

Micro-W: Teaching Narrative Writing to Primary ESL Learners in the New Normal

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Abstract

Narrative writing is the most common type of writing being taught at school especially to primary school learners which involves descriptions of an incident. However, past research showed many second language learners had difficulties producing a good narrative composition as they lack practice and mastery of other language elements such as vocabulary and grammar. The Covid-19 pandemic had greatly impacted the teaching and learning of writing skill and had dampened the process in many ways due to a lot of restrictions. The aim of this study is to investigate the effectiveness of using Micro-W to improve primary ESL learners' narrative writing skill and enhance engagement in learning writing in the new normal. Micro-W is a writing template which utilizes Microsoft Word Visual Basic Application (VBA) to enhance learning experience. The template has many features and can be personalized according to the content and theme. It is user-friendly, reusable and promotes autonomous and interactive learning. Micro-W is cost-effective, practical, and accessible in urban and rural areas, online and offline. A research was conducted to 30 Year 5 of low intermediate pupils studying in an urban and a rural primary school in Selangor, Malaysia. A pre-test and post-test were conducted to identify pupils' improvement in writing skill before and after using Micro-W. Pupils' perceptions and engagement in learning writing using Micro-W were evaluated using a 4-point Likert scale questionnaire. The findings showed a significant improvement on pupils' narrative writing skill after using Micro-W. Pupils also responded positively and were more engaged in learning writing. The pandemic had caused great adversity to the teaching and learning processes and had shifted education settings to a more resilient and mobile method of learning. Thus, innovation and improvisation in teaching and learning methodology are highly demanded to cope with the new normal.

Keywords: Narrative Writing, Microsoft Word, Visual Basic Application, ESL Learners, Covid-19 Pandemic

Introduction

Writing skill is one of the main skills in language learning. It is widely used in all fields of life, in creativity, in business, and scholarly activities (Keshta, 2013) but it is considered as the most complex skills among the four language skills (Rao, 2019). Writing is perceived as challenging as it requires the learners to construct many language elements into comprehensible sentences. According to Younes and Albalawi (2015), the main difficulties in students' writing

include punctuation, grammatical, and spelling problems. Many English as a Second Language (ESL) students are going through difficulties in conveying their ideas effectively due to insufficient knowledge in English writing skills and the lack of creativity (Adas & Bakir, 2013) and Rao (2019) also stated that, ESL students especially, need to allocate more time to practice the skills.

Malaysian ESL learners at primary level are required to achieve A2 band under the Standard of Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) for all language skills. As for writing skill, they are expected to write by using appropriate mechanical features of writing throughout their primary school years. However, many Malaysian ESL learners had difficulty producing good compositions as they faced challenges in mastering language elements such as spelling, vocabulary, grammar and the L1 interference (Harun & Abdullah, 2020; Ghulamuddin et al., 2021). The learning of writing skills is getting more challenging after the Covid-19 pandemic spread where teaching and learning at home was enforced and eventually impacted the learning process greatly.

The Covid-19 pandemic had made the teaching and learning of writing more difficult and dampened the process in many ways due to a lot of restrictions. School closure and learning from home have been enforced as a measure to control the spread of the disease (Sintema, 2020). The Ministry of Education has announced the implementation of teaching and learning at home where learning can be conducted online and offline or offsite (MOE, 2020). However, according to Schleicher (2020), this crisis has revealed many inadequacies and inequalities in the education system. These include in terms of network and internet access, the availability of devices required for online learning, the environment that supports online learning as well as the imbalance between resources and needs. The education gap between urban and rural areas are getting further apart. Thus, innovation and improvisation in teaching and learning methodology and teaching tools are highly demanded to cope with the new normal. Therefore, the aim of this study is to investigate the effectiveness of using Micro-W in the teaching and learning of narrative writing to primary ESL learners in urban and rural areas.

Literature Review

Multimedia learning approach in learning writing skill

Multimedia learning approach is widely used in the education system in recent years. As the trend increases, multimedia is commonly used to assist the learning so that the learners can get new knowledge and skills in a fun environment (Guan et al., 2018). Multimedia is an essential element of a good computer-assisted skill-building software (Shakhnoza Ibragimovna, 2019). The use of multimedia in teaching and learning can provide a good atmosphere for English language instruction depending on the availability of resources and information (Kumar et al., 2021). Kumar et al (2021) further stated that it can enhance learners' thinking and linguistic abilities. Guan et al (2018) also added that multimedia can help in developing the learner's independent learning ability. According to Leow and Neo (2014), multimedia-based educational programmes are in demand in various fields of learning as it promotes new ways in delivering information due to the accessibility and reusability to cater to various types of learners. Thus, multimedia has become an important part in teaching and learning.

