

A review of research on the teaching and learning of writing in Singapore EL classrooms

Paula Png

English Language Institute of Singapore
Singapore

Abstract

Among the different areas of language learning identified in the English Language syllabi, writing has been surfaced by curriculum specialists and educationists as a key area of concern. This report provides a descriptive analysis of what has been done in the area of writing research during the implementation of the English Language Syllabus 2001 and 2010 and, at the same time, highlights the gaps or silences revealed in its representation of writing instruction. While it is evident from the findings that both researchers and practitioners have, over the years, conducted numerous studies in response to the call to improve students' standards of written communication, this report shows that the object of research is more often than not influenced by factors other than what is stated in the syllabus. Instead, the conducted research has focused on the assessed curriculum and broader Ministry initiatives rather than areas emphasized in the syllabi such as the teaching of a range of text types, the use of rich texts in the classrooms.

Introduction

This report focuses on the second phase of a larger research study that reviews the research on English language (EL) teaching in Singapore schools. Having established a broad overview of the EL education research in the first phase, the second phase looks specifically at the studies related to writing, an area of language learning that has been identified by curriculum specialists and educationists as a key area of concern. This report aims to provide a descriptive analysis of what has been done in the area of writing research before highlighting the gaps or silences revealed in its representation of writing instruction.

Phase 1: the larger research study

The English language syllabus in Singapore is reviewed every ten years or so, mainly in response to new developments in language study, educational and pedagogical influences from other developed countries, national education policies and concerns, as well as the changing linguistic landscape in Singapore schools (Rubdy, 2010; Rubdy & Tupas 2009). With the current English Language Syllabus (ELS) 2010 presently undergoing review, the information needs of curriculum planners from the English Language and Literature Branch (ELLB) have never been greater. While it is pertinent for these officers to study and synthesize the wide array of international literature on curricula and pedagogical methods, it is just as critical for them to keep abreast of the research findings generated from studies conducted in local primary and secondary EL classrooms. Yet, only a few of these studies are published in peer-reviewed journals or as book chapters while the majority of them are in the form of unpublished postgraduate theses, and hence subject to strict access restrictions in local educational repositories.

As the demand for improved information access increases, there is a need to refine the way local education research is collected, disseminated, and shared among policy makers, teacher practitioners, and academic researchers. It is the recognition of this need which prompted the larger research study, in the form of a searchable repository, to which this particular writing research review is a follow-up. Clearly, the curriculum planners from ELLB, for example, could greatly benefit from a repository that consolidates the wide array of research conducted in the local EL classrooms. Such knowledge and information could provide invaluable insight into the impact of the previous syllabus on EL teaching and learning as well as the areas of concern that teacher-researchers may have about the development of the EL curriculum in their classrooms. The consolidation of research publications into a searchable repository was also seen as valuable in helping senior curriculum specialists from ELLB recognize areas of research interests/foci that are emphasized or may have been overlooked in a particular field. In other words, the research repository could double up as a blueprint to guide future research in the area of English language teaching and learning.

Reason for conducting Phase 2

Apart from establishing a research repository that records and systematically organises the growing but rather fragmented body of local research, it is also very important to study and synthesize data related to the different areas of language learning. Among the six areas of language learning highlighted in the syllabi, the area of writing has been repeatedly singled out by educators and employees as an area of concern and deserving of greater attention. For example, as revealed in the document titled 'Recommendations of the English Language Curriculum and Pedagogy Review' released by MOE Singapore in 2006, more should be done in the area of writing instruction to help students develop effective writing skills.

Overall, our students are competent in English, but there is significant scope for improvement in certain areas. Singapore students do fairly well in reading literacy, but standards of oral and written communication are highly uneven. Some employers have observed a decline in oral fluency, writing skills and the ability to communicate with impact. (Ministry of Education, 2006, Para. 3)

Results from a recent longitudinal study on the grammar of primary school students' writing¹ echo this urgency to improve students' standards of written communication. Qualitative analyses carried out on students' written texts have indicated that students show little development in their writing skills as they move up their primary years (Alsagoff, 2016). Given the need for continuous efforts to be put in place to improve students' writing competency, a close examination of the studies related to the area of writing would thus be helpful in providing curriculum planners as well as policymakers a comprehensive picture of the trends, foci and challenges of teaching writing in the local classrooms. This is what Phase 2 of this research review project seeks to accomplish.

