# The Role of Speed of Lexical Retrieval in Continuous Second Language Fictional Essays

**SHARIFA EDA ALKAFF**

*Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan Taman Setiawangsa, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia*

## ABSTRACT

This study attempts to explore the relative importance of speed of lexical retrieval in improving continuous writing in a second language. The research was designed under the paradigm of quantitative research. It was observed that many students are unable to write good fictional essays due to their inability to use strong verbs to describe specifically the activities of their characters which have rendered their essays dull and boring. Furthermore, as these students could not retrieve words or grammatical structures in the second language fluently, they were unable to write 350 words in the fictional continuous writing category within the limited time given (one hour). It can be inferred that speed of lexical retrieval would help to improve second language learner's writing skills. This study involved 34 average Malay students. Therefore, exercises in the form of strong verbs were given and tests were conducted to measure whether students were able to use strong verbs quickly and improve the writing performance in the second language. The results show that the usage of strong verbs had indeed helped to improve ESL students' accuracy in their written work and the speed of lexical retrieval had increased as well.

**Keywords: Speed of lexical retrieval, ESL writing, strong verbs**

## Introduction

Lexical retrieval is an essential sub-skill in fluent language production. In the case of writing essays, lexical retrieval is important in contexts with imposed time restrictions (Snellings, Van Gelderen, & De Glopper, 2004). As essay writing is an essential component in Malaysian national examinations such as the Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) and the Form Three Examination (PT3), students need to be proficient in writing and demonstrating their proficiency in this skill in different genres such as in factual, argumentative and fictional essays. Writing in the second language is a demanding skill as it involves knowing and being able to use a formal variety of language that needs to be learned. It is a difficult task as students need to be competent in lexical retrieval in order to write proficient essays (Schoonen, Van Gelderen, De Glopper, Hulstijn, Simis, Snellings, & Stevenson, 2003). Writing skills must be learned and practiced through experience, especially in classrooms. It has been observed that learners of English as a second language (ESL) have problems in writing essays as they need to devise new ideas while incorporating information into new texts, as in fictional writing. Furthermore, they appear to find it difficult to express their thoughts and opinions in the English Language (Abdul Rashid Mohamed, Goh & Wan Rose Eliza, 2004). Additionally, Snellings et al's (2004) study demonstrated that by enhancing the speed of lexical retrieval, students' ability in writing essays had increased. They were able to retrieve and use the words effectively in their essays using the Written Productive Translation Task (WPTT). This is similar to Chenoweth and Hayes' study (2001) which showed that even two to three semesters of second language instruction would make a difference in L2 writing essays. Training students to focus on speed will reduce the cognitive demands of lexical retrieval in foreign language writing. Once lexical retrieval proceeds effortlessly, it can help students to retrieve the necessary vocabulary directly without having to simplify the words. In addition, enhanced lexical retrieval may enable a faster retrieval process. The writer is also free to select suitable words for usage (Zimmerman, 2000). As little research has been done on the speed of lexical retrieval in the Malaysian secondary schools context, it is imperative to get an insight into the process of lexical retrieval in written second language production. The implication of this finding is that in teaching, attention should also focus on speed of lexical retrieval and not only on teaching words and their meanings. Students' speed of lexical retrieval will be measured using reaction times (RTs) which refers to the interval time between application of a stimulus and detection of a response (*The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, 2004).

## The linguistic threshold hypothesis

This study revolves around the linguistic threshold hypothesis. The linguistic threshold hypothesis (LTH) (Cummins, 1984) emphasises academic skills from the perspective of second language development. Cummins believes that there is an important type of language proficiency which he labels as Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP). CALP refers to students' ability to understand and express, in both oral and written modes, concepts and ideas that are relevant to success in school. CALP is used while performing in an academic setting. CALP is the ability to think in and use a language as a tool for learning. Cummins's (1984) research suggests that K-12 students need 5 to 7 years to acquire CALP in the second language if the learner has native language literacy. However, if learners do not have strong native language literacy, they often need 7-10 years to acquire CALP in the second language. CALP usually occurs in academic situations

where higher order thinking skills, such as analysis, synthesis and evaluation are required in the curriculum. Language is hidden from a meaningful, supportive context and students rely on linguistic cues and knowledge about language and text to understand meanings (Baker, 2006).

Therefore, this hypothesis stresses on the critical level of second language development, regardless of the first language proficiency, and until this threshold is reached, the individual may have weak academic skills in the second language (Alderson, 1984; Clarke, 1980). Hence, low second language proficiency is conceptualized as a second language problem rather than the problem related to the first language. Within this framework, the problem of weak academic skills such as writing ought to be rectified on the principle that it further develops second language skills. In addition, the threshold hypothesis proposes that a bilingual child must achieve a minimum level of lexical retrieval to avoid cognitive disadvantage. This allows the potentially beneficial aspects of bilingualism to influence his/her cognitive and academic functions. Thus, teachers ought to create suitable activities for students' involvement in the writing task, moving from easy tasks to increasing cognitively challenging activities. For example copying sentences might be appropriate for a beginner but more cognitively demanding and context-reduced task such as writing a standardized test would be a task for advanced learners.

Likewise, Verhoeven (2006) attempted to find empirical evidence for this hypothesis by studying 98 six year-old Turkish children. A longitudinal design monitored the development of lexical, pragmatic, phonological and literacy abilities in the children's first and second languages. Pragmatic, phonological and literacy skills appeared positive for the interdependence in bilingual development. Thus, this study is carried out to discover whether students can enhance on their writing skills using the speed of lexical retrieval.

**Research questions**

This present study seeks to reveal the effectiveness of strong verbs using the speed of lexical retrieval to improve the overall quality of written essays in a second language.
Therefore, this study is guided by the following research questions:
1. What is the correlation between the strong verbs and students' achievement in the pre-test and post-test?
2. What is the relationship between speed of lexical retrieval and students' correct scores in the cloze passages test?
3. What is the relationship between the speed of English Lexical Retrieval Test and the students' reaction times (RTs)?
4. What are the reaction times (RTs) for pre-test (mid-year examination) and post-test (essay test)?

## Methodology

This section presents in detail the methodology of the study which comprises quantitative measures. The major aim of the study was to investigate the outcome of usage of strong verbs using speed of lexical retrieval, thus this study focus on a quasi-experimental design.

### *Research design*

The strong verbs used in this study are the independent variables whereas English Essay tests scores, Cloze Passage Test scores, English Lexical Retrieval Test (Appendix G) scores are dependent variables. The strong verbs will be manipulated to affect the test scores. Ary, Jacobs and Razavieh (2002) state that a quasi-experimental design is a suitable design to demonstrate how one variable has influenced the other variable.

