L2 Writing Challenges for the Undergraduates: A Performance Analysis and a Literature Review on SIL Domains

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Abstract

English is used as a second language (L2) in Malaysia with a great emphasis on tertiary education as the medium of instruction, the most important subject in the curriculum, and a mandatory subject for all undergraduates. Yet, the university lecturers share a common view that students find it difficult to perform satisfactorily, particularly in writing assessment in English language courses. To identify the challenges of ESL writing, particularly among the undergraduates in Malaysia, one of the Malaysian universities with the highest population was chosen. A performance analysis was conducted in two consecutive semesters on the results of one of the English courses, which writing becomes the core assessment. Besides, a review of the past studies was done. Nine L2 writing challenges were identified, which can be represented by a chain reaction diagram called "SIL": system (S), instructor (I), and learner (L). SIL proposes a sequence of inductive remedial actions, which should be taken by considering the elements within the S to the I, and finally to the L. To conclude, poor writing skill of Malaysian undergraduates in language and content perspectives as identified in the performance analysis is supported by several past studies prescribed in the SIL domains.

Keywords—Performance analysis, learner, instructor, system, SIL

I. INTRODUCTION

Malaysian students especially in higher learning institutions always face difficulty to master good English skills. Cruez (2002, November 24) reported that due to their poor command of English, 700 out of the 13,000 graduates who had applied for jobs in the service and marketing sectors in the first 10 months of 2002 were rejected. Besides, poor English was among five factors why graduates were unemployed based on a study conducted by the Federation of Malaysian Manufacturers (February 27, 2010). Furthermore, according to the vice-president of the Industry Development, Multimedia Development Corporation, Saifol Bahri Mohd Shamlan, poor command of English among graduates had been cited by most employers as the reason for not hiring (April 1, 2010). Moreover, Marie Aimee Tourres, a senior research fellow at the Department of Development Studies in Universiti Malaya, said Malaysian undergraduates found it difficult to grasp the English language (November 7, 2011). Similarly, Sharifah Hapsah, the Vice-Chancellor of Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, commented:

> *"We have with us today a sizeable number of students who are unable to string proper sentences in English."* (Sharifah Hapsah and Syed Hasan Shahabudin, 2008).

II. PROBLEM STATEMENT

Through teaching and assessing the students' English performance, the university lecturers found that the undergraduates face problems with the writing skill as compared to other basic language learning skills (Elia, Kardina, & Nazirah, 2006, as cited in Chittra Muthusamy et al., 2010). The lecturers share a common view that students find it difficult to perform satisfactorily or with very little positive results in the English language courses though multiple measures have been planned, strategized, and acted upon. They have found that after several semesters of taking English proficiency courses by the undergraduates, there seems to be minimal or no observable improvement in writing. Fig. 1 shows the results of an English course on report writing in two consecutive semesters from one of the Malaysian universities with the highest number of students. The radically increasing number of students who scored B as compared to the previous semester shows a sign of deterioration in the standard of English among this group of L2 learners.
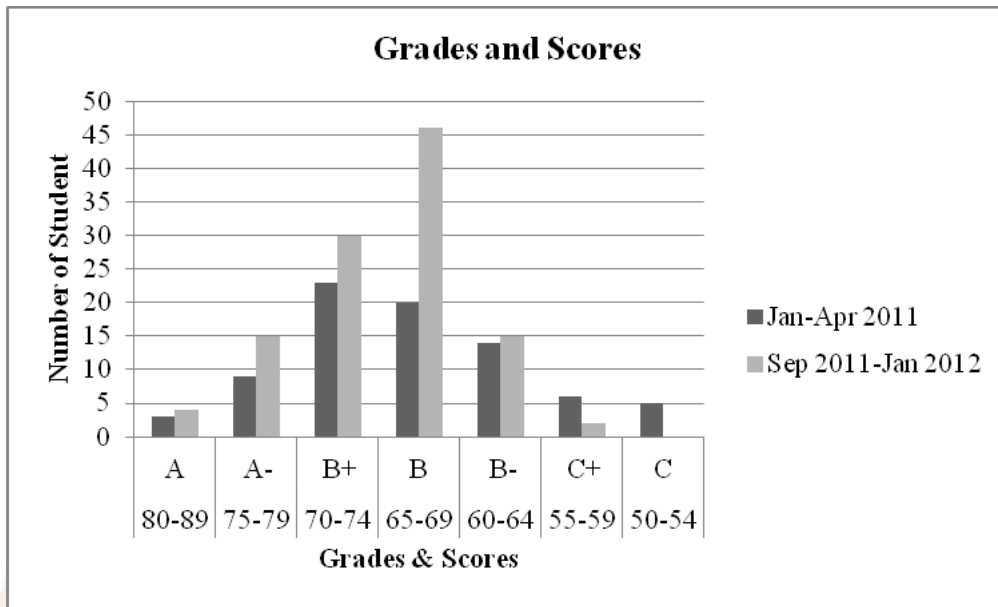
Fig.1 Grades and scores in January-April 2011 and September 2011-January 2012 semesters

