THE EFFECT OF INSTRUCTIONAL SCAFFOLDING IN WRITING GUIDED ESSAYS AMONG YOUNG SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNERS

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THE EFFECT OF INSTRUCTIONAL SCAFFOLDING
IN WRITING GUIDED ESSAYS
AMONG YOUNG SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNERS

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree of
Master in Education (TESL)

Faculty of Education

Universiti Teknologi Malaysia

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I dedicate this piece of work to my loving and supporting husband, Edmund Selvaraju,
my beloved children, John Emmanuel, Abigail Esther, Jonathan Emmanuel
and Hebron Emmanuel, my lovely daughter-in law, Yeoh Xiao Qi,
my family members and my friends
for their love, motivation and support.
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ABSTRACT

Writing is often seen as a very difficult skill to master and teachers too find it a difficult skill to teach. This study was to investigate the effect of scaffolding on writing guided essays to primary school students. A quasi experiment was carried out on two groups, the experimental group and the control group. The study was administered for two weeks during their English lessons. Four treatments were administered including modelling, brainstorming, conceptualisation and schemata building. Each treatment lasted for one hour. The intervention was administered to the experimental group. A pre test was given before the intervention followed by a post test after the intervention to both groups. Two external examiners were involved in marking the scripts and an inter-rater reliability test was conducted. The test scores were analysed using the SPSS and the essays were analysed to determine the effectiveness of the treatment. The respondents from the experimental group were interviewed to uncover their perceptions of using this technique. Three teachers were interviewed to find out some of the methods they use in teaching writing. The results indicated that the intervention was successfully carried out and the results obtained were favourable. This shows that students if given correct and sufficient support will be able to write better and the scaffolding technique is one such way.
ABSTRAK

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

Many adults have experienced moments that when they sit to write, nothing seems to come out of them, not even a word. They sit, staring at an empty page, wondering what to write and trying to communicate with an unseen audience. Likewise, for many students, writing is an arduous task, and for some, writing can be a life long struggle. What then makes writing so difficult? This is the challenge that many second language teachers face is teaching writing to young second language learners. Writing is not only a daunting task but it is often seen as a very difficult skill to master as it demands the integration of diverse cognitive, memory, linguistic, motor and affective skills which together contribute to the writing process.

Writing is not only the process the writer uses to put words to paper but also the resulting product of that process which is conditioned by its audience and genre. As writing in a second language is further complicated by issues of proficiency in the target language, first language literacy, and differences in culture and rhetorical approach to the text, instruction in writing can effectively improve student proficiency in a number of key areas.
For a second language learner, writing is an extension of listening and speaking. Therefore, the student must be provided with opportunities to build, extend and refine oral language in order to improve written output. Being aware of the various stages in the development of writing skills and the main issues that concern teachers of writing, we can take actions to resolve them.

In order to be writers, there must be considerable amount of interaction among peers, teachers, parents and the social context in which children immerse themselves in. According to Dorn and Soffos (2001), writing is a social process and children learn how to become writers through meaningful interactions with more knowledgeable people. They also state that writing must be learnt and it is shaped through practice and constructive feedback which requires motivation, strategies, skills and knowledge.

Dorn and Soffos (2001) also state that a teacher can orchestrate, or scaffold, student learning in the area of writing by asking four simple questions before they begin. The first two questions are directed to the students; as to ‘what is easy for the writer to do?’ and ‘what is hard for the writer to do?’ The other remaining questions are directed to the teacher; ‘What does the teacher expect the writer to do?’ and ‘What does the teacher expect to do for the writer?’

As writing is not automatically learned, a teacher, therefore, has to devise activities and give enough support to enable second language learners to learn the skills of writing. Learning is not only a cognitive development but is also of shared social practices and both of these are vital in classroom teaching. Learning opportunities are created when learners interact with each other and with the teacher and focuses on matters of shared interest and that contain opportunities for learning. With proper pedagogical support given, teachers would be able to develop these second language learners achieve their potential as writers.
1.2 Background of the study

The background will discuss the overview of the English Language writing component in The Integrated Curriculum for Primary School, the teaching of writing in the Malaysian classroom, students’ attitude towards learning English especially writing in the second language and the students’ performance in English papers during the examination.

