EFFECTS OF UTILIZING THE STAD METHOD (COOPERATIVE LEARNING APPROACH) IN ENHANCING STUDENTS' DESCRIPTIVE WRITING SKILLS

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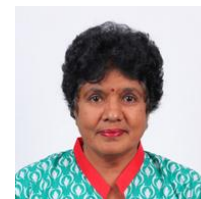
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ABSTRACT

Students' ESL writing skills in general are not at a desirable level. The objective of this study was to determine the effectiveness of utilizing the STAD method to enhance descriptive writing skills among students in an international school in Selangor, Malaysia. This study employed an action research design. The sample consisted of 20 Year 6 students aged between 11 and 12 years. The data for the research was obtained using a pre-test and a post-test, focus group interviews with students, teacher's reflection and an observation checklist. The action-research was carried out over a period of 6 weeks. The quantitative data was analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics and the qualitative data (interviews, teacher's reflections and observations) was analyzed based on emerging themes. The findings from the quantitative data indicated that the STAD method helped to enhance students' descriptive writing skills. The analysis of the qualitative data revealed that students enjoyed writing in groups and they stressed that they learned a lot from their friends when they wrote in groups. The teacher's reflection revealed that the STAD method improved students' writing skills through collaborative learning as they get the opportunity to edit their group essays. Findings from the observation showed that students were actively engaged in the process of writing during group work and their social skills improved too. This study has pertinent theoretical implications, pedagogical implications and practical implications in ESL writing.

Contribution/Originality: This study is one of very few studies which have investigated the effectiveness of utilizing the STAD method to enhance students' ESL writing skills in an international school. This study has strong pedagogical implications as it serves as a guide to teachers on how to carry out action research using the STAD method.

1. INTRODUCTION

Education plays a vital role in fabricating generations of intellectuals and acts as the major drive in the process towards achieving a fully developed country. A high quality education which forms the basis of human civilization is important in helping our younger generations to face the competitive and challenging era of globalization today. Good quality education can boost the quality of lives of individuals, society and the country as a whole. For instance, insufficient skills and competencies of an individual may limit his access to better employment opportunities and economic prosperity. This weakness may later lead to the risk of social exclusion and poverty and even hinder his full engagement in civil and political affairs. Hence, the quality of our education should be maintained and upgraded from time to time in order to fabricate more generations of intellectuals.

In Malaysia, the English Language has always played a significant role in the quest of becoming a developed nation. Darmi and Albion (2012) stated that the implementation of the National Education Policy in 1970 patented the unification of a system encompassing Malay language as the language of teaching whilst English was rendered the status of second language (L2). Nevertheless, the proficiency levels among English as a Second Language (ESL) learners in Malaysia still need vast improvement. The deficiency of proficiency in English language may result in problems of acquisition, retention, and language production which may affect the academic performances and grades of learners in future (Darmi and Albion, 2012). In Malaysia, English is one of the prerequisite subjects and it is crucial for all students to master all the English language skills which include speaking, reading, listening and writing, in order to further their studies at the tertiary level as well as for better employment opportunities.

Good proficiency in English language is beneficial for students to master other subjects, as well as to prepare the students for a more challenging world. Adams and Keene (2000) opined that English is widely used as the language of instruction in many tertiary institutions and thus, students' proficiencies in communication and writing are on the topmost list of institutional demands.

Al-Khasawneh and Maher (2010) also stressed that English is extensively used as the language of instruction in a vast majority of tertiary institutions and thus, students' proficiency in English communication is the highest institutional demand. Good proficiency in English language is beneficial for the students to master other subjects, as well as to prepare the students for a more challenging world. Among other language skills, writing tends to be the most difficult skill to acquire for ESL students. According to Nesamalar et al. (2001) writing is the skill that most students are least proficient in when acquiring a new language. Lack of proficiency in English language may affect their attempts to produce good quality writing (Cole and Feng, 2015; Baradaran and Kharaziyan, 2016; Cao, 2018; Zabala and Peñol, 2018).

