

# Classroom Writing Task Strategies by Secondary School Teachers in Penang, Malaysia

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## Abstract

This study explores the types of writing task strategies used by English teachers, the effectiveness of these strategies in addressing the needs of ESL learners, and the barriers that hinder the implementation of effective writing task strategies in the ESL classroom. The study employs a case-study method and the findings are based on 15 questions with 5-point Likert scale rating and 1 open-ended question given to 162 secondary school teachers in the central district of Seberang Prai, Penang, Malaysia. The standard deviation and variance of each item were measured and reported in the findings with the overall results suggesting that the teachers practice differentiated writing assessment in their ESL classrooms. A thematic analysis on specific ways teachers are using in their classroom writing tasks also indicated that teachers are using a variety of methods and techniques to support and guide students in developing their writing skills in ESL classrooms.

**Keywords:** Writing Strategies, Classroom Language Learning, Secondary School Teachers.

## Introduction

English language proficiency is becoming increasingly important in the global arena, and in Malaysia, it is a crucial aspect of education and national development. As a second language, English is taught in Malaysian schools from an early age, with the aim of equipping students with the necessary skills to communicate effectively in a globalized world. Writing is one of the essential components of English language learning, and it is a skill that is critical for academic and professional success. Despite the emphasis on English language learning in Malaysia, many students continue to struggle with writing in English. This academic introduction aims to provide an overview of the challenges and opportunities associated with teaching writing in the English as a Second Language (ESL) classroom in the Malaysian context. It will also explore the strategies that teachers can use to facilitate the development of writing skills among ESL learners in Malaysia. By examining the current state of English language teaching and learning in Malaysia and the challenges faced by ESL learners, this paper seeks

to contribute to the ongoing conversation on how to improve the teaching of writing in the Malaysian context.

Writing is one of the language skills that are taught and tested in the English Language Malaysian School Syllabus. Different genres of writing were given to the students, such as descriptive, narrative, argumentative, report writing and informal letter (Swaran et al., 2020). As new innovations begin to emerge in writing, teachers must adopt various process techniques for teaching writing skills. Unfortunately, studies have shown that Malaysian teachers are still dependent on the traditional product approach (Swaran et al., 2020). This struggle may be attributed to various factors, including the lack of exposure to authentic language use and the limited opportunities to practice writing in English. To overcome this issue, teachers have been moving towards an emphasis on process, rather than product, and in consequence, there are a variety of available sources providing research findings on how students learn to write, suggesting new teaching strategies and arguing for curricular changes (Din et al., 2021). Nevertheless, the strategies used by English teachers to facilitate writing tasks in the classroom may not be effective in addressing the specific needs of ESL learners in Malaysia. This problem statement aims to explore the challenges faced by English teachers in Malaysia in implementing effective writing task strategies in the ESL classroom. By examining the current state of writing task strategies and the challenges faced by English teachers, this paper seeks to contribute to the ongoing conversation on how to improve the teaching of writing in the Malaysian context. Specifically, this study will explore the types of writing task strategies used by English teachers, the effectiveness of these strategies in addressing the needs of ESL learners, and the barriers that hinder the implementation of effective writing task strategies in the ESL classroom. The findings of this study may inform the development of more effective writing task strategies that are tailored to the specific needs of ESL learners in Malaysia.

### **Literature Review**

The COVID-19 pandemic has presented a significant challenge for English teachers in Malaysian secondary schools, particularly in teaching writing. As remote and online learning became the norm, teachers had to adapt their strategies to ensure high-quality writing instruction for students. Now, as the pandemic begins to subside in Malaysia, teachers face the task of readjusting their teaching strategies for in-person learning while continuing to improve students' writing skills.

Teachers play a central role in educational reforms, necessitating a deep investigation into their understanding and application of contemporary teaching and assessment practices (Kaur et al., 2018). The Malaysian Education Blueprint addresses academic diversity among learners through differentiated instruction practices but does not explicitly address differentiation in assessment practices (Kaur et al., 2018).

