

**ASSESSMENT CRITERIA IN A HOLISTIC SCORING SCALE AS A  
PEDAGOGICAL TOOL IN TEACHING ENGLISH LANGUAGE  
ARGUMENTATIVE ESSAY WRITING IN A MALAYSIAN SECONDARY  
SCHOOL**

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## ABSTRACT

This small scale study is spurred by two contrasting scenarios. On one hand, is the inundating emphasis on academic excellence in recent years that is highly prized by all parties concerned in the education fields including the students themselves. On the other hand, there are moans and groans on the declining standard of English language among Malaysian students despite the fact that communicative element is constituted as one of the important components in our current approach in the teaching and learning of English language. As a result, there is a tendency for the Malaysian classrooms to gear towards examination-oriented teaching and learning. In other words, backwash effects become dominant. This study explores the possibility of using assessment criteria in a holistic scoring scale as a pedagogical tool in teaching English Language argumentative essay writing. To determine its potential, briefing sessions based on notes and checklist that contains assessment criteria derived from a holistic scoring scale used to mark essays in Malaysian secondary schools are carried out. Questionnaire is employed as the investigative tool to obtain data from selected subjects who are currently studying in Form 4 in a school in Sarawak. However, this study does not intend to make any conclusive statements about the feasibility of using assessment criteria in a holistic scoring scale as a pedagogical tool in teaching English Language argumentative essay writing. Instead, it is intended merely to look into the potential of using the aforesaid method in helping the Malaysian learners to better their performance in essay writing.

## ABSTRAK

Kajian kecil ini didorong oleh dua scenario. Pertama, kemahuan untuk mengecapi pencapaian akademik cemerlang yang melibatkan semua pihak termasuk pelajar sendiri. Kedua, rungutan berkaitan kemerosotan tahap penguasaan Bahasa Inggeris di kalangan pelajar Malaysia walaupun elemen komunikasi telah ditekankan di dalam pendekatan proses pengajaran dan pembelajaran. Sebagai akibatnya, terdapat satu kecenderungan untuk menuju ke arah proses pengajaran dan pembelajaran yang berorientasikan peperiksaan. Kajian ini mengkaji kemungkinan menggunakan kriteria penilaian yang berasaskan skala penyemakan secara holistik sebagai satu alat pengajaran-pembelajaran Bahasa Inggeris. Bagi merealisasikan kemungkinan ini, sesi taklimat berasaskan nota dan senarai semak yang mengandungi kriteria penilaian berkenaan digunakan. Selain itu, soal selidik juga dijalankan untuk mendapat data daripada subjek-subjek terpilih yang sedang belajar di Tingkatan Empat di sebuah sekolah di Sarawak. Walau bagaimanapun, kajian ini tidak bertujuan untuk membuat kesimpulan yang muktamad tentang praktikaliti alat berkenaan. Tujuan sebenar adalah untuk mengkaji potensi alat berkenaan untuk memperbaiki pencapaian pelajar dalam penulisan esei Bahasa Inggeris mereka.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### 1.1 Introduction

“One salient factor in Malaysian classroom practice is the examination-oriented lesson. One of the main reasons given is that at the end of the day, the school, parents and learners want good grades. Everybody and all schools compete for better grades each year” (Lewey, 1977 in Fauziah Hassan and Nita Fauzee Selamat, 2002: 108).

As implied by the quotation above, Malaysian education system is very examination-oriented. In this era of paper chase, Malaysian students are expected to undergo different types of examinations. In relation to this, it is observed that there is an emphasis on students’ performance in terms of passing rate – a school is termed as “good” if the passing rate is high and one of the criteria for one to be viewed as a “good” teacher is to produce students with a lot of “As”.

As a result, the language teaching methodology used in classrooms that produces the most number of students with “As” is deemed as “the most effective”. The content of the lessons in the classrooms is also designed to suit the purpose of the examinations. In addition, homework is given based on examination format. Consequently, we witness that students are given test after test, examination after examination, memorizing formulae and regurgitating facts.

In other words, backwash effects, which are normally believed to have more harm than good, become dominant (Prodromou, 1995). However, are backwash effects necessarily harmful for learning as in this case, learning to write essays of different genres? This study explores the possibility of utilizing the popular examination-oriented belief to an advantage.

## **1.2 Background of the problem**

In public examinations for the fifth formers, five questions of different genres, namely narrative, descriptive, argumentative, factual, imaginative or reflective, are given in accordance to the prescribed English Language syllabus by the Ministry of Education. Candidates are expected to select one out of the five questions given to produce a piece of continuous prose of approximately 350 to 500 words. A standardized holistic scoring scale is used to mark students’ work, consisting of nine performance bands in which each band has distinct details of descriptors (Appendix A), ranging from Band A which is the best to Band Uiii which is the worst.

Nowadays, the aforesaid holistic scoring scale can be found in almost all the printed references of Malaysian English language subject available in the market. But, in the context of school, the aforesaid holistic scoring scale is usually for the reference of teachers only because the majority of teachers think it is unnecessary for this to be made accessible to students. Is this necessarily true? By exposing students explicitly to the assessment criteria in the holistic scoring scale for marking essays, it is believed that students with average level of English Language proficiency can perform as well as students with advanced level of English language proficiency in essay writing.

