IDENTIFYING WRITING DIFFICULTIES AMONG ESL STUDENTS OF SENIOR MIDDLE ONE (C)

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed at investigating the writing difficulties in secondary school level from students' experiences. The data was collected from 22 ESL (English as a Second Language) students as the participants of this research, from Senior Middle One Group C (S1C) in Confucian Private Secondary School, Kuala Lumpur. A questionnaire and persuasive writing tasks were utilised as the instruments of the study. The findings revealed that these students have problems in writing tasks, especially in formulating ideas with appropriate sequences at the stage of planning. The study suggests some practical methods in order to cope with this particular writing problem.

Keywords: Writing difficulties, receptive language, expressive language, process approach, planning, persuasive essays

1. INTRODUCTION

This part discusses background of the study, statement of the problem, theoretical perspective or framework, objectives, research questions and significance.

1.1 Background of the study

English language has been playing a dominant role as a compulsory subject in Malaysian schools. It is a considerable need for the future generations of Malaysians to master the language (Ambigapathy, 2001, cited in Chow, 2007, p. 1). To master the language, students ought to fulfil language skills required. Serve Center (n.d.) suggested that "all communication has two aspects: receptive language and expressive language. Receptive language is what we hear and understand. Expressive language is what we say to others. These two facets of language are very different but equally important."

Table 1: The differences between receptive and expressive language (Serve Center, n.d.)

Receptive language	Expressive language
❖ Input language	❖ Output language
❖ Listening skill: the ability to listen to language	❖ Speaking skill: the ability to talk and respond to others using language
❖ Reading skill: the ability to understand language	❖ Writing skill: the ability to write and reply using language

In view of this fact, Chow (2007) suggested that "writing is such an important learning tool because it helps students to understand ideas and concepts better." Through writing, teachers will be able to recognise their students' language proficiency, as it requires students to compose a written text based on what they have learned throughout the language development process they have gone through. This is also a useful channel for teachers to understand their students' difficulties in learning English language and hence meet their needs for improvement.

1.2   Statement of the problem

Writing has always been a difficult task for both teachers and students of ESL classes as it involves a lot of strategies to produce a well-written text. It is sometimes frustrating and confusing for those who teach a student who has difficulty in writing (WGBH Educational Foundation, 2002). It is especially challenging for teachers of ESL classes because their students suffer no loss as a result of less exposure to English language, due to having a different language background. Lewis & Lewis (2010) suggested that "ESL students may experience difficulties with understanding (receptive language) and using language (expressive language)."

Table 2: The difficulties students may face with receptive language and expressive language (Lewis & Lewis, 2010)

Receptive Language	Expressive Language
❖ Following instructions ❖ Understanding new ideas ❖ Understanding information ❖ Learning new vocabulary ❖ Understanding oral language and written text ❖ Understanding grammar	❖ Using correct grammatical structures ❖ Extending the length and complexity of sentences ❖ Using language for academic purposes (e.g. formulating narrative stories with appropriate sequences, such as beginning, middle and end) ❖ Extending their vocabulary development ❖ Making friends with their peers

The lack of competence of students in writing does not only upset teachers, but also discourages students from treating their writing tasks seriously. Some of the written tasks are not that hard to do but some other can make the students overwhelmed. Teachers sometimes find it hard to encourage students to devote more time and attention to their written assignments. Even though students are repeatedly taught with the writing strategies, they are still unable to make their essays a pleasant read.

As a result, the current study not only concerns about some of the common writing difficulties among ESL students, but also suggests solutions based on researcher's experiences which can be helpful and supportive in developing writing skills.

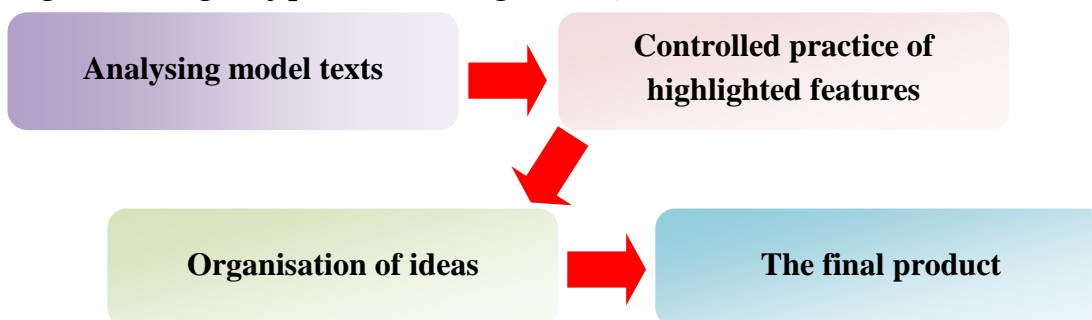## 1.3   Theoretical perspective or framework for the study

