



## Fostering effective networking in qualitative research

Charanjit Kaur Swaran Singh <sup>a</sup> , Tunku Mohani Tunku Mohtar <sup>b1</sup> , Nor Azmi Mostafa <sup>c</sup> ,  
Sasigaran Moneyam <sup>d</sup> , Nadiyah Yan Abdullah <sup>e</sup> , Tarsame Singh Masa Singh <sup>f</sup> 

<sup>a,b,c,d,e</sup> *Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris, Malaysia*

<sup>f</sup> *Institute of Teacher Education, Tuanku Bainun Campus, Pulau Pinang, Malaysia*

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### Abstract

The aim of the research is to develop models and modules for teaching English as a second language to weak learners. A qualitative research design was employed. Data were collected through classroom observations and focus-group interview with a group of students. Fifteen ESL learners, one ESL teacher and principal participated in the study. The learners are Form Three students in a private Islamic school in Malaysia. The students were given a total of five compositions to write. They wrote one composition each time the researchers visited them. The students were observed as they wrote. The problems they had were noted by the researchers. The observations made revealed the learners' weaknesses at writing compositions in English. A focus-group interview was made after each observation to probe further into their problems of learning English. An informal conversation was also conducted with the English Language teacher during each visit. While conducting the research it was discovered that the students who were interviewed became more and more interested in participating in the project. They became willing partners and they contributed valuable information in spite of their linguistic inadequacies. The regular visits seem to have endeared us to the principal, teacher and the students that they look forward to our visit. This paper describes the procedures taken to effectuate networking with the principal, teacher and the students. It analyses and discusses the factors that have contributed to this effective networking.

*Keywords:* Networking; qualitative research; ESL learners; ESL teacher; writing skills

## 1. Introduction

It is common knowledge that many ESL (English as a Second Language) learners are weak at writing compositions (Dar & Kahn, 2015). There is insufficient practice at writing provided in the textbooks at all levels in school in Malaysia. Students very infrequently write compositions in class. This is because the number of students in a class is often large (about 40 students in a class) and hence marking the compositions takes up a lot of the teacher's time (Nesamalar, Saratha, & Teh, 2001; Rosli & Maarof, 2016). Students who are proficient in the language are able to cope with the task on their own. However, the weak learners are at a disadvantage (Berman & Cheng, 2010). The problem is

<sup>1</sup> Corresponding author

*Email id:* mohaniazmi@yahoo.com

aggravated when they are automatically promoted from Form One up to Form Three. The public examination which students have to take at the Form Three level requires them to write two compositions. Preparing for this task becomes a great struggle for the weak learners as well the teacher concerned (Malaysia Education Blueprint 2015-2025). Therefore, awareness of the plight of the weak ESL learners and the teacher teaching them provided motivation for the preparation of modules to assist them.

## **2. Background to the problem**

The need to plan for an integrated approach to the teaching and learning of the writing skills was felt to assist the weak learners and the teacher concerned (Palpanadan, Abdul Rahim Salam & Fauziah Ismail, 2014; Yunus et al., 2021). It was decided that a set of modules for the teaching and learning of writing would satisfy the need. A module in the context of the study is considered as ‘a self-contained, formally structured learning experience with a coherent and explicit set of learning outcomes and assessment’ (Donnelly and Fitzmaurice, 2010). The idea was to focus on the quality of learning that can be achieved by the weak learners. The process of learning was structured into modules and by working through the module students would be assisted in writing compositions on their own. In order to produce the set of modules data for the content had to be procured. Data had to be obtained not only from the English Language school syllabus but also from the teacher and the students involved in the study. The syllabus provided the formally stipulated content that students had to be taught. The teacher and students provide information regarding the students’ proficiency level and the language activities that students were capable of doing. Obtaining data required networking with the teacher, students as well as the school administrator whose permission was necessary to conduct the study in the school.