Research objectives

As mentioned in the earlier section, the primary objective in Phase 1 was to build a research database that collated, categorised and archived local studies in key areas of language learning as delineated in the syllabus. Phase 2, however, conducts an in-depth study of the research found in the database that relates to the area of Writing. Specifically, the objective of the second phase is to identify, review, synthesize, and show salient and emerging trends, influences, research priorities and omissions in the field of EL writing research and practices in Singapore. This critical review can potentially offer new

¹ 2016/OER 47/12 LA. Investigating the development of the grammar in the writing of primary school children.

perspectives on the continued issue of improving students' writing and, at the same time, inform stakeholders about the key challenges and practical recommendations surfaced in these local studies by teacher-researchers and applied linguists as well as point to the gaps and weaknesses in the stories told in these studies. The overarching question for the critical review of local writing research is:

- 1) *What empirical research was undertaken on the teaching and learning of writing across the primary and secondary levels in Singapore schools when ELS2001 and ELS2010 were in effect?*

This question was then initially further unpacked by the following sub-questions:

- a. *What were the key areas of focus investigated during the implementation of ELS2001 and ELS2010?*
- b. *What similarities and differences were revealed in the key areas of focus between the two education levels during the implementation of ELS2001 and ELS2010?*
- c. *What were the pedagogical insights (e.g., challenges, recommendations) offered by the studies conducted in the primary and secondary classrooms during the implementation of ELS2001 and ELS2010?*

Methodology

Search strategy for Phase 1

It is necessary to provide a short summary of the search strategy employed for the larger study since studies more closely examined in Phase 2 were obtained from the research database built in the first phase of the study. For the first phase of the study, electronic searching was carried out on various institutional repositories (e.g., NIE Repository, NUS Scholar Bank) as well as major scholarly research databases (e.g., EBSCO, Education Research Complete) through the use of relevant search terms. For example, search terms used for sourcing studies on reading instruction included teaching/learning reading in Singapore, reading instruction in Singapore schools, reading strategies, teaching reading comprehension and learning to read in Singapore. Applied linguists in NIE as well as authors of relevant publications were also asked if they could point to more related research. The consultant of the present study whose research interest is in language teaching and learning also provided many local articles that were difficult to access. In general, the types of publication included master's theses, doctoral dissertations, peer-reviewed journal articles, ELIS-funded teacher research, book chapters, and conference proceedings – all of them products of education research projects conducted in Singapore.

Inclusion/Exclusion criteria for Phase 1 and Phase 2

The scope of research for Phase 1 and Phase 2 was largely determined by the information needs required to review ELS2010 and to design the new syllabus. Hence, the research literature is limited to local published and unpublished empirical research (i.e., qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-methods research) on English language instruction in Singapore schools published from 2002 to 2016. Only research published from 2002 to 2016 is included in both phases of the study. The reason for choosing these years stems from the assumption that the studies conducted in the local classrooms are, in one way or another, motivated by the changes and recommendations of the ELS2001 and ELS2010. In the case of Singapore, as Rubdy (2010) maintains, "changes to the syllabus are centrally mandated for nationwide implementation and teachers are expected to faithfully implement them at the classroom level" (p. 207). Studies conducted before 2002 are beyond the scope of this research

study as they are likely to reflect the changes made to ELS1991. That said, studies published after 2002 that drew on data collected in classrooms that enacted the ELS1991 syllabus are also excluded from both phases. In addition, projects that were conducted on non-local students or at the tertiary and undergraduate levels are excluded from both phases of the study. While insights about the transition from the secondary level through to undergraduate level may be useful for some stakeholders in the ministry, there is a practical need to exclude such studies so as to focus on the education levels included in the EL syllabus.

All publications related to local EL education that meet the above inclusion criteria were systematically recorded under specific research fields in a single Microsoft Excel spreadsheet² by the research assistant. The completed spreadsheet functioned as the research database from which writing research was then retrieved for close examination during Phase 2 of the study. However, not all the retrieved studies pertaining to the area of writing could be further examined for potential pedagogical insights that can inform future practice as intended by the last research sub-question. Instead, further sampling restrictions had to be put in place to ensure methodological rigour. As highlighted by Foster and Hammersley (1998), unpublished research may be able to provide more up to date information about the area of focus but it “has not been through any public process of collective assessment” (p. 621). That is to say that the inclusion of unpublished studies is questionable and may impact the “credibility that can be placed in the review’s conclusion” (Evans & Benefield, 2001, p. 534). Hence, even though both published and unpublished research studies were recorded during the first phase given its priority of comprehensiveness, it was decided only studies that had undergone some form of collective assessment would be used to answer the final research sub-question. These studies include funded or non-funded projects with published journal articles, Master of Research theses, and doctoral dissertations.

