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### The Effectiveness of English Within 20 Minutes On Students' Writing Skills A Case Study of Form 5 Students in a Secondary School Language and Communication

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#### ABSTRACT

For many of the students, writing is an uphill task. Having a mental block is one of the excuses given by students for not writing. Because of its complexity and difficulty, students are often in a state of confusion on what to write and how to write. This study aims to assess the effectiveness of the EW20 program in improving student's ability in writing narrative essay. To identify the students' improvement in writing narrative essay under the EW20 program this research focused on the form 5 students as the subjects. Four students from low intermediate level of writing proficiency were chosen from each three classes that makes the total number of subjects twelve. The subjects sat for a pre-test and underwent the treatment a week after that. Subjects were given samples of narrative essays and were required to rewrite the essay which then their writing skill tested in the pre-test. Bases on the results of data analysis, it has been found that EW20 program did not help students in improving their ability in writing narrative essays. The mean scores for both experimental and control group revealed the difference between pre-test and post-test may appear by chance not because of the program.

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#### INTRODUCTION

It is said that not everybody is a natural-born writer. There are students whom we can consider as poor writer and excellent writer as well. The question is why isn't everyone an excellent writer? What are the main problems that actually block students from writing? According to Brown (2001), written products are often the result of thinking, drafting and written procedures that require specialized skills, skills that not every speaker develops naturally. Therefore, teaching methods that focus on how students can generate ideas, how to organize their ideas coherently and how to use appropriate grammar should be emphasized in a writing lesson.

Individual students will come to each program with their own unique background, learning style, attitude and expectations. In Malaysia education system, besides getting an excellent result, students know and realize that they should have a sufficient

ability in English in order to be placed in any higher institution after completing their secondary school.

In Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM), the English paper consists of two papers, namely Paper 1 and Paper 2. Students' skill in writing will be tested in Paper 1 whereby there are two sections. Section A is Directed Writing (guided) which only one question is given and students do not have the luxury of choice which they are given in the continuous writing section. For section B it is Continuous writing whereby students are required to choose a topic from five topics of different types of essays (narrative, descriptive, argumentative, reflective and 'open' essay) and write a 350 words of essays for an estimated of one hour. Students usually do not score well for this section. This has caused their marks to be pulled down as this section only, carries a total of 50 marks. Pertaining to this matter it is important that students can score well for this particular to achieve good marks for the English 1119 paper.

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Several writing programs have been carried out in school in order to help students to improve their writing skill. One of the programs introduced by the Johor State Education Department is English Within 20 minutes (EW20) that is purposely organized to improve students' writing ability. The program is carried out in all schools all over Johor whereby students are required to copy an essay for 20 minutes.

This research was held in a Secondary School located in Johor Bahru. The school is one of the premiere schools in the state and the students enter this school based on their results in public examination. For the purpose of the study, 12 students from intermediate level were used as the samples. In terms of the nature of the learners as in the writing context, majority of them can be considered as transitional writer which is a transition between dependent towards becoming independent writers. The main objectives of this study were:

1. To assess the effectiveness of EW20 program in improving students' ability in writing narrative essays.
2. To identify the students' improvement in writing narrative essays under the EW20 program.

#### **Review Of The Literature:**

In relation with school English syllabus, English writing is one of the four skills being emphasized. There are many reasons for getting students to write, both in and outside class. Although some people considered it as the most difficult skill to learn, it has an advantage in compared with speaking skill. Students have more "thinking time" in writing than when they attempt to do spontaneous conversation. Writing allows students to have more opportunity in language processing (drafting, editing, revising, etc), thinking about the language they are involved in.

The inclusion of writing in school language subject syllabus is not merely for communication purpose. It also serves as the reason to support language learning itself (Raimes, 1983). She argues that writing reinforces the grammatical structures, idioms, and vocabulary.

Hyland (2003) believes that three major approaches have been introduced from the development of EFL/ESL writing as a distinctive area of scholarship in the 1980s. The first approach is called product-oriented approach. It focuses on text as the product of writing and considers writing as an outcome. Learning to become a good writer is largely a matter of knowing a good grammar in this approach because it sees texts as arrangements of sentences and words clauses.

Writing in the process approach is seen as predominantly having to do with planning and drafting, and there is much less emphasis on linguistic knowledge, such as text structure and

Knowledge of grammar (Badger & White, 2000). According to Badger and White (2000) "in

process approaches, the teacher primarily facilitates the learners' writing, and providing input or stimulus is considered to be less important" (p.154). It would mean that we need to teach students systematically problem-solving skills connected with the writing process that will enable them to realize specific goals at each stage of the composing process (Seow, 2002).