According to Giridharan & Robson (2011), "in ESL academic writing, instruction has mostly moved away from a traditionally product approach to a process approach where instructors work with students on their written drafts and provide feedback for continuous improvement."

Table 3: The differences between product approach and process approach (Steele, 2004)

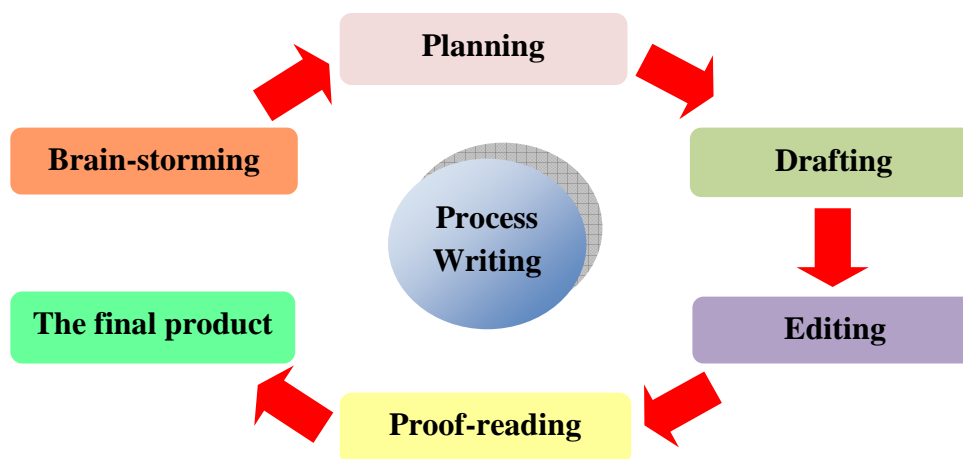| Product Approach	Process Approach
❖ Imitate model text	❖ Text as a resource for comparison
❖ Organisation of ideas is more important than ideas themselves	❖ Ideas as starting point
❖ One draft	❖ More than one draft
❖ Features highlighted including controlled practice of those features	❖ More global, focus on purpose, theme, text type, i.e., reader is emphasised
❖ Individual	❖ Collaborative
❖ Emphasis on end product	❖ Emphasis on creative process

Steele (2004) stated that product approach is a traditional way of writing, in which students are encouraged to refer to a model text and analyse it at an early stage. They are required to highlight the features of the genre. For instance, students may have to focus on the techniques of paragraphing and use of language to make formal requests when they are studying a formal letter. Proceeding to the next stage which consists of controlled practice of the highlighted features, students may have to learn the language used to make formal requests like "I would be grateful if you would..." structure if they are studying a formal letter. Then, students have to organise their ideas rather than the creativity of the ideas themselves. Individually, they will have to use the skills, structures and vocabulary they have been taught to write an essay.

Figure 1: Stages of product writing (Steele, 2004)

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┌─────────────────────┐      ┌─────────────────────────┐
│ Analysing model     │ ──▶  │ Controlled practice of  │
│ texts               │      │ highlighted features    │
└─────────────────────┘      └─────────────────────────┘