Revision of Research Sub-question 1c

Before carrying out a full data analysis of the studies related to writing instruction, a quick scan of the retrieved research from the research database was conducted. The initial scan revealed a total of 43 research studies related to writing instruction, of which 28 were published when ELS2001 was in effect, and 15 published when ELS2010 was in effect. However, when the additional exclusion criteria were put in place, only a total of 17 research studies were coded as expert-assessed studies and could be included for examination in order to answer the final research question. Given the paucity of expert-reviewed studies (12 from ELS2001 and five from ELS2010), the basis for taking up the final research sub-question, which sought to draw out the pedagogical insight offered by the researchers, became problematic (Pleasants, 2009). While it was possible to delineate the pedagogical insights offered by the 17 shortlisted studies, the result is likely to be an unfocused and weakly substantiated list of recommendations given that the questions about writing instruction which they sought to answer in their studies were highly divergent and hence the resulting pedagogical recommendations may lack a solid evidence base. Rather, in an attempt to counteract the common privileging of expert researcher accounts over those which draw on the experience of practitioners, it may be more beneficial to look at the potential gaps or silences in the representation of writing instruction based on a comparison of expert-reviewed studies and those that are initiated by teacher-researchers. A closer look at the broad research foci of these studies can also potentially highlight differences in pressing issues in writing instruction as perceived by the syllabi and the different groups who engage in educational research. With these considerations in mind, the final approach taken was to include both expert-reviewed

²The fields in the database include author, title, type of publication, date /year of publication, type of student participants, specific area of language learning, methodology, findings and recommendations (see Appendix 1 for the detailed list of fields). The shortlisted studies were also coded for their broad research focus (see Appendix 2 for the detailed coding scheme).

studies and those that were initiated by teacher-researchers conducted when ELS2001 and ELS 2010 were in effect. The final research sub-question was thus revised to explore the potential gaps and differences that become apparent in these research studies when compared to the aspects of language instruction emphasized in ELS 2001 and ELS 2010:

- c. *What aspects of writing and writing instruction in Singapore schools do these studies leave unattended when compared to the aspects of language instruction emphasized by the two syllabi?*

Data analysis for Phase 2

Key areas of focus

Unlike Phase 1 where all publications related to local EL education were systematically coded in the database, Phase 2 demanded a further analysis of the 43 shortlisted studies on writing instruction. Thematic analyses, rather than statistical methods, were used to determine the specific areas of focus, and the similarities, differences that may exist among the range of retrieved studies pertaining to writing instruction. Apart from focusing on the education level and the publication type, attention was also paid to the key areas of focus investigated in the retrieved studies.

One such key area of focus was the type of text that was being investigated since one of the distinctive characteristics of ELS 2010, carried over from its 2001 predecessor, is the explicit reference to the teaching and learning of text types (Rubdy & Tupas, 2009). In fact, both syllabus documents include an explicit listing of text types to be taught across the different year levels. So prominent is such a focus in the retrieved studies that most of the studies include the text type to be investigated in their titles. Notwithstanding, another key area of focus is the specific areas of language instruction investigated by the retrieved studies.

Aspects of language instruction focused on in the two syllabi

Apart from looking at the two key areas of focus, it was also important to look at the intentions of the two syllabi, specifically at what they actually highlighted as pertinent aspects of language instruction. This step is particularly critical in answering the revised research sub-question. One particular aspect of language instruction found in both syllabi is a set of principles for language learning and teaching, which are explicitly mentioned within both documents. As seen in Table 1, the ELS2001, for example, delineates six guiding principles of language learning and teaching which teachers should follow during the implementation of the syllabus within their EL classrooms. In the ELS2010, however, teachers are not only guided by the re-ordered six principles of EL teaching and learning (CLLIPS) but are also encouraged to employ six Teaching Processes (ACoLADE) “thoughtfully and flexibly in their instructional planning and classroom teaching” (Ministry of Education, 2008, p. 117).

Table 2.1

Differences in the teaching and learning processes in ELS2001 and ELS2010

ELS2001 Principles of Language learning and teaching	ELS2010 Six principles (CLLIPS) and the teaching processes (ACoLADE)
1) Learner Centredness 2) Process Orientation 3) Integration	CLLIPS 1) Contextualisation 2) Learner centredness 3) Learning-focused interaction

ELS2001 Principles of Language learning and teaching	ELS2010 Six principles (CLLIPS) and the teaching processes (ACoLADE)
4) Contextualisation 5) Spiral Progression 6) Interaction	4) Integration 5) Process orientation 6) Spiral progression ACoLADE 1) Raising <u>A</u> wareness 2) Structuring <u>C</u> onsolidation 3) Facilitating Af <u>L</u> (Assessment for Learning) 4) Enabling <u>A</u> pplication 5) Guiding <u>D</u> iscovery 6) Instructing <u>E</u> xplicitly