A study by Ghabool and Kashef (2012) revealed that a vast number of Malaysian ESL students faced difficulties in performing writing tasks, especially in producing writing that complies with writing standards and language use, such as in the correct use of grammar and punctuations. In addition, ESL teachers in Malaysia concurred that the majority of ESL students are struggling to improve their writing, especially in the use of conventions and punctuations. Hence, ESL teachers need to improve their teaching strategies in order to upgrade students' writing skills.

Among other language skills, writing tends to be the most difficult skill to acquire for ESL students. According to Nesamalar et al. (2001) writing is the skill that most students are least proficient in when acquiring a new language. Pak-TaoNg (2003) also stressed that writing is a difficult task for students because it involves complex activities such as thinking about the topic, note gathering and data collection, all of which lead to reflective thoughts in the end. A study by David et al. (2015) in a public university also revealed that students found ESL writing to be the most difficult and complex skill to master among the four language skills.

Similarly, Sahin et al. (2002) also argued that teachers should employ the right pedagogy in teaching writing skills because it has a great impact on students' writing. Akinwamide and Adedara (2012) asserted that teaching writing skills is a difficult task as compared to teaching other skills such as speaking, listening and reading. As stressed by Vygotsky (1978) in his social constructivist theory, the ESL teachers require extensive training in order to scaffold and enhance ESL students' language proficiency in general, specifically writing skills. Based on this theory, students will reach the zone of proximal learning if they get the scaffolding from adults or peers. Thus, it is essential for ESL teachers to take into account the writing difficulties faced by students and identify the relevant solutions to overcome these problems in writing. Students can experience highly satisfying writing experiences if teachers employ the right pedagogical methods to teach them the relevant skills. The cooperative learning method by Johnson and Johnson (1999) which is based on Vygotsky's social constructivist theory is very effective in providing scaffolding to students and had produced positive results in students' academic achievement (Dotson, 2001; Zarei and Keshavarz, 2011; Yanga and Yenb, 2016; Vargas, 2017; Dogan and Dogan, 2018).

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A preliminary study carried out by the researchers among Year 6 primary students in an international school in Selangor indicated that students encountered various problems in mastering writing skills, namely choice of vocabulary, sentence structure, organizing ideas, grammar and mechanics. The researchers and the ESL teacher realized that students' writing can be improved if writing is carried out as a process in groups, collaboratively. This gives them the opportunity to work in small groups and learn to brainstorm ideas, organize their writing, use the right vocabulary and edit their work in terms of grammar and mechanics.

Research related to methods of teaching writing skills to students in international schools in Malaysia is very limited. The STAD method which is known as the Student Team Achievement Division designed by Slavin (1994) is one of the most prominent among 10 cooperative learning methods. Most studies in this area have indicated that the STAD method helped to enhance students' writing skills because this method is student centered and it encourages students to write collaboratively. As such, the current study investigates the effects of utilizing the STAD method in ESL writing among Year 6 students in an international school in Selangor. This study employed an action research design, utilizing the STAD method to teach writing skills for 6 weeks.

1.1. Research Objectives

The objectives of this study are as follows:

1. To investigate whether the utilization of the STAD method raises students' overall mean scores in writing.
2. To explore students' perceptions of the utilization of the STAD method in teaching writing skills.
3. To explore the researcher's reflections on the utilization of the STAD method in teaching writing skills.

1.2. Research Questions

1. Is there a difference in students' overall mean scores for descriptive writing between the pre-test and the post-test?
2. What are the students' perceptions of the STAD method employed by the teacher in teaching writing skills?
3. What are the teachers' reflections on the utilization of the STAD method in teaching writing skills to Year 6 students?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

International schools in Malaysia have become progressively famous among Malaysians who practice urban lifestyle as well as within the international community. The majority of international schools provide high quality, internationally-oriented, advanced standards of education. According to a Malaysian-Education website, the Ministry of Education outlined an 'International School' as a private school which offers preschool, primary and secondary school education, using an International Curriculum and English as the official language for teaching. Furthermore, the focal categories of international curriculum that has been approved by the Ministry of Education include British, American, Australian and Canadian curriculum. In Malaysia, most International schools offer education from pre-school to the preparatory levels of sitting for external examinations like the IGCSE 'O' level and International Baccalaureate.