III. PURPOSE

The objective of the research is to identify the challenges of L2 writing among the undergraduates. Hence, the results of an English for Specific Purposes (ESP) course on report writing offered by one of the Malaysian higher learning institutions with the biggest population of students was analyzed. Since performance analysis helps to meet important organizational goals by filling a gap in knowledge (Clark and Mayer, 2003), the research conducted a performance analysis based on the results of the selected ESP course from January-April 2011 semester and September 2011-January 2012 semester as depicted in Fig. 1. The performance analysis was derived from the course assessment components, report assessment items, language and content assessment items, as well as their weightings as presented in Fig. 3 to Fig. 8. Besides, a literature review was conducted to analyze the related past studies and summarize the causes of L2 writing challenges into a chain reaction diagram called *SIL* as illustrated in Fig. 9.

IV. PERFORMANCE ANALYSIS

A. *Average Scores*

Fig. 2 shows the average scores of electrical and civil engineering undergraduates in two consecutive semesters. In general, based on the total average score of each semester, there is a marginal rise of 2.53% from January-April 2011 semester to September 2011-January 2012 semester. This is because the overall performance of civil engineering undergraduates had improved 11.25 percent. However, the electrical engineering undergraduates' performance has encountered a fall of 7.16 percent. Overall, the average score of both groups of engineering undergraduates is under 73 as most students scored B and B+ and none of them scored A+. This shows after three

years of taking English proficiency courses in diploma plus two or three semesters of undergoing degree courses, they are yet to be proficient enough in English and in the writing skill in particular.
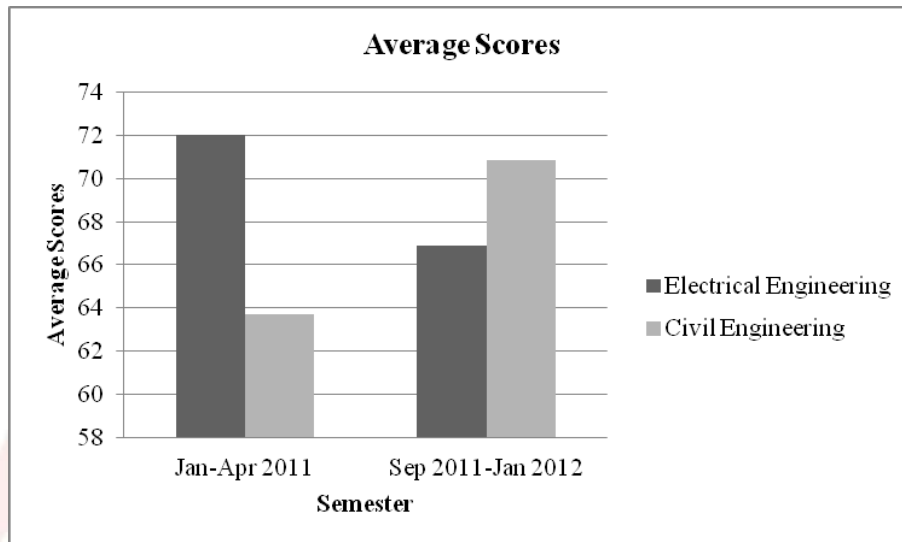

Fig. 2 Average scores in January-April 2011 and September 2011-January 2012 semesters.

