

COMPOSING STRATEGIES IN ENGLISH AND BAHASA MALAYSIA

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INTRODUCTION

Composing strategies in Bahasa Malaysia and English may be quite different for different people; this is because very few people are equi-bilinguals i.e. equally competent in both languages. Therefore, a person may be more proficient in one language and not so in the other; indeed, the level of proficiency may even be dependent upon the styles or genres of the compositions: either descriptive, narrative, argumentative or factual. I had the task of composing descriptive essays in both languages; and then observing the similarities and differences between their composing strategies.

The methodology used is explained below:

1. The whole process, from preparation to writing was filmed; two cameras were used: one for a frontal, mid close-up shot while the other, for a close-up shot of the writing process.
2. Two sealed envelopes containing two sets of questions were given to me beforehand, to be opened when the writer and the TV cameras were ready.
3. One question was answered at a time so, only one envelope was opened first.
4. Five minutes was allocated for the preparation of the first question.
5. Ten minutes was given for each composition: in English first, then Bahasa.
6. After the two compositions had been written, another five minutes was allotted for preparation of the second question from the second envelope.
7. This time, instead of writing in English first, I had to reverse the order and compose in Bahasa first and then English.
8. After the four compositions had been written, I had to get them marked by a bilingual language teacher.

Linguistic background:

I must at this stage give some information regarding my linguistic background in relation to Bahasa and English. I went through the transitional type of education where I studied Geography and History in Bahasa Malaysia. I must admit however, that my proficiency in Bahasa is not comparable to my command of the English Language as evidenced by the grades of my compositions: A- for both the English compositions and B- and C+ for the Bahasa versions which I felt was very generous indeed. This lack of proficiency is compounded by the fact that I hardly use Bahasa in my daily life either

socially or professionally; I converse in English and Cantonese at home and purely in English with my colleagues. When teaching, however, I do switch to Bahasa but very rarely.

DISCUSSION

With the methodology and my linguistic background in mind, I have divided my discussion into four stages:

- i. Pre-preparation.
- ii. Preparation
- iii. Writing
- iv. Post-writing

I. PRE-PREPARATION

Before the shooting started, the technicians were busily adjusting the camera positions to get the optimum angles. While observing their movements and conversations, I suddenly thought of three things: -

1. as the technicians would be manning the cameras and monitoring the taping, some of them would be observing my movements and compositions;
2. as the questions were in sealed envelopes, I would not know what to expect; and I was slightly nervous;
3. as the scripts would be assessed, I had to be extra careful with my answers.

In 1(2) and 1(3), the conditions were similar to that of an examination.

II. PREPARATION

Below are my findings (please refer to Appendix B for the notes written during the preparation stage): -

1. a difference in length: the notes in English were lengthier than those in Bahasa
2. a difference in the number of times I stalled: there were more stalls observable during the preparation in Bahasa than in English;
3. the ideas were in English: even though I had to compose in Bahasa first for the second question, my ideas appeared in English for both the topics;
4. a difference between the type of ideas perceived: in the English version, the notes included ideas for the foreground and background descriptions as well as inferences, emphases and contrasts; in the Bahasa notes however, it was purely ideas for foreground and background descriptions.
5. the words varied in terms of level of specification: the English words chosen to represent the ideas were relatively general eg. "attire" and "expression" while those in Bahasa were more specific with "tali leher", "jam tangan" and "warna".
6. the avoidance of certain words due to difficulties in translation: in the first set of notes, "golf post" was mentioned in the English but not the Bahasa version; in the second set, similarly, "skyscrapers" was only mentioned in English; interestingly, both these words did not appear in the actual writing stage in any script.

III. WRITING

I observed six differences between my composing strategies in Bahasa and English. They are as follows (please refer to Appendix C for the compositions): -

1. Stalls and cancellations

There were more stalls and cancellations when composing in Bahasa as opposed to English e.g. for the first question, there were three cancellations and one insertion for the English composition; the shorter Bahasa composition however, had eight cancellations and two insertions.

The reason for the stalls was also different for both the languages. I stalled on simple words e.g. "tall leher", "long-sleeved shirt" etc. when composing in Bahasa; as for the English compositions I was more concerned with the linking together of ideas into complex grammatical structures e.g. "The man in the foreground is very smartly attired with a long-sleeved shirt and a brilliant red neck-tie." In the Bahasa version, I could not translate "long-sleeved shirt" and consequently, I left it as, "lelaki itu memakai pakaian yang segar. Tali lehernya yang berwarna merah dengan garis biru itu berbeza dengan warna biru pakaiannya." The above sentences in Bahasa were given the comment "inappropriate expression" by my examiner.

2. Flow of thought

Another observation was the difference in the flow of thought. As was composing in Bahasa, my ideas were truncated because I could not recall some of the vocabulary items to express myself. In this respect, my ideas were governed by the limited pool of vocabulary words. Furthermore, these ideas were presented in a random order. In the English compositions, on the other hand, I felt a sense of freedom. I thought of the ideas and the language flowed as my ideas developed. The language was used as a tool to express my thoughts as opposed to the Bahasa composition, where the language directed and manipulated my flow of ideas. Moreover, there was a tendency to go out of point when writing in English.

