

Improving Low Proficiency ESL Primary School Students' Writing Skills using Flipped Classroom



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ABSTRACT: There are many new approaches of teaching and learning in current classrooms. One of them is flipped classroom - a means of instruction in which students learn new input during the out-of-class period through electronic tools. Nevertheless, it is interesting to note that writing skills has not been significantly utilised in flipped classroom. This paper reports on a study that explores the use of flipped classroom to enhance low proficiency ESL primary school students' writing skills. Employing the action research approach, data were collected through pre and post-test, semi-structured interview and questionnaires. The findings depict that the students scored higher marks for the post-test writing task compared to the pre-test. The findings from the questionnaire and the interview has shown that the pupils favour learning writing skill through the flipped classroom approach and their writing skill has improved significantly through this approach. The findings reveal that the intervention proved to be effective in order to improve simple sentence construction. This research has proven that the implementation of flipped classroom approach has improved pupils' writing skills and boost their confidence in enhancing their writing skills especially in English language.

KEYWORDS: Flipped Classroom, Teaching and Learning English, Low Proficiency Students, Writing Skills, ESL

INTRODUCTION

The Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025 (MEB) was first launched by the Ministry of Education in 2012. The implementation of the MEB has brought about a reform for primary education with the introduction of the Primary School Standards-Based Curriculum or KSSR beginning 2013. The KSSR was introduced for primary education given the alarming fact that more than 35% of the primary school children, exiting after year Six from 2010-2012, scored below the minimum competency level. The students were discovered unable to read, write and speak in English as the majority of the students do not live in English enriched environments at home. Their solely access and exposure to the language is experienced at schools which is rather limited (Hazita 2016). Hence, KSSR gives liberty for the teachers to focus on learner-centred approach and facilitate diverse learning needs of their students.

Studies on Malaysian students have shown that low proficiency ESL students lack motivation to improve their language proficiency, particularly in writing skills, and that most are unable to produce coherent utterances or written text in English (Chong et al. 2011, Wahi 2015, Goh 2018). In fact, writing is deemed a complicated skill to be acquired since students must apply their knowledge of the language into writing. According to Durga & Rao (2018), students these days rely on the use of gadgets to find and get answers provided by other people instead of learning by themselves. This is one of the contributing factors that affect their self-motivation towards learning the language.

Wahi (2015) reports on ESL students' predicament in mastering the grammar rules that impede them from developing a strong interest in the language. Thus, their failure to grasp complete understanding of the English grammar has led to more disappointment and resistance towards the language.

Most ESL students were observed to have a minimal exposure and little opportunity to use English. The use of English in their daily lives was almost absent as the majority normally communicate using their first language which encompasses their respective dialects such as Bidayuh, Bajau, Javanese or Sarawak Malay for the Malays and Hokkien or Cantonese for Chinese (Wahi 2015). These affect their understanding of the structure of the English language as they perceived it as a foreign language, not as a second language as proclaimed by most educators.

A research by Ghabool, Mariadass and Kashef (2012) depicted that their 30 respondents have problems in technical parts of writing. Ahmad (2015) conducted a research that tried to improve sentence constructions with the help of hands on activity. He further emphasized that it is important for the students to experience the language by themselves. Another research was to improve writing flow and ideas of the respondents by using thinking maps. This research was done by Sovakandan, Jaganathan and Husain (2018) proved the use of thinking maps helps the students in learning writing well. These researches showed that there were many

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attempts done by educators and education people in order to improve writing skill. However, writing is still unsolved issue in the country.

Although there were many studies conducted to show improvement in the target language, there were only focused on one skill at a time. There is a need to have an approach that can help the students to improve in English holistically without neglecting any of the skills. Flipped classroom is not a new alternative learning approach that has been proven to be effective in the classroom. However, there were only small number of researches that prove the implementation of flipped classroom can help with students' learning including the anxiety and motivation. There were limited researches on the use of flipped classroom for English as a Second Language (ESL) classroom particularly in Malaysian context. Moreover, there were also very limited researches on how flipped classroom can be implemented mainly for low proficiency students in ESL classroom. Therefore, this research aimed to test how effective is flipped classroom in improving the writing skills of the Year 5 English low proficiency pupils and their perceptions towards flipped classroom approach.