B. Course Assessment Components

Writing is the most demanding language skill in the selected English course as it adds up to 70 percent out of the total course assessment. Among the four assessment components, report writing constitutes 40 percent of the total score, which is the highest weighting. However, based on the performance analysis on four different types of assessment from 2011 to 2012 as depicted in Fig. 3 and Fig. 4, all undergraduates from both engineering faculties in UiTM Penang Branch have gained the lowest achievement in report as compared to the other assessment components such as test (writing), oral presentation, and online assignment. Writing a good report requires conscious effort, technical skills, and much practice in developing, analyzing, composing, and revising ideas throughout the semester. The lowest average score in the report indicates writing has become the greatest challenge to the undergraduates as L2 learners.
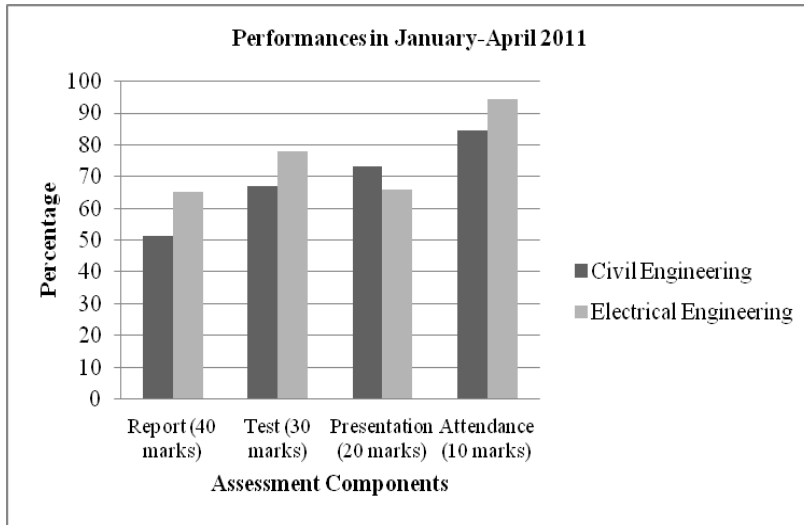
Fig. 3 Performances based on different course assessment components in January-April, 2011.
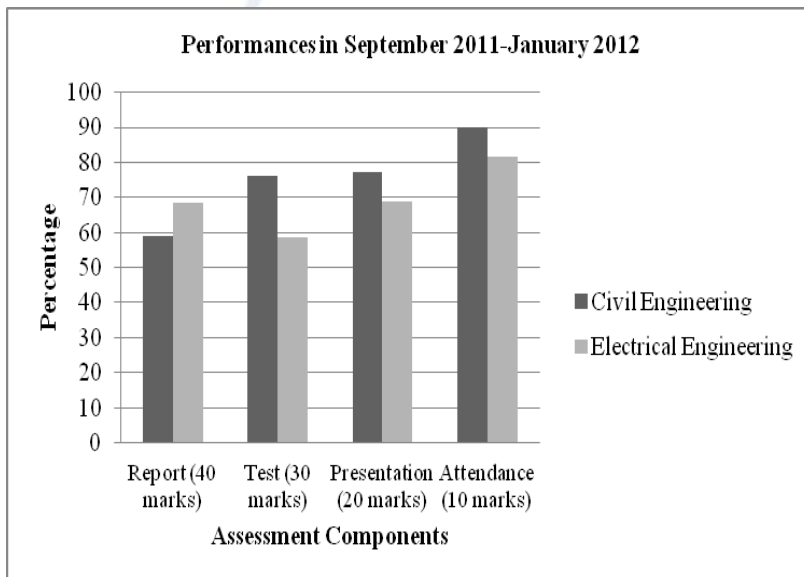

Fig. 4 Performances based on different course assessment components in September 2011-January, 2012.

