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USING BAHASA MELAYU WHILE WRITING IN ENGLISH: A CASE STUDY OF MALAY STUDENTS

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INTRODUCTION

Writing in a second language (L2) is a challenging process (Wolfersberger, 2003:1). He continues to explain that this is because while the first language (L1) writing process includes producing content, drafting ideas, revising writing, choosing appropriate vocabulary, and editing texts, writing in L2 involves all of these elements jumbled with second language processing issues.

In addition to that, L2 writers are also faced with other challenges that can affect the L2 writers' composing competence. Factors such as linguistic competence, cognitive ability as well as social aspects also need to be addressed by ESL practitioners in order to understand L2 writing better. However, because of the constraints of limited second-language knowledge, writing in a second language may be hampered because of the need to focus on language rather than content (Weigle, 2002: 35). It is true that form or language does play an important role in L2 writing but it should not be the only element that needs attention. Writing in a second language classroom should not be impeded in lieu of too much focus on the language. As such, a shift in paradigm is needed so as to address other important elements that underly L2 writing such as background knowledge, writing strategies, writing processes, the role of L1, and others.

LANGUAGE SWITCHING AND L2 WRITING

Various studies have compared L1 English essays and ESL essays written by groups of students with different L1 background to investigate L1-L2 transfer of cultural rhetorical patterns (Uzawa, 1996, Kubota, 1998, Wolfersberger, 2003, Wang, 2003). The assumption is that if distinct patterns emerged from English written texts written by different L1 groups, they would provide evidence that such rhetorical patterns exist in their L1 and carry over into L2 writing. Kobayashi (1984) in Kubota (1998) conducted a study on Japanese students and observed that essays written in Japanese were similar to essays written in English in terms of rhetorical pattern, which confirmed the transfer from L1 (Japanese) to L2 (English). Oi (1984) cited in Kubota (1998) examined essays written by Japanese students writing in Japanese and English and found evidence of L1 to L2 transfer based on similarities in some lexical features and organisational patterns. Thus, it can be concluded here that transfer from L1 to L2 does exist and further studies on this will be of great help towards understanding the nature of L2 writing. ESL practitioners need to have a clear understanding of the unique nature of L2 writing in order to deal effectively with L2 writers (Silva, 1993:657). Silva (1993) further commented that:

“There is evidence to suggest that L1 and L2 writings are similar in their broad outlines; that is, it has been shown that both L1 and L2 writers employ a recursive composing process, involving planning, writing, and revising, do develop their ideas and find the appropriate rhetorical and linguistic means to express them”.

(Silva, 1993:657)

The above statement demonstrates that there is not much difference between L1 and L2 writers and a close examination of both L1 and L2 writing is needed to explore this further. This can be achieved by means of an empirical research comparing ESL and

native-English-speaking writers as well as that comparing L1 and L2 writing of L2 subjects (Silva, 1993:658).

Edelsky (1982) conducted a study on the relationship between first language and second language writing and she found out that L1 writing processes have been used in L2 writing. In addition to that, what a writer knows about writing in the first language forms the basis of new hypotheses rather than interferes with writing in another language. Therefore, knowledge of L1 writing should be seen as assisting L2 writing rather than hampering it.

Similarly, Qi (1996), in his study on a Chinese subject, discovered frequent switching between L1 and L2 even during the development of a single thought. This particular subject often switched quickly to the language in which an idea could be most comfortably expressed (Qi, 1996:427). This switch, according to Qi (1996), resulted from the subject's need to use a language that could articulate her ideas most effectively, expressively, and with the least possible interruption in the process of thought development. This finding indicates that using L1 when writing in L2 does indeed promote L2 writing rather than hindering it since the use of L1 is seen as helping L2 writers in the process of composing especially in the idea generating phase. This is further supported by Qi (1996) who claimed that, based on his research, language-switching enabled an initiated thought to continue to develop and helped generate content which the subject of his study sometimes felt less competent to produce when she used L2 only.

In relation to the above, Woodall (2000) ascertained that language switching in L2 plays a significant role in L2 writing and any model of L2 writing skill needs to incorporate this behaviour. This ultimate discovery acknowledges the importance of language switching so much so that any L2 writing model should include this behaviour as it is seen as an important aspect of L2 writing. Quite possibly, according to Woodall (2000), language switching is essential for representing the development of L2 writing skills, as opposed to merely describing the development of L2 writing processes. Woodall (2000: 185) goes on to explain that:

...it seems like a good pedagogical practice to recognise that a student's native language can be an important resource in L2 writing. As a tool, the L1 can be used in the writing processes, like generating content and organising ideas. Students who have troubles generating content in their L2 might use their L1 for these purposes until they have obtained sufficient L2 resources for efficient content generation.

