

# Writing Proficiency Of Upper Secondary School Students

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## Abstract

This paper aims to present the findings of a research on writing proficiency in Bahasa Malaysia of upper secondary schools students in Malaysia. The research is designed to compare writing patterns of urban and rural students from four different zones. The focus of analysis is divided into three aspects, namely, language used, discourse and idea conceptualization. In language used, the focus is on sentence structure, dialect usage and punctuation while discourse looks at interesting phrases. The ideas in the writings are evaluated holistically by looking at the clarity, maturity and relevance of ideas presented. The respondents of this research are selected from five different zones; Kedah (northern zone), Kelantan (eastern zone), Negeri Sembilan (central zone), Sabah & Sarawak (East Malaysia). The total number of respondents is 1461 students. Generally, the findings of the research show that the writing proficiency of the students is at satisfactory level.

## Introduction

Traditionally, writing skill is one of the skills emphasized in learning a language. This is parallel with previous notions on literacy. Kern (2000) says that literacy traditionally is seen as the ability to read and write. These two skills are often emphasized at the beginner and intermediate levels of language learning and followed by literature and cultural knowledge at advanced level.

However, the current perspective on literacy has shifted or transformed. Reading and writing are no longer considered as the determining factors on gauging one's literacy level. Scholars from disciplines such as rhetoric, writing, educational psychology, sociology, linguistic and cultural theory challenge the notion of literacy that concentrates solely on reading and writing as limiting and suggest a more dynamic concept of literacy that incorporates cultural aspects in reading and writing practices in language learning

(Kern 2000). Even though there has been a paradigm shift in the notion of literacy, it is felt that efforts in improving on the two skills should still continue to better equip a language learner in becoming a literate person. This paper will focus on one of the skills in literacy, specifically writing skill.

This paper is based on the findings of the research conducted by our group on the competence and performance in Bahasa Malaysia of Malaysian secondary school students. This research covers five areas or zones in Malaysia; north (Kedah), east coast (Kelantan), central (Negeri Sembilan) and in East Malaysia, Sabah and Sarawak. This research looks at the language ability of the students in various aspects namely, their perception towards Bahasa Malaysia, grammatical competence, learning strategies, their knowledge in Malay literature and writing skill. However, this paper will only discuss the writing skill and ability of the students by presenting our findings from all the zones.

The research involves 1,600 form four students from the five zones mentioned above and they are selected randomly. These groups of students (form four) were chosen because they are approaching the end of the compulsory education. In addition, they have chosen their focus area (science, account, literature, and technical) to pursue at tertiary level or if they decide to join the work force.

### **Writing skill**

As mentioned above, the focus of this paper is on the writing performance or writing proficiency of the students/respondents. The students were given a writing task and it is a stimulus-based writing task. This writing task mirrors the task given in SPM Examination. A stimulus-based writing task is found in Part A of Bahasa Malaysia exam Paper I. There are seven types of possible stimulus and they are pictures, diagrams, cartoon illustrations, plan, advertisements, an extract and notes. The stimulus used for this writing exercise are pictures; a group of four pictures on possible activities for the students in their free time. Based on pictures given, the students were required to explain and discuss on the (beneficial) activities that they can try to fill-in their free or spare time (refer appendix). The stimulus-based writing exercise aims to test the overall

understanding of the students on the stimulus, to gauge their ability in making interpretation, their analysis of the stimulus and lastly to test their knowledge on current issues. Upon closer inspection, it seems that various competencies are emphasized. This is in tandem with the current perspective on literacy which sees literacy as beyond basic competencies in reading and writing alone.

## **Methodology**

The marking scheme for the stimulus-based writing states that a good writing must fulfill the conditions that have been set, namely, it should fulfill the task stated in the question, have adequate important points, ideas expressed must be relevant and in orderly manner, use grammatical language and in various forms, extensive and correct vocabulary, correct spelling and punctuation, and complete discourse which includes interesting expressions. The students' writings were examined and graded based on the marking scheme that has been determined to look at the link and reasons between students' abilities and mistakes made by them in the writing exercise.

The grading of the writing is based on the SPM marking scheme; Excellent (26-30 marks), Distinction (20-25 marks), Satisfactory (15-19 marks), Less-Satisfactory (10-14 marks) and Minimal Achievement (01-09 marks). However, for the purpose data analysis this marking scheme has been rearranged to only three levels; Excellent (20-30 marks), Satisfactory (15-19 marks) and Weak (01-14 marks).