C. Language and Content Assessment Items

As portrayed in Fig. 5, in this English course, the weighting of each language assessment item of the report is unequal. It is notable that language is assessed on grammatical accuracy and vocabulary appropriateness, which each of them composes the highest weighting as 12.5 percent. Other components include appropriate language for report writing and originality of text production which constitute 6.25 percent respectively. The weighting of each content assessment item of the report is given the equal measure as illustrated in Fig. 6.
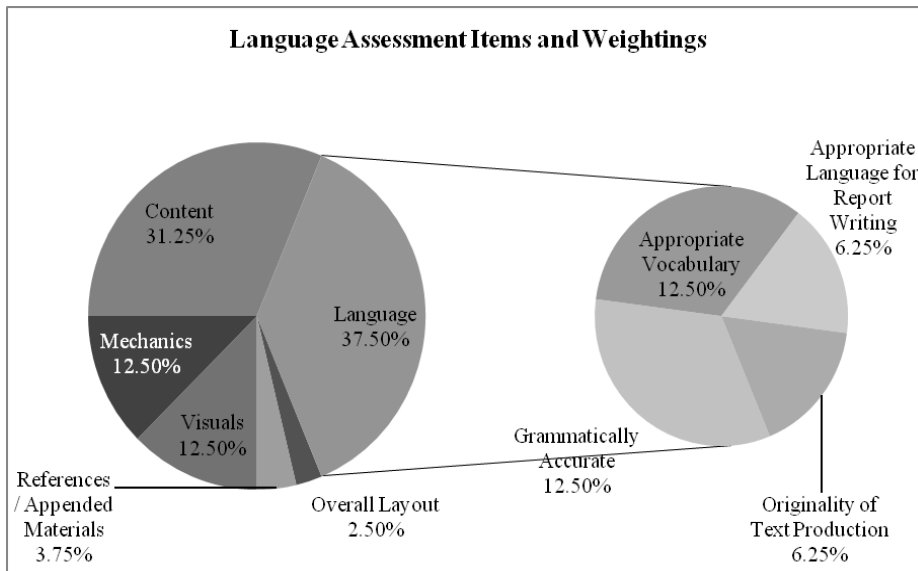
Language Assessment Items and Weightings

Content 31.25%

Mechanics 12.50%

Language 37.50%

Visuals 12.50%

References / Appended Materials 3.75%

Overall Layout 2.50%

Appropriate Vocabulary 12.50%

Appropriate Language for Report Writing 6.25%

Grammatically Accurate 12.50%

Originality of Text Production 6.25%

Fig. 5 Language assessment items for the report and their weightings.

Content Assessment Items and Weightings

Language 37.50%

Content 31.25%

Mechanics 12.50%

Visuals 12.50%

References / Appended Materials 3.75%

Overall Layout 2.50%

Analysis of Information Collected 6.25%

Substantial and Well-researched Data 6.25%

Selection of Relevant Information 6.25%

Clear and Concise Background 6.25%
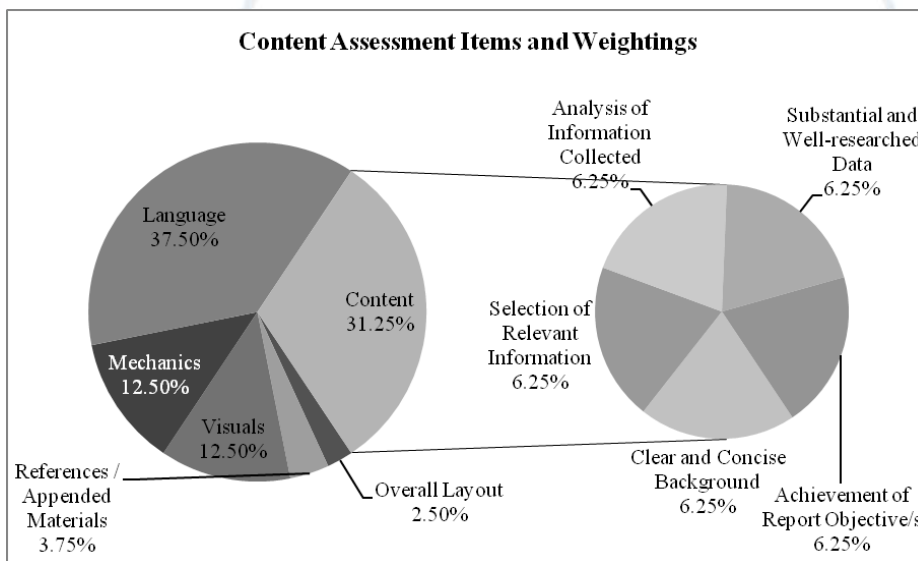
Achievement of Report Objective/s 6.25%

Fig. 6 Content assessment items and their weightings for the report.

