



**THE ROLES OF LINGUISTIC
KNOWLEDGE AND LEXICAL
RETRIEVAL IN WRITING ESSAYS: A
COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE
FIRST AND SECOND LANGUAGE
WRITING OF MALAYSIAN ESL
LEARNERS**

BY

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ABSTRACT

This study is an investigation into the role of linguistic knowledge and lexical retrieval in order to improve essay writing in second language. Writing in the second language is a challenging task to second language learners due to their less developed language abilities such as linguistic knowledge and lexical retrieval. Their linguistic knowledge (grammar) of the second language is limited, making learners unable to connect words into proper clauses and sentences. In addition, due to inadequate lexical retrieval, second language writers are unable to express their ideas well, thus making a lot of mistakes in their essays. Having considered the Linguistic Interdependence Hypothesis (LIH) and Linguistic Threshold Hypothesis (LTH), this study presents an analysis of the Malay and English writing proficiency of students who learn Malay as the first language and English as the second language. This study adopts a correlation design involving Form Five Malay ESL students of mixed ability (n=97 good, average and weak). The primary concern in this study is to investigate whether a correlation exists between English and Malay in terms of linguistic knowledge and lexical retrieval so that the students' limited ability in writing essays may be improved using instructions in both Malay and English. Thus, the writing proficiency test is divided into two sub skills: linguistic knowledge (a Malay Grammatical Knowledge Test which tests on sentence construction and an English Grammatical Knowledge Test which tests on vocabulary) and lexical retrieval (a Malay Lexical Retrieval Test which tests on vocabulary and proverb retrieval and an English Lexical Retrieval Test which tests translation from Malay to English) and argumentative essays in both Malay and English. Using Pearson's r , linguistic knowledge and lexical retrieval in Malay and English writing were compared. The results show that there is no relationship between linguistic knowledge in Malay and English writing. On the other hand, a moderate relationship exists between lexical retrieval in Malay and English writing. Furthermore, a significant correlation for Malay and English writing skills are found to exist. In addition, multiple regression analyses were conducted to evaluate one variable against several other variables that explain how well Malay Essay Test scores predict mastery in English Essay Test scores. Thus, linguistic knowledge and lexical retrieval would help to improve second language learners' writing skills.