The research design shown in Figure 1 is a systematic plan to investigate whether the usage of strong verbs used by ESL learners improved the quality of written essays and simultaneously increased their reaction times (RTs). This design of the current study is adapted from Schoonen et al's (2003) and Kamimura's (2000) studies. Figure 1 below summarises the research design of this study.

The design firstly focused on the students' usage of strong verbs, which were then compared between pre-test and post-test. Next, the teacher provides students exercises to enhance their usage of strong verbs. Later, the relationship between students' Reaction Times (RTs) and students' correct scores in the cloze passages test were measured. Later, the relationship between the students' Reaction times (RTs) were compared with the students' correct scores in the English Lexical Retrieval Test. Finally, the reaction times (RTs) for pre-test (mid-year examination) and post-test (essay test) were also collated.
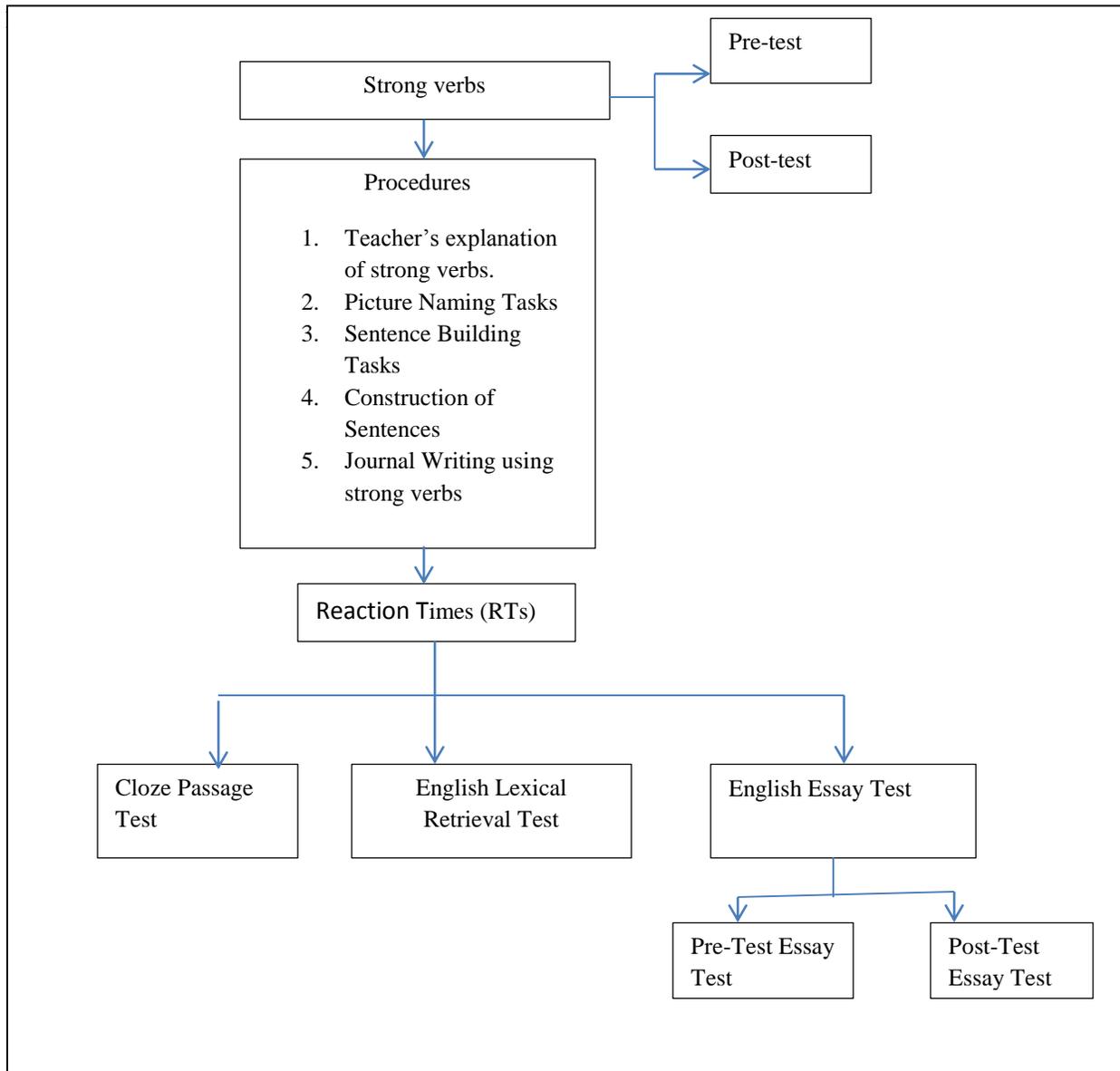
**Figure 1. Research design**

## *Participants*

This study involved 34 Malay secondary students who were from Class 4X. The major problem that had been identified in this study concerns problems in writing essays by students at the secondary level. Hence, Malay students were selected due to the researcher's accessibility to the sample population. 14 male students and 20 female students participated in the study.  Table 1 shows the band scores that were rated according to the English Upper Form essay marking rubrics. This evaluation rubric is adopted from the English Upper Form essay marking syllabus, while Table 2 presents the scores from Form 4X students' mid-year continuous essay test (pre-test).

**Table 1. Essay marking rubrics**

| Grade/Level | Band Scores |
|---|---|
| Excellent (A) | 45 – 50 |
| Good (B) | 39- 44 |
| Average (C) | 33-38 |
| Weak (D) | 27-32 |
| Unsatisfactory (E) | 20-26 |
| Fail (F) | 0- 19 |

**Table 2. Mid-year examination scores of Form 4X**

| GRADE/LEVEL | Band Scores | MID-YEAR EXAMINATION | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | | Number of students | Percentage of students |
| Excellent (A) | 45 – 50 | 1 | 2.94% |
| Good (B) | 39- 44 | 4 | 11.8% |
| Average (C) | 33-38 | 7 | 20.6% |
| Weak (D) | 27-32 | 9 | 26.5% |
| Unsatisfactory (E) | 20-26 | 8 | 26.5% |
| Fail (F) | 0- 19 | 4 | 11.8% |
| | | Total =34 | 100% |

Most of the students had obtained unsatisfactory marks in the examination due to the usage of general verbs in their essays to describe the actions of their characters in their essays. Hence, it is imperative that a solution is found to improve students' essays and simultaneously increase students' marks. General verbs refer to linguistic name for verbs which express a general action (Nordquist, 1991). Dornyei (1995) further declares that second language students tend to apply general verbs such as 'do', 'take', 'make' and 'keep' in all-purpose sentences which have little or no meaning outside the context of their particular use. Hence, these students find it quite difficult to write accurately what they mean. Therefore, 20 general verbs were chosen from the students'

essays which were used often by students and 100 strong verbs were identified to replace the 20 general verbs stated (Refer to Appendix A).