2.1. Approaches to Teach Writing Skills

As Tangpermpoon (2008) stated, based on all four major language skills of reading, listening, writing and speaking, writing is claimed to be the most challenging skill because it requires wider knowledge in lexical, syntactic and L2 principles of organizing to produce an accurate piece of writing. Hence, it is the teacher's responsibility to apply a suitable approach in order to ensure students are able to produce good writing. In Tangpermpoon (2008) study, he integrated genre, product and process approaches in a writing class to assist teachers to enhance students' writing competence to produce good writing.

2.2. The Product Approach

According to Gabrielatos (2002) the product approach may be defined as "a traditional approach in which students are encouraged to mimic a model text, which is usually presented and analyzed at an early stage". Richards and Rodgers (1982) on the other hand explained that the product approach resulted in teachers to focus on students' abilities in writing while the activity is conducted and the ways to determine the proficiency of writing skills depending on the performance of the final product. Additionally, Jing (2016) justified that teachers primarily emphasized students' final writing product to observe whether they are comprehensible and are grammatically correct or judicious in the aspect of structure. Students are assigned to do exercise by replicating given models so that they fully comprehend and are able to write phrases, sentences and paragraphs correctly. For instance, students are provided with a standard sample of a writing such as an article or formal letter, and the students are expected to construct a new piece of writing by following the standard. As this model is just one-sided transmission and teacher-oriented, there is no presence of collaborative work and classroom activities throughout the lesson (Jing, 2016).

2.3. The Process Approach

The process approach to writing emphasizes the various classroom activities that encourage the development of language use such as brainstorming, group discussion and re-writing. Steele (2004) as quoted in Hasan and Akhand (2010) stated that the Process Approach Model consisted of eight stages. The first stage is generating ideas through brainstorming and discussion. During the group discussion sessions, the teacher monitors from afar and only provides language support when required, so as not to hinder their generation of ideas. The second stage requires the students to plan and structure their ideas into note form. By doing so, they can critically analyze the quality and usefulness of their ideas. Stage three is organizing their ideas through mind mapping such as in a spider gram or linear form. Stage four is where the students start drafting their work in groups. In stage five, the students receive feedback on their writings from their peers. Then, in stage six, the drafts are returned to be edited based upon feedback from their peers. In stage seven, the students start writing the final essays and in stage eight , their writings are evaluated with feedback from the teacher. In this study, the researchers employed the STAD method to teach essay writing and the students used the Process Approach for their descriptive essays.

2.4. Constructivist Theory

According to Powell and Kalina (2009) social constructivism is a highly effective teaching method that can benefit a vast number of students. This theory incorporates collaborative learning and social interaction in language learning. The pioneer of this Social Constructivist theory was Vygotsky (1930) a Russian psychologist. His work was translated into English in 1978. He believed that social interaction is an integral part of learning. Students' levels of understanding and cognitive development are attained through social interaction. Vygotsky claimed that we learn by interacting and communicating with each other. In his study, Vygotsky (1978) pointed out how social environments influence the learning process of students. Learning takes place when any interaction occurs between students and their peers, teachers, and other experts. In relating to Vygotsky's view of social interaction, teachers can create a learning environment such as a cooperative learning environment, which can maximize students' abilities to interact with each other collaboratively.

Richards and Rodgers (2000) claimed that if students work cooperatively in the classroom, this cooperation may trigger a warm and positive atmosphere which may boost their motivational levels. Furthermore, as Li-Hua and Jia (2016) have stated in their study, when students learn cooperatively, social practice is brought into the classroom. This social practice may enhance the students' independent thinking abilities and problem-solving abilities which create capability-oriented teaching forms. Thus, the teacher can apply these cooperative learning

strategies in enhancing students' writing skills via the implementation of collaborative activities such as group discussions and exchange of peer feedback.

