

CHILDREN'S WRITING IN ENGLISH IN THE
SINGAPORE UPPER PRIMARY SCHOOL: A CASE
STUDY OF SIX 12-YEAR-OLD STUDENTS

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	Overall English Result	Compositions' Marks
Low ability	50-59%	Failed or 20-23/40
Middle ability	60-65%	24-26/40
High ability	66% and above	27-33/40

Table 2: Breakdown of the types of composition received in relation to when they were written
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Low Ability		Middle Ability		High Ability	
Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male
Jan – C1	Jan – C1	Jan – C1	Jan – C1	Jan – C1	Jan – C1
	Feb – C2	Mar – C6	Mar – C6	April – C9	Mar – C6
May – SA1	May – SA1	July – C14	July – C14	July – C13	April – C9
	July – C13	Sept – SA2b	August–SA2a	August-SA2a	July – C14

Key: C – composition SA – Semester Assessment (mid-year)
SA2a – Preliminary Exam 1 SA2b – Preliminary Exam 2

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Name of S	grandparents	parents	siblings	Friends in class	Friends outside class
LAF	-	M	E & M	E & M	E & M
LAM	D	M	E, M, D	E & M	M
MAF	M & D	E & M	E & M	E & M	E & M
MAM	M	E & M	E & M	E & M	E & M
HAF	D	E	E	E	E & M
HAM	M	E	E	E & M	E & M

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Names of students	Confident in speaking	Confident in writing
LAF	M	M
LAM	M	E
MAF	M	E
MAM	E	E
HAF	E	E
HAM	E	E

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LAF	LAM	MAF	MAM	HAF	HAM
C1 – 18/40	C1 – 18/40	C1 – 26/40	C1 – 26.5/40	C1 – 26/40	C1 – 27/40
SA1 – 25/40	C2 – 21/40	C6 – 25.5/40	C6 – 27.5/40	C9 – 28/40	C6 – 28.5/40
	SA1–25.5/40	C14 – 26/40	C14 – 26/40	C13 – 27/40	C9 – 30/40
	C13 – 15/40	SA2b–24.5/40	SA2a– 24/40	SA2a–26.5/40	C14 – 28/40

Table 6: Frequency and types of books students read

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Name of student	Fiction	Non-fiction	Leisure
LAF	sometimes	sometimes	rarely
LAM	only a little	never	sometimes
MAF	sometimes	sometimes	sometimes
MAM	sometimes	often (encyclopedia)	sometimes (comics)
HAF	sometimes	rarely	sometimes
HAM	sometimes	sometimes (encyclopedia)	never

Table 7: Reading during free time in and outside class

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Name of Student	LAF	LAM	MAF	MAM	HAF	HAM
In class reading	No	No	No	No	No	Yes
Outside of class reading	sometimes	No	sometimes	rarely	rarely	often

Table 8: Dealing with errors in grammar and vocabulary

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Grammatical errors:	Vocabulary errors:
- Oral feedback	- Introduce new words during brainstorming
- Written feedback on their work	- Use a list of helpful words
- Go through common errors as a class	- Use errors as spelling lists
	- Use assessment books for reinforcement

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 MOTIVATION AND SIGNIFICANCE OF RESEARCH

Writing plays an important role in our life. Yet it is a skill that is not easily mastered. Not many people are fluent writers. We can either speak or write to communicate our thoughts. However, history has attested that written language is the more reliable and consistent means of preserving record across time and space.

Before children could make their first independent attempt at composition, they have to be introduced to the mechanics of writing and the system of the language. Initially, they will be taught that writing serves different functions and is used to meet different social practices, such as, writing a birthday card or a postcard. Subsequently, they will be exposed to various genres such as, writing a letter, a narrative story, designing a poster and so on.

School teachers today could hardly afford to examine the different kinds of writing that children do in and outside class. From my previous teaching experience, teachers are frequently racing against time in a bid to cover the entire syllabus within the school term. Seldom do they study the influence a child's mother tongue has on his/her writing. Although teachers pick up the errors in their children's writing they could not deal with them systematically by drawing up a more comprehensive remedial programme. This research is timely as areas which teachers are too busy to look into will be reviewed and analysed. I hope it will stimulate more in-depth research in future.

1.2 OBJECTIVES AND SCOPE OF STUDY

The primary objective is to look at the types of writing in English that students are engaged in in class. The following are the major research questions that guided the current investigation (a few minor questions are brought up in the analysis section):

- A. What were some of the influences reflected in the children's writings?
- B. What approach had the teacher adopted to teach writing to the students?
- C. How did this teacher respond to students' writing?

D. How did this teacher help the students in their errors?

Due to geographical and time constraint, this study does not claim to have a comprehensive coverage over all the kinds of children's writing. Rather, it is meant to be an exploratory case study; further research is necessary to fill gaps in the current study with regards to children's writing in the Singapore context.

I selected only six students and I analysed the written pieces of writing done by each student. They submitted some of their journal entries and compositions. The teacher's role was to provide feedback on the approach used to teach writing and how she responded to students' writing.

1.5 OVERVIEW

The dissertation has been organised as follows. Chapter 2 gives the background for this dissertation. Chapter 3 reviews research literature relevant to the current investigation. Chapter 4 discusses the research methodology, covering the design and framework of this study. Chapter 5 analyses and discusses the findings. Chapter 6 summarises the results and offers some pedagogical implications. Some suggestions for future research are put forth in conclusion.

CHAPTER 2

BACKGROUND

The context of this dissertation is Singapore which some readers may not be familiar. Hence, a sketch of the background is provided. The use of English in Singapore and in particular in the primary school will be highlighted. Then a brief mention of what is meant by mother tongue. Finally, a brief description on the teaching of creative writing in the classroom is given.

SINGAPORE

2.1 A Brief History

Kuo (1985:337) describes “the Republic of Singapore as small in size and short in history, yet heterogeneous in ethnic and linguistic composition. Singapore’s geographical location and its consequent emphasis on international trade and tourism make Singapore an international city and encourage the use and status of English”.

2.2 Educational Context

Kuo (1985:334) says that all students in Singapore are required to take lessons in English and one of the ethnic languages (Chinese, Malay or Tamil) under the bilingual education policy. The two languages are used not only in language courses, but also as languages of instruction for specific subjects. He says that as a general principle English is used in mathematics, science and other technology-related subjects, while the ethnic language is used in civics (or moral education) and humanity-related subjects.

2.3 Native Speakers of English in Singapore

Gupta (1994:5-7) says that the kind of English which the English-speaking parents of Singapore have supplied to their children is a variety which is syntactically very different from Standard English (StdE). It is called Singapore English (SgE). Gupta further explains that most studies see any form of SgE, as distinct from StdE, as being a ‘deviant’ variety whose features resulted from interference and error.

She adds that nearly all children who have learnt English from birth have SgE, rather than StdE, as their native language. This is because SgE is more commonly spoken at home whence they obtain their first exposure to the language. However, StdE is taught and used in school. Therefore, Gupta adds that Singaporean children of 5 and over in age, who are native speakers of English, are generally speakers of SgE and learners of StdE.