This study is in line with Cumming's (1981) study which examined 23 selected young adult Francophone students in a French (L1)/English (L2) bilingual program in Canada. The study found that as the young adults gain proficiency in their second language, they were able to write more proficiently in their essays. Kamimura (2000) also implies that writers' knowledge in second language especially in verbs might improve the quality of their text.

*Procedures*

Table 3 shows the summary of the sessions, procedures/tests and duration of time to measure students' speed of lexical retrieval. Table 3 shows that throughout one month, students were exposed to exercises on strong verbs. Firstly, they were instructed to read a passage and later underline the verbs in the passage. The teacher explained that the verbs underlined were general verbs. Then, the teacher gave a hand-out containing 100 strong verbs such as 'devour', 'chew', 'nibble', 'consume', 'bite', 'gobble', 'swallow', 'guzzle' and 'crunch' to replace the general verbs such as 'eat', 'walk' and 'talk' (refer to Appendix A). Students were discouraged to write general verbs and they were instructed to construct sentences using strong verbs. After that, students were instructed to name the activities that the individuals and animals had depicted in Picture Naming Tasks. Next, the students were instructed to complete sentences using suitable words (refer to Appendix B).  Later, the students constructed 30 sentences based on the 30 specified verbs given by the teacher (Appendix C). Finally, the students were required to write journals using as many of the strong verbs given as possible (Appendix D). The exercises were created based on the researcher's discussion with a few English teachers.

**Table 3. Summary of sessions, procedures/tests and duration of time**

| Session | Activity | Procedures | Duration of time |
|---|---|---|---|
| First session (first week and second week of June 2013) | Activity 1 | **Strong Verbs**: Teacher distributed a passage. Teacher later explained about the usage of strong verbs to replace general verbs. | 80 minutes (2 periods) |
| Second session (third week of June 2013) | Activity 2 | **Picture Naming Task :** Students named the activities that the individuals and animals did. | 40 minutes (1 period) |
| Third session (third week of June 2013) | Activity 3 | **Sentences Building Task**: Students were presented with the beginning of 30 sentences comprising 30 strong verbs and they had to complete the sentences. | 40 minutes (1 period) |
| Fourth session (fourth week of June 2013) | Activity 4 | **Construction of Sentences**: Students construct 30 sentences using 30 strong verbs. | 40 minutes ( 1 period) |
| Fifth session (fourth week of June 2013) | Activity 5 | **Journal Writing :** Students wrote a journal on their activities during the weekends using strong verbs. | 80 minutes ( 2 periods) |
| Sixth session (first week of July 2013) | Test 1 | **Cloze Passage Test:** Students filled in the blanks with suitable strong verbs. | 40 minutes (1 period) |
| Seventh session (second week of July 2013) | Test 2 | **English Lexical Retrieval Test :** Students translated Malay sentences into English sentences. | 40 minutes ( 1 period) |
| Eight session (third week of July 2013) | Test 3 | **English Essay Test:** Students composed English factual essays. | 1 hour Total : **6 hours** |

The instruments used in this study were three types of tests. They were:

    i.       Cloze Passage Test
    ii.      English Lexical Retrieval Test
    iii.     English Essay Test

i.       Cloze Passage Test

In the test for speed of Cloze Passage Test (see Appendix E), students had to fill in the blanks of three cloze passages with suitable verbs. A set of English cloze tests which comprised three sub-tests with ten blanks in each test were administered to the students. This cloze test was used to complement the writing test and to examine the students' ability in retrieving the strong verbs. One blank is for one specified verb only. Students' speed in doing this test was measured for reaction times (RTs). Reactions times refer to students' correct scores divided with the time gained by students. The correct answer was given 1 mark. The incorrect answer was not given any marks. The scores were graded according to the English Word Choice Scoring Rubric which was adapted from TOEFL, Vancouver Public Schools and Upper Form English Syllabus (Refer to Appendix F).

ii.      English Lexical Retrieval Test

In the test for speed of English Lexical Retrieval Test, students were required to translate 30 Malay sentences into English sentences within the allocation of one hour. The aim of this test was to tap into the efficiency of the retrieval process in L2 writing. In this test, the native language (Bahasa Malaysia) was used as the researcher noted that students normally think in their first language to construct sentences in the second language (English). This observation is in line with Widdowson (1990), who affirmed that a writer's first language plays a significant role in the development of second language writing. In addition, Friedlander (1990) affirms that learners use their first language when generating ideas and attending to details while writing in the second language. Native straightforward translation words were used so that the participants might comprehend the words. This is because the process of retrieving words from memory and writing the words down in context is similar to the process involved in actual writing. In addition, the written format in this test makes it possible to test the whole class of students simultaneously without the need for laboratory conditions. The scores were later rated according to the English Word Choice Scoring Rubric which is adapted from TOEFL, Vancouver Public Schools and Upper Form English Syllabus (refer to Appendix G) and later measured for reaction times (RTs). Besides that, the usage of general verbs in the sentences was deemed as incorrect. The correct sentence was given 1 mark. The incorrect sentence was not given any marks at all. The evaluation solely focussed on the precise verbs that the teacher had taught earlier and not on other aspects of grammar.

iii.    English Essay Test

In the test for speed of English Essay Test, students were instructed to write an essay of about 350 words for the question 'A Frightening Experience'. The English Essay Test was used to examine the participants' ability to use strong verbs in writing. Moreover, the length was considered

suitable as it would provide enough data to measure the participants' proficiency in vocabulary. The time allocated for each test was one hour. Ample time was given so that participants would use precise words and grammar to convey their thoughts and opinions. The topic was utilized as the data-gathering instrument for second language text to examine the participants' lexical retrieval. Before the start of this test, the researcher again briefed the students about strong verbs so that students would understand the usage of the strong verbs and used them specifically in the test. Students were instructed to write an essay of about 350 words for the question 'A Frightening Experience'. Students composed an English continuous essay 'A Frightening Experience' in one hour. No discussion was allowed. The students were not allowed to refer to dictionaries. The students' essays were measured for reaction times (RTs).

**Results**

The results are discussed according to the research questions of the study. The first concerns the effectiveness of strong verbs that is the correlation between the strong verbs and students' achievement in the pre-test and post-test.

Table 4 shows that the mean score for the post test (M=41.7) is higher than the pre-test (M=30). The researcher observed that during the post-test, the number of students who obtained excellent result (grade A) was 10 students compared to only 1 student in the mid-year examination (pre-test). Furthermore, the number of students who obtained good result (grade B) in the post-test was 17 compared to only 4 students in the pre-test. Moreover, the number of students who obtained average (grade C) was 7, which was similar to 7 students in the pre-test. There were 9 weak students in the pre-test while there were no weak students in the post-test at all. The number of students who obtained unsatisfactory (grade E) in the pre-test was 9 students whereas there were no unsatisfactory students in the post test. Nobody failed in the post test compared to 4 students who failed the pre-test. Thus, there is a positive relationship between the specific verbs and students' achievement in the pre-test and post-test essay in the essay test.