The main objective of this study is to investigate the students' writing performance in written Bahasa Malaysia within the five zones: Kedah (northern zone), Kelantan (eastern zone), Negeri Sembilan (central zone), Sabah and Sarawak. We are interested to understand the level of writing performance among students in relation to zone, gender, race and language used.

The research objectives are:

1. To investigate the writing proficiency level of Bahasa Malaysia among secondary school students.

2. To investigate the contributing factors to students' writing the proficiency level of Bahasa Malaysia.

### **Research procedure**

The respondents were 1,600 form four students from the selected zone in Malaysia, they are central zone (Seremban, Negeri Sembilan), northern zone (Kedah), eastern zone (Kelantan), Sabah and Sarawak. However, only 1,523 essays were returned; 703 (46.1%) science stream students, 242 (15.9%) account stream students, 408 (26.8%) arts stream students, 44 (2.9%) technical stream students dan 127 (8.4%) other streams of study. The respondents consisted of 877 (57.6%) Malay students, 154 (10.1) Chinese students, 54 (3.5%) Indian students, 66 (4.3%) Iban students, 30 (2.0%) Kadazan students dan 342 (22.5%) from other ethnic groups.

Students were given an essay to write. It was a guided picture essay that needed the students to develop their essay based on the pictures. Each picture demonstrated different activity.

### **Findings**

As previously mentioned, the aim of this study was to investigate the writing proficiency level among secondary school students in those five zones by comparing at their Bahasa Malaysia essay writing, in terms of language used, discourse and idea conceptualization, and the factors that contribute to the students' proficiency level.

### **Writing proficiency level**

The essay was examined and classified into three levels; Excellent (20-30 marks), Satisfactory (15-19 marks) and Weak (01-14 marks). The data indicated that the majority of students were in the satisfactory (61.9%), and excellent (25.5%) categories. This indicates that even though Bahasa Malaysia has been taught since the primary school and it is the national language, students were still not proficient in the language. These students need more help in to improve their level of writing proficiency, and this finding

also supported the worries that some people have towards the declining of Bahasa Malaysia among the Malaysians.

Since the students had completed PMR (Form 3) and sat for Bahasa Malaysia paper, it was interesting to know whether the students' achievement in PMR had any relation to their writing proficiency in Form 4. The data revealed a very interesting result. Within the excellent students in PMR (A), only 40.8% remained in excellent level and 51.4% in satisfactory level, whereas within the satisfactory students in PMR (B and C) 69.3% remained in the same level and 15.9% had increased to excellent. As for the weak students in PMR (D and E) 67.3% had increased their level of writing proficiency to satisfactory, and 7.7% to excellent level. The data proved that the PMR result has no relation with the students' performance at present.

