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(IJEPC)**www.ijepe.com**EXPLORATION OF THE LEVEL AND EMPLOYMENT OF ESL
WRITING STRATEGIES AMONG MALAYSIAN LOWER
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This work is licensed under [CC BY 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)**Abstract:**

This survey study explored and identified the level as well as the employment of ESL writing strategies use among Malaysian lower secondary school students. This study utilised Petric & Czarl (2003) modified writing strategies use questionnaire as its data collection instrument. 124 Form One students from an urban school in Keningau, Sabah participated in this study. The results of the questionnaire showed that lower secondary school students are medium users of writing strategies. The results also indicated that lower secondary school students used during writing strategies more than pre-writing and revising strategies. Recommendations for future studies include approaching related studies with qualitative approaches.

Keywords:

ESL, Writing, Writing Strategies, Lower Secondary School Students

Introduction

Writing is a critical skill for interaction, communication, and survival that everyone should be able to master. Writing in English poses difficulties for Malaysian secondary school students in terms of proficiency and behaviour and despite having learned the language for eleven years, secondary school students frequently fail to produce the writing that is expected at their level (Li & Razali, 2019). In the Malaysian educational context, most teachers perceived ESL writing as one of the weakest language skills (Fauziah Hassan & Nita Selamat, 2002; Ghabool, Mariadass, & Kashef, 2012; Mastan, Maarof, & Embi, 2017). Writing-related challenges in the Malaysian educational context frequently centred around issues with proficiency and language, including the influence of the students' native language (Maros, Kim Hua, & Salehuddin, 2007); problems with grammar; and inadequate, imprecise vocabulary use (Fauziah Hassan & Nita Selamat, 2002; Ghabool et al., 2012; Fareed, Ashraf, & Bilal, 2016). In addition, it was found that Malaysian students experience anxiety when it comes to writing (Akhtar, Hassan, & Saidalvi, 2020), and possess low sense of self-efficacy (Parilah et al., 2011).

The complexity of writing can be reduced through the use of appropriate writing strategies. Expert writers have been proven to be strategic in approaching their writing. Often, students who struggle with writing attempted to solve their writing difficulties in unthoughtful manners, indicating that they may lack strategic planning in their effort to solve their writing problems (Okasha & Hamdin, 2014). In contrast to good writers, the majority of students were unable to manipulate writing strategies that would have assisted them in managing the process of writing (Zimmerman & Risemberg, 1997). Furthermore, Yang (2013) observed that a significant number of students learning English as a second language (ESL) are frequently unaware of the right strategies to apply when writing. Hence, attempting to identify the level of writing strategies use and how learners employ the strategies could be helpful in informing teachers and other stakeholders on aiding students to become proficient writers.

Literature Review

The use of writing strategies in the area of ESL body of knowledge is extensive and vast, and researches undertaken on identifying the frequency and employment of writing strategies in various ESL context had produced results which covers factors such as population, proficiency levels and types of writing strategies being used by ESL learners.

ESL Writing Strategies

The notion of writing strategies has been vastly discussed in the areas of ESL writing and writing strategies. Various researchers claim that employment of writing strategies is one of the characteristics that distinguish the successful and less successful writers (Arndt, 1987; Raimes, 1985; Zamel, 1982 as cited in Mu, 2005). Writing strategies can be defined as conscious decisions and techniques employed by a writer to achieve their writing goals (Mu & Carrington, 2007; Narik et al, 2019).

Successful writers often employ myriads of writing strategies. Hyland (2008) stated that when faced with writing assignments, authors are genuinely engaged in the process of looking for answers to a number of difficulties. As a result, writing is a complicated cognitive activity that involves the use of a variety of different tactics and processes. It is essential to a writer's success to make use of several strategies when they are in the process of writing. Riduan and Lim (2009) also indicate that the most important factor in producing high-quality writing or essays

is the regular employment of the strategies that are used to generate ideas or to revise what has been written, as well as the types and amounts of techniques that are used.