┌─────────────────────┐      ┌─────────────────────────┐
│ Organisation of     │ ──▶  │ The final product       │
│ ideas               │      │                         │
└─────────────────────┘      └─────────────────────────┘
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Differ from product approach, process approach focuses on varied classroom activities that involve students in the process of writing, such as brain-storming, group discussion, planning, drafting, editing, proof-reading and producing an essay. This approach requires students to practise cognitive strategies before developing a piece of well-written essay. It encourages students to think on their own and to be self-directed, while teachers act as a facilitator in the classroom. Students have to understand the topic given and generate ideas by brainstorming and group discussion, while teachers only support students with language assistance if needed. Then, students need to judge the quality and usefulness of ideas before extending them into note form. They may organise the ideas into a mind map, for example. They will be able to see the relationship of ideas more obviously, so that they will have a better idea on manipulating their texts. First draft will then be produced by students in class and often in pairs or groups. There will be exchange of drafts and everyone will read each other's work. As a reader, they have to respond to the draft by providing useful and meaningful feedback for better improvement. Students will get back their drafts and do amendments based upon peer feedback. A final draft is written. (Steele, 2004)

Figure 2: Stages of process writing (Ozagac, 2004)

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                      Planning
       Brain-storming         Drafting
              Process
              Writing
       The final product      Editing
                    Proof-reading
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1.4 Objective of the study

- ❖ To identify the difficulties frequently faced by S1(C) students in English language writing
- ❖ To get information about the factors that contribute to students' writing difficulties in English language
- ❖ To suggest some possible ways to overcome the writing difficulties faced by S1(C) students in English language

1.5 Research questions

RQ1: What are the more common writing difficulties S1(C) students might face in English language?

RQ2: Which type of essays is considered the most difficult for S1(C) students to complete?

RQ3: Do the writing strategies implemented solve the writing difficulties S1(C) students frequently face in English language?

1.6 Significance of the study

Due to the existence of writing problems among ESL students, this study intends to investigate the difficulties they may face during their writing development process. This may benefit both students and teachers as it helps teachers to adapt their teaching methods according to frequent writing problems of students. In addition, the study also provides suggestions for students to overcome their biggest difficulty in writing assignments.

2. METHODOLOGY

This part addresses the research design, instrumentation, participants, data collection procedure and framework for data analysis.

2.1 Research design

By following a survey research design, this study examines the writing problems occurred among the Senior Middle One Group C (S1C) students in Confucian Private Secondary School. There were 22 students who participated in this study. The type of essays which students found difficult to complete was also investigated in the pre-study questionnaire. Data was supported by students' pre-study and post-study written evidence. Based on the result in pre-study questionnaire, students were taught the methods to overcome their main writing problem by researcher. They had to write on the same topic again and their feedback on the effectiveness of the solutions was collected through the post-study writing task.

2.2   Instrumentation
2.2.1   Pre-study questionnaire

The questionnaire was conducted before the study, in order to investigate the most common difficulty students faced in English language writing and also the type of essays that they found it the hardest to complete.

Appendix 1: Pre-study questionnaire

**IDENTIFYING WRITING DIFFICULTIES
AMONG ESL STUDENTS OF SENIOR MIDDLE ONE (C)**

Thank you for participating in the research project on identifying writing difficulties among ESL students of Senior Middle One (C). All the information obtained from this survey will be used solely for academic purposes.

1. Which stage of process writing is considered the most difficult for you to complete? (Choose only ONE)
    ☐ Brain-storming
    ☐ Planning
    ☐ Drafting
    ☐ Editing
    ☐ Proof-reading
    ☐ The final product

2. Which type of essays is considered the most difficult for you to complete? (Choose only ONE)
    ☐ Narrative
    ☐ Descriptive
    ☐ Expository
    ☐ Persuasive

☺ **Thank You** ☺

There were two questions in the questionnaire. The first question followed the stages of process writing presented by Ozagac (2004), whereas the idea of four major types of essays was used in second question (Time4Writing, 2012).

Table 4: Four major types of essays (Time4Writing, 2012)

1	Narrative essays	**Telling a story** ❖ Can be imaginative or about a real-life experience ❖ Involve the readers by making the story as vivid as possible
2	Descriptive essays	**Painting a picture with words** ❖ Describe a person, place, object, or even memory of special significance ❖ To communicate a deeper meaning through the description ❖ Show, not tell, through the use of colourful words and sensory details ❖ Appeal to readers' emotions
3	Expository essays	**Just the facts** ❖ Informative piece of writing that presents a balanced analysis of a topic ❖ Explain or define a topic, using facts, statistics and examples ❖ The comparison and contrast essay, the cause and effect essay and the "how to" or process essay
4	Persuasive essays	**Convince me** ❖ Convince readers to accept the writer's point of view or recommendation ❖ Must build a case using facts and logic, as well as examples, expert opinion and sound reasoning ❖ Should present all sides of the argument, but must be able to communicate clearly and without equivocation why a certain position is correct

Based on the students' feedback, researcher could assign suitable writing tasks to support the validity of data and implement remedies that suit their needs in overcoming their writing difficulty.