#### **The Free-Writing Approach:**

There is such no fixed way to teach writing. Many teachers and education practitioners use varied approaches in teaching writing. In the 1970s, however, most ESL writing classes still focused on grammatical sentence structures that supported the grammar class and on controlled writing. Exercises consisted of pieces of discourse, which students were instructed to copy and in which to then make discrete changes or fill in the blanks (Rainsbury, 1977). In controlled writing students are taught incrementally, error is prevented and fluency is expected to arise out of practice with structures. Journal articles and textbooks defended those approaches (Dykstar, 1977) principally on the basis that controlled writing allowed students to practice and habituate correct structures and thereby learn to "write" on their own. Nunans (2003) believes that writing is a teachable and learnable skill, it is not a talent. Thus, it is apparent that such skill training needs the teachers' assist and tremendous exercises; that is why the employment of controlled writing strategies seems inevitable.

In the late 70s and early 80s, a movement from strictly controlled writing to "free writing" or guided writing occurred. (Allen, 1981; Carpenter and Hunter, 1981; Ramis1978; Sampson, 1980). Elbow and Belanoff (2000) state, free writing is defined as writing any ideas or thoughts that come to mind in a given time period without stopping. If there is no specified topic for the writing, it is called unguided (self-sponsored) free writing whereas guided (teacher-sponsored or focused), free writing happens when a topic is given (Elbow, 1998b; Elbow & Belanoff, 2000; Fontaine, 1991; Lannin, 2007). Elbow (1998b) who is a proponent of free writing argued that while students doing free writing they shouldn't stop because "the main thing about free writing is that it is *nonediting*" (p. 6, italics in the original). These rules to keep writing and not edit make it possible for students to increase writing fluency by producing text from their stream of consciousness without being distracted by already produced text (Elbow, 1998a). Some researchers like Polio (2001) are concerned that focusing on fluency might have a negative impact on students' writing quality; however, the quality of writing is not considered as an issue in free writing. Elbow (1998b) states that what is accomplished through conducting and practicing free writing is "separating the producing process from the revising process" (p. 14).

Elbow & Belanoff (2000) believe that the main benefits of unguided free writing are considered to be increasing writing fluency and finding self-concept whereas, guided free writing is useful for getting started on the actual writing itself which is considered to be one of the most difficult parts of the writing process .

Free writing was limited to structuring sentences, often in direct answers to questions, the result of which looked like a short piece of discourse, usually a paragraph. Moreover building, reading comprehension, grammar, and even oral skills that culminated in a piece of writing (Reid, 1993).

Free- writing is an approach in teaching writing in which the teachers stress on the quantity of writing rather than quality (Ramies, 1983). The emphasis of this approach is on the content and fluency in writing the ideas and not so particular on form (Spencer, 1967). Some teachers emphasize the quantity of writing rather than the quality. The free writing is the approach of teaching writing being facilitated by the EW-20 where the students are able to compose a free writing after program is being done.

Numerous studies have been carried out to employ free and controlled writing strategies to enhance learners' writing performances as a sequence of one learning process (Hwang 2010; Mingly, 2012; Vahid Dastjerdi & Hayati Samian, 2011). Hwang (2010) examined the effect of guided free writing on EFL College –level students writing fluency. A total of 208 guided free writing samples written by eight EFL college-students over eight weeks were analyzed in terms of fluency by words per minute in order to gauge and measure the students' writing fluency. The results revealed that conducting and practicing guided free writing for eight weeks had a considerable effect on improving the students' writing fluency.

#### ***EW20 (English Within 20 Minutes) Program:***

EW20 program is a state program applied in all secondary schools in Johor State, Malaysia. It is a program of writing in English for about 20 minutes in every English lesson period. This program is grounded on the perspective that being able to answer objective test item does not reflect the real achievement gained by the students in any school lesson. The ability to convey ideas in written text is very important.

Considering that the achievement made still less satisfied Johor Education board introduces the EW20 Program to improve the students' proficiency in English writing. The objective of this program is to increase the percentage of students' amount in passing English subject over than 85%, to improve students' writing skill and to enrich their vocabularies, to build students' confidence in writing in English, to create an interesting atmosphere in learning and collaborative working (EW20 Program, Jabatan Pelajaran Johor 2009).

The target of this program is students from 1<sup>st</sup> year to 6<sup>th</sup> year and the transitive period to Form 5. The focus is on the students with low English proficiency. They will copy one essay three times a week, provided by the students or in the EW20 Module. English teachers are in charge of this program, supported by other subject teachers.