A close look at the two syllabi reveals a few new emphases on language instruction in the ELS2010 which were previously absent from ELS2001. As stated in the foreword of the syllabus document, some of the revisions and inclusions in the ELS2010 are influenced by the key recommendations articulated by the English Language Curriculum and Pedagogy Review Committee (ELCPRC). One such development includes the emphasis on using rich texts, “literary and informational/functional texts which are well written and engaging... rich in content and concern themselves with a variety of ideas, issues, topics and themes” to facilitate language learning. (Ministry of Education, 2008, p. 129). Specifically, a strong recommendation is made for students to be exposed to a wide range of rich texts which model good writing and use of language in the language classroom. As explicated in the document, the developers of the ELS2010 believe that this new emphasis on reading and viewing different types of rich texts not only heightens students’ appreciation of how language works in different texts but also enables students to move from reading to writing with greater ease.

When exploring the two syllabi, it is also worth mentioning the subtle but important change in the organisation of the learning outcomes or expected attainment targets that may influence how language instruction is enacted in the Singapore EL classroom. The ELS2001, with its focus on language use and learning outcomes, organises language learning and teaching around three major areas of language use, 1) Language for information, 2) Language for literary response and expression, 3) Language for social interaction. Learning outcomes for each area of language use are specified in two-year periods. In comparison, the ELS2010 organises learning outcomes around the six areas of language learning (i.e., Listening and Viewing, Reading and Viewing, Speaking and Representing, Writing and Representing, Grammar, Vocabulary). Learning outcomes for each area of language learning are made known at each year level.

Results and Discussion

Education level

As mentioned in the earlier section, a total of 43 research studies were conducted during the time the two syllabi were in effect. Table 2.2 shows the detailed breakdown of the studies according to education level. Of the 28 shortlisted research studies conducted during the time ELS2001 was in effect, 11 were conducted at the primary level and 17 at the secondary level. In comparison, far fewer studies have been conducted during the time ELS2010 has been in effect. This is not surprising given that ELS2010 was only implemented in 2010. Nevertheless, despite this time discrepancy, the number

of studies conducted at the primary level during the four years of ELS2010 has already reached the same number as those carried out during the 10 year period of ELS2001.

Table 2.2

Spread of studies across education level

Research type	ELS2001 (28 studies published from 2002-2012)		ELS2010 (15 studies published from 2013-2016 ³)	
	Primary	Secondary	Primary	Secondary
Expert assessed	4	8	2	3
Non-expert-reviewed	7	9	8	1
<i>Total</i>	11	17	11	4

In terms of the expert-assessed studies, about two-thirds of them were conducted during the time ELS2001 was in effect. Not surprisingly, a large portion of the 12 peer-reviewed studies published from 2002 to 2012 were initiated by academic researchers. Only two (i.e., Pereira, 2006, Lee, 2012) were doctoral studies, both of them investigating writing instruction at the secondary level. Interestingly, the peer-reviewed studies published since the implementation of ELS2010 showed a slightly different trend. Although the peer-reviewed studies conducted at the secondary level were still led by academic researchers, the same cannot be said of the studies conducted in the primary classrooms. Of the two peer-reviewed studies conducted at the primary level, one (i.e., Png, 2016) was a doctoral study while the other (i.e., Nair, Tay, & Koh, 2013) was led by a group of teacher-researchers.

An interesting observation is made when comparing the expert-reviewed studies to those that are not. Although the number of peer-reviewed studies remained the same during the two time periods, there seems to be a big drop in the number of non-expert-reviewed studies conducted at the secondary level. The number of non-expert-reviewed studies shrank from nine to one, signalling a sharp decline in teacher-researcher initiated studies.

[Education level X Publication type](#)

Table 2.3 shows the spread of research studies by publication type and by education level. In terms of the types of publication, approximately two-thirds of the studies conducted during the time ELS2001 was in effect (i.e., 20 out of 28) were academic submissions undertaken by teacher-researchers. A similar trend is observed of the studies published from 2013 to 2016. Although the number of academic submissions dropped due to a possible change in academic requirements⁴, it is important to note that five⁵ out of the six research project reports were produced by teacher-researchers who conducted action research in their classrooms. In other words, echoing the findings about studies undertaken during the earlier time period, less than one third of the studies conducted during the time ELS2010 has been in effect are led by academic researchers.

³ Most of the studies are coded according to the syllabus they referred to in their respective research reports.

⁴ In recent years, students taking the Honours years in NIE are no longer expected to submit a thesis. Similarly, students taking the Master of Arts programme in NIE are given the option to choose between submitting a thesis or completing two additional courses. The specific year of these changes is however unknown to the author.

