

## Investigating Malay Language Writing Proficiency Level Among Upper Secondary School Students

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### Abstract

This paper aims to present the findings of a research on writing proficiency in Malay language 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 and Sarawak (East Malaysia). The total number of respondents is 1524 students. Generally, the findings of the research show that the writing proficiency of the students is at satisfactory level. However, there are differences in the students' writing performance within the zones.

**Keywords:** language learning, writing, school, error analysis, literacy.

### 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, however, will focus on one of the skills in literacy, specifically writing skill.

### **Writing in General**

Writing is a big responsibility for a writer because writing is not only a hobby but it is also considered as a profession. Besides that, writing is also a form of communication that people use to communicate as long as they are literate. Oral communication, on the other hand, is not as complicated as written communication, because one needs to be efficient in writing in order to be an effective communicator (Awang Sariyan, 2004). For a writer to be able to write effectively, he or she must be able to develop writing towards the needs of the target group, thus this requires different skills such as academic writing or narrative writing skill (Tindal & Marston, 1990). Furthermore, when a writing is considered as a good writing, the writing should also be able to show the development of knowledge and suitability of language register according to the discipline and the level of target readers. The development in writing involves the presentation of ideas, the correct use of language, grammar, elaboration and the ability to develop them into a paragraph (Abdullah 1996; Kementerian Malaysia, 2000).

Besides that, clarity, coherence and focus of the writing are also the elements of good writing, and many writers, especially students failed in their writing due to lack of these elements (Carroll, 1990). Faridah Serajul Haq, Nooreiny Maarof and Raja Mohd. Fauzi Raja Musa (2001) in their study with a group of secondary school students evaluating the narratives in terms of the dimensions of ideas, organization, voice, word choice, fluency and writing convention indicated that students have problems in writing conventions but did better for ideas and organization.

Other reasons related to why students are unable to write to the expected benchmark set is due to the lack of general knowledge in order to expend and elaborate the issue discussed in their writing (Jamaludin Haji Badusah & Mohamed Amin Embi, 2006) and this is due to lack of reading (Abdullah, 1996; Howie 1989). Even if they are writing in their mother tongue or in their instructional language, such as Malay language as it is the language of instruction in the education system in Malaysia, students are found to be not proficient in their writing (Zamri & Zarina, 2001; Bukari Kadam, Sabariah Samsuri, Rosmini Md. Salleh & Zamri Mahamod, 2008). The obvious problems faced by students

are related to language accuracy including spelling, punctuations (Sabar Hj. Mohamad, Esa Mohamad and Zamri Mahamod (2008), morphology and syntax (Awang Sariyan, 1980; Nor Zaiton Hanafi, Nor Azura Mohd Salleh & Zamri Mahamod, 2008).

Furthermore, accuracy in writing is also caused by the writing strategy used by students. When students write they have a tendency to change, transfer, sentence structure, morpheme, and words that cause errors in their writing (Corder, 1981) and that in turn, will lead to errors in their writing. Making errors is a part of the process in writing that will be experienced by all language learners before they become competent writer. Therefore, it is important to analyse the errors made by students in their writing to understand the area of their weaknesses for us, as educators, to prepare in teaching and learning.

### **The Study**

This paper is based on a research conducted on Malaysian secondary school students looking at the students' writing performance in Malay language. This research covers five areas or zones in Malaysia; north (Kedah), east coast (Kelantan), central (Negeri Sembilan) and in East Malaysia (Sabah and Sarawak). The objectives of this study are to investigate Malay language writing proficiency level among secondary school students and to understand the contributing factors that contribute to students' writing performance. This paper discusses students' writing performance from all the five zones. Besides that, the level of students' performance in writing in relation to zone, gender, race and language used will also be discussed.

The research involved 1,600 form four students from the five zones mentioned above. Students from each zone are selected randomly by the teachers from the schools. These students have taken their Penilaian Menengah Rendah (PMR) examination and one of the compulsory subjects in the examination is Malay language. The students race composition are as follow; 877 (57.6%) Malay, 154 (10.1) Chinese, 54 (3.5%) Indian, 66 (4.3%) Iban, 30 (2.0%) Kadazan and 342 (22.5%) from other ethic groups. These students are from different educational streams: science, account, arts and technical and other streams (such as applied science and agriculture). Each student is required to write an essay, however, only 1,524 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 procedure**

The students are given a stimulus-based writing task. This writing task mirrors the task given in Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) Examination. The essay is a guided essay in which the students are required to develop their essays based on the pictures given. Each picture depicts different activity. The students are required to write between 150 to 200 words essays in Malay language. The topic is familiar to them as they had discussed this topic earlier with the teachers in their classroom.

