



## Characteristics and Teaching Challenges of Struggling Secondary School Writers: Assessing the need for self-regulation strategies based instruction

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### Abstract

*The writing performance for limited English proficiency secondary school students in Malaysia are considered below par due to various problems related to the teaching and learning of writing in the classroom. Based on this observation, the researcher embarked on a qualitative investigation through the use of a focus group interview and document analysis with seven secondary school English language teachers in Sabah to explore the needs for including self-regulation strategy instruction within writing lessons in the classroom. A semi-structured interview protocol was used to gather the primary data and a document analysis of students' essays was included as supplementary source of data. The findings revealed that students display behaviours which suggest lack of self-regulation processes such as procrastination, reluctance to find support, and total reliance on the teachers for information. The findings also revealed that despite perusing writing strategies and the process writing approach when teaching writing, little emphasis was given on developing self-regulation processes through self-regulation strategies use in the classroom. It may be concluded that the findings implied the need to include embedding self-regulation skill within writing instruction through existing self-regulation learning models or develop a writing instruction module based on self-regulation learning models to improve the teaching of ESL writing for limited English proficiency students.*

**Keywords:** self-regulation strategy, writing strategies, teaching writing, teaching challenges, ESL writing

### Introduction

English is taught as a second language in Malaysia, and the writing skill component is one of the four language components being taught and tested in schools (Tan and Miller, 2007). The teaching and learning of ESL writing skill can be complicated (Vengasamy, 2006) and instruction is perceived as an intimidating task for many Malaysian writing teachers (Maarof, Yamat, & Kee, 2011). Writing is known as an essential, yet challenging, part of the any school curriculum globally (Miller & McCardle, 2011; Teo & Kramer-Dahl, 2011 in Mckeown, Fitzpatrick, and Sandmel, 2016). It is considered as a highly complex task that requires the writer to use different number of skills at the same time (Harris, Mason, Graham, and Saddler, 2002; Parilah, Wan Hamiah,

Rossen Din, Aminuddin Yusof & Khalid Mat Pardi, 2011). Skilled writing requires strenuous practice and for most second language students, composing a piece of quality essay can be demanding, especially to students who possess limited English proficiency.

## Literature Review

Learning how to write is a difficult process which warrants for formal and systematic instruction (Emig, 1977). Previous researches regarding the writing skills among Malaysian students have generally emphasised on problems with English language proficiency, writing conventions and students' attitudes towards writing. Most Malaysian ESL students, including secondary school students, have problems in terms of language and attitudes (Ghabool, Mariadass, and Kashef, 2012), also in linguistic and cultural (Musa, Lie, and Azman, 2012). In terms of language, apart from difficulties in expressing ideas and organising their thoughts, previous studies on the written work of Malaysian ESL learners have found that their writing often lacks vivid and engaging elaboration, apart from displaying common language mistakes (Shah *et al.*, 2011). In most Malaysian classrooms, previous studies found that many teachers complain that their students have hesitation when writing and would leave their writing half done due to their lack of language skills and these students developed a perception that writing is difficult (Mastan, Maarof, and Embi, 2017; Shah *et al.*, 2011). Writing also creates apprehension among ESL students (Akhtar, Hassan, and Saidalvi, 2020).

Previous findings on ESL writing in the local context seemed to imply that apart from issues with English language competency, the difficulty to master writing is also influenced by the students' negative behaviour and attitude towards writing. Teachers have created various interventions to improve their students' writing performance by focusing on grammar and vocabulary aspects of writing. Despite the awareness regarding students' language problems and teachers' difficulties in regards to teaching and learning writing, little attention was given on the roles of self-regulation processes involved in writing such as planning and goal-setting (Graham & Harris, 1997) as an element that could perhaps aid in teacher-made interventions for writing.

In Harris & Graham (1996), it was proposed that self-regulation strategies need to be taught within the context of writing as to enable students to independently develop and execute a plan of action for accomplishing a writing task, hence promoting in more independent writing. High self-regulatory levels are considered important in order to master writing as composing a piece of writing is a deliberate activity that is frequently self-planned and self-sustained (Zimmerman & Riesemberg, 1997).