2.4 Mother Tongue

According to Gupta (1994:27), “Singaporeans are allocated a race (Chinese, Malay, Indian or Others) and a ‘dialect group’ (a subdivision of ‘race’) at birth which is based on their father’s official racial and ‘dialect’ identity”. In other words, one’s official mother tongue follows that of one’s father. For example, the mother tongue of a child of a Chinese woman married to an Indian is officially Tamil even though the child may not speak the language at all. A child naturally pick up the language(s) of its care-giver(s), be it Mandarin, Malay, Tamil, a dialect or English. Therefore, the child’s true mother tongue is that in which it is brought up.

When children start primary school at the age of six or seven, they bring their mother tongue into the classroom. In school, they are exposed to StdE, a different language for some and a different variety of English for others. These children are learning StdE as a second language in school. Teachers play a crucial role in helping them speak, read, listen and write in StdE. These children may exhibit interference from their mother tongue in their written English. Their expressions tend to take on a form that suggests a direct translation from their mother tongue into English. Hence, teachers have to bear in mind that these children have different abilities and needs.

2.5 Teaching Creative Writing in the Classroom

Students in Singapore typically spend twenty-five hours per school week in the classroom. Six and a half hours are devoted to English as a subject of which only two hours on creative writing (according to feedback to Q.5 & 6 on the teacher’s questionnaire). In those two hours, students are asked to do a creative piece: e.g., writing a note, a postcard, a narrative or descriptive account. For the rest of the time, teachers conduct reading comprehension, introduce new vocabulary or grammar items and run through worksheets

or workbook exercises with their students. Not much time is spent on creative writing because teachers are always under pressure to complete the entire syllabus within the school. Though students also submit written pieces for other subjects (e.g. Science and Mathematics), the latter's focus is on contents and do not serve to develop the former's ability to write in English.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this chapter is to provide a general overview of the use of English in Singapore and in the school context. It pays particular attention to writing in English in the classroom. The next chapter reviews some of the literature related to children's writing.

CHAPTER 3

LITERATURE REVIEW

INTRODUCTION

This section begins with the question: What is writing? Then the difference between speaking and writing and the relationship between reading and writing will be noted. Next, one approach to writing and types of writing children do in school will be looked at. Finally, a brief description on how teachers respond to students' writing is given.

3.1 WHAT IS WRITING?

I would like to start by making a distinction between learning-to-write writing and writing-to-learn writing. Learning-to-write writing means learning the mechanics of writing – the system of writing, the alphabet, the physical forms of letters, spellings and punctuation. On the other hand, writing-to-learn writing is using English more expressively and creatively as a means of communication and to further the learning to write. All these need to be taught explicitly to non-native speakers of English language. In addition, writing-to-learn writing is also used in the learning of other subjects. As mentioned in section 2.2 under *Educational Context*, English is the medium of instruction in Mathematics, Science and other technology-related subjects. In other words, all the writing done in those subjects will be in English. However, the focus there is to use English to express the content in those subjects and not to teach children how to write in English.

In this dissertation, I am mainly interested in writing-to-learn writing, the use of writing as a means of communication to convey thoughts, express feelings, and for creative purposes. It is to see learners using writing to produce a range of different kinds of written texts such as writing a journal or a narrative. In addition, it is using writing to perform social functions such as writing a message or postcard.

3.2 RELATIONSHIP OF THE SKILLS

3.2.1 Speaking and Writing

Raimes (1983:4) says that speaking and writing are two different processes. It is not enough to teach students to speak English. She adds that students do not naturally know

how to write in English when they speak adequately because learning to write is not just an extension of learning to speak.

Ur (1996:159) lists several generalisations of differences between written and spoken discourse: permanence, explicitness, density, detachment, organisation and use of standard language. Take for example the use of standard language. In speech, it is acceptable if the person does not use standard English, but in writing, the use of standard English is the norm as what is written will sometimes reach a larger audience who may not understand you if you use your regional variety in your writing.

3.2.2 Reading and Writing

Hedge (1988:11) says that generally good writers are those who read a lot. Students benefit from the exposure to different text types which help develop their awareness of what constitutes good writing. Nevertheless, Hedge says that reading is not sufficient because students need to write a lot too. This is especially true of poor writers; they feel that they are poor writers, so they are not motivated to write and, because they seldom practise, they remain poor writers.

Perera (1984:208) says that teachers are doing a great service to students by encouraging them to read. It appears that some good writers start writing with the appropriate 'schema' in their heads although they may not have any formal instruction yet. She says that this ability seems to have been built up through reading and inferring the structures of texts. Students can gain considerable insight from reading published and peer group writing.

3.3 PROCESS WRITING APPROACH

Raimes (1983:10-11) says that writers ask themselves questions such as, 'How do I write this? How do I get started? All writers need to decide how to begin and organise the task. Student writers need to realise that what they first put down on paper is not necessarily the finished product but the setting out of their first ideas. She adds that teachers who use the process approach give their students two crucial supports: time for the students to try out ideas and feedback on the content of what they write in their drafts.

Hedge (1988:22) says that the process of writing is often described as consisting of three major activities or groups of activities: Pre-writing (brainstorming), Writing and rewriting (revising), and Editing. Czerniewska (1992:84) says that all process theorists stress that the stages in the writing process are recursive rather than linear. She adds that it would be inappropriate to go through all these stages in every instance of writing – the nature of the ‘process’ depends on the purpose for writing, the length of the text, the complexity of the ideas and the time available to the writer. Moreover, Parrott (1993:224) explains that in practice these stages will rarely be discrete – there may be considerable overlap between them and there may be ‘regressions’ to earlier stages.

3.4 JOURNAL WRITING

According to Czerniewska, (1992:90) journals are used as a means for personal expression and ‘free’ writing by students which teachers do not assess. They provide a place ‘outside’ the writing curriculum where students can explore their thoughts and feelings. She explains that journals provide an ‘off the record’ place for dialogue with the teacher, a place where progress can be voiced and evaluation can be made about a lesson. She adds that journals help students reflect on their thinking and give them a chance to write about events of immediate importance rather than the standard ‘write about what we did to day’ mode.

As Harmer (1991:145) points out journals give students a chance to write for genuine communicative purposes. Teachers react to the journals rather than correct and assess them. He adds that teachers give content feedback which are usually short and reflect an interest to what was written. Teachers have the advantage of interacting with their students as individuals.

3.5 DIFFERENT TYPES OF WRITING

As reported in Czerniewska (1992:131-2), Martin and Rothery (1984) looked at classrooms and asked ‘what do children write?’ They found that certain forms of writing dominated the early years of schooling. The first type of writing that they found children engage in was ‘labelling’. The labelling genre develops into the ‘observation/comment’ genre, the form of writing most prevalent in the first two years of primary school. Why do

children write in this way? The answer lies in the teacher-child interactions. From this early genre of observation/comment two different types of writing are identified: These are 'recount' and 'report'. In turn, these are the foundations of two main generic strands of development: recount leading to the development of narrative genres and report leading to expository genres.