This study is based on the Social constructivist theory by Vygotsky (1930) which stressed that every child will be able to reach his zone of proximal learning if given the scaffolding by elders or peers The cooperative learning approach which is based on Vygotsky's theory was first developed by Allport (1954) and further developed by Johnson and Johnson (1999).

There are several methods in the cooperative learning approach and the STAD method is one of them, which was developed and introduced by Slavin (1987). In the STAD method, students work in small heterogeneous groups and help one another to learn the academic content. They also work collaboratively to complete the task given by the teacher in the classroom. Therefore, this pedagogical approach is a shift from students working individually to collaborative learning which can encourage students to think critically and creatively.

2.5. The STAD Method and Academic Achievement

According to Ishtiaq et al. (2017) the STAD method can be defined as a cooperative learning strategy in which learners work in heterogeneous groups to achieve a common goal. According to Wyk (2012) the STAD method is one of the cooperative learning methods that had been comprehensively explored and evaluated explicitly on academic accomplishments, attitudes, social interactions and interpersonal relationships. Slavin (1994) asserted that the STAD method is one of the simplest methods of cooperative learning and it consists of five different components, namely, class presentations, group work, quizzes , scores of individual improvement as well as team recognition. Devi and Dahiya (2013) emphasized the importance of cooperating to learn and learning to cooperate. Here, students with different abilities and capabilities are placed in groups to work together to accomplish the tasks given by the teacher.

Slavin (1987) formulated the STAD method in which small groups of four or five members consisting of high and low achievers are formed without any distinction of race or gender so that there is contiguity in learning experience by the whole class. Slavin (1994) also commented that in the STAD method, students are assigned in groups of four or five members of mixed abilities, backgrounds and gender. Hence, teachers need to monitor their group discussions from afar to ensure that every team member cooperates to achieve their group's goals.

The STAD method has positive effects on both high achievers and low achievers (Devi and Dahiya, 2013). According to a study done by Maddinabeita (2006) the STAD method is one of the most prominent among ten cooperative learning methods (Teams-Games-Tournaments (TGT); Group Investigation; Jigsaw; Team-Assisted individualization; Cooperative Integrated Reading and Composition; Student Teams-Achievement Divisions; Learning Together; and Complex Instruction). In the STAD Method, students learn new materials collaboratively in teams, but they are tested individually to ensure individual accountability. Zarei and Keshavarz (2011) claimed that once the teacher conducts a lesson, students work in teams to ensure that every member in their team has mastered the new lesson. All students take their individual tests weekly, and the scores are then compared with the previous test scores.

The STAD Method adopts a student centered approach where the teacher acts as a facilitator in guiding the students to achieve their goals. Slavin (1994) viewed the STAD Method as a concept where the students may achieve their learning goal when they work together in small groups. Wyk (2012) justified his evidence by stating that research showed that the utilization of the STAD as a teaching practice had been instrumental for countless success in copious research projects. Apart from these, through the STAD Method, teachers can identify their students' strengths and weaknesses and thus they can plan lessons to cater their learning needs. This can then help teachers to overcome the problems that come with heterogeneous ESL classes such as those in international schools in Malaysia.

Collaborative practices are highly encouraged in ESL writing classrooms (Kessler *et al.*, 2012). They conducted a study among the learners of English as a second language on collaborative writing in academic web-based projects. The findings indicated that cooperative learning improved the students writing skills tremendously. In addition, the students also successfully developed their personal styles and processes that suited their writing.

A study by Nair and Periasamy (2015) revealed that the usage of the STAD method in ESL classrooms boosted students' comprehension in responding to explicit and implicit questions. The findings also affirmed that the STAD method is a modification from teacher-oriented approach to student-oriented approach in teaching ESL comprehension. Aldana (2005) conducted a study utilizing cooperative learning in the writing process among 9th graders'. The findings revealed that the use of the cooperative method in writing lessons encouraged active participation of students with different competency levels, thus providing huge opportunities for students to contribute positively to their writing tasks.

