

Excelling in Exam Through Narrative Writing: A Connection of Creative and Descriptive Expressions

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the impacts of an action research on how students can excel in writing skills regardless of their level of competency especially for those taking the English Language paper (SPM 1119) in the Malaysian Secondary School Public Exam in 2018. This action research aims to exert the need for realigning our focus to incorporate an approach of teaching and learning at upper secondary level. The research was carried out from January to October in a secondary school in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah. Two classes of 37 Limited English Proficiency students and 24 High English Proficiency Students who were sitting for SPM 1119 in 2018 were the subjects. The students were exposed to creative expressions under various topics which were then emphasized to be utilized in continuous writing. As a result, the performance of students had improved significantly in their continuous writing where they eventually scored 100 percent pass in SPM1119 in 2018. All 24 Highly Competent students were able to score ranging from “A-” to “A+” with grade A being the median grade. On the other hand, all the students from the Limited English Proficiency students passed with grades ranging from “A”+ to “E” (minimum passing grade) with grade “B” as the median.

Key words: Creative Expressions, Descriptive Expressions, Exam Performance, Narrative Writing

INTRODUCTION

Malaysian secondary school students generally lack the necessary skills in reading and writing effectively in an English language classroom, thus, making it as one of the major obstacles faced by most English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers to incorporate in the classroom. Most students write because it is part of language assessment. Thus, for students who sit for national exams like SPM (Malaysian Secondary School Public Exam) would have to do well in the English Paper (SPM 1119) especially in the writing component which is tested in Paper1 if they want to pass with higher grades.

Though ESL students can acquire the English language through reading and writing texts, it is not emphasized in the classroom as the curricula are primarily devised separately under the pretext that these skills are completely different. This separation unfortunately ignores the integrative relationship between reading and writing and fails to see the contributions that the connection of these skills can make on students' language ability (Jui-min Tsai, 2006). It also alienates the emotions involved in the reading and writing in the classroom.

Majority of the students who enroll in tertiary institutions in Malaysia, are struggling readers as stated in a study

conducted by Pandian (1997). Hence, most students do not display advanced literate behaviors in reading. However, it is clear that effective learning takes place when experiences in the classroom raises the learner beyond the independence level from background knowledge and comprehension as the motivation to learn increases when there is a connection between the reader and the text (Vygotsky,1962 and Piaget, 1978 cited in Tomlinson, 2001).

In general, Hamilton (2018) believes Malaysian school students from Standard One (primary level) to Form Five (secondary level) receive approximately 1,600 hours of English language instruction. However, global data show that only 1,200 hours of purposeful practice and effort is needed to achieve the C2 standard on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). He continues to state that the predicament of many poor learners in the English Language could be result of lack of motivation. Consequently, teaching and learning in the classroom should incorporate appropriate activities to bolster motivation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

As Gaudart (2003) states that teaching methods can contribute a great deal to a child's acquisition of reading and writ-

ing skills, hence being teachers, “are we producing balanced learners who are not only able to read and write, but to do so creatively?” Thus, how a teacher teaches in the classroom can promote learning among the students.

Studies have also shown that students especially adolescents have the desire to discover messages about the meaning of their lives, to find interesting characters they could relate within their fantasies, or to use ideas of the author to affirm their own beliefs and prejudices (Appleyard, 1991). Hence, using young adult narratives would be essential for teaching and learning in the classroom. However, the focus on passing with good grades in the exam emasculates the intention of the programme which aims are to contribute to students’ personal development and character building (KPM, 2000).

Hence, the teaching in the secondary school classrooms should explore the reading and writing connection. As in a study by Faridah, Naimah and Hamidah (2005) showed that the Malay students’ performance at Lower and Upper Secondary level in general is influenced by the school and its environment where it is conducive and meaningful. In other words nurturing supersedes nature where the environment of the lesson can impact the result. As a matter of fact, effects of linking reading and writing in a classroom can provide a framework of how to apply these concepts in actual teaching situations to create a meaningful learning environment. In order to help ESL readers and writers develop confidence and competence, we need to explicitly introduce them to texts and then provide them with guided practice (Olson, 2003).