This group of students has been taught the seven types of stimulus in the syllabus such as diagrams, cartoon illustrations, plan, advertisements, an extract and notes earlier in the classroom. The stimulus-based writing used for this study is a set of cartoon illustrations of four activities that the students do during their free time. Based on the pictures given, the students are required to explain and elaborate on the activities. The activities are picnic, camping, outdoor games and reading. From the teacher's syllabus, the objectives of stimulus-based writing exercise are to test the overall understanding of the students on the stimulus, such as to gauge their ability in making interpretation, to test their ability in analyzing the stimulus and lastly to test their knowledge on current issues. Upon closer inspection, it seems that various competencies are emphasized in assessing the students' writing. This is in tandem with the current perspective on literacy which sees literacy as beyond basic competencies such as reading and writing.

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

The grading of writing task is based on 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 of this study and data analysis, a different structure of the marking scheme was developed. They are Excellent (20-30 marks), Satisfactory (15-19 marks) and Weak (01-14 marks). The results are then transferred to SPSS and categorized as 3 = Excellent, 2 = Satisfactory and 1 = Weak. These data are then analyzed using descriptive analysis.

A set of questionnaire was distributed to the students to obtain the students' background information such as their language proficiency level, Malay language result in PMR, social background, academic streams, language used at home and others. The data gathered from the questionnaire are then cross-tabulated to understand the factors that might contribute to students' writing performance.

## **Findings**

This section starts by discussing the writing proficiency level among secondary school students. The second part will discuss the factors that contribute to students' writing proficiency which will focus on language used, discourse and idea conceptualization. In language used, the focus is on sentence structure, dialect usage and punctuation while discourse looks at the use of interesting phrases. The ideas presented in the writings are evaluated holistically by looking at the clarity, maturity and relevance of ideas presented.

### **Writing proficiency level**

The essays are examined and classified into three levels; Excellent (20-30 marks), Satisfactory (15-19 marks) and Weak (01-14 marks). The marking and classification of essays are made by the examiners, who are experienced teachers. The marks are placed according to the levels and later analysed.

The data indicated that majority of students are in satisfactory level (61.9%), and excellent level (25.5%). The findings show that even though Malay language has been taught since the primary school and it is the national language, students are still not proficient in the language. These students need more help to improve their writing skill, and these findings also support the worries that some academicians have concerning the declining state of Malay language proficiency of the students.

Given the situation that these students have completed Penilaian Menengah Rendah (PMR) (Form 3) and sat for Malay language paper, it is interesting to know whether the students' achievement in PMR Malay language paper has any relation to their writing proficiency in Form 4. The data reveals a very interesting result. Within the excellent students in PMR (grade A in Malay language paper), only 40.8% remained in excellent level and 51.4% in satisfactory level, whereas within the satisfactory level in PMR (grade B and C) 69.3% continues to be in the same level and 15.9% have moved to excellent level. As for the weak students in PMR (grade D and E) 67.3% have increased their level of writing proficiency to satisfactory, and 7.7% to excellent level. The data proves that PMR result has no relation with the present students' performance.

With regard to school zones, results from the analysis reveal that students in the excellent category are from the eastern zone (Kelantan) which is 37.8% whereas Sarawak has the least number of students in this category (9.5%). As a matter of fact, most students from Sarawak are in the satisfactory level. The data also shows that students from Negeri Sembilan are weak in writing in Malay language that is 38.2% from the overall percentage of weak students from all zones.

As mentioned earlier, the students are from different academic stream; science, account, arts, and technical. When further analyzed, the data reveals that students from Science stream are in the excellent category (67.4%), most probably this is due to the number of students in science stream, which covers the largest number of students in this study. However, when the overall results are analyzed, it is found that only 17.3% of the science stream students are in the excellent writing category and 25% of them are in the satisfactory level. A startling discovery is within the arts stream students, it is found that the students did not do well in writing. 72.5% of them are in satisfactory level and only 13% are in excellent level. It shows that the assumption we have towards the arts stream students are incorrect. We assumed that students from the art stream would do better in Malay language writing. The assumption is based on the nature of these students' learning environment. Most subjects in art streams are taught in Malay language and require the students to write in Malay language. In other words, these students are exposed to the language and this environment would have provided them with some

guidance or given them more opportunity to learn the language compared to students from other streams, and thus they should not have any problems writing in Malay language. This shows that the problem in writing has no relation to the level of language exposure in the classroom.