### *2.1 Rationale for networking*

Networking entails collaboration and cooperation of the participating parties in an organization. The purpose of networking in the study was to get as much information as possible from the relevant parties in order to write the modules. This meant direct contact with the students, teacher and administrator had to be made. Interaction between the researchers and the subjects involved was necessary to obtain the relevant data. There are a number of reasons which support this networking. Firstly, the students had to be familiar with the researchers. Three or four researchers were involved at any one time with the students. Getting to know the students and to socialize with them would make them open up and warm up to the researchers (Singh et al., 2020; Goyak et al., 2021). In relation to this reason was the trust that was required from them so that they were not suspicious of the researchers in any way. It was also to avoid making them feel inhibited in speaking up. Thirdly, it was to make them feel confident in sharing information with the researchers. They were required to express their problems regarding writing compositions in English. They had to be convinced that it was not an evaluation of their teacher’s teaching should they fail to understand what was taught. Fourthly, it was necessary to make them feel relaxed and comfortable in divulging information to unfamiliar people. They were also made to understand that the researchers were there to help them improve their learning.

Networking with the teacher was made to convince her that the procedure was descriptive and not evaluative. Most teachers would feel uncomfortable to be questioned about his or her teaching and the students’ performance. It was also done to make the teacher familiar with the researchers so that she would not feel uncomfortable to be questioned by two or three interviewers. She was also made to understand that the researchers were there to help her by providing alternative materials which could be produced as a result of the interview.

The administrator was interviewed to gather information for the study and also to get his support in engaging the students and teacher in the school to participate in the project. During the course of the networking, care was made not to criticize or pass negative remarks in any situation.

## 2.2 Theoretical Framework

The procedure undertaken in this study is based on the social network theory. The term ‘social network’ was first coined by Barnes in 1954. In his fieldwork in a small village in south-west Norway, he was intrigued by the part played by kinship, friendship and neighbouring in producing an integrated community. The theory views social relationships in terms of nodes and ties. The nodes are the people involved in the network and the ties are the relationships between those involved (Wikipedia, 2010). According to this theory, the relationships the individuals involved have with one another is important. The relationships in networking in this study were based on common interests, beliefs and knowledge. It was through social networking that the information required in the study was obtained. This theory was referred to provide support for the interaction that ensued.

This paper also draws on social constructivism (Vygotsky, 1978) to support the network established. The constructivists maintain that learning is a process of constructing meaning and how people make sense of their experiences. Learning according to the constructive view is best promoted through interaction. Students reflect on their previous experiences to make sense of new experiences with the help of the teacher or other knowledgeable adults.

Another theory that explains the use of networking satisfactorily is the collaboration theory. There is currently no general theory of collaboration but a number of frameworks upon which collaboration is used have been proposed. The term is defined in various ways such as ‘systems’ (Noam, 2001), dialogue (Clark et al., 1996) and creative problem solving (John-Steiner, 1992). The word ‘collaboration’ is used in various contexts, one of which is education. To avoid it from reflecting a nebulous concept, a theoretical structure and framework were constructed to guide the researchers in achieving the objective of this study. The definition of ‘collaboration’ in this context echoes the definition given by Montiel-Overall (2010) that is, ‘a process in which two or more individuals work together to integrate information in order to enhance student learning’ (p.1). The collaboration was based on what Russell (2002) has suggested namely, shared goals, shared vision, trust, respect, comprehensive planning and shared risks.

## 2.3 Objectives of the study

The objectives of the study were to explore and identify the impact of social networking between the researchers and the samples selected.

The networking was conducted to discover the following information:

The problems the students had in writing compositions in English.

The problems the teacher had in teaching writing compositions in English.

The type of activities that students felt could help them write.

Forms of assistance required to help them write.

The problems the administrator had in getting students to learn English.

The questions addressed at this juncture were:

What is the impact of networking on the students, teacher and administrator?

What are the factors that influence networking between the researchers and the students, teacher and administrator?

## 3. Method

This study employed qualitative research design that reports the findings of the impact of social networking between the researchers and the samples selected. This study used a qualitative methodology that permitted the researchers to discover and comprehend human views, perspectives, experiences and communication that would allow probing further into the phenomenon being investigated from the participant perspectives (Merriam, 2009; Varutharaju & Ratnavadivel, 2014).