Perera (1984:217) reports findings by different researchers that claim that children from the ages eight to twelve write mostly narrative texts instead of expository text. They used predominantly chronological organisation although some older children could manage other patterns.

3.6 RESPONDING TO STUDENT WRITING

3.6.1 Teacher Responding to Students' Writing

Tribble (1996:119) mentions four basic roles that teachers play in responding to student's writing: as audience, as assistant, as evaluator, and as examiner. Celce-Murcia (1991:257) says that the goal in responding to student writing is to foster student improvement. However, it is difficult to determine what type of response will facilitate this improved mastery of writing. Hedge (1988:10) suggests that positive response to the strengths in a student's writing builds up confidence in the student.

3.6.2 Forms of Feedback

Hedge (1988:258) suggests both oral and written feedback to be given by the teacher. Individual conferences on student papers are valuable and peers can be taught to provide feedback. She adds that this peer response serves to sharpen their critical skills in analysing written work as well as to increase their ability to analyse their own drafts critically.

Munice (2000:50-51) views peer feedback at mid-drafts more profitable to the student compared to teacher feedback at mid-drafts. The reason he gives is that peers are perceived as genuine collaborators and interested readers of a writer's work. The writer has complete choice over which comments to utilise, and to what extent. In addition, students tend to take in whole-sale whatever suggestions and feedback teacher has made

and revise their writings accordingly without having to decide what to do, only how to do it. This implies a lack of critical processing and evaluation of the feedback which then has little effectiveness in helping student in the long-run to write better. He suggests instead that teacher gives feedback on the final draft and on the day that the draft is returned to students that the students write down in a book entitled: ‘How I can improve future compositions.’ In this book, they write down all the comments they receive from peers and teacher. Throughout future writing, students are frequently reminded to refer to this book whilst composing and to ensure that they are following its recommendations.

3.6.3 Responding to Errors

Raimes (1983:22) claims that the principal job as teachers of composition is not to search for errors. Students should be checking their own errors before handing in their papers to us. Parrott (1993:235) says that some teachers believe that not correcting all the errors students make is dangerous although there is little empirical or theoretical evidence for this assumption. Other teachers feel that learners expect every error to be corrected and therefore they have to satisfy the students’ expectations. Still others rigorously correct only mistakes of a certain kind, depending on the purpose for which the written task has been set. However, Parrott suggests that teachers and students should identify the attitudes and preferences of both parties and agree on how errors should be responded to.

As reported in Celce-Murcia (1991:274), Robb *et al.* (1986) claimed, “Research suggests that direct correction of surface errors does not produce significantly better results in EFL student writing than less time-consuming correction measures such as underlining or highlighting errors”. There does not seem to be any recent research to throw further light on this. Hedge (1988:260) says that students’ writing is likely to show problems in language control. She adds that teachers should not be swayed by the presence or numbers of errors and turn the writing course into a grammar course.

3.6.4 Students’ Response to Teacher’s Feedback

Celce-Murcia (1991:257) says that students must be trained to use the feedback to improve their writing either on the next draft or the next assignment. Without the training, students may ignore the feedback or fail to use it constructively. Celce-Murcia (1991:257) also

reports the following research on student response to comments in an L2 environment: “Leki (1986) found that students expressed a lack of interest in teacher reaction to the content of their papers, and instead indicated a desire to have every error marked on their papers. Cohen (1987) found that students had a very limited repertoire of strategies for processing feedback, and as such, Cohen and Cavalcanti (1990:176) concluded that clear teacher-student agreements on feedback procedures and student training in strategies for handling feedback could lead to more productive and enjoyable composition writing in the classroom”. There seems to be no recent research that throws further light on this matter.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter I have tried to explain what I mean by writing as used in this dissertation – not using writing to learn the mechanics of the writing system, but using writing as a means of communication. All the other sections will be referred to when analysing my research data in Chapter 5.

CHAPTER 4

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

4.1 SELECTION AND PROFILE OF SCHOOL

My research is based on Ai Tong School, a primary school in Singapore. Ai Tong School being a SAP (Special Assistant Plan) school only offers Mandarin as a second language to its students, therefore it has almost no non-Chinese children. This helped to narrow down my scope of study as I can concentrate on Chinese and the dialects of Chinese instead of Malay and Tamil, as mother tongue of most of the children, besides Singapore English. Moreover, I taught in this school for five years and therefore was familiar with the system, demands and expectations of the school. In addition, I have friends here who could help me collect the data that I needed.

The academic year of the school system in Singapore starts at the beginning of the year on 2 January and ends in the middle of November of the same year. There are ten-week terms per academic year.

4.2 SELECTION AND PROFILE OF TEACHER

The teacher has been teaching for six years. She always teaches English and Mathematics and sometimes Science to the upper primary levels, namely the 11- and 12-year-olds. She is friendly yet firm to the children. She has no problem with classroom management and therefore is able to carry out her lessons without much disruption from her students.

I chose this particular teacher because she is a personal friend of mine who was willing to carry out the survey on her students and collect the data that I needed. Moreover, she was teaching a class of 12-years-old which was the basis of my case study.

4.3 SELECTION AND PROFILE OF STUDENTS

I was especially interested in the writings of 12-year-olds who were in the upper primary level. This age group was interesting to study because they were in their final year in the primary school system and had been there for six years. As a result, their writing should be more interesting and varied as they had been exposed to writing in English for a

relatively long time. In addition, it would be interesting to see if there was still the influence of their mother tongue and Singapore English in their writing after all these years.

I asked the teacher to select six students from her class for my study. The criteria I gave her were:

1. Three boys and three girls.
2. A boy and a girl for each of the different ability groups, namely high, middle and low.
3. Family background or the language background of the parents is not to be considered.

I only chose six students because I felt that these six students formed a manageable size for the scope of this study. In addition, I felt they were a reasonable representative of the make-up of the class as a whole.

The selection of each ability groups was based on their English examination results, which comprised of tests on the four skills, (from students' questionnaire, Part A Q.6). The low ability students were those who got on average 50-59% in their English marks, middle ability students were those who got 60-65% and the high ability were those who got 66% and above. In addition, in terms of their compositions' marks, the passing mark being 20, the low ability students got either below 20 or between 20-23 out of 40. The middle ability students got between 24-26 out of 40 and the high ability got between 27-33 where 33 was the highest mark this teacher has ever awarded to this class of students. The table below is a summary:

Table 1: To show how the different groups are classified according to ability:

	Overall English result	Compositions' marks
Low ability	50-59%	Failed or 20-23/40
Middle ability	60-65%	24-26/40
High ability	66% and above	27-33/40

4.4 RESEARCH PROCEDURE

A questionnaire was designed for the teacher and students to fill in before the students left for their school holidays.