Winne (1997) posits that it is inaccurate to judge a person about being "un-self-regulated" or having no self-regulation at all. Self-regulation, according to Zimmerman (1990 as cited in Paris, Newman, and Paris, 2010), requires the learners to understand, value, and engage in academic learning in fundamentally different approach than their peers who have difficulty in school. A self-regulated learner is defined as an individual who are "metacognitively, motivationally, and behaviourally active participants in their own learning process" (Zimmerman, 1989 in Chen, 2002). It is also a self-directive process by which students transform their mental abilities into academic skills, thus learning is viewed as an activity that students do for themselves proactively than as a covert event that simply happens to them in reaction to teaching (Zimmerman, 2002).

Zimmerman (2002) posits that self-regulatory processes, such as goal-setting and self-evaluation, can be taught through instruction and modeling. Hence, this makes self-regulation as a component that can be trained by experts, or in the classroom context, teachers and parents. However, in order to diagnose whether including self-regulation strategies within classroom

writing lessons are suitable and needed, an exploration of the current situation within the classroom is required.

The general purpose of this study is to explore the writing classroom situation and to identify the needs of incorporating self-regulation strategies instruction in classroom writing programmes or lessons to help struggling writers cope with the demands of writing. In order to identify the needs to incorporate self-regulation strategies in existing writing lessons, the researcher will seek to identify characteristics of learners that lacks self-regulation, namely learners who are deemed as “weak” or struggling. In addition to students’ characteristics, this study also inquired the common problems faced by limited English proficiency learners and the teachers’ routine writing instructions in order to explore the challenges of teaching writing to struggling writers. The central questions that frame the study are as follows:

- a. What are the characteristics of struggling writers as perceived by the teachers?
- b. What are the common problems faced by students when writing?
- c. What is the common teaching of writing practices utilised by teachers in teaching limited English proficiency students?

## Methodology

The design for this study is a basic qualitative design in which the researcher gathers data through a focus group interview and documents. Employing the qualitative approach enables the researcher to delve into the phenomena of understanding the problems and characteristics of struggling writers through the teachers’ perspectives. Perusing the qualitative approach also ensures that a rich, in-depth exploration can be added to the mostly quantitative existing body of literature related to ESL writing and self-regulated learning.

The group interview participants consist of seven secondary school English subject teachers who were purposively selected based on several criteria listed below:

- a. Teaches the English subject to limited English proficiency learners
- b. Taught the subject for at least two years
- c. Teaches in secondary school

The demographic information of the teacher participants can be referred to in the table below.

Table 1: Focus group participants

No.	Teachers’ Pseudonym	Years of teaching experience	of Teaching experience with LEP	Major	School	Secondary school type
1.	T1	8 years	5 years	TESL	Suburban	SMJK(C)
2.	T2	4 years	4 years	TESL	Suburban	SMJK(C)
3.	T3	11 years	8 years	TESL	Suburban	SMJK(C)
4.	T4	3 years	3 years	TESL	Rural	SMK
5.	T5	7 years	7 years	TESL	Rural	SMK
6.	T6	4 years	2 years	TESL	Suburban	Mission school
7.	T7	25 years	25 years	TESL	Suburban	Mission school

Data was collected through a single focus group semi-structured interviews with teachers (Morgan, 1996), and document analysis of students’ essays. The primary source of data is taken from the teachers’ interview, collected using an interview protocol in a single meeting with the teachers. The single focus group session took approximately one and a half hours. The teachers

were also asked to bring three to five sample essays written by their students for document analysis. A total of 25 sample students' essays were collected for secondary data.

The interview was audiotaped and transcribed ad verbatim prior to being analysed with Atlas.ti software. A method triangulation and multiple source triangulation, in which data was collected using interview and document analysis and from various informant through the focus group were used as the triangulation approach for this study.

Data from the interview and documents were analysed using Krueger (1994 in Rabiee, 2004) framework analysis as it provides a clear set of steps which enables the researcher to manage the large amount of data and the complexity of qualitative data's nature in a systematic manner. The data was read and reread to gain sense or familiarization into the data. Then, a thematic framework is created and the data goes through indexing. The data is then charted, mapped and interpreted.