Looking at the level of writing proficiency in more detail, the data revealed that almost all races are in satisfactory level. However, within races, Iban students obtained the highest percentage in satisfactory level (83.3%) and Malay students obtained the highest percentage in excellent level (30.3%). When the students' races are compared against the writing marks, the data shows that Malay students scored the highest percentage in the excellent level (68.4%). The study further looks into the relationship between the students' performance and the language they use at home. 70.2% of the students communicate in Malay language at home, and within that number only 25.6% of the students are in excellent level. This indicates that the language used at home does not play an important role in the students' writing performance. For example, among the Malay students, 97.9% of them communicate in Malay language at home, however only 30.3% of them are in excellent level. Similarly, among the Kadazan, 86.7% of them use Malay language at home but only 26.7% are in excellent level.

Going for extra tuition has been a trend in Malaysia as parents and students believe that extra tuition can help improve the students' academic performance in examinations. When the students are asked if they attend tuition for Malay language, only 9.8% attended, and within this group only 18.1% are in excellent level, and 14.1% are still weak in writing, compared to those who did not attend any tuition class, 26.5% are excellent in their writing and only 7.5% are weak in their writing. This study shows that going for extra tuition has no direct co-relation with the students' level of writing proficiency.

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

This study further investigates the factors that contribute to the students' writing proficiency by examining the important components in writing assessment. The components are the language used, discourse and idea conceptualization. In language used, the focus is on sentence structure, dialect usage and punctuation errors, whereas in discourse, element such as interesting phrases is the focus. The other important component is idea conceptualization which looks at the clarity, maturity and relevance of ideas. This section uses quantitative descriptive analysis and qualitative descriptive data to discuss the findings.

**Language used**

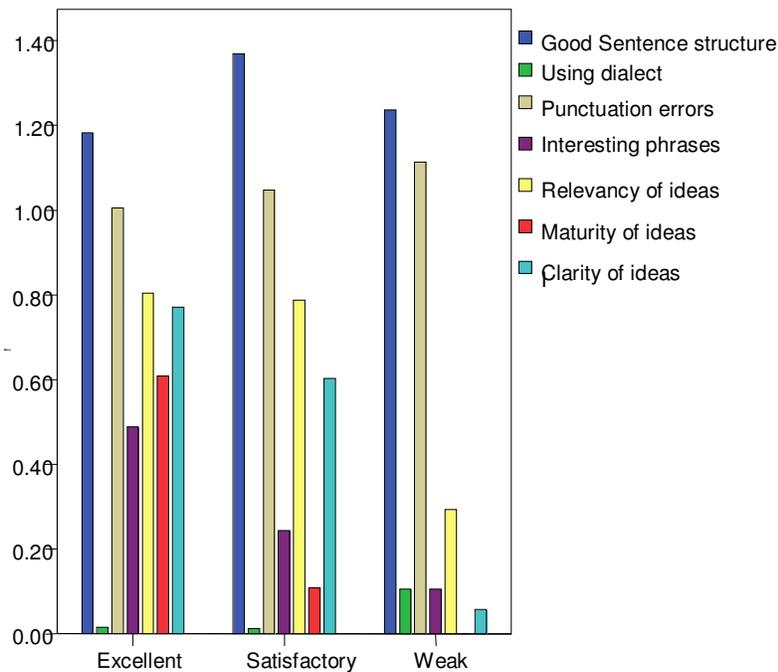


Chart 1: Marks for Writing

Chart 1 shows the general overview of students’ writing performance versus the factors that contribute to the students’ writing performance. In general, all students are able to write in good sentence structure (71.7%). This proves that they have no problem in constructing sentences. However, one obvious problem faced by the students is punctuation. The punctuation in this context includes spelling, capital letters, the position of prefix “*di*” and suffix “*lah*” and “*kan*” and simplification of word. Chart 2 shows that most students do the same errors in their writing, even the students in the excellent level make mistakes in punctuation (25%). With regards to conceptualization of ideas, it is revealed that students in the high performance category are able to conceptualize ideas better. Essays that are considered excellent must incorporate interesting phrases, relevant, matured and clear ideas in their essays. Most weak essays in this study failed to demonstrate relevance (70.7%), maturity (100%) and clarity of ideas (94.5%) in their writings. In addition, they also failed to include interesting phrases in their writing (89.4%). This indicates that the essay writing practices in class should be more focused on the construction of ideas because it is considered as one of the important writing criteria.