The aim was to obtain in-depth information regarding the teaching and learning of writing compositions in English with the intention of assisting the teacher and students achieve better results. The techniques used to collect data were classroom observation, focus group interview and individual interview. All these techniques require networking with the subjects.

The aim of this part of the study was to assist teaching and learning through interaction with the teacher, students and the administrator. The samples were from one private residential Islamic school in Perak. The main subjects taught were Arabic language and Islamic religious knowledge. English Language was taught twice week for a total of two hours. The participants were a group of ESL learners from a Form Three class. There were 15 students altogether in an intact class. They were all boys whose ages ranged from 14 to 15 years. They came from various parts of Perak and Selangor.

A qualified ESL female Malay teacher taught English Language to the class throughout the school term. She had had experience in teaching English Language in secondary schools. She taught English Language twice a week (Tuesday and Friday) to the class under study. The duration of each lesson was one hour.

The administrator was a philanthropist. He established the school on his own plot of land. He saw to the management of the school as well as teaching and learning. His permission was required for the study to be conducted in the school. He gave his blessing to the team as he believed that extra help was needed to coach the students in the learning of English.

### *3.1 Classroom Observation*

Observation was conducted to obtain an in-depth and holistic view of what went on during an English Language writing lesson in the classroom. It was done to establish rapport with the students and teacher and to mingle with them so that they will act naturally while performing their tasks of teaching and learning. At the same time, the researchers would be able to detach themselves from the setting and be able to analyse what went on in the classroom and then write about the experience (Bernard, 2002). As the subjects became more familiar with the researchers, there was little likelihood that they would act in a way when they were aware of being observed which Bernard (2002) refers to as “reactivity”. To sustain the rapport with the teacher and students, participant observation was used. The level of participation used depended on the task administered. When the task given was fairly challenging for the students more interaction was required. At times the students were able to manage on their own. Students were observed as they wrote the compositions which were given over a period of five weeks. One composition was given to the students each week. They had to complete each composition in class. Two, and sometimes three or four researchers were present at each session to observe the students as they wrote. The English Language teacher was with the students in the classroom.

### *3.2 Focus group interview*

This was conducted after the composition writing session. Six to seven students representing the weak students and the more able ones were selected. They were gathered in the school hall. The researchers sat together with them forming a circle. The interview consisted of questions and answers pertaining to the students’ experience at writing the composition that day. The questions were first asked in English but when students showed inability to understand what was required, the question

was translated to Malay. The students were encouraged to answer in English but if they had problems with the language they could answer in Malay. The main purpose was to obtain information from them and hence they were allowed to express themselves in the language they were comfortable with.

### *3.3 Individual interview*

The individual interview was conducted with the teacher and the administrator separately and on two different occasions. Permission to conduct an interview with the teacher as well as the administrator was sought so that they were prepared for it. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. Each of the interviewee was given the relevant transcript to check for any inconsistencies or for information they would not like to divulge.

### *3.4 Data Analysis*

Data obtained from the students' focus group interview, individual interview with the teacher and administrator were analyzed thematically. The categories include writing problems faced by the ESL learners, strategies for teaching writing, role as a school principal, factors contributing to a positive relationship during interviews, factors contributing to a positive relationship during interviews and effectiveness of networking.

## **4. Findings**

### *4.1 What is the impact of networking on the students, teacher and administrator?*

Data were collected during the observations made, focus group interviews and interviews with the English Language teacher and the principal.

#### **Observation**

### *4.2 Writing problems faced by the ESL learners*

Networking with the students was very fruitful (Lidawan, 2019; Alaa et al., 2019; Goyak et al., 2021). The students revealed that they had problems in getting the right words to use in the compositions. They were highly dependent on the teacher for guidance. The teacher had to tell them what to write and how to write by reading the instructions and words given in the task sheet. The teacher had to translate to Malay what she had said earlier in English. The students constantly referred to the bilingual dictionary when they had problems looking for words they wanted to use. They were told not to use the dictionary too often as it would impede their attempt at completing the composition. Their recourse was asking the teacher or the researchers for help. This marked the beginning of the interaction or networking. They were given guidance in the form of linguistic items which they required, explanation of vocabulary items given or format of the composition such as the introduction, body and conclusion of the composition by the teacher. The researchers provided further assistance as they wrote, and reminded them of what the teacher had explained. The students depended heavily on translation to get words to use. The researchers encouraged the students to find relevant words which they had already learned. Their problems were mainly:

- inability to understand the instructions given to write the composition,
- inability to understand certain words given as guidance in the task paper,
- lack of vocabulary items to use in the composition, and
- inadequate knowledge of grammatical structures to construct sentences in English.