**Table 4. Mid-year examination and final examination scores of Form 4 – usage of strong verbs**

| Grade/Level | Band Score | Mid-Year Examination | | | Final Examination | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | Number of students | Percentage of students | Scores | Number of students | Percentage of students | Scores |
| Excellent (A) | 45 – 50 | 1 | 2.94% | 45 | 10 | 29.4% | 45,46,47,48,49, 48,45,46,47,48 |
| Good (B) | 39- 44 | 4 | 11.8% | 44, 39,40,41 | 17 | 50% | 39,40,41,42,43, 44,39,40,41,42, 43,44,44,40,39, 40,41 |
| Average (C) | 33-38 | 7 | 20.6% | 33, 34,35,35, 36,37,38 | 7 | 21% | 33,34,35,36,37, 38,33 |
| Weak (D) | 27-32 | 9 | 26.5% | 27,27,27, 28,28,29, 30,31,32 | - | | |
| Unsatisfactory (E) | 20-26 | 9 | 26.5% | 20,21,22, 23,24,25, 26,26,26 | - | | |
| Fail (F) | 0- 19 | 4 | 11.8% | | - | | |
| | | Total =34 | 100% | | Total = 34 | 100% | |
| | Mean | 30 | | | Mean | 41.7 | |
| | Standard Deviation | 7.9 | | | Standard Deviation | 0.8 | |

The second research question addressed the relationship between the speed of lexical retrieval and students' correct scores in the cloze passages test. Table 5 illustrates the results of the cloze passages test and students' reaction times (RTs). The higher the usage of specified verbs, the higher the reactions times (RTs= 0.93) and the higher the writing performance (28 correct scores).

**Table 5. Results of the cloze passages test and students' reaction times (RTs)**

| Grade/Level | Band Score | Number of students | Percentage of students | Students' correct scores (out of 30 blanks) | | Time scores (minutes) | Reaction Times (RTs) = students' correct score/time |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | Number of students | Scores | | |
| Excellent | 26-30 | 11 | 32.4% | 1 | 28 | 30 | 0.93 |
| | | | | 5 | 28 | 40 | 0.7 |
| | | | | 5 | 26 | 40 | 0.65 |
| Good | 20-25 | 10 | 29.4% | 2 | 25 | 40 | 0.63 |
| | | | | 4 | 24 | 40 | 0.6 |
| | | | | 2 | 23 | 40 | 0.58 |
| | | | | 2 | 22 | 40 | 0.55 |
| Average | 15-19 | 7 | 20.6% | 1 | 19 | 40 | 0.48 |
| | | | | 1 | 18 | 40 | 0.45 |
| | | | | 3 | 17 | 40 | 0.43 |
| | | | | 1 | 16 | 40 | 0.4 |
| | | | | 1 | 15 | 40 | 0.38 |
| Passable | 10-14 | 6 | 17.6% | 1 | 14 | 40 | 0.35 |
| | | | | 1 | 13 | 40 | 0.35 |
| | | | | 2 | 12 | 40 | 0.35 |
| | | | | 2 | 11 | 40 | 0.35 |
| Weak | 02-09 | - | -- | - | - | - | - |
| Fail | 01 | - | - | - | - | - | - |

The third research question addressed the relationship of speed of the English Lexical Retrieval Test and students' reaction times (RTs). Table 6 shows the relationship between the speed of English Lexical Retrieval Test and the students' reaction times (RTs).

**Table 6. The relationship between the speed of English Lexical Retrieval Test and the students' reaction times**

| Grade/Level | Band Score | Number of students | Percentage | Students' Correct Sentence Scores | | Time Scores | Reaction Times (RTs) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | Scores | Number of Students | | |
| Excellent | 26-30 | 15 | 44.1% | 29 | 2 | 30 | 0.97 |
| | | | | 28 | 5 | 40 | 0.7 |
| | | | | 27 | 5 | 40 | 0.68 |
| | | | | 26 | 3 | 40 | 0.65 |
| Good | 20-25 | 9 | 26.5% | 25 | 1 | 40 | 0.63 |
| | | | | 24 | 2 | 40 | 0.6 |
| | | | | 23 | 1 | 40 | 0.58 |
| | | | | 20 | 5 | 40 | 0.5 |
| Average | 15-19 | 7 | 20.6% | 19 | 2 | 40 | 0.48 |
| | | | | 18 | 2 | 40 | 0.45 |
| | | | | 17 | 1 | 40 | 0.43 |
| | | | | 16 | 1 | 40 | 0.4 |
| | | | | 15 | 1 | 40 | 0.38 |
| Passable | 10-14 | 3 | 8.8% | 14 | 1 | 40 | 0.35 |
| | | | | 13 | 1 | 40 | 0.33 |
| | | | | 12 | 1 | 40 | 0.3 |
| Weak | 02-09 | - | - | - | - | - | - |
| Fail | 01 | - | - | - | - | - | - |

Most students were able to translate the 30 Malay sentences to English sentences. Two students were able to complete the test ten minutes before time. The rest of the students managed to finish the test on time. 15 students were able to gain excellent results with 44.1% while 9 students achieved good grades with 26.5%. 7 students scored average result with 20.6% and 3 students gained a pass with 8.8%. Nobody failed in this test. The speed of English Retrieval Test correlates positively (RTs = 0.97) with the high scores that were obtained by the students.

The fourth research question addressed the reaction times (RTs) for the tests. Table 7 displays the reaction times (RTs) for pre-test (mid-year examination) and post-test (essay test).