The data is presented in the following format:

*"Quotation" Participant A, Source of data.*

## Results and Discussion

In the effort to identify the needs of incorporating self-regulation processes in the teaching and learning of writing, the researcher focused on the characteristics of struggling writers in the classroom and the problems they faced in attempting writing tasks, as well as the teachers' common writing instruction classroom practices. In this section, the findings were categorized according to the research questions and will be discussed first according to the themes that emerged from the data. The discussion for the findings will be done after the presentation of key findings.

### a. Characteristics of struggling writers and their problems with writing

The findings for common problems that students faced were divided into behavioural and language related. During the interview, the participants were enquired about what characteristics they observed in their struggling learners' behaviours when teaching writing in the classroom. The reason for enquiring was to gauge what the teachers perceived as "struggling writers" in their classroom. Based on the data, it was found that the teachers equate struggling writers with students who have limited English proficiency and these students can also be identified through their passive behaviours such as timidity, laziness and disruptive behaviour such as, rowdiness:

*"Lazy... Other times they don't get any work done at all."* - T3, Interview.

*"Some of my weak students are timid and I think they just pretend to understand the lesson. I always ask, "Understand?" and they would say "YESSS" then submit a blank paper or similar work with their friends"* - T5, Interview

*"Some of my students are quite rowdy and shows lack of interest when it comes to writing essays. A few students would immediately go to sleep even though I scolded them".* - T7, Interview.

Most of the participants also reported that their students lack attention and displayed signs of boredom such as sleepiness whenever they were asked to write essays:

*“Naughty, sleepy, and lazy.... Whenever I teach, they are not listening I tried to do more interesting activities for them but usually their attention is not long. I find my students hate to write essays because they rarely submit a complete work, all I get is just blank papers” – T4, Interview*

*“When they hear the word ‘Essay’, their head dropped to the table and start to show body language of being uninterested...They tend to roam around the class searching for answers for their work from their friends” - T5, Interview.*

In addition to passive, disruptive behaviours and lack of attention, the teachers also shared that struggling writers would not ask for help from the teacher or from their peers who are better writers. Some students were seen as too reliant on their teachers, either by persistently asking the teacher about the task, especially in language related items, or by passively waiting for the answers or sample answers from the teacher.

*“Usually, they would wait for me to give them with answers and at the end, instead of them brainstorming about the topic, I ended up brainstorming for them!” - T7, Interview.*

Based on the teachers’ responses, the students were observed to be very lazy and would copy their friends’ essays and pass it as their own. To complement this finding, three teachers also showed essays that are identical, similar contents but different handwriting. Another teacher showed students’ essays which were literally copied from the workbook’s answer sheet.

*“Whenever I teach, they are not listening. Only a few students pay attention to me when I’m teaching. I tried to do more interesting activities for them but usually their attention is not long. I find my students hate to write essays because they rarely submit a complete work, all I get is just blank papers”. - T4, Interview.*

*“Some of the students are well behaved, all quiet and shy in classes. They don’t want to talk to me or ask questions even though they have problems in understanding the topic or lesson.” - T1, Interview.*

*“There are about 8 students in this class that will not give any effort in doing exercises. They just simply copy answers ...”. - T5, Interview.*

*“...They also copy their answers from their more hardworking friends. Especially when the essay is made as homework, when marking you will get the same essays from two, three kids!” – T6, Interview*

Teachers also identified another characteristic, which is having self-doubt and having the fear of failing:

*“I also noticed that they also have self-doubt. A lot of students feel they can’t do a good job on their class work. They refuse to do the work out of fear of failing. Much of their self-doubt can also be brought upon by the influence of others. And I also notice that my students’ lack of interest in their classes. I feel like these students sometimes attend these classes to complete an obligation for school or family”. – T2, Interview.*

The teachers also discussed that students’ self-belief about English as a subject is also one of the contributing reasons why students lack the interest to learn writing skill. One teacher disclosed that some students’ perception about learning could stem from the family as well:



*“Once, I asked Lee - one of my students in 5F why he didn’t want to learn English. He said “I know I’m weak in this subject since primary school, what’s the point of learning it now... it’s too late and it will always be the same.” Another student thinks that learning English is not important, it’s enough for them as long as they could achieve a pass grade in BM and Sejarah – as passing these subjects, they could still be awarded SPM certificate”. - T1, Interview.*

*“They just see English as a not so important subject. As long as they can pass, they will be okay”. - T2, Interview.*

