



ENGLISH GRAMMAR AWARENESS FACILITATES L2 LEARNERS' WRITING

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Abstract:

“Words – so innocent and powerless as they are, as standing in a dictionary, how potent for good and evil they become in the hands of one who knows how to combine them”, Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804-1864). It is true that from just words can become a phrase then a sentence but what we may need to realize is how hard and challenging it is to make the sentence right. To face the real world, writing is the most challenging skill to teach for language teachers mainly because students take time to grasp and digest the knowledge of writing skill. To make matters worse, writing test is also the most popular means of test for placement in entering schools and universities. Due to this reason, L2 learners crave to write clearly and accurately in English. Undeniably, how a person writes with acceptable choice of words and correct grammar represents the L2 learner's competency in English Language. This study is done to explore the importance of having English grammar awareness to facilitate L2 learners in their writing activities. The study thus aims to determine how grammar awareness amongst the L2 and other support systems such as English classes & facilities help facilitating L2 writing. 84 undergraduate students answered the questionnaire. The quantitative data have been analysed at the end of the research. Some of the findings are 75% of the respondents indicated that they were still unsure on the use of proper grammar in writing despite 94% of the respondents agreed and strongly agreed that they understood when the instructor/teacher taught them English Grammar. The mix-up results in the findings have shown some drawbacks in the teaching and learning practices. Moreover, only 63% of the participants answered agree and strongly agree that their learning institution has an English classroom that is conducive for learning (self-access centre), which can be considered as not satisfactory since English Language is the second language in Malaysia. It is hoped that the government of Malaysia could provide complete conducive learning centre for schools and universities.

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1. Introduction

1.1 Background of Study

English language becomes universal language as it is internationally used (Rauf, & Saeed, 2019) - not only as a diplomatic, politic and economic medium to get connected globally (Abushariefeh, 2016) but also it is commonly used for social transaction and education. Therefore, it is possible for language users worldwide to acquire English language to cater for the world's needs. Malaysians too are using English language for all the mentioned transactions especially when it comes to work place interaction (Noor & Murtaza, 2018); (Rauf, & Saeed, 2019) and for school education where the government has strengthen the use of English language to both English for specific purpose and special purpose (Kepol, 2017). However, varied patterns of English language are seen applied in Malaysia as the people (with multi-racial population) are of different backgrounds – in terms of their races, cultures, and also their first languages. Some are found to adapt to code switching and code mixing – to make the communication smooth and also to cater to the needs of their partner - and some are found to adapt to translation method – from L1 to L2 and L2 to L1. These two methods can lead to more serious English language error as these L2 users may be influenced by their negative transfer of L1 or their native language structure (Skoczylas, 2016). This translation method does occur in other Asian country too like Vietnam (Pham, 2017) as it is believed to ease the communication. Here, it is observed that as for Malaysians, they still need some improvement in order to use English language smoothly, appropriately and correctly.

Speaking of smooth communication, people would agree that social or professional interaction is vital – in which it has to be conveniently applied and later, conveyed. Therefore, many would also agree that communication requires both sides' – sender and receiver – understanding (Qu, 2019) in which they will be satisfied that messages are successfully sent or delivered; with or without taking into consideration the language rules. However, what they do not realize is the final interpretation by the receiver (listener or reader) due to language barriers. Rahmat, Shahabani & Ibrahim (2020) in their research reveal how important to be English language competence (for L2) – to assimilate good grammar and speaking skills - in order to assure effective communication in a society. In addition, Qu (2019) also mentioned that both sender and receiver should possess language ability to help ease social interaction. She adds that both sides' consideration and empathy to one another are important to ensure that the messages are correctly understood or sadly, without it, the messages can be misinterpreted. As a result, the social or professional interaction here is a failure. This situation, whether or not we realize it, can affect social, professional and business transaction negatively which consequently devastate people. In addition, Wang (2016) affirmed that L2 language literacies (verbal or written) becomes necessary when participating in social or professional interaction – this is as an assurance that L2 users or learners can be accepted in or by the society. With all the worrying conditions put forth,