⁵ The five research studies were funded by the ELIS Research Fund, a research fund offered by ELIS to support education officers carrying out projects that are in line with the English Language and Literacy Agenda.

The observed spread of research studies by publication type provides some explanation as to why there are few peer-reviewed studies in the field of writing instruction in Singapore. Given that the bulk of research studies are led by teacher-researchers who are exploring an area of interest that directly impacts their classroom teaching either as part of their academic coursework or as a school-initiated action research, it is likely that the size and scope of these studies do not always meet the methodological rigour and wider relevance that peer-reviewed journals look out for. More importantly, from the viewpoint of these teacher-researchers, it may well be more practical to share their findings in symposiums and research seminars organised by MOE or other educational institutions. Nonetheless, it is worth mentioning that the only journal article published about writing instruction in the primary classroom during the period ELS2010 has been in effect is based on teacher-led research.

Table 2.3

Spread of studies across publication type and education level

Type of publication	ELS2001 (<u>28</u> studies conducted from 2002-2012)		ELS2010 (<u>15</u> studies conducted from 2013-2016)	
	Primary	Secondary	Primary	Secondary
Academic submissions	7 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 3 B.A. thesis • 4 M.A. thesis 	13 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 9 M.A. thesis • 2 M.Ed. thesis • 1 EdD thesis • 1 Ph.D. thesis 	5 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 3 M.Ed. thesis • 1 Ph.D. thesis 	1 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1 M.A. thesis
Research project reports	2 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hu, Gu, Zhang & Bai, 2009 • Zhang et al., 2012 	2 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chandrasegaran, Kong & Chua, 2007 • Pereira, Netto-Shek & Ayaduray, 2010[#] 	5 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Loh, Ang & Goh, 2015 • Teo, Leong & Koh, 2016 • Appoo, Vasu & Chutatape, 2016 • George, Rai & Mohamed, 2016 • Khaw & Gwee, 2016 	1 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tay & Ng, 2014
Journal articles	2 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Koh, 2002 • Wong & Hew, 2010 	2 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teo & Kramer-Dahl, 2011 • Kramer-Dahl & Chia, 2011 	1 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nair, Tay, & Koh, 2013 	2 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cheung, 2013 • Teo, 2014
Book chapters	NIL	NIL	1 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wales & Mohamed, 2013 	NIL

Text type X Education Level

One of the distinctive characteristics of the ELS2001 that has been retained in the ELS2010 is the explicit listing of text types to be taught across the year levels (Rubdy & Tupas, 2009). Table 2.4 shows the spread of text types across the primary and secondary levels as it is apparent from the research studies during the time the two syllabi were in effect. An interesting observation made of the spread of text types in the primary level is the dominant focus on the teaching and learning of texts for creative and personal expression, specifically narratives. Although eight types of texts are specified in both syllabi, more than half of the research studies conducted at the primary level from 2002 to 2016 investigated the teaching and learning of narratives. Texts for academic and functional purposes, for example, the information report and the exposition text, were only explored on one or two occasions. Likewise at the secondary level, the research studies tended to look only at the teaching of one or two text types, namely narratives and expositions. As with the primary classroom, the other text types such as recounts, information reports and explanations were hardly researched. However, while just as at the primary levels, the studies favoured narratives over expositions during ELS2001, there was a shift in emphasis with the implementation of ELS2010. As revealed in Table 2.4, the study of the teaching of narratives in the secondary classroom has made way for that of expository texts. In fact, three out of four of the conducted studies look specifically at the teaching and learning of expository writing, foremost argumentation.

Table 2.4

Spread of studies across text type and education level

Research type X Text types	ELS2001 (<u>28</u> studies published from 2002-2012)		ELS2010 (<u>15</u> studies published from 2013-2016)	
	Primary	Secondary	Primary	Secondary
Peer-reviewed	4 1) Narrative (3) 2) Exposition (1)	8 1) Narrative (5) 2) Exposition (3) 3) Factual recount (1) <small>*Payne (2003) focused on more than 1 type of text.</small>	2 1) Exposition (2)	3 1) Exposition (2) 2) Everyday texts (1)
Non-peer- reviewed	7 1) Narrative (4) 2) Information Report (1) 3) Personal recount (1) 4) Journal writing (1)	9 1) Narrative (3) 2) Exposition (6) 3) Personal recount (1) 4) Description (1) 5) Situational Writing (1) <small>*Tan (2008), Sia (2006) & Ang (2008) focused on more than 1 type of text</small>	9 1) Narrative (7) 2) Information Report (1) 3) Journal writing (1)	1 1) Exposition (1)
<i>Total</i>	11	17	11	4

