



The Use of Pictures in Improving Students' Writing

Yasmine Liong Pui Kwan Abdullah¹

Melor Md Yunus²

Student, University Kebangsaan Malaysia. 1

Associate Professor, University Kebangsaan Malaysia 2

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ABSTRACT

In general, Malaysian schools teach English as a second language. Many people consider English essential as it is a global language now. Therefore, students need to be competent users to be able to cope with the era of globalisation. However, it has always been a challenge when it comes to writing. This study attempts to investigate the effectiveness of pictures in helping students to write. This research is a quasi-experimental design which involved 34 Year 6 students in a suburban primary school in Seremban. The instruments used are two writing tasks and a Likert scale questionnaire containing 16 items to obtain students' perception of the use of pictures. The comparison of scores from the writing tasks indicated an improvement when the teacher uses pictures to teach writing. The analysis of the questionnaire showed a positive response from the respondents on the use of pictures in helping them to write. They also agreed that teachers should use pictures more often during the teaching and learning process.

1. Introduction

English is taught as second language in all the preschools, primary and secondary schools in Malaysia. Generally, the main goal of the English language curriculum for schools is to aid learners in acquiring the language to enable them to use it in everyday life, to further their studies and for work purposes. In the aspect of writing, the objective of English language curriculum is to enable learners to write a range of texts using appropriate language, style, and form through a variety of media as well as to use correct and proper rules of grammar in speech, and writing. However, various research has found that the English as Second Language (ESL) learners in Malaysia have the least proficiency in writing skill as stated by Chitravelu, Sithamparam & Teh (2005) as cited by (Zakaria, Yunus, Nazri & Shah, 2016).

In all the preschools, primary and secondary schools in Malaysia, English is taught as a second language (ESL). The new language policy *Memartabatkan Bahasa Malaysia Memperkukuh Bahasa Inggeris* 'to uphold Malay and to strengthen English' aims to strengthen the proficiency in English of Malaysians to be able to compete at the era of globalisation. Zuraidah Mohd Don states that stakeholders such as employers expect English proficient employees and parents wants their children to be proficient in the language to get a better future. The most important stakeholders, nation's children, are expected to be proficient in the language as they determine the prosperity and development of our country (English Language Education Reform in Malaysia: The Roadmap 2015-2025., 2015). However, researchers found that Malaysian graduates' poor competency in the language cause them to underperform in universities as well as getting a job (Yamat, Fisher, & Rich, 2014). Therefore, teachers

play an important role in ensuring that their students could master the four skills, most importantly, the writing skill as it is seen as one of the most important means of communication in today's era of globalisation (Yunus et al., 2018).

Even though students are to the English Language since preschool, they still face difficulties in mastering the language (Ahmad Zaki & Md Yunus, 2018). Out of the four skills taught in schools, writing ability is the most challenging skill to master compared to reading, listening and speaking (Ahmad Zaki & Md Yunus, 2018; Rajeswari, Melur, Jamaluddin, & Azlina, 2017; Sa 'diyah, 2017; Wening, 2016). Students do not just 'pick up' writing skill as they learn other skills during English class, it needs to be taught (Raimes, 1983). Writing ability needs to be acquired through language learning as we need to know the grammar or rules of the language to write in the language (Krashen, 2003; Raimes, 1983).

Writing is an important skill in language because it helps students to learn (Raimes, 1983). They learn in the process of being adventurous in the language and through the effort of expressing their idea using the correct grammar and vocabulary (Raimes, 1983). Teachers play an important role in teaching writing as they need to create the correct condition for generating ideas and motivate students to write (Wening, 2016).

Valuable resources can be found in pictures such as drawings, comics, graphs, photographs, maps and posters. Pictures are valuable resources to ESL teachers as they provide shared knowledge among learners in the classroom, the use of common language forms, the basis to a variety of tasks and act as a focal point for students (Raimes, 1983). Pictures are an excellent stimulus in foreign language learning. Learning can be effective and fast through the use of good visual materials (Ali, 2014; Raimes, 1983).

The focus skill of this study is one of the productive skills, writing. At times, ESL learners face the problems of having no idea what to write. If they were simply given a topic, they need to rely on their experience (Raimes, 1983). For example, the topic given is 'My Worst Nightmare'. They need to come up with their own idea about what to write. A learner needs to go through a number of processes and use different strategies in order to produce a good piece of writing (Ghazali & Mohamad, 2017). A learner needs to have specialized skills to write which is to generate and organize ideas on what they want to write about and put them in sentences accordingly (Sa 'diyah, 2017).

