| **RESEARCH ARTICLE**

Identifying Problems in Writing among Year 2 Pupils in a Malaysian Primary School

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| **ABSTRACT**

This preliminary study aims to identify the problems in writing faced by Malaysian Year 2 pupils in a primary school. A document analysis design was employed to gather qualitative data from 75 participants who were purposively selected due to accessibility. The main instruments used in this study are the reports from English School-Based. The pupil's essays and worksheets were then analyzed. Findings revealed that 58.67% of the students are only at Band 3 in the School-Based Assessment (SBA) for writing skill performance which indicates that they were only at a satisfactory level. Analysis of the pupils' work revealed a clear problem with writing skills; where 36 out of 72 (50%) pupils were not able to write simple sentences properly. This implies that early intervention is needed to cater to this issue.

1. Introduction

Learning the English language has become essential and a crucial need in this current era of technological revolution. The mastery of English will give advantages in general as well as in the educational field. Ahmad (2016) English is a language that needs to be mastered as it must be developed at a very young age with formal or informal education. English is established as the international language with a total of 371 million native speakers and 611 million non-native speakers (Julian, 2020). supported the statement by stating that English should be acquired by learners for long-lasting earnings as it gives students a space to examine a variety of fields of knowledge. Adequate command of English would enable students to manage their studies and acquire the necessary knowledge conveniently (Siddek & Ismail, 2021). A study by Ghabool, Mariadass, and Kashef (2012) has proven that Malaysian students have difficulty with grammar, punctuation, and sentence structure in writing because they are influenced by the grammar system in the native language. The report and analysis of the Primary School Assessment (UPSR) 2019 from the Ministry of Education Malaysia (2019) has also shown that Malaysian pupils are still not proficient as English scored the lowest with 14.87% and 23.34% of national primary schools' pupils still could not reach the minimum requirements for comprehension paper which related to reading and writing paper respectively.

According to Thomas et al. (2020), inspecting children's early writing skills, especially for those who have been identified as at-risk for later literacy difficulties, is essential to understanding potential differences in the early writing of the children. In line with this, from 2009 until 2019, Malaysian schools have a program called Literacy and Numeracy Screening (LINUS), which helped to screen students with difficulties in literacy for both Malay language and English language as well as numeracy. Through this LINUS program, teachers would have running records of students' level of literacy and numeracy, as well as the intervention was done. Unfortunately, the program was discontinued to give chances to schools to identify and curb the issues by themselves without having to depend on a certain module or package (Bungga, 2018). Nowadays, in a mixed-ability classroom, without an official program to address the issue of struggling learners, teachers tend to forget to keep a running record of students' performance level in the basic skills acquired. Thus, although teachers are aware that the issue of struggling pupils exists, they do not have evidence to show that the problems exist and to what extent students lagged behind.

This study aimed to therefore identify the pupils who are weak in writing as well as their level of writing skills according to the School-Based Assessment (SBA) scale, and it is hoped that teachers would be encouraged to keep a record of students' level of writing so that appropriate intervention could be provided to the students. Two research questions were set:

    i.   Who are the weak pupils among the Year 2 pupils in a Malaysian primary school?
    ii.   What is the weak pupils' level of writing in ESL?

2. Literature Review
2.1 Writing skills and ESL Learners
Writing is perceived as a channel of communication that allows primary English speakers to express their ideas and feelings through a carefully planned text (Morthy and Aziz, 2020). The procedure of writing and rewriting, as described by Johnson (2017), is set out as a principle of how writing might render primary ESL learners with the space to construct, expand and claim identity. Writing is regarded as one of the toughest language skills learners are expected to excel in (Majid, Stapa & Keong, 2015) since it prompts intellectual growth. Learners with writing problems may grapple with one or more components of the writing process, including proper grammar, norms, punctuation, capitalization, spelling, and some of the basic parts of writing (Emak & Ismail, 2021). The importance of writing should be emphasized since primary school as it allows the learners to disclose their ideas better. It helps to strengthen other language skills such as listening, speaking, and reading (Saed & Al-Omari, 2014) because it is a comprehensive skill that enhances vocabulary, grammar, thinking, planning, editing, revising, and other elements (Ien, Yunus & Embi, 2017). Hence, writing is an essential skill to be mastered as it is definitely beneficial to all ESL learners. Educators all around the world at all levels of learning institutions are obligated to derive plenty of engaging and meaningful activities that can attract and gauge primary ESL learners to learn and improve their writing skills.