Design of questionnaires

These instruments were designed in order to gather information of relevance to my research from a) the student's perspective and b) the teacher's perspective.

a) Student's questionnaire – in Appendix 2

The main purpose of this questionnaire was to find out more about the students' spoken language background, their interests in reading and writing in English and what types of writings they did in and outside class.

b) Teacher's questionnaire – in Appendix 3

The purpose was to look at what approaches the teacher used in teaching writing, how she dealt with grammatical and vocabulary errors, and the difficulties she faced in teaching writing.

Due to the tight schedule and the need to come out with the questionnaire before the students left school for their term break, I later realised that some of the items included in the student questionnaire were not necessary. For example the section on parental background was redundant. The section on writing outside the class was left out in the final analysis as there was already too much of other data to analyse. In addition, the way some of the questions were phrased made it difficult to use for providing background information. However, it appeared that the teacher's questionnaire was quite well constructed since almost all the items were useful for providing me with the background that I needed.

4.5 RESEARCH DATA

The samples of student's written work were mainly their compositions written in class. They did other kinds of writing such as, writing on worksheets, workbooks and reading record (very short book reviews), and journal entries. However, I did not have access to them except the journals, because the students had either thrown them away or given them to someone else.

4.5.1 Compositions

Below is a break down of the compositions that I received from the six students. They ranged from the beginning of the year to the end of the year.

Months of the year	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	July	August	Sept
No. of Compo. received	6	1	3	1	2	5	3	1

Below is another breakdown of the compositions by each individual based on the different ability groups.

Table 2:

Low Ability		Middle Ability		High Ability	
Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male
Jan – C1	Jan – C1	Jan – C1	Jan – C1	Jan – C1	Jan – C1
	Feb – C2	Mar – C6	Mar – C6	April – C9	Mar – C6
May – SA1	May – SA1	July – C14	July – C14	July – C13	July – C14
	July – C13	Sept – SA2b	August–SA2a	August-SA2a	August-SA2a

Key: C – composition SA1– Semester Assessment (mid-year)

SA2a – Preliminary Exam 1 SA2b – Preliminary Exam 2

4.5.2 Journals

The students in this class wrote journal entries weekly. The journals were written at home over the weekend and handed in at the beginning of a new week. The students were given a free hand in their writing and could write anything they liked. The teacher managed to collect journal entries from only three of the students – one from the female high ability and the other two from the middle ability students. She randomly selected the entries and they comprised entries written across different months of the year. Below is a breakdown of the number of entries received:

Gender & Ability Group	No. of entries submitted
Female – High Ability	7
Female – Middle Ability	5
Male – Middle Ability	4

4.5.3 Questionnaires

All the six students and the teacher filled in the questionnaires. The teacher was given a cover sheet of instructions (Appendix 1) to guide her in conducting the survey. I shall not do the breakdown of the data here but in the analysis section so that there will be no duplication of work.

CONCLUSION

This chapter shows the profile of the school, teacher and students used for the study. In addition, it shows how the research was carried out and the kinds of data collected. Some of the data was analysed in the next chapter and they formed part of this dissertation.

CHAPTER 5

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

INTRODUCTION

Not all the compositions collected will be analysed in detail because that would be beyond the scope of this dissertation. Rather, some of the compositions will be used and some words, phrases or sentences selected as examples to illustrate my analysis. In other words there will not be a comprehensive, in-depth analysis of each composition in turn, rather, it is the results of an overall analysis of the pieces which will be considered here.

For ease of reference, all the tables used below are re-printed on pages (v – vi)

I have operationalised the following concepts that I am using in this section:

1. a “good” writer is one who gets around 27/40 marks and above in his/her composition;
2. to write “well/better” means making very few grammatical and spelling error, using interesting vocabulary and having interesting content with good development in the ‘body’ of the composition;

I know that the awarding of marks by one teacher is a very subjective process. Besides, the teacher could be inconsistent in giving the marks. Obviously, this feature needs to be borne in mind in interpreting the research findings.

The research questions (RQ) set out in section 1.3 form the basis of my analysis. Both the students’ and teacher’s questionnaires provide some background information that will help relate to the research questions. All the theorists mentioned in this chapter are found in the literature review in Chapter 3. For ease of reference, I shall reproduce the major research questions here and include some minor questions as well:

- A. What are some of the influences reflected in the children’s writings?
 1. Is a student’s mother tongue reflected in the writings?
 2. Do students who speak English write better?
 3. Do students who read many English books write better?
- B. What approaches had the teacher adopted to teach writing to the students?

1. The Process Writing Approach
 2. Journal Writings
- C. How did the teacher respond to students' writing?
- D. How did the teacher help students in their errors?

The six students who filled in the questionnaire (Appendix 6 contains all six students' questionnaires) are divided into three groups, namely, the low ability, middle ability and high ability male or female (please refer to section 4.3 for the definition). I shall refer to each student by the associated acronym instead of using their actual names. These acronyms will be written on the questionnaires and students' writing so please ignore their actual names.

Key: Low Ability Female – LAF Low Ability Male – LAM
 Middle Ability Female – MAF Middle Ability Male – MAM
 High Ability Female – HAF High Ability Male – HAM

5.1 In answer to RQ A1: Is a child's mother tongue reflected in his/her writing in English?

Table 3: Languages spoken at home and with friends (from students' questionnaire, Part A Q.1 & 4): Key: Student – S English – E Mandarin – M Dialects – D

Name of S	grandparents	parents	siblings	Friends in class	Friends outside class
LAF	-	M	E & M	E & M	E & M
LAM	D	M	E, M, D	E & M	M
MAF	M & D	E & M	E & M	E & M	E & M
MAM	M	E & M	E & M	E & M	E & M
HAF	D	E	E	E	E & M
HAM	M	E	E	E & M	E & M

From Table 3 above, we see that all these children were at least bilingual in Mandarin and Singapore English (SgE) and had either Mandarin or SgE as their mother tongue. A few of them knew one other dialect of Chinese and spoke that with their grandparents. Sometimes, the influence of the mother tongue was manifested through the translation from Mandarin into English or through some phrases that were commonly used in SgE. Below are some examples.

