



UNIVERSITI PUTRA MALAYSIA

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

MARGARET RAJOO

FBMK 1999 8

**WRITING STRATEGIES OF LESS SKILLED ESL WRITERS:
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By

Margaret Rajoo

**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
FOR THEIR FAITH IN ME;**

**MY HUSBAND
FOR HIS
SUPPORT AND ENCOURAGEMENT
IN EVERY POSSIBLE WAY**

AND

**MY TWO CHARMING SONS,
JONATHAN VINOOTH KUMAR
AND
JEREMIAH VINESH KUMAR
WHO HAVE BEEN
A CONSTANT INSPIRATION TO ME
TO COMPLETE THIS TASK**

**Abstract of thesis presented to the Senate of Universiti Putra Malaysia in
fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.**

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

Faculty: Modern Languages and Communication

This study describes the writing strategies of less skilled ESL writers in the TESL Matriculation programme of University Putra Malaysia. This study contains elements of cognitive development research that look into the mental process of individuals involving the process of utilising language, and the personality of the writer. The study used writers' think-aloud protocols which provide valuable insights into the on-going cognitive and metacognitive processes and strategies that writers engage in while writing. In addition, writers' completed essays were also used as data base for analysis and discussion.

The researcher presents the writing strategies of the four writers that were identified and appraises the results of the writing strategies of these writers using the Flower and Hayes' (1981a) Cognitive Process Model of Composing. Analysis of the data revealed that although a significant number of writing strategies identified in this study were uniformly distributed among all the four less skilled ESL writers of this study, some strategies, however, were unique to one or two writers only.

The study also revealed that while some of the writing strategies of less skilled ESL writers identified support earlier findings of previous related studies, there are others that failed to concur with the findings of previous related studies.

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

**STRATEGI PENULISAN PENULIS-PENULIS KURANG MAHIR:
ANALISIS PROTOKOL**

Oleh

MARGARET RAJOO

Oktober 1999

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

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Kajian ini menghuraikan penggunaan strategi penulisan di kalangan penulis kurang mahir yang terdapat dalam penggunaan Bahasa Inggeris sebagai Bahasa Kedua di program Matrikulasi TESL di Universiti Putra Malaysia. Kajian ini mengandungi elemen perkembangan kognitif yang menjurus kepada proses mental individu yang melibatkan proses penggunaan bahasa dan personaliti penulis. Kajian ini menggunakan protokol luahan fikiran yang menyumbang maklumat tentang proses kognitif dan metakognitif yang berterusan yang digunakan semasa aktiviti penulisan. Tambahan pula, karangan penulis digunakan sebagai bahan data untuk analisa dan perbincangan.

Penyelidik mengemukakan strategi penulisan yang dikenalpasti dan membuat analisa tentang kaedah penulisan berdasarkan Model Penulisan Proses Kognitif Flower dan Hayes (1981a). Analisa kajian ini mendedahkan bahawa walaupun kebanyakan strategi penulisan yang dikenalpasti lumrah kepada semua penulis, terdapat juga beberapa strategi penulisan yang unik kepada seorang atau dua penulis sahaja.

Walaupun kajian ini menunjukkan bahawa beberapa strategi penulisan penulis-penulis kurang mahir yang dikenalpasi melalui kajian ini menyokong dapatan kajian-kajian lepas, terdapat juga beberapa strategi penulisan yang tidak selaras dengan dapatan kajian-kajian lepas yang berkaitan.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to express my sincerest gratitude to the members of my supervisory committee for their dedication and commitment in ensuring the successful completion of this thesis: Associate Professor Dr. Sali Zaliha Mustapha, the chairperson who inspired this research with much patience, kindness and wisdom; Dr. Faiz Abdullah and Puan Ain Nadzimah Abdullah for their insightful comments and thoughtful recommendations.

I am also full of gratitude to the UPM TESL Matriculation students who willingly participated in this study.