According to research by Abdullah and Yunus (2019), primary ESL learners are risk-takers when it comes to writing. They tend to express their ideas in a variety of ways, which can be very challenging for them. The reason behind this is that they work with their friends in expressing ideas using the correct grammar and vocabulary, specifically in meticulous discussions. Immediate feedback given by primary ESL learners acts as a focal point for their writing enhancements. As a result, it is also important that primary ESL learners' schemata are connected to their learning environment through writing. Troyka, Hesse, and Strom (1993) add that the purposes of writing are to let writers express themselves, provide information, persuade readers and create literary work. These purposes contribute significantly to human thought and culture. Through writing, messages to others on particular topics can be successfully delivered. However, teaching writing is not as easy as it seems because producing students with splendid writing skills seems to be a challenging task for educators.

In Malaysia, English is taught as a second language (ESL), which means that the teaching of English is challenging because English is not the student's first language. The issue arose when the configurations of the first and target languages were basically different (Siddek & Hanita, 2021). Students are expected to master all four language skills; reading, speaking, listening, and writing. Among all the four skills, writing is said to be the most difficult skill to learn and also to teach (Yusuf, Jusoh & Yusuf, 2019). To come out with a piece of writing as written communication requires the writer's ability to use not only the linguistics capability but also their communicative capability (Mukminatin, 1997). On that note, as writing skill is a wide area to cover, the researcher is trying to focus on simple sentence construction among primary Year 2 pupils.

2.2 Teaching of Writing in ESL Classroom
There are a variety of teaching strategies and research conducted by using a variety of interventions to teach writing skills among ESL learners. According to Avelino and Ismail (2021), teachers are accountable for conveying social and intellectual development to young learners since teachers are one of the main roles in shaping the student's future prospects. As we are in the 21st-century era, the type of teaching educators employed must not be at the same old level. As more research is conducted, teachers should be aware that teaching and learning strategies should be student-centered, and teachers act as a facilitator in class. The chalk-and-talk method is not irrelevant at all, as we still need the traditional method for some learners who learn best that way; however, exploring the current teaching strategies to improve learning is great as well.

The researchers come out with different strategies and instructions to improve the writing problems. A study by Morthy and Aziz (2020) stated that one of the strategies to enhance sentence construction among learners is through language games. The findings of this study showed the most significant effects of language games on improving learners' sentence construction. The language games are used during the practice stage in a lesson after the teacher has explained the rules. Learners are able to have fun and meaningful learning (Wang & Dostal, 2018), thus resulting in happy and pleasant learning. All those elements involved in using language games can boost the learner's motivation to enhance their sentence construction as they can remember things faster and better (Ibrahim, 2017). The usage of digital games in this study has shown positive outcomes as the learners are able to construct sentences by just recalling the rules and input during the language game activity.

Next, there is a study conducted by Alsamadani in 2018. The researcher employed the usage of social media, which is Online Blogging, to improve individual and group writing skills. They produce pre-writing and post-writing samples through blogging practices, and as a result, it revealed that blogging has revolutionized EFL pedagogy and methodology as writing practice is proven to be more interactive, and learners can dramatically improve their writing skills in terms of content, word choice, sentence construction, language mechanics. This is supported by Boling (2008), who agreed that blogging also gives students a personal goal that makes writing more engaging than the academic critical thinking adopted by most curricula. The studies related to the teaching of writing have opened more opportunities for other researchers to adapt and implement it in their school settings.

Last but not least, the usage of cooperative learning (CL) in teaching writing has also shown significant improvement among second language learners in a study conducted by Yusuf, Jusoh, and Yusuf in 2019. Cooperative work promotes independent learning in which the learners are responsible for earning what it's taught but also promotes the teamwork spirit where other members need to help one another to create an atmosphere of achievement. Richards, Richards, and Renandya (2002) also strengthen the statement by stating that CL encourages helpfulness and active participation of the learners. Yusuf et al. (2019) opted for cooperative learning by using two methods which are Jigsaw and Student Teams-Achievement Division (STAD). The result of the study revealed that the students had performed better in narrative essay writing after the CL method was implemented. The measures taken are appropriate and can be adapted by our ESL teachers to be implemented in their schools because one strategy is not for all. Teachers play an important role in determining which learning strategies best suit their own pupils.

When learning a second language, writing is commonly the skill that poses problems among the other language skills (Kustati & Yuhardi, 2014). On the face of it, Malaysian former education director-general Khair Mohamad Yusof stated that our students have yet to achieve a level desired for writing in the English language as 23 percent of pupils had failed their English written paper in the Primary School Achievement Test (UPSR) in 2016 ("New UPSR format", 2016). From 2009 until 2019, LINUS exists to help teachers to identify struggling pupils. However, since the program was demolished, the tracking record of pupils' writing skills is not properly stored or monitored. Though teachers realize the problem exists, they do not have evidence to show that it exists and to what level students are lagging behind.