In a usual language classroom, the stress on grammatical competence is inevitable nevertheless the exposure to metaphorical use of language is crucial in producing fluency in the target language as supported by Kathpalia and Heah (2011). It was found that as second language learners have a higher probability to employ metaphoric thinking than first language speakers if their active mental engagement can be harnessed to facilitate the comprehension and learning of metaphors. Thus, it will also empower them to use these metaphors appropriately in their written and spoken communication with an international audience. In other words, this approach is expected to reduce language anxiety and on the contrary enhances understanding.

Many students struggle with writing because they neglect the basic elements of a short story which has metaphorical words like creative expressions. They know what to write about; however, someone should provide the necessary scaffolding to help them acquire the skill to write creatively and to revitalize their interest in the writing process. In this way, they will be able to utilize what they learn about other people, places, and times in the writing process and, ultimately, make it their own. Another factor that contributes to poor performance of ESL students is because of high level of language anxiety as mentioned by Zhang (2001). The problems faced by ESL students is that they often require extra time to read and are unable to articulate their knowledge in essay exams (Phakiti & Li, 2011). It is essential to enable learners to develop their language proficiency by stimulating their linguistic knowledge including vocabulary, grammar and

structure (Azizi, Nemati & Estahbanati, 2017) It is suggested that writing skills to be taught from an early age that focuses on developing critical thinking skills that would help the learners to organize their ideas in producing comprehensible essays (Norhartini & Noor, 2019).

It is therefore suggested to incorporate a reader response approach to link the students as proposed by Thamburaj (2007) where students would have to respond based on their attitudes, knowledge and experiences brought to the text. One of the ways of in which this can be achieved is by exploring through the lexical phrases and semantics. As Vethamani (2007) stresses that students need to examine the metaphorical meanings of the words by studying how the words work together effectively to convey the tone and meaning in the text. Effective writing skills are essential in both higher education and in the workplace. One’s ability to write an extended text is the single best determiner of success in coursework during the freshman year (Geiser, 2001, as cited in Kellog & Whiteford, 2009).

However, with the present school constraints and as scores or marks are determining factors that show whether the students performed well or not has prompted the researcher to look for a synergized approach to achieve higher passes with good grades. According to Fitzgerald and Shanahan (2000), readers and writers depend on four common foundational knowledge: content knowledge, procedural knowledge, specific knowledge on components of written language, and metaknowledge. As readers and writers, they act from one level to the next of which they should learn to alter.

As presented in Table 1, the readers’ and writers’ level on the domain or content knowledge steers the development of other knowledge. Content knowledge indicates specific knowledge of the topic about which one is reading or writing. Procedural knowledge indicates the knowledge and skills needed to negotiate reading and writing. This may include relatively automatic or self-regulating processes, such as recalling information from memory, or more intentional strategies, such as predicting, summarizing, or questioning. Procedural knowledge is also known as the cognitive processes employed by readers and writers to access, use, and generate information during reading and writing (Shanahan, 2006). Thus, it can be summed that procedural knowledge with the learners ability to see from another’s point of view and content knowledge where background knowledge of the learner are both crucial.

Therefore, it can be said that there are two major aspects that can determine students’ performance: (i) suitable environment for procedural knowledge to take place and (ii) provision of content knowledge. Creating a suitable environment by lowering language anxiety (Zhang, 2001). The environment should be set to encourage learning to taking place where the researcher outlines the main objectives or reasons for reading a particular text.

Domain or Content Knowledge of the text is when readers can respond on the attitudes, knowledge and experience brought to the text (Thamburaj, 2007). In this step, the texts that are introduced should elicit response from the previous

knowledge or experience to the text. Thus, a suitable approach is taken to provide understanding of lexical phrases that have expressions in the texts taught.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Reader Response theory (Rosenblat, 1995 as cited in Thamburaj, 2007) and Critical Knowledge from Adolescence to Adults in Reading and Writing (Koons, 2008) are incorporated in the framework employed as presented below.

Based on Figure 1, it can be noted that in order for the desired outcome in a reading and writing classroom begins from the teacher as the initiator who would identify the need

of appropriate texts to be used to engage students in reading. Thus, the teacher’s classroom instructions hold a valuable key for the success of any teaching and learning process. With the initiation of the teacher and engage of students in highlighting expressions as pointed out in the texts would enable the students or learners to employ them in their own writing.