D. Writing Assessment Items

To assess the report, language is awarded 15 marks, which constitutes the highest weighting as 37.5 percent of the total. Since most of the undergraduates had committed a great amount of grammatical and vocabulary errors in their reports, they obtained the lowest scores in the main assessment component, language, as reported in the performance analysis based on report assessment items in Fig. 3 and Fig. 4. In January-April 2011 semester as shown in Fig. 7, the undergraduates' scores in content of their reports are 60 percent and below. It is the second lowest performance after language assessment component. One of the highly possible reasons is lack of input presented in their reports, which may due to poor reading attitudes among the undergraduates as reported in the past studies.

V. SIL DOMAINS

Based on the results of the performance analysis from different perspectives, poor writing skill in terms of language and cognitive developments was found. To identify the causes of poor writing skill among the undergraduates, the related past studies were reviewed and nine L2 writing challenges were identified. These challenges can be summarized into three domains, which is illustrated as SIL – a chain reaction diagram as depicted in Fig. 9.
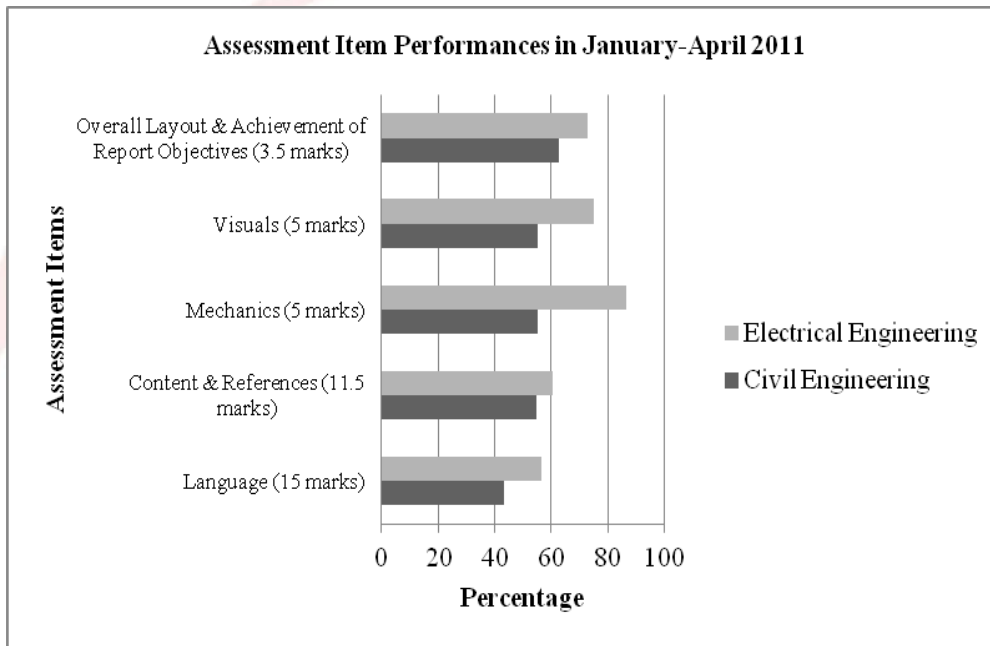
Fig. 7 Report assessment item performances among the undergraduates in January-April 2011.
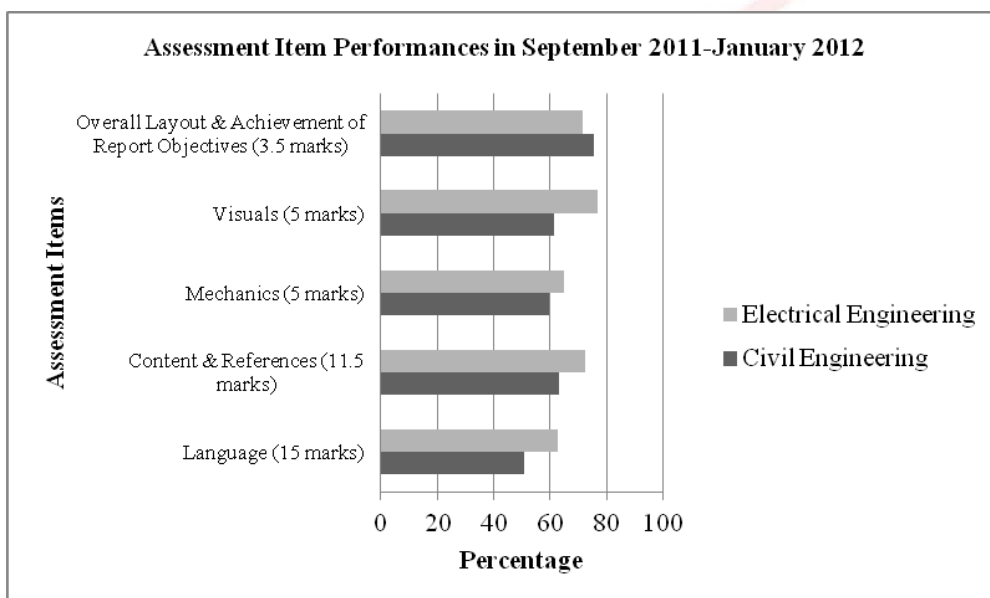
Fig. 8 Report assessment item performances among the undergraduates in September 2011-April 2012.
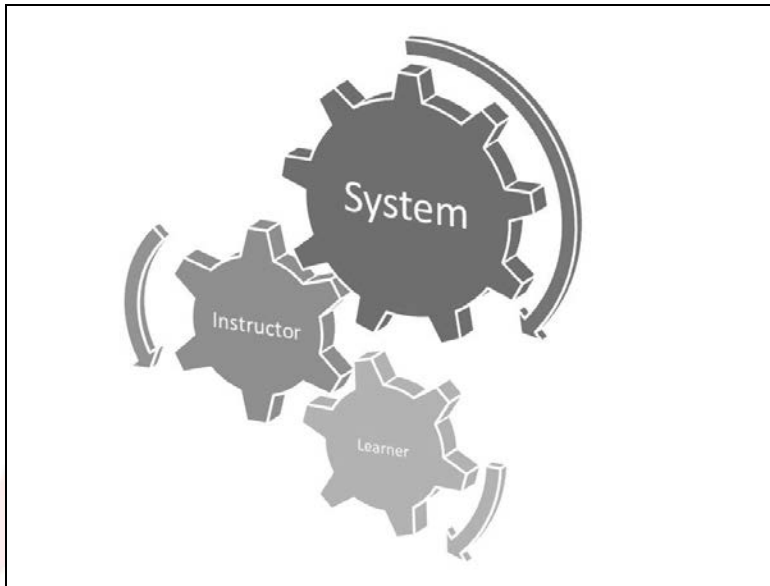