LAF: “I and my mother” – in Mandarin we say “wo he wo mama” (Appendix 7)

MAF: “I took mother to...” – the pronoun ‘my’ is missing [Chinese speakers tend to drop them (Swan (1987:232)] (Appendix 8a)

“...where I stay” (SgE) instead of ‘live’ in (StdE) (Appendix 8a)

“I brought my mother...” (SgE) instead of ‘took’ in (StdE) (Appendix 8b)

SgE and translation from Mandarin into English is unacceptable in written English. I had expected all the students to exhibit more influence of their mother tongue in their writings. However, below are a few reasons I can think of as to why there wasn’t as much influence as I had expected:

- Mandarin does not have as strong an influence now on children who speak them because these children are not that proficient in that language when it comes to writing. We can see that in Table 4 below:

Table 4: Languages that students are more confident in speaking and writing (from students’ questionnaire, Part A Q.2 & 3)

Names of students	Confident in speaking	Confident in writing
LAF	M	M
LAM	M	E
MAF	M	E
MAM	E	E
HAF	E	E
HAM	E	E

- On the questionnaire Part B Q.5, although two of the students said that they thought in Chinese most of the time, another two said that they thought in both Chinese and English and the last two thought in mainly English, I still think that the influence is slowly dwindling. In fact from Table 4 above, five of them were more confident in writing in English than in Mandarin. This could be because it was much easier to write the English alphabet than the Chinese characters.
- I would like to suggest that it is not so much the interference of Mandarin or SgE in students’ writing, rather, it is the weakness in English grammar that influence a piece of writing, making it unreadable or resulting in it getting low marks. By that I mean the development of their grammar as an interlanguage form of English quite separate

from their mother tongue influence. For example in Appendix 8a (underline in red) – “There was a lady, who was dranked, has fallen into the cannal.” We can roughly understand what the student was trying to say, but her expression, tenses and spelling needed help and the teacher corrected for her in Appendix 8b (underline in red) – “...the lady was drunk and had fallen into the canal.”

- For the lower ability students, their problem was with the English grammar as well as the content as they did not know how to elaborate their points. For example in the last paragraph in Appendix 7, the student could not express herself clearly and it had many grammatical errors. In terms of content, the whole composition was very dry. The student merely gave the bare facts of the picture without going into detail of how the daughter was being rescued, how the fire was put out, what other damaged was done, and so on.

To conclude, students writing reflected some influences of either their Mandarin or SgE. However, it was their weakness in the development of grammar as an interlanguage form of English that caused students to perform badly in their writing.

5.2 In answer to RQ A2: Do students who speak English write better?

This section is related to the above section, but here I am looking at the use of English, even if it was SgE as helping students in their writing. I am trying to find out if students who used or spoke English even if it was SgE could write better than those who did not speak that much English. Table 3 above shows that only HAF and HAM spoke mainly English at home and with friends they spoke both English and Mandarin. They got the highest marks in their compositions as is shown in Table 5 below. As for MAF and MAM, they both used English and Mandarin at home and with friends and they were considered average students who managed to get relatively high marks too. Whereas LAF and LAM were low ability students and who spoke mainly Mandarin and more confident in their Mandarin. Their composition marks were generally lower although in one of their examinations, both of them got better marks compared to their usual compositions. Table 5 below shows the breakdown of their compositions marks:

Key: C – Composition; SA1 – Semester Assessment 1 (mid-year); SA2a – Preliminary Exam 1 (year-end); SA2b – Preliminary Exam 2 (year-end)

Table 5

LAF	LAM	MAF	MAM	HAF	HAM
C1 – 18/40	C1 – 18/40	C1 – 26/40	C1 – 26.5/40	C1 – 26/40	C1 – 27/40
SA1 – 25/40	C2 – 21/40	C6 – 25.5/40	C6 – 27.5/40	C9 – 28/40	C6 – 28.5/40
	SA1–25.5/40	C14 – 26/40	C14 – 26/40	C13 – 27/40	C9 – 30/40
	C13 – 15/40	SA2b–24.5/40	SA2a– 24/40	SA2a–26.5/40	C14 – 28/40

Taking the example of LAF, who was more confident in speaking Mandarin and more confident in writing in Mandarin, she managed to get a better mark in her SA1 composition compared to her C1. I do not think she had started speaking more English and therefore, had written a better composition for her SA1. It does not mean that if one can speak well, one can write well. It is difficult to prove any connection between the two. Moreover, I am aware that there are a lot of factors involved that made one student get higher marks compared to another.

Raimes (1983:4) said that speaking and writing are two different processes and that writing is not simply speech written down on paper. Linking this to the earlier section 5.1, we could see some students simply put their speech into writing and ended up writing SgE in their compositions. There is a distinction between speaking and writing as highlighted by Ur (1996:159). Students should not simply write what they speak. This is not what I like to see here. Rather, I want students to be able to write in StdE although they speak SgE. I would like to suggest that if a person can speak well, in the sense of the level of development of the linguistic competence in the language, not just their communicative performance in the oral medium, it is already an advantage and that will help in his/her writing. On the other hand, if the student is already struggling with the speaking of the language because of a less developed linguistic competence, he/she will have more problems in trying to write.

From my previous teaching experience, it was true that those students who spoke well wrote better than those who did not. One reason was that those students who spoke well managed to get their grammar right or at least made fewer mistakes. Their sentences were written more clearly and could be understood better compared to students who did not

speak English well and therefore had difficulty expressing themselves either in speech or writing.

5.3 In answer to RQ A3: Do students who read many English books write better?

In the questionnaire I asked students if they read any of the books that I have listed (Part A Q.10). Due to space constraint, I shall group the list of books under these main categories:

Fiction – thrillers, short stories, fairy tales, ghost stories, Nancy Drew & Hardy Boys, compositions written by others

Non-fiction – encyclopedia, Reader Digest

Leisure – magazines, comics, TV guide, newspaper

To elicit responses in terms of the main categories above, I shall give an average of the books read by the students in the table below:

Table 6

Name of student	Fiction	Non-fiction	Leisure
LAF	sometimes	sometimes	rarely
LAM	only a little	never	sometimes
MAF	sometimes	sometimes	sometimes
MAM	sometimes	often (encyclopedia)	sometimes (comics)
HAF	sometimes	rarely	sometimes
HAM	sometimes	sometimes (encyclopedia)	never

In the questionnaire, I asked what students did during their free time in class and outside class in Part A Q.7 and 8. I got the following when I looked at how often the students read an English book during their free time in and outside class:

Table 7

Name of Student	LAF	LAM	MAF	MAM	HAF	HAM
In class reading	No	No	No	No	No	Yes
Outside class reading	sometimes	No	sometimes	rarely	rarely	often

In Table 7, LAM stated that he never read an English book during his free time both in class and outside class. However, in Table 6, he said that he sometimes read books such as magazines, TV guides and comics. I wonder when he read those books since he said earlier on that he never read any English books during his free time! It seemed what a few

of the students filled in the questionnaire contradicted each other a little as reflected in the above two tables. Thus, I shall not be able to rely completely on the tables.

From Table 6 above, it shows that all the students read some kind of English books although LAM read only a little. I am not sure when and where they read them since I did not ask them to indicate in the questionnaire. However, Table 7 shows us whether students read any English books at all in class or outside class. **All** except one did no reading during their free time in class. MAM and HAF rarely read books during their free time outside class. On the other hand, since almost all of the students claimed to have read some English books, their readings should help in their writings as researchers such as Perera (1984:208) and Hedge (1988:11) claimed. Nevertheless, we know that was not the case for all the students.