The taxonomy of ESL writing strategies is generally categorised according to the three main stages of writing. Petric and Czarl (2003) classified their writing strategies taxonomy to before writing (time planning, mental planning, expert model, reference, and outlining); during writing (Sentence and Paragraph verification, outline revision, language transfer, positive grammar and vocabulary, use of dictionary and peer assistance), and after writing (reading aloud, revision, drafting, instruction matching, collation and self-reward). Mu (2005) writing strategies taxonomy, on the other hand, focused on creating a writing strategies taxonomy based on previously suggested categories of strategies introduced in older studies (see Arndt, 1987 and Wenden, 1991 as cited in Mu, 2005) for example, cognitive and metacognitive strategies. In Mu's taxonomy, apart from cognitive and metacognitive strategies, the taxonomy included rhetorical (organisation, translation of L1 ideas into English, genre or modelling), communicative (avoidance of problems, anticipating readers' response), and socio/affective strategies (resourcing and referencing, getting feedback, assigning goals, reducing anxiety).

Although previous researches have identified the various levels of writing strategies use and employment of these strategies among ESL learners in different contexts (Maarof & Murat, 2013; Rahmawati et al., 2019; Kalaivaani & Mahendran, 2020), there is a lack of exploration in terms of participants from secondary schools, especially lower secondary school students. Previous studies focused on tertiary level students and high achievers; hence it would be worthwhile to identify and explore the level of writing strategies use and its utilisation by lower form students.

Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this study is to identify the level and the use of writing strategies among lower secondary school students. The two research questions of this study are as follows: -

- a. What is the level of writing strategies used by the respondents in the three stages of writing?
- b. What writing strategies are employed by the respondents in all three stages of writing?

Methodology

Research Design And Participants

This study employed a survey design. This study's respondents comprised of 124 Form 1 students from an urban secondary school in Keningau, Sabah. There were 61 female students and 63 male students among the respondents (see Table 2). The respondents were chosen using a non-random, purposive sampling method (Kelly, Clark, Brown, & Sitzia, 2003). Since random sampling was not possible at the research site, respondents were chosen from a pool of those who are representative of the target population (Fraenkel, Wallen, & Hyun, 2012).

Table 1
Students Demographic

Gender	Number of students
Male	63
Female	61
TOTAL	124

Instrument

This study employed a self-report writing strategies questionnaire adapted from Petric and Czarl's (2003) Writing Strategies Questionnaire. This instrument was used to identify ESL writing strategies that students find useful and manageable when completing content course writing assignments (Petric & Czarl, 2003). The original questionnaire was designed for non-native speakers in the adult EFL context; thus, for the purpose of this study, the questionnaire was modified to accommodate this study's contexts and participants. Using Petric and Czarl's suggestions, the researcher changed some of the questionnaire's wordings by simplifying the statements into simpler English that lower secondary students could understand. The questionnaire contained 45 items divided into three sections: 1) students' demographic details, including the language spoken at home and their proficiency level, 2) students' writing strategies prior to writing, 3) students' writing strategies during writing, and 4) students' writing strategies after writing. This study collected students' perceived frequency of using the writing strategies at the three different stages of writing using a five-point Likert-scale. To indicate the frequency of strategy use, respondents were asked to circle the number that best represented their response on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (almost). The modified questionnaire was distributed to respondents via their English subject teachers, and respondents completed the questionnaire within 30 minutes.

Data Analysis

The questionnaire data were tallied to determine the level of writing strategy utilisation and the manner in which the respondents employed writing strategies. Before comparing the data to Oxford's Level of Writing Strategies Use, the data was analysed using percentages and frequencies.

The data were analysed using descriptive and frequency analysis. The mean and percentage of responses were utilised to determine the frequency of writing strategy use among students and to determine whether they were high users, medium users, or low users of writing strategies. Using Oxford's frequency scale (1990), the mean scores for each strategy were compared to their frequency of usage. The Oxford frequency scale (Table 3) was also utilised as a point of reference for the employment of writing strategies in previous research.

Table 2
Oxford's (1990) Conversion on Frequency of the Use of Strategy and Mean Score Scale

Level	Indicator	Mean
High	Always or almost always used	4.5 – 5.0
	Usually used	3.5 - 4.4
Medium	Sometimes used	2.5 – 3.4

Low	Almost never used	1.5 – 2.4
	Never used	1.0 – 1.4

Results

The survey findings are as follows. Overall, the data indicated that respondents used writing strategies at a medium level (Table 4). The data also indicated that respondents have a proclivity to use writing strategies during the During Writing stage ($M=3.18$). This was followed by the Before Writing stage ($M=3.05$), with the Revising stage being the least used writing strategy by respondents.