A close look at the research reports and the rationale they offer for the study of the particular text type in focus provides some insights to the rather narrow spread of text types investigated at the

different education levels. Quite a few of them suggest that, for example, the interest in the teaching and learning of narratives in the primary classrooms does not seem to be directly associated with the demands of the syllabi, given that a broader range of text types is explicitly listed for teaching across the different year levels. Rather, the motivation for looking at this specific text type appears to be influenced by what is to be assessed. Accordingly, researchers of both expert-reviewed and non-expert-reviewed studies during ELS2001 and teacher-researchers during ELS2010 deliberately selected narratives as the object of research as that was the main text type assessed in school-based and national examinations. It is worth noting, however, that there is a shift to the study of expository writing in the expert-reviewed studies conducted during ELS2010. At the same time though, both these studies were interventions, pushing teachers to move from their usual preference for the teaching of narrative genres to that of the more neglected expository writing. Taken together, these findings suggest that the object of research, and possibly the curriculum that is taught in primary schools may be influenced by factors other than the syllabi.

Similarly, at the secondary level, the assessed curriculum is also cited in most of the research studies as one of the main driving forces for selecting narratives and expositions as the key object of research in the earlier years. Chandrasegaran, Kong and Chua (2007), for example, explained that secondary school teachers had, for many years, avoided teaching expositions to students, and had even advised their “students to keep to narrative topics in the Singapore-Cambridge General Certificate of Education ‘Ordinary’ Level (‘O’ level) English examination” (p. 2). However, the introduction of the ELS2001 has led to a change in the O-level English examination paper, specifically to the de-emphasizing of narrative topics. As a result, many English teachers started to “realise the importance of expository writing and teaching expository writing” (Chandrasegaran, Kong & Chua, 2007, p. 2). Given that there has been no major change in the examination format since then, it is possible that this ‘realisation’ may have become even more wide-spread and deeply entrenched with ELS2010 in effect. It is also likely that teachers feel a greater need to devote more time and attention to the teaching and learning of such texts at the secondary level particularly since this text type is given little focus in the primary classrooms. Taken together, these findings again suggest that what is taught in the secondary writing classrooms may be greatly influenced by the assessed curriculum and, to a smaller extent, the writing curriculum in the primary classrooms instead of the mandated syllabi.

Broad Research Focus in Writing

Apart from looking at the types of texts that the studies focused on, it is also interesting to explore what other areas teacher-researchers and academics alike focus on when conducting research in the writing classroom. The top broad research areas in focus when ELS2001 was in effect are 1) Effectiveness of proposed instruction, 2) Factors affecting students’ competency, 3) Stakeholder perception, beliefs and attitude, 4) Language learning strategies, 5) Use of ICT tools in teaching and learning, as well as 6) Comparison of low and high progress students. In terms of exploring the effectiveness of the proposed instruction, many of the research studies (e.g., Long, 2002; Lum, 2006; Singh, 2003) seem to focus primarily on exploring the effectiveness of the genre approach particularly in terms of improving students’ knowledge of the schematic structure and linguistic features of the text type. The vast attention given to the genre approach does not come as a surprise given the emphasis on text types in 2001. Nonetheless, there were also a number of studies (e.g., Hu, Gu, Zhang & Bai, 2009; Zhang et al., 2012) that looked specifically at the effectiveness of strategy-based instruction in improving primary school students’ narrative writing.

As with ELS2001, for the ELS2010, research areas such as Effectiveness of proposed instruction and Stakeholder perception, beliefs and attitude continued to rank as two of the top most researched areas of focus. However, there seems to be more variation in the specific focus when exploring the

effectiveness of a proposed instructional approach in the writing classroom. Unlike ELS2001, where many of the studies investigated the effectiveness of the genre approach, the studies conducted while ELS2010 has been in effect seem to be more varied in the specific focus areas, with some looking at the effectiveness of drama (e.g., Lim, 2013; Wales & Mohamed, 2013) and others focusing on the use of free writing, journaling and self-regulation training (e.g., Loh, Ang & Goh, 2015; Teo, Leong & Koh, 2016) to improve the achievement and motivation of students in writing.

Unlike ELS2001, the keen interest in studying factors affecting students' writing competency (e.g., gender, correlation between sentence structures and writing performance) seem to have disappeared during the time period when ELS2010 has been in effect. Likewise, none of the research studies conducted during this period focused on making comparisons between low and high progress writers or exploring the language learner. Rather, there seems to be a shift in focus. Research areas unique to ELS2010 that were not evident in the research studies conducted when ELS2001 was in effect are mainly related to the development of 21st century competencies in students. The study conducted by Teo (2014), for example, focuses on developing a critical disposition in students through a critical reading and writing project. What is interesting about this finding is that the 21st century competencies framework, while reflected in major MOE documents and websites, is not found in the ELS2010 document. A close look at the research studies also reveals a persistent focus on the use of ICT tools in the teaching and learning of writing throughout the years. Research studies that explore how ICT tools can be utilised in the classroom (e.g., Tan, 2008; Nair, Tay & Koh, 2013) have, in one way or another, cited Singapore's Masterplan for ICT in education as the motivating factor. These observations suggest that the motivation behind conducting research in the writing classroom may be influenced by broader Ministry initiatives rather than the key areas highlighted in the syllabus document alone.