In fact, Hedge (1988:11) said that reading is not sufficient although it is necessary and valuable. Take for example, LAF who claimed to read during her free time outside class and read both fiction and non-fiction books got a failed mark for her first composition in Appendix 7. You will notice that she was weak at both the content and language and should not her readings help her in both those aspects. Having said that, some of her ideas must have come from fiction books that she had read. Why then did her apparent readings not help her more? I shall suggest some reasons later on. In contrast HAF, who generally got high marks for her compositions (as reflected in Table 5) claimed that she never read during her free time in class and rarely read during her free time outside class. It seemed that for her case, she did not need reading books to help her in her writings. But, when we look at a piece of her writing in Appendix 9a which was on the same topic as what LAF had written in Appendix 7, you will notice that she gave more elaboration in her content. She must have got some of the ideas from the few books that she had read. HAM, on the other hand, who read often did get the highest marks in all his compositions. (You can see that in Table 5).

I shall do a stylistic analysis of HAM's writing to show that some of the words or phrases he used seemed to appear from books that he might have read.

For example (Appendix 9b), “disgusted by their attitude”; “outrageous sight”; “hallucinating”; “heaved a sigh of relief”; “...been beaten to a pulp”; and “reprimanded me”.

In addition, his content was good. There was a smooth flow of thoughts with a clear sequence of events leading to the end.

Not all students who read a lot of English books write well. I would like to suggest a few reasons why students like LAF who apparently read many English books did not write very well:

- Very often when one reads a book, one is only interested in the story and enjoying it. When the book is finished, the reader may have gained some knowledge of the content but not the individual words or phrases. If the teacher can discuss some of the books that students read and the plot used in that story with students, they may get an idea of how a story flows and that could help in the content and organisation of the student’s own writing.
- Some students have to be told explicitly what phrases they can use from their reading in their writing. Those phrases may have to be explained to them and they have to be told in what context it is suitable to use them. Of course it is not necessary to use those phrases, but they make the compositions more interesting and ‘colourful’.

Personally, I believe that reading helps and exposing students to books of similar genre such as narrative texts help them to become aware of certain phrases that are often used. This may prove useful since most of the types of writing done by these students at this level are mostly narratives as suggested by Czerniewska (1992:131-132) and Perera (1984:217).

5.4 In answer to RQ B1: Process Writing Approach (PWA) (The literature review can be found in section 3.3)

Hedge (1988:22) suggested three major processes. This teacher used those same processes to ask students to write their compositions. The processes that she used as found in the Teacher’s questionnaire Q.1a (Appendix 10) were:

- brainstorming/planning (most of the time),

- drafting (some students didn't do it),
- peer editing (all the time),
- conferencing – one-to-one, teacher-student discussion (sometimes),
- publishing – printed the better ones for the class (a few times),
- no personal editing (where students examine their own composition critically, to find and correct their own mistakes),
- no revision (not just re-copying from the first draft but trying to make improvements).

There were only two students in my sample whose compositions showed the application of some of the processes such as brainstorming, drafting, peer editing, but for conferencing and publishing, it was hard to determine. The two students – HAF and LAM (Appendix 11a-b) wrote on the same title, the brainstormed ideas and plans were included in the appendix. I would like to compare these two compositions to show that the process writing approach does not seem always able to help students be better writers.

Planning – Both students had a plan and based on the teacher's questionnaire, I would assume that the plan was the result of some brainstorming as a class. It was quite a detailed plan with almost all the points that should be included in the composition.

Drafting – Both students drafted the first writing based on their plans.

Peer-editing – The peers only corrected or tried to correct spelling errors and in Appendix 11a the peer gave the wrong corrections for the past tense of 'think' – instead of 'thought' it was written '*taught*'. Other corrections included one on tense and another on some extension of a sentence (highlighted in red). Then the students wrote their second and final draft.

Conferencing & Publishing – unable to determine!

The marks that both students got were striking. LAM got 15/40 and HAF got 27/40. I am aware that there are other factors involved to affect the writing besides the validity of the process writing approach. For example, both students were at the extreme end in terms of their English language competence. However, the process writing approach is supposed to help all kinds of learners, but it seems that only the high ability learners benefit most from it.

What makes one writing better than the other?

To answer the question, I would give a brief comment on what both students had written in their compositions.

LAM – there was a sequence of events but there was no elaboration. It was very ‘dry’ reading with only a few ideas. It gave the reader the impression that the writer just wanted to get it over and done with. The writer did not seem to be making much effort in his writing. In addition, there was quite a few grammar errors and errors in sentence construction.

HAF – she gave an introduction to her story about what happened before going into the computer laboratory. There was more development in the ‘body’ of the composition. She did not make many grammar errors and her story line was more interesting. In her second draft, she even extended her conclusion and added more content. I could see that she had put in effort in her writing.

Overall Comments

The process writing approach is a good approach to use for teaching writing but for weak students, they may need more guided writing and conferencing with the teacher. It is difficult to determine how much of that was provided although the teacher in the questionnaire Q.8 listed those processes as being helpful to students.

According to Raimes (1983:10-11), teachers who use the PWA should give students two crucial supports: time and feedback. I do not know how much time was given for each draft and the completion of the whole writing although I believe that the students had enough time to go through the processes. In Appendix 11a, we can see that this composition was written over at least a week. The brainstorming was carried out on a Thursday and I would assume the first draft was either written on that same day or over the weekend, peer editing on following Tuesday and final draft written on Wednesday. I would say that the students were given sufficient time for them to think, write and revise. We can see HAF making use of these processes to improve her final draft before handing in to the teacher for marking.

In terms of feedback (which I shall elaborate later in section 5.6.2), at least the written aspect of it seemed to be lacking. This could be the reason for LAM getting low marks. He might not have known how to improve his draft. His peer did not suggest any improvements or give any comments. LAM did not seem to get any feedback from the teacher as well. Therefore, all he did was re-write what he wrote on his first draft and corrected his spelling. To students like LAM, writing another draft seemed a waste of time and a tedious process. No wonder some students felt the writing process too long as reported in the teacher's questionnaire, Q. 9. It is a waste of time both for the teacher and student if the student did not know how to fully utilise the process writing approach.

Czerniewska (1982:84) and Parrott (1993:224) said that the writing process is not linear but recursive. I got the impression that LAM was writing in a linear progression. He wrote his first draft, peer corrected it and then he wrote his last and final draft and handed in to the teacher. Whereas for HAF, we could see her writing in a recursive process. She went back to her first draft and did some quite major revision to her ending before handing in to the teacher.

From my past teaching experience, students felt that whatever they had written down on the first draft was the best they could offer. I can understand the feeling especially when they had to first struggle to put some words onto a blank sheet of paper and when they managed to fill up the space, they felt that they had finished their writing. These students at this level still did not really know how to do peer and personal editing. They depended a lot on the teacher. And when the teacher did not provide any feedback at mid-drafts, what was the student to write on their second draft except to correct some spelling or maybe some corrections on tenses and tried to make the final draft as error-free as possible. In fact, Perl (1979) reported in Perera (1984:209) said that the older and abler children are more aware of the possibility of revising a written text; their less proficient counterparts are more concerned about producing a neat, error-free end-product.