In a much more recent study, Wang and Wen (2002) discovered that the L2 writing process is a bilingual event; L2 writers have two languages (i.e. L1 and L2) at their disposal when they are composing. This study also found L1 involvement in various composing activities; process-controlling, idea-generating, and idea-organizing activities (Wang and Wen, 2002:239). When investigated further, it is found that their subjects with low English proficiency level tend to directly translate from L1 to L2 throughout their L2 composing process. The advanced subjects, on the other hand, appeared to use their L1 strategically for idea-generating, monitoring, and lexical searching purposes (Wang and Wen, 2002). This finding reveals that, regardless of one's L2 proficiency, L2 writers tend to switch to their L1 at some point in their attempt at composing in L2.

In another related study, conducted on eight adult Chinese speaking writers, Wang (2003) found that all participants in the study switched language frequently while composing in the L2. Furthermore, the findings of the study also suggested that language-switching was common to high and low proficiency learners, facilitating their writing processes while they were composing (Wang, 2003). Ultimately, this study also discovered that the high proficiency participants switched to their L1 more frequently than the low proficiency participants did while composing in two writing tasks required of them. This indicated that, as far as L2 writing is concerned, regardless of their L2 proficiency, L2 writers will eventually resort to their L1 for various purposes during the composing process.

3.0 Research Questions

The main questions that this research attempts to answer are:

1. Do Malay university students with different levels of English language proficiency switch to Bahasa Melayu when writing in English?
2. If yes, how, when and for what reasons.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

A total of 620 questionnaires were distributed to the first year first semester engineering undergraduates at the Universiti Teknologi Malaysia. These students were of multiple proficiency levels based on their Malaysian University English Test (MUET) scores, ranging from Band 1 to Band 5 and with the majority of them belonging to Band 3. A detailed distribution of these students based on their MUET scores is further illustrated in the following table:

MUET Scores	Frequency
Not stated	20
Band 1	7
Band 2	138
Band 3	381
Band 4	71
Band 5	3
Total	620

Table 1: Respondents' MUET scores

The distribution of the questionnaires took almost a month to complete. They were distributed to those students taking their first English course at the university; i.e. English for Academic Communication. Since the focus of this study is on the engineering students, the questionnaires were then circulated among students from these engineering faculties, namely 1) the Faculty of Mechanical Engineering, 2) the Faculty of Electrical Engineering, 3) the Faculty of Chemical and Natural Resource Engineering, and 4) the Faculty of Civil Engineering. Some of these questionnaires were distributed personally by the researcher and some were distributed by the lecturers teaching the different cohorts of students.

After all questionnaires have been returned, I then started to do a thorough check on them to make sure that they had all been completed in full. After this, the responses to the 620 questionnaires were coded and analysed . This involved the application of the SPSS statistical package where all information obtained from the questionnaire were coded, keyed in and later analysed using descriptive statistics to obtain the relevant information.

The analysis of the questionnaire revealed significant findings related to the research questions that this study is trying to address. The most striking result was that 87.42% (542 out of 620) of the respondents indicated that they use Bahasa Melayu while undertaking a writing task in English, while only 12.58% (78 out of 620) said they did not. This finding demonstrates unequivocally that, regardless of their levels of proficiency, most Malay university students do switch to Bahasa Melayu when they are in the process of completing a writing task in English.

There was however, considerable variation with the samples with regards to the frequency of use of Bahasa Melayu while engaged in a writing task in English, as illustrated in the following table:

Description	Frequency	Percent
Rarely	131	24.2
Sometimes	268	49.4
Often	133	24.5
Always	10	1.8
Total	542	100

Table 2: Respondents' use of Bahasa Melayu while writing in English

The above table indicates that almost 50% of the samples (268 out of 542) reported occasional use of Bahasa Melayu while almost 25% (133 out of 542) indicate that they 'often' used Bahasa Melayu when dealing with producing texts in English. Very few students (1.8%) reported that they 'always' used Bahasa Melayu when writing assignments in English (10 out of 542). A further quarter of the students (24.2%) said they 'rarely' used Bahasa Melayu in carrying out writing tasks in English.

The next interesting finding that emerges from this questionnaire relates to the specific ways in which Bahasa Melayu was used by these respondents when they were in the process of completing a writing assignment in English. The following table illustrates the different uses of Bahasa Melayu reported by the respondents.

Description	Frequency	Percent
1. Generating ideas in Bahasa Melayu and later translate them into English	503	25.40
2. Looking up in the bilingual dictionary for the appropriate English words to use	484	24.43
3. Making notes (e.g. mind maps) in Bahasa Melayu and later translate them into English	397	20.04

4. Translating any difficult English words or phrases into Bahasa Melayu	396	19.98
5. Discussing aspects of the English text in Bahasa Melayu with a classmate or family member	201	10.15
Total	1981	100

Table 3: How Bahasa Melayu was used when writing in English

A closer look at the above table demonstrates that the respondents used Bahasa Melayu mainly when generating their initial ideas for a writing task which they then translated into English. Apart from that, Bahasa Melayu was also reported to be used when these respondents were facing difficulties in finding the appropriate English words to be used when writing in English. Thus, using a bilingual dictionary was ranked second by these respondents as one of the ways in which Bahasa Melayu was utilized when they were writing in English.