- overdependence on translation of English words to Malay and also vice versa.

#### 4.3 Focus group interview

The focus group interview was a means of triangulating data collection conducted during observation. Since the time was spent solely on interacting, more detailed information was obtained. During the first session the students were not very responsive. They could have developed what is known as “stranger danger” which could be expressed as ‘a reluctance to share with others unknown to you’ (Wikipedia, 2010). This could pose a barrier to collaboration. It was also their first experience in being interviewed. The interview was not recorded as the students were not forthcoming with information. The students were made to understand that the researchers were there to help them improve their writing proficiency and not to evaluate them. They were also told that the interview would be recorded. Hence, during the ensuing sessions they were relaxed and casual as they understood the researchers’ intentions.

The problems discovered were similar to those obtained during observation. The students’ main problem of writing was that they could not understand the instructions given for the task to be done. Some of the vocabulary items accompanying the pictures given in the task were beyond their comprehension. They did not know the meaning of lexical items such as ‘utensil’, ‘avoid’, and ‘observe rules’. Hence, they were unable to write anything pertaining to them. They disclosed that they had to ask the teacher or their friends, or look up the bilingual dictionary for assistance. However, during the second session, they wrote the composition on their own. They did not ask for help unless necessary. They had problems with spelling, grammar, vocabulary and getting ideas. They formed sentences in Malay first and then translated them to English. Whenever a student sought help from a friend, the friend would merely tell him what to write or what he (the friend) had written. The students also divulged that they had forgotten many of the words they had learned before. They did very little reading after school. One of them claimed to have read a book on how to speak English, another read the textbook and another student remembered having read “The prisoner of Zenda” and “Robinson Crusoe” which were reading texts for their literature lesson some time ago. They used the bilingual dictionary to find the Malay equivalence of the English word they did not understand. Sometimes they had to look up the English equivalence of a Malay word in order to write a sentence in English. They students were aware of what they had to do to improve their command of English.

#### 4.4 Teacher

The first encounter the researchers had with the teacher was quite intimidating for her as she thought that she was being evaluated. She felt very uncomfortable about it. After some explanation about the research and its procedures, the teacher felt happy and looked forward to the visit every week. The teacher provided information pertaining to the students’ background. Most of them were from Selangor and they were placed in the religious school because their parents felt that their children could not cope with the current social environment. Placing them in the religious school would prevent them from being involved in socially undesirable activities. Students in the class are of mixed ability. There were some slow readers who could hardly read in English. There were, however, a few who could. The students were very weak at English in spite of the teacher’s attempts at conducting a variety of activities to make them speak and write in English. The teacher attributed the problem to the students’ negative attitude towards learning in general. Although they had ideas to write about, their poor command of the language hindered them from expressing their ideas in English. However, if they had to write they would refer to the dictionary most of the time. The students used different types of dictionary: the English-English, English-Malay, and the English-Arab Oxford/Longman dictionaries. They used the bilingual dictionary very frequently. Yani et al. (2018) and Pillay, Singh, Yunus (2020)

& Rosli and Maarof (2016) divulged that guiding student to connect concept as a learning strategy can be effective to improve their logical thinking capability.

#### *4.5 Strategies for teaching writing*

The teacher had encouraged the students to have a dictionary each to refer to when they had an essay to write. The teacher did not provide vocabulary items for students to use in their compositions. Instead, she told them to locate words in the dictionary and to find their meanings. She only explained the meaning of certain words if they really could not find the meaning. The teacher taught dictionary skills almost every day. Another problem of writing that the students had was starting the composition. They did not know how to construct sentences. The students also lacked the vocabulary to write and therefore they did not know how to express their ideas using suitable words. The students were very dependent on their teacher who had to translate words from Malay to English.