The study further investigates the students’ writing performance and compares it with the location of schools to investigate whether the location of schools plays any role in the students’ performance in terms of the sentence structure, dialect usage and punctuation errors. Chart 2 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%), and clear ideas (59.2%) in their writing but they could not produce matured essay (32.7%). It is not a surprise to find students from rural schools like to use

dialects (71.4%). These students use dialects at home and may get the impression that words that they use at home are the standard variety and hence, acceptable in formal writing. This indicates that the influence of dialect or mother tongue is stronger in the rural schools compared to urban schools in the students' writing.

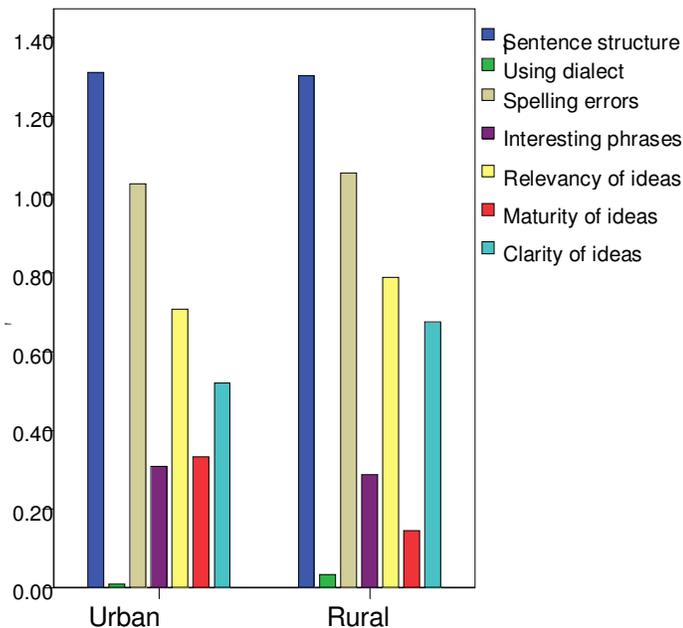


Chart 2: Location of schools

### General Spelling error

Errors in spelling can give an impact to students' writing. Even though most errors detected in the essay have little effect on the reader's comprehension, the errors could pose a problem in the coherence of the essay. The types of spelling errors found are capitalization, prefix "di", suffixes "lah" and "kan", spelling, and abbreviations.

### Capitalizations

The misuse of capital letters in sentences are very obvious. The errors made at the beginning of sentences could be due to students' carelessness or lackadaisical attitude and assumed that the capitalizations are not very important in writing. When the capitalization errors are detected in the middle of a sentence, there is a high possibility that the students might be confused 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 are examples of errors made 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 discovered in the writings is the prefix “di”. In Malay language, this prefix is used to indicate an action and preposition as discussed by Maslida Yusof (2009). As a marker for action the prefix “di” must be positioned close to the word, whereas as a preposition, “di” must be positioned apart from the word. This error is found in the students’ essays probably because they are confused by the functions of “di”. For examples: *dipadang* (at the field), *dirumah* (at home), *dimasa* (at that time), and *dikalangan* (among). The use of prefix “di” in those examples should be separated from the main word. Whereas “*di kasihi*” (to be loved) should be positioned close to the main word because it is a verb.

Suffixes “lah” and “kan”

The use of suffixes “*lah*” and “*kan*” in Malay language at the end of a main word should be attached with the main word to form correct word/ spelling. However, many students made mistakes. Examples of the mistakes are:

*harga 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 the students are taught Malay language formally since they were in standard one, they still could not spell correctly. One of the errors detected in the essay is adding or omitting alphabet in certain words. For example in the word “*kabar*”, the alphabet “*h*” is omitted, whereas in “*berkhelah*”, the alphabet “*h*” is added. These mistakes could be attributed to the pronunciation of the words. In the word “*khabar*” the [h] is not pronounced but is needed in the spelling. The same mistake happens in “*berkhelah*” where “*h*” is omitted.