As shown in the above table, the respondents said that they also used Bahasa Melayu when they were making notes prior to the actual writing. This was placed as the third most frequently mentioned use of Bahasa Melayu. Next, it seems that Bahasa Melayu was also used by these respondents when they initially translated any difficult English words or phrases into Bahasa Melayu before they started writing in English, for example in interpreting assignment questions and guidelines. The least common way of using Bahasa Melayu, as shown in the above table, was by discussions of aspects of the English text in Bahasa Melayu with a classmate or family member. This is probably due to the fact that much of the students' writing was done in the classroom and not as home work, hence the lack of opportunity for discussion.

After examining the ways in which Bahasa Melayu was used by these respondents, I turned my attention to the stage of writing

during which they reported using Bahasa Melayu the most. The table below clearly exhibits the different stages in writing in which they said they were using Bahasa Melayu the most.

Description	Frequency	Percent
1. When I brainstorm for ideas (pre-writing stage)	466	58.40
2. When I draft and write my essay (writing stage)	248	31.07
3. When I edit and proofread my essay (post-writing stage)	84	10.53
Total	798	100

Table 4: When Bahasa Melayu was used when writing in English

Looking closely at the table, I could see that Bahasa Melayu was mostly utilised by these respondents when they were brainstorming for ideas to be included in their written work. A significant proportion of the students reported use of Bahasa Melayu at that stage (58.4%). A further significant proportion (31.07%) indicated that they use Bahasa Malaysia when they were drafting/writing their essays. A much smaller proportion (10.53%) suggested that they used Bahasa Melayu when they were editing and proofreading their essays, for example checking lexical items in a bilingual dictionary.

Next, we are going to look at the reasons why Bahasa Melayu was used by the respondents when completing a writing task in English. They were seven reasons altogether and they were ranked accordingly by the most utilised to the least utilised.

Description	Frequency	Percent
1. To enable me to think of what to write (idea generation)	501	19.38
2. To clarify ideas to be included in the writing (idea clarification)	431	16.65
3. To enable me to find suitable English words to be used when writing.	410	15.84
4. To ensure the continuation of my flow of thoughts	395	15.26
5. To help me find the meaning of any difficult words	386	14.91
6. To enable me to understand the task that I have to fulfil by translating the question into Bahasa Melayu	333	12.86
7. Using Bahasa Melayu when undertaking a writing task in English had become a habit	132	5.10
Total	2588	100

Table 5: Reasons for using Bahasa Melayu when writing in English

As highlighted by the above table, Bahasa Melayu was reported to be used mostly during the idea generation phase (19.38%). This correlates with the earlier findings in Table 3 where the most frequently reported function of Bahasa Melayu was that of developing ideas for the writing which were then translated into English. It also correlates with Table 4, item 1, which referred to the brainstorming stage of writing as being the time when the greatest use of Bahasa Melayu was evident.

Other reasons given by the students for the use of Bahasa Melayu included: clarifying their ideas to be included in their writings (reported by 16.65% of the samples), finding suitable English words to be used when writing (e.g. by referring to a bilingual dictionary)

(reported by 15.84% of the samples), ensuring the continuation of their flow of thoughts while writing (reported by 15.26% of the samples), understanding the meaning of any difficult words that could help them in their writing later on (e.g. through the use of a bilingual dictionary, as mentioned earlier)(reported by 14.91% of the samples). Similarly, use of a bilingual dictionary was also implied by the responses relating to translating questions into Bahasa Melayu for facilitating understanding of the required task (reported by 12.86% of the samples). And finally, a small proportion of the students (5.10%) actually chose the questionnaire item which stated that using Bahasa Melayu had become a habit.

Lastly, the vast majority of the students in the samples responded positively to the question which was designed to determine their perceptions on the value of Bahasa Melayu when having to produce texts in English for their university studies. The following table summarizes the pattern of answers to this question.

Description	Percentage
Yes	96.3
No	3.7
Total	100

Table 6: Does using Bahasa Melayu help

Undoubtedly, the use of Bahasa Melayu was regarded by these respondents as facilitating them in completing writing tasks in English. Contrary to the views that predominant in ELT circles, most of these students appeared to view their L1 as a significant resource in the accomplishment of the required tasks.

CONCLUSION

This study is far from conclusive. More analysis needs to be done on the findings to offer a more conclusive recommendation. Nevertheless, based on these preliminary findings, it is then appropriate to conclude that these Malay university students do depend on Bahasa Melayu when they were writing in English. They used Bahasa Melayu for a variety of reasons as well as in different ways and stages of their writings. Therefore, it is imperative that teachers of ESL writing look at how one's L1 can actually help while undertaking a writing task in English.

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