Malaysians can still overcome the issues by taking seriously on the appropriate use of language forms and functions – that is English grammar and the role of its parts of speech. English Language rules are not complicated to learn – as long as it is guided systematically. The most important thing to observe is how language users learn or acquire the rules – when English grammar is imparted and how it is taught. Country like Malaysia uses English widely as English language is the second language (Veloo, Aziz & Yaacob, 2018) and also used as a medium of instruction to some learning institutions. Therefore, the language is taught to school students since they are at the age of six years old. Here, Malaysians apparently should not have issues with acquiring English language. Unfortunately, it is found that many are still not aware to accurately apply the language – with correct grammar rules – though, ironically, the language is commonly used. Moreover, it is found that some English language users have no concern to form sentences correctly (spoken and written). Improper use of tenses, active-passive forms, and modifiers; inaccurate use of vocabularies; and wrong use of word order (influenced by native languages) amongst common mistakes and issues found in L2 conversation and writing. Influenced by L2's native language, now, sounds common. Nevertheless, to make it right, the L2 users of English have to be very selective and resourceful as the transfer of L1 to L2 can result in either a positive or negative but sadly, the most usual tendency is the negative transfer - while positive transfer can happen, but it has to be guided (Chen, 2020) so that the acquiring of English language can be easily transmitted. Thus, proper and serious effort to remedy the drawbacks should be taken as to assist Malaysian language users to succeed in every interaction and transaction made. Therefore, this research attempts to answer the following research questions:

- 1) Do English grammar knowledge and skills and awareness facilitate student's writing?
- 2) Do English classes/lessons at school level as well as the school facilities assist university students in their writing?

2. Literature Review

2.1 English grammar knowledge and skills facilitate students writing

Writing has never been easy. Writing is taxing and can be bored too especially writing in learners' second language (Mejia-Hudson, 2016). However, instead, writing also is very important at any educational levels and becomes an essential skill to learners for all their academic achievements (Mejia-Hudson, 2016); (Chenowith, 2017). Still, writing can be smooth and fun to write provided that writers have the skills - planning your writing as to come out with the outline, knowing how to organize the content, understanding the processes, checking the flow and the content and so forth are amongst the skills that writers need to have. Writers can see that their writing flow will be at ease when they are well prepared with those mentioned steps. But another significant element that the writer must possess are the grammar skills – in which many are not aware of this. Grammar components - the word class rules, the punctuations, the spellings and also the syntactic rules (either it is taught in-class or with the technology application) – contribute to better

and smoother writing flow (Mejia-Hudson, 2016); (Kwok, 2016). With grammar skills that the writers acquire, writing can never be complicated anymore and writing too is deemed as one quality piece produced by a writer when it is written with correct grammar (Chenowith, 2017).

The first part that is the pillar of all grammar components is the word classes or the parts of speech. Each part of speech and its form and function does aid the writers to maneuver their sentences and paragraphs more interestingly. Writers will be able to use descriptive words and modifiers more effectively when they are well versed of these word classes. For example, the use of modifiers help a lot in terms of providing extra information and putting some emphasis to the sentences. Without this skill, sentences can be choppy and can be lacking in the elaboration. Therefore, the knowledge of the word classes is observed to be very relevance to L2 writers (Chenowith, 2017). Not only content is clearly and smoothly conveyed, the sentence patterns used also can be varied. In addition, with the word classes' knowledge, learners or writers must understand well how verbs - tenses and active-passive forms - work. Çerçi (2017) found in his research that L2 writers (Turkish writers) have more issues with verbs and that is considered very serious as it affects ones writing. Wrong use of these verb components leads to misinterpretation of content. Lacking of verbs knowledge decreases one's ability to express their thoughts (Kiasi, & Alavi, 2016). With the twelve common tenses that all English users should know, L2 learners especially can benefit from it as tenses help writers to organize their content more efficiently with appropriate time frame planned. This, on the other hand, helps readers to develop their comprehension without many obstacles. Furthermore, with tenses too, not only can help writers to convey various idea and meaning by using the same verb but also can help writers to provide different emphasis to some events or some conditions by applying different tenses in a varied manner – for example; the interchangeably use of future tense or modality “will” with “is going to”. Here, it shows how interesting and beneficial if writers can grasp verbs – main verbs and the auxiliary - and their tenses skills.

Next, writers also need to learn the varied types of phrases and clauses – the building blocks of sentence arrangement. This is to learn more in-depth of English sentence patterns. Phrases and clauses affect sentence patterns that the writers may apply as they are based on different constituents used – for instance, with the use of different verb types and the adjectival and adverbial phrases. Additionally, L2 learners need to grasp the knowledge of parsing too. L2 learners have to be well guided with the skill, given that they will encounter with more complicated phrase such as complex noun phrase (CNP) and so forth throughout their academic studies – this CNP offers learners to see multiple layers of noun and its modifiers, lacking of phrases knowledge and fail to see how each word is parsed can result in confusion and uncertainty (Priven, 2020). The different concepts of phrases and clauses – noun, adverbial, adjectival, prepositional and verb phrases as well as noun, adverbial, and adjectival clauses - have to be at the writer's finger tips as the knowledge to arrange words in sentences (by exploiting all these phrases and clauses) assists the writers to find their own writing style. Kiasi & Alavi (2016) in their research found that the experimental group – which are equipped with

grammar and syntactic skills (passive, modals, adverbial, adjective phrase and so forth) performed better in writing in comparison to the control group which did not get such treatment. The skill of organizing phrases and clauses can give impact to the writing – help in shaping the paragraph more systematically - that provides ease of reading to the readers.