Hayashi (2005) stressed that the most challenging areas in writing for ESL learners are the development of writing and the organization of ideas. The findings of the study indicated that the cooperative learning method created an environment where students work collaboratively through the editing process. Nair and Kim (2014) carried out a quasi-experimental study which employed the STAD method in teaching short stories (literature component in English) among Form Two students. The findings revealed that the STAD method efficaciously boosted students' performance in answering questions related to setting, plot, characterization, theme and moral values, compared with the control group which was using the conventional method (Nair and Kim, 2014).

Mahmoud and Mohamed (2014) implemented the STAD method to enhance the EFL writing skills among Saudi university students. The findings showed that the students' scores for writing improved significantly after being taught using the STAD method. In addition, the students' attitudes towards writing skills improved and they developed their writing skills in general.

On the other hand, Zulfa (2015) conducted an action research using the STAD method to improve students' EFL writing skills. The study was conducted among eleventh grade students in Surakarta, Indonesia. The study used a pre and post-test to measure the students' speaking skills. The research showed that the students participated actively in the learning process and were encouraged and more keen to speak in English than before.

Similarly Siddique and Singh (2016) employed the cooperative learning method to teach ESL writing skills to college students (intermediate) in Pakistan. The findings indicated that students' descriptive essay writing improved tremendously through this method. The researcher opined that through group work in the cooperative learning method, the students had the opportunity to write collaboratively and had the freedom to exchange ideas to construct their own knowledge through active participation.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study employed an action research, which utilized quantitative and qualitative approaches. The application of multiple data resources and approaches permitted the researcher to develop an in-depth knowledge on the issue investigated (Anderson, 1998). Prior to the action research, the researchers trained the ESL teacher on how to carry out the STAD method in the writing class. Following that a pre-test (descriptive essay writing) was conducted to gauge students' performances in their writing skills. Then, action research was implemented for six weeks and students were taught descriptive writing skills using the STAD method. At the end of the action research, a post-test was administered (similar to the pre-test). The quantitative data were obtained from the pre-test and the post-test. The qualitative data was obtained from focus group interviews with students and teacher's reflections. Four students (two high scorers and two low scorers in post-test) were interviewed on their views on the utilization of the STAD method in the learning process. The teacher also reflected on the action research based on her observations and the field notes prepared daily on her classroom teaching. The quantitative data was analyzed using

descriptive statistics and inferential statistics (paired sample t-test) while the qualitative data was analyzed based on emerging themes.

Spiral steps provided by Kemmis and McTaggart (1988) in action research were used in the current study. The four steps are as following (Refer to **Figure 3.1**)

i)   Planning
ii)   Acting
iii) Observing
iv)   Reflecting

Figure-3.1. Spiral steps in action research.
Source: Kemmis and McTaggart (1988)

During the planning process, the teacher analyzed the students' problems in their writing skills and planned strategic actions to help them. In this study, the teacher planned to implement the STAD method to enhance students' descriptive writing skills. In the acting stage, the teacher implemented the planned strategies (the STAD method) over a period of 6 weeks (1 hour per week, one essay in two weeks) in the ESL classroom.

During observation, the teacher documented the effects of the action by using appropriate measures. According to Kemmis and McTaggart (1988) the observation data may originate from various sources including the teacher's professional journal, case study notes, reports, test papers, check lists, meeting records, interviews, surveys, etc. In this study, the researcher obtained the data through a pre-test and a post-test, observations and focus group interviews with students and the teachers' reflection.

In the final stage, the teacher reflected on the actions carried out during the action research. In order to do the reflection, the teacher discussed with the students to gauge their views on the action research.