**Table 7. Results of reaction times (RTs) for pre-test and post-test**

| Grade/Level | Band Scores | English Essay Test (Mid-year Examination/Pre-test) | | | | English Essay Test (Post-test) | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | No. of students | Scores | Time Score | Reaction Times (RTs) = scores/time | No. of students | Scores | Time Score | Reaction Times (RTs) = Scores/time |
| Excellent (A) | 45-50 | 1 | 45 | 60 | 0.75 | 4 | 47 | 60 | 0.78 |
| | | | | | | 4 | 46 | 60 | 0.77 |
| | | | | | | 2 | 45 | 60 | 0.75 |
| Good (B) | 39-44 | 2 | 43 | 60 | 0.72 | 9 | 44 | 60 | 0.75 |
| | | 2 | 40 | 60 | 0.67 | 8 | 43 | 60 | 0.72 |
| Average (C) | 33-38 | 4 | 38 | 60 | 0.63 | 2 | 38 | 60 | 0.63 |
| | | 1 | 35 | 60 | 0.58 | 2 | 37 | 60 | 0.62 |
| | | 1 | 34 | 60 | 0.57 | 2 | 36 | 60 | 0.60 |
| | | 1 | 33 | 60 | 0.55 | 1 | 35 | 60 | 0.58 |
| Weak (D) | 27-32 | 2 | 31 | 60 | 0.52 | - | - | - | - |
| | | 2 | 30 | 60 | 0.5 | | | | |
| | | 2 | 29 | 60 | 0.48 | | | | |
| | | 2 | 28 | 60 | 0.47 | | | | |
| | | 1 | 27 | 60 | 0.45 | | | | |
| Unsatisfactory (E) | 20-26 | 3 | 25 | 60 | 0.42 | - | - | - | - |
| | | 4 | 24 | 60 | 0.4 | | | | |
| | | 2 | 20 | 60 | 0.33 | | | | |
| Fail (F) | 0-19 | 2 | 18 | 60 | 0.3 | - | - | - | - |
| | | 1 | 15 | 60 | 0.25 | | | | |
| | | 1 | 14 | 60 | 0.23 | | | | |

In the pre-test, the maximum scores in the excellent grade category was 45/50 while the maximum scores in the post-test was 47/50. Thus, the Reaction Times (RTs) correlate positively with the scores. The higher the marks (47/50, 46/50, 45/50), the higher the Reaction Times (0. 78, 0.77, 0.75). In the good grade category in the pre-test, the Reaction Times (RTs) in the pre-test were slower (0.72) than the Reaction Times (RTs) in the post-test (0.75).  In the average grade, the Reaction Times (RTs) in the pre-test and the post-test were the same (0.63) and later the Reaction Times (RTs) were slower (0.58, 0.57, 0.55) in the pre-test compared to the Reaction Times (RTs) (0.62, 0.60,0.58) in the post-test. Reaction Times (RTs) only existed in the weak, unsatisfactory and failing grade. In the weak grade, Reaction Times (RTs) were 0.52, 0.5, 0.48, 0.47 and 0.45. In the unsatisfactory grade, Reaction Times (RTs) were 0.43, 0.4 and 0.33 while in the failing grade, the Reaction Times (RTs) were 0.3, 0.25 and 0.23.

Figure 2 shows the percentage of students' achievement marks of pre-post Essay Test and post-test Essay Test.
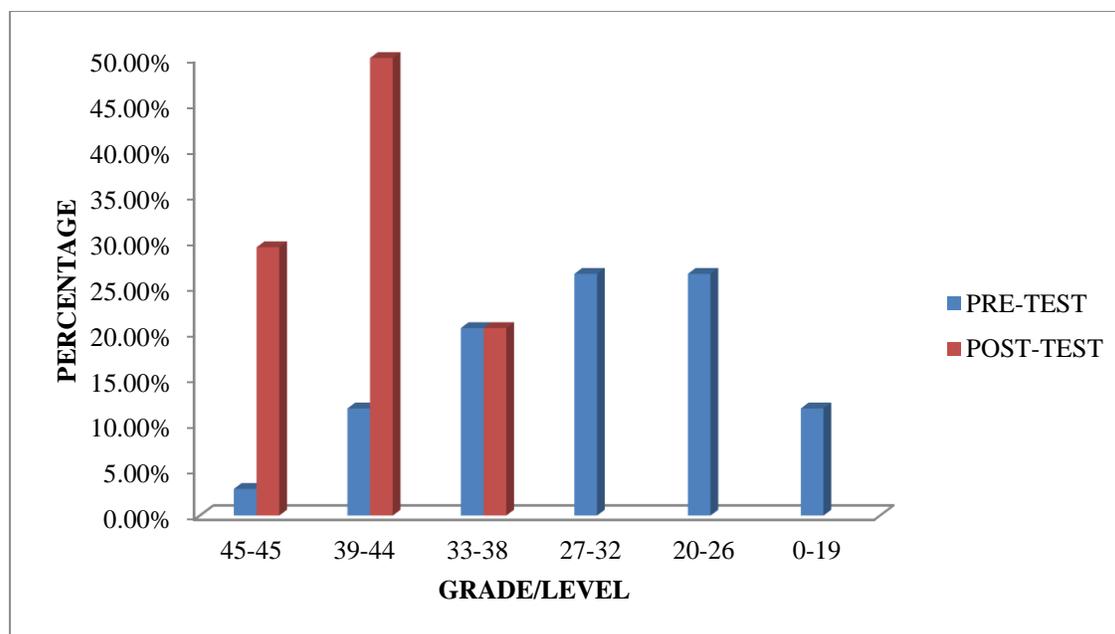
**Figure 2. The percentage of students' achievement marks of pre-post/post-test essay test**

## Discussion

The focus of this study was to explore whether the usage of strong verbs and the speed of lexical retrieval improves essay writing skills. To summarise the findings, the four research questions were analysed. The first question was concerned about the effectiveness of strong verbs. There was a correlation between the strong verbs and students' achievement in the pre-test and post-test essay in the essay test. The second question investigated the relationship between the speed of lexical retrieval and students' correct scores in the cloze passages test. There was an association of the reaction times (RTs) and the students' writing performance. The third question analysed the relationship between the speed of English Lexical Retrieval Test and the students' reaction times (RTs). The findings showed that the speed of English Lexical Retrieval Test interacted positively with the students' reaction times (RTs) thus the writing performance of the students became better. The fourth question compared the reaction times (RTs) for pre-test (mid-year examination) and post-test (essay test). The marks connect positively with the Reaction Times (RTs).

The study's findings can help Malay ESL students to gain proficiency in second language essays by writing strong verbs in their essays quickly and appropriately within the time frame given. As students are able to retrieve the strong verbs easily, they are able to express their ideas more intelligently, consequently, having sufficient cognitive capacity in their working memory for other higher level processes of writing such as text structuring. Thus, this could enhance the writing process and improve the students' writing performance. Hence, lexical retrieval has a positive influence on second language writing development.

It is also hoped that this study would be catalyst for teachers to help weak and average students in writing second language essays by using accurate specific verbs within the time restriction given

(one hour). Teachers should also realise that it is not sufficient to teach verbs and their meanings only as students need to retrieve strong verbs and use them accurately in their essays. In addition, teachers should increase students' awareness of storing strong verbs in their working memory by using the exercises stated earlier so that students would be able to retrieve the strong verbs using increased speed competently, and subsequently improve their writing performance.