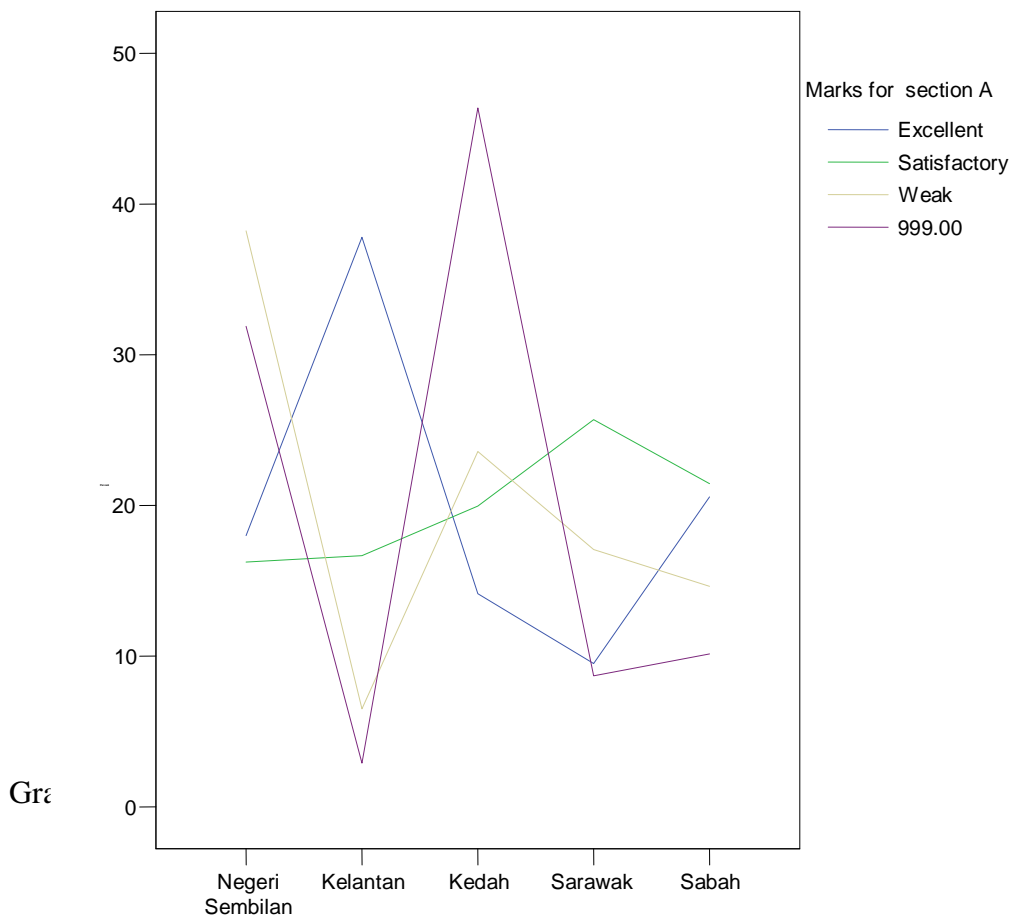


Chart 1: School Zone

With regard to school zone, result from the analysis revealed that students who were in the excellent category is from the eastern zone (Kelantan) which is 37.8% whereas the least students under this category was from Sarawak which was only 9.5%. As a matter of fact, most students from Sarawak were under satisfactory level. The data indicated that students from Negeri Sembilan were weak in Bahasa Malaysia essay writing, 38.2% from the overall percentage of weak students.

As mentioned earlier, students participated were from different academic stream; science, account, arts, and technical. When further analysed, the data revealed that students from Science stream were in the excellent category (67.4%), most probably this is due to the number of students in science stream, which encompassed the largest number of students in this study. However, when analyzed the overall result, science stream students only carried 17.3% of excellent writing and 25% of them were in the satisfactory level. Shockingly, within art stream, it was found that the students did not do well in the writing. 72.5% of them were in satisfactory level and only 13% were in excellent level. It shows that the assumption we had towards the art stream students were incorrect in which students could have done better in Bahasa Malaysia writing. The assumption was done based on the nature of these students learning subjects. In other words, most of the subjects taught in the class required them to write in Bahasa Malaysia, in which the exposure of the language would have provided the students with some guide or given them the opportunity to learn the language more compared to students from other streams, and thus they should not have any problem when writing in Bahasa Malaysia. This showed that the problem in writing had no relation to the level of language exposure of in the classroom.

Looking at the level of writing proficiency in more detailed, the data revealed that all races were in the satisfactory level. However, within races, Iban students obtained the highest percentage in this category (83.3%) and Malay students were the highest percentage for excellent level (30.3%). When comparing the races against the writing marks, the data indicated that Malay students carried the highest percentage of excellent

essay (68.4%). The study further looked into whether the students' performance had any connection with the language they communicated at home. 70.2% of the students communicated in Bahasa Malaysia at home, and within that number only 25.6% of the students were excellent in their essay writing. This indicated that the language used at home did not play an important role in the students' writing performance. For example the Malay students, 97.9% of them communicated in Bahasa Malaysia at home, however only 30.3% of them were excellent in their writing. Similar with the Kadazan, 86.7% of them used Bahasa Malaysia as their language at home but only 26.7% were excellent in writing.

Going for extra tuition has been a trend in Malaysia as the parents and students believe that extra tuition can help them improve their score in examination. When asked the students if they attended tuition for Bahasa Malaysia, only 9.8% attended, and within the group only 18.1% were excellent, and 14.1% were still weak in writing, compared to those who did not attend any tuition class, 26.5% was excellent and only 7.5% was weak within the group. This study showed that going for extra tuition had no relationship to the students' level of writing proficiency.

### **Factors that contribute to students' writing proficiency level**

This study investigated further into the factors that contributed to the students' proficiency level in writing by examining the important component of assessing writing during examination. They were the language used, discourse and idea conceptualization. Each of these components carried weight to the total marks of the essay. In language used, the focus was on sentence structure, dialect usage and punctuation errors, whereas for discourse the component was interesting phrases. And the other critical component was the idea conceptualization, in which consist of the clarity, maturity and relevancy of ideas.