Hence, the knowledge of grammar and its components does enable English users to write without hesitating. Here, language instructors are encouraged to transfer more grammar skills to the learners as to aid writing competency.

2.2 English classes/lessons at school level and school facilities assist university students in their writing

In Malaysia, L2 learners as early as 6 years old have been introduced to English language. English syllabus is designed carefully and also reviewed over time to ensure its reliability to the current move. Malaysian learners are believed to be well guided and trained to be language proficient looking at when English is imparted and how it is delivered. At school level, L2 learners are exposed to all four language skills and English grammar is taught across these four skills- namely, listening, speaking, reading and writing (Macken-Horarik, Love & Horarik, 2018). Here, learners should have some awareness to apply correct English grammar in their sentences – writing or speaking – as grammar skills are taught across the language skills. These grammar skills are mentioned in the syllabus and therefore, should be highlighted to the learners as grammar is the pillar to language learning (Zhou, 2018). For instance, in writing class especially, cloze-text writing practices are used to help learners to form correct sentences and to help learners get some ideas on content. These exercises, apart from getting the content, also help language instructors to emphasize on the use of parts of speech – content and function words - to the learners (Macken-Horarik, Love & Horarik, 2018). These word classes to be taught have to be carefully planned in the syllabus and have to be taught systematically because the lessons are all about managing and structuring sentences (Zhou, 2018). Speaking of word classes, language instructors also are to focus on the tenses. Reading class is where tenses should be easily taught as learners can foresee how writers plan their writing to ease the readers. Here, apart from having the opportunity to see the difference of each time frame, learners also will be exposed to see different participial forms when they deal with tenses. With such lessons, learners will be benefitted from acquiring grammar skills as to assist them in more challenging English language learning. The appropriate and sufficient grammar knowledge instilled is hoped to help these learners in their future higher education where writing is concerned.

Instead of grammar lessons imparted, L2 learners also are equipped with literature lesson. These L2 learners are exposed to English poems, short stories and novels. The contents of each literature component here such as examining characteristics of the poems, examining plots, characters, themes of the stories and so forth, indeed help these young Malaysians not only to expose them to many different cultures and to the world but also give them a chance to explore how authors – worldwide – write (Rauf, & Saeed, 2019). With the exposures, learners are hoped to observe the different writing styles –

with varied sentence patterns used – and also learn grammatically correct grammar applied.

Here, these teaching and learning activities carried out demonstrate how much efforts have been put forth to the learners from school level and how much inputs are being transferred to our Malaysian learners so that they are well prepared with English language skills. Such lessons are seen sufficient to equip them with writing skill too in which will be beneficial as they pursue to higher education phase.

Malaysian learners are observed very lucky as the government – with the education ministry supports and efforts – has provided facilities meant to ease language learners. Every school is occupied with a library and a language centre to heighten learning. This kind of facility is relevant to learners where it helps them to obtain reliable knowledge and information (Irfan & Kadiwal, 2016). These two centres are to prepare L2 learners to get access to learning English without difficulty where books, other forms of learning and reading materials (such as electronic media), audio-video equipment, and so forth are provided - without the learning resources, learning will not be pleasantly accomplished (Alizadeh, 2018). All facilities prepared do offer the learners to help themselves with self-learning and to enrich their existing knowledge. Therefore, no excuses should be given as a result of learning breakdown.