Fig. 9 SIL: System (S), Instructor (I), and Learner (L)

SIL demonstrates the sequence of corrective measures from the system (S) to the instructor (I), and finally to the learner (L). The remedial actions should begin with the largest perspective, system, which can cause helpful effects to take place in other smaller perspectives, instructor and learner. Lecture time, institutional e-learning system, and ICT research fall under system perspective. Besides, classroom practice, ICT interest, and L2 writing approach are the concerns from instructor perspective. From a learner perspective, it covers reading habits, language proficiency, and first language.

A. System

In the university at diploma level, four language skills are required to be taught in most of the English proficiency courses. Each course consists of six contact hours per week, which is equivalent to three credit hours per semester. However, for English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses, the two contact hours per week are insufficient for the lecturers to teach the major language skills as well as examine the students' writing tasks. Hence, the time constraint for students to meet up their lecturers face-to-face has reduced their chances to receive enough guidance and feedback on writing, which has led to low interest in L2 writing. As highlighted by Chao and Huang (2007), the limited class time allotted for teaching different stages of writing process is the root of the poor language achievement. Since the main preoccupations are the completion of the syllabus and the preparation for students' assessment, lecturers tend to minimize the teaching of necessary composing skills, which may create a group of passive learners without thinking critically and creatively in writing their essays.

Many higher learning institutions in Malaysia are progressively gearing towards Internet usage to enhance teaching and learning. There is a complimentary

instructional method used in the university for teaching and learning processes of all subjects including English courses. Before the institutional e-learning system was opened for usage among the university students, the acceptance on e-learning among the students was as low as 38.7% who preferred e-learning (Chow et al., 2007). Based on the nine suggested online activities using the institutional e-learning system, there is no focus especially to promote L2 writing skills. For language enhancement, there is no scaffolding application to facilitate L2 writing skills such as dictionary, translator, chat room, and language games. No social media application is available to allow the users to communicate synchronously and asynchronously with one another or with other social communities. For cognitive development, there is a limited workplace for users to modify, edit, publish, and share their thoughts through writing online. It also does not allow the users to subscribe its news feed for getting the latest updates or shared information. Based on the limitations highlighted above, the existing institutional e-learning system possesses its constraint to further enhance L2 writing skills.