**Conclusion**

It is undoubtedly true that writing for second language learners is a challenging process. It is apparent that many second language learners do not possess strong verbs and speed of lexical retrieval ability to produce good texts. The main focus of this study was to determine whether students were able to retrieve strong verbs quickly in second language essays thus helping them to write better essays. The findings from this study suggest that speed of lexical retrieval plays an important feature in the writing production in the second language especially in contexts with time restrictions imposed (Levelt; 1989, Snellings et al. 2004). In this study, the speed measure correlates with writing proficiency. Besides, the usage of strong verbs contributes significantly towards second language writing. The findings of this study also corroborate the linguistic threshold hypothesis. A few studies have been done to test the linguistic threshold hypothesis such as John and Mayes (1990) who demonstrated that students who have better second language proficiency can write productive essays.

The present study shows promising findings on strong verbs and speed of lexical retrieval therefore, it is anticipated that teachers would consider incorporating this approach in language classes in order to assist students to improve essay writing. Nevertheless, the findings of this study are limited due to its dependency on the data obtained from the students. Besides, this study only focuses on strong verbs and speed of lexical retrieval. Therefore, further research should focus on other linguistic items such as vocabulary in order to assist students to write productive essays and identify the best technique to increase speed of lexical retrieval in writing. Moreover, as little attention is given to the usage of dictionaries while composing in the second language, it would be useful to investigate whether or not the usage of dictionaries is able to increase the students' speed of lexical retrieval and strong verbs. In addition, a focus on speed of lexical retrieval is still lacking in educational practice especially in second language writing, whereas previous research such as McCutchen's (2000) study recommends that the speed of lexical retrieval plays an important role in fluent writing. Time constraints had also limited the methodological design of this study. A longer period for the administration of the exercises provided would be suitable. Finally, a longitudinal research would provide more evidence in the investigation of various aspects of the role of lexical retrieval speed and essay development, as at this stage, the conclusions that are gained are only preliminary.

## References

Alderson, J. C. (1984). Reading in a foreign language. A reading problem or a language problem? In J. C. Alderson & A. H. Urquhart (Eds.), *Reading in a foreign language* (pp. 122–135). New York: Ablex.

Abdul Rashid Mohamed, Goh L. L. & Wan Rose Eliza. (2004). English errors and Chinese learners. *Sunway College Journal*, 1, 83-97, 2004.

Ary, R., Jacobs, L. C., & Razavieh, A. (2002). *Introduction to research in education*. (6th edition). Orlando: Harcourt Brace College Publishers.

Baker, C. (2006). Bilingual education. In K. Brown (Eds.), *Encyclopaedia of language and linguistics* (2nd ed.) (pp. 772-780). Oxford: Elsevier.

Clarke, M. (1980). The short circuit hypothesis of ESL reading or when language competence interferes with reading performance. *Modern Language Journal, 64*(2), 203–209.

Cummins, J. (1981). The role of primary language development in promoting educational success for language minority students. In C. Leyba (ed.), *Schooling and language minority students: A theoretical framework* (pp.16-62). Sacramento, CA: California Department of Education.

Cummins, J. (1984) *Bilingual education and special education: Issues in assessment and pedagogy.* San Diego: College Hill.

Chenoweth and Hayes (2001). Fluency in writing. Generating text in L1 and L2. *Written Communication*, *18*(1), 80-90.

Dornyei, Z. (1995). On the teachability of communication strategies. *Tesol Quarterly*, *29*(1), 55-83.

Ellior, J. (1991). *Action research for educational change*. Retrieved from http://www.actionresearch.net/living/Erica/bibliogr.pdf

Ferrance, E. (2000). *Action research.* Providence: RI: Brown University.

Johns, A. M., & Mayes, P. (1990). An analysis of summary protocols of university ESL students. *Applied Linguistics*, *11*, 253-271.

Kamimura, T. (2000). Japanese students' L1-L2 writing connections: Written texts, writing competence, composing processes, and writing attitudes. *The Bulletin of the Kanto-Koshin-Etsu English Language Education Society, 15,* 165-183.

Levelt, W. J. M. (1989). *Speaking: From intention to articulation*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

McCutchen, D. (2000). Knowledge, processing and working memory: implications for a theory of writing. *Educational Psychologist*, *35*, 13-23.

Nordquist, R. (1991). *A writer's guide* (Instructor's Edition). New York: St. Martin's Press.

Snellings, P., Van Gelderen, A., & De Glopper, K. (2004). The effect of enhanced lexical retrieval on L2 writing; a classroom experiment. *Applied Psycholinguistics*, *25*(2), 175-200.

Schoonen, R., Van Gelderen, A., De Glopper, K., Hulstijn, J., Simis, A., Snellings, P., & Stevenson, M. (2003). First language and second language writing: The role of linguistic knowledge, speed of processing and metacognitive knowledge. *Language Learning*, *53*, 165-202.

*The American heritage dictionary of the English Language* (4th ed.). (2004). Boston, Ma: Houghton Mifflin Company.

Verhoeven, L. T. (2006). Transfer in bilingual development: The linguistic interdependence hypothesis revisited. *Language Learning*, *44*, 3, 381-415.

Zimmerman, B. J. (2000). Self-Efficacy: *An essential motive to learn. Contemporary Educational Psychology*, 25, 82–91.

**APPENDIX A**

Handout 1

Most of us look  forward to spend our weekends in an interesting manner. This is especially so after five days of hard work. Normally I would always stay at home. However, recently, there was one weekend which I decided to 1.stay somewhere out of home. I decided to stay at my uncle's house at Pontian.  It was the most enjoyable weekend that I had ever experienced.

On the day I arrived at Pontian, my uncle 2. told  me that he would 3. make a raft to 4.use it in the sea. Then he would 5. buy  a fishing net to catch some fish in the shallow waters near the coast. When I heard all this, I was very excited because it was for those reasons that I had decided to spend my weekends at my uncle's house.

On the next day, my uncle and I 6.walked to the forest nearby to collect some tree trunks. On the way, we 7.laughed and 8.made jokes at each other.  I also saw some people 9.running and playing volleyball at the beach. A man was also 10.sleeping under a huge tree. All this was indeed very interesting to look at. As my uncle's house was near to the sea, we decided to  make a raft on the beach itself. It took us almost the whole morning to make the raft. We then 11.ate our lunch and went to town to buy a fishing net. After that, we returned to my uncle's house. My little cousin 12.whined to his father that he wanted to go on the fishing trip but his father disallowed stating that it was dangerous. He  14.  cried but his father was adamant not to allow him to go with us.

In the evening, we put the raft on the sea. The water was still high, but the raft floated quite well.  My uncle 15. shouted with joy. Later, we 16.sat on it and began to row it 17. using the oars that we had made ourselves. We felt very happy indeed and continued to row it. We remained on it for a long time but as it was getting dark, we did not go far. We returned to the shore and tied the raft to a tree.

