

IMPROVING THE PERFORMANCE OF MUET STUDENTS IN REPORT-WRITING: FROM EXPERIMENT TO ACTIONS

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ABSTRACT

Students always need sincere and kind guidance from the teachers. Hence, a true customer orientation is instrumental in teaching English as it is always good to understand the students' needs to improve their performance. This paper addresses the requirement to understand the students' needs and then teach accordingly to improve the quality of MUET report-writing. A class-room based experiment was done on 40 students in a government school. The students were briefed on the requirements for report writing in MUET. There were experimental and control groups in this study. This research found that the format-driven teaching (FBT) had significantly improved the writing performance of the MUET students. The results indicated that the overall mean score of the students before the FBT teaching stood at 18.50 (out of maximum 40.00), but the score significantly increased to 23.95 after the students were briefed and taught based on the format and requirements of the report-writing. The quality of their writings was much better than before. This research suggested the need of putting the interests of the students first in teaching. The students might have different needs such as not knowing the expectations of the examiners or teachers. Implications and direction for future research were also discussed.

KEYWORDS: Student Performance; MUET; Format-based Teaching; Action Research.

INTRODUCTION

The students always need sincere and kind guidance. Hence, a true customer orientation is instrumental in teaching English as it is always good to understand the students' needs to improve their performance (e.g. Jaggar, Folk and Mullins, 2018, Teo, Voon and Voon, 2013). This paper addresses the requirement to understand the students' needs and then teach accordingly to improve the quality of MUET report-writing. An experiment was done on two groups of students in a government school. The students understood the requirements for report writing in MUET. The findings of the action research indicated that the students performed better when they understood what was expected of them in writing a statistical-based English report. The overall mean score of the students significantly increased.

The Ministry of Education (Malaysia) has been trying to improve the standard of English among the school students. For instance, there has been an increasing number of trained and qualified English teachers to enhance the teaching and learning process. The Malaysian government will continue to emphasize the importance of English and competency of English teachers. In fact, the Malaysian University English Test (MUET) was introduced to enhance the students' command of English in a holistic approach. As such, the MUET curriculum stresses the components of listening, speaking, reading and writing. Table 1 shows the weightage assigned for each of the components as well as the overall scoring scheme. Reading (120 marks) carries the highest weight followed by Writing (90 marks). The focus of this research will be on the report-writing section of MUET.

Table 1: The Assessment Structure for MUET

The Papers	Marks	%	Band (Marks)
Paper 1: Listening	45	15.0	1 (1-99)
Paper 2: Speaking	45	15.0	2 (100-139)
Paper 3: Reading	120	40.0	3 (140-179)
Paper 4: Writing	90	30.0	4 (180-219)
(Essay & Report)	(54 & 36)	(18 & 12)	5 (220-259)
Total	300	100.0	6 (260-300)

One of the challenges faced by MUET students is writing, typically report-writing. Generally, their scores on Paper 4 (Report) are found to be relatively lower. The reason for the poor performance has to be investigated. The root cause has to be explored (e.g. Latino, Latino and Latino, 2019) to improve performance. It has to be understood that the newly introduced component of report-writing (previously, summary writing) is statistical and analytical in nature. Many students do not know how to write a precise and informative report. Their skills in the statistics-oriented report-writing should be enhanced and appropriate approach for teaching it must be developed, tested and implemented accordingly. The students are required to write a good report that can meet the examiners' expectations. However, many students are still not sure of the format. Hence, they are having a hard time writing good reports. As such, this experimental action research was carried out to discover the teaching approach which could effectively improve the quality of MUET report-writing among the students.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Report-writing in MUET

Question 1 of the MUET Writing component normally consists of one or two or sometimes even three visuals that require one to interpret them by analysing and synthesizing the given information. The visuals maybe in the form of bar or line graphs, tables, pie charts, tables or newspaper extract. A good report should include the following elements:

- A suitable title which summarises the given information obtained from all the visuals.
- An introduction of all the visuals
- An overview that synthesizes or logically links the information given in the visuals
- Analysis of significant information
- Synthesis of significant information and
- A conclusion with overview

The report can be written in three paragraphs: Introduction, body and conclusion. The important elements for these three paragraphs are as follows:

I. Introduction

- Introduce all the given visuals.
- Write the overview at the end of the introductory paragraph.