*“I check on their progress more compared to the other students and guide them if they need help. to them especially when they start to make noise and chit chatting with their friends. However I believe it is the motivation factor as well. They don’t seem to want to learn and improve... Usually it is because of family background”. -T6, Interview*

Teachers also observed that students would show up in class with no preparation such as not bringing a pen or their exercise book. Teachers seemed to perceive this behaviour as students’ lack of interest with the lesson and the task at hand. Procrastination is also a common theme occurring as the data suggests. In addition to laziness and the lack of effort, the teachers lamented that their students tend to delay the writing task until the end of the lesson or on the day of homework submission.

*“And I also notice that my students’ lack of interest in their classes. I feel like these students sometimes attend these classes to complete an obligation for school or family. I think it’s more like – they are there, but not there – if you can get what I mean. There are students who are focused and interested and several students are just...there. Badan saja, semangat tiada. No interest, not bringing their books – alasan? Lupa, teacher. For me, it seems like they are not ready for the lesson, everytime”. T3, Interview.*

*Some of my students also do not have interest because they find writing very difficult and lengthy. They often think that when writing one does not need to plan... they would stare at the blank page and perhaps wait for other students to give them ideas – T7, Interview.*

All teachers observed that their students’ commonly have problems with English language such as lack of vocabulary, lack of elaboration, errors in sentence constructions and grammar structure, as well as having difficulties to generate their ideas. The teachers also observed that their students do not plan and draft their essays despite exposing students with several commonly used writing strategies. All teachers agreed that their students seemed to face similar problems, mostly in language related problems such as wrong usage of vocabulary and wrong use of parts of speech. The teachers also noticed that the topics prepared in textbooks or workbooks for writing task are not relevant to the students.

*“...they don’t know how to elaborate. I can see that they are having difficulties to generate ideas. For example when writing a narrative essay, I asked them to use plot to help them narrate a story but it seems like they are having ‘writer’s block’ and it takes forever to start writing the essay. I think some of them are just lazy to think of an idea”.- T1, Interview*

*Most students have writer's block when it comes to writing essay, regardless it is a long or short essay. They have no planning or drafting before writing as they cannot see the importance of drafting. And from my observation after asking them, they said they were never taught to do so during their primary school years. They are also not using appropriate grammar. (pause) Some of the students have the ideas on what to write, but they tend to overlook simple grammatical errors. This goes back to weak English language basics. Some students also are not familiar with the writing topics from books and some of them never experienced the topic that they are going to write. – T2, Interview*

*My students...they have linguistics problems for example insufficient linguistic proficiency – errors in using English words, formatting the words, (pause) using different words classes and they have poor grammatical structure – T3, Interview*

*I think it's almost similar with other teachers. My students didn't understand the meaning of words, didn't know how to translate the words and didn't know how to use the parts of speech properly. Also they face troubles with spelling errors as well. Basically what other teachers have said, happens to my students too. – T4, Interview*

*I find that it is always a challenge to teach essay to weak classes when they do not know how to start and form a sentence... I find that most topic in the workbook or textbook are quite unrelated to them or just boring. Like "Describe a day at the beach." Almost half of my students never seen the beach before (laughs) – T5, Interview*

*I see that even to construct a grammatically correct sentence is challenging for them.- T6, Interview*

Two teachers also mentioned about the use of direct translations of students' native tongue or L1 in their writing. These teachers discussed that students who find writing difficult tend to rely on producing essays that are mixed or directly translated in their native tongue. These teachers perceive that students who use their L1 have little vocabulary in English.

*"...(The students) don't know the appropriate use of words. The students have the idea to write (in BM/BC) but they have quite limited vocabulary in English. – T1, Interview*

*"They also tend to have reliance on their L1" – T4, Interview*

#### b. Teachers' common teaching of writing classroom practices

The teachers' common practices when teaching writing in the classroom were also enquired to assess whether there are hints of self-regulation strategies activities in their lessons. The data revealed that all the teachers in this study employed the process writing approach as it is the default classroom writing instruction provided in the English language curriculum (Li and Razali, 2019)

The teachers' responses imply that although there are a several writing strategies used when teaching writing in the classroom, there is little inclusion and emphasis given to self-regulation strategies for the classroom such as task analysis and goal-setting, in the teachers' lessons. However, factors such as time spent on teaching, examination preparation and other tasks were attributed to the lack of inclusion and emphasis on building and improving the students' level of self-regulation skills.