3.1. Sampling

The sample for this study consisted of 20 Year 6 students in one of the international schools in Selangor, Malaysia. The action research was conducted during the English lesson (essay-writing lesson).The sample consisted of 11 boys and 9 girls of mixed-nationalities from various countries such as India, New Zealand, Yemen, Nigeria and mixed races of Malaysians (Chinese, Indians and Malays). The age range of the students was from 11 to 12 years. They were students of average English language proficiency based on their performance in English language in their mid-term examination. In this study, the researcher decided that the essays would be descriptive in nature. This was done to narrow down the scope of the study and to avoid exploitation of the findings.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

1. Is there a difference in students' overall mean scores for descriptive writing between the pre-test and the post-test?

The findings of this study showed that the utilization of the STAD method in descriptive essay writing is able to enhance students' writing performance. The students who were taught in a systematically planned manner using the STAD method managed to achieve a higher mean score in their post-test compared to the mean score obtained in the pre-test

Table-4.1. Students' Scores for Descriptive Essay Writing in the pre and post-test.

	Mean	SD	Mean Difference	t-value	df	p value
Pretest	12.20	1.95				.00
Posttest	19.00	1.88	3.2	6.26	19	

Level of significance at p<0.05.

Table 4.1 shows students' overall scores for descriptive essay writing in the pre and post-test. In the pre-test, students' overall mean score was only 9.00 (Mean=9.00, SD=1.95). In the post-test, students scored a higher mean score in their descriptive essay writing (Mean= 12.20, SD=1.88) and the mean difference was 3.2. The students' overall scores were obtained based on their performance in organizing the essay, the contents, style and grammar in the pre and post-test. Based on the results of the paired sample t-test, we can conclude that the students' overall scores for post-test was significantly higher than the pre-test (t=6.26, df=19, p=.00). The students tended to perform better through cooperative learning as compared to individual learning. Through cooperative learning, the students could learn with scaffolding from each other during the descriptive writing tasks. They could exchange ideas, scaffold each other's writing and learn from each other, which was beneficial to improve the quality of their writing. Therefore, this indicated the efficiency of utilizing the STAD method in improving students' performance in descriptive essay writing.

The utilization of the STAD method which involves a lot of group discussion allowed each of the students to have equal opportunity to discover their individual weaknesses after receiving guidance and constructive feedback from their teacher and peers. The teacher acted as a facilitator who scaffolds each group progress and the students in each group can interact with each other to achieve mutual goals. Thus, this may boost their performance in descriptive essay writing. The findings of this study showed that the utilization of the STAD method was beneficial to enhance the quality of the teaching and learning process, especially in teaching descriptive writing. These findings also support the studies done by Zulfa (2015); Mahmoud and Mohamed (2014) and Siddique and Singh (2016) who had verified that the STAD method can improve students' writing performance significantly.

2. What are the students' perceptions of the STAD method employed by the teacher in teaching writing skills?

Interview Q1: Do you like to write essays individually or in groups? Can you explain why?

Student 1 (high scorer)

"Yes! I can. But writing in group is more fun because can get more ideas as my friends are around me. I can be more creative by using different types of adjectives to describe the subject or object in sentences."

Student 3 (low scorer)

"Oh No! I don't like to write individually because I do not know how to start the writing. It's difficult to think and write. But when I write in group I get ideas on how to write, my friends help me."

Findings from interview question 1 indicated that both high scorers and low scorers prefer to write in groups because they can share their ideas and at the same time they can also get more ideas from friends. They stressed that sharing ideas can be interesting and collaborative writing can enhance their writing. On the other hand, the

low scorers did not like to write essays individually because they do not know how to initiate writing without help from friends.

Interview (Q 2): Do you like the cooperative learning method used by the teacher during descriptive essay writing?

Student 2 (high scorer)

"Yes. I had so much fun through this activity. More heads are always better than one. More great ideas and interesting opinions. We can organize ideas in paragraphs. We could work together in producing a good quality of writing!"

Student 4 (low scorer)

"Yes. I like this activity. I like this activity. Because cooperative learning helps me to work with smart students. They even guide and teach me on how to write a good essay. They correct my mistakes. I learnt new words and adjectives too! I am not bored….. to learned, interesting".