The teacher had always helped the students to write by giving them ideas. For example, she would ask the students to read the question, answer it and write. According to Singh et al. (2020), ESL teachers can employ different strategies when teaching writing. Finding obtained from this study is in line with Singh et al. (2020) as teachers must create ways for students to generate ideas for writing. The teacher started her typical writing session by asking the students a question, then discussed or gave the students a sample composition. She went through the composition with them and then told them to write. She explained the use of the introduction, body and closure of a composition. According to the teacher, the students wrote one composition each month. The teacher also gave them summary writing and answering questions as part of writing. The students sometimes discussed in groups before they started writing. The teacher encouraged the students to prepare a draft first before writing their compositions. The teacher ensures that her students feel safe to learn and this is supported by (Tam & Linh, 2017) that teachers' pedagogical practices employed during the writing process can motivate students to stay connected with the learning process. The weaker students who could not write at all were given a sample composition to read and then copy. After copying the essay, the students would identify ten words and find the meanings. This was the strategy the teacher used to make the weak students write and this is supported by (Rahman et al., 2021; Singh et al., 2021). They wrote whole paragraphs and then the whole composition. As for the good students, the teacher asked them to write journals, just like a diary. The students had to write one paragraph or just three sentences in a paragraph. The teacher also believed that if she guided them well, they would be able to write. The finding of this study is in line with Singh et al. (2020) that ESL teacher can infuse and motivate ESL students to write step-by step so that they can show interest towards writing. According to (Mursyid & Nia Kurniawati, 2019; Gopal & Singh, 2020; Tek et al., 2021) teachers can be creative in their pedagogical approach to assist students to write better.

#### *4.6 Principal*

##### *4.6.1 Role as a school principal*

The principal performed varied duties and responsibilities in the school. The progress of the school depended on him and he had an obligation towards the workers of the school, the students, the teachers and guardians. He had to see that work in the school was carried out efficiently. As the head of the school, the principal ensured that the school setting provided an environment which guided the students to achieve optimal knowledge and skills, develop positive attitudes and ways of thinking. The principal was very cooperative in supporting this project. The principal was also satisfied with the teacher teaching English Language to the Form Three students because she was a qualified TESL graduate and very committed to her work. The principal who was also the headman of the village

where the school is located, had a clear mission statement to enable the students to excel in religious and academic subjects. However, the lack of funds and inadequate infra-structure especially the hostel for the girls were constraints that he faced. Nevertheless, he expressed optimism in solving this problem. He had offered the piece of land where the present school is located to the Menteri Besar of Perak who planned to establish a District Maahad Tahfiz which could take in more students.

#### *4.7 What are the factors that influence networking between the researchers and the students, teacher and administrator?*

##### *4.7.1 Factors Contributing to a Positive Relationship during Observations*

In this section, the factors that contributed positively to the researcher-student relationship were analysed in the contexts of the classroom sessions and general interactions with the students at other times prior to and after the classroom sessions and the focus group interviews. The factors that could be detected are:

- The researchers treated the students as partners in the research projects rather than as students who were below their rank as academics. Although it is common practice in Malaysian schools for students to stand and greet the teacher and visitors when these people arrive in the classroom, the researchers also took the lead and would greet the students or return their greetings if they happened to be outside their classroom when they arrived. The greetings were usually followed by light chatting asking the students about their wellbeing and school life generally. Likewise, before leaving the school, if the students were outside their classroom, the researchers would chat briefly with them before bidding them farewell. These encounters, while providing opportunities for the students to practice using the English language for natural conversation, also helped to build rapport with them.

- During the classroom sessions, the researchers not only walked around to observe how the students went about their tasks but also helped them when they asked for it. The researchers offered their help freely when there were no restrictions imposed by the requirements of the study. An example of one of these restrictions was the need to let the students complete the writing assignment independently at certain stages of the study. When helping the students, the researchers ensured that the students were satisfied with the outcome. A researcher sometimes sought help from other researchers when he or she felt uncertain or unable to help the students to come up with a desired outcome. The researchers' efforts showed that they were genuine in helping the students to complete their tasks. The researchers' willingness to cooperate with the students showed that they were approachable, a positive factor in developing a good working relationship with the students.