This is why educators must realize that as much as it is important to design a proper intervention to cater to this writing problem among our young learners, it is of utmost importance for teachers to identify the weak learners and struggling pupils who have difficulties in writing skill. It is remarkable if the pupils can be identified early to provide and tailor the necessary intervention to support continued literacy or academic development. On that note, Hairston (2011) believes that identifying the struggling learners at an early stage will close the achievement gap and promote successful learning among our young children. First thing first, there should be a system to identify these weak learners who have problems with writing skills before teachers can provide them with the intervention needed. Vaughn and Fuchs (2005) stated that early identification is crucial and essential for students with poor academic skills because students who receive a proper supplemental education aid are less likely to be labelled as students with a learning disability (LD) in the future years. Hence, in this study, simple screening measures, which are the School-Based Assessment (SBA) report and pupil's work (documents), will be employed to help in identifying the learners who are weak in writing skills.

2.3 Identifying Struggling Writers
Early identification of these struggling writers can reduce the gap between high proficiency, intermediate and weak learners. Teachers should accept whatever these struggling writers manage to write independently and then provide commentary and explicit aid to help them to write better (Peterson 2010). Objectifying the challenges experienced by struggling writers in middle elementary school is of both theoretical and practical importance (Dockrell, Connelly & Arfe, 2019). Policymakers, school administrators, teachers, and parents play their own role in addressing the writing difficulties our children have had since primary school so that proper intervention can be administered to help them. Identifying the weak writers can be done in various ways in order for us to specify the suitable method to help these young learners. Virinkosky et al. (2017) found that combining class teacher ratings and screening tests in the first, second, or third grades increased the accuracy of identifying students who would experience learning difficulties in the future. Thus, in this case, Malaysian primary school teachers could pair School-Based Assessment (SBA) with any suitable writing tests to get more accurate results in identifying the struggling readers.

3. Methodology
3.1 Research Design
This study aimed to measure pupils' writing performance based on the SBA and to determine the types of problems in writing the Year 2 pupils have. The document analysis method was employed in order to identify specific characteristics of the materials. A qualitative research approach is chosen because this approach strengthens an understanding and interpretation of meaning as well as intentions underlying human behaviour and experiences (Creswell, 2007). Apart from that, Creswell (2014) also emphasizes that in the entire qualitative research process, the researcher keeps a focus on learning the meaning that the participants hold about the problem or issue, not the meaning that the researcher brings to the research or what the writers express in the literature.

Through this study, the researchers are able to identify the struggling learners, especially in writing skills among the Year 2 pupils, so that an appropriate measure can be taken to cater to the problem.

3.2 Research Participants

The research participants in this study were selected through purposive sampling. The participants are the students of the researcher from a Malaysian primary school. There are 75 Year 2 pupils who have participated in this study, and they have different academic achievements, especially in writing ability. The school only has two classes for each level, and the research was conducted on all Year 2 pupils in both classes.

3.3 Instruments

According to Creswell and Guetterman (2019), the selection of instruments for data collection should be based on the type, aims, and objectives of the research. Martinez-Mesa et al. (2016) highlighted that the development and preparation of an instrument must also be made ready prior to the implementation of research to ease the administration process. Thus, it is necessary to select suitable and proper instruments that would help to ensure an organized and efficient flow during the implementation of the research. In regards to this research, the report for the English School-Based Assessment (SBA) and the pupils' work (documents) were collected and analyzed to identify the pupils who are weak in writing skills from both classes as follows:

i)   School-Based Assessment

The SBA reports for English encompasses five main skills such as listening, speaking, reading, writing, and language arts. The SBA reports from January to June were used in this study. The SBA reports were made and evaluated by the teachers who observed the pupil's performance throughout the years by using a variety of strategies. In each of the main skills, it is further divided based on learning standards, and the descriptors for each band are different to indicate the pupil's performance level. There are six bands altogether, ranging from Band 1 as the weakest and Band 6 as the most excellent. As this study focuses on writing skills, only the writing column would be interpreted and tabulated. In the writing section, there are five learning standards that need to be assessed according to the Standard Documents for Curriculum and Assessment (DSKP), and the indicator for each band is different according to the performance level. SBA is rated using the six scales performance level, and each level has its own descriptors. Each number on the scale was defined as follows:

Table 1: Performance level description for SBA

PERFORMANCE LEVEL	DESCRIPTORS FOR WRITING SKILLS	NOTES
1	· Hardly writes simple sentences by using appropriate language form and style even with a lot of support from the teacher. · Hardly organizes basic information even with a lot of support from the teacher.	Requires support to achieve curriculum target (A1 Low)
2	· Writes simple sentences by using appropriate language form and style with a lot of support from the teacher. · Organises basic information with a lot of support from the teacher.	On track to achieve curriculum target (A1 Low)
3	· Writes simple sentences by using appropriate language form and style with support from the teacher. · Organises basic information using correct punctuation and spelling with support from the teacher.	Achieves expectations of curriculum target (A1 Low)
4	· Writes simple sentences by using appropriate language form and style with minimal support from the teacher. · Organises basic information using correct punctuation and spelling with minimal support from the teacher.	Working towards exceeding expectations (A1 Mid)
5	· Writes simple sentences by using appropriate language form and style confidently. · Organises basic information using correct punctuation and spelling without hesitation.	On track to exceed expectations (A1 Mid)
6	· Writes simple sentences by using appropriate language form and style independently. · Organises basic information using correct punctuation and spelling independently. · Displays exemplary model of language use to others.	Exceeds expectations (A1 Mid)

The table can be simplified, and each of the bands in the performance level can be defined as follows:

Table 2: Performance level description for SBA (Simplified version)

Performance Level	Descriptor
1	Very limited
2	Limited
3	Satisfactory
4	Good
5	Very good
6	Excellent

ii)   Document Analysis

Besides that, the document, which is the pupil's worksheet, was analyzed to highlight the writing problem the pupils have. The worksheets were related and focused on the simple sentence construction exercises, Subject Verb Object (SVO), and writing simple self-introduction. The researchers analyzed the common errors made by the pupils to point out the writing issue among the learners in that lower primary school.

3.4 Data Collection Procedure

Next, the researcher analyzed the School-Based Assessment (SBA) report on the aspect of writing skills and interpreted the excerpts from the pupil's work. The SBA reports were taken from the first semester of schooling, and only the writing performance and level are highlighted in this research. As for the pupil's work which is the worksheet, researchers have chosen the writing exercises to analyze the common problem. The process was administered before the school closed due to Covid-19.

3.5 Data Collection Analysis

As for the data analysis, in this research, Microsoft Excel was used to analyze the data, which included percentages and frequency. The data for School-Based Assessment were tabulated following the performance level in Table 4.3.1 and Table 4.3.2. The scores for each construct of learning standard were accumulated to get the overall score and then matched with the performance level. On the other hand, the pupil's works were analyzed to compare the similar problem for writing skills faced by the participants and to highlight the sentence construction problem among them.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Who are the weak pupils among the Year 2 pupils in a Malaysian primary school?

The findings are analyzed and explained to answer the research questions for this research. Table 3 below shows the data interpreted from the English School-Based Assessment for the two Year 2 classes. The data were taken from the 'writing columns' only as that is the focus of the study. Figure 1 shows the percentage of each participant in each level. It clearly shows the difference in the height of the bar. The data was presented by using the bar chart.

Table 3: SBA Writing Performance Level for Year 2 A and 2 B

Performance level	2 A	2 B	Total
	n (%)		
1	0	0	0
2	0	7 (9.33)	7 (9.33)
3	16 (21.33)	28 (37.33)	44 (58.67)
4	16 (21.33)	3 (4)	19 (25.33)
5	5 (6.67)	0	5 (6.67)
6	0	0	0

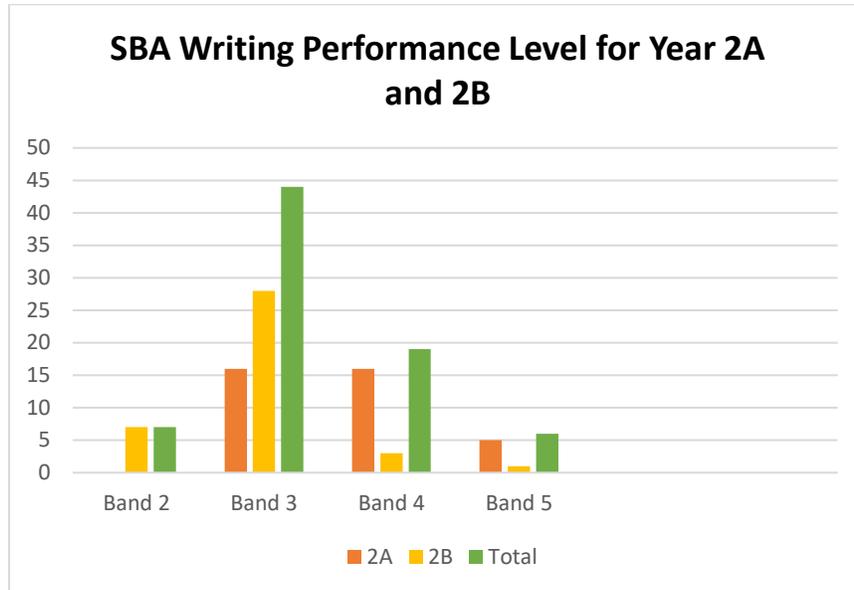**SBA Writing Performance Level for Year 2A and 2B**