خلاصة البحث

تحقق هذه الدراسة في دور المعرفة اللغوية والاستخراج المعجمي لتحسين كتابة المقالات، في كونها اللغة الثانية للكاتب، والتي يشكل تحديا كبيرا للطلبة الذي يتخذون من الإنجليزية لغة ثانية، وذلك بسبب عدم تقدم قدراتهم اللغوية، مثل المعرفة اللغوية والاستخراج المعجمي. وتعد المعرفة اللغوية (القواعد) في الإنجليزية بكونها لغة ثانية محدودة وأقل سرعة في جعل الطلبة غير قادرين على ربط الكلمات لإنشاء عبارات وجمل. إضافة إلى ذلك، وبسبب نقص عملية الاستخراج المعجمي، يعاني الطلبة من إبداء آرائهم، مما يقلل من جاذبية مقالاتهم. لذلك، تقدم هذه الدراسة تحليلا في فصاحة اللغتين الملايوية والإنجليزية عند الطلبة الملايويين الذين يتخذون من الإنجليزية لغة ثانية. وتبنت الدراسة المنهج الربطي، وتضمنت 97 طالبا ملايويا في المرحلة الثانوية بالصف الخامس، لتحديد قدراتهم بالمستويات (جيدة، متوسطة، وضعيفة). ويعد الأمر الرئيسي في هذه الدراسة هو التحقق من كون هذا الارتباط موجود بين اللغتين الإنجليزية والملايوية، من ناحية المعرفة اللغوية والاستخراج المعجمي، لذا فإن قصور الطلبة في قدراتهم الكتابية قد تساعدهم في استخدام التعليمات من اللغتين الإنجليزية والملايوية. وهكذا، تصنف اختبارات المهارة الكتابية إلى المعرفة اللغوية (اختبار معرفة القواعد الملايوية والتي تقوم على بناء الجملة، في حين تقوم معرفة القواعد الإنجليزية على بناء الحروف)، والاستخراج المعجمي (اختبار الاستخراج المعجمي الملايوي والذي يقوم بناء على الاستخراج الحرفي والمثلي، في حين يكون الاستخراج المعجمي الإنجليزي على أساس ترجمة الحروف الملايوية إلى الإنجليزية). واستخدمت الدراسة منهج (بارسون) للمقارنة بين المعرفة اللغوية والاستخراج المعجمي في الكتابة الإنجليزية والملايوية. وأظهرت النتائج بأن عينات البحث لم يقوموا بإظهار أي علاقة بين المعرفة اللغوية في الكتابة باللغتين الإنجليزية والملايوية. ومن جانب آخر، أظهرت النتائج بأن هناك ارتباط متوسط بين الاستخراج المعجمي في الكتابة الملايوية والإنجليزية. علاوة على ذلك، هناك ارتباط مهم بين مهارات الكتابة باللغتين الإنجليزية والملايوية. إضافة إلى قيام الباحث بتحليلات الارتداد المضاعف، لتقييم تأثير المتغير على عدد من المتغيرات، مثل كيفية إجابة توقعات درجات اختبارات الكتابة الملايوية في درجات الكتابة الإنجليزية. واقترحت نتائج الدراسة بضرورة استخدام اللغة الأولى في تركيبات اللغة الثانية، لاسيما عند ضعف اللغة الثانية عند المتعلم. إضافة إلى ذلك، فإن فصاحة اللغة الثانية تحتاج إلى مضاعفة فصولها الدراسية، والتي قد تنقل تعبيرات اللغة الأولى إلى اللغة الثانية، لتمكين الطلبة من مهارات الكتابة في سمات المعرفة اللغوية (القواعد) والاستخراج المعجمي.

APPROVAL PAGE

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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this thesis is the result of my own investigation, except where otherwise stated. I also declare that it has not been previously or concurrently submitted as a whole for any other degrees at IIUM or other institutions.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Essay writing is an essential component in national examinations in Malaysia such as the Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) and the Penilaian Menengah Rendah (PMR), thus students need to be proficient in writing and demonstrate their proficiency in this skill in different genres such as descriptive, narrative and argumentative essays. Regardless of whether one is writing in the first or second language, writing is a demanding skill as it involves knowing and being able to use a formal variety of a language that needs to be learned. It is a demanding task because students need to possess linguistic knowledge and competent in various language abilities such as lexical retrieval ability in order to produce good essays (Schoonen, et al. 2003).

Linguistic knowledge refers to the knowledge of sounds, sound patterns, basic units of meanings such as words, vocabulary and rules, all integrated to form logical sentence according to the intended meaning. A grammar of a language on the other hand, is a set of rules that combine words and their component parts such as nouns, verbs and adjectives to generate grammatical or 'well- formed' sentences (Fromkin, Rodman & Hymes, 2003). As students' ideas are both expressed in single words and grammatical structures, students ought to have linguistic knowledge at their disposal in order to connect words into proper clauses and sentences (Grabe & Kaplan, 1996; Yau, 1991).

Yau's (1991) study demonstrates that a student's level of linguistic knowledge affects the conceptual content of second language writing; the higher the level of linguistic knowledge (of the student's second language) the more complex are the idea chunks and

syntax produced by students in his or her second language writing. Furthermore, Whalen and Menard (1995) discover that Canadian students learning French as a second language planned and evaluated more frequently with regard to the linguistic knowledge level rather than the content. They revised most frequently at the linguistic knowledge level in both first and second language writing but linguistic knowledge revisions were done at a deeper level such as phrases and sentences in the first language.