II. Body

- Present all your analyses and syntheses of significant information obtained from the visual (s) in the body paragraph which may be in a single or two paragraphs.
- The tense used must be consistent.

III. Conclusion

- Conclude your report logically in the final paragraph.

It is of utmost importance to read the instructions given in the Question so that one knows how to tackle the question appropriately. Another important technique is to learn how to count the words correctly. Phrases such as ‘Figure 1’, ‘Week 1’, ‘Kentucky Fried Chicken’ and ‘to save money’ are counted as 1 word whereas ‘Figure One’, ‘Week One’ and ‘first quarter’ are counted as two words. The year e.g. In 2005 (2 words), In the year 2005 (4 words), In the year of 2005 (5 words) and (2005) is counted as only one word. This knowledge will enable one to write within the stipulated number of words, that is, between 150 and 200 words.

From Market Orientation to Student Orientation

The marketing concept can be instrumental in education as it is all about putting the interest of the customers (students) first. The marketing and management scholars and practitioners suggest that the high performing organisations and individuals are very competent in terms of serving their target customers. They are very customer-oriented. It is also observed

that more and more researchers have illuminated marketing mechanisms in the education sector (e.g. Edwards & Kuhlman, 2007; Green, 2006; Mehra & Rhee, 2009; Voon, 2006).

Market orientation concerns the implementation of the marketing concept. It is about putting the interests of the customers first. Kohli and Jaworski (1990) emphasized the critical behaviours of generating and disseminating information as well as being responsive to information. In fact, market orientation is regarded as a culture that most effectively and efficiently creates the necessary behaviours for the creation of the superior customer value (Narver & Slater, 1990). The server should be customer and competitor-oriented, and inter-functional coordination is essential. Knowing and serving are important components of putting the customers' interests first. This implementation of marketing concept will tend to benefit the targeted customers and in return the producers or providers (individuals or organizations). In the context of schools and teaching, the needs and wants of the students need to be understood, discussed and responded to accordingly in order to create value for the targeted students.

To provide an integrated curriculum, the ideal school experience should be designed to achieve more than just implementing professional skills knowledge and must have other attributes such as competence development, values, and philosophical orientations (Benson and Enström, 2017). It is believed that this important set of culture, beliefs and behaviours are relevant for schools and teachers. In the context of teaching and learning, putting the interests of the students first will be essential. The teachers need to be student-oriented. In fact, a lot of empirical research suggested that understanding the students' needs and then teach will be more effective (e.g. Edwards & Kuhlman, 2007). There were examples where experiments and surveys were carried out by teachers in teaching. For instance, an English teacher successfully applied the customer-oriented approach in teaching summary writing (Teo, 1991). Before asking the students to summarize any passage, the teacher made sure that they understood the text by asking them questions and explaining any difficult vocabulary. For her first lesson, she gave them a practice on note-taking. Then she gave them a practice on writing short notes of messages in a sentence. After this, she gave them a practice on taking out important points by using an understanding technique. Later, they played a game called 'Many words into one' before they practised summarizing in the form of a sentence. This was followed by a practice on summarizing a paragraph and paragraphs respectively. The results from the experiment indicated that the students performed better under the suggested approach.

THE CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

A customer-oriented approach of teaching report-writing in MUET is believed to be necessary in order to help the students. The students need to know the examination format and requirements. Figure 1 shows the conceptual framework for this experiment-based action research. The independent variable was the teaching of report-writing called Format-based Teaching (FBT). FBT was basically about a teaching approach in which the students were briefed on the examination format and the writing requirements (e.g. Title, Introduction, Body and Conclusion). It was hypothesized that FBT would lead to a better report-writing performance.