METHODOLOGY

An action research was carried by the researcher at a secondary school in Kota Kinabalu Sabah, Malaysia. The data for the research were obtained from SPM results, written

Table 1. Critical knowledge from adolescence to adults in reading and writing

Stages	Procedural knowledge	Meta knowledge	Knowledge about universal text attributes	Domain knowledge about substance and content
Ages 9-13 reading and writing for learning the new text	Knowing how to create and use word meanings. Knowing how to create and use meaningful connected text.	Meta comprehension	Syntax of sentences with longer portion of text (text structures)	(Background knowledge: employing reading and writing to learn) semantics: vocabulary meaning. Comprehension created through context of text.
Ages 14-18 multiple viewpoints high school	Knowing how to see from another’s standpoint. Knowing how to critique and analyze.	Meta comprehension	Syntax of portions of text (text structure)	Semantics: vocabulary meaning’ comprehension created through context of connected text.
Age 18 and above construction and reconstruction: a worldview college	Knowing how to see from another’s standpoint. Knowing how to critique and analyze.	Meta knowledge about how readers and writers interact.		

Adapted from koons (2008)

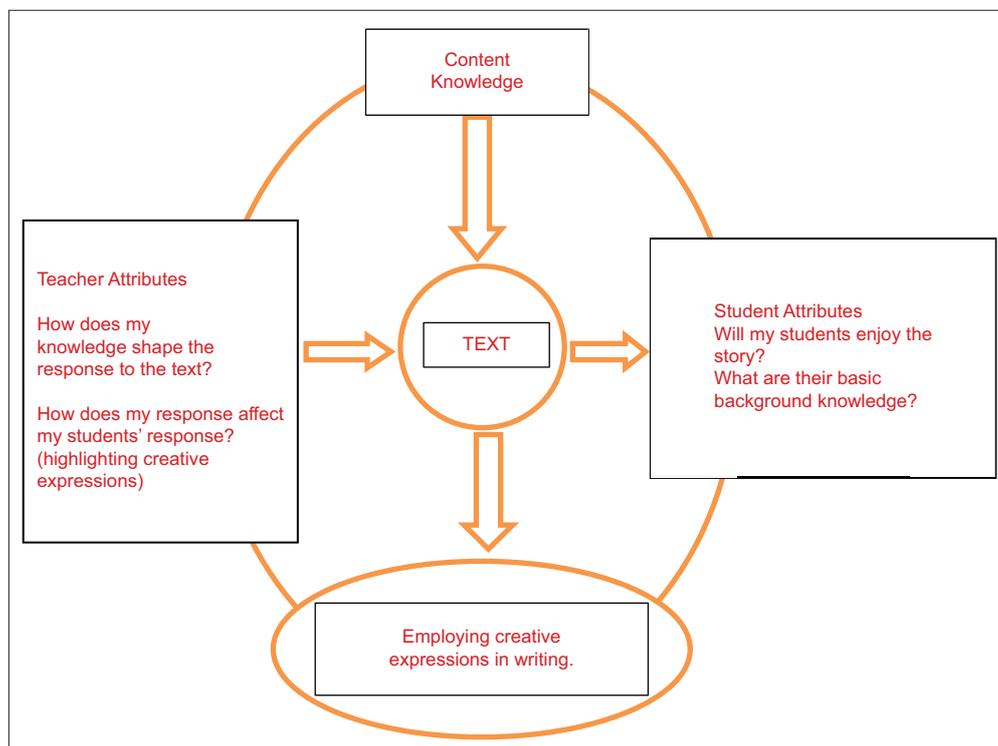


Figure 1. Theoretical framework (Adapted from Koons, 2008; Thamburaj, 2007)

essays in the classroom and observation. The subjects were selected based on convenience sampling as the researcher was the subject teacher for these classes. The researcher taught the class for the duration of 10 months with the usual allocated normal class schedule which is about 5 hour weekly. The main objective of this research is to enhance the writing skills especially in narrative writing by incorporating descriptive and creative expressions in the essays so that they can do well in the SPM English examination as the weightage for writing component is the highest. Thus, the focus on student interaction and participation in the teaching and learning process is employed which makes it as a fundamental approach.

The target groups consist of two classes 5D1 (Limited Proficiency Students- 37 students) and 5S1 (Highly Competent Students- 24 students).