Table 3
Overall Writing Strategies Use

Stage	Mean	SD	Level of Use
Before Writing	3.05	1.18	Medium
During Writing	3.18	1.10	Medium
Revising	2.81	1.32	Medium
Overall	3.01	1.18	Medium

The subsequent tables show the level and employment of writing strategies according to the three main writing stages.

Table 5 displays the before writing strategies use frequently utilised by respondents. Students perceived themselves as medium users of prewriting strategies during the prewriting or before writing stage. Students studied the task instructions before writing ($M=3.99$, $SD=1.086$), they thought about what they wanted to write and had a plan in their heads, but not on paper ($M=3.56$, $SD=1.231$), and students interacted with their environment by ensuring they are not disturbed if writing from home ($M=3.66$, $SD=1.300$).

Table 4
Before Writing Strategies

Before Writing	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Oxford scale
1. I plan on how to complete the writing task (example: how long I take to brainstorm, how long to finish the whole essay, how to arrange my ideas, prepare my stationaries, etc) before writing my essay.	124	3.09	.980	Medium
2. Before I start writing, I study the writing task's instruction.	124	3.99	1.086	High
3. I look at an essay sample written by a native speaker or a more proficient writer.	124	2.67	1.167	Medium
4. I look at essay samples from reference books.	124	3.06	1.283	Medium
5. I start writing without having a written or mental plan.	124	2.44	1.121	Low

6. I think about what I want to write and have a plan in my mind, but not on paper.	124	3.56	1.231	High
7. I note down words and short notes related to the topic.	124	3.06	1.117	Medium
8. I write an outline of my paper.	124	2.62	1.101	Medium
9. I write notes or an outline in my native language or in Bahasa Malaysia.	124	2.68	1.266	Medium
10. If writing at home, I make sure that I am not disturbed.	124	3.66	1.300	High
11. If the writing task is given as homework, I ask others to help me out before doing the essay assignment.	124	2.90	1.297	Medium
12. I will prepare myself by reading related materials about the essay.	124	2.90	1.139	Medium

The majority of students perceived themselves to be neutral in terms of planning how to complete the writing task, as well as other factors such as time required, how they organise their ideas, and how they prepare their stationery ($M=3.09$, $SD=0.98$). Students perceived the least useful before writing strategies as beginning writing without a written or mental plan ($M=2.44$, $SD=1.121$). This may imply that students have a plan, which is supported by students thinking about what they want to write and having a mental plan, but not writing it down. ($M=3.56$, $SD=1.231$).

Most respondents stated that they rarely look at essay samples written by a native speaker or a more proficient writer when looking for models of good writing ($M=2.67$, $SD=1.167$). This could imply that when looking for model essays to emulate, students may discover that looking at essay samples written by native speakers or proficient writers is not an important part of their writing process. Most students, however, do occasionally look at essay samples from reference books ($M=3.06$, $SD=1.283$), suggesting that students look for sample essays from materials that are easily accessible to them. In contrast to the students' responses in the previous item, students prefer to look for sample essays in reference books rather than referring to a proficient writer's work.

Table 6 shows the During Writing Strategies frequently employed by students. In the "During Writing Strategies" section, the students' responses revealed the four most frequently used strategies, including "beginning with the introduction" ($M=3.88$; $SD=1.173$), "rereading their written work to generate ideas" ($M=3.86$; $SD=1.129$), "selecting a similar word to a word they do not know the meaning of" ($M=3.59$; $SD=1.176$), and "asking for help if they encounter problems" ($M=3.68$; $SD=1.159$).