*“Discuss the outlines and notes. I will provide instructions throughout the writing process. I will also use rubrics/ writing worksheet for my weak learners. Students will be able to write the task but I think they will be too depending on me. Another way is to ask them to read up. It helps to expand their vocabulary. I also show them different ways of using words. But some of my students are too shy to read”. – T1, Interview*

*“...put them into groups of different proficiency levels. Secondly, is guiding them group by group. Despite using the common strategies of 5Wh and group discussion when teaching, sometimes the lesson tend to drag on and students won't cooperate. Need more time for teaching writing.”- T4, Interview*

*“Follow the process approach but teacher is limited to the pre-writing and drafting stages only. Students first draft will be the final draft. Not enough time for teacher to go through the editing process individually. Tried peer editing with the weak learners but it is difficult even though a guideline was given to each of them. Use group or collaborative approach where the students would collaborate on one point and the whole class ended up with same essay. By that, the students learned how to write certain genres, especially the difficult ones like factual. Group activity will have “leechers”. -T7, Interview*

c. Discussion of key findings

The findings suggest that the teachers perceived students who are struggling in ESL writing display certain characteristics such as timidity, disruptive, laziness, lack of attention, procrastination, self-doubt and having a perception that the English subject is not an important subject. The students limited level of English proficiency also added on to the struggles they have against one of the difficult language skills to master. The findings on the students' characteristics and problems they faced as the teachers perceived, suggest that the students may require help in building key processes of self-regulation. The findings also appear to suggest that students who are struggling in writing tend to display behaviours that shows ineffective or reactive self-regulation behaviour (Winne, 1997). The students described by the teachers in this study shares similarities with Zimmerman's (2002) illustration of a fictitious student named Tracy who displayed traits of being easily distracted; who used no specific strategies, lack of planning and does not ask for help from others. Tracy, like the students discussed in this study, were seen as lacking self-regulation key processes such as time-management, learning strategies, self-attribution and significant self-motivational beliefs such as self-efficacy and intrinsic task interest.

The findings also support other findings from previous researches in relation to ESL writing that students face difficulties in producing a good quality essay which are organised, coherent, and achieved the task requirement. Students, especially who possess limited English proficiency, would often produce written work that is brief, difficult to read, plagiarised from peers and most of the time, incomplete or not attempted at all. Pajares (2002), for instance, found similar observations, in which he observed that "struggling writers write papers that are shorter, poorly organized, and overall weaker in quality than those of their peers". Pajares (2002) also states that struggling writers have difficulty in executing and regulating the composing process especially planning and revising. In addition, they also have negative beliefs about themselves as writers.

Despite the teachers' efforts in utilizing the writing strategies in their lessons, students tend to forget the strategies taught soon after they were taught, hence creating a need to address the issue with sustainability by incorporating self-regulation strategies instruction within writing lessons. Based on the findings on the teachers' classroom writing teaching practices, it may be implied that teachers did not utilize the potentials of self-regulation strategies when teaching, for example



encouraging students to set goals or ask the students to self-reflect or self-evaluate their work. Hence, it may be concluded that there is a need to include the aspect of self-regulation strategies to help teachers to teach writing effectively and to help students to gradually be more independent and take responsibility to complete their writing tasks.

## Conclusion

Writing, for secondary school students, can be very difficult and often secondary school students would find it very demotivating to write due to several factors. Although their level of proficiency also plays a part in determining their level of motivation to complete a writing task, the ability to self-regulate one's behaviour is one of the important factors that helps struggling writers to complete a writing task. Teaching writing in English as a second language requires the teacher to have an approach that could help learners to learn to write effectively, and eventually guide them in sustaining their learning. The findings of this study seemed to suggest that, in the attempt to develop modules as pedagogical improvement programmes, it is important to gather input from the teachers regarding their perceptions on characteristics, problems faced by students and their common practices in teaching writing. The findings of this study identified the need to have a writing intervention programme or module that helps students to develop self-regulation skills with the help of writing and self-regulation strategies.

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