## Language used

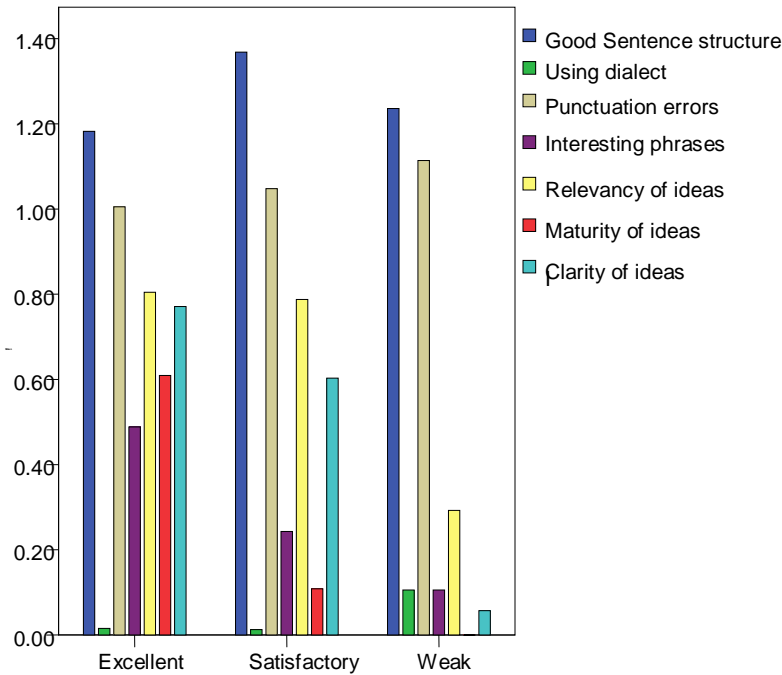


Chart 2: Marks for Writing

Chart 2 shows the general overview of the students' performance versus the factors that contributed to the students' performance. In general, all students could write in good sentence structure (71.7%). This proved that they had no problem in constructing sentences. However, one obvious problem faced by the students is punctuation. The punctuation in this context included spelling, capital letters, the position of prefix "di" and suffix "lah" and "kan" and simplification of word. Chart 2 shows that most students did the same error in their writing, even the students in the excellent categories made mistakes in punctuation. When comparing the conceptualization of ideas, it revealed that students with high performance had strong conceptualization of ideas. Essays that were considered excellent were supposed to incorporate interesting phrases, relevant, mature and clear ideas in their essay. Most weak essays failed to demonstrate relevancy, maturity and clarity of ideas, in addition to interesting phrases in their writing. This indicated that the essay writing practices in class should be more focused on the construction of ideas as the conceptualization of ideas is considered as one of the important writing criteria which give a good impression to the readers.



The study further investigated the students' performance against the location of schools to understand whether the location of schools played any role for the students' performance in terms of the sentence structure, dialect usage and punctuation errors. Chart 3 shows that there are no major differences of students' performance between the urban and the rural schools. The rural school students could produce relevant ideas (55.5%), clear ideas (59.2%) in their writing but they could not produce mature essay (32.7%). It was not a surprise to find out students from rural schools like to use dialects (71.4%). Most probably they were more comfortable to use them as they may get the impression that the words dialects they used at home were standard words and acceptable in formal writing. This indicates that the influence of mother tongue is stronger in the rural schools compared to urban schools.