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Writing Skills

Cole and Feng (2015) note that information has reliably demonstrates that ESL understudies from all levels score lower in writing compared to other skills. Cole and Feng (2015) also claimed that writing is the final skill of second language learning to be developed. It is very hard to build writing skill (Zsuzsi, 2017; Ien, Yunus & Embi, 2017; Zaki & Yunus, 2018). Writing is a complex task since ones need to master the technical part of writing and must also be able to generate ideas. One cannot write without any ideas or zero knowledge on the structures as it may cause misunderstanding. There are five elements of writing to be effective (Wilbers 2016). The elements are tabulated below:

Table 1. Effective Writing (Wilbers 2016)

Elements	Criteria
Idea	Meaningful, clearly mentioned ordinarily in the opening, subordinate ideas are linked to the main idea
Organization	Introduction states the main idea clearly including the reasoning, consistency and coherence, smooth transitions, clear summaries.
Supporting Materials	Relevant examples
Expression, Word Choice, Point of View	Avoid ambiguity by choosing vocabularies appropriately.
Spelling, Grammar, Punctuation	Free from grammatical and technical errors.

As tabulated above, it showed that the elements are complex and it is very hard to be delivered to the students. Problems in writing are not only encountered in the primary schools but until the tertiary level. Problems in generating idea, organization of ideas and also elaborating are usually more serious in the tertiary level while for primary and secondary school students; they usually make grammatical and technical errors such as the structures of writing. Ghabool, Mariadass and Kashef (2012) conducted a study that investigates writing problems on the element of convention, punctuation and language use of 30 students; showed that students had more issues on the language use rather than the other two. The study concluded that more exposure to the English vocabularies must be given to the students. Another research by Pratama (2016) reveals that the middle school students (12 – 14 years old) who are the study samples found that the writings of the students are still vague and the use of non-standard English still occurred prior to the intervention to enhance their language. From these studies, it can be inferred that, in order to acquire all the five elements of successful writing, the technological and basic language problems need to be tackled first. Then only the elements of concepts to be taught one by one, the organization and the supporting material.

As for that, the primary and secondary students must master the basic of writing in improving the two technical sections. The basic piece of writing is the sentence structure. First of all, one has to be able to understand the simple construction of sentences. The most basic of these is Subject + Verb + Object (SVO) and the grammar parts which are the Subject Verb Agreement (SVA) rules.

A research conducted by Chambers and Yunus (2017) that uses a fun way to build sentences on fifteen students in Form 5. The results showed that the students were progressing in a less stressful environment while constructing simple sentences with the right SVA rules. Another research is on using strip color codes in the construction of sentences (Omar 2016). This study was done for five primary students in Year 5. The results showed the same as the earlier study which is the students were able to build better sentences using strip color codes. Another study was done by (Ien, Yunus & Embi 2017) which showed successful results. The research was to ensure that the students were able to distinguish tenses in their writing and the solution called "Build me Up" was found to be a successful tool for the students in the rural area.

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There are other researches (Natasha, Rita & Pek 2019; Nurul, Siti & Kamisah 2021; Ratnawati, hazlina & Ainul, 2016) that examine the problems in prose. Because of the rise of numerous written issues, a lot of research has been done to develop not only the writing but also the writing mechanisms.

2.2 Problems in Writing Skills

In Malaysia English is a second language. There is no doubt that learning and acquiring that language can be a problem for some. Due to the multiracial existence of Malaysia, English is no longer a second language for some people as they have their mother tongue language, Malay language as the first language was taught for some of them then only English as the third or fourth language.

One of the difficulties Malaysian students have in studying is that their English education has been confused with their mother tongue, which is Malay (Ministry of Education 2012). This argument can be confirmed by a study conducted by Maros, Hua and Salehuddin (2007), which showed that the six rural students still have difficulties in using correct English, mainly due to interference in the mother tongue, which is Malay. The mistakes that the students frequently make are misused by posts, SVA, and verb to be. It is clear that Malay language is interfering. In another study by Jalaludin et al (2008; as quoted in Musa, Lie & Azman, 2012) it was claimed that linguistic differences are the main reason why students are discouraged in acquiring English literacy. It's because there is different syntax and morphology in the Malay and English languages.