On the following day, we went out to catch some crabs and fish. We used the net to catch the animals. We managed to catch a lot of crabs and fish. It was really a pleasure to be away from the shore. I felt independant and free. After that, we returned home. I 18.used the money that my parents gaveme to buy some snacks for my cousin.  I spent some time playing with my cousin. We 19. fought  and 20. pushed each other. At that moment, there was a loud explosion. A car had 21. collided with a van at the junction in front of my uncle's house! We helped the victims and sent them to the hospital. After that, my aunty 22.cooked us some delicious curry and ordered me to 23.wash myself. I really enjoyed myself that day!

SPECIFIED VERBS

| GENERAL VERBS | STRONG VERBS |
|---|---|
| 1.  Buy | purchase |
| 2.  Laugh | Giggle /chuckle<br>Cackle (laugh loudly)<br>Smile<br>Roar with laughter<br>Burst out laughing |
| 3.  Run | Sprint (run at full speed at a short distance)<br>Dash (run in a great hurry)<br>Jog<br>Rush (move too quickly)<br>Race |
| 4.  Walk | Stroll (walk leisurely)<br>Stride  (walk with long decisive steps) |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | | Tramp (walk heavily or noisily)<br>Ramble ( walk for pleasure in the countryside)<br>Pace (a single step taken when walking) |
| 5. | Talk | Discuss<br>Chat<br>Banter (friendly teasing)<br>Converse (hold a conversation)<br>Gossip<br>Speak |
| 6. | Cry | Howl  (a loud cry of pain)<br>Sob (cry with loud gaps)<br>Mourn (deep sorrow with the death of someone)<br>Lament (expression of grief)<br>Wail (a long high-pitched cry)<br>Weep |
| 7. | Whine | Complain<br>Grumble (complain in a bad-tempered way)<br>Moan ( a low mournful sound)<br>Whimper  (low weak sounds expressing discontent) |
| 8. | Sleep | Doze off (short, light sleep)<br>Catch Forty winks/catch a wink<br>Nap/take a nap<br>Slumber<br>Snooze (short, light sleep)<br>Snore ( a snorting sound in a person's breathing when they are sleeping)<br>Hit the sack<br>Rest<br>Retire<br>Fall asleep |
| 9. | Sit | Grab a chair<br>Have a seat<br>Perch (sit on the edge of something)<br>Sit down<br>Sit back<br>Sit around<br>Sit astride<br>Sit facing<br>Sit on the bridal dais<br>Sit side by side<br>Sit straddling<br>Sit up<br>Sit with legs streched out |
| 10. | Use money | Spend money on |
| 11. | Stay somewhere or do something for a period of time | Spend |
| 12. | Using | Useful<br>Method<br>Benefit of using something<br>Use |
| 13. | Fight | Usage of  weapons<br>Hit/kick/bite each other<br>Argue<br>Disagree<br>Assault (Violent attack) |

|  | Attack<br>Defy |
|---|---|
| 14. Make | Create something<br>Build<br>Accomplish<br>Assemble<br>Cause<br>Manufacture (To make or process (a product), especially with the use of industrial machines)<br>Put together<br>Compose<br>Construct |
| 15. Shout | Yell<br>Bark<br>Call<br>Cheer<br>Howl<br>Holler<br>Roar<br>Scream<br>Screech<br>Shriek |
| 16. Push | Shove (push with force)<br>Move something quickly and carelessly<br>Force somebody to do something |
| 17. Collide | Crash into each other (accident)<br>A head-on collision<br>bang<br>slam into<br>bump into<br>hit with a loud noise<br>smash<br>clash |
| 18. Cook | Boil<br>Bake<br>Concoct  (to prepare a dish/a drink by  combining raw materials) |
| 19. Punch | To box<br>To pound<br>To fist-fight |
| 20. Wash | Cleanse / clean<br>White wash<br>Ablution<br>Purify |
| 21. Eat | Consume food<br>Bite<br>Chew<br>Gobble up<br>Swallow<br>Nibble<br>Devour |

| | Digest |
| --- | --- |
| | Guzzle |
| | Crunch |
| | Guzzle |

**APPENDIX B : SENTENCES BUILDING TASK**

Name :_____ Form :_____

Complete the sentences below

1. The man purchases the goods at _____
2. The girl jogs at _____
3. The boys were afraid of the robber who came into their house. They dashed out into

   _____
4. We had not meet Jamil for a long time. Thus, we chatted for a while before

   _____
5. The dogs were hungry. They devoured _____
6. I sat down facing the _____
7. She whimpers because _____
8. The old woman grumbles because _____
9. The kettle boils at _____
10. Nowadays, teenagers spend a lot of money on___ _____
11. He strode towards____ _____
12. The girls wash their hair before _____
13. He smiles when he _____
14. The men banter about_____
15. The girl is sobbing because _____
16. The young mother laments about _____
17. The bird perches on _____
18. I dozed off in front _____ _____
19. His loud snores woke _____
20. Her book is a useful contribution towards _____
21. Those girls are always arguing about _____
22. They stroll leisurely at the _____
23. The big bully shoves the small girl _____
24. The thief hits _____
25. Encik Ahmad's house collapsed after the storm. The villagers later help Encik Ahmad to

   _____ _____
26. The boy courageously kicks the criminal on _____
27. The composer composes a _____
28. The little girl wails as _____
29. The two cars crashed into each other at _____
30. My mother likes to bake _____

**APPENDIX C: CONSTRUCTION OF SENTENCES**

**Name :**_____ **Form :**_____

**Make sentences using the verbs given**

1. **Punch** _____
2. **Crunch**_____
3. **Manufacture** _____
4. **Ablution** _____
5. **Wash** _____
6. **Concoct** _____
7. **Bite** _____
8. **Guzzle** _____
9. **Slam into** _____
10. **Giggle** _____
11. **Slam into** _____
12. **Cackle** _____
13. **Smile**_____
14. **Hit with a loud noise** _____
15. **Smash**_____
16. **Chew** _____
17. **Gobble up**_____
18. **Swallow**_____
19. **Nibble** _____
20. **Devour**_____
21. **Digest**_____
22. **Crunch**_____
23. **Tramp**_____
24. **Ramble** _____
25. **Pace**_____
26. **Grumble**_____
27. **Moan**_____
28. **Sit straddling**_____
29. **Sit with legs stretched out**_____
30. **Assault**_____

**APPENDIX D : JOURNAL WRITING**

Write out a journal about your previous weekend.

**APPENDIX E : CLOZE PASSAGE TEST**

Name : _____                    Form :_____

Cloze Passage (1 hour)

Instruction : Answer all questions.

Cloze Passage I

When I woke up, it was already evening. I got up and sat 1)_____the window. The streets were empty now. Then I 2)_____ my face in cold water. I put on my jacket and went to the streets. There was a    news-stand    at    the    corner,    half    a    block    away.    I 3)_____ there and 4)_____a newspaper. I carried it back to the apartment and read it. There was the story again on Page 1 : Celebrity Murdered by Boyfriend.  I read the story slowly. I finally became very hungry. I could eat a horse! So, I  5) _____ a steak.  As there was no drinking water, I decided to 6_____ some water.  Then, I made myself a cup of coffee.