Finally, my heartfelt gratitude goes to my husband who put his own interests, comfort and work aside to help me attend to mine; and to our two sons, Jonathan Vinoth Kumar and Jeremiah Vinesh Kumar, who made do with the little time I spent with them.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

UPM	Universiti Putra Malaysia
ESL	English as a Second Language
L1	one's mother tongue or first language
L2	one's second language
SPM	Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia
STM	Short Term Memory
TESL	Teaching of English as a Second Language

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Background to the Research Problem

Speaking and writing are probably the two language skills that most reflect a student's proficiency in a language. Between these two skills, writing would appear to be more important because writing is given more weightage during assessment of a student's proficiency. The methods in the product approach presently used in our classrooms have proven to be limited as they focus more on form than on the process of writing (Fernandez, 1992).

The great emphasis on the accuracy of grammar in the Malaysian education system makes 'error free' writing a very important consideration in the writing of composition. The product becomes the main focus and as a result students are often caught in a dilemma. They want to produce good, interesting writing, yet they are conscious and fearful of making grammatical errors. This fear causes a mental block (Rose, 1984) and is therefore counter productive.

LeFevre (1987) notes that writing has a long history of being considered a sort of passive activity that has experienced many major

changes in the past years, but perhaps one of the most profound has been the gradual shift from the perception of writing. As the result of research on the writing process reached both L1 and L2 teachers, they began not only to assign more writing but also to restructure their classes to support the students through an elaborate writing process, taking into account the fact that their students would benefit from help with planning, writing, and revising. Hairston (1982) and Young (1987) have likened this new perception of writing to Kuhn's (1967) paradigm shift in the sciences.

After years of looking solely at the end results of student writing, this change in perspective prompted composition researchers to look closely at the kinds of writing behaviours they found in their students as they were writing the assignments rather than the finished products. Researchers also began moving away from error counts in finished drafts to observing how students changed their texts and why they did so as they worked their way to the final drafts. Revision became an important element of the writing process but it became apparent that a distinction between writing and revision is not a clear one. As Murray (1978) emphasises in his often quoted remark, "writing is rewriting" (p. 85).

These changes in writing are known as process centred approaches. (Freedman, 1993). The Process Approach (Zamel, 1976) de-emphasises the final product. Student writers are taught to be aware of their purpose, audience and the need to communicate meaning through a long process of

writing which includes planning, revising, writing and re-writing numerous drafts. Process-centred approaches help student writers to understand their own composing process and to build their repertoires of strategies of prewriting, drafting and rewriting leading to the final product. However, this approach is in direct contrast to the Malaysian Education System, which practices the traditional approach of composition. This has often fallen short in helping students learning English as a Second Language (ESL) to develop skills needed to handle writing tasks. 'Writing process' has become a term that often stands for a ritual. There is enough evidence to suggest that there is a lack of understanding as to what the writing process is. This term has come to represent some monolith, a method that many teachers and texts have packaged into a neat, uniform formula.

In the Malaysian setting, a writing classroom is where the process is a series of "right steps" and the end product is merely a grade. Students are often required to produce essays in short organisational modes - for example, a series of five paragraph essays each according to a given method or organisation. Even well meaning classrooms where the "writing process" is used can be mistaken if the emphasis is upon writing as a series of steps. This is in direct contrast to Murray's (1980) observation of the writing process. He sees writing as a process of interaction, not a series of logical steps. Murray (1978) states that the "writing process is too experimental and exploratory to be continued in a definition, writers move

back and forth through all stages of the writing process as they search for meaning and then attempt to clarify it" (p. 86).

Supporting Murray's interaction process is Vygotsky (1978) who asserts that individual thoughts are built on social interactions. This theory has become popular as researchers have begun to view writing as a social act, not only in purpose but also in method. For example, in order to develop or refine a piece of writing some sense of questions that readers might pose is necessary for the writer in the composing process. Social writing paves way for writers to interact. They in effect make explicit the relationship between writer and reader that is implicit in and critical to the composing process (Freedman, Greenleaf and Sperling, 1987).