5.5 In answer to RQ B2: Journal Writing (The literature review can be found in section 3.4)

This is not really reflected in the teacher's questionnaire except in Q.9 where the teacher mentioned that the students enjoyed writing journals. In the students' questionnaire, Part B Q.5 & 6, four students indicated that they liked writing journals, one did not like it and the other student had no comments. I shall look at only three journal entries due to word constraint and state briefly the content of the entries. Then, I shall give an overall discussion on them and finally comment on the kinds of grammar and vocabulary the student had used.

Appendix 12a (by HAF)

This entry was about her brother's birthday and what he got for his presents. The teacher gave the following comment: "He must be very happy. Your parents love both of you very much, don't they?" From her comments, one can see that the teacher is reminding the student of her parents' love and bonding the family with the child.

Appendix 12b (by MAF)

This student asked some questions such as, 'why do people change?' She also talked about her visit to the dentist and about her bad examination marks. Her writing did not flow smoothly and she just wrote whatever came to her mind. The teacher responded in a little Chinese (the translation is given on the appendix itself).

Appendix 12c (by MAM)

This student just gave a recount of an event. The teacher still responded positively.

Overall comments

According to Czerniewska (1992:90), journals are seen as places for personal expression. We can see students freely expressing their thoughts and feelings and writing about events that are of importance to them. Journal writing provides a place for students to voice their concerns and make evaluations about their own progress. All the functions of journal writing listed by Czerniewska could be seen in the examples above.

Harmer (1991:145) pointed out the role of the teacher in respond to journal writing. The teacher gave very general and short comments but always related to what was written. As an outsider reading both the journal and the teacher's comments, the teacher had expressed an interest in what the students had written and responded positively. In addition, I could see a rapport between the student and teacher and that the students felt very free to share their thoughts with her – be it about their families, concerns about school work, relationships with their friends or their own thoughts

Mistakes made

All the students made some grammatical and spelling mistakes, but not once did the teacher correct any of them. According to Harmer (1991:145), journals are not to be corrected, but rather to be reacted to. The teacher did not give any mark or grade on the entry except a brief comment and the date. She was purely interested in the content and what the students had written.

5.6 In answer to RQ C: How did the teacher respond to student's writing?

5.6.1 Responding to student's writings

In Appendix 13a, the teacher exhibited the roles mentioned by Tribble (1996:119). What the teacher seemed to be doing in giving the response in the compositions was to try to play at least three roles at the same time - with only limited success in any of them. By devoting time to identifying problems in the learner's control of the language system the teacher has tried to *assist* the learner to make improvements in the text. However, the comments cannot in fact help the learner to improve this text as it is already complete for this particular composition. By giving a final *evaluative* comment the teacher might be wishing to encourage the learner and to point them in the right direction for future writing, but the comment is too vague to be useful. By giving a mark the teacher is moving towards the role of *examiner* and is indicating that the text has failed to achieve excellence. Finally, the teacher has failed to give any indication of whether or not she enjoyed reading the text. In other words, she had avoided the role of *audience*.

Celce-Murcia (1991:257) said that the goal in responding to student writing is to foster student improvement. While Hedge (1988:10) said that teachers should respond positively

to the strength in student's writing to build confidence in the student. There was no evidence of any response from the teacher. If we used the marks given as an indication of response, students getting a failed mark or low mark would indicate a negative response from the teacher and how could the students use that to improve their writing?

5.6.2 Forms of feedback

Hedge (1988:258) suggested both teacher and peer feedback.

Teacher feedback

According to the teacher's questionnaire, Q.2, this teacher gave both oral and written feedback. It is difficult to determine how often and what sort of oral feedback was given since I did not ask the teacher to indicate in the questionnaire, but in terms of written feedback in the samples that I have, it was very rare. In addition, if written feedback was given, it was on the final draft of the writing (an example is in Appendix 13a). Feedback given at the end may soon be forgotten by the student by the time s/he wrote another composition. It seemed unproductive of the teacher's time to respond to the finished product of the writing since it cannot influence the student's writing anymore. Raimes (1983:139) said that, "Responding to a paper only at the end limits teachers in doing the following:

1. giving the paper a grade/mark;
2. writing a comment: very good, needs improvement, careless;
3. correcting errors.

For the majority of the cases, the final draft was the first time this teacher looked at the writing. The other time would be during conferencing but we can not determine whose writings have undergone that process and after speaking to the teacher on 16/3/02, I was told that conferencing was not carried out often and only with the weak students. Appendix 13a was written by MAF, an average student, so she would not have met the teacher for conferencing. As a result, what the teacher had done to this particular writing here seemed to be exactly what Raimes said. The teacher gave feedback on the final draft. She gave a mark, corrected errors and gave a comment 'Story should have been developed more'. The written feedback given by this teacher here was too vague and general. I do

not think the student will know how to develop the story more! I wonder if the student even knew what it meant to ‘develop’? Besides, there was no suggestion on how to do it.

Having said all the above, Munice (2000:50-51) said that teacher giving feedback on the final draft is good and beneficial to the students. This is the case only if students write down all the comments given by the teacher and peers (from mid-drafts) into a book and always refer to it whenever they are composing the next text. If this teacher had used Munice’s suggestions to ask students to write down her feedback onto a book and to refer to it whenever they write other compositions, the written feedback might have helped. However, as I have mentioned above, the feedback was too vague and general, and certainly not very helpful. In addition, this teacher didn’t use Munice’s ideas at all.

Peer feedback

Both Hedge (1988:258) and Munice (2000:50-51) suggested that peer feedback is useful to the writer. However, Hedge did mention that students had to be taught how to give feedback to each other. Apparently, the students in this class were not really taught how to give peer feedback. In Appendix 13b, the peer managed to correct some spelling mistakes, grammar and even reconstruct a sentence for the writer. However, there was neither comments nor feedback either positive or negative, nor suggestions on the content. One possible reason could be that students were told by the teacher to look at only the language used by the writer instead of commenting on the content. Another reason could be the simple fact that students did not know how to comment on the content. They did not know how to help their friends improve their writing.

5.6.3 Responding to errors

Raimes (1983:22) said that the teachers’ principal job is not to search for errors and Hedge (1988:260) said that teachers should not be swayed by the presence or numbers of errors. However, we often find teachers spending more time searching for and correcting students’ writing instead of helping them to write. As can be seen in the composition in Appendix 14, the teacher corrected most of the errors made. She cancelled unnecessary words, struck out wrong words, wrote over errors, and inserted missing words. Teachers laboriously went through every single mistake on the student’s writing and hoping that

students will somehow learn from them. She together with many teachers in this school believed that all the errors made by students must be corrected. Besides, this was the expectation of parents and the school. However, Robb (1986) as reported in Celce-Murcia (1991:274) said that there was no evidence to show that students will be helped when teachers correct all their errors. So the question remains whether teachers should continue to correct every error made by students? Parrott (1993:235) suggested that teachers and students should identify the attitudes and preferences of both parties and agree on how errors should be responded to.