Pictures may help learners in the exploration of ideas besides motivating them to write (Sesrica & Jismulatif, 2017). Pictures stimulate learners in the process of generating ideas which leads to the construction of sentences. Everyone likes to look at pictures and pictures can provide a stimulating focus on students' attention (Raimes, 1983). Raimes also said with a picture, all students, after close observation of the material, will immediately need that appropriate vocabulary, idiom and sentence structure to discuss what they see. Hence, the purpose of this study is to investigate the effectiveness of pictures in helping students generate ideas to construct sentences using the target language.

2. Literature Review

The English language is taught as a second language in Malaysia as *Bahasa Melayu* is the official language. There are four skills in the English language, and writing is more difficult to master compared to listening, speaking, and reading (Ahmad Zaki & Md Yunus, 2018; Rajeswari et al., 2017; Sa 'diyah, 2017; Wening, 2016). ESL learners face problems in writing (Fareed, Ashraf, & Bilal, 2016; Ghabool, Mariadass, & Kashaf, 2012). In order to address this issue, many types of research have been carried out to find a suitable strategy to help learners in writing (Yunus et al., 2018).

2.1 Writing skill

It is important to master writing skill as it is a productive skill. It helps students to learn (Raimes, 1983). Writing skill is important because it is a tool to measure their knowledge (Kurniati, 2015). As we know, learners need to write for many purposes: tests, examinations, letters, emails, messages and many more (Kaur et al., 2017; Wening, 2016; Yunus et al., 2018). It is also written communication (Fareed et al., 2016). In the era of technology, we socialize through Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Tumblr, just to name a few, which also require the use of writing skill (Kaur et al., 2017). The process of writing requires the writer to be able to brainstorm, organize ideas, review, edit and others (Almubark, 2016; Kurniati, 2015; Yunus et al., 2018). It is insufficient to have just a skilful teacher and by doing writing practices to master writing skill (Almubark, 2016). Teachers should plan well for an effective teaching and learning process together with the use of suitable media so that their students can improve on their writing skill (Asrifan, 2015; Fareed et al., 2016; Kaur et al., 2017; Nusrat, 2016; Sesrica & Jismulatif, 2017; Wening, 2016).

Teachers play an essential role in supporting learners in the process of writing. Therefore, it is crucial for teachers to be prepared with the knowledge and skill to teach the skill. Most learners have difficulty in generating ideas and putting them into words (Almubark, 2016; Asrifan, 2015; Fareed et al., 2016).

2.2 The use of pictures

In a conventional classroom, it is mostly teacher-centred with the use of textbooks or chalk and talk. The learners will be bored if this is practised as a daily routine (Kaur et al., 2017). This is a significant setback for learning to take place. Teachers should consider the use of instructional media if they want to capture students' attention, at the same time, helping them learn. There is a variety of instructional media available, and it is crucial for teachers to choose the appropriate media which caters to need and preference of their students. One of them is pictures. Pictures come in many forms such as photographs, drawings, advertisements, tables, posters, slides, maps, and others. Pictures are valuable sources for teachers (Raimes, 1983). There is an idiom which says 'a picture paints a thousand words' which means a picture tells you more than words. Pictures help students generate ideas, choose vocabularies and put them in sentences (Asrifan, 2015; Kurniati, 2015; Styati, 2016). There are researches done in the use of pictures in improving students' writing skill. Pictures are proven to be effective in improving students' writing ability (Asrifan, 2015; Kaur et al., 2017; Kurniati, 2015; Sesrica & Jismulatif, 2017; Styati, 2016; Wening, 2016).

Styati (2016) found that students performed better with the use of pictures compared to Youtube. The method of using pictures enhances students' writing performance (Styati, 2016). Pictures are effective in improving students' interest, motivation, and attitudes (Ali, 2014; Asrifan, 2015; Kaur et al., 2017; Sesrica & Jismulatif, 2017; Styati, 2016). In his study, Ali (2014) stated that students' writing skill in narrative writing mainly in the five writing components with the use of series pictures. The method of using series pictures as visual aids in teaching writing is exciting, and students managed to score higher. Ali (2014) also stated that pictures stimulate and encourage the development of ideas and imaginations to write.

Pictures are also an exciting form of instructional media. If teachers use suitable pictures, they can help students generate ideas. Kurniati (2015) found that students who used pictures to help them write scored higher than those who did not. In research done by Asrifan (2015), found that students who were taught using pictures have better performance in writing compared the group which was taught using the conventional way.

Students who seldom practice the language were not confident in using the language when it comes to writing. Before the use of pictures, they were discouraged to write in English as they lack the confidence to do so

(Kaur et al., 2017). Besides helping students generate ideas to write, pictures also build up their confidence (Kaur et al., 2017; Sesrica & Jismulatif, 2017). Therefore, it is imperative for teachers to be creative in determining the choice of media to use in ensuring a success teaching-learning process (Wening, 2016).