Table 6
During Writing Strategies Use

During Writing strategies	N	Mean	SD	Oxford frequency level
1. I start with the introduction.	124	3.88	1.173	High
2. I stop after each sentence to read it again.	124	3.31	1.245	Medium

3. I stop after a few sentences or a whole paragraph, covering one idea.	124	3.23	1.155	Medium
4. I reread what I have written to get ideas how to continue.	124	3.86	1.129	High
5. I go back to my outline and make changes in it.	124	2.85	1.141	Medium
6. I write bits of the text in my native language or in Bahasa Malaysia and then translate them into English.	124	2.76	1.315	Medium
7. I make sure that my essay's grammar and vocabulary are accurate.	124	3.33	1.102	Medium
8. I simplify what I want to write if I don't know how to express my thoughts in English.	124	3.18	1.176	Medium
9. If I don't know a word in English, I write it in my native language and later try to find a suitable English word.	124	3.02	1.337	Medium
10. If I don't know a word in English, I find a similar English word that I know.	124	3.59	1.176	High
11. If I don't know a word in English, I stop writing and look up the word in the dictionary.	124	2.77	1.320	Medium
12. I use a bilingual dictionary, for example a BM-English dictionary.	124	2.69	1.314	Medium
13. I use a monolingual dictionary, for example an all-English language dictionary.	124	2.36	1.205	Low
14. I ask somebody to help me out when I have problems while writing in class.	124	3.68	1.159	High

For this level of writing strategy use, the results revealed an intriguing pattern for techniques utilised moderately. When faced with a word issue, such as not knowing the exact term or phrase to use in an essay, students tend to either simplify the word ($M=3.18$, $SD=1.176$) or write it in their native language and return to it later to locate an appropriate word ($M=3.02$, $SD=1.337$). Occasionally the students do stop writing to consult the dictionary ($M=2.77$, $SD=1.33$). The results revealed that if a student encountered difficulty with word definitions and word selection while writing, he or she would either temporarily simplify or replace the problematic word rather than stop writing to consult a dictionary or their teacher or peers. Using a monolingual dictionary was the least common method ($M=2.36$; $SD=1.205$). This could be because students do not possess monolingual dictionaries or do not know how to utilise them at their level. Regarding dictionary use during writing, however, some students reported that they would stop writing and look up the meaning of a term if they were uncertain about its English meaning ($M=2.77$, $SD=1.320$). Others disclosed that they would utilise a bilingual

dictionary, such as a BM-English dictionary ($M=2.69$, $SD=1.314$). This may suggest that the majority of pupils do not own dictionaries or are less dependent on them.

Table 7 shows the After Writing Strategies used by students. The students viewed themselves as moderate users of writing strategies throughout the revision or post-writing phase. The most common writing strategies was checking for errors after obtaining feedback from the teacher ($M=3.73$, $SD=1.219$), indicating that lower secondary school students may require the assistance of an authoritative individual, such as their teacher, to identify their errors. Checking to see if their essay adheres to the writing requirement was the second most common approach for revision ($M=3.37$, $SD=1.172$). When rewriting, the students' reaction suggested that rechecking the task requirement could be an afterthought rather than a necessary step.

Table 7
After Writing Strategies

Revising/After writing	N	Mean	SD	Oxford frequency level
1. I read my text aloud.	124	2.26	1.249	Low
2. I only read what I have written when I have finished the whole essay.	124	3.27	1.224	Medium
3. When I have written my essay, I hand it in without reading it.	124	2.12	1.138	Low
4. I use a dictionary when revising.	124	2.33	1.034	Low
5. I make changes in vocabulary.	124	2.54	1.023	Medium
6. I make changes in sentence structure.	124	2.78	1.000	Medium
7. I make changes in the structure of the essay.	124	2.82	.972	Medium
8. I make changes in the content or ideas.	124	2.97	.928	Medium
9. I focus on one thing at a time when revising (e.g content, structure).	124	3.02	1.140	Medium
10. I drop my first draft and start writing again.	124	2.70	1.140	Medium
11. I check if my essay matches the writing instructions.	124	3.37	1.172	Medium
12. If the essay is a homework, I leave it aside for a couple of days and then I see it in a new perspective.	124	2.94	1.198	Medium
13. I show my essay to somebody and ask for his/her opinion.	124	2.84	1.290	Medium

14. I compare my essay with the essays written by my friends on the same topic.	124	2.90	1.232	Medium
15. I give myself a reward for completing the assignment.	124	2.40	1.255	Low
16. I check my mistakes after I get my essay back with comments from the teacher, and try to learn from them.	124	3.73	1.219	High

The lowest approach utilised by students was rewarding themselves after completing their work ($M = 2.40$, $SD = 1.255$). Other strategies, such as reading their work aloud after writing ($M=2.26$, $SD=1.249$) and making modifications or revisions to language ($M=2.54$, $SD=1.023$), essay structure ($M=2.82$, $SD=0.972$), and substance or ideas ($M=2.97$, $SD=0.928$), were also employed at a moderate level. This result indicated that students might not regard proofreading or editing their papers before submission as a crucial stage in the writing process.