5.6.4 Student’s response to the teacher’s feedback

What is the student to do when he received his work filled with red marks? Raimes (1983:141) put it succinctly – “What student does, of course, quite often is groan, put the paper away, and hope he’ll somehow get fewer “red marks” next time.” I cannot say distinctly which of the six students reacted in the way Raimes mentioned here. Based on my experience as a student, that was my reaction. Students were used to seeing lots of correction done on their writing and they were only interested in what marks they got not in the mistakes they had made. Some research recorded by Celce-Murcia (1991:257) highlighted the fact that some students either ignored teacher’s feedback, in this case the correction of errors, or failed to use them constructively. As a result, we could see students repeating the errors in subsequent compositions. Although I can not make a generalisation, I find that from the repeated errors that students made, it seemed quite true that students did not know how to respond to the teacher’s feedback.

5.7 In answer to RQ D2: How did the teacher attempt to help these students?

In the teacher’s questionnaire, Q.2 & 3, the teacher was asked how she dealt with grammatical and vocabulary errors. Table 8 shows a summary of the various ways used by this teacher.

Table 8

Grammatical errors:	Vocabulary errors:
- Oral feedback	- Introduce new words during brainstorming
- Written feedback on their work	- Students have a list of helpful words

- Go through common errors as a class	- Use the errors as spelling lists
	- Use assessment books for reinforcement

By written feedback of grammatical errors, I presume it took the form of underlining the errors and correcting the errors on the student's piece of writing as shown in Appendix 14.

This teacher had tried to help her students with their errors as we can see in Table 8. In the teacher's questionnaire, Q.2, this teacher said that she would go through common errors made by students as a class. In other words, she did not only correct individual pieces of work, she collated a list of common errors, corrected the errors together as a class and gave some practice to help students overcome those errors.

It is difficult to judge the effectiveness of her methods since I am not doing a detailed analysis of all the compositions written by her students in the class from the beginning of the year to the end of the year. The overall impression I got just by looking at those samples of compositions sent to me was that students kept making similar errors throughout the year. The composition marks students received fluctuate throughout the year (please see Table 2 and 5). At times students made an improvement, and then, their marks went down again. I was aware that there were many factors involved that might have caused the apparent fluctuation in marks and it might not be due to a lack of effectiveness of the methods used by this teacher. I would just like to suggest some ways the teacher could use to help the students with these errors.

First of all, the teacher by correcting the whole composition may have a negative effect on the students due to the following reasons:

1. Compositions were corrected at the final draft of the writing and so students did not pay much attention to them.
2. Too many errors were corrected at one time resulting in the students not knowing what to look out for to improve their writing.
3. Students were already discouraged by so many cancellations and other red markings that very often they just put away the piece of writing and never looked at it again.

The teacher might want to consider what kinds of errors to correct, when, how and why instead of correcting all the errors on every piece of writing. Before we can help students with their errors, the teacher must have the right attitude towards it. Raimes (1983:22/3) suggests some general strategies for error correction. See errors as friends and not enemies to be conquered; use errors in students' writing to plan ahead; give students time and opportunity to correct errors before the teachers do; concentrate on meaning in students' drafts; and expect errors to occur.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I have tried to meet the objectives of this dissertation by answering all the research questions. I have used data collected and commented on in Chapter 4 to help in my analysis and discussion. I have also used the research findings expressed in the literature review in Chapter 3 to support my analysis wherever appropriate. Finally, in Chapter 6, I shall give an overall conclusion to this dissertation.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

6.1 RESULTS OF STUDY

To a certain extent there was a reflection of interference of students' mother tongue, be it Mandarin or Singapore English on students' writing. However, it was their weakness in the development of grammar as an interlanguage form of English that caused students to perform badly in their writing. Students who spoke English, even if it was Singapore English and those who read a lot of English books, tended to be better writers.

The problems that students experienced and encountered in their writing appear to originate from a lack of linguistic competence. Singapore students in the primary level have to struggle with the syntax, semantics, pragmatics and phonology of the English language. Although these students have been in school for six years now, many of them still have not grasped fully the complexity of the English language. Over the five years of my past teaching experience, I had only seen a few students who managed to use the English language confidently in writing.

The help provided by the teacher was constrained by a number of things as mentioned in the teacher's questionnaire Q7. – time, students lack of motivation to write, students level of English, students not learning from mistakes and lack of writing outside class. She tried to teach writing using the process writing approach, but some students found that process too long and tedious. The teacher also tried helping in the language – grammar and spelling, however, the results were inconclusive.

6.2 PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

Teachers should be more aware of instances where students exhibit interference of learners' mother tongue and to highlight them to the students so that they become aware of them and avoid making the same mistake in future.

Students should be continually encouraged to speak English and read more English books. I have seen some teachers spending the first 15 minutes of the lesson reading a story to the

whole class. The main objective here was to encourage students to read more books on their own. Sometimes the teachers asked students to infer what might happen next in the story or to discuss the plot of the story with the class. This is carried out subtly and not at the expense of students' enjoyment of the story. In addition, teachers could make a list of useful words and phrases that are directly relevant to students and are found in the books that students often read.

When reading student's writing, a positive response from the teacher is important. It will be helpful to students if the teacher plays all the roles described by Tribble (1996:119) equally in all circumstances. It is important that teachers comment on the content, always trying to say something positive and give suggestions to improve the content, instead of emphasising on having an error-free composition.

One important element in using the process writing approach effectively is to be flexible. As Czerniewska (1992:84) said, the nature of the 'process' depends on the purpose of the writing, the length of the text, the complexity of the ideas and the time available to the writer. All the processes should not be rigidly followed in each writing otherwise students might be put off by it. There are bound to be some topics that require a simpler writing process and the teachers should adopt the writing approach to suit the needs of her/his class.

6.3 LIMITATIONS OF STUDY

As this is only a case study of 6 students, it does not allow generalisation of the findings. In addition, although I collected quite a few pieces of students' work, I did not use all of them in my analysis due to the constraint of space. I therefore selected from them only the sections that were relevant to my discussion. It would obviously have been better to be able to analyse the whole of the data systematically.

6.4 SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

In this study I have tried to include a wide range of sub-topics when looking at writing. Consequently, it has been difficult to do justice to each of them. Each sub-topic can become the main focus in a future dissertation, for example, a lot has been written on

teacher's response to student's writing. It will be interesting to use an ethnographic approach to study this further by asking teachers to apply the various suggestions and see the results first-hand.

I had left out children's writing outside the classroom because I did not have any data to analyse. More research could be carried out in this area and see how it affects their writing in the class.

CONCLUSION

The teacher plays a very important role in helping children write in English. The teacher should be aware of hindrances such as interference from a child's native language and lack of exposure to both written and spoken English. The way the teacher responds to children's writing and deals with errors is also crucial. The teacher should always be positive in his/her feedback and treat errors as a friend that can be used to help the children.

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