According to Muhammad Kamarul Kabilan (2007) and Fook and Gurnam Kaur Sidhu (2009), although the positive effects of using the technological tool in teaching and learning have been recognized, research on the integration of ICT in ELT in Malaysia is still at the infancy stage. Based on the report done by DETYA (2000) and Fook and Gurnam Kaur Sidhu (2009), the penetration of ICT applications into university teaching, ICT expertise, as well as the practice of ensuring all academic staff to make use of the ICT tools widely, was deficient. Hence, such lack of interest in e-learning has left many unexplored research areas in connecting between ICT and ELT. One area that is yet to be extensively explored is using Web 2.0 application as a writing pedagogical tool in tertiary education; for instance, little research has examined the ways blogging can be best employed in the teaching of EFL writing (Chao & Huang, 2007), which had been found useful and easy to use (Mah, 2009, Mah and Er, 2009).

B. Instructor

Even though the university is gearing towards a more student-centered learning approach based on the resources available to students and lecturers (Abdul Manaff Ismail et al., 2010), the teacher-centric practice such as "chalk and talk" method, textual instructional medium, and students-write-and-teacher-correct routine is still being practiced in the traditional ESL classrooms at the university. According to Dzullijah Ibrahim and Peridah Bahari (2005), these directed instruction models have been applied for decades in the university and ICT is fairly used among the lecturers (Koni Md Taha et al., 2006). Based on the results of a survey conducted on ICT readiness, lecturers showed low commitment to integrating ICT into their teaching and they hardly used computers on a regular basis in their teaching practice (Fook and Gurnam Kaur Sidhu, 2009). For English lecturers, neither specific offline nor online writing approach is employed in implementing the English course syllabi.

Regardless of the great potential of ICT, the face to face teaching and learning is still very much preferred among academics for lack of confidence (Syed Othman Alhabshi, 2002), doubt of the ICT effectiveness, and cautiousness in implementing ICT into

their classroom teaching (Fook and Gurnam Kaur Sidhu, 2009). Besides, the lecturers also displayed little enthusiasm in constructing their own Web pages for teaching and learning (Fook and Gurnam Kaur Sidhu, 2009). Since the need to set up educational Web pages is not considered important by the lecturers, the tertiary students will have less opportunity to write in L2 beyond the time constraint in the classrooms. In traditional classrooms, the use of purely "pedagogical" methods makes students "hear" lectures instead of listening to them. The lessons become boring, dull, and not challenging enough to cater for the ever curious minds of the young learners. Consequently, this poor delivery method will cause passive learning and rote memorization without understanding but just for the sake of examination (Vigneswaran Kannan, December 15, 2011). The students will also become stereotyped individuals who are unable to encounter learning tasks alone and too dependent on the lecturers when engaged in their learning quest (Rasaya Marimuthu and Elangkeeran Sabapathy, 2005).

The effort of developing effective writing skills among the L2 learners is often a predicament due to the conflicts and critiques among the product, process, and genre approaches applied in isolation; whereby each emphasis, structure, and methodology is different and unique on its own. In fact, no single approach is sufficient in itself to account for how writing is learned, developed, and employed (Rahmah Mohd. Rashid, 1999). Yet, due to the lack of awareness of different theoretical approaches, many instructors employ the writing approach in isolation in their teaching. The most distressing cases are the wrong choice of approaches to teach writing and even the absence of them, which eventually will lead to poor writing skills among the students. According to Krashen (1992), teachers usually teach learners to write about what they have already known instead of discovering new ideas. In most of the situations, not much is known about what the teachers actually do when they teach writing (Rahmah Mohd. Rashid, 1999).