Students rarely abandon their initial draft and rewrite it ($M = 2.70$, $SD = 1.140$) when it comes to making revisions ($M = 2.70$, $SD = 1.140$). This could signal that students do not have the time to drop and rework their first draft or that they have already proceeded far enough in their writing task that dropping their first draft would take additional time to finish. Overall, students use revising stage strategies moderately, but this stage also had the lowest mean of the three writing stages.

Discussion

The results of the survey suggest that lower secondary school students used writing strategies at a moderate level. This implied that although writing was considered as a difficult skill to master, Malaysian lower form students possess adequate knowledge of writing strategies. Besides, the findings also indicated that there is room for lower secondary school students to be taught how to utilise writing strategies effectively in order to help them improve their writing skills. The findings also implied that lower secondary school students are more inclined towards using during writing strategies compared to pre-writing and revising strategies.

In their research, Maarof and Murat (2013) used the same questionnaire in their study and discovered that secondary school ESL students used writing strategies at a moderate level. According to the findings of the study, the writing strategy that was utilised the most frequently was the while-writing strategy, whereas the revision strategy was the one that was utilised the least. It was shown that those with lower proficiency employed different strategies than those with intermediate proficiency when learning the language. This shows a similarity with the findings of this study. However, when compared with Kalaivaani and Mahendran's (2020) study which utilised the same questionnaire, it was found that their undergraduate respondents seemed to be inclined to use pre-writing, especially planning strategies as the frequently used writing strategies. The difference of findings might be due to the different nature of participants; however, this opens up potentials for other variables such as age to be studied.

The findings of this study also indicate that based on the respective writing stages, lower secondary school students displayed interesting characteristics based on the writing strategies employed. In the Before Writing stage, it was shown that lower secondary students were inclined towards having a mental plan prior to writing and organising by preparing themselves

to write. This observation is similar with Gibriel's (2019) study. At the During Writing stage, the respondents tend to be quite linear i.e. beginning with the introduction and rely on others' assistance when facing problems with vocabulary or other writing-related problems. It is also important to note that lower secondary school students do not utilise the dictionary as a form of reference or assistance. For the After Writing stage, it is notable that the respondents sought feedback and were less keen on revising their draft. These observations indicated that younger adolescents learners may approach writing in a different manner when compared to mature learners.

The limitation of this study is this study only focused on two aspects, namely the level of writing strategies use and how the students utilised the writing strategies. Hence, the study might benefit further if other variables, for instance, proficiency levels were compared as well.

It may be recommended for future studies to do the following: firstly, to include a larger population for generalization considering that the samples of this study are homogenous in nature, when in fact Malaysian lower secondary school students comprised of Form 1 to Form 3 students; secondly, this study could benefit from a qualitative approach, meaning adding on perspectives of the participants through means of interviews and other qualitative approaches so that a richer, meaningful data could be achieved.

Conclusion

In summary, it was found that lower secondary school students are medium users of writing strategies and showed ability to employ writing strategies at three main stages, especially during writing stage. These observations may indicate potentials for secondary school students to be taught how using strategies could help them improve their writing skills. Identifying lower secondary school students' level of writing strategies use as well as what writing strategies were deployed could help inform teachers and practitioners on how to develop writing interventions that is strategic in nature. Possessing the knowledge of the level and writing strategies employment could also help students to be more aware of strategic approaches in reaching their writing goals. It is also essential for students to receive direct instruction on several strategies that can help them improve their writing. The writing quality of ESL learners could perhaps be improved through training on the use of effective writing strategies, which will ultimately lead to improved writing performance on their part.

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