#### ***EW20 in Language Learning Perspective:***

Basically, in EW20 program, students are assigned to copy sample of essay with certain genre in twenty minutes every English learning period. Although copying is often used as a technique for elementary-level students (Raimies, 1983), the EW20 program for secondary school is expected to result in a condition in which the students are subconsciously acquiring certain linguistic feature from the essay they copy and improving the writing skill. Students how show low competencies in writing do not always have poor language competency. It is more on the poor competency in composing sentences (Raimies, 1985).

The activity of copying the text is grounded in Behaviorism principle. When the students copy the essay, they repeat and imitate the language in written form for several times during certain period. The end product (the writing) is physical and observable (Hadley, 1993; Goh and Silver, 2004). It is also a technique of using reading materials to improve writing skill (Raime, 1983).

A study by Alcorso and Kalantzis (1985, in Nunan, 1988) on students' perceptions on the most useful parts of lesson according to a representative group of learners shows a supporting data about copying. In the finding of that study, 25% of the participants choose copying written material, memorizing, drill, and repetition work as the third rank as the most useful part of lesson, with grammar exercise on top of the list (40%).

However Raimies continues with the notion that there is a problem in using copying technique. When students see copying as a tedious task, they will lose interest and make more mistakes due to boredom. That is why teachers need to transfer the activity into a meaningful one. Writing out the text for a partner or integrating it with other classroom activity can be considered (Raimies, 1983).

#### ***Methodology:***

This research employed quantitative methods to describe the effectiveness of EW20 program using the statistical figures obtained from students' pre and post-tests scores. By comparing the results of both tests, it was expected to get information on how the program had affected the students' ability in writing English essay. The populations of this study were students in form 5. There are three classes of the students in form 5, Diamond, Pearl, and Crystal. Diamond and Pearl classes are the nature sciences, while crystal class is a social science class

(accounting class). Four students were selected from each of the classes. This study began by giving pre-test to the students to identify their level of proficiency in writing. The teachers conducted the pre-test to the twelve students from different classes. Six students who were on experimental group were given the narrative essays and were asked to copy the essay. Six other students, who were on control group, were taught by using the same method, which was discussing the essay. After the pre-test, the experimental group received a treatment, which was EW20. They had to rewrite the sample narrative essay within 20 minutes, while the control group did the usual activity. The usual activity conducted in the classroom was discussing the sample essay. This activity had been carried out for about 20 minutes every day for one week period. After one week treatment, both groups were tested (post-test) with another writing test, with similar genre. After a week, the students from the two groups were given post-test, similar topic/genre, to investigate their writing skills to know whether there is any improvement in their narrative essay. The rewritten essays were reviewed by the teachers to find out whether the students had completed rewriting the essays or not.

In analyzing the data, the researcher managed to get assistance from one English teacher in that particular school. Instead of the researcher doing the marking, teacher marked the students' papers, both the pre-test and post results. This is to control the inter-validity of scoring the students' writing. In addition, in order not to make the marking process biased with the intention to have a better result in post test, the post test and pre-test papers from the students had been coded and mixed together that the marking teacher would not be able to identify whether

she or he was marking the pre or the post-test one. The researcher later separated the papers based on the codes. The marking scheme is based on the standard marking scheme for writing essay in secondary school at Johor State.

### **Research Findings And Discussions:**

#### **Mean Scores:**

As Table 1 shows, the mean score for experimental groups pre-test is 20, and the mean for post-test scores is 20.5. This results in a margin of improvement of 0.5. It seems that within one week of treatment, EW20 did not have much impact on students' ability in writing narrative essay.

The control group showed similar results where the mean scores for their pre-test is 19 and the mean score for post-test result is 18.3. This resulted in -0.7 of margin of improvement. However, the margin improvement of the experimental group did not reflect the real performance of the students because there were some regressions on some of the participants' scores. For E6, his post-test score was lower than the pre-test score. His individual margin of improvement was -7. This score has affected the mean scores for margin of improvement for all participants in the experimental group. The same thing happened to the control group in which one of the participants, C6, had the lowest score in his post-test. This score has decreased the mean scores for the margin of improvement for the control group.

As a whole, it seemed that EW20 program did not help students in improving their ability in writing narrative essays within one week. The mean scores for both groups may appear by chance not because of the program.