Most students in 5D1 and 5S1 managed to get across their main and simple points in the short narrative essays they were asked to write, but their writing did not have the sophistication to meet the standard for proficiency set by the national curriculum. As the researcher was checking 5D1 (Limited Proficiency Class) and 5S1 (Highly Competent Class) students' essay, she was alarmed to see their poor mastery level in vocabulary, descriptive and creative expressions. Incomprehensible essays were produced mostly from the low proficiency students. Most students who demonstrated basic writing skills were able to make simple points but not put together sophisticated sentences. They could not express situations well due to limited vocabulary, descriptive phrases and expressions. Therefore, the students find it very stressful to write essays.

Around 4 major activities were carried out throughout the research to help foster understanding and knowledge on using creative expressions in the essays.

Pre-Test on Narrative Essay

An essay entitled "Morning" was given to both classes in the beginning of the year. It was to ascertain the level of competency of the students before the action.

Exploring Creative Expressions through Young Adult texts

A few narrative texts consisting of various interesting creative expressions were given to the students. The creative expressions were identified and explained by the teacher in the class. The teacher then discussed with the students on other ways the expressive words can be applied in other situations. Students were exposed to various creative expressions under various topics which were then emphasized to be utilised in writing.

Individual Classroom Activity (Presenting individual texts)

Students were asked to prepare a text for class presentation individually by looking for a text that has interesting creative expressions which would be approved by the teacher

prior to printing copies for the class by the teacher. The students who were involved on the day of presentation would initiate the class to read the texts and highlight the descriptive and creative expressions used in the text. The students would then write sentences using the identified descriptive and creative expressions with the assistance of the teacher.

Short Paragraph Writing in the Class

The teacher gave short essay writing practice to the class after four weeks. The students were required to use the descriptive and expressive words, phrases and sentences learnt from the past class lessons with the teacher being the facilitator. The teacher guided the students in applying the appropriate expressions for the various situations in the essay. Students were also asked to highlight the expressions used in their writing. This activity was carried out every month till October.

Narrative Essay Writing

The teacher gave a title for students to write narrative essay with a minimum of 350 words long. Students were asked to refer to the various creative expressions learnt in the previous narrative texts. Students were required to apply appropriate and suitable expressions for all the different situations. Students had to write the essay and submit to the teacher at the end of the lesson.

Post-test on Narrative Essay

The teacher gave the same title –'Morning' to the students to write. This time the students were not allowed to refer to the creative expressions from the previous texts. They were asked to highlight the creative expressions used in their writing. The students submitted their essays to the teacher at the end of the lesson. In short, the researchers employed the following steps to promote better writing skills:

In short, the researchers employed the following steps to promote better writing skills:

1. Explicitly teach about various short narrative texts.
2. Discuss the meaning of the texts and highlight expressive words or phrases.
3. Explore in the class for other ways the expressive words or phrases can be applied in other sentences.
4. Come up with own sentences.
5. Writing short paragraphs on given topics.
6. Writing SPM type question essays.

Throughout the period of research the students were introduced to various young adult narrative texts that could enhance various lexical phrases denoting feelings or expressions. One of the examples would be as below:

The expression happy can be replaced with *over the moon, in cloud nine, leapt with joy, happiness swept through my entire frame, excitement bubbled in my heart, my heart swelled with joy and so on*. By giving many other examples that carry the same meaning allow students to exhibit improved lexical phrases in their essay writing.