In The Integrated Curriculum for Primary School (KBSR English Language Curriculum), English language is taught from Year 1 at the primary level of education until the end of the secondary level where the syllabus is topic and skill based. The topic provides the content whereby language skills are developed. The syllabus includes the language component, positive moral values, literary elements, the principles of language skills and grammar integration. The language skills of listening, reading and writing form the core of the primary English curriculum. Learners use these skills to talk to and to write to people, to obtain information from various sources and to enjoy a poem or story read to them. The skill of writing is taught to enable learners to express their ideas clearly on paper in legible handwriting or to communicate via the electronic media if the facilities are available in school. (Sukatan Pelajaran Bahasa Inggeris KBSR, Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia, 2001, p. 3.)

The skill of writing focuses on developing learners’ writing ability beginning at the word and phrase levels and progress to the sentence and paragraph levels. For those who are able and capable they must be encouraged to write simple compositions comprising several paragraphs. In writing simple compositions, learners are taught the various steps involved in writing such as planning, drafting, revising and editing. In the process they are also taught to use appropriate vocabulary and correct grammar to get their meaning across clearly.
Although much of the writing at this level is guided, the amount of control is relaxed for learners who are able and proficient in the language. (Sukatan Pelajaran Bahasa Inggeris KBSR, Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia, 2001, p.8).

However despite the holistic curriculum and integrated use of the four main skills, writing is still a problem among students (Chitravelu, 1995). A good evidence is a study conducted by Jamali and Hasliza (1995) who investigated students’ perception in the importance of being proficient in English in 42 rural schools in Selangor. The findings from the study revealed that 23% of them perceived themselves as being the least able in writing skills. Jamali and Hazliza argued that this situation is significantly related to the students lack of exposure towards the target language and lack of practice in using the language for communication.

The teacher-centered approach is a method that has long been used in teaching and learning. Currently, there are still many teachers who use this approach. This approach however has the disadvantage, that students will be passive in class as they do not have the opportunity to play a role in finding information themselves. They only get information based on what they hear from teachers. They only act as a receiver of material, and the teacher as transmitter of the material. The teacher comes to class, gives or delivers materials while the students sit and listen. Such an approach is less effective for teaching and learning process. In supporting this, Ebinizar(1997) stated that most of the time these teachers do not teach the students the strategies of writing essays. What normally happens is that these teachers would just give the titles of the essays and a few main points. Following that they would instruct students to write without giving guidance at all with the assumptions that the students are able to write. Students, on the other hand do not have much alternative but to just write the essay on their own. After the essays are marked and given to the respective students, feedback given by the teacher is often not helpful (Loh, 1999). This is attributed to some teachers having the tendency to focus more on giving feedback on grammar.
Students, then only correct the grammar aspects but they still do not know how to improve the essay. Indirectly this causes frustration to the students and discourages them to write. This situation prolongs and students will not be able to make much progress in writing especially in expressing and organizing their ideas and elaborating their points (Loh, 1999).

Teachers too have the tendency to rely on model essays and workbooks as the main source to help students obtain good grades (Loh, 1999). This often leads to writing activities being meaningless. The teachers only focus on essay writing where as students should be introduced and exposed to a variety of writing activities like poem, portfolio, writing lyrics of songs and short stories (Ebenizar, 1997). Thus this makes the writing classroom ‘dry, boring and rigid’, especially when the focus of the writing class is now turned to spotting the potential examination questions (Loh, 1999). The writing activity is confined to writing essays, copying the model essays and memorizing the points of essays (Chitravelu, 1995).

When it comes to writing, most of the students would avoid it (Ebenizar, 2007). They believe that writing is difficult especially if they do not know how to convey what they intend to say. They also argue that the limited vocabulary and the lack of practice using the language prevent them from being a good writer. The students’ negative beliefs and attitudes have made many teachers complain of not being able to re-train their students to be better writers.

The Primary School Evaluation Test, also known as Ujian Penilaian Sekolah Rendah (commonly abbreviated as UPSR in Malay), is a national examination taken by all students in Malaysia at the end of their sixth year in primary school before they leave for secondary school. It is prepared and examined by the Malaysian Examinations Syndicate (Lembaga Peperiksaan Malaysia), an agency that constitutes the Ministry of Education. The English examination is divided into two papers, Paper One and Paper Two. Paper One
contains forty multiple choice questions which test the vocabulary level of students, using social expressions, grammar, punctuation, spelling and comprehension questions based on a liner and a non-linear text. Paper Two, has three subjective questions. Students describe a picture in five sentences, transfer information from a text into a table and write a short paragraph on a choice made from the information in the given text and writing a guided essay based on three pictures. Therefore in order to get good grades, students need to perform well in both Paper One and Paper Two. However, many students failed to do well in Paper Two because they are not often able to write good essays. The researcher has been an examiner for the UPSR English paper and has seen that students mainly have difficulty in writing the guided essay.