Later, it was clear that I had to surrender myself to the police. However, it was not my fault. She cheated on me. I went to her house and demanded an explanation. Out of the blue, her new boyfriend appeared out of nowhere and  we 7)_____. He 8) _____me on the face. Maria tried to stop us from 9)_____. I accidentally  10)_____ her and she fell on the floor. She died instantly on the spot. There was blood all over the place. My lovely Maria!

Cloze Passage 2

During the weekend, I went to my uncle's house in Port Dickson.  I   1) _____my time 2)_____ a raft. My uncle was very helpful. We decided to go to the forest nearby my uncle's house and collected some tree trunks. We then 3)_____ to the forest. It took us almost the whole morning to build the raft. In the evening, we put the raft on the sea. The water was still high but the raft floated well. My uncle and I sat 4)_____ on it and we began to row by 5)_____the oars that we had constructed ourselves. We felt very excited and continued to row it. However, as it was getting dark, we did not go far. We returned to the shore and tied the raft to a tree. After that, we  returned to my uncle's house. Soon it was time for dinner. My aunty had 6) _____a delicious meal for us! After dinner, I packed my things to go back home. On my journey back home, my uncle and I 7) _____ about the fun we had at the seaside. As I was exhausted, I  8) _____ off. Ten minutes later, we reached my house. I thanked my uncle for an enjoyable weekend.  He 9)_____ and burst out 10)_____.

Cloze Passage 3

In the evenings after dinner, my siblings and I assemble in the living room and 1)_____ for some time. The topics of our conversation range from friends and relatives to problems in school. We also like to 2) _____ Ahmad, who is the youngest among our siblings. At dinner, once again, we have fun 3)_____ about ourselves and others. Father always reminds us to 4)_____ food slowly but we tend to devour our food instead! After dinner, we always do our homework in our rooms. Some of us, who are free will lend a helping hand to Mother in cleaning and 5)_____ the dishes.  My room is at the back of the house, facing the field. I like to 6)_____ at the field during the evenings with my siblings. Sometimes I 7)_____ to Mother when my siblings did not do housework but normally I 8)_____with them as they can be very funny and child-like. My siblings and I also like to

9)_____ at a small lake near our house.  When they went away to study at colleges,  I began to 10) _____hysterically.

**APPENDIX F: SCORING RUBRIC**

**English Word Choice Scoring Rubric (Adapted from TOEFL, Vancouver Public Schools and Upper Form English Syllabus)**

| Marks | Word Choice |
|---|---|
| Excellent<br><br>26-30 | Words conveyed are interesting, precise and natural way appropriate to audience and purpose. The writer does most or all of the following:<br><br>-choose specific accurate language<br><br>-choose fresh, lively, vivid expressions<br><br>-includes the purposeful, effective selection of figurative language and/or slang. |
| Good<br><br>20-25 | The variety of words employed is functional and appropriate to audience and purpose. The writer does most or all of the following<br><br>- familiar words or phrases may occasionally employ ordinary words<br>- fresh, vivid expressions although they may be ineffective<br>- Usage of figurative language which may occasionally seem overdone or ineffective. |
| Average<br><br>15-19 | Language is predictable, ordinary, and/or precise, and at times may not be appropriate for intended audience and/or purpose. The writer does most or all of the following:<br><br>- uses words that colourless, flat, imprecise, e.g. fun, thing, a lot, nice, language may be repetitious or misused<br>- relies on predictable vocabulary<br>- uses little figurative language; images and sometimes fuzzy. |
| Passable<br><br>10-14 | Language is limited, monotonous and or misused<br><br>The writer does most or all of the following:<br><br>- extremely limited range of words |

| | |
|---|---|
| | - words that do not fit the text ; they may be imprecise, inadequate, or just plain wrong,<br>- makes no attempt to use figurative language; uses general, vague words that fail to communicate |
| Weak<br><br>02 - 09 | Usage of words is fuzzy.<br><br>Frequent mistakes in vocabulary making the meaning barely comprehensible.<br><br>Only simple sentence structures.<br><br>Very basic vocabulary – many errors in the use of even simple words.<br><br>Style and tone hidden by the density of errors. |
| 01-09 | The usage of words is mostly from first language. Almost unrecognizable as English.<br><br>Makes no sense from beginning to end. |

**APPENDIX G: ENGLISH LEXICAL RETRIEVAL TEST**

**Name :**_____**Form :**_____

English Lexical Retrieval Test

Translate the Malay sentences given into English sentences. English verbs must be in its specific form.

1. Air masak pada 0 C. _____

2. Dia tidur berdengkur._____

3. Perempuan itu mengambil air sembahyang. _____

4. Anjing itu mengigit pencuri itu. _____

5. Amin duduk bertenggik di atas batu besar itu. _____

6. Adik saya sedang masak kek coklat. _____

7. Kereta itu telah berlanggar dengan bas pagi tadi.

   _____

8. Saya membeli makanan di kantin. _____

9. Wanita itu menanggis tersedu-sedan. _____

10. Kami sedang berbincang tentang kerjarumah itu.

    _____

11. Dia merungut tentang keputusan itu. _____

12. Saya tertidur sekejab di dalam kelas Bahasa Inggeris

    tadi._____

13. Budak kecil itu mengambil masa yang lama untuk  menghadam  makanan itu.

    _____

14. Saya sedang menelan roti sewaktu loceng berbunyi.

    _____

15. James menolak adiknya dengankeras sehingga adiknya terjatuh.

    _____

16. Lelaki itu berlari-lari anak di padang. _____

17. Saya menendang pencuriitu. _____

18. Kilang itu membuat permainan kanak-kanak. _____

19. Komposer itu telah mengubah sebuah lagu sedih. _____

20. Mereka tidak setuju dengan arahan itu. _____

21. Penonton telah bersorak untuk pasukan bola Kelantan.

    _____

22. Jamilah menjerit dengan nyaring kerana dompetnya hilang.

    _____

23. Maniam telah membelanjakan duitnya untuk membeli buku rujukan.

    _____

24. Budak lelaki itu telah menjerit dengan kuat.

   _____

25. Wanita itu ketawa dengan kuat melihat telatah anaknya.

   _____

26. Mereka berjalan dengan bising di koridor.

   _____

27. Saya sedang bergurau senda dengan kakak saya.

   _____

28. Dia meraung di atas kejadian itu.

   _____

29. Pak Abu mengeluh kerana dia telah tua. _____

30. Pengemis itu makan dengan lahapnya.

   _____