Writing is a complex cognitive task that requires multiple skills to be employed simultaneously (Jain et al., 2021). Effective writing instruction strategies are crucial for developing writing skills in secondary school students. In Malaysia, the education system aims to enhance critical and innovative thinking skills through teaching practices outlined in the Malaysian Education Blueprint (Swaran et al., 2020; Kaur et al., 2018). While the curriculum content is standardized, teachers have the flexibility to modify its presentation, delivery, and assessment methods (Ramli & Yusoff, 2020). However, current assessments, such as

standardized tests and examinations, may not accurately reflect students' writing ability across various genres (Chen & Su, 2017).

Teachers' assessment practices have a strong influence on students' learning achievement (Kaur et al., 2018). Consequently, teachers must acquire the necessary skills and knowledge to conduct effective classroom assessments (Kaur et al., 2018). Malaysian secondary school students face challenges in writing, including hesitation and a perceived difficulty in writing in English due to limited language skills (Jain et al., 2021). In large classrooms with diverse backgrounds and varying levels of English proficiency, teachers encounter difficulties in meeting students' needs (Swaran et al., 2020).

To address these challenges, various instructional approaches have been explored. The genre-based approach, which focuses on understanding and producing selected genres of texts, has shown effectiveness in improving students' writing skills, particularly in content and organization (Yusof & Salleh, 2018). Collaborative writing, a social process that fosters communication and coordination among writers with a common goal, has also proven effective in Malaysian secondary schools (Othman & Lee, 2017). These approaches, along with scaffolding strategies and the integration of technology, contribute to effective writing instruction.

Assessing writing is crucial for writing instruction in secondary schools, with feedback playing a key role in improving students' writing skills (Rosli & Alias, 2017). Effective writing assessment strategies involve various techniques, such as peer assessment, rubrics, and portfolio assessment. Clear assessment criteria, guidelines, and opportunities for self-assessment and reflection can enhance students' writing skills (Abdullah et al., 2021; Othman & Mohamed, 2020).

Differentiation, as a flexible approach to teaching, is essential to address the diverse needs of learners in heterogeneous classrooms (Tomlinson, 2017). Differentiated instruction can improve students' learning experiences, but teachers face challenges in designing and implementing lesson plans due to limited resources (Ismail & Aziz, 2019). Teachers' self-efficacy has a significant influence on differentiated instruction practices, and there is a need for more strategic knowledge on differentiated assessment (Ramli & Yusoff, 2020; Kaur et al., 2018).

The present study is situated in the Malaysian context where educational reform planning is communicated through the Malaysian Education Blueprint (2013-2025) published by the Ministry of Education. The Blueprint aims at elevating the standards and quality of the Malaysian education system by focusing on teaching practices for developing higher order, critical and innovative thinking skills among students (Swaran et al., 2020; Kaur et al., 2018). Although the curriculum content is standard and the same for all students, it is up to the teacher to modify the presentation of the curriculum content, to organise how it will be delivered and to determine the type of assessment to be conducted (Ramli & Yusoff, 2020). In Malaysia, writing is usually assessed using a combination of formative and summative assessment strategies. Formative assessments include peer assessment, self-assessment and teacher feedback (Albirini, 2012). Summative assessments include standardized tests and examinations, which are used to evaluate students' writing proficiency. However, research has shown that these assessments do not accurately reflect students' writing ability and may

not be suitable for assessing various writing genres (Chen & Su, 2017). Synthesis of research related to teachers' assessment practices has established strong links between teachers' assessment practices and students' learning achievement (Kaur et al., 2018). Therefore, it is essential for teachers to acquire skills and knowledge to conduct classroom assessments in an effective manner (Kaur et al., 2018).

There are many concerns related to Malaysian secondary school students' declining writing performance. In most Malaysian classrooms, previous studies found that a lot of teachers complain that their students have hesitation when attempting writing tasks due to their perception that writing in English is difficult and would often leave their writing half done due to their lack of language skills (Juin et al., 2021). Students are diverse in skills, prior knowledge and understanding can affect the pace at which they comprehend new contents and demonstrate their learning, hence, teachers need to choose and employ a variety of measures that are appropriate for students' level in their instruction and assessment strategies (Kaur et al., 2018). However, teachers are facing great difficulties when teaching big classes, where students come from diverse backgrounds with limited English proficiency, differing interests and mixed emotions on school culture and experience (Swaran et al., 2020). According to Juin et al (2021), teachers have designed and tested the latest methods, models, and relevant practices in their effort to make writing easier for their students and improve students' writing performance but in the Malaysian context, it can be observed that most writing intervention modules are often aimed at improving their scores in national examinations.