3. Methodology

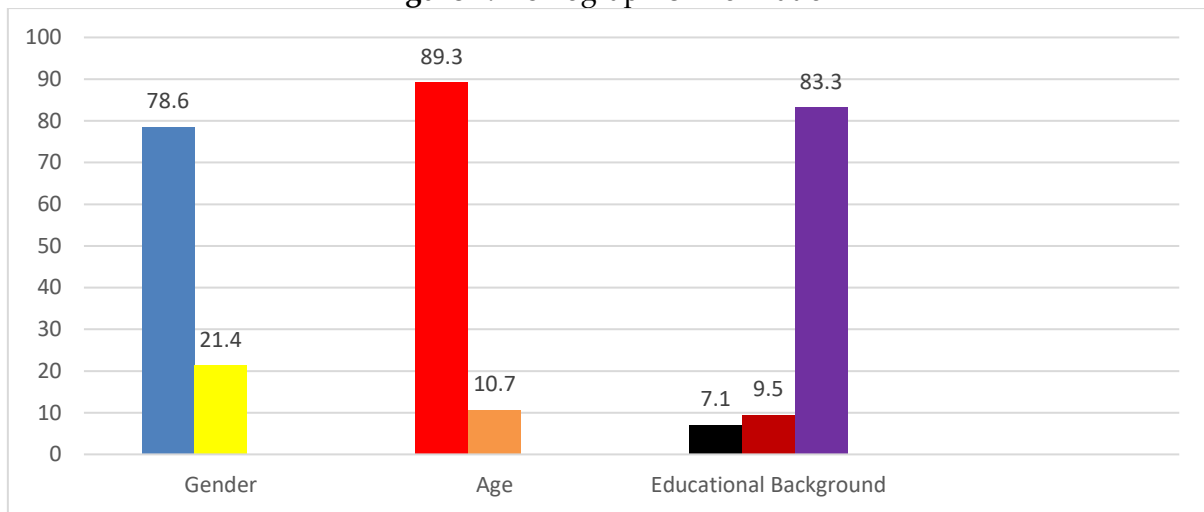
This study in a form of survey was administered to 84 students from four different clusters that is in the field of language, accountancy, architecture, health science. There were 18 males and 66 females students from first, second and third year in their studies. The quantitative data have been collected at the end of the research. The questionnaire consists of 3 sections; first section explains participant's demographic profile, second section attempts to describe grammar lesson and awareness towards writing and the final section aims to clarify students' preparedness to writing based on English lesson learnt at school and school facilities provided. Five-point Likert scale: 5 for "strongly agree", 4 for "agree", 3 for "undecided", 2 for "disagree" and 1 for "strongly disagree" is used for the survey.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1 Demographic information

For the first section, participants were asked their background information such as age, gender, hometown and educational background. Both male and female subjects involved in this study. 78.6% of the subjects are female and 21.4% of the subjects are male. 89.3% of the subjects age around 19-21 years old and 10.7% of the subjects are around 22-24 years old. The subjects are from all states in Malaysia. In addition, 7.1% of the subjects are diploma holders, 9.5% are STPM (Malaysian higher education certificate) holders and 83.3% are from other educational background such as matriculation and foundation study (the pre-degree education).

Figure 1: Demographic information



Note: for gender, 78.6% for female and 21.4% for male; for age, 89.3% for 19-21 years old and 10.7% for 22-24 years old; for educational background, 7.1% for diploma holders, 9.5% for STPM holders and 83.3% had pre degree education.

4.2a and 2b: Do English grammar knowledge and skills and awareness facilitate student's writing?