**Table 1:** Comparison of marks between pre-test and post-test.

Group	Subject	Pre-test	Post-test	Margin of improvement
Group I (EW20 students)	E1	23	24	+1
	E2	20	21	+1
	E3	15	18	+3
	E4	19	20	+1
	E5	24	28	+4
	E6	19	12	-7
Mean scores		20	20.5	+0.5
Group II (control group)	C1	22	20	-2
	C2	20	20	-0
	C3	18	19	+1
	C4	21	20	-1
	C5	14	17	+3
	C6	19	14	-5
Mean score		19	18.3	-0.7

\*E- experimental group subject

\*C-control group subject

#### **Individual scores:**

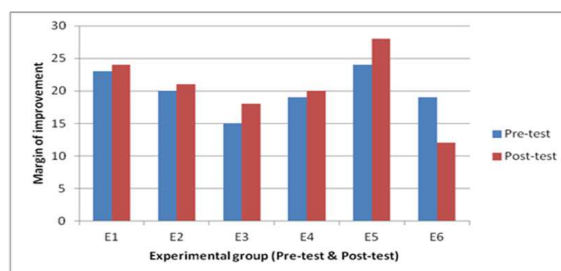
Although EW20 might not have much impact on the students' performance as a whole, there is some individual improvement. According to the table 1, in the experimental group, 5 out of 6 students obtained positive increment on their post-test scores result. On the other hand, only 2 out of 6 students in control group have made positive improvement.

There was no pattern in the scores results for both groups. For example, E1 and E2 had only margin of improvement of +1. This 1 score difference was possibly gained by chance, not because of the program. However, E3 and E5 showed higher improvement on their margin although E3 pre-test was the lowest among the participants in the experimental group. This similar situation happened

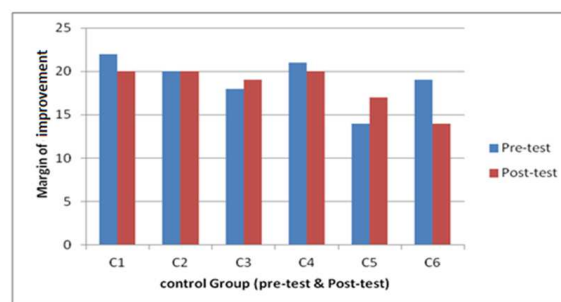
in the control group in which C5 got the lowest score in the pre-test but obtained the highest margin of improvement in the post-test.

However, one of the subjects in the experimental group, E6, showed an exceptional result. As the figure shows, instead of showing an improvement, E6's mark has decreased from 19 to 12. This situation is possibly due to his inability of completing rewriting the essay within 20 minutes. Based on the teacher's review, this particular subject only managed to copy 3 or 4 paragraphs out of 7 to 8

paragraphs of essays. One interesting finding is found on E5, E6, C5 and C6. They are from the same class (5Crystal) but have showed significant different scores. E5 and C5 obtained higher score for the post-test while E6 and C6 are in the opposite situation. 5Crystal is considered as a low-intermediate class compared to the other two classes (5 Diamond and 5 Pearl) in which the other participants were selected. The results differ possibly due to individual variability. E5 and C5 are known as highly motivated students.



**Fig. 1:** Comparison of pre-test and post-test marks for experimental group



**Fig. 2:** Comparison of pre-test and post-test marks for control group.

Moreover, according to the results it is obvious that the use of this writing technique in the classroom would increase the students' confidence in expressing their thoughts and feelings. For a long time programme the EW20 will help the students to progress from straight forward manner of writing to more detailed expressive mode of writing.

During this short period of time for conducting the EW20 program some new words, nouns and verbs were incorporated by the students in their writing which can be considered as an asset. In addition, narrative writing can promote a strong bond between the teacher and students. Teachers will be able to consult students who need more help.

As a whole, both groups of students were almost of the same level as the pre test results indicated and the post test results showed improvement in individual scores for the experimental group in comparison to the control group. One of the benefits of EW20 program as observed in this study is that it rises up the teaching and learning process. As the students are not aware of their errors in the language and are more emphasised on conveying their views

in their writing, this is vital for them to focus more on accuracy.

#### **Limitations And Recommendation For Further Research:**

This study only involved 12 students from three parallel classes with two different major, nature science and social science. More samples to be participated in this kind of study would possibly reveal a different result or bring a better understanding and more valid data toward the problem carried out in this study.

This study is also limited to only certain level of students, selected from the student population. As it has only 5-20 minutes sessions and limited sample, the findings should not be generalized as the overall performance toward the EW-20 program and more than one week. A deeper study on how this program affects students with different level of competency will be very interesting to conduct. With a thorough research, school can conduct a research on the effectiveness of the State EW20 Program, for

different grade and different level of proficiency (low-intermediate, advanced, etc)

### Conclusion:

The effectiveness of this program after being conducted for certain period of time needs to be evaluated to improve the program itself. One week EW20 treatment to experimental group had showed improvement to the majority of the individual scores in the experimental group. A longer period of this program would possibly result in higher scores from the group. Thus, the result would be more valid to obtain information about students' performance especially in writing skill.

Based on the results obtained from this study, the low proficiency students who have high motivation in learning English would likely gain more advantages in this EW20 program if the program is being carried out for longer period of time.

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