The stereotype lesson of writing in a Malaysian classroom entails a brief classroom discussion on the topic for ideas, a quick talk on the choice of words and the students are required to write the essay. The teacher then marks the essay, provides some comments and gives the marks. Copying model essays of different genres in writing has been another way of students learning to write.

The process writing approach which requires students to produce drafts of written work before the final work is being handed in is however not suitable in primary schools as this method is tedious and due to the long process of several drafts, the teacher is able to only complete one essay a month. In support of this, Horowitz (1986) asserts, some people think that the process approach is unrealistic because it puts too much emphasis on multiple drafts which may cause ESL students to fail the academic exams with their single draft restrictions (as cited by Leki, 1992).

Hence, there is a need for teachers to guide students to write effectively and in order to do so, enough support must be given to enhance their writing ability.
1.3 Statement of the problem

In Malaysian schools, students have started to learn English since they were in primary schools. Despite being taught to write English for more than six years, students are still unable to write good essays (Chitravelu, 1995). Students often perceive writing essays as a negative experience because the teacher often gives a lot of negative criticism. Due to this students always try to avoid writing for the fear of making mistakes. They do not enjoy writing and have negative perceptions towards writing activities. (Ebenizar, 1997)

Teachers do not expose the students on how to write but they provide students with various types of materials. In addition, teachers seldom write out the types of expressions used for a particular writing task. Students need to be assisted by teachers by injecting ideas to help them improve writing. Hence one of the ways in which the teacher could help pupils is by giving them enough support.

This support could be provided by studying examples of texts, discussing appropriate or useful language, doing practice exercises and using structured outlines, teachers can help students build bridges between reading and writing which they could not normally build on their own. Support could also be in the form of offering assistance by a teacher or peer to support learning. Contextual supports for meaning through the use of simplified language, teacher modeling, visuals and graphics, cooperative learning and hands-on learning are further examples of support. Students would be able to expand their points through brainstorming and coming up with mind maps, so that their essay will be more concrete, systematic and structured. Therefore, if the students are given enough time, opportunities and support, they would be able to acquire the required skills to become good writers.
Some of these supports could be provided through scaffolding. This study will look into the effect of scaffolding in writing guided essays among young second language learners.

1.4 Purpose of the Study

The main purpose of this study is to investigate whether the use of scaffolding will help young L2 learners to write guided essays. This study also seeks to discover the perceptions of L2 learners towards instructional scaffolding in improving writing guided essays as well as to know the different ways teachers teach writing.

1.5 Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the study are:

- To investigate the effectiveness of using scaffolding to help improve young second language learners’ ability in writing guided essays.

- To uncover the perception of the second language learners towards writing guided essays through scaffolding

- To know how teachers teach writing.
1.6 Research Questions

Three research questions are formulated for the purpose of this study. The research questions are as follows:

i. How does the use of scaffolding help improve young second language learners’ ability in writing guided essays?

ii. What are the young second language learners’ perceptions in writing guided essays through scaffolding?

iii. What are the different ways teachers use to teach writing?

1.7 Significance of the Study

In view of the fact that many second language learners are weak in their writing skills; teachers must find ways and means to improve their skills. The writing process is not just about writing sentences but there are many aspects of writing that these learners should possess in order to be good writers.

Since the Malaysia Education System puts much emphasis on examinations, most teachers put great effort to ensure that these learners produce good results. There are some teachers who at the same time make their lessons fun, creative and interesting to draw these learners’ attention. Writing skills can be improved in many different ways. Students need to be given ample opportunities to write. Spending an additional ten minutes every day to write is a good idea to start with. Teachers need to provide guidance when the student
writes. Students need to know that writing is a difficult task that needs effort; therefore they should not be discouraged if their progress is slow. They need to be given opportunities to talk about their writing experiences and hear what their peers have written.

The results of this study is expected to provide useful information for readers, especially for English teachers about scaffolding instruction that can be used in teaching writing as well as other language skills such as the communication skill and reading and comprehension skills. Besides teaching language skills, scaffolding can be used in developing many learning processes among which would be the language development process. The scaffolding technique ultimately helps students become autonomous learners.