Humanistic element is important in teaching writing (Farikah, 2019) and the learners of from different age groups or abilities may differ in needs. Implementing interactive writing was found to be instrumental in teaching writing to the young learners (Suarmita and Fatimah, 2019). Nevertheless, the technical aspect such as the teaching and marking systems, needs to be learner-oriented. The learners also need to know what the examination requirements are and what the examiners want or expected of them. Nasir, Rashid, Yaakub and Mohamad (2019) in reviewing Malaysian University English Test (MUET) report writing and using the move analysis of a corpus-based approach, argued that the examiners would tend to look out for includes format, language use and the content in marking essay writing. If the teachers teach the requirements (i.e., MUET Report-writing requirements) and the students realize the requirements or format, most probably the students can write a better quality report. Figure 1 shows the graphical model.

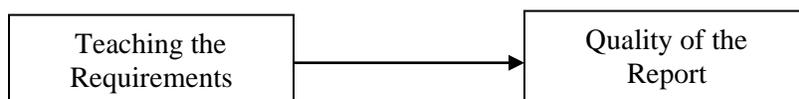


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

METHODOLOGY

This action research was aimed to improve the students’ performance in report-writing. The systematic investigation using experimental design was based on the classroom-teaching of the report-writing requirements. Two groups of Form 6 students participated in the experiment. The performance was evaluated quantitatively and the findings were used in the intervention stage to practically improve the quality of the report-writing of the MUET students.

There were experimental and control groups in this study (Figure 2). The experimental design was technically called Pretest-Posttest Control Group (Malhotra, 2009). EG stands for the Experimental Group whereas CG is the Control Group. The symbol X represents the Treatment (teaching). For the EG, Observation or assessment of the report-writing skills was done (O_1), followed by another Observation (O_2). Observations (O_3 and O_4) were also done on the Control Group (CG). Test units were randomly assigned (based on the existing classes where subjects’ performances are rather similar) to the experimental or control group. A pre-treatment measurement was done on each group. The treatment effect (TE) was measured as: $(O_2 - O_1) - (O_4 - O_3)$. Selection bias was assumed to be eliminated by randomization (R).

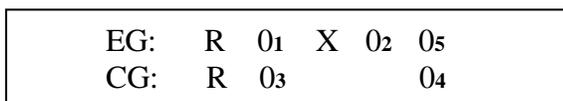


Figure 2: Pretest-Posttest Control Group

- Step 1: Asked EG and CG to write reports (no teaching) and the teacher marked the reports
- Step 2: Taught EG (did not teach CG)
- Step 3: Asked EG and CG to write the reports and the teacher marked

In analyzing the effects of the teaching, the scores of the reports were analyzed and compared with the group which was not taught.

The students wrote the report after the teacher gave out the question papers for both groups (EG and CG) without any guidance from the teacher. Then, the teacher marked the written reports of the participating students (O₁ and O₃).

During the treatment (teaching), the experimental group (EG) was briefed on the format of report-writing which included the title, Introduction, Overview, Body and Conclusion for 10 minutes. In the title, the students should include information from all the visuals. As for the Introduction, the students needed to write what each visual depicted. Moreover, they needed to write an overview which displayed how each visual was related to each other. In the body, students were required to write the Analysis and Synthesis. For the Analysis, students needed to include the Key Features, Trend Word, Data and Time Frame. As for the Synthesis, they needed to link the visuals and see their relationship. For the conclusion, they wrote another overview in an alternative way. This was what was meant by Format-driven Teaching (FBT).