3. Composing strategies

The composing strategies for the descriptive essays in English were of a higher level than those in Bahasa. For the compositions in Bahasa, I just described what I saw so I elaborated on the objects found in the foreground and background of the pictures. This was not true of the English version where I went a step further to infer from the picture; e.g. I inferred that the purpose of the picture was for a watch advertisement and consequently, based my description on that inference (Someone commented that the language used in the English compositions was very much like that found in an advertisement).

4. Directness in composition

There was more directness in the Bahasa compositions, so everything that was described, was found in the pictures. In the English essays, however, the descriptions were inferences, consequently they were more indirect. This explained the presence of words and phrases like "probably", "symbolises", "conjectured", "looks like", "gives the impression", "imply" etc. in the English compositions but not in the others

5. Structures and sentence pattern

As expected, the English compositions contained more complex structures arranged in a variety of sentence patterns; the opposite was true of the Bahasa compositions because there was repetition of

sentence patterns as well as of words eg. "*Latarbelakangnya di padang golf ml sunyi sen yap dan kelihatan bersih. Di tepi lelaki itu juga kelihatan setengah kolam dan bayang pokok juga kelihatan.*"

To illustrate the difference in complexity of grammatical structures between the languages, I would like to draw your attention to these two examples:

He proudly crosses his arms to exhibit the elegance and prestige the watch symbolises.
"Terdapat satu jam tangan yang kelihatan mahal dan bergaya."

6. *Length of compositions dependent upon the level of difficulty of the pictures.*

Lastly, during the writing stage, I discovered that with a relatively simple picture (with a number of simple objects to describe), as in the first question, the length of the compositions in both the languages was relatively similar though I elaborated differently for different languages.

In the second question, however, which I felt was more difficult (based on the type of objects in the picture), I gave up when writing in Bahasa Malaysia evidenced by the much shorter length of the essay. Yet when it came to writing in English, more ideas developed as I went along; more than in the first question.

This implies that a more difficult picture and a certain level of command of the language, allows more scope for higher levels of description. A relatively simpler picture, on the other hand, helps a less proficient writer to produce a relatively substantial amount of writing.

IV POST WRITING

After I had written the four compositions, I observed the videotape to try and discern different physical manifestations of my mental difficulties; I also tried to explain these difficulties. Therefore, I have divided this stage of my discussion into two sections:

1. Video observations
2. Explanations of difficulties.

1. Video observations

I was very fortunate that there were observable physical representations of the thoughts that were going through my mind. The first piece of evidence that proved that I had had difficulties when composing in Bahasa was the number of times I stalled: I stalled with more frequency during the Bahasa compositions and I cancelled quite often too.

I would furthermore like to describe the two types of stalls discernible. For the Bahasa compositions, I fidgeted quite a lot: I scratched my head and at one stage, had my left palm on my forehead partially hiding my face from the camera. There were more indications of exasperation and frustration because the ideas had no satisfactory outlet: I just could not find the language to express myself.

The second type of stall was observed in the English compositions. These stalls were more alert with fewer fidgets; it was as though I was doing mental gymnastics and I kept still to try and capture them. My eyes too, moved differently. In the Bahasa essays, they frequently went from side to side and up and down; in the English versions, they moved from side to side most of the times.

This seems to indicate that when a writer's mind is inundated with ideas and there are no language obstructions, there are generally fewer fidgets observable and the eyes basically shift from side to side.

2. Explanations of difficulties

As we have seen in the discussion so far, I had difficulties when composing in Bahasa and less so while in English. My ideas were similar, but the reproduction of them was substantially different for both the languages. Therefore, it could be deduced that with other factors remaining constant, the language was the only possible determining factor.

1. offer three reasons to explain these difficulties:
2. lack of knowledge of grammatical structures;
3. lack of knowledge of discourse markers, conjunctions and auxiliary system and
4. limited vocabulary resources.

Due to these three factors;

my ideas appeared truncated,
they were also manipulated,
the flow of thought was disrupted and
I had less to write.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I would like to add that since I face difficulties when composing in Bahasa, similarly, my students find it difficult to express themselves either verbally or in written form in English. In relating my findings to second language teaching-learning, I concluded that:

- i. the students' ideas appear structurally incohesive and have little coherence because they could not organize their ideas appropriately with conjunctions, discourse markers and the auxiliary system in a variety of grammatical structures.
- ii. a certain level of proficiency has to be reached before the students could go beyond the basic level of description into the stage of subtlety and nuances; only then can we discern a level of maturity in their answers.

As a teacher of English I would like to point out that learners should learn how the language operates (linguistic competence) at the elementary level of language learning. Once they have acquired a substantial amount of language resources as communicative tools, they can then progress to learning how the language is used as in description, narration, reports etc.

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