

The Effectiveness of Using Sentence Makers in Improving Writing Performance among Pupils in Lubok Antu Rural Schools

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Abstract: ESL writing is a critical problem in Lubok Antu. This study investigated the effectiveness of using Sentence Maker in improving ESL writing among the Year 5 and Year 6 pupils in Lubok Antu rural schools. For this study, quantitative data were required. A number of 22 ESL learners were asked to write an essay as the pre-test. All the 22 essays were carefully rated and pre-test data were obtained. The results revealed the low performance in ESL writing. Then, intervention was introduced in the while-process. Learners were introduced to the Sentence Maker tool to visually aid them to understand sentence pattern more clearly. Post-test was conducted to collect data on the grades after intervention was done. Comparison between the pre-test and the post-test data revealed that Sentence Maker has been a useful tool that aids in improving learners' ESL writing. The findings of this study may benefit the primary ESL learners particularly those from among the rural schools in Lubok Antu. Educators may also find this tool as beneficial as it is easy to use. In the near future study should include the common errors in ESL writing among the rural ESL learners in the district and their perception in using Sentence Maker to address the errors.

Keywords: esl learners, esl rural learners, esl writing, writing performance, sentence construction

The English language, being the second language of the nation is being formally taught in every level of education – from the preschools, the primary schools, and the secondary schools right to the varsities. The English subject is a compulsory subject to take from Primary 1 to Form 5. The English language functions to equip students with the necessary language skills to enable them to continue their schooling to the higher levels, as well as to prepare them for employment. Acquiring certain levels of the English language enables them to look for online resources from the Internet. They can also network with students from all over the world to gain access to systematic way of learning.

One of the most crucial ESL skills is the writing skills. Having being given much emphasize within the curriculum, it is vital that students are comfortable with their ESL writing. However, it is easier said than done because compared to L1 learners, L2 learners have to bear the struggle of putting accurate grammar together to produce structurally-correct sentences. This is due to the fact that L2 learners have less knowledge and confidence in using the language compared to the L1 learners. In general, teaching and learning of the English as the second language is a big challenge for both teachers and learners in Malaysia.

The Malaysian Education Blueprint 2013 – 2025 (MOE, 2012) has endorsed the implementation of the new Standard Curriculum that gives an additional allocation of time (300 minutes) for the English Language subject in both primary and secondary schools. This is mainly to address the issue of low level of competency in the particular subject which used to be taught in shorter time of 210 minutes. The new curriculum has been designed and developed to have such emphasis to encourage the aspects of learners' literacy and critical

thinking. Comprehension and essay writing comprising the critical thinking elements are being absorbed into learners' ESL learning and evaluations.

"Writing stimulates thinking, compel students to concentrate and organise their ideas, and cultivate their abilities to summarize, analyse and criticise. It also gives emphasis to constant learning in, thinking in, and doing reflection in the English language" (Maghsoudi & Haririan, 2013). In Malaysian primary level of educations, it is compulsory for learners to sit for a public examination known as the Primary School Achievement Test, known also as "Ujian Pencapaian Sekolah Rendah (UPSR) before they move on to the secondary level of their education. The English Language comprises of two sets for evaluation papers, namely the Comprehension (Paper 1) and the Writing (Paper 2) papers. The English subject has proven to be the most difficult subject for the students to score well. Incompetency to write well for the Writing paper is one of the main contributing factors to that. Starting 2016, Paper 1 and Paper 2 are being graded separately, unlike previous practice of combining marks of both papers to come up with a single grade for the English paper. For the writing paper, the sets of questions are divided into three main sections. In Section A, students are required to fill in the blanks of a passage using appropriate answers. 10 marks are allocated for this section. In section B students are required to write three answers and write an email, where 15 marks are allocated. Whereas for Section C, students are required to write a short essay of 80-120 words using given stimuli as guide. 25 marks are given for this section. Students find themselves having a hard time to score well in Section C due to their inability to build varieties of written text using various styles, incorporating imaginative elements into their narrative writing, using different language functions to address the difference in purpose, and giving ample content to write relevant content in sufficient, precise manner. It is a complex cognitive activity involving attention at multiple levels: thematic, paragraph, sentence, grammatical and lexical (Lavelle, Smith & O'Ryan, 2002).

