proficiency especially in writing skill (Saadiyah Darus & Subramaniam, 2009; Wendy, 2012). Writing is an important experience through which we are able to express ourselves, share ideas and experiences, persuade and convince other people to read and review our ideas (White, 1991). Writing is a difficult skill to teach and teachers are having problems to teach writing (Jingwei, 2012; Akinwamide, 2012; Nadia Hanim, 2012). Despite being taught English from the early stage of a student's life, some are still in dilemma and facing problems in writing and mastering it due to various reasons (Rahilly, 2004; Martin, 2010).

In Malaysia, several studies have been done on the writing problems faced by Diploma students. Among other, Yah Awg Nik, Azizah Hamzah and Hasif Rafidee (2010) studied on the problems pertaining to writing faced by undergraduates. The results showed that the students have problems in the language use which include grammar, sentence construction, tenses, word order, etc. Another study by Nadia Hanim (2012) investigated on the difficulties faced by diploma students at Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) in writing. The results of Nadia Hanim's (2012) study showed that the students have problems as they have limited ideas and knowledge in contents, grammatical errors, limited choice of vocabulary, etc. Similar problems are also faced by polytechnic students (Kho, Wong, & Chuah, 2013). According to Kho et al. (2013), the diploma students at polytechnic often translate from Malay to English, are unable to use correct words and tenses, and have poor command of grammar, etc.

Based on the findings highlighted in the studies above, it can be concluded that most diploma students in Malaysia have problems in writing. Ironically, these problems still persist in spite of various efforts done to overcome them. If no positive steps such as introducing and using new approaches or techniques to improve writing, these problems can never be overcome (Neda Ghabool, Marian Edwina, & Seyyed Hossein, 2012).

One of the approaches that can be used in teaching writing is the lexical chunk approach. Some studies have been done on the use of the lexical chunk approach in improving students' writing in Algeria (Mounya, 2010) and in China (Ying, 2009; Lixia, 2010; Lee, 2010 and others). In Malaysia, there are studies on lexical chunks in speaking (Nazira Osman & Kamaruzaman Jusoff, 2009), reading (Ong & Yuen, 2014), but not many studies have been conducted on the use of the lexical chunk approach in writing. However, there are studies on the lexical chunks categories such as collocation (Siti Salwani, 2009; Ang, Hajar Abdul Rahim, Tan, Khazriyati Salehuddin, 2011), phrasal verbs (Rafidah Kamarudin, 2013) done in Malaysia. With the limited studies being done on lexical chunks in writing thus far, there is a need

for relevant measures to ensure successful implementation of the lexical chunk approach on a larger scale in Malaysia.

1.3 Research Objectives

The objectives of conducting this study are to:

- (i) investigate how the lexical chunk approach can be used in teaching writing to KPTM students.
- (ii) investigate how the lexical chunk approach can improve students' performance in writing skill.
- (iii) determine the students' perceptions of learning the lexical chunk approach in writing.

1.4 Research Questions

- (i) How the lexical chunk approach can be used in teaching writing to KPTM students?
- (ii) How the lexical chunk approach can improve students' performance in writing skill?
- (iii) What are the students' perceptions of learning the lexical chunk approach in writing?

1.5 Significance of the Study

The findings of this study can be beneficial to provide better ways for lecturers at KPTM to teach their students writing rather than using the same available approaches every semester. The introduction of the lexical chunk approach in teaching and learning English can make writing more interesting, thus taking some burdens off the lectures in teaching English and making writing a much easier skill to learn.

At the same time, the findings can be beneficial to the Head of Language Department, particularly in discussing with the administrative units to arrange workshops and in-service trainings on the lexical chunk approach for lectures. KPTM Bangi can be a pioneer to these workshops and in-service trainings for lecturers before spreading out the initiative to other lecturers at other KPTM branches all over the nation.

1.6 Limitations of the Study

This study investigated the use of the lexical chunk approach in writing. Therefore, it is important to highlight the limitations of the current study.

One of the limitations is that the study was only confined to KPTM Bangi students and not those in other colleges or universities throughout Malaysia. Additional opportunities such as having easy access to own students were considered in ensuring that the research was a success (Taber, 2013).

Moreover, the students selected for this study were those in semester two taking Proficiency English II (HPE1023) and were required to write a full essay of around 200-250 words in their final examination. This is different from semester one, where there students were required to write a short article of about 50 to 60 words in their final examination. Therefore, the results of the study cannot be applied to or generalised to other samples or groups of students who are not related to this study.

1.7 Definition of Terms

The key words used in this study are essay writing, lexical chunks, collocation, sentence frames and heads, and poly-words.