Figure 1: SBA Writing Performance Level for Year 2A and 2 B

Based on Table 3, no one gets the 'excellent' band which is Band 6. It shows that the pupils still need guidance from the teachers, as Band 6 indicates that pupils should be able to write independently and confidently. Next, there are 6.67 % of them in Band 5, which means 'very good', and 19% of the participants are in Band 4, which is considered 'good' for this particular writing skill. On the other hand, 44% of the participants are in Band 3, which is the 'satisfactory' level, and Figure 3.1 clearly depicts that it is the highest frequency among them. This level is considered as those who need little intervention and guidance from teachers to be able to get to level 4. However, if addressed later, they might shift down to level 2. In Band 2, there are 7% of them which means they only have 'limited' skill in writing. The participants who are in Band 2 all came from the same class (2B), and the researcher has put a note that the second class is considered the low proficiency level class compared to the other class (2A). Lastly, zero pupils are in Band 1, which is the lowest level of all. Band 1 is indicated as 'very limited' and can be viewed as those who need the most help from teachers. The pupils who are in Band 1 until Band 3 can be considered weak writers as they still need extra guidance from the teacher to even write simple sentences. Thus, the appropriate measure needs to be taken so that the gap between the high achievers and the low achievers can be lessened.

4.2 *What is the weak pupils' level of writing in ESL?*
The pupil's worksheets were analyzed, and similar writing problems such as sentence construction, punctuation, spelling, and grammatical structure were pointed out based on the excerpts. It was revealed that participants have similar writing problems, which is to construct simple sentences. This can be further supported by the excerpts from the pupil's worksheet below:
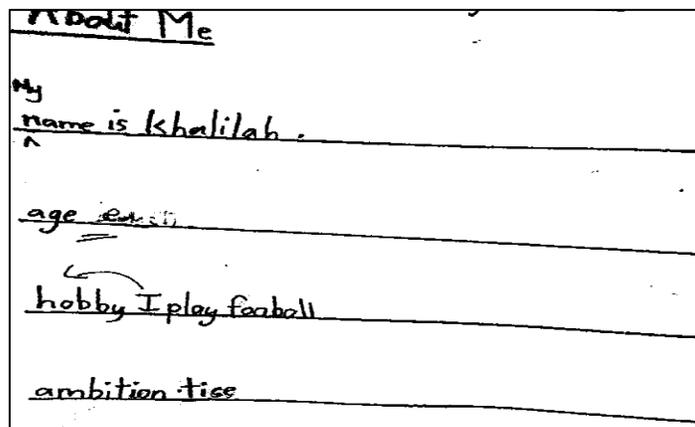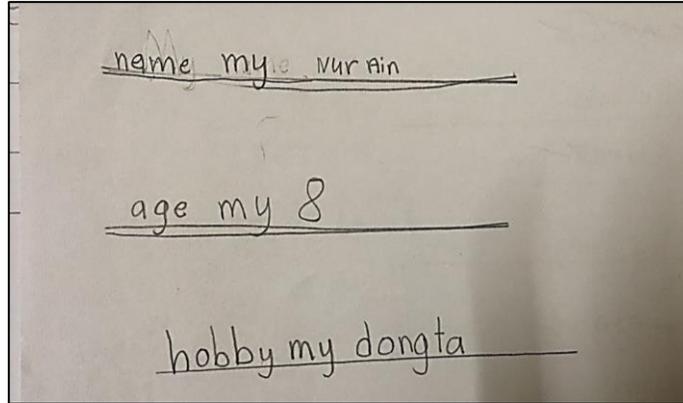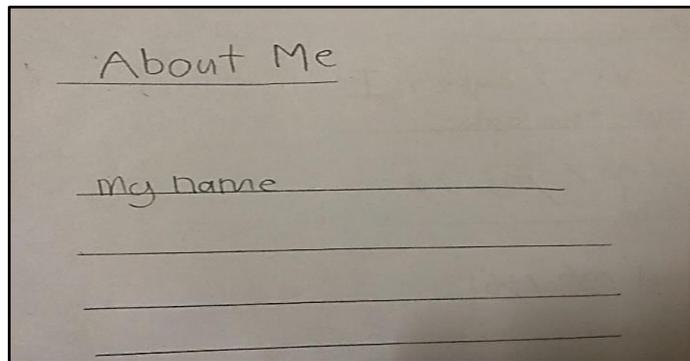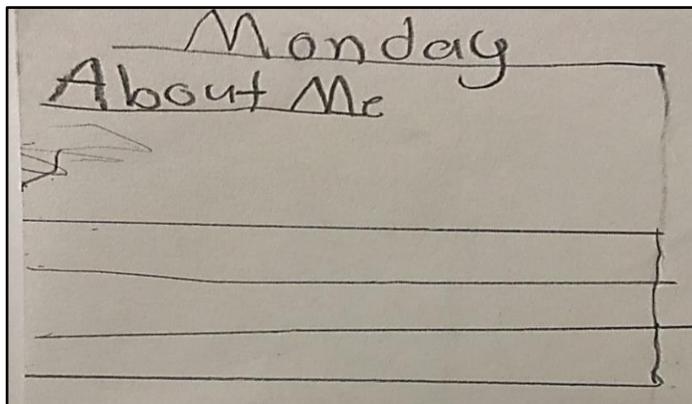
Figure 2: Example of pupil's work