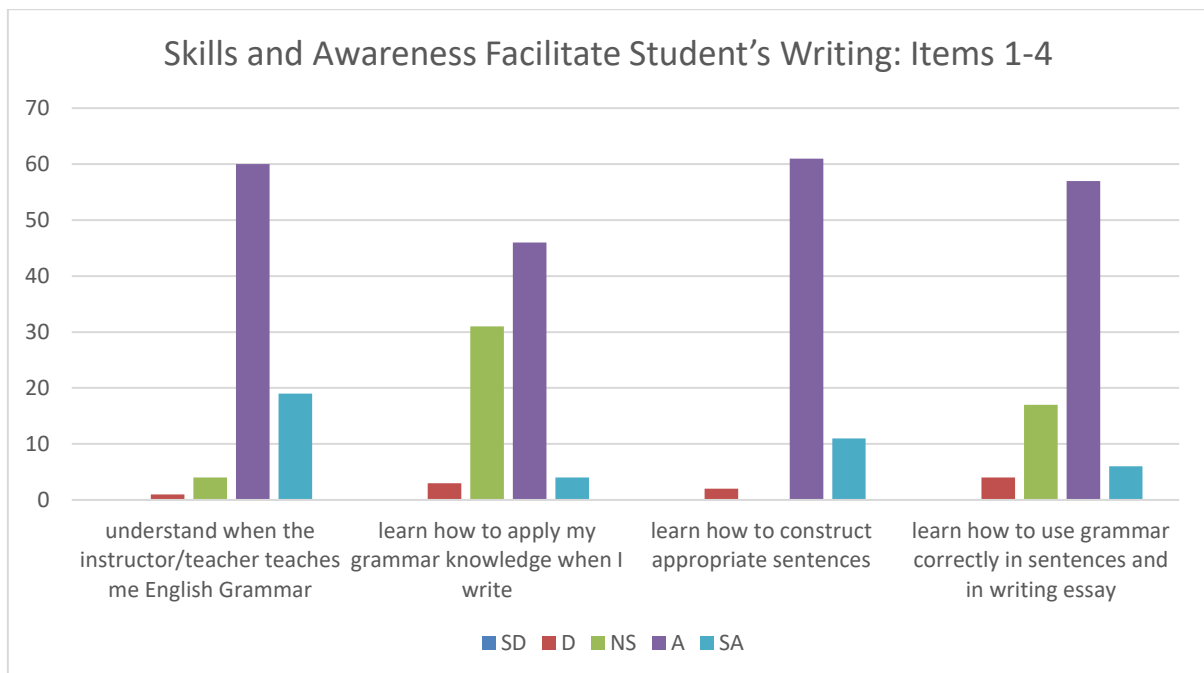


Figure 2a (Items 1-4): Bar chart shows the learners' awareness towards English Language

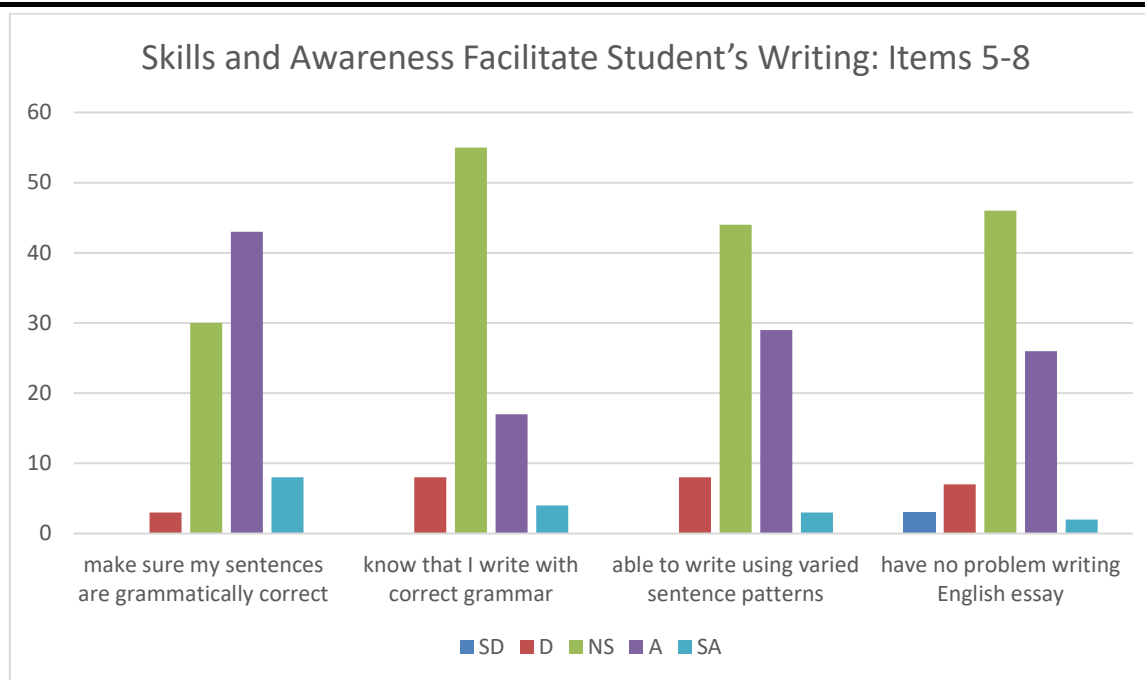


Figure 2b (Items 5-8): Bar chart shows the learners' awareness towards English Language

For the second section of the questionnaire, participants were asked 8 questions relating to grammar lesson and awareness towards writing. It is found that 94% of the subjects responded agree and strongly agree that they understand when the instructor/teacher teaches them English Grammar. 59% responded agree and strongly agree that they learn how to apply grammar skills when writing. Majority of the respondents also agree and strongly agree that they learn how to construct appropriate sentences and learn how to use grammar correctly in sentences. These results seem very encouraging. From the result, it can be interpreted that these L2 learners should be ready to write correctly and are well equipped with grammar lessons in order to prepare them to write effectively. It is seen that grammar skills instilled to these learners are significant to get them write with correct grammar and use appropriate sentence structure as grammar components taught definitely will incorporate all important lessons such as word classes, tenses, active-passive forms, phrases, clauses and so forth. However, unfortunately, further findings show that these L2 learners still lack in some important English language skills at school and that they have no confidence with the knowledge of grammar that they possessed. This is because 65% of the respondents indicated that they are not sure whether or not they write correctly and 10% responded that they do not know if they write correctly when grammar is concerned. This worrying result shows that the learners are not confident with their grammar knowledge though grammar lessons are well taught as revealed earlier. With this result, hence, it can be said that the grammar lesson delivered is partially imparted – insufficient input delivered - or it could be that the lesson is delivered by unqualified or inexperienced language instructors who are not proficient. Therefore, the input delivered is ambiguous that makes the L2 learners uncertain with what they learnt. English language teachers who lack of *“knowledge and preparedness to deal with linguistic issues”* are causing *“significant barrier to language*