Yusof and Salleh (2018) conducted a study to examine the use of the genre-based approach in teaching narrative writing to Malaysian secondary school students. The genre-based approach to writing regards "genre as a product in writing" (Dirgeyasa, 2016, p. 47), and as a result "focusses on the understanding and production of selected genres of texts" (Lin, 2006, p. 69). The study found that this approach was effective in improving students' writing skills especially in the area of content and organization.

One of the well-known approaches to teaching writing is collaborative writing. It is defined as a "social process" which encourages writers who have the same focus, a common goal and it gives them opportunity to communicate, negotiate and coordinate the ideas and writing content (Roselli, 2016). A study conducted by Othman and Lee (2017) indicated that collaborative writing was also effective to help students in Malaysian secondary schools by improving their writing skills and fostering positive attitudes towards writing.

Rosli and Alias (2017) conducted a study to investigate the effectiveness of teacher feedback on improving students' writing skills. The study found that the students who received feedback on their writing performed better than those who did not receive feedback.

A study by Ismail and Aziz (2019) involved 20 English language teachers from 4 different schools in the Klang district, Malaysia indicated that teachers perceived differentiation as a beneficial approach in teaching diverse academic learners, which also promotes better, enjoyable, and satisfactory student-centred learning and teaching sessions. Their findings also revealed the process of designing, planning and implementing the lesson plans are challenging and time-consuming for teachers as they are lacking in fundings to construct and design their own teaching and learning materials.

Ramli and Yusoff (2020) collected 428 Malaysian teachers' responses via an online questionnaire to identify the level of teachers' self-efficacy and its significant influence over the differentiated instruction practices and found that there is a significant positive relationship between the former with the latter, which proved that teachers' self-efficacy has a major influence and can predict their practice of differentiated instruction in the classroom.

In their study on differentiated assessment practices of 32 Malaysian in-service teachers, Kaur et al (2018) concluded that teachers are aware of basic principles of differentiation and the benefits of differentiation on students' cognitive, affective, and emotional development. However, they noted that there are gaps in strategic knowledge on the purpose of differentiated assessment and its application due to time constraints and large number of students per classroom.

Overall, these studies suggest that effective writing assessment strategies involve a combination of techniques and methods, including peer assessment, rubrics, and portfolio assessment. Additionally, providing students with clear assessment criteria and guidelines, as well as opportunities to self-assess and reflect on their writing, may be critical to enhancing their writing skills. These studies also suggest that effective writing instruction strategies involve a combination of techniques and methods, including the process-based approach, genre-based approach, collaborative writing approach, scaffolding strategies, and the use of technology. Additionally, providing students with explicit instruction on writing strategies and techniques, as well as opportunities to write in different genres and contexts, may be critical to enhancing their writing skills.

In conclusion, developing a CEFR-aligned writing syllabus and implementing differentiated instruction strategies, such as genre-based writing instruction and self-assessment, are critical for enhancing students' writing skills in Malaysian secondary schools. Collaborative writing and effective feedback techniques can also contribute to improved writing performance. It is important for teachers to continue exploring and implementing innovative teaching and assessment practices to ensure high-quality writing instruction in the Malaysian education system.

### **Methodology**

The data were collected in July 2022. For the purpose of the study, a questionnaire was developed with the aim of addressing several research questions. However, in this paper, the findings will only report the classroom writing strategies by the target respondents based on 15 questions with 5-point Likert scale rating and 1 open-ended question. The case study methodology was chosen to examine in detail the strategies used by ESL teachers when teaching writing to their students, particularly in the classroom setting. The classroom setting provided real life experience in determining the development of higher-order thinking skills when teaching writing (Swaran et al., 2020). This case study can help to gain a better understanding of the selected subject. The data obtained were analysed thematically.

## Results and Discussion

Table 1.