It will also provide additional informative input for other researchers who intend to carry out their research in the same field with certain interests. This research would serve as an example where researches could be done in other language skills as well as other learning processes that seem to be a problem with different students with different learning abilities. Finally, this technique will serve as a guide for teachers who face similar writing problems with their students and they will be able to use it to help them in writing.

### 1.8 Scope of the Study

This study involves primary school students who are from an average Year Six class. They come from a semi rural school in the district of Johor Bahru in the state of Johor. Thirty students are chosen for this research who are in an average class from a total of one hundred and five Year Six students. They consist of Malay, Indian and Iban boys and girls.
This study primarily investigates whether the use of scaffolding among the L2 learners will help improve their guided essay writing. As the essays are marked holistically according to the standard format of the Primary School Evaluation Test, (UPSR) marking scheme, it will look particularly into the development of ideas and how the essay is written as a whole. It will look into whether these students have improved in writing guided essay in the post test, as compared to the ones written in the pre test. This is to determine the effectiveness of the treatments administered.

1.9 Conceptual Framework

Sociocultural Theory

Vygotsky's theories stress the fundamental role of social interaction in the development of cognition (Vygotsky, 1978), as he believed strongly that community plays a central role in the process of "making meaning." "Learning is a necessary and universal aspect of the process of developing culturally organized, specifically human psychological function" (1978, p. 90).

According to Vygotsky (1978), much important learning by the child occurs through social interaction with a skillful tutor. The tutor may model behaviors and/or provide verbal instructions for the child. Vygotsky refers to this as co-operative or collaborative dialogue. The child seeks to understand the actions or instructions provided by the tutor (the parent or teacher) then internalize the information, using it to guide or regulate their own performance.

Scaffolding

Jerome Bruner (1978), the "father of cognitive psychology," coined the term "scaffolding" to describe the support structure teachers and parents routinely provide children during the learning process. This theory states that learning takes place actively as children build new ideas upon their current and prior knowledge.
In education, scaffolding is used by teachers to move students beyond their current developmental stage or skill set and into progressively more difficult tasks. The student learns by observing a more competent person solving a problem or completing a task. The teacher provides support and models strategies for the student. It is a learning process designed to promote a deeper learning. Scaffolding is the support given during the learning process that is tailored to the needs of the student with the intention of helping the student achieve his/her learning goals (Sawyer, 2006). These supports are gradually removed as students develop autonomous learning strategies, promoting their own cognitive, affective and psychomotor learning skills and knowledge. Teachers help the students master a task or a concept by providing support.

This conceptual framework is divided into two broad categories, which complement each other, namely, constructivism and instructional design. Constructivism, which is situated on the bottom of the overall framework, both functions as a solid foundation and represents the underlying theory on which the instructional design is built based on practical issues applicable to be conducted in the classroom. The constructivist theory embraces a vibrant learning community, which is made up of active social interaction among its active members. Within this active social interaction, carefully-scaffolded activities are maintained. The three elements (a vibrant learning community, active social interaction and the scaffolding processes) affect each other in that orderly sequence.

Upon reaching this stage, the role of the instructional design comes into play. The types of scaffolding involved in the scaffolding processes reflect a strategic and practical planning in the instructional design to reach the learning outcomes as anticipated beforehand.

The carefully-scaffolded activities consist of four stages. In the first stage, the teacher models and some form of self scaffolding is done which is pre-instructional. This is followed by bridging activities where the teacher in class provides the expert scaffolding. The next stage involves contextualizing or
reciprocal scaffolding where there is communication and interaction both from the students as well as the teacher. Finally, in the remaining two posts instructional stages are self scaffolding and transcendental scaffolding. In these two stages, conceptualization happens and schema theory is activated. The process of long learning may eventually take place as the ultimate goal of the whole teaching learning processes.

The framework in Figure 1 was adopted and adapted from Holton and Clarke (2006). It is adapted in this study to teach a second language writing class. It depicts how the two broad categories together with their respective ingredients of which they are made up, are interrelated. However, the focus of the discussion at this time is restricted to how the scaffolding processes can be applied to enhance learning.
Figure 1. Conceptual Framework
Source: Adapted from Holton and Clarke (2006)
1.9.1 The scaffolding concepts adopted in this study

The scaffolding concepts offered by Holton and Clarke (2006) are adopted in this study to teach a second language writing class. According to Holton and Clarke (2006), scaffolding is defined as “an act of teaching that (i) supports the immediate construction of knowledge by the learner; and (ii) provides the basis for the future independent learning of individual.” (p. 131).