From the findings of interview (Question 2), it can be concluded that the high scorers liked the STAD method employed by the teacher because this method helped them to work together in small groups and they were able to generate more creative ideas. It also helped them to organize ideas and write the paragraphs of the essay. Writing group essays encouraged them to work together collaboratively to produce good quality essays. Similarly the low scorers also liked the cooperative learning method (the STAD method) because it helped them to improve their writing. They learned new adjectives and vocabulary from the good students which also improve their writing. In other words, they got scaffolding from group members on how to correct their mistakes. They also stressed that the STAD method was interesting and not boring.

Interview Q3: Does the cooperative learning method help to improve your descriptive essay writing? Can you explain further?

Student 1, high scorer

"Absolutely! Through this method, we could alter and modify the sentence together so that there will be less grammatical errors. It's also much more fun working together. We can learn from each other too!"

Student 3, low scorer

"Yes. I does improve my essay a lot! Hmm… Actually, now I can understand better on how to write a descriptive essay. I work together with my friends and I get to write a whole essay properly."

Findings from interview (Question 3), showed that the STAD method helped to improve students descriptive essay writing. According to Student 1, working in groups was more fun because he learnt to work together with friends and learnt to improve his essay writing. The low scorers also agreed that they learnt a lot when they wrote in groups because their friends guided them to write better essays. In addition they also learned new vocabulary and how to describe the subject creatively.

3. What are the teachers' reflections on the utilization of the STAD method in teaching writing skills to Year 6 students?

From the teacher's reflections, there was a tremendous improvement in the mean scores of students in the post-test. After the utilization of the STAD method, most students performed much better in their post-test as compared with their pre-test. When marking the essays in the post-test, the teacher noticed that there were many improvements in terms of content, structure, style and grammar of the essay. Furthermore, the low ability students were able to produce good quality essays with more creative content, varied use of descriptive words and even made less grammatical errors As these students had received good coaching and guidance from the higher ability students earlier, this enhanced the quality of their essays. The findings of this research are in line with the findings

of Wahyuni (2015) who showed that the utilization of the STAD method could improve students' writing skills. Wahyuni (2015) indicated this by comparing the performance of writing skills before and after the implementation of the STAD method. His study also showed that the students' writing skills gradually improved after the implementation of this method.

The teacher stressed that the utilization of the STAD method helps to promote healthy competition between groups and strengthens the teamwork skills of the students which is parallel to a study by Johnson and Johnson (1999) stating that cooperative and competitive learning experience manages to promote higher achievement than individual learning experience.

The teacher also reflected that, since the best essay is rewarded, this motivates each group to produce good quality writing. Each member of the group needs to collaborate and team up in order to produce a good product. Nair and Kim (2014) claimed that the cooperation and guidance that was developed among the group members during the process of learning enhanced the students' abilities to communicate, discuss and to do group presentations on the task that had been assigned by the teacher.

In addition, from the teacher's point of view, the implementation of the STAD method is beneficial to both students and the teacher. The teacher was able to plan more interesting activities that can cater to students' needs while enhancing their language learning skills.

Besides that, the teacher found that students made less errors and produced better essays when they completed the task in groups. This is because students learn to edit their group essay in the process of writing. By doing so, the teacher and the good students were able to help the weak students and provide scaffolding to improve their writing skills. As for the students, they can interact with each other collaboratively during the group activity. This can boost their motivation and learning engagement throughout the lesson. They will not easily get bored or sleepy as there is much interaction taking place during the implementation of the STAD method. As Suyasti and Sada (2016) claimed in their study, the STAD method also makes students more motivated to learn English, which can be seen through their active engagement throughout the lesson. Wahyuni (2015) also agreed that the group discussions made the students highly-motivated to learn, feel less bored and get sufficient opportunities to engage themselves throughout the lesson.