*Writing assessment strategies by English secondary school teachers (Cronbach Alpha = 0.940147107)*

Item	Mean	Standard deviation	Variance
I practice differentiated writing assessment in my ESL classroom.	3.56	0.83	0.69
I am interested in learning more about how to address learners' diverse needs in ESL writing.	3.95	0.74	0.54
When conducting a writing assessment or task throughout the academic year, I differentiate by instruction and feedback before it is done.	3.68	0.73	0.53
When conducting a writing assessment or task throughout the academic year, I differentiate by the task given to my students.	3.75	0.71	0.51
When conducting a writing assessment or task throughout the academic year, I differentiate by the type and amount of support provided.	3.73	0.66	0.43
When conducting a writing assessment or task throughout the academic year, I differentiate by the outcome expected from my students.	3.81	0.68	0.46
When conducting a writing assessment or task throughout the academic year, I differentiate by the time my students are given to complete it.	3.72	0.73	0.53
When conducting a writing assessment or task throughout the academic year, I differentiate by supporting individual learning preferences and needs.	3.66	0.73	0.53
When conducting a writing assessment or task throughout the academic year, I differentiate by the types of questions asked.	3.74	0.74	0.54
When conducting a writing assessment or task throughout the academic year, I differentiate by the feedback given after it is completed.	3.77	0.69	0.48
When conducting a writing assessment or task throughout the academic year, I am given free rein to decide on what to access.	3.66	0.77	0.60
When conducting a writing assessment or task throughout the academic year, I am given free rein to decide on how to access.	3.61	0.83	0.68
When conducting a writing assessment or task throughout the academic year, I am given free rein to decide on when to access.	3.54	0.81	0.66
When conducting a writing assessment or task throughout the academic year, I am given free rein to choose and design my own assessment methods.	3.56	0.79	0.62
I have my own unique method (outside of textbook methods) of assessing my students' ESL writing skills.	3.52	0.80	0.65

Table 1 presents the results of a study that aimed to investigate the writing assessment strategies used by English secondary school teachers in their ESL classrooms. The Cronbach Alpha value of 0.940147107 indicates that the items in the table have a high level of internal consistency, meaning that the items are measuring the same construct.

The standard deviation and variance can provide additional insights into the variability of the responses to each item in the table. The standard deviation measures the spread of the

responses around the mean. A smaller standard deviation indicates that the responses are tightly clustered around the mean, while a larger standard deviation indicates that the responses are more spread out. Looking at the table, we can see that the standard deviation values range from 0.66 to 0.83. This suggests that the responses to each item are relatively tightly clustered around their respective means, indicating a high level of agreement among the participating teachers.

The variance is another measure of variability that is derived from the standard deviation. It represents the squared value of the standard deviation and indicates the degree to which the responses are spread out from the mean. In this table, the variance values range from 0.43 to 0.69. These values are relatively low, which indicates that the responses to each item are clustered relatively closely around their respective means, and there is not a lot of variation between the responses.

Overall, the relatively small standard deviation and variance values suggest that the participating teachers had a high level of agreement in their responses to each item in the table. This indicates that the findings are likely to be representative of the larger population of English secondary school teachers in their ESL classrooms.

Overall, the results suggest that the participating teachers practice differentiated writing assessment in their ESL classrooms, with a mean score of 3.56. This indicates that they are aware of the need to cater to the diverse needs of their students and use different approaches to assess their writing skills.

The item with the highest mean score is "I am interested in learning more about how to address learners' diverse needs in ESL writing" with a mean score of 3.95. This suggests that the participating teachers are motivated to improve their knowledge and skills in addressing the diverse needs of their ESL students. This is a positive finding, as it shows that the teachers are committed to providing quality education to their students.

In terms of differentiating the writing assessment task, the participating teachers reported that they differentiate by instruction and feedback before the task is done, by the task given to their students, by the type and amount of support provided, by the outcome expected from their students, by the time given to complete the task, by supporting individual learning preferences and needs, by the types of questions asked, and by the feedback given after the task is completed. These findings suggest that the teachers use a range of strategies to differentiate the assessment tasks, indicating a good level of pedagogical skill.

The results also indicate that the teachers have autonomy in deciding what, how, and when to assess their students' writing skills, with mean scores ranging from 3.54 to 3.66. This finding suggests that the participating teachers have a good level of professional autonomy, which is important for promoting innovation and creativity in the classroom.