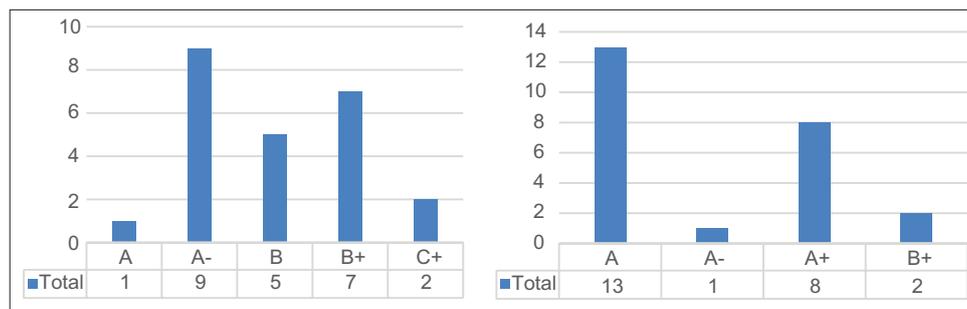


Figure 2. Trial Exam and SPM Scores for High Competent Students

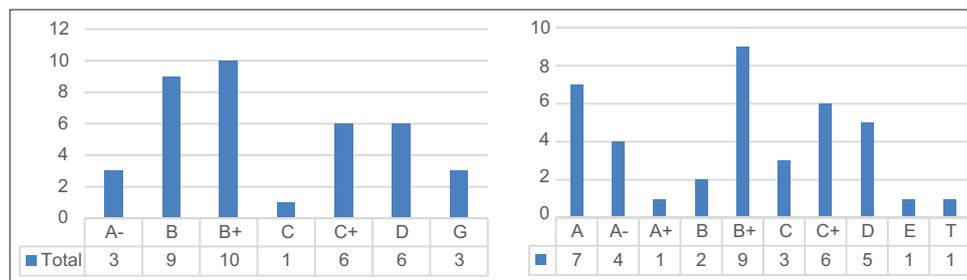


Figure 3. Trial Exam and SPM Scores for Limited Competent Students

Findings

Observation

Students are observed by the teacher throughout the research by noting the response and physical expressions of the students and feedback on the writing.

Reflection

The teacher feels excited to see the response on students especially in the classroom where the atmosphere is changed from teacher centred to student centred.

Observation

Students are seen to be motivated to write as they are exposed to interesting expressions that can be applied in their writing.

Reflection

It is really satisfying to note that the students are looking forward for their next English class.

Observation

Individual classroom activity gives opportunity for students to take responsibility in the teaching and learning process.

It gives a sense of joy to know that students are able to take their responsibility seriously even the limited proficiency students are able to share short texts with one or two sentences that have creative expressions.

Observation

The writing ability of students have improved, thus improving the performance in the English language test in general.

REFLECTION

The greatest satisfaction of a teacher is to see his or her students succeed. Hence, this is one of the moments.

The findings show that students' scores in both classes increased. The following figures show the Highly Competent Students' grades in the trial exam and the actual Malaysian Certificate of Education (SPM) exam. SPM is a public Malaysian upper secondary examination before the students continue tertiary education. Generally, there was a significant increase of grades in both classes.

As shown in Figure 2, there was a 58% increase of students scoring A's between the trial exam and actual SPM examination. In the trial there were 9 A- and 1 A while in SPM there were 8 A+, 13 A and 1 A- for the High Competent Students. Similarly, for the Limited Competent Students' the grades had also improved significantly.

With reference to Figure 3, it shows an increasing trend with the marks and grades. For the trial exam there was 48.7% of the students who scored B to A- with 9 B, 7 B+ and 1 A-. The failure was 7.69% or 3 students.

In the actual SPM exam, there was 56.4% of students who scored B to A+ with scores ranging from 1B, 9B+, 4A-, 7A and 1A+. There were no failures. There was a 22.7% increase of B+ to A.

CONCLUSION

Employing creative expressions in the reading and writing classroom can help the students in general to be equipped with more ways of writing a similar expression and thus also creating a room for increasing explicit self esteem that can promote positive attitudes towards writing. Thus, this activity gives opportunity for students to take responsibility in the teaching and learning process. The students were motivated to write as they were exposed to interesting expressions

that could be applied in their writing. In fact, the researchers were also encouraged to see the response on students especially in the classroom where the atmosphere was changed from teacher-centred to student-centred. The notion that limited English proficiency students cannot be helped is invalid as this research proved that these students can achieve positive outcome in the public examination where all passed the English paper.

However, a few limitations can be identified in this study. One of them is the sampling method. Had the sample been selected randomly, the generalizability of the present results would have been higher. In addition, a larger sample size would have resulted in more powerful results. Furthermore, considering other variables such as family background, reading habit, and availability of reading materials would have made the findings more interesting. Future studies should explore more on how reading courses need to be carried out to show correlation of the methodology or approach and the perception of the students. In any case, the descriptive statistics featured in this paper has shown that the grades changed from many failures to no failures.

This paper has shown that the perception that Limited Proficiency Students are not able to perform well in the exam should be realigned as there is always hope for those who are motivated to persevere regardless of their circumstances. If one is willing to change the way one perceives oneself, one can change the circumstances as well.

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