The two of the students made regularly of the three errors are elements that do not occur in the Malay language. Malaysian language does not have an SVA. In Malay language, the verbs need not agree with the subject. There are no single and plural verbs in Malay, so the students transfer the use of Malay language to English and apply the same grammar rules. The same holds true for the verb to be. Malay language does not need any verb to accompany a verb and has caused the students to be confused.

Another issue in Malaysian school writing is rote learning; which was a typical Malaysian learning style. The style of learning can still be seen throughout the country to this day. According to a study done by Yunus and Mat (2014) on sixty-two respondents, students in the FELDA region are too reliant on their teachers and this has made them passive learners. Since facilities and the environment are too discouraging, the students seemed to not understand the importance of learning English language. Because of this, Malaysian students never want to leave their comfort zone. Students are used to being accountable only to the teachers without the incentive to start searching for information or attempting exercises alone. As for that, it has caused them to lack writing skill because writing skills can only be developed if one learns to think alone and not wait for the teachers to deliver the knowledge on the subject.

Another issue in Malaysia's writing is the methods which were used to teach writing. Usually students will find it too boring to learn how to write, as they would only learn by using non-technology materials. The methods used by teachers these days are no longer suitable for teaching writing as learning writing perceived by the students is a passive learning. A study was conducted to assess the ability of teachers to use mobile learning to teach writing (Zaki & Yunus 2018). This work has shown that pre-service teachers are able to use mobile learning in areas like practical training, abilities, and psychological preparation, but are not interested in using mobile learning in writing teaching. It has also been proved that the pre-service teacher is more inclined to integrate mobile learning with other skills than to write. This study contended that teaching using technology to teach writing is not being sufficiently explored.

2.3 Flipped Classroom

The use of technology in the classroom has taken a significant role in the education sector. There are increasing number of researchers focusing on the use of technology in classrooms. For example, a research conducted by Sidek & Yunus (2012) reveal that the students loved the lesson with the aid of the Information, Communication and Technology (ICT) tool and eventually get them to learn writing on their blog. Another positive work is that Yunus & Salehi (ibid) experimented with Facebook groups in order to encourage brainstorming ideas for writing. The results showed that the students' writing skills improved significantly.

Flipped classrooms refer to a means of instruction in which students learn new input during the out-of-class period through electronic tools (Bergmann & Samms 2012). That is why it is called as 'flipped' classroom as the lessons will be taught at home as a homework and uses the time in class for learning periods and more exercises to be done in the classroom. According to Hung (2017), flipped classroom is more effective compared to traditional teaching style as the time in the class can be used to practice and students are engaged in learning activities collaboratively and cooperatively. This is also supported by Zainuddin and Attaran (2016) that preferred flipped classroom than the traditional classroom teaching and learning.

Flipped classroom is starting to receive the acknowledgement from the Malaysia education system as the traditional teaching is no longer fully effective. Flipped classroom allows students to have the opportunity to experience the language by themselves. More classroom interactions and pupil-centered activities can be conducted as students were given input before the class start. This is supported by Noraini, Norazilawati & Mahizer (2017) that stated flipped classroom can help elevate the students in the subject as they were well-prepared before they enter the class. Moreover, more quality time can be given to teachers and students to discuss and improve based on the feedbacks provided by the teachers and peers.

Flipped classroom used variety of teaching aids for learning to be more interesting and effective. The input was recorded into videos or any accessible videos found online are a great way to catch the attention of the students. Furthermore, it helps to serve

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all the three types of learning styles which are audio, kinaesthetic and visual learners. All the three elements can be found in video learning and kinaesthetic learners can learn best in the classroom as they can have hands-on activities. As for that, it is a significant learning approach that should be brought to the front. There were limited numbers of research that make use of this approach for improving writing skills. Usually this approach was used to improve students' motivation or engagement in the classrooms. So, this research is significant as it will help to determine whether flipped classroom can contribute to help in improving the writing skills of the low proficiency students.

METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

The study is an action research as it allows the viewpoint of the researchers on learning issues and developments in the students' composition (Abraham, 2015). The Kemmis and McTaggart Model for action research comprising four steps which are plan, act, observe and reflect was deployed in this study (Kemmis, McTaggart & Retallick, 2004). This was illustrated by looking into how flipped classroom could enhance the writing skills among the low proficiency students. In the preparation phases the correct action was determined for measuring purposes together with the necessary instruments. The operation, then, was to carry out the action. After that the results were reported in the observation stage. Eventually, the findings were examined, and a review was made to see if major improvements have been made. The research used data triangulation in which qualitative and quantitative data were combined and compared using the pre-and post-test instruments, semi-structured interviews and questionnaire.

3.2 Respondents

Twenty-five students from Year Five who were identified with low proficiency in English were selected from a primary school class located in Sandakan, Sabah. The respondents came from a low-income status family where most of their fathers work as fishermen, and their mothers are mostly housewives. The respondents were chosen through purposive sampling. Only the students with low proficiency were chosen to be the respondent for this study. In addition, the students were chosen because they own a cell phone so that they could access the Whatsapp and Youtube application via the cell phone. The respondents all were 11 years old.

3.3 Procedure

A pre-test were conducted to the selected students in their classroom. The students were identified to have low proficiency level by looking at their scores in the English language mid-year examination. A Whatsapp group was created with all the students. After that, the intervention was conducted in three weeks. In the first week, the students were given a task to read a text each day from their Whatsapp group. Then, students were asked to find ten verbs and make sentences individually on their exercise book. The following day, the students were divided into groups and they had to do peer-checking activity to check their sentences. So, in week 1, they would have four texts to read from the Whatsapp group.

In week 2, students were still required to do some reading from their Whatsapp group but in this week, they were asked to write a summary of the story that they read on their exercise book. The students would have four stories to read from their group. Then, students would share their summary in groups and a presentation were done by group.

In week 3, students were given short clip for them to watch. Students were asked to find the characteristics of assigned characters. After that, in school, students would try to write one paragraph of description on the character assigned in groups and presentation were done during English class.

After the third week, a post-test was conducted to all the students. A questionnaire was distributed to all the students and they answered it individually. Five students were interviewed to give feedback on the usage of flipped classroom. The following table shows the summary of the activities done in the intervention period.

Table 2. Activities done for flipped classroom

Week 1	e-Reading and Make Sentences
Week 2	e-story reading and summary in flow maps
Week 3	Watch short clip and describe one assigned character

3.4 Data Analysis

The pre-test and post-test results including the questionnaires were analyzed using the descriptive statistics while interviews were analyzed by identifying the emerging themes. Students were coded as Pupil 1, Pupil 2 and so on. For interview, pseudonyms were used.

Findings

This section presents the findings of this research. Results from the pre and post-tests, questionnaires and semi-structured interview depict an improvement in the students' writing and positive feedbacks were received using this new approach of learning.