C. Learner

Poor reading habits and low interest in reading among Malaysians were reported by Long (1984). If academic textbooks and classroom reading materials are excluded, on average, Malaysians read only half a page a year. This scenario also happened in the university whereby the lecturers share a common view that it is not a common habit for the students to read in English for self-interest. They only read in English to fulfil the classroom tasks, assignments, or projects. Besides, they also perceived reading in English was not a priority for them which may be due to their busy schedule in studies (Leele Susana Jamian and Emily Jothee Mathai, 2003). According to (Leele Susana Jamian et al., 2006), an analysis of students' results (May - October 2002) revealed that 64.89% of students scored C grade and below in an English paper where 70% of total scores are based on reading skill. Due to poor reading as the contributor of low proficiency, as Rasaya Marimuthu et al. (2011) have pointed out, students in the university find English language courses difficult to perform satisfactorily. Since the university students showed very low interest in reading and speaking in English (Rushita Ismail and Muriatul Khusmah Musa, 2006, Leele Susana Jamian and Emily Jothee Mathai, 2003), there is a greater tendency for them to communicate among

themselves in their mother tongue (Rushita Ismail and Muriatul Khusmah Musa, 2006), which the English exposure is being limited to the classroom setting.

Language instructors in the university are facing a lot of difficulties and disappointment when essay writing is concerned. In writing, some students are greatly lacking in imagination and creativity. Their essays generally read dull and dry, whereby the stories are mere displays of boring chronological events, having no life, content and some direly lacking in proficiency (Chittra Muthusamy et al., 2010). Many students still commit the grammatical errors that consume a great deal of the lecturers' time and effort to correct their written tasks. After analyzing the students' mistakes in writing, their grammatical errors seem to vary from local, global and spelling errors (Leele Susana Jamian et al., 2006). Their numerous grammatical errors in L2 writing reflect their insufficient knowledge; for example, a study on the use of subject-verb agreement between two groups of arts and science students in the university revealed that they faced difficulties in subject-verb agreement of number followed by subject-verb agreement of person (Surina Nayan, 2002).

The university students have a tendency of making language errors due to first language (L1) transfer. Most of the university students use Malay language (L1) but in learning English (L2), they tend to use L1 in L2 sentence structures although they have been exposed to L2 from an early age. Allen and Corder (1974) explain that while writing, L2 learners in general have to think about all those rules they need to apply or are supposed to have automatized. Since the university students are *bumiputras* who always use Malay as their L1, there is a greater inclination for them to communicate among themselves in Malay compared to English (Rushita Ismail and Muriatul Khusmah Musa, 2006). When it comes to learning English as their L2, they tend to use L1 in L2 sentence construction. With mother tongue interference, according to Chittra Muthusamy et al. (2010), they are further handicapped in the domain of creative and imaginative writing. Undoubtedly, they have difficulties going beyond the surface idea in writing and prone to making errors particularly in the study of ESL (Leele Susana Jamian et al., 2006).

VI. CONCLUSION

Writing is regarded as the most difficult language skill to learn and to teach although it is an important productive skill as prescribed in Malaysian Curriculum of Secondary Education. Based on the performance analysis, the undergraduates encountered difficulty to master effective writing skill particularly in report writing. They were still weak in both language and cognitive development, though they had been learning English for more than 15 years. As L2 learners, they need to face some challenges which have been identified through the review of the related past studies. SIL is proposed as a chain reaction diagram summarizing the nine L2 writing challenges in three different perspectives. This diagram provides a clearer overview of L2 writing challenges, which is proposed to be overcome inductively and sequentially. If the challenges of the system (S) can be overcome by the related authorities, the shortcomings of the instructor (I) will also be prevailed; along with the hitches of the learner (L), which will be resolved gradually. Therefore, the remedial actions should begin with the largest perspective, S: lecture time, institutional e-learning system, and ICT research. This will bring positive effects to take place in I,

which includes classroom practice, ICT interest, and L2 writing approach. As the last perspective, L, the predicaments in reading habits, language proficiency, and first language can be curbed eventually. To sum up, the poor writing skill among the Malaysian undergraduates as highlighted by the past studies in SIL domains support the results of the performance analysis in both language and content perspectives.

VII. FUTURE RESEARCH AND DIRECTIONS

The further implication of the research on L2 writing challenges for the undergraduates summarized by SIL can be further investigated by examining the other possible domains. This can be done by looking into other English courses from different higher learning institutions to provide an extension of SIL domains besides the system, instructor, and learner. Additionally, based on the defined L2 writing challenges on SIL domains, ample research can be done to improve the writing skill among the L2 learners from various disciplines of knowledge. The potential areas for future research are as follows:

- What is the theoretical framework that can improve language and cognitive developments?
- How to design and develop an instructional tool to improve writing performance and critical thinking?
- How the learner differences affect the writing performance and critical thinking?

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