Writing is a series of processes namely the planning, production, editing and revision of a written text; with integration of contents and coordination as a whole. The Malaysian government has carried out many programmes to attract particularly rural area learners to learn and master the English language (Ilyana, et al, 2015). One of them has been the First Step Program, a program that emphasized on reading and writing among the rural students to help improve their level of English writing skills. Learners in the rural schools, particularly in the district of Lubok Antu, Sarawak find it difficult to have any significant interest in the English language learning. The language itself, to them is not seen as having any immediate significance and importance in their daily lives. According to Mustapha, "a great number of Malaysian students are passive learners" (1998). This is especially true in Lubok Antu rural schools. The command of the English language is still poor among rural learners in Lubok Antu. It is only seen as an examination subject; and ESL educators in Lubok Antu find it difficult to maintain any genuine interest in the subject among their learners after examination is over. Learners in rural Lubok Antu are highly dependent on their teachers for sources of revision and information. This is due to the lack of important and basic facilities available such as the Internet connectivity, power supply and public linking roads in Lubok Antu rural schools.

This study aims to investigate the usefulness of the Sentence Maker in helping the Year 5 and Year 6 ESL learners in Lubok Antu rural schools overcome problems in constructing correct sentences.

LITERATURE REVIEW

What is Second Language writing?

According to Grabe and William (2001), second-language writing is the study of writing performed by non-native speakers or writers of a language as a second or foreign language. Myles in 2002 stated that SL writing involves composing, which implies the ability to tell or retell pieces of information in the form of narratives or description, or to transform information into new texts, as in expository or argumentative writing. Writing is an essential skill in ESL teaching and learning and it will never go obsolete in education (Riswanto and Putra, 2012). By telling and retelling information, this of course would involve composing of the written piece, or transferring of information from one form of text to a different form of text. As writing skill requires ideas development and organization, it tends to be a tedious and difficult task for the rural ESL learners to accomplish. Dunsmuir, et al (2014) states that the key domains of writing reflect a focus on ideas development, vocabulary, sentence structure, grammar, spelling, punctuation and handwriting mechanics. This is where it explains that in order to become good writers, learners must be frequent in practising their SL writing.

Why is it important?

Writing is an integral and necessary skill when learning a second language as communication is not only done orally. Writing is necessary if a person is looking to study or work in a particular country. Writing also results in increased practise using the language (AbiSamra, 2002). Therefore, the key domains of writing reflect a focus on ideas development (rhetorical skills), vocabulary, sentence structure and grammar (writing processes), spelling, punctuation and handwriting mechanics (Dunsmuir, et al, 2014).

How does it help?

Teaching materials “contextualize” the language learning. In addition, teaching materials help to bridge the gap between the language being taught in the classroom and the language used by real people (Genhard, 1996). Being explorative and fun are essential parts of students’ learning experiences, interactive learning environment also helps the students to develop positive learning behaviours in the learning process (Kung and Pui, 2012)

METHODOLOGY

The study has been carried out upon 22 rural ESL learners in the district of Lubok Antu, Sarawak. The learners consist of 13 Year 5 pupils and 9 Year 6 pupils who have undergone at least 5 years of ESL learning during their schooling life. Out of 22 participants, 8 are females and 12 are males. The levels of competency among the participants vary from low-achieving learners to below average. The study has been an action research whereby it involves a pre-test as an initial evaluation, an interventional step where the Sentence Maker is being utilized, and a post-test to measure the effectiveness of the Sentence Maker in improving essay writing among the study participants.

For the pre-test, participants were given a short essay question. The tool was a guided narrative essay typically featured in the Section C of English Paper 2. Participants were required to write between 80-120 words of narrative essay based on the pictures and

keywords given in the question. The written essays were checked and marked according to the latest UPSR KSSR marking scheme. The scores of the pre-test served as initial data to serve as a comparing tool against the data obtained from the post-test (which will be administered after 5 weeks of intervention). Writing errors were identified to check for any similarity in error types committed by the participants. This is important to ensure that the right approach is to be chosen and used during intervention.

The intervention took place in 5 weeks. Details on the intervention program (steps 2 – 6) are shown as follows:

Table 1: Steps & Procedures

STEP	ACTIVITY
Step 1 (Week 1) 11 July 2016	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Revisit previous lessons on tenses (Present Tense, Past Tense, Present Continuous Tense, Past Continuous Tense) Pre – Test
Step 2 (Week 2- 1st Session) 18 July 2016	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Teacher introduced the Sentence Maker to the pupils. Explained (with demonstration) how to use it. Explained why pupils need to use it/the purpose of the sentence builder.
Step 3 (Week 3 – 2nd Session) 25 July 2016	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Constructing simple sentences using Present Tense Teacher showed some example Pupils explore the sentence builder and build their own sentences. (In groups) Discussion on their works.
Step 4 (Week 4 – 3rd Session) 1 August 2016	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Constructing simple sentences using Past Tense Teacher showed some example Pupils explore the sentence builder and build their own sentences. (In groups) Discussion on their works.
Step 5 (Week 5 – 4th Session) 15 August 2016	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Constructing simple sentences using Present Continuous Tense Teacher showed some example Pupils explore the sentence builder and build their own sentences. (In groups) Discussion on their works.
Step 6 (Week 6- 5th Session) 22 August 2016	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Constructing simple sentences using Past Continuous Tense Teacher showed some example Pupils explore the sentence builder and build their own sentences. (In groups) Discussion on their works.
Step 7 (Week 7 – 6th Session) 29 August 2016	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Post- Test