3. Method

3.1. Participants

This research is quantitative research with experimental study. It is quasi-experimental research to investigate the effectiveness of pictures in helping students generate ideas to construct sentences using the English language. The independent variable of this study, pictures, and the dependent variable is improving students' writing.

Purposive sampling is used in this study. The respondents of this study were 34 students Year 6 from a suburban primary school in Seremban. They consist of 21 boys and 13 girls with mixed ability who had difficulty to write in English.

3.2. Materials

The instruments used in this study were two writing tasks of pre-test and post-test as well as a Likert scale questionnaire.

3.3. Procedure

First, all the students completed a writing task, which was the pre-test. It consisted of only guide words to help them complete the task. The next day, they were given the post-test writing task which consisted of the same guide words from the pre-test but addition of serial pictures to help them complete the task. After marking both the tasks, the teacher analysed the marks and presented the differences in the scores of the pre and post-test in a line chart. After that, the students were asked to answer a questionnaire. The data of the questionnaire was presented in the form of a table.

4. Results and Discussion

This section will address the data and results found in this study through two writing tasks and a questionnaire according to the research question. The findings are presented in two sections. The first section will show the results of the two writing assignments and the second sections will present the results of the questionnaire.

4.1 Analysis of Writing Tasks

The 34 students were given Writing Task 1 where only the guided words were provided to be completed. After that, they were given Writing Task 2 where both pictures and guided words were provided to be completed. The results of both the tasks are presented in the Line chart below.

Figure 1. The scores of pre and post-test

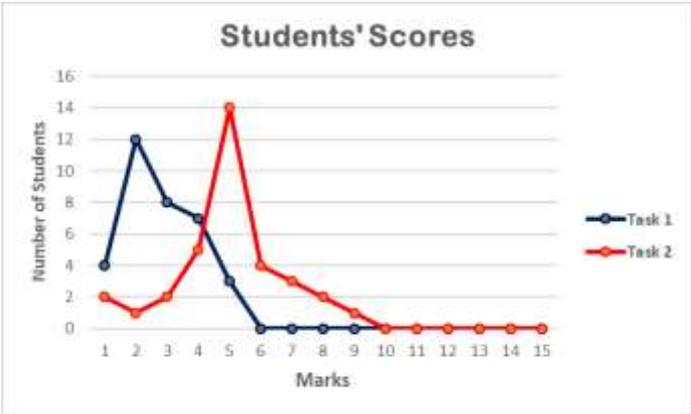


Figure 1 shows the scores of Writing Task 1 and Writing Task 2 of the 34 students who were selected. According to the results, most of the students were able to score higher in Task 2 where both pictures and guided words were provided. Students' writing ability improves with the presence of pictures compared to without pictures (Kaur et al., 2017).

According to the chart, the minimum score for both tasks is 1. The maximum score for Task 1 is 6, but the maximum score for Task 2 is 10 which shows improvement concerning scores. Significantly, the number of students who scored below 5 has also decreased which is from 31 to 10. Meanwhile, the results also show that students were able to score higher than 5 in Task 2 compare to Task 1.

Findings indicate that the use of pictures was able to help students in writing. When they were asked to write using only guided words, they had difficulty because their incompetence in writing was a setback for them as they did not know what they should write. When pictures were used in Task 2, they were able to get ideas from the pictures, besides using the guided words provided, to help them write. They were able to understand the situation better by looking at the pictures. This is supported by Raimes (1983), who stated that pictures could attract students' attention and they can paint a vivid picture of the outside world in the classroom. Pictures are effective in improving students' writing (Novita Ika Nurhanifah, 2015; Sesrica & Jismulatif, 2017). This can be depicted from the results shown in the Line chart.

4.2 Analysis of questionnaire

The students were given a Likert scale questionnaire upon completing the two writing tasks. The questionnaires have been analysed using frequency count, and the data is as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Students' perception on the use of pictures in post-test