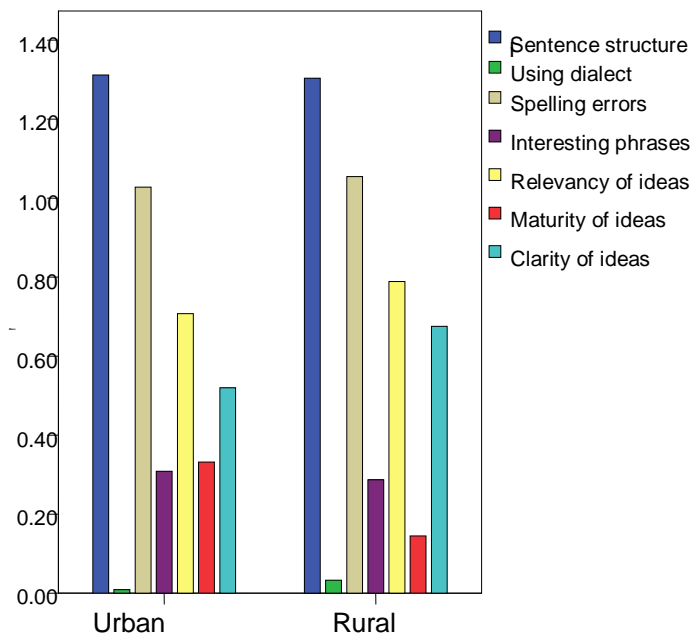


Chart 3: location of schools

### ***Spelling error***

Error in spelling has given an impact to the students' writing. Even though most errors detected in the essay have a low negative impact to the reader's comprehension, the errors still interrupted the smoothness of the reading. The types of spelling errors found were capitalization, prefix "di", suffixes "lah" and "kan", spelling, and abbreviations.

### *Capitalizations*

The misuse of capital letters in sentences were very obvious. The errors made at the beginning of a sentence, were most probably because of carelessness or having a not-bother- attitude, and assumed that the capitalizations were not very important in their writing. Whereas when the capitalization errors were detected in the middle of a sentence, there were high possibility that the students might have a confusion between a noun and a proper noun. Eventhough the errors may not have an acute negative impact on the essay nevertheless this mistake must be taken seriously by the students and teachers. Below is the example of errors done by the students:

068	...kita akan tertekan. <b>jadi</b> gunalah...; di tepi pantai. ia boleh...; di hutan. <b>kerana</b> ...; (+ 6 kesalahan lagi)	Beginning of a sentence
084	...dan <b>Alam Sekitar</b> kepada...	Not a proper name
008	Banyak <b>Iklan</b> ...	Not a proper name
008	...dan mengemas rumah. <b>banyak</b> lagi aktiviti... ...dan lain-lain. <b>aktiviti</b> ini dapat ... ...pengatahuan kita. <b>mengisi</b> masa lapang...	Beginning of a sentence
015	di sekeliling kita. <b>dengan</b> melakukan ...	Beginning of a sentence
038	siaran <b>Hiburan</b> ...; ...rakan-rakan Juga...; ..ia Juga...;	Not a proper name

### *Prefix “di” to indicate actions and positions/directions*

Other error done by the students is the prefix “di”. In Bahasa Malaysia, this prefix is used to differentiate between action and direction. As for action word the prefix “di” must be positioned close to the word, whereas prefix “di” to indicate direction must be positioned apart from the word. This error was found in the students’ essays probably due to the confusion of the position and the meaning of each position. For example *dipadang* (at the field), *dirumah* (at home), *dimasa* (at that time), and *dikalangan* (among). The use of prefix “di” in those situations should be separated from the main word. Whereas “*di kasihi*” (to be loved) should be positioned close to the main word because it shows action.

### ***Suffixes “lah” and “kan”***

The use of suffixes “lah” and “kan” in Bahasa Malaysia at the end of a main word should be joined with the main word to form a correct word/ spelling. However, many students made mistakes. Example of mistakes done by students are:

*hargai lah, semesti nya; tangan lah; merosak kan, harus lah...; merehat kan; menerang kan; ...bergembira lah...; melaku kan...; terutama nya...; amat lah; jadikan lah ...;*

### ***Spelling***

Although Bahasa Malaysia has been taught formally since the students were in standard one, the students were still made mistakes with spelling. One of the errors detected was the adding and omitting alphabets in the words. Most probably the students were confused when they spell the words. For example the word “kabar”, the alphabet “h” was omitted, whereas “berkhelah”, the alphabet “h” was added. This most probably because the sound system of the word that influenced the spelling of the word, such as the quiet sound “h” when pronounce but needed the alphabet in the spelling (*kabar*), and no sound of ‘h’ in “kabar” but needed the alphabet “h” in the word.

Other spelling errors detected were *mengarapatkan, berfaedak, memaina, di terpeng pantan, menanben makanan* dan *sanang*, which were considered vital because they gave an impact to the reader. This occurred most probably because the influence of the dialect, in which the words were spelled according to the sound system they have in their dialect and they used to. The influence of dialect may have an impact to the students’s way of spelling and also writing.