acquisition and achievement” amongst the L2 learners or users (Skoczylas, 2016). Here, language instructors too should have self-efficacy in teaching as they actually have important role that is to have the ability to control learners’ behaviour – that they cannot give up – (know how to interact with the students and know when to use their teaching strategy) when imparting English language skills to the L2 learners in order to ensure effective learning (Al-Shukri, 2016); (Taylor, 2016). In addition, majority of the respondents also revealed that they are unsure when asked if they can write using varied sentence patterns and unsure if they have no problem writing English essay. This demonstrates that the grammar lesson received do not assure language competence amongst these L2 learners and do not help in guiding them to vary their writing style as they are not sure if they are able to write using varied sentence patterns. Here, L2 learners – are seen - have not received enough of important input such as syntax skill – on top of grammar - which enable them to write more efficiently and in a more creative manner. Furthermore, 36% of the respondents, nevertheless, are not sure if they concern to ensure their writing is grammatically correct. This reveals the students’ ignorance and portrays their negative attitude towards English learning, or they must be confused of the grammar lesson acquired and choose to focus more on the content delivery. However, even though the respondents are not sure of their grammar and are not sure if they write correctly - in which reflects their inefficiency in writing – they (61% of the respondents) still have some awareness to make sure and to check whether they write correctly – with grammar accuracy. The issue here is how can they be very certain of the writing – without grammar error - when they are not sure of their own grammar knowledge and skills. It is actually a positive move to improve language learning amongst L2 learners when there is an attempt to check their sentences, but the danger is that when they do not see if they have made mistakes in their writing. This is just wasting time and energy as they themselves are not well verse of English grammar and sentence structure rules – due to not receiving appropriate grammar lessons when they are at school. Thus, it is observed that grammar lessons imparted at school level do not promise accuracy of content delivered or it could be that the methods and approaches of teaching and learning are not convincing. It is also revealed that the content delivered at school level is not sufficient. There are many consequences due to this issue namely inefficiency of the language instructors, the language instructors’ teaching qualification (Irfan & Kadiwal, 2016), the teaching methods applied, the L2 learners’ attitude towards the learning process and their attitude towards English language and so forth. These findings answer research question one that English grammar knowledge and skills and also the awareness facilitate student’s writing. Without the grammar knowledge and L2 learners’ awareness, writing cannot be smoothly produced and content cannot be effectively delivered – due to lack of grammar skills and also confusion of which rules are right. Therefore, both language instructors and learners have to take teaching and learning English grammar seriously because grammar skills can help to reinforce English writing.

4.3 Do English classes/lessons at school level as well as the school facilities assist university students in their writing?