No	Questions	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Undecided	Agree	Strongly Agree
		n %	n %	n %	n %	n %
1	I like writing in English.	1 (3)	7 (21)	3 (9)	11 (32)	12 (35)
2	I like looking at pictures.	2 (6)	8 (24)	0 (0)	10 (29)	14 (41)
3	I like the colourful pictures.	0 (0)	1 (3)	1 (3)	10 (29)	22 (65)
4	Pictures are attractive.	1 (3)	2 (6)	7 (21)	11 (32)	13 (38)
5	I like it when my teacher uses pictures during English lessons.	1 (3)	3 (9)	3 (9)	8 (24)	19 (55)
6	Pictures are very informative because they provide details and ideas.	1 (3)	0 (0)	11 (32)	9 (27)	13 (38)
7	Pictures give me ideas to write.	2 (6)	2 (6)	0 (0)	12 (35)	18 (53)
8	Pictures give me ideas to discuss what I see.	1 (3)	1 (3)	8 (24)	10 (29)	14 (41)
9	Pictures give me the confidence to discuss what I see.	4 (12)	0 (0)	4 (12)	15 (44)	11 (32)
10	Pictures help me to write with confidence.	0 (0)	2 (6)	5 (15)	12 (35)	15 (44)
11	I can write better with the help of pictures.	0 (0)	0 (0)	7 (21)	11 (32)	16 (47)
12	I can write better without the help of pictures.	12	8	5	5	4

		(35)	(23)	(15)	(15)	(12)
13	My teacher should use more pictures when they teach writing.	1 (3)	0 (0)	7 (21)	16 (47)	10 (29)
14	My teacher does not have to use pictures when they teach writing.	12 (35)	9 (27)	11 (32)	2 (6)	0 (0)
15	My teacher should use pictures that I can understand easily.	0 (0)	2 (6)	2 (6)	10 (29)	20 (59)
16	My teacher should plan writing activities using pictures to help me write better.	1 (3)	0 (0)	4 (12)	7 (21)	22 (64)
N = 34						

Table 1 shows the feedback of the 34 students on the use of pictures in writing tasks. The table shows that 41.2 per cent of the students like looking at pictures and 64.8 per cent of them like looking at colourful pictures. This is because colourful pictures are more attractive (Asrifan, 2015). A total of 38.2 per cent strongly agree that pictures are attractive. Most of them would prefer if their teacher use pictures during English lessons.

From the table, we can see that most of them agree that agree that pictures provide them with ideas to discuss what they see. Pictures are useful because they provide students with ideas to write and to discuss what they see (Asrifan, 2015; Kurniati, 2015; Nyong, 2018; Sa 'diyah, 2017; Styati, 2016). Novita (2014) as cited in Sa'diyah (2017), pictures can make the writing activity more interesting as they can increase students' interest. Besides that, pictures also motivate students to write (Kaur et al., 2017; Sesrica & Jismulatif, 2017). Based on the table, we can see that 44.1 per cent strongly agree that pictures help them to write with confidence. A total of 47 per cent strongly agree that they write better with the help of pictures. This is because pictures are powerful media as they speak louder than words (Asrifan, 2015; Kaur et al., 2017; Kurniati, 2015; Sa 'diyah, 2017).

Most of the students have difficulty with writing because they do not have ideas and vocabulary for them to express themselves (Asrifan, 2015). Teachers should have the initiatives to help their learners by switching from traditional teaching methods to more interesting ones by using appropriate media (Asrifan, 2015; Kaur et al., 2017; Novita Ika Nurhanifah, 2015; Nyong, 2018). A total of 47.1 per cent agree that they would like their teachers to use pictures when teaching writing. Saying so, teachers should choose pictures which are suitable for their lesson (Nyong, 2018). They should select pictures that can be understood by the students, and a total of 55.9 per cent strongly agree that their teachers should use pictures that they can easily understand. Teachers should consider integrating the use of pictures in their writing lessons as 61.8 per cent strongly agree to that.

5. Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to find out students' perception on the use of pictures in writing activities. Findings of the research have validated that pictures are useful in helping students generate ideas to construct sentences using the target language. Data has been analysed using frequency count. Findings are presented in a table and a chart.

5.1 Implication of the study

With the findings of the preferred use of pictures in writing activities in the classroom by students, teachers should be made aware of the benefits of pictures and try to use more pictures in their teaching. Visual materials are good material in helping to develop writing skills and can provide both contexts and stimulation for a variety of activities (Novita Ika Nurhanifah, 2015; Sesrica & Jismulatif, 2017). This is because pictures are attractive and they function as aids to help students generate ideas to help them write (Asrifan, 2015; Kurniati, 2015; Nyong, 2018; Sa 'diyah, 2017; Styati, 2016).

Implication refers to the use of Likert Scale questionnaire for knowing students' perception on the use of pictures in writing activities. Findings based solely on a questionnaire have limitations. To get a full picture of students' perception and also their preference for the use of pictures, it would be better if lessons are carried out using pictures. Since the aim of this study was to see the students' perception as a whole, this methodology would perhaps be sufficient. A teacher should not expect their students to be interested in learning how to write without a suitable stimulus, and as proven in this study, pictures.

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