Figure 3: Example of pupil's work

The excerpts were some of the examples from pupils' work when they were asked to write simple personal information about themselves (name, age, hobby, ambition). Based on the excerpts shared show that participants have problems constructing even simple sentences. The errors such as sentence structure and grammatical mistakes are the most obvious errors committed by the participants. 70% of the participants still need help and guidance from the teachers to construct simple sentences because they are unsure about the correct way to write them. This writing problem is more obvious in 2B compared to 2A as they are considered low proficiency learners. Most of the pupils could not even finish writing the sentences and just left the page blank. The evidence is attached below:

Figure 4: Example of pupil's work

Figure 5: Example of pupil's work

Based on the excerpts, it is proven that pupils in the school have problems with writing skills, and essential measures need to be taken to cater to this problem. The participants could not construct simple sentences even if minimal guidance was given by teachers. Some of them did not even try, thus showing the motivation they have for learning, especially in writing. Next, the data from the pupil's work which focuses more on simple sentence construction (SVO), were analyzed. Unlike the first task, where the pupils needed to write their personal details, this exercise was about arranging and rewriting the sentences based on the subject, verb, and object given. Most of the participants in 2A were able to complete this activity with flying colours. The examples are as follows:
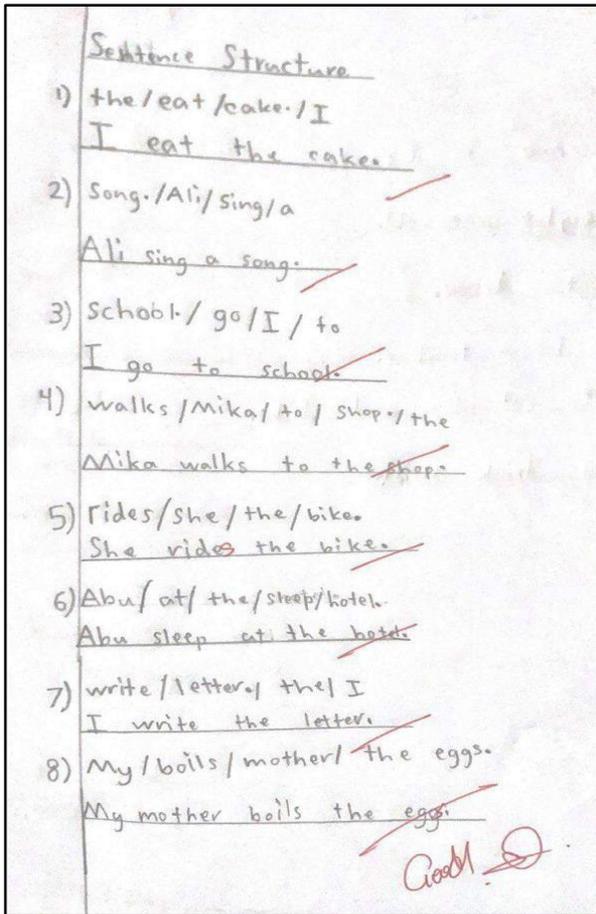