1.7.1 Essay writing

Essay writing is a formally and specifically structured piece of writing supporting the topic based on ideas and information (Brown, 2002). Essays in this study were used in the pre-test and post-test analyses and the topics selected are the same for both the experimental and control groups. The topics of the essays were taken from the question bank and the length of the essays is between 200-250 words.

1.7.2 Lexical chunk approach

In recent years, the lexical chunk approach has been used in the teaching of foreign language, where more emphasis is placed on the cultivation of students' proficiency with lexis or words, and combination of words. According to Lewis (1997), the lexical chunk approach is based on the idea that the ability to acquire a language involves the ability to comprehend and produce lexical chunks as unanalysed wholes. Lewis's teaching approach applying lexical chunks is termed as the "lexical approach". The main point of applying the lexical approach is to learn lexical chunks by storing them in memory and using them frequently to enable language learners to improve (Nattinger & DeCarrico, 1992). This will also increase their ability to achieve accuracy and fluency in their writing.

1.7.3 Lexical chunks

Lexical chunk is a collective chunks of words that can be used in our daily life, particularly in writing and communication. As mentioned by Islam and Timmis (2005), lexical chunks can be defined as any pair or group of words which comes collectively. In other words, lexical chunks are rote-learned word groups or chunks of words (Myles, Hooper, & Mitchell, 1998). There are different types of lexical

chunks from different perspectives. According to Nattinger and DeCarrico (1992), there are four types of lexical chunks namely polywords, institutional expressions, sentence builders and phrasal constraints (refer Table 2.2). Meanwhile, Michael Lewis (1993) mentioned four types of lexical chunks, which are polywords, collocations, institutionalised utterances and sentence frames and heads (refer Table 2.3). In this study, lexical chunks are used by resorting to the use of lexical chunks in language, planning ideas and are an asset in composing essays to produce longer and more detailed plans and drafts, thus resulting in better written essays in terms of ideas and language. The use of lexical chunks in this concept can be considered as a simpler and easier method to use in teaching writing in English.

1.7.4 Collocation

Collocation is one category of the lexical chunks used in this study. Collocation refers to certain words that are used or strung together such as *'toast bread'*, *'grill or boil meat'*, etc. (Jameel Qasim, 2008). According to Lewis (1993), to know words fortified with collocation components and use them would benefit a lot in mastering their collocation range. Collocation has several categories; these include: verb + adverb (example: *drive carefully*), noun + verb (example: *dogs bark*), fixed order (example: *knife and fork*), verb + noun (example: *shake hand*), adjective + noun (example: *bright red*) and adverb + adjective (example: *horribly expensive*).

1.7.5 Sentence frames and heads

Sentence frames and heads are also one of the categories of lexical chunks. It is a framework for a sentence (Lewis, 1993). In this study, Lewis's classification of sentence frame and head was used in order to help students to have the correct framework in stringing sentences. For example, *'I love reading books because'*. In other words, a framework of a sentence is given and it will guide them to complete the sentence.

1.7.6 Polywords

Polywords form another category of lexical chunk. Polywords are words that have short phrases and the same functions as individual words (Nattinger & DeCarrico, 1992). There are a wide variety of polywords such as relater, summariser and many more.

Example: Relater : *'for that matter'*
 Summariser : *'all in all'*

1.7.7 Phrasal Constrains

Phrasal constrains are short to medium length phrases, allowing variation of lexical and phrasal categories and associated with many functions (Nattinger & DeCarrico, 1992).

Example: **timing:** *'a...ago'*
 apologising: *'sorry about...'*
 partings: *'see you then/see you later'*
 relator: *'.....as well as.....'*

1.8 Summary

The background of the study discusses that among the four skills of listening, writing, reading, and speaking, writing is among the most difficult skills to master. Although Malaysian students have been exposed to the English language from early age, they still have problems using and learning this language. In this study, Kolej Poly-Tech Mara (KPTM)'s students were involved in this study. These students have a low level of proficiency in English, especially in their writing. The statement of the problem for this study was that writing is a difficult skill to teach and teachers are having problems to teach writing in English. In Malaysia, several other studies have been done on the writing problems among diploma students. Nonetheless, very limited studies have been conducted on the lexical chunk approach. There are three objectives outlined in this study. These were to investigate on how the lexical chunk approach can be used in teaching writing to KPTM students; to investigate how the lexical chunk approach can improve students' writing and to determine their perception of learning the lexical chunk approach in writing. The findings of this study can be beneficial to KPTM lecturers and Head of Language Department at KPTM. In addition, the definitions of specific terms have also been delineated. The following chapter will review some existing literature on the use of the lexical chunk approach in writing.

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