Specifically, there were various requirements systematically taught by the teacher. Firstly, students were required to read the question carefully including the instructions. Then, the teacher asked the students to highlight the important information in the visuals for instance, look for the highest and lowest value of the relevant statistics. Thirdly, students attempted to link the key statistics logically to another visual given. To cite an example, how the highest or lowest value of the tiger population in the different countries is influenced by the most or least reasons leading to the increase or decrease in the tiger population. Fourthly, the teacher constructed sentences to show students the correct way of writing an analysis and synthesis. Students looked at the graphics and then the statistics. They were trained to link the statistics or graphics to the logical reasons. For example, the highest number of tiger population is due to the most reasons taken to protect the tiger population. Fifthly, to draw meaningful conclusion for the statistics or graphics, students were asked to see the overview. Finally, students had to proof read their report writing by checking the content whether the key feature or data is correctly written, not forgetting to check the relevant use of the grammar.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

This experimental research found that the format-driven teaching had significantly improved the writing performance of the MUET students. The results presented in Table 2 indicate that the overall mean score of the students before the FBT teaching stood at 18.5 (out of 40.00), but the score significantly increased to 23.95 after the students were briefed and taught based on the format and requirements of the report-writing. The t-test indicated that the difference was significant ($t = 4.33$, $p = 0.00$). The quality of their writings was much better than before. The improvement was 29.5%.

Making corrections was also important. The teacher told them where their mistakes were and the students made the necessary corrections as told. In the third attempt, a similar report

writing Question was given after the teacher explained to them their mistakes and they also made the necessary corrections. This time the students could perform even better and their marks increased to 28.67 and there was an additional increase of 19.7%.

There were also specific observations found on certain students. For instance, CYY's 2nd attempt decreased in performance due to wrong interpretation of time frame. LL and PKS decreased in performance due to less synthesis mentioned. In addition, the 3rd attempt decreased in performance for JCY was because of no data given and no synthesis attempted. As for CC, it was due to wrong interpretation of data (e.g., Exact figure must be given such as 50 instead of writing about 50).

Table 2: Results for the Experimental Group (EG, n=20)

		Before Teaching			After Teaching			Imprv.		After Correction			Imprv.	
		C	L	Tot	C	L	Tot	Diff.	Band	C	L	Tot	Diff.	Band
1	NTS	8	8	16	10	9	19	3	2 - 3	-	-	-	-	-
2	LC	9	10	19	14	15	29	10	3 - 4	-	-	-	-	-
3	JL	9	10	19	11	10	21	2	3 - 3	10	10	20	1	3 - 3
4	TYH	8	9	17	14	16	30	13	2 - 4	18	18	36	6	4 - 5
5	JPQ	10	9	19	14	15	29	10	3 - 4	18	18	36	7	4 - 5
6	LBS	8	8	16	13	13	26	10	2 - 4	13	13	26	0	4 - 4
7	JCY	7	8	15	13	12	25	10	2 - 4	10	10	20	5	4 - 3
8	AW	9	9	18	13	13	26	8	2 - 4	13	13	26	0	4 - 4
9	TG	9	9	18	13	11	24	6	2 - 3	13	13	26	2	3 - 4
10	HLK	8	9	17	9	10	19	2	2 - 3	14	14	28	9	3 - 4
11	KZW	8	9	17	8	9	17	0	2 - 2	13	13	26	9	2 - 4
12	WCH	8	9	17	14	13	27	10	2 - 4	17	17	34	7	4 - 5
13	CC	9	10	19	13	13	26	7	3 - 4	8	9	17	9	4 - 2
14	CPH	8	8	16	13	12	25	9	2 - 4	14	13	27	2	4 - 4
15	DW	9	10	19	14	14	28	9	3 - 5	16	17	33	5	5 - 5
16	BML	9	9	18	10	11	21	3	2 - 3	15	17	32	11	3 - 5
17	SUM	9	9	18	14	15	29	11	2 - 4	18	18	36	7	4 - 5
18	CYY	9	10	19	6	9	15	(4)	3 - 2	15	16	31	16	2 - 5
19	LL	14	15	29	13	12	25	(4)	4 - 4	13	13	26	1	4 - 4
20	PKS	12	12	24	9	9	18	(6)	3 - 2	18	18	36	18	2 - 5
		18.50			23.95			5.45 (29.5%)		28.67			4.72 (19.7%)	