Surfaced gaps

A number of gaps become apparent in the representation of writing instruction among the shortlisted research studies when compared to the intent of the syllabus documents. Firstly, although both syllabi documents explicate the learning objectives to be mastered by all primary and secondary students, most of the projects conducted during the implementation of the two syllabi focused on the teaching and learning of writing to primary students in the standard classrooms as well as their secondary counterparts taking the Secondary Express and Normal (Academic) courses. In other words, little research has been conducted on students taking Foundation English at Primary 5 and 6 and students taking Normal (Technical) English from Secondary 1 to 4 – a group of students identified as “low progress learners who require more scaffolding in their learning of language skills” (Ministry of Education, 2008, p. 6). Only one peer-reviewed study conducted by Pereira, Netto-Shek, and Ayaduray (2010) looked at the skills of low progress students, in this case, the effectiveness of a literature-driven English programme in improving the writing skills of students from the Normal (Technical) Stream. This suggests a very striking gap in the representation of writing instruction of low progress students in our local schools.

Another surfaced gap concerns the use of rich texts in the teaching of writing. Although the use of rich texts to facilitate language learning is a distinctive feature of ELS2010, none of the studies conducted in the period that ELS2010 has been in effect has incorporated the use of rich texts to improve students' writing. In other words, despite the persistent interest in exploring new ways to increase students' writing competence, both teacher-researchers and applied linguists alike did not investigate the potential effects of the use of rich texts on students writing. It is possible that, although the inclusion of rich texts is strongly recommended in ELS2010 by curriculum developers, this intent was not well-communicated to the respective stakeholders during syllabus implementation.

It is also worth noting the principles of EL teaching and learning, specifically the principle of contextualisation, do not seem to impact the way in which writing lessons are designed in the research studies conducted during the different periods that ELS2001 and ELS2010 have been in effect. In terms of writing instruction, it is expected that students should learn to write in meaningful contexts of use and that the writing lessons are planned “around learning outcomes or a type of text to help pupils use related language skills, grammatical items/ structures and vocabulary appropriately in [the] written language to suit the purpose, audience, context and culture” (Ministry of Education, 2008, p. 11). Yet, as seen in most of the shortlisted studies, students engage in decontextualized writing or writing tasks that do not have a clear purpose or audience in mind. Only a handful of expert-reviewed studies (e.g., Png, 2016; Teo, 2014) seem to follow the principle of contextualisation, having provided students with opportunities to deconstruct, analyse and produce written texts intended for different audiences across different modes.

Conclusion

The aim of this report is to provide curriculum planners a descriptive analysis of what has been done in the area of writing research during the time ELS2001 and 2010 were in effect. In the midst of doing so, some potential gaps have been revealed in the representation of writing instruction. While it is evident that both researchers and practitioners have, over the years, conducted numerous studies in response to the call to improve students’ standards of written communication, this report has shown that the object of research is more often than not influenced by factors other than what is stated in the syllabus. Our findings show that research has focused on the assessed curriculum and broader Ministry initiatives rather than areas emphasized in the syllabi such as the teaching of a range of text types, the use of rich texts in the classrooms. If the aim of the EL syllabus is to educate and influence the way language learning is carried out in the EL classroom, more will need to be done to ensure that the respective stakeholders (e.g., practitioners, teacher-training institutions) are aware of the intent of the syllabus and its accompanying recommendations. Only then can the link between research and student learning be strengthened.

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Appendix 1: Database Fields and Description (Phase 1)