2.2.2 Pre-study writing task

As the purpose of this study was to identify the writing problems faced by ESL students, the participants were requested to write a 200-word persuasive essay based on the topic given before the study. The type of essays was decided based on the data given by students in Question 2 in pre-study questionnaire. The essays were used to see whether students showed improvement after they were taught the ways by researcher to overcome their main writing problem. The topic given to the students to write their essays was "Examinations should be abolished. What do you think?" (Sanjeet, 2012)

2.2.3 Post-study writing task

After the participants were taught the methods of solving their main writing problem in English, they were required to write on the same topic again, using the methods they had learnt from the researcher. By comparing their essays with the pre-study writing assignments, the effectiveness of the methods could be seen whether it really helped students to improve on their biggest difficulty in writing an essay.

Figure 3: Guidelines for organisation of ideas for persuasive essay

First paragraph   : Introduction
❖ General statement / definition / phenomenon
❖ Thesis statement – State your stand

Second paragraph   : Body 1
❖ Topic sentence – The main idea of this paragraph with keywords
❖ Supporting details – Elaboration (two to three sentences)
❖ Example

Third paragraph   : Body 2
❖ Topic sentence – The main idea of this paragraph with keywords
❖ Supporting details – Elaboration (two to three sentences)
❖ Example

Fourth paragraph   : Body 3
❖ Topic sentence – The main idea of this paragraph with keywords
❖ Supporting details – Elaboration (two to three sentences)
❖ Example

Fifth paragraph   : Conclusion
❖ Restate your stand
❖ Summary of topic sentences

2.3   Participants

The participants of this study were 22 ESL students, from Senior Middle One Group C (S1C) in Confucian Private Secondary School, Kuala Lumpur. There were 10 from Senior Middle One Science (S1Sc) and 12 from Senior Middle One Arts One (S1A1). They were prepared to sit for Cambridge ESOL:

Key English Test (KET) which is the basic level of English language test in November 2012. They also followed SPM (The Malaysian Certificate of Education) and UEC (Unified Examination Certificate) syllabuses for both examinations in coming years.

2.4 Procedure of data collection

Figure 4: Procedure of data collection

The students of S1(C) were selected to participate in this study. The researcher, also the English language teacher for this class, conducted the survey in one of the English language periods. During the period, the students were told about the purposes of the study to give them a wider perspective about the study. A thorough explanation was provided on the pre-study questionnaire to the students and the questionnaires were distributed to them. They were given 5 minutes to complete the questionnaire which was consisted of two multiple-choice questions only. They were supposed to put a tick in the box beside the suitable answer.

After analysing the data collected from the questionnaires, the students were assigned a pre-study writing task where they needed to write a persuasive essay on their own without any guidelines. The topic was "Examinations should be abolished. What do you think?" The objectives of the writing task were also explained to the students. They had to complete their essays within one hour during English language lesson. Their essays were immediately collected.

Researcher then taught students the methods of overcoming their biggest writing problem which was revealed in the pre-study questionnaire. By using the researcher's guidelines, students had to write an essay on the same topic again. They were given one hour to write the essay during English language lesson. Once their essays were collected, the researcher would examine them to see whether the students showed improvement on their weakness.

2.5 Framework for data analysis

2.5.1 Quantitative study

Scientific calculation was involved to analyse the data collected from pre-study questionnaire. This included number and percentage with the illustration of table and chart.

2.5.2 Qualitative study

Students' written texts for both pre-study and post-study would be the most reliable evidence to support the quantitative data.

2.5.3 Experimental study

Based on the data collected from pre-study questionnaire, researcher provided students applicable solutions or guidelines to overcome their biggest writing difficulty in English language. A comparison would be done with their both pre-study and post-study written persuasive essays, to see whether they were able to overcome their weakness with the guidelines given.

3. DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

This part addresses the answers and results found in this study through the questionnaire and sample essays according to research questions and objectives.

3.1 Analysis of pre-study questionnaire

The first question focused on gaining students' feedback on the most difficult stage they faced throughout the process writing. Figure 5 shows the different stages students faced the biggest difficulty in process writing. Out of 22 participants, there was a majority of 9 students (40.90%) felt that it was the most difficult to plan their ideas with appropriate sequences.

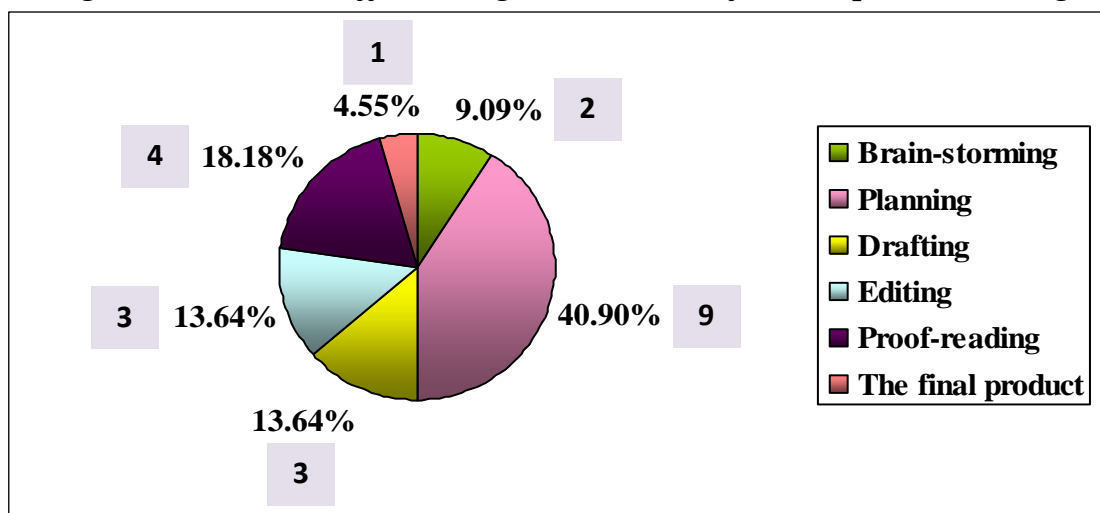*Figure 5: The most difficult stage S1C students faced in process writing*

Figure 6: Students' opinions on the difficulties they faced in organisation of ideas in writing

"Brain-storming? Easy job. A lot of ideas is flying like butterflies in my mind. My grammar is not too bad; I know when to use suitable tenses. But, I don't know how to organise my points. I tend to mix up all the points and the whole essay looks very messy." – **Student A**

"My previous teachers always said that I don't know how to organise my points. They always deducted my marks for organisation. That's unfair! No one tells me what I should do to overcome my weakness and I kept repeating the same mistake!" – **Student B**

"I admit I'm kind of lazy person. So what?! I'm not interested in organisation of ideas. It's too troublesome. I will just write whatever comes into my mind. That's why I like to write story. That's different case for factual essays; it's too rigid for me." – **Student C**

As for the second question, Figure 7 below shows the result of the type of essays students found the most difficult to write and complete. Among these four types of essays, most of the students (45.45%) agreed that writing persuasive essays put them in the most difficult state compared to narrative essays (13.64%), descriptive essays (18.18%) and expository essays (22.73%).