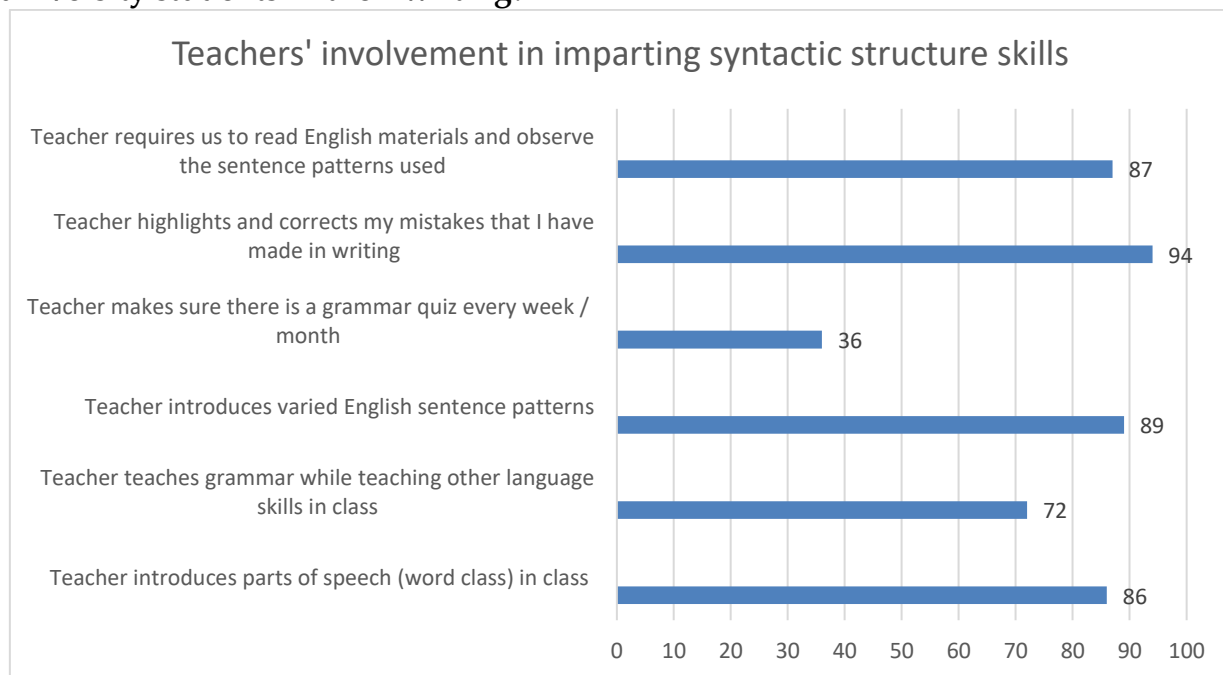


Figure 3: Bar chart shows whether teachers impart syntactic structure skills to students

For the third section of the questionnaire, participants were asked 6 questions on the teachers' engagement in teaching syntactic structure skills or grammar rules to students. It is found that 94% of the participants reported that their teachers highlighted and corrected their mistakes that they have made in writing. Furthermore, 89% of the participants revealed that their teachers introduced variation of English sentence patterns, 87% of the participants claimed that their teacher required them to read English materials and observed the usage of sentence patterns and 86% of the participants admitted that their teachers taught them parts of speech in class. 72% of the participants also believed that their teachers taught them the English grammar in class. These statistics show that the students believed that they received enough lessons on improving their skills in writing.

However, only 36% of the participants disclosed that their teacher administered grammar quizzes every week or month. These data show that the teachers taught ample writing knowledge to students and students believe that they have sufficient capabilities in writing yet, they were not given enough challenges in testing their skills in short tests and quizzes. Dr Judith C. Hochman, founder of an organization called the Writing Revolution claimed that the students need enough practices in grammar so they will eventually be confident incorporating the knowledge in their writing assignment or test (Goldstein 2017). Evans (1959) as cited in Chowdhury (2015) has also pointed out that it is crucial for teachers to conduct quizzes and practices since this will give more opportunities for students to develop maturely in their writings. Robinson & Feng (2016) also discovered in their study that their students improved significantly in their writings after the students were given grammar test/quiz as known as direct grammar instruction

every week for a period of four months. Results have shown that the students were able to make reasonable progress in their writings when tests or quizzes were implemented during writing process. These studies indicated that it is very crucial to impart grammar knowledge in order to improve students' writing skills.