Holton and Clarke (2006) point out further that there are three kinds of scaffolding: ‘expert’, ‘reciprocal’, and ‘self’ scaffolding. Nevertheless, there seems to be another kind of scaffolding, which might be temporarily termed as ‘transcendental’, existing after particular students have passed the three types of scaffolding applied in a certain sequence in their learning processes.

The rationale of using Holton and Clarke’s theory was that the agency (actor/doer/giver of the scaffolding) is emphasized. In most theories of scaffolding, the focus was on the learners (receivers of the scaffolding) who were given the scaffolding, focusing on passive scaffolding given from an expert to a student. Holton and Clarke’s theory touches on the opportunities for the students/learners to scaffold themselves in the self scaffolding. If these students can scaffold themselves internally, then they should try to scaffold other friends or students externally which might function as the foundation of the transcendental scaffolding. As the name itself suggests, it refers to a process of ‘beyond’ scaffolding, to be literally specific, beyond ‘self’ scaffolding, which implies an active scaffolding process done by the actor, the doer or the giver of the scaffolding. When the scaffolding is removed later on, it is hoped that these students can become independent learners because they have passed the expert, reciprocal, self and transcendental sequence. They will be mature enough to stand on their own feet to search for the next knowledge to acquire.
1.9.1.1 Holton and Clarke’s expert scaffolding

The teacher or the scaffolder, as an expert in a certain area, provides scaffolding to the students. In this phase, the students receive the scaffolding from the teacher. Modeling is an effective technique. Providing real examples will be good. The students will then imitate what the teacher has done. With online learning, the role of the teacher has shifted. The teacher functions as a facilitator. Some awareness to a certain topic can be created. It is like giving a small piece of the whole picture. Then, the students will be trying to find the missing parts in their knowledge construction.

1.9.1.2 Holton and Clarke’s reciprocal scaffolding

This is a trial and error phase where the students work together with their peers in exchanging information in their search for knowledge. In the process, quasi-transcendental scaffolding is identified along the way, as the students seem not to have mastered the materials or knowledge yet.

1.9.1.3 Holten and Clarke’s self scaffolding

In this type of scaffolding, the students are scaffolding themselves in their search for knowledge by finding other resources on their own and adjusting the knowledge they have acquired. Self scaffolding is effective when they are highly motivated. Thus, without being asked, they keep on constructing their knowledge.
1.10 Definition of Terms

The important terms used throughout the study are as follows:

Second language learners (L2 learners)

Second language learners are students whose primary language(s) or language(s) of the home, is other than English and who may therefore require additional services in order to develop their individual potential.

Guided essay

A guided essay is one that is outlined, with key concepts, so that a student does not have to start out with a blank piece of paper. They are provided for those who have little writing experience and who want some tutoring to write the required essays. Guided writing is an individual or group activity where learners use word maps to organize their ideas and write texts. It serves as a scaffold to independent writing. Teachers discuss and model writing strategies with students.

1.11 Limitations of the study

This small scale study investigates the use of scaffolding in teaching of writing. However, the findings of the study are confined to some limitations.

The population involves Year Six students in all the primary schools in the country. The sample was taken from a suburban primary school in Johor. The study was conducted with only sixty respondents. The results may be different if the respondents are more or less than the number of respondents used in this study. This is because larger group of respondents may affect the learning process as the teacher would not be able to pay attention to all students. This may result in the decline of performance of the students.
The respondents involved in the study are from a mixed ability level of proficiency. The findings may vary if the study is conducted in a lower level of ability or with intermediate level or high level of proficiency. The teacher has to be more aware about the students’ proficiency level and prepare adequate tasks which are suitable for them.

The study is conducted for a short period of time which is two weeks. The researcher administers four intervention treatments using only one topic. If more treatments were given, students may have produced better results as there would have been more time for practice and further discussions. If more topics were used as a basis of discussion and brainstorming, the students would be able to write better as their ideas would have developed.

1.12 Conclusion

In conclusion, the poor performance in English Language in the schools and public examinations arouse the awareness to take measures to improve students’ performance in the English Language. One way by which students can improve their marks is by producing better written work, especially in their guided essays.

Overall, this study intends to investigate whether the use of instructional scaffolding will help motivate and enhance young L2 learners to write guided essays and expose teachers to the scaffolding instruction as well as their opinions in using this technique.