When composing aloud with the implicit requirement of being clear, writers may bring inert or passive knowledge into active use. They use their familiar oral language patterns and approaches to tasks. Thus, when doing writing tasks, students can use their comfortable, everyday language and thoughts to write what they mean effectively. (Vygotsky, 1978). This composing process reveals cognitive processes as they write with their thoughts and texts that they write.

Researchers like Flower (1979), have enlightened us on the relationship between language and cognition while others (Emig, 1971; Perl, 1979; Smith, 1982; Taylor, 1981) have encouraged us to review revision

in writing as a “creative discovery procedure” (Taylor, 1981: 6). Writing has been recast as not something which only a few ‘creative’ souls can do but is seen as a door which is unlocked freeing us to “develop what we potentially know” (Smith, 1982: 23).

Statement of the Problem

Much of research in writing has focused on what is referred to as the writing process or the composing process. The herald of such research was Emig (1971) and the banner has been taken up by many. There remain however, certain doubts about the process approach, particularly when it is related to performance assessment. The major doubt is simply what is it that is assessed? How can we talk about students being better or worse planners, drafters, revisers or editors? In each case it seems we have to look beyond the act to the result of the act: the plan, the draft, the revision or the edited copy.

Writing tasks may be seen in terms of their discourse functions, their cognitive demands, and their social situations (Vygotsky, 1978). Such a three-dimensional depiction of writing tasks leads away from the notion that writing may be thought of as a single trait. However, although student writing processes have been widely studied (Emig, 1971; Flower and Hayes, 1980a; Perl 1979; Pianko 1979; Sommers 1980), many of these studies were conducted in settings in which the subjects were asked to

write for the occasion of the research project itself. As a result, much of what we know about the process, and the practices and strategies of writers during composing comes from this research setting and not from everyday writing demands.

In inner psychological processes such as attribution, intentionality or comprehension, the connection between mind and the verbal system by which mental processes are made apparent to oneself or to others, is difficult to capture (Martlew, 1983). The real-life flow of mental processes is typically broken up and decontextualized in research test questions. Think - aloud protocols is a method which offers a record of many of the writers' thoughts as they compose and it reveals cognitive processes during composing and writing.

Focus has always been on the product of the writing process and not on the writing processes itself. "What happens when people write?" Flower and Hayes (1980b) posed this very question and approached it in novel and important ways. They made use of the thinking out loud technique frequently employed in the examination of human problem solving (Ericsson and Simon, 1993). Their subjects were asked to think aloud as they wrote. It was assumed that this procedure would produce a verbal record of the writers' thinking processes.

Therefore, in order to find out what happens when people write, researchers must examine the natural, real life process as it is occurring. Though Flower's and Hayes' approach is a step in this direction, their think aloud technique still requires their subjects to make an unnatural effort to talk about what they are thinking. Voicing of thoughts about the writing without being prompted to do so purely for the sake of an experiment would be a more natural process.

To date, no research on writing strategies of skilled or less skilled Malaysian ESL writers has been published. The focus of this study is on the writing strategies that less skilled ESL writers employ in the course of their writing. This would in turn provide the less skilled writers an insight into their own writing strategies and hence provide an opportunity for them to upgrade their skills in writing. By identifying the various writing strategies that less skilled Malaysian ESL writers make use of, it is hoped that teachers, educators and linguists will gain useful insights of the writing strategies to enable them to meet the needs of these writers.

Research Questions

The purpose of this study is to identify the strategies that writers essentially require to write effectively by fusing both their ideas and language, especially between meaning and their communicative roles.

The above statement of the problem gives rise to the following research questions:

- 1). What strategies do less skilled writers use during composing?
- 2). Are there any differences and/or similarities in the writers' strategies during composing?

Objectives of the Study

This study aims to describe the writing strategies employed by four less skilled ESL writers in their writing tasks with a view to gain deeper insights into the writing processes and associated problems of unskilled ESL writers. The specific objectives of the study are:

- 1). To identify the strategies that less skilled ESL writers use during composing.
- 2). To ascertain if any differences and/ or similarities existed in the strategies employed by the less skilled ESL writers during their writing tasks.
- 3). To classify the data and to compare it to existing taxonomies of writing strategies.