Test

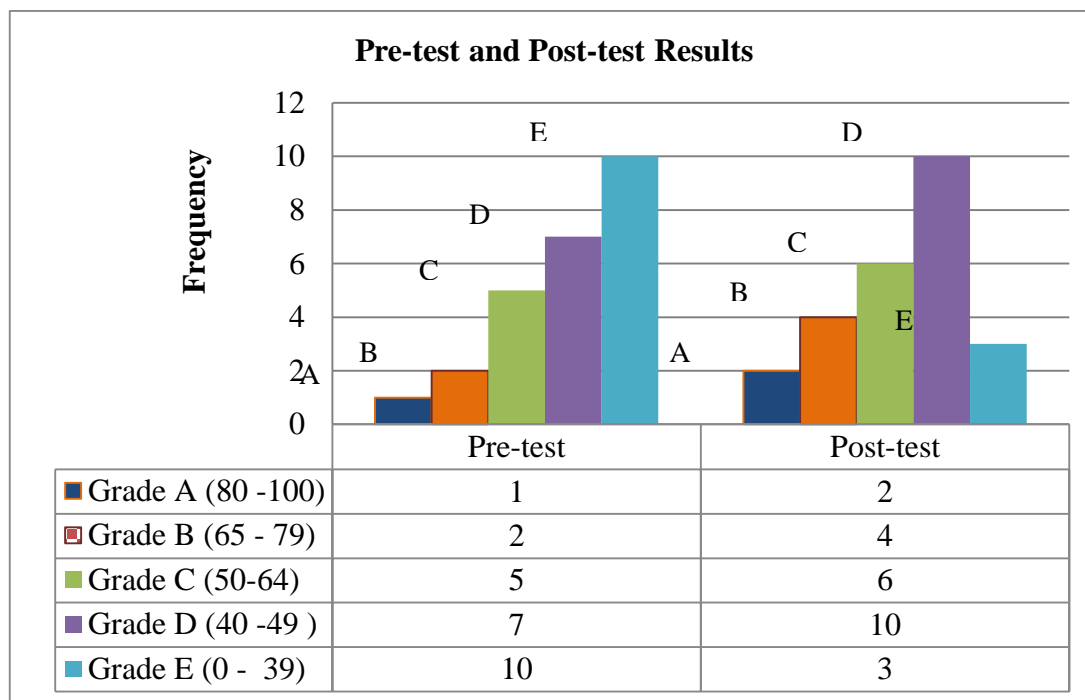


Fig 1. Pre-test and Post-test Results

Above is the results of both pre-test and post-test done before and after the intervention. The students were graded using the grading system of Malaysia education system where the marks of below 40% are considered 'Fail' and marks above 80% are considered 'Excellent'. It can be seen for Figure 1 that 40% of the students failed the pre-test and 12% of them failed the post-test. There was a difference of 28% improvement after the new approach being conducted. In the pre-test, only one pupil scored grade A in the test while in the post-test, two students scored grade A. There were also an increase in number of students in Grade A until D for the post-test as there were less number of students that failed the post-test. The mean mark for the pre-test is 41.02 while the mean mark for the post-test is 52.54. It showed a significance differences between the pre and post-test. The mean mark indicates that the students scored better in the post-test rather than the pre-test. The mode for the pre-test is Grade E at which most of the students failed to score. The mode for the post-test is Grade D at which it shows most students were able to at least pass the test. The median for both the pre-test and post-test is Grade D.

Questionnaire

Table 3. Results of the Questionnaire for each item

No.	Items	Frequency	
		Yes	No
1	I like this approach of learning.	16	9
2	I like teacher to teach in class compared to watching videos and reading from Whatsapp.	7	18
3	I like doing my homework now. (watching videos and reading from Whatsapp)	16	9
4	Activities in the classroom helped me to write better.	17	8
5	I can write better sentences.	14	11
6	Watching videos and reading from the Whatsapp are interesting and fun.	22	3

Table 3 shows the results that has been obtained from the questionnaires. The questionnaire aims to record the students' responses on the intervention. For item number 1, 16 students which makes up to 64% of the total number of research participants liked the new approach whereas only 9 students which is about 36% disliked the approach. For item number 2, 7 students, which is 28% of the total number of research participants like the traditional way where the students preferred the conventional teaching and learning session where the teacher would provide the input and the students only listen and receive the input. In contrast, 72% of the students that makes up 18 respondents of the research preferred the learning to happen in both ways where the teacher would facilitate input through the WhatsApp application. For item number 3, 16 students which makes up 64% of the total number of research participants

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like to do their homework through the utilisation of videos and reading from the WhatsApp application. However, 9 students which is 36% of the respondents disagree to the item. They preferred the traditional way instead of using videos and reading through the WhatsApp application. For item number 4, 17 students which makes up to 68% of the total number of research participants has mentioned that the activities in class has helped them to write better and 8 students which is only 32% of the research participants has disagreed to the statement. They felt that the activities in the classroom did not help them to write better. As for item number 5, 14 students which is 56% stated that they can write better sentences. However, 11 students which makes up to 44% disagreed to the statement. For item number 6, 22 students which makes a good total of 88% mentioned that watching videos and reading from WhatsApp are interesting and fun whereas only 3 students which is only 12% disagreed to the statement. The results obtained from the questionnaire has proven that the use of flipped classroom approach has given a positive impact on the improvement of English language skills especially the writing skill.