Nevertheless, the teacher also reflected that the training provided by the researchers on how to implement the STAD method gave her the confidence to carry out the lessons effectively. As stressed by Nair and Periasamy (2015) teachers need thorough training and adequate exposure on how to carry out the activities based on the STAD method before implementing them in their classes. Nair and Kim (2014) also emphasized several factors that contribute to effective cooperative learning which may be due to the teacher's performance and the students' maximal cooperative skills. He stated that teachers should have a good mastery of the STAD method before implementing it. The teacher plays a vital role in maximizing the students' learning by acting as a facilitator throughout the activity. According to Nair and Kim (2014) the teacher's intensive monitoring throughout the lesson and their intervention on students who face problems in collaborative skills is crucial. The teacher needs to ensure that there is equal participation within a group and monitors any student who tries to dominate the group and discriminate others. Even though the STAD method has countless benefits for both teachers and students, the teacher needs to be equipped with good knowledge on how to carry out this method effectively.

5. CONCLUSION

The findings of this study are expected to contribute towards the modification of methods to make them suitable for the teaching and learning of the English language. The STAD method utilized in this study, had significantly enhanced students' performances in descriptive writing. Based on the positive findings from this study, it is recommended that teachers make a paradigm shift in their teaching strategies by modifying the conventional teacher-centered approach to a more interactive and collaborative student-centered approach.

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The STAD method is a very inclusive method that fulfills the demands of education by ensuring that the teaching and learning process is centered on students. The collaborative interactions ignite students' motivation and attention towards writing lessons which in turn facilitate their learning. Therefore, it is hoped that this study will encourage future researchers to explore further the utilization of the STAD method in enhancing students' performance in descriptive essay writing skills.

Findings from the interviews with students indicated that both the high and the low scorers liked the STAD method utilized by the teacher in the classroom. According to the students, the STAD method creates a fun learning environment in the classroom.

The teacher's reflection revealed that most students performed much better in their post-test as compared with their pre-test. The STAD method created the platform for students to work collaboratively in groups and motivate them towards learning which enhanced their writing skills.

This study has implications on the teaching and learning of ESL descriptive essay writing. This study also indicates that the STAD method is an effective alternative and can be utilized by teachers to enhance the mastery of essay writing skills among students. Collaborative learning through the STAD method does not just build more heterogeneous relationships among the students but also helps students to learn from each other by exchanging creative thoughts and skills. As a result, the students' performances in descriptive essay writing improved greatly after the implementation of cooperative learning.

The positive attributes which stemmed from the STAD method enabled students to be actively engaged in an ESL classroom. As a result, the students felt comfortable to speak and write in English throughout the lesson. Even when a student made an error in writing, his friends and teacher would help him to write correctly.

Additionally, this study can act as a guide to publishers and book writers in producing exercise books based on this method. As the STAD method is revealed to be an effective teaching strategy in enhancing students' writing skills, they can plan exercises and activities according to this method. Thus, this will help novice teachers by guiding them to utilize this method in teaching descriptive writing skills.

Finally, the findings of this study also have theoretical implications because the findings support the social constructivist theory by Vygotsky, the STAD method, and the process approach. The collaborative interaction which occurs during the STAD method activities maximizes the students' learning and improves their process of writing.

There are several limitations in this study. Firstly, in this study the researcher used a small sample of 20 students to carry out the action research. Future research should engage bigger samples which include schools from different states in Malaysia to obtain more conclusive findings to resemble a bigger population.

Secondly, this research was conducted in an international school located in a sub-urban area. In future, researchers can conduct similar research on samples from international schools in the urban areas. Besides that, in this study only the STAD method was employed by the researcher. As such, future research should also compare the effects of utilizing the STAD and other cooperative learning methods on students' writing performances in international schools.

As this study only emphasizes descriptive writing skills, future research should investigate the effects of utilizing the STAD method in enhancing other language skills such as reading, listening and speaking. For instance, future researchers can carry out quasi-experimental studies to investigate the effects of the STAD method on students' performances in reading comprehension.

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