- The researchers often encouraged the students to read and use the English language at every opportunity. This frequent encouragement to practice using the English language showed that the researchers were supportive of the students' efforts to learn the language and wanted them to be able to use the language. During one visit, the lead researcher brought old magazines and asked each of the students to pick a few that they would like to read. The students enthusiastically selected the magazines that they wanted. By providing the students with materials to help them to improve their English language proficiency, the researchers were going beyond mere verbal encouragement. This action showed to the students the extent to which the researchers were willing to help them learn the language well. It can be seen as a positive contribution in the networking process because the students were able to see that the researchers were not only interested in collecting data for their research project but they were also there to help them learn.

- When interacting with the students, the researchers often addressed the students by name. This was done from very early on in the research project and was maintained during the interviews. Addressing the students by name made the interactions more personal and it showed that the researchers were interested in developing the relationship with them at a cordial level rather than a superficial one.

The researcher-teacher relationship during the school was collegial in nature. The teacher was treated as a colleague rather than a subordinate or stranger. Permission from her was sought before the researchers entered the classroom. She was also made to understand that the observation was done to also discover her problems of teaching writing compositions to the students. Her problems could be detected through the students' responses to her lessons. The teacher's instructions and explanations to the students were made without any intervention by the researchers. There was no comment about her lessons as had been promised her. It was clearly conveyed to her that this was not the intention of the study.

#### 4.8 Factors Contributing to a Positive Relationship during Interviews

##### 4.8.1 Student

The data collection sessions in the classroom were followed by focus group interviews with selected students. The selection was done by the teacher based on the researchers' request that students at different levels of proficiency were represented. Six to seven students participated in each interview session. A qualitative analysis of the interview data pointed to several factors that could have contributed to a positive working relationship between the researchers and the students. These factors are described below:

- The questioning technique employed by the researchers during the interviews encouraged the students to speak and to clarify their answers. The researchers used a variety of questions that helped the students to focus on the questions and to open up and elaborate on their answers. During each of the interviews, the students often gave very short answers to the researchers' questions. This was understandable given their age and proficiency level of English. The students were at the age where they were rather shy and their low level of proficiency could have affected their confidence to participate in the interviews with ease. There was a consistent need to keep the interviews moving forward by asking questions that encouraged the students to talk more. The need to encourage active participation during the interviews also led to the need to conduct the interviews mainly in the native language, which was Bahasa Malaysia, although English was still used every now and then. The more the students felt at ease during the interviews, the easier it would be for them to communicate with the researchers and vice versa. The ability to communicate with ease was a factor in encouraging rapport.

- The interviewers frequently followed the students' lead during the interviews. When students used a word in their answers to the interviewers' question, then the same word would be used in the following question. Another example is when the students brought up specific examples from the preceding classroom session, the following questions would then be based on those examples. For instance, in one of the researcher's effort to encourage a student to elaborate more on his answer to a question, the researcher continued the interview as shown in Excerpt 1. The question inquired why the student found it hard to write the essay that he had just written. The words in italics are the translated version of the excerpt.

#### Excerpt 1. Student's reflection on problems with vocabulary

Interviewer	Jadi yang buat dia betul-betul susah tu apa? So what makes it really hard for you?
Interviewee	Ada..macam..setengah..sesetengah ayat yang buat Bahasa Melayu..masa nak buat dalam bahasa Inggeris..macam..tadi ladanglah..susahkan..macam tak ingat dia punya ..erm..ayat dia..bila sebut tu baru ingat sikit-sikit..tak yakin bila huraikan... There are some sentences in Bahasa Melayu .. when I want to make them in English ..like just now, "ladang" .. that was hard .. like, I couldn't remember its .. erm .. sentence .. when I say it then I could remember a bit .. not confident in elaborating it ...
Interviewer	Hmm..you're not confident in elaborating..but you know some words....nak elaborate tu susah.....adakah itu sebabkan kurang tahu apa perkataan kurang vocabulary? ...It's hard to elaborate....is that because you don't know the word .... lack of