Finally, a post-test was administered in the 7th week of the study to evaluate the participants' essay writing after 5 weeks of intervention program. The post-test scores determine the

effectiveness of using the Sentence Maker in addressing the ESL writing incompetency among sample participants

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Among the 20 participants who were involved for the study, 8 participants, or 40% were female and 12 participants or 60% were male. Participants belonged to the age of 11 and 12 years old. They either belong to the very low/limited users to below average users of ESL. As shown in Table 2, participants' pre-test and post-test scores were collected. The data captured in both tests were later interpreted using the paired samples T-Test to determine whether there is any significant effect in using the Sentence Maker in the intervention stage to improve writing performance among the study participants.

Table 2: The Pre-Test & Post-Test Scores of the Participants

NAME	PRE TEST	G	POST TEST	G
S1	9%	E	16%	E
S2	49%	D	80%	A
S3	40%	D	86%	A
S4	8%	E	12%	E
S5	32%	E	60%	C
S6	55%	C	100%	A
S7	30%	E	54%	C
S8	27%	E	50%	C
S9	56%	C	100%	A
S10	66%	B	88%	A
S11	50%	C	80%	A
S12	55%	C	86%	A
S13	14%	E	36%	D
S14	64%	B	88%	A
S15	54%	C	72%	B
S16	50%	C	68%	B
S17	48%	D	62%	B
S18	68%	B	80%	A
S19	35%	D	49%	D
S20	24%	E	40%	D

Based on the pre-test scores, only 45% of the participants passed the writing test. The 55% failing scores clearly showed the low-level writing competency among the samples. 7 participants scored an E, 4 participants scored D, 6 scored C and 3 managed to score B. After five weeks of intervention using the Sentence Maker, a significantly improved scores were recorded where 9 samples managed to score an A, 3 scored B, 3 scored C, 3 scored D and only 2 scored E. This means that the passing percentile has increased to 75% from the initial 45% before the intervention of the Sentence Maker.

To compare the participants' scores for the pre-test and the post-tests, a paired-samples T-Test was done. Based on **Table 3.1** and **Table 3.2**, it is shown that there was a significant increase in the post-test after the administration of the Sentence Maker.

Table 3.1: Paired Samples Statistics

Paired Samples Statistics					
		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	Pre-Test	41.70%	20	18.496%	4.136%
	Post-Test	65.35%	20	25.580%	5.720%

Table 3.2: Paired Samples T-Test

Paired Samples Test									
		Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
					Lower	Upper			
Pair 1	Pre-Test Post-Test	-23.650%	11.811%	2.641%	-29.178%	-18.122%	-8.955	19	.000

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Based on the analysis result done upon the scores of the pre-test and the post-test of the 20 study participants in a rural primary school in the District of Lubok Antu, it was concluded that the Sentence Maker is a useful interventional tool to assist the lower-competence ESL learners in their ESL writing. Writing is not an easy task as it is a highly complex and demanding task that requires a number of skills to be performed (Ilyana, et al, 2015). It is a complex cognitive activity involving attention at multiple levels: thematic, paragraph, sentence, grammatical and lexical (Lavelle, Smith & O'Ryan, 2002). The Sentence Maker consists of segmented, visual sentence-building tool that is easy to use and serves the purpose of helping ESL learners in their sentence-constructing in a very easy way to understand.

The findings of this study may help other rural ESL educators in solving the similar problem of having lower-competency ESL learners with their sentence and essay writing problems. However, no matter how beneficial the Sentence Maker seems to be in addressing the low writing proficiency level among the rural ESL learners in Lubok Antu, there is always room for improvement particularly where writing is concerned. It is suggested that the future research to include the types of common errors commonly done among the rural ESL learners in Lubok Antu, and the perception of learners and teachers towards using the Sentence Maker to address the problem of English writing. It is also suggested that the researcher include a wider scope of participants in the future to include more rural primary schools in Lubok Antu so as to have a wider view and result of the study.

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