Beside that, English spelling is also found in some of the essays, such as “*impaks*”, “*stress*” and “*guitar*”. The words were borrowed from English words, however the students spelt them using Bahasa Malaysia spelling system. This can be assumed that English words are very familiar to some of them and they could not find similar words in Bahasa Malaysia and chose to continue writing.

### ***Using abbreviation***

There were also students who used abbreviation in their essay. Using abbreviation is considered an error in writing and marks will be deducted. For example the words "otot2" and "perkara2". These words should be repeated to show plural, but the students replaced "2" to indicate that the words need to be repeated when reading. Another example of abbreviations that were considered an error in Bahasa Malaysia was "nak", "t'luang" and "tak". The spelling of these words were shorten similar to their daily speech. On the other hand, to use shorter spelling according to the sound has been a trend especially when using short message system (SMS) in sending messages. As a result of this, students may think that it is acceptable to use the same spelling in their writing. The influence of short messages may give an impact to the development of students' writing in the future.

### ***Discourse***

Using *interesting phrases* was the only discourse investigated in this study. From the marking scheme of Bahasa Malaysia paper, discourse is considered as an important component that the students must have in their writing for them to get a good marks. Using idiomatic expressions, *pantun*, slogans, engaging expressions, an extract, wise sayings, the *hadith*, poetic vocabulary and meanings sourced from *Al-Quran* are considered important as they carry marks. From the data, it showed that 67.3% students did not use any interesting phrases in their essay. Out of 25.5% of the excellent essays only 12.5% had included interesting phrases. That was about 50% of the excellent essays. As for the satisfactory essays, most of the essays did not contain any interesting phrases. Only 15% from 61.9% of the satisfactory essays. This is less than half of the essays. Sarawak was found to have the least used of interesting phrases (1.6%) out of the overall total. When comparing between urban and rural schools, the data shows no differences. Both have the same percentage of using interesting phrases (13.9% and 14.4%).

The category of interesting phrases that were used often was idiom. Only few students used slogans. The example of slogans used by students are as below:

*Pemuda bangsa Negara; pemuda tiang Negara*  
*Membaca itu jambatan ilmu*

As for idioms, most students used about the same types of idioms. This most probably has the influence of the topic of essay, that is *Free time activities*. The topic directed the students to focus on different types of idiom that were related to the topic. Students, on the other hand, might have been exposed to the same type of idioms that were related to the topic. For example, five (5) out of six (6) essays picked from the same school used the same idiom "masa itu emas" (time is gold) to indicate the importance of time. Another idiom commonly used by the students is "umpama katak di bawah tempurung", means you should not be in isolation, when they wanted to imply that they have to broaden their knowledge.

Below is the sample of idioms commonly used by the students:

*"bagai aur dengan tebing"*

*"Katak di bawah tempurung"*

*"Bersatu kita teguh bercerai kita roboh"*

*"Bagai anjing dengan kucing"*

*"Bulat air kerana pemetung, bulat kata kerana muafakat"*

*"Terlajak perahu boleh berundur, terlajak kata kita hancur"*

## **Discussion**

The finding of this study concludes that the students' writing proficiency is in the satisfactory level. The students' weaknesses can be divided into few categories, however the most obvious weaknesses is the maturity of the idea. The development of ideas from the students writing were not at par to the standard of their Bahasa Malaysia level that is expected for their age. On the other hand, at this stage of learning, the students should be able to think more critically and able to give mature examples to

support their points. The maturity of their writing is seen to be closely related to their ability to develop ideas.

An excellent writing is a piece of writing that is able to demonstrate the use of discourse, such diversity usage of language with interesting phrases. However, most students in this study were not able to indicate a strong usage of discourse. It was very clear that the students memorize the interesting phrases and the idioms given by the teachers to be used in the essay. Most probably there were limited number of interesting phrases or idioms that were related to the topic of the essay taught in the classroom. As a result of this the same idioms were used by many students, and this may give some effect to the students' writing.

It was noticeable that the proficiency level of Bahasa Malaysia among the school students need to be looked into more seriously. This study demonstrated that the main weakness of students' writing is the ability to write maturely and critically. The students were not able to establish a mature thinking and critical thinking in their writing. These students should be exposed to different types of reading materials, such as newspapers, magazines, and current issues, and not too textbook oriented. The exposure to current issues may help them develop the critical thinking and thus by having the experience and knowledge of current issues, the students will be able to discuss the issues in their writing intelligently.

## **Reference**

Kern, R. 2000. *Literacy and Language Teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.