In addition, Grabe and Kaplan (1996) claim that students need to have lexical retrieval in order to express their ideas in written form to readers. Chenoweth and Hayes (2001:80) define lexical retrieval as recalling words from long-term memory and applying the words accurately in the written text. Students' lexical knowledge tends to influence the quality of their writing texts; Engber (1995) for instance, notices that the diversity of lexical choice and the correctness of lexical form made by writers in texts significantly affect readers' evaluation of the quality of essays. Grabe's research (1981 cited in Engber, 1995) also suggests that efficient writing and vocabulary diversity are closely linked.

Taiwo (2004) also regards lexical mistakes as being equally significant as grammatical mistakes. Dornyei (1995) further declares that second language students apply general verbs such as *do*, *take*, *make* and *keep* in all-purpose sentences which have little or no meaning outside the context of their particular use. As a result, they tend to use these words carelessly and substitute one for the other casually. This misuse of verbs may prevent them from acquiring good marks in writing essays.

Schoonen et al. (2003) and Liu (2000) mention that as second language writers often lack lexical retrieval in second language, writing in the second language can be a very challenging task for them as language abilities such as linguistic knowledge may be limited and the accessibility of lexical retrieval ability may be less automatic. Moreover, Chenoweth,

Hayes and Cumming (2001) indicate that it is not sufficient to acquire only linguistic knowledge; students need to possess lexical retrieval ability so that they may write excellent essays. The researchers confirm that the latter may actually lower one's cognitive processing load, thus enhancing the writing process and improving the quality of the text. Students who have good lexical retrieval ability are likely to focus more on text organization than weak students who concentrate more on basic vocabulary when writing.

Writing should be seen as an arrangement of words, clauses and sentences according to a system of rules. Thus, writing ought to be viewed as a product, constructed from a writer's command of linguistic knowledge and lexical retrieval. This orientation is born from the marriage of structural linguistics and behaviorism of second language (Silva, 1990). Writing is also regarded as an extension of grammar, as a means of reinforcement of language patterns through habit formation and tests learners' ability to produce well-formed sentences. Silva (1990) also states that writing is a complicated structure that can be learned by developing the ability to enhance linguistic knowledge and lexical retrieval. Currently, these two aspects are not given sufficient emphasis as most existing writing models focus on the writing process and on the development of writing proficiency. Hence, this study will focus upon the linguistic knowledge and lexical retrieval ability of Malaysian ESL learners in writing essays, both in their first and second languages.

Writing skills must be learned and practiced through experience, especially in classrooms. The researcher has observed that second language learners have problems in writing essays, especially in the second language, as they need to devise new ideas while incorporating information into new texts, as in expository or argumentative writing. Thus, there is a need to find a solution to these problems. This research indicates that the solution

can be found in the areas related to the students' possession of linguistic knowledge and lexical retrieval abilities.

1.2 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

As the English language is the second language in primary and secondary schools all over Malaysia, it is taught in five or six 40-minute periods a week. However, learners still do not acquire writing skills as expected by the Ministry of Education, particularly the Curriculum Development Center. However, Malay Malaysian ESL learners are lacking of linguistic knowledge by producing consistent errors such as in active/passive construction, past tenses, subject-verb agreement, singular-plural nouns, articles, modals, quantifiers, infinitives, nouns, conjunctions, usage of colloquial words, spelling, prepositions, incomplete sentences, negative sentence structures, adjectives, adverbs and the use of past participles. Furthermore, they appear to find it difficult to express their thoughts and opinions in English (Abdul Rashid Mohamed, Goh & Wan Rose Eliza, 2004). Nevertheless, it is important for Malaysian ESL learners to acquire proficiency in writing English essays to ensure good grades. Consequently, it is challenging to write in English as these language abilities such as linguistic knowledge and lexical retrieval may be limited.