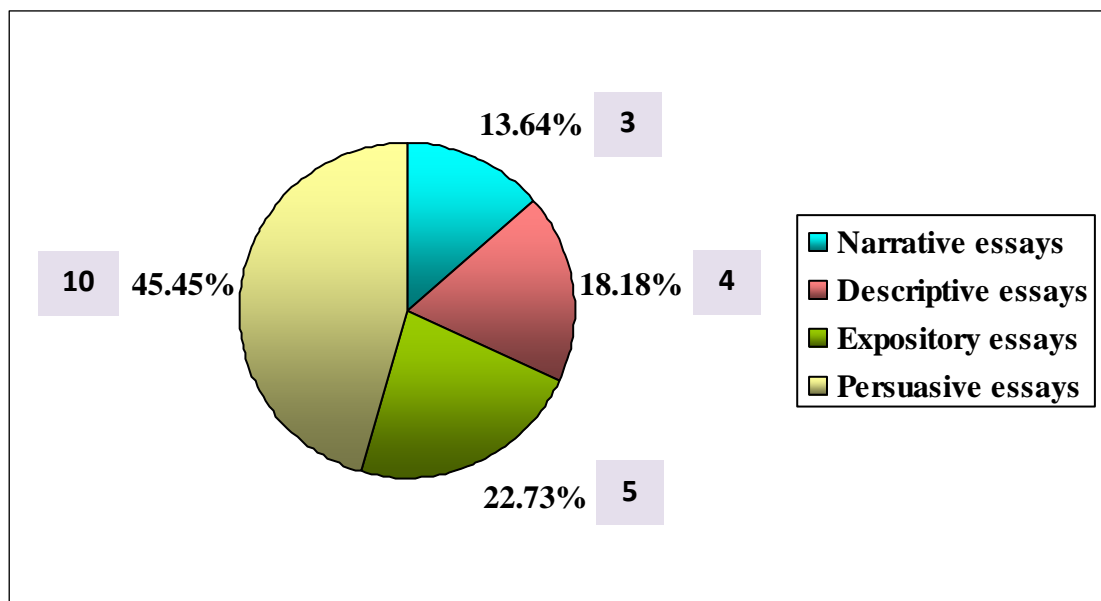*Figure 7: The most difficult type of essays for S1C students to complete*

Figure 8: Students' opinions on the most difficult type of essays for them to complete

"We are taught writing narrative and descriptive essays since primary school, but expository and persuasive essays are a bit tough for me. Persuasive essays are more difficult. I can't even persuade myself, how to persuade the others?!" **– Student D**

"If you ask me to give facts, I can write. I don't know how to persuade people because I'm easily persuaded by the others, hahahahaha…" **– Student E**

"I prefer to write narrative essays as I can write about my personal experience. I can also imagine or create a story on my own. No one will know whether it is true. But expository and persuasive essays are different. They need facts which I don't have much. I don't read a lot." **– Student F**

"I don't dare to write persuasive essays, especially in examination. What if my stand is different from the one who marks my essay? He or she might be biased in grading my essay. To be safe, I better write other kinds of essays." **– Student G**

3.2   Analysis of pre-study and post-study writing samples

By comparing both pre-study and post-study writing samples from students, most of them showed improvement in organising their ideas in appropriate sequences. Most importantly, they could even write better with sensible ideas and smooth coherence. Their improvement proved that planning before writing does affect a writer's performance at other stages of process writing. By having an organised layout of ideas, a majority number of students were able to perform better in their post-study writing task, as shown in Table 5 below. 81.82% showed improvement in writing introduction for their essays while 20 of them (90.91%) could organise their ideas better for body part. There were also 72.73% students were able to conclude their essays more effectively compared to their pre-study writing samples.

Table 5: Students' improvement on organisation of ideas in their writing

Paragraph	Improvement	
	Yes	**No**
Introduction	18 (81.82%)	4 (18.18%)
Body	20 (90.91%)	2 (9.09%)
Conclusion	16 (72.73%)	6 (27.27%)

Figure 9: Both pre-study and post-study writing samples for introduction part

Nowadays, majority of students disagree to have examinations in their school life. In my opinion, examinations should be abolished. – Student H

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Examinations are the most useful ways to test students whether they really understand what they have learnt. However, most of the students are too anxious when they heard the word "examination." In my opinion, it brings more negative effects than positive ones to everyone involved. – Student H

Some students say examinations should be abolished because they make students anxious and stressful. Students hope the schools can change medium like using computers and post their teaching materials online. Students can even do online tests. It can also test a students' ability to memorise and regurgitate facts. – Student I

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Look at our society. Parents are too concerned about comparing their child with others. Students do not dare to check their results. Schools focus most on how many full-As students they can produce. Don't you think it is ridiculous? Everyone cares about the marks. Examinations will only bring out one's evil side and hence I agree that examinations should be abolished. – Student I

In recent years, many students did not score well in examinations and then jumped down from the buildings. In my opinion, examinations should be abolished. – Student J