Note: Band 1 (0-12), Band 2 (13-18), Band 3 (19-24), Band 4 (25-30), Band 5 (31-36) & Band 6 (37-40)

NTS and LC in the 3rd attempt = transfer to other schools

This experimental research also found that without the format-driven teaching, the writing performance of the MUET students could only went up slightly. In the Control Group (20 students), 12 students improved their marks by 1 to 6 marks only, 7 students' score remained the same, and 1 student's mark declined. Compared to Table 2, the result illustrated a slight increase of 11.7% with no teaching being carried out. This probably was due to students discussing among their friends and informally learnt. Moreover, it was the 2nd attempt at the Q, thus the students could have understood what was expected of them. As the saying goes, practice makes perfect.

The results presented in Table 3 depict that the overall mean score of the students before the FBT teaching stood at 13.65 (out of 40.00), but the score slightly increased to 15.25 (without teaching). After the teaching the score significantly increased to 31.10. This suggested that the students who were briefed and taught based on the expectations of the writing component performed much better. The content quality of their writings was found to be much better than before. The increment was 25%.

Table 3: Results for the Control Group (CG, n=20)

		No Teaching			Before Teaching			Imprv.		After Teaching			Imprv.	
		C	L	Tot	C	L	Tot	Diff.	Band	C	L	Tot	Diff.	Band
1	CF	8	8	16	12	10	22	6	2 - 3	16	15	31	9	3 - 5
2	HD	6	6	12	7	7	14	2	1 - 2	15	15	30	16	2 - 4
3	HWW	7	9	16	9	9	18	2	2 - 2	16	16	32	14	2 - 5
4	JL	7	8	15	7	8	15	0	2 - 2	15	16	31	16	2 - 5
5	JR	6	6	12	6	8	14	2	1 - 2	15	15	30	16	2 - 4
6	JTL	6	8	14	10	10	20	6	2 - 3	17	15	32	12	3 - 5
7	MNI	7	7	14	7	7	14	0	2 - 2	15	17	32	18	2 - 5
8	NZ	7	8	15	8	8	16	1	2 - 2	16	14	30	14	2 - 4
9	NS	6	6	12	6	6	12	0	1 - 1	14	14	28	16	1 - 4
10	NB	7	7	14	7	7	14	0	2 - 2	15	15	30	16	2 - 4
11	NA	7	7	14	8	9	17	3	2 - 2	17	17	34	17	2 - 5
12	NS	6	6	12	6	6	12	0	1 - 1	17	16	33	15	1 - 5
13	NE	5	5	10	6	6	12	2	1 - 1	16	15	31	19	1 - 5
14	NAT	6	7	13	10	8	18	5	2 - 2	15	15	30	12	2 - 4
15	NAS	7	7	14	7	8	15	1	2 - 2	16	16	32	17	2 - 5
16	SJ	9	9	18	10	9	19	1	2 - 3	16	16	32	12	3 - 5
17	SNA	6	6	12	6	6	12	0	1 - 1	15	15	30	18	1 - 4
18	SITIN	7	8	15	7	8	15	0	2 - 2	15	16	31	16	2 - 5
19	SKN	7	8	15	7	7	14	-1	2 - 2	17	16	33	19	2 - 5
20	VA	5	5	10	6	6	12	2	1 - 1	16	14	30	18	1 - 4
		13.65			15.25			1.6 (11.7%)		31.10			15.50 (25.0%)	

Note: Band 1 (0-12), Band 2 (13-18), Band 3 (19-24), Band 4 (25-30), Band 5 (31-36) & Band 6 (37-40)

In summary, the teaching had helped the students to improve their quality of report-writing. The results in Table 2 and 3 indicated that the performance of 17 students had shown improvement compared to 3 students with no improvement. In the Control group, only 12 showing improvement compared to 8 with no improvement.