Other spelling errors detected are *mengarapatkan, berfaedak, memaina, di terpeng pantan, menanben makanan* and *sanang*. These spelling errors could be influenced by the

students' dialects. The students might have spelled the words according to way it is pronounced in their dialects.

Besides that, English words are also found in some essays, such as "*impaks*", "*stress*" and "*guitar*". The words are borrowed from English, however they are spelt according to the Malay language spelling conventions. This can be assumed that the students could not differentiate the spelling conventions between Malay language and English.

### Using abbreviation

There are also students who used abbreviation in their essay. Using abbreviation is considered an error in writing and marks will be deducted when assessing students' writing. Some examples of abbreviations found in the students' writings are "*otot2*" and "*perkara2*". In Malay language, reduplication is to indicate plurality but instead the students used the numeral "2" to indicate plurality. Other examples of abbreviations that are considered as error in Malay language are "*nak*", "*t'luang*" and "*tak*". The spelling of these words are contracted as they are used in spoken language. On the other hand, using abbreviation according to the sound is a trend among school children, especially when using short message system (SMS) in sending messages. As a result, students may think that it is acceptable to use SMS spelling system in their writing therefore, they transfer the SMS way of spelling to formal writing. The influence of short messages may have an impact to the development of students' writing in the future.

### Discourse

This study looks at use of *interesting phrases* in the students' essays. From Malay language marking scheme, interesting phrases are considered as important component that the students must have in their writing in order for them to get good marks. Using idiomatic expressions, *pantun*, slogans, engaging expressions, an extract, wise sayings, the *hadith*, poetic vocabulary and meanings sourced from *Al-Quran* should be included in their writings as these will help them secure good marks in writing. From the data, it shows that 67.3% students did not use any interesting phrases in their essay. Out of 25.5% in the excellent level only 12.5% have included interesting phrases in their writings. That is only about 50% of the excellent writings. As for the satisfactory level, most of the essays did not have any interesting phrases. Only 15% out of 61.9% of the satisfactory level include interesting phrases. This is less than half of the essays. In all the zones, students from Sarawak use the least amount of interesting phrases (1.6%). However, when both urban and rural schools are compared, the data shows no difference in performance in both school types. Both have about the same percentage of interesting phrases (13.9% -urban and 14.4%-rural) usage. The interesting phrases that are often used in the students' writing are idioms. Only few students use 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 use almost similar idioms. This is probably because of the topic of the essay which is "*Aktiviti masa lapang/ Activities during free time*". Students might have been taught the same type of idioms related to the topic because from the data (essays) it shows that most of them used the same idiom for the same situation. 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 regularly used by the students is "*umpama katak di bawah tempurung*", which means that one should not isolate oneself.

Below are some idioms regularly 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 pembetung, bulat kata kerana muafakat"*

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

## **Conclusion**

The findings of this study conclude that the students' writing proficiency generally fall in the satisfactory category. The students' weaknesses can be divided into few categories, however the most obvious weakness in essay writing among the form four students is the level of maturity of idea of the essays. The development of idea is not at par with the standard of Malay language expected at their age. In addition, at this stage of learning, students should be able to think more critically and able to give matured examples to support their points or ideas in their essays. The maturity of their writing is seen to be closely linked to their ability to develop ideas.

An excellent piece of writing is a writing that is able to demonstrate the use of discourse, such as diversity in language used which includes interesting phrases. However, most students in this study are not able to do so. It is very clear that the students memorized interesting phrases and idioms given by the teachers to be used in the essay. As a result, the same idioms are used by most of the students.

Lastly, the proficiency level of writing in Malay language among school students need to be looked into more seriously. This study shows that the main weakness of the students' writing is the inability to write maturely and critically. The students are not able to establish a matured and critical thinking skills in their writing. In general, students should be exposed to different types of reading materials, such as newspapers, magazines, and current issues to build up their general knowledge. The exposure to current issues may help them develop their critical thinking skill. Thus, when students have the experience and knowledge of current issues, the students will be able to discuss the issues in their writing intelligently.

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