	vocabulary?
Interviewee	Ada sikit-sikit. A bit.
Interviewer	Sebab tadi ada beberapa orang yang tanya-tanya saya ..tapi dia cuma nak perkataan..jadi nak membina ayat tu okaylah ya? Because there were a few students who asked me .. but they only wanted the words .. so constructing sentences is okay, is it?
Interviewee	Boleh ah... Can ..
Interviewer	Boleh bina... You can construct it ..
Interviewee	Tahu maksud..boleh sikit-sikit..ada ah.. I know the meaning .. can do a bit ..

In excerpt 1, the student brought up an instance in the classroom when he asked the researcher for the word “ladang” in English. The students’ reflection of that instance initiated a focus on problems with vocabulary as evidenced by the researchers’ questions after that. Taking the lead from the students indicated that they were given some control over the interviews and that they were partners in the data collection process. Creating feelings of control and equality is important in any networking effort.

The researchers were friendly in their approach toward the students. There were instances when the researchers made light comments or teased the students during the interviews. The following excerpt (Excerpt 2) shows such an instance:

**Excerpt 2:** Close bonding between researchers and students

Interviewer	Bila kamu bangun pagi .. hmm .. nak bangunkan kawan .. boleh guna tak perkataan bahasa Inggeris? When you wake up in the morning .. hmm ..when you want to wake up a friend .. can you use English?
Interviewee	Wake up ...
Interviewer	Bagus tu ... tapi guna ke tak? That’s good .. but do you use it or not?
Interviewee	Guna... Yes.
Interviewer	Betul-betul guna ke? Do you really use it?
Interviewee	Baru nak guna .. haha ... Just about to use it .. haha..

In this episode, all the students and researchers laughed. The ability to share a light moment such as this helped to relax the students during the interviews and also during the whole data collection process with them. It also showed them that the researchers were warm and friendly and this encouraged them to participate more actively.

#### 4.9 Teacher

##### 4.9.1 Effectiveness of networking

The effectiveness of networking with the teacher was due to a number of factors. It was iterated to her that the observation and interview were merely conducted to gather detailed information in order to produce materials that would facilitate her in teaching English to weak learners. The interview started with an enquiry about her students. This procedure was taken to steer her away from thoughts about her performance which could unnerve her. The concentration on the students could make her focus on their problems which indirectly revealed hers. Information such as having a class of mixed

ability with students' proficiency levels ranging from a 'B' grade to an 'E' grade was enough to indicate the teaching problems she had. She also revealed how she taught them, what she did to motivate them and the extent of her success and disappointment.

#### 4.10 Principal

The principal was approached before the research was conducted to get permission to use the school as the focus for research. The purpose of the study was explicitly explained to him. He was appreciative of the fact that the researchers were interested in helping the students improve their English. Prior to this research, a few undergraduates from University Pendidikan Sultan Idris had assisted the students by providing tuition in Science, Mathematics and English Language. The setting was thus very conducive for collaborative work.

The interview with the principal was conducted fairly formally and amiably. An appointment was made to ensure that it did not disturb him from his work. He was interviewed in Malay by three researchers. He was accorded the deference appropriate to his position as an administrator. He was addressed by a polite term "Tuan Haji" with respect to his having performed the Haj. The questions asked were straightforward and pertinent to the research. No sensitive issues were raised. The researchers paid attention to whatever he said by backchannelling, for example, repeating words he had said.

Interviewer	Hmm..berapa orang guru yang terlibat semasa penubuhan sekolah? Hmm...how many teachers were involved when the school was first established?
Interviewee	Kita mula ini...enam lah.. When we started...six
Interviewer	Enam... Six...
Interviewee	Enam...jadi gambar-gambar ini.. itulah... Six.....so these pictures...that's it..

Sometimes further questions were asked based on what he had said earlier. He was given ample time to have his turn before a researcher took his or her turn at speaking. The turns taken by the researchers were short and the questions precise.