Interview

The findings collected from the semi-structured interview also proved that there were positive feedbacks towards the flipped classroom approach. The students' responses to the interview questions were analysed and four emerging themes were established. The themes include (1) the improvement of writing skills, (2) classroom activities, (3) teaching aids and (4) motivation.

In regards to the improvement of writing skills, all students expressed that they can write better after experiencing the three weeks of flipped classroom. Pupil 4 said, *"I can write better than before because I can now write complete sentences."* Pupil 2 added that, *"This new style of learning is helping me to have more vocabularies so I can write and understand what I want to write."* Based on the interview, they all admitted they have improved their writing with the use of flipped classroom.

On classroom activities, majority of the students agree that they can learn better with the help of the classroom activities done in the classroom. Pupil 1 stated, *"It is easier because I have teacher and friends to tell me my mistakes in writing."* Pupil 5 said, *"I am not sleepy and I learn more from my friends from the activities."* These showed that 80% of the students benefited from the flipped classroom approach.

In terms of the teaching aids, most of the students mentioned that they are in favour of the teaching materials used by their teacher which are the videos from Youtube, short stories and texts from the Whatsapp group. Pupil 2 stated, *"I like that we do not use the textbook."* Pupil 3 further added that *"I can read or watch videos many times at home and ask my parents if I do not understand."* 60% of the students showed that flipped classroom has given them more input.

For the last theme which is motivation. Pupil 1 and Pupil 4 pointed out that flipped classroom is a good approach for them to learn English. Pupil 1 said, *"I found English is interesting to be learnt this way."* Pupil 4 claimed, *"I am confident to write in English because I can learn more from teacher and other friends in classroom."*

To sum up, the students generally preferred learning writing skill through flipped classroom approach. The quantitative and qualitative results were consistent in the sense that the results show that the students have improved their writing through this newly implemented approach.

DISCUSSION

This research has portrayed that flipped classroom leaves a positive mark on improving the students' writing skill. This is a good sign for the teachers and schools to infuse the flipped classroom approach in their classrooms especially the English language classrooms. Researches believe that the flipped classroom approach would benefit almost all the Malaysian students as the same result has been reflected in researches done in the Malaysian classroom setting as Zainuddin & Attaran (2016) and Noraini, Norazilawati & Mahizer (2017). These researches has also proven the effectiveness of using the flipped classroom approach in the Malaysian classrooms. The flipped classroom approach would also challenge the rote learning method as suggested by Yunus & Mat (2014) that has been implemented the Malaysian classroom for the years. It would further improve the teaching and learning strategies in Malaysia especially in the Malaysian English language classrooms. This approach would provide a fresh, new outlook on how the teaching and learning process is viewed. The infusion of flipped classroom would also open doors to encourage students to learn in a less stressful manner as suggested by Chambers & Yunus (2017). This is because the flipped classroom approach would provide an ample space for the students to receive and learn input on their own pace. The researcher firmly believes that the flipped classroom approach would provide a huge benefit to the Malaysian education system especially in facilitating the Malaysian students to acquire the English language.

CONCLUSION

Hence, it is hoped that this approach will be a great way for the teachers all around this country to teach English efficiently. This approach should be given emphasis in all schools so that there would be a revolution for the traditional teaching and learning. This will also help students to maximize their learning by learning at their own and experiencing the language themselves. Moreover, this will help the curriculum developers to take this as a proof if flipped classroom is effective or not in improving the low proficiency students. This flipped classroom has been proven to be a successful tool to aid improvement of the writing skills to a certain extent. This teaching approach can help students to improve their writing skills even faster compared to the traditional teaching. The world

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is revolving with the technology advancements. Therefore, it is important for the education field to be improved with the use of technology and new innovative approach of teaching and learning. In the next cycle, the flipped classroom is to be used in order to improve other skills such as reading, speaking or listening skills among the secondary students.

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