### **1.3 Statement of the problem**

Compared to other components in the English Language paper in the public examination, Malaysian students have more difficulties attempting free essay writing. These are attributed to various reasons. No notes are given to guide students in their writing as in the case of Directed Writing, one of the writing components assessed. Students are expected to illustrate their skills of process writing ranging from planning to writing the final draft solely on their own.

Other components in the English Language papers are structural-based whereby students are to answer objective questions, short responses in relation to the prescribed literature texts (poems and short stories) and comprehension text, summary writing based on the comprehension text and respond to a question based on the chosen prescribed novel. Furthermore, for the aforesaid literature components, students have something to focus on while preparing for their examination.

As for this component of continuous essay writing, students are left on their own to fend for themselves. The scope of the possible topics for the aforesaid section is simply too wide. In addition, writing an essay of such substantial length of 350 to 500 words within a limited period of time is a demanding and tedious task. This particular component is also the determining factor of whether a student will obtain an overall good grade for English, constituting approximately 30%. Students with advanced English Language proficiency usually have no problem obtaining good grades, but the ones of average English Language proficiency may stand a minimal chance to attain good grades despite their strenuous effort.

#### **1.4 Purpose of the study**

This study aims to investigate whether students' explicit knowledge of the assessment criteria in the holistic scoring scale for marking essays will substantially help to better students' performance in terms of marks in percentage in writing essays. This study also aims to explore whether such exposure has any significance to consolidate the writing skills of those students who are initially proficient in their English Language. This study also intends to share an experimental teaching-lesson session whereby assessment criteria in a holistic scoring scale for marking essays are used pedagogically to teach argumentative essay writing.

## 1.5 Research questions

The research questions for this small-scale study are as follows:

1. What are the problems faced by students in writing essays?
2. What are the accumulated writing experiences that students have in their course of development as writers?
3. Does students' explicit knowledge of the assessment criteria in the holistic scoring scale for marking essays make any significant difference in helping them better their performance in writing essays?

## 1.6 Hypothesis

As stated below, there are two contrasting hypothesis, the null hypothesis (HO<sub>1</sub>) followed by the alternative hypothesis (HA<sub>1</sub>).

HO<sub>1</sub> Explicit exposure of assessment criteria in the holistic scoring scale for marking essays makes no significant difference to better students' performance in writing essays.

HA<sub>1</sub> Explicit exposure of assessment criteria in the holistic scoring scale for marking essays makes significant difference to better students' performance in writing essays.



### **1.7 Significance of the study**

Examinations are inevitable, a necessary evil indeed. Familiarizing students with the format and in this case, the assessment criteria in the holistic scoring scale for marking essays, enable students to make the most out of the situation they have to endure. Although this examination-oriented technique of teaching essay writing might incur many accusing fingers, it is undeniable that this attempt will not “harm” the students’ pursuit of knowledge in any way. Having to have learnt something even if it is at a minimal level is better than having none at all. This is the reminder one has to bear in mind considering the deteriorating standard of English Language among Malaysian students.

It is believed that by making the assessment in the holistic scoring scale for marking essays accessible to students systematically, students are made aware of what are expected of them and both students and teachers have a common goal to work on, rather than struggling blindly and finally leading to futile effort. As a result, students’ performance in writing English Language essays will be enhanced.

### **1.8 Scope of the study**

Limited by time constraint, some aspects are scoped in this small-scale study. Firstly, only 25 Form 4 students of a particular school in Sarawak are chosen to participate in this research. Secondly, only the genre of argumentative is chosen from the whole range of genre of essay prescribed in the Form 4 English Language syllabus (such as narrative, descriptive, factual, factual and imaginative). Thirdly, only one rater

is involved in the essay marking process. Ideally, the essays in the pre-test and post-test should have been marked by different raters to ensure the reliability of the score awarded for each piece of work. Finally, the briefing sessions were restricted to 6 sessions of 40 minutes per session. More sessions could have been allocated to ensure maximum benefit for those who have attended the sessions, giving time for the maturation of the content learnt during the briefing sessions.

### **1.9 Operational definition of terms**

**Holistic scoring scale** is a tool used in impressionistic marking or multiple marking whereby a single mark is awarded to an essay from a range of marks categorized in different performance bands in which each band is characterized by descriptors based on the total impression of the essay as a whole. It is widely used in Malaysian schools to mark essays in school-based and public examinations.

**Assessment criteria** are focuses derived and synthesized from the descriptors mentioned in the performance bands in a holistic scoring scale. In the context of this study, the assessment criteria are presented systematically and are used as a pedagogical tool in teaching essay writing.

**Pedagogical tool** is a device used in a teaching-learning session.

**Argumentative essays** are a genre of continuous prose that requires one to give one's point of view on a certain subject matter. One can write either in support of or against the topic given. One can even adopt a neutral stand.

### **1.10 Conclusion**

This chapter gives a glimpse on the overview of this small-scale research, touching on the background of how this research has come to realization and also the pre and post backbones of the research, in which the former refers to the research questions and the latter refers to the significance of the research. It lays the foundation for the following chapters.