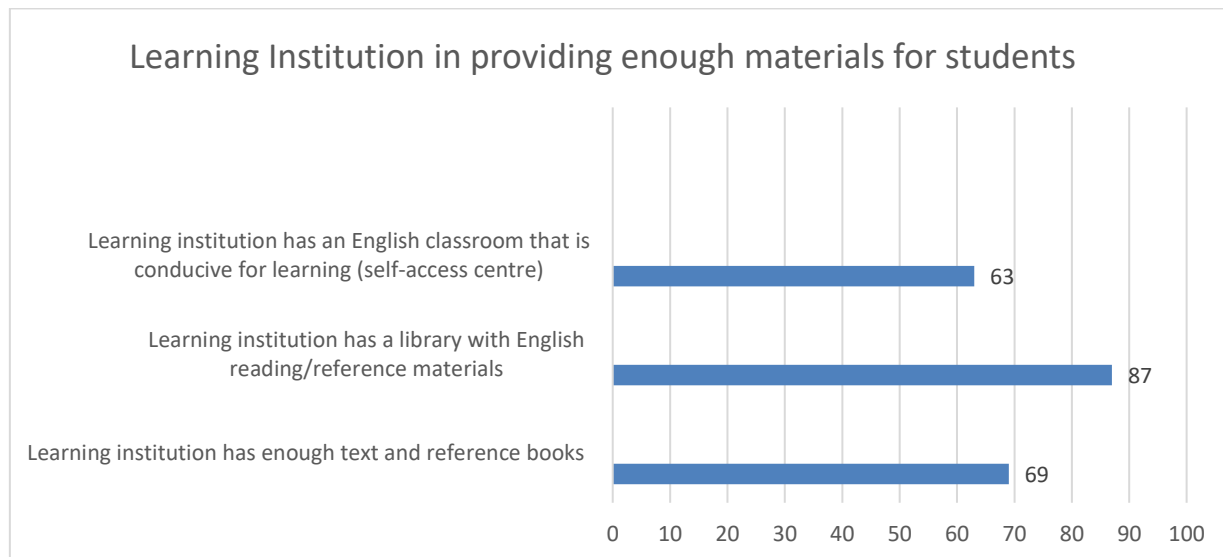


Figure 4: Bar chart shows whether learning institution provide enough material for helping students in writing

The fourth section of the questionnaire, participants were asked 3 questions whether their institutions have provided enough English language materials for them to do revision, study and practise their English Language skills. It is found that only 63% of the participants answered agree and strongly agree that their learning institution has an English classroom that is conducive for learning (self-access centre). This data is not satisfactory since English Language is the second language in Malaysia and yet, the government could not provide complete conducive learning centre for schools and universities. However, 87% of the participants answered agree and strongly agree that their learning institution has a library with English reading materials. The Malaysian government should provide enough materials in the libraries for the students to be successful English Language learners. Lastly, it is found that only 69% of the participants answered agree and strongly agree that their learning institution has enough text and reference books. This data is also not satisfactory since the students need adequate English reference books and materials. Several higher learning institutions in Malaysia also do not provide conducive English learning classroom due to Malay is the official language of the learning institutions (Mat Saad & Md Yunus, 2015). This scenario becomes the major drawback in learning English and hampers the students' motivation in learning English as the second language.

A study performed by Marzaei et al. (2014) indicated the successful stories of learning English as a foreign/second language in the secondary schools in India. The study demonstrated the importance of conducive environment in learning English. The Indian students had good access to English audio-visual aids (for example, listening and

watching English TV programs or news). They read English newspapers and magazines more than five times a week. The students also stated that they enjoyed learning with English materials. Furthermore, authentic learning materials are also necessary to facilitate students in improving their writing skill. According to Souvannasy, Masashi, & Yukiko (2008) as cited in Souriyavongsa et. al (2013), the causes of weakness in language learning primarily are because shortages of textbooks, unqualified English teachers and also unstandardized curriculum. Meanwhile, it is also stated by Boissiere (2004) as cited in Global Education Monitoring Report (2016) that in developing countries, learning languages by using textbooks, which written to cater several degrees of difficulty are actually very economical and yet, if the textbooks are utilised wisely, it will ensure the students' achievement in learning.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, there are several ideas that can be concluded from the findings. Firstly, L2 learners need teachers that are knowledgeable and confident with their English language skills so that they will master the skills without doubts. An expert teacher definitely will produce a proficient student. According to Galaczi et al. (2018), the students' progress in learning the second language is mainly affected by the expertise of teachers. The better equipped the teachers in his/her field, the savvier the students will be in their writings. Darling-Hammond et al (2017) also stated in their report 'Effective Teacher Professional Development' that professional development is crucial for teachers as refined methods of teaching are needed to produce knowledgeable students. It is understandable since English language is the second language in Malaysia, it will take some time for teachers to reach highest expertise in teaching English. This fact will lead to the second idea that the government of Malaysia needs to train and produce more skillful and assertive teachers so that language skills can be delivered completely. Here, the Government of Malaysia has carried out several measures in order to solve problem of unqualified English language teachers. English teachers in all learning institutions were instructed to sit for MUET (Malaysian University English Test) (The Star Online 2019) to certify their language competency. This action was taken to support Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025, where it highlighted that Malaysians need to be proficient in English language since it is the international language of communication in workplace. Expert English teachers will provide strong and adequate English language skill to the new generation to excel in STEM courses. STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) knowledge is available in English textbooks and materials hence it is crucial for new generation in Malaysia to be proficient in English. STEM knowledge is a critical requirement in order to uphold the standard of living in Malaysia and to compete with other nations around the world.

Last but not least, government needs to provide pertinent and sufficient learning materials and other relevant resources to all government learning institutions especially primary, secondary schools and public universities. Quality textbooks, authentic learning materials, suitable reference materials and conducive teaching and learning facilities are

all necessary in alleviating students' writing skill. Mavunga (2017) in his study affirmed that the government support does assist tremendously the country's education which it took into several processes; for example, providing learning institutions as well as the facilities to ensure all will receive better education.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest towards the publication of this article.

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