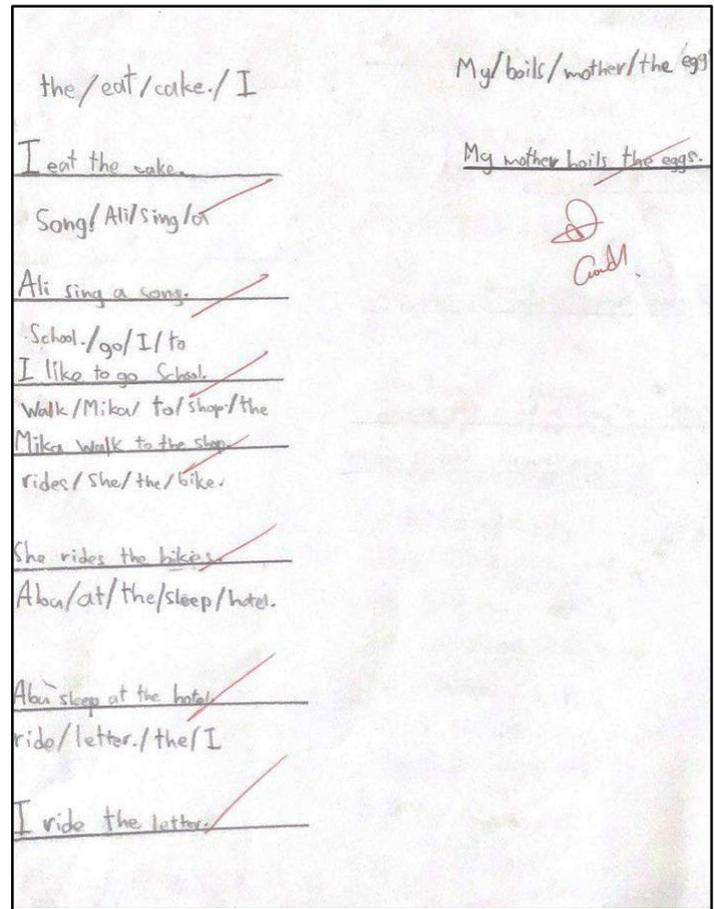**Figure 6: Example of pupil's work**

Figure 7: Example of pupil's work

The excerpts above are taken from participants who are in 2A, and 80% of them are able to identify and write the correct sentences according to the SVO rules correctly. However, the same scenario was not portrayed in the other class 2B as they still have problems writing the simple sentences (SVO) even though the language support and examples have been given. The examples are as follows:
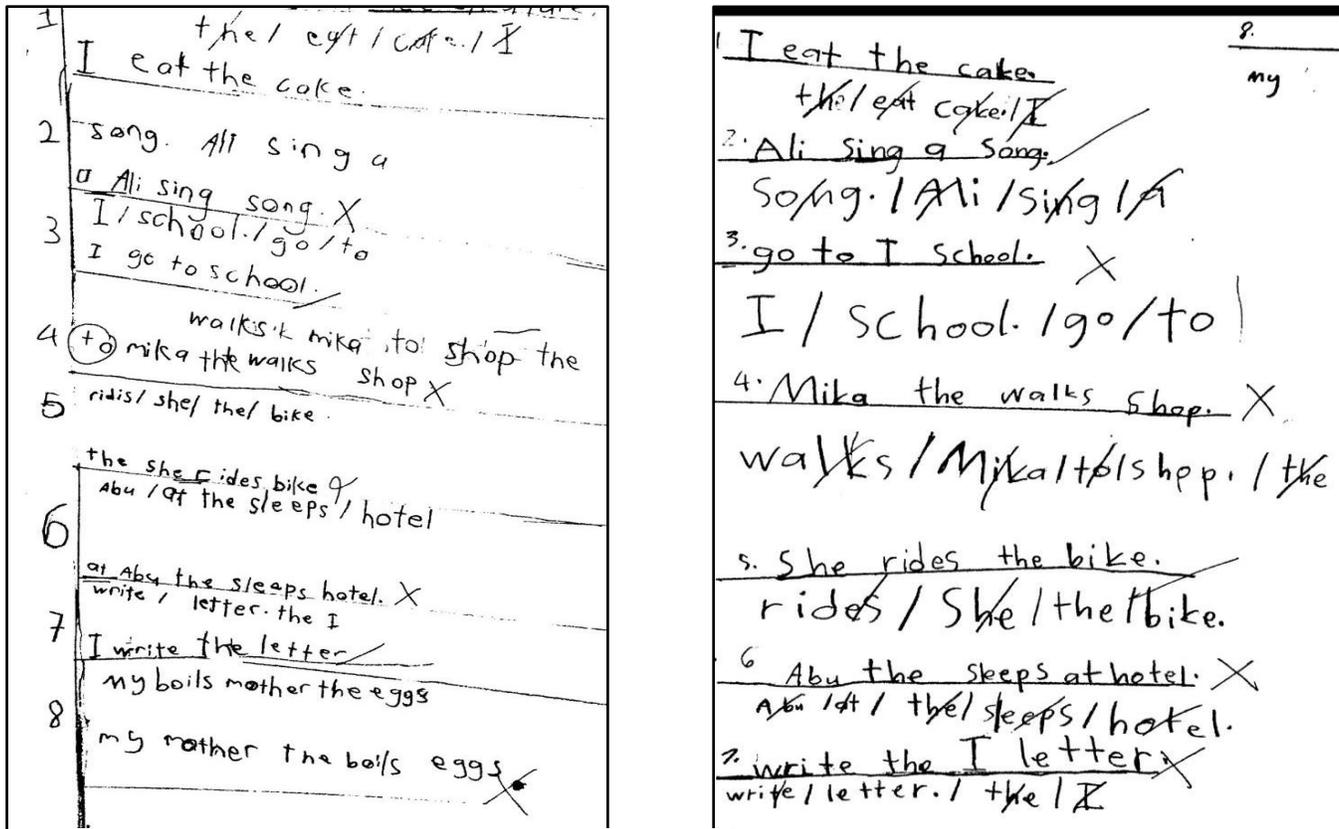
Figure 9: Example of pupil's work