## 5. Discussion

One of the challenges for researchers in collecting qualitative data is to elicit participant feedback. The researcher role is not limited to collecting data but some measures are needed to ensure the participants are willing to interact and share their learning experiences, motivation, problems and other issues they face in learning. According to Fareed, Ashraf, and Bilal (2016), teachers cannot deny the fact that writing skill is viewed as one of the important skills for language production. Nevertheless, students still find it very difficult write and produce logical, cohesive and well-organized essays (Mahboob, 2014). Teachers can assist and motivate the students to write better by redesigning their teaching approach and employing newly acquired writing strategies (Young & Ferguson, 2021). Students often feel anxiety to write as they are unable to locate the proper words to use in the essay and this is supported by researchers (e.g., Haider; 2012; Ganapathy & Kaur, 2014; Singh et al., 2020) as similar issues occurred in past studies. Students have difficulties in generating ideas for writing at the initial stage of their learning. As a whole, these problems can be categorized into cognitive, pedagogy, linguistic and psychological aspects (Haider, 2012; Hyland, 2003). Students' poor English language proficiency obstruct the writing flow as they are unable to activate their thinking skills to generate ideas (Gopal & Singh, 2020; Nik, Hamzah & Rafidee, 2010; Singh et al., 2020). Teachers

have to consider students' learning styles, cultural backgrounds and proficiency when planning to teach writing so that students show confidence in learning (Ahmad et al., 2013). Teachers' appropriate strategic pedagogic approach can motivate the students to take part in learning and be more confident in sharing their ideas for writing (Bilal, Tariq, Din, Latif, & Anjum, 2013; Dar & Khan, 2015; Haider, 2012; Mahboob & Talaat, 2008). Teachers must foster positive relationship with students so that they feel less inhibited and are able to seek help when completing the writing tasks. Teachers have to explore a variety of learning resources for students to facilitate their language learning. By doing so, students would be more confident in terms of understanding the writing mechanism or format including the introduction, body and conclusion of the composition. Clear instructions from teachers to do the writing tasks can also facilitate the student learning process. Teachers can encourage students to read newspapers, magazines and story books to improve their vocabulary so that they can use the new words learnt in their essays. Integrating technology into the teaching and learning process can spark student interest, confidence, enjoyment and motivation for writing (Graham & Perin, 2007). Teachers can assign students to work and collaborate in pairs and groups to further assist them in writing. Networking and support from the school administration and stakeholders can boost and strengthen the teacher-student relationship. Most importantly, teachers must nurture and guide students toward developing a positive attitude to writing so that students can activate their thinking skills to express ideas for writing. Thus, teachers must employ creative and innovative strategies to ensure students are given the opportunity to share and deliver their ideas to demonstrate their speaking capability (Singh et al., 2021).

## 6. Conclusions

Conducting research using qualitative methods requires a lot of time and patience (Patton, 2002). To ensure that the data obtained are satisfactory, ample time should be spent with the subjects in a study so that they become familiar with the researchers conducting the study. Such measures are necessary to make them warm up to the researchers and not be restricted by any inhibition especially when the subjects have to be asked about the way they are taught. Contact and interaction with the subjects should be conducted very frequently so that the relationship is sustained for a long period of time. The experience gained in this study has shown that the subjects were enthusiastic in the classroom even when there were four researchers observing them. Researchers should treat their subjects as friends, colleagues or partners in their research projects so that the subjects can contribute as much information as possible.

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#### AUTHOR BIODATA

**Charanjit Kaur Swaran Singh** is an associate professor at the Faculty of Languages and Communication, Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris.

**Tunku Mohani Tunku Mohtar** is a professor at the Faculty of Languages and Communication, Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris.

**Nor Azmi Mostafa** is an associate professor at the Faculty of Languages and Communication, Sultan Idris Education University, Malaysia.

**Sasigaran Moneyam** is the Director of Centre for Languages and General Studies (CEFLAGS), Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris

**Nadiah Yan Abdullah** is a language teacher at the Centre for Languages and General Studies (CEFLAGS), Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris

**Tarsame Singh Masa Singh** an associate professor at the Institute of Teacher Education, Tuanku Bainun Campus, Pulau Pinang.