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Flipping through the newspapers, the cases about students jumping down from the buildings due to poor academic results are not something new to us anymore. Therefore, I suggest that examinations should be abolished. – Student J

Figure 10: Both pre-study and post-study writing samples for body part

One of the reasons is students feel stressful with examinations. There are too many subjects they need to study and memorise. So, they seldom involve critical thinking skill in examinations as they just answer the questions with what they have memorised. – Student K

Having examinations is really stressful for most of the students. In order to compete with the others, they would stay awake until midnight. Without enough rest, it will then affect their health as well as their mental state. They may get sick and are unable to perform well in their examinations. This would be a big blow to them which may lead to committing suicide. – Student K

The second reason is wasting paper. Examinations need to prepare a lot of papers for students. Thus, many trees will be cut and it will destroy the nature. The animals will lose their habitats. Besides, the greenhouse effect will be getting worse. – Student L

Besides that, it is a waste of paper to conduct examinations. The schools need to photocopy question papers for students. Students need to write their answers. All these require papers. Many trees will be cut to produce papers and it destroys the nature. Animals and plants will lose their habitats. Without trees, greenhouse effect will be getting worse. – Student L

In fact, examinations waste human resources. Most of the teachers have to go for invigilation during the examination period. The photocopying work will burden those who are involved to have it done by hand. – Student M

Examinations require extra human energy. Before examinations, teachers need to prepare the test papers. During examinations, they need to go for invigilation. After examinations, they have to mark the papers. If there are no examinations, teachers can use the time to do more meaningful things like reading or training for self-improvement. – Student M

Figure 11: Both pre-study and post-study writing samples for conclusion part

All in all, I think examinations should be abolished. Thus, students will have a great learning experience in school. – *Student N*

All in all, examinations do not bring many benefits to both teachers and students. It is not only a waste of paper, time and human resource, but it also causes the stress in students. I think examinations should be abolished, so that students can have a great learning experience in school. – *Student N*

Lastly, examinations are not only used to grade students in school, but also destroy our society. – *Student O*

In conclusion, examinations are useful tools to grade students' performance in academic but students and teachers may be under pressure to carry out this procedure. I suggest that examinations should be abolished in order to keep things simple and easy. – *Student O*

In conclusion, examinations should be abolished because it can make many students like the schools and learn more from their teachers. – *Student P*

In conclusion, examinations should be abolished as students may feel stressful in learning process. It is too time-consuming and it wastes a lot of papers. Without examinations, I think students will like the schools more and are more willing to learn from their teachers. – *Student P*

4. CONCLUSION

This part addresses the summary of findings, limitations of the study, implications of findings and recommendations for future research.

4.1   Introduction

This study serves as a first step in gaining an understanding of the students' difficulties in English language writing and hence suggesting applicable methods to overcome their problems. It basically presents a summary on the previous parts. Emphasis will be also given to the research questions.

4.2   Summary of findings

Taking into account the writing difficulties and coming up with applicable methods to writing problems could undoubtedly influence ESL writing performance and bring desirable improvements. Based on the questionnaire and writing tasks carried out, this study was conducted regarding students' writing difficulties in ESL context. Writing difficulties by students were studied according to different stages of process writing: brain-storming, planning, drafting, editing, proof-reading and the final product.

The findings of this study showed that planning was the most challenging stage for S1(C) students. They did not prefer persuasive essays which involve too complicated elements to complete one. Students were taught the skills to organise and layout their ideas by following researcher's experience. Students showed apparent improvement in post-study writing task and in fact they still need more training on other aspects of writing too.

Furthermore, teacher training should also be taken seriously into consideration in order to develop and improve students' language proficiency and writing skill in particular.

4.3   Limitations of the study

The sample size was particularly small as it was narrowed down into only 22 students of Senior Middle One Group C (S1C) in Confucian Private Secondary School, Kuala Lumpur. The result may or may not apply to all of the Senior Middle One students in the school.

Due to the time constraint, this study does not really go in depth. The researcher could only focus on one writing difficulty with applicable solutions to students' writing problems.

4.4   Recommendations for future research

Future research will be of benefit if it can involve a larger population over a longer period of time. Research on the related topic with larger sample may increase the accuracy and validity of the result and present a more reliable interpretation.

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