The excerpts above explained that the participants have similar problems in writing, which is in constructing simple sentences. The participants could not arrange the words which indicated the SVO rules properly. The exercise given is suitable for their level and Year 2 syllabus. However, from the analysis, the pupils are still struggling to construct simple sentences. Minor errors such as punctuation (capital letters, full stop) and spelling errors can also be discovered through document analysis.

From the above findings, it can be concluded that both assessment by teachers through SBA and pupil's work assessment, the participants who could be considered as weak pupils in writing skills are almost the same and quite high. 58.67 % of the participants are only in Band 3, which is considered 'satisfactory' only. If no proper measure is taken to cater to this problem, their level of proficiency could shift down to Band 1 or Band 2, thus leading to a much bigger problem. The pupils who are in Band 2 until Band 3 can be considered weak learners because maximum guidance is still needed from the teachers to help them with their writing performance.

The findings from the pupil's work assessment also showed a clearer problem among the Year 2 pupils as they could not arrange and identify the subject, verb, or object (SVO) to form proper simple sentences. 36 out of 75 of the pupils were not able to write simple sentences correctly in the SVO exercise given. These numbers are half of the participants in this study which is worrying because it means half of the pupils are having difficulties in writing skills. Based on the findings from the SBA and pupil's work, it can be concluded that the Year 2 pupils are not able to write simple sentences properly; hence it is much needed for researchers or teachers to reach out to these students before it is too late.

5. Conclusion
To conclude, the screening methods employed had helped the researchers to identify the weak pupils in writing skills among Year 2 pupils in the primary school selected. For further study, researchers could continue to screen the students and explore the use of different writing tests or assessments. The limitations of my study were the number of pupils was quite small, and it could not justify the performance of every pupil in Malaysia. In the future, researchers could also expand the study for further research by employing new interventions to assist the weak learners with a bigger number of participants. Through the Write-It-Right Programme, which emphasizes task-based learning methods, it is hoped that it can help the pupils to improve their writing skills, specifically in simple sentence construction. Plus, as it is shown in this study that learners are having difficulties at different levels,

further research could propose a differentiation approach to help them to acquire the skill better. As much as it is important to design a proper intervention, it is of utmost importance for us to identify the struggling learners first.

Thus, to close the difference between the low proficiency learners and high proficiency learners as well as to promote successful learning, schools must adequately prepare teachers to identify struggling learners, and teachers must design effective strategies and interventions to assist them in improving their language skills, especially in writing. Early detection and help to these weak learners can make a difference in their academic performance. Therefore, the collaboration between the policymakers, school administrators, and teachers to elevate our pupil's performance in English, specifically in writing, is vital for our future generation's potential.

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