However, the mean score for "I have my own unique method (outside of textbook methods) of assessing my students' ESL writing skills" is relatively low at 3.52. This suggests that while the participating teachers have autonomy in their assessment methods, they may not be using innovative and creative methods to assess their students' writing skills.

Overall, the findings suggest that the participating teachers are aware of the importance of differentiated writing assessment in their ESL classrooms and use a range of strategies to cater to the diverse needs of their students. The findings also suggest that the participating teachers have a good level of professional autonomy, which is important for promoting innovation and creativity in the classroom. However, there may be scope for the participating teachers to develop more innovative and creative assessment methods.

Based on the written responses from teachers, the findings suggest various themes related to teaching and assessing writing skills in ESL classrooms. The first theme is evaluating writing based on different aspects, such as content, vocabulary, language, and communicative achievement. The teachers are focusing on providing feedback on different writing conventions, such as spelling, grammar, capitalization, and sentence structure. They are also emphasizing the importance of developing writing skills for blog posts, informal letters, emails, and paragraphs.

The second theme is using technology for providing feedback to students' written works. Teachers are utilizing various online platforms, such as Padlet, Google Classroom, and Google Docs, for giving feedback to students. They are also providing writing tasks via WhatsApp and advanced activities for advanced students.

The third theme is providing support to students through different scaffolding techniques, such as providing a sample of writing before the writing task, exposure to useful vocabulary, peer editing, and following writing rubrics. Teachers are also using different types of writing tasks, such as fill-in-the-blanks, picture description, grammar tasks, scrambled words, short answers, gap-filling, reordering, feedback, parallel writing, free writing, and self-assessment.

The fourth theme is providing support to weaker students and advanced students. Teachers are using different methods, such as writing part by part for weaker students and full essays for advanced students, advising advanced students to use advanced vocabulary, and providing guidance and support to weaker students.

The fifth theme is providing resources to students for improving their writing skills, such as exposure to model essays, copy, text completion, writing quiz, and re-writing short paragraphs into standard English. Teachers are also utilizing different techniques, such as mind mapping, internet reference, copy essay, and providing stimulus in guided writing through slides and videos.

The sixth theme is providing assessment through different methods, such as observation, group participation, and student feedback to the teacher via Google Forms. Teachers are also using different resources, such as exercise books, PDF files, and worksheets, for assessing students' writing skills.

The seventh theme is providing guidance and support to students through different methods, such as using Canva to make interesting videos, voice recording to explain rubrics, advanced apps for advanced students, and WhatsApp for weaker students. Teachers are also providing detailed guidelines, points, mind maps, and brainstorming for ideas and examples. They are also mixing better students with weaker ones to provide support and guidance.

Overall, the findings suggest that teachers are using a variety of methods and techniques to support and guide students in developing their writing skills in ESL classrooms. They are using technology, providing scaffolding and resources, and assessing through different methods to improve students' writing skills.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

Teachers are aware of basic principles of differentiation and individual student needs as well as how differentiation benefits them. Since teachers are mandated to promote higher-order thinking skills in all curricula in pursuant to the national educational policy, further research is needed on the strategies that can be employed by teachers to foster higher-order thinking skills in the classroom. This study highlights the importance of English language proficiency and writing skills in the Malaysian education system. Despite the emphasis on English language learning, many students in Malaysia continue to struggle with writing in English. The paper explores the challenges faced by English teachers in Malaysia in teaching writing and discusses various strategies that can be used to facilitate the development of writing skills among ESL learners. The literature review reveals that effective writing instruction and assessment strategies involve a combination of techniques such as the genre-based approach, collaborative writing, scaffolding strategies, and the use of technology. It also emphasizes the need for differentiated instruction and assessment practices to meet the diverse needs of students. The findings suggest that implementing a CEFR-aligned writing syllabus, providing explicit instruction, and offering opportunities for self-assessment and reflection can contribute to enhancing students' writing skills. It is crucial for teachers to continue exploring innovative teaching and assessment practices to ensure high-quality writing instruction in Malaysian secondary schools. By addressing these challenges and implementing effective strategies, the Malaysian education system can better equip students with the necessary skills to communicate effectively in the globalised world.

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