Database fields	Brief description
Title	title of research
Author	first author (surname first)
Co-Authors	list the other authors according to occurrence (surname first)
Type of publication	type of publication; could be an academic document like Masters/Doctorate dissertation, journal article, research project report (typically technical reports submitted to the funding institution)
Year of publication	Typically 2000 to 2016
Education level	the different levels of education in Singapore; Lower Pri (Pri 1-3), Upper Pri (Pri 4-6), Lower Sec (Sec 1-2), Upper Sec (Sec 3-4), JC, ITE, Pre-Pri (Kindergarten), IB
Proficiency level	the proficiency levels commonly found in Singapore - the official titles 1) gifted stream, 2) low progress stream(NA/NT/FEL/EM3), 3) the general mainstream group, 4) high progress (ID by teacher), Low Progress (ID by teachers)
Language Area (1)	the main 8 language areas as stated in the EL syllabus 2010; the more prominent one is placed as (1). Indicate ALL if the project looks at EL as a whole (e.g., curriculum implementation) and OTHERS if it focuses on classroom discourse, out of school literacy practices etc
Language Area (2)	may or may not be filled as some projects have one distinct research area
Language Area (3)	may or may not be filled as some projects have one distinct research area
Broad Research Focus (1)	the broad themes that surfaced from the projects and may be language area specific; possible field could include 'effectiveness of proposed instruction' 'stakeholder beliefs and attitudes', '21st century competencies: Critical and creative thinking', '21st century competencies: New media literacies', 'Assessment, feedback, washback', 'Low progress learners', 'Bilingual literacy' etc.
Broad Research Focus (2)	may or may not be filled as some projects have only one distinct research focus. The 2nd research focus should be distinct from the first.
Approaches to Research	the type of methodological approach
Methods	specific methods like semi-structured interviews, case study, quasi-experiments (specific type of quasi experiment), corpus, textual analysis
Intervention	whether an intervention was carried out
Year of Data Collection	year the study was carried out
Reference to syllabus	ELS2001, ELS2010
Data Sources	Specific research instruments/data collected; specify the number of scripts, types of interviews or the types of instrument used
Research Question(s)	research objective/research question; please label as RO1/2/3 or RQ1/2/3 in the order stated in the report

Database fields	Brief description
Findings	Findings of the study as related to stated research objectives or research questions; label them as 1), 2), 3) (so on and so forth)
Recommendation(s)	Recommendations of the study as related to stated research objectives or research questions or as related to specific stakeholders
Project code	Assigned code and name of institutions that provide the
Related projects	research articles that derive from funded projects

Appendix 2: Brief description of the coded fields for Broad Research Focus (Phase 1)

Broad Research Focus	Brief Description
Home factors (family, sociocultural background)	Literature that focuses on home factors such as family roles and sociocultural background and how they affect students' learning
Effectiveness of proposed instruction	Literature that focuses on the effectiveness of proposed instruction(s) either qualitatively or quantitatively
Comparison of Low Progress students and High Progress students	Literature that compares the effectiveness of proposed instruction(s) or assesses attitude, motivation, aptitude, and characteristics between low progress and high progress students
Student motivation, attitude, learning styles	Literature that focuses on understanding or eliciting students motivation, attitudes, and/or learning styles
Bilingual education	Literature that emphasises the effect of bilingual education on students development or learning
Assessment, feedback, washback	Literature that focuses on the types of assessment and/or feedback used by teachers
Factors affecting students' competency	Literature that focuses on factors that may affect students' competency on a specific language area
Professional development	Literature that focuses on the effect of teachers' professional development either through workshops or in-school training sessions
Classroom practices	Literature that focuses on teachers' classroom practices that could affect students' learning
Classroom discourse and interaction	Literature that focuses on classroom discourse and classroom interactions between students and teachers
Multiliteracies, Multimodal literacies	Literature that looks at the prevalence and/or use of multimodal material in classroom
Stakeholders perceptions, beliefs and attitudes (e.g., teachers, students, parents, principals)	Literature that focuses on teachers', students', parents', and/or school staffs' (e.g. HOD, principals, learning support coordinators) perceptions, beliefs, and/or attitudes
21 st century competencies: Civic Literacy, Global Awareness & Cross-cultural skills	Literature that focuses on students' civic literacy, global awareness, and cross-cultural skills in classroom
21 st century competencies: Critical and creative thinking	Literature that focuses on students critical and creative thinking in classroom
21 st century competencies: Communication, collaboration and information skills	Literature that focuses on collaborative work in either through the use of online workspace or in classroom

Broad Research Focus	Brief Description
Using ICT tools in teaching and learning	Literature that focuses on the use of ICT tools as means of teaching and learning
Curriculum/Syllabus restructuring, innovation	Literature that looked at curriculum/syllabus restructuring or innovation by teacher(s), department(s), and/or school(s)
Out of school learning experiences	Literature that examines students' out-of-school learning experience including MLEA, tuitions, and students activity beyond the classroom
Language learning strategies, Metacognitive and cognitive strategies	Literature that examines language learning strategies and students cognitive and metacognitive strategies
Singapore English	Literature that focuses on the impact or prevalence of Singapore English in teaching and/or learning on teachers and/or students
Policy/Program evaluation (official)	Literature that examines MOE's policies and programmes which includes the use of government approved textbooks in classrooms