At present, a large number of ESL students in Malaysia continue to fail to master the basics of the English language even after eleven years of formal education from Standard One to Form Five (Abdul Rashid Mohamed, Goh & Wan Rose Eliza, 2004). It is even more alarming to learn that many fifth-formers, with the exception of those from international schools, are struggling with even the fundamentals of English grammar, which is an important component of effective writing. According to experienced SPM examiners, weak students

usually obtain grade D which is 21-25 marks out of 50 marks in Continuous Writing (Abdul Rashid Mohamed, Goh & Wan Rose Eliza, 2004).

Basturkmen and Lewis (2002) and Kim and Kim (2005) point out that many second language learners have the tendency to demonstrate limited knowledge of English grammar and little ability to write in English. In addition, they display major errors in spelling, capitalization, word order and verb form. Their writing attempts are often hindered by lack of adequate English vocabulary and basic grammatical and structural patterns. Second language learners often regard writing assignments as difficult as these tasks are often presented as isolated texts and are time-consuming, with the teacher as the primary audience (Basturkmen & Lewis, 2002). The researchers also affirm that second language learners have difficulty in formulating new ideas as they involve transformation of information, which is much more complex in writing than in speaking. Musch and Broder (1999) claim that second language learners' low performance in writing is due to their inability to retrieve words and phrases in the second language and not because of unsuccessful learning or insufficient knowledge of the subject matter.

Furthermore, second language learners' linguistic knowledge and lexical retrieval ability are limited (Schoonen, et al., 2003). The difficulties that students encounter in lexical retrieval ability burden the working memory of the students, thus hindering the writing process and the quality of their essays. As a result, second language students may be involved in word finding and ascertaining grammatical structures that require too much attention and time, making them unable to attend to higher-level writing skills such as organizing the essay properly and trying to convince readers of the validity of a certain view (Schoonen, *et al.*, 2003).

Abu Talib Abdullah (1988) elaborates that Malay students are not focused while writing Malay essays as they believe that they are able to score easily in essay tests in this language. Thus they make errors in their texts. Hence, there is a possibility that Malaysian ESL learners' poor performance in writing in both first and second languages is affected by their lack of linguistic knowledge and lexical retrieval ability.

Not many studies have been carried out to investigate students' problems in writing essays in their first and second language from the aspect of linguistic knowledge and lexical retrieval. There are some studies, for example by Schoonen et al. (2003) that focus on the issue but particularly absent are studies administered in a Malaysian setting with a focus on ESL students who require the use of English as a second language. Therefore, there is a need for a study to be conducted in secondary schools like the current one that complements related research and investigates the problem. It is hoped that the findings from this study could, to a certain extent, rectify the problems faced by Malaysian ESL learners when writing essays.

1.3 OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The main objective of this study is to compare first and second language writing. The specific objectives of the study are to investigate:

- (1) the role of linguistic knowledge and lexical retrieval ability to improve the quality of the written essays of first and second language learners.
- (2) the relationship between Malay ESL learners' linguistic knowledge and lexical retrieval ability in their first and second language writing.

1.4 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This present study seeks to reveal the contribution of linguistic knowledge and lexical retrieval to the overall quality of the written essays and writing proficiency of first and second language learners. The primary focus is the level of linguistic knowledge and lexical retrieval ability in first language and second language writing (Questions 1, 2, 3 4, 7, 8 and 9). Additionally, the relationship between first language and second language writing will be explored (Questions 5 and 6). Therefore, this study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What is the students' level of linguistic knowledge ability in L1 writing?
2. What is the students' level of linguistic knowledge ability in L2 writing?
3. What is the students' level of lexical retrieval ability in L1 writing?
4. What is the students' level of lexical retrieval ability in L2 writing?
5. What is the students' level of L1 writing?
6. What is the students' level of second L2 writing?
7. Is there a correlation between the students' linguistic knowledge in L1 and L2 writing?
8. Is there a correlation between the students' lexical retrieval in L1 and L2 writing?
9. Is there a correlation between the students' writing abilities in L1 and L2 writing?

1.5 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The findings of this study will contribute to second language writing theory. Central to this study is an investigation of whether a correlation exists between first and second language writing abilities. By comparing first and second language writing, alternative