ACTIONS AND INTERVENTIONS

The findings from this class-room research for MUET report-writing were found to be useful and encouraging. The MUET teacher of the government school continued to teach the report-writing format to the students, asked the students to do necessary corrections and gathered their feedbacks for continuous improvement in teaching MUET Report-writing.

After all, action research (Figure 3) concerns the use of research findings for further improvement and the research is a means to the practical actions (Johnson, 2005; Hendricks, 2006). The research findings were put into actions to benefit the students. The findings from this EBT research were immediately used to improve the quality of MUET teaching specifically the content quality component of the report-writing in Paper 4. Suggestions from the students' were obtained from time to time as these could help to practically and specifically help the teacher to teach the students.

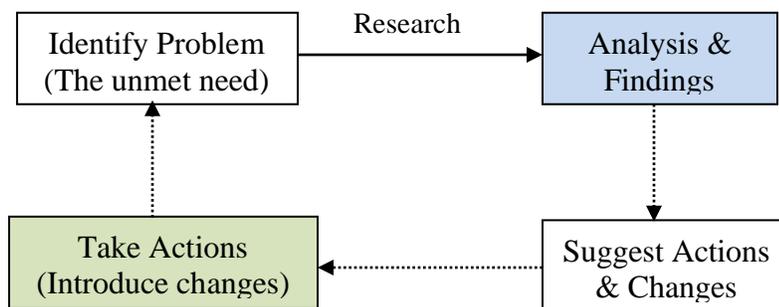


Figure 3: The Action Research Process

The teacher also shared the importance of teaching the format to other teachers. Workshops were conducted in different parts of Sarawak and the teachers as well as students were attending the workshops. After knowing the format and expectations, the students did well in their report-writing. The students also gave feedbacks to the teacher(s) for further improvement. Students were encouraged and asked to do the necessary corrections for their report-writing.

Ideally, action research needs to be consistently and continuously done. In fact, in the teaching and learning processes, the teacher might still encounter certain challenges or problems. The new problem could then be researched, and the findings would then be used for further improvement to improve the quality of teaching MUET Report-writing. The action research process will be repeated when new problem is encountered for continuous improvement.

CONCLUSION, IMPLICATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Teachers can always learn from classroom-based experiments which are scientifically and ethically done, and put the findings obtained into the necessary actions to benefit the students. This experimental design action research aimed to test the impact of a Format-based Teaching (FBT) approach in improving the MUET students' report-writing performance and also to explore the importance of making corrections. The teaching was found to be very effective in improving the report-writing performance of the students. The lessons learned from this research could have the necessary implications for higher education too.

This research indicated the need of putting the interests of the students first in teaching. This applied to the teaching of English and report-writing in the higher learning institutions.

Teaching of the format is always important. The students might have different needs such as not knowing the expectations of the examiners or teachers. The proposed FBT aimed to discover the students' needs or weaknesses, thereafter inform them what they could do in order to improve. The teaching activities emphasized what were expected of them to write a good quality report in MUET. The various English and report-writing courses (e.g. research reports, letters and memos, business writings) in higher learning institutions are necessary to be reminded of teaching the formats and the relevant requirements.

This action research was done at a government secondary school in Kuching and it could be extended and replicated to other schools or higher learning institutions. There should be more schools/institutions as well as the participating learners. The procedures for the experiment can be more comprehensive and systematic in comparing the results of the experimental and control groups. In fact, the present research has yet to accomplish the full experimental design for more conclusive findings. The demographic influences of the students on their learning should also be investigated for more effective teaching and learning processes to be developed to cater for different types of students. The intercultural aspects could be investigated (e.g. Ihtiyar, 2018) to manage the cross-cultural needs of the students (schools and higher learning institutions) to leverage the performance of different groups of students more effectively and efficiently.

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