The multimedia learning approach is supported by the principles of the Cognitive Theory of Multimedia Learning (CTML) which was popularized by (Mayer, 2001). CTML refers to the learner's attempt to make connections between words and pictures to produce a

meaningful learning by building a systematic mental representation from the presented materials (Mayer, 2014). A study by Charles and Natalia (2016) indicated that multimedia integration improved and facilitated the writing ability and skills in English. Birds and Edwards (2014) also reported that the ability of the learners to generate content increased by using a digital framework. Therefore, this study attempts to merge the offline and online tools for teaching writing.

Teaching and learning of narrative writing

Narrative writing is one of the many types of texts introduced in primary schools. It is the most common type of writing text being taught in primary schools (Cole & Feng, 2020). Narrative text is defined as a type of text which tells an event where students are able to share their imaginative stories of narratives, often with moral values insertion (Fitriati et al., 2018) which involves various purposes such as to support and illustrate ideas with anecdotes and to attract readers with revealing stories (Kusumawardhani, 2015). Three strategies in narrative writing which are flexible-focus, fixed-topic and topic-elaboration can produce texts with distinctive structures (Hayes, 2011; Hayes & Berninger, 2014). The process to produce narrative writing is considered to be challenging especially to ESL learners. The process of writing has been perceived as primarily cognitive activities that tend to be lonely, challenging, brain bound and an internal affair (Nishino & Atkinson, 2015). Thus, it is crucial to select the best teaching and learning strategies to support the learners' narrative writing process.

Most Malaysian students are having difficulties in producing a good narrative composition, as it requires them to describe an incident (Ien et al., 2017). Students need to broaden their knowledge when writing narrative texts as stated by (Grenner et al., 2020). Williams and Larkins (2013) also suggested that students must have a background information or having ideas when writing a good narrative essay. The students should also read more as findings from Grenner et al (2020) found out that students with high reading comprehension scores can improve the quality of the texts written. Materials used in teaching and learning narrative writing also influenced the students' interest in learning (Siddek & Ismail, 2021) and it should be relevant to the student's environment for them to write it well (Herdi, 2015). Therefore, innovation and improvisation in teaching and learning strategies are highly demanded to cope with the progressive education setting.

Innovation in Teaching and Learning of Narrative Writing in New Normal

Innovation of teaching and learning materials can be used as one of the strategies to improve narrative writing. Media used in teaching and learning of writing support the teacher to handle the material and increase student's motivation significantly (Herdi, 2015). Hence, a multimedia learning approach is essential to assist teaching and learning. For instance, Pertiwi et al (2020) in his study, created and developed teaching materials using Visual Basic Application (VBA) in Microsoft Word to support the learning in the new normal. In a study by Bernard et al (2019), students worksheet media assisted by VBA showed positive responses from students and piques students' interest and increases their understanding.

Microsoft Word is user friendly, practical and accessible. It is a widely used word processor package that aids the teacher to prepare and produce a writing document easily (Bawa et al., 2021). It is easily accessible and it can help the students to write the words correctly as the program has stored the words and characters in its memory (Drougas, 2021). Due to the pandemic, the teacher finds it difficult to give feedback on students' writing manually. The features in Microsoft Word like 'Track Changes' can help teachers to review

and make a comment on the writing as explained by Benacquisto (2021). Thus, in this study, the researchers are interested in making an innovation out of Microsoft Word by utilizing VBA and simple coding to improve the teaching and learning of narrative writing. The innovation, namely Micro-W, is a writing template that blends the offline and online features to create multimedia learning in order to enhance learning experience. Thus, this study will further investigate the effectiveness of using Micro-W to improve primary ESL learners' narrative writing skills and engagement in learning writing in a new normal.

Methodology

Research Design

The quasi-experimental research was chosen for this research because of the availability of the samples (Creswell, 2014) and it is significant with the research aims to investigate the effectiveness of using Micro-W to improve primary ESL learners' narrative writing skills. Quantitative data was derived from the pre and post-test and quantifying a 4-point Likert scale questionnaire. The researchers conducted this research for 5 weeks. ADDIE model was selected because it is a learning model used to create effective learning experiences (Branch, 2009). It stands for Analysis, Design, Development, Implementation and Evaluation. The ADDIE model is adopted from Branch (2009) as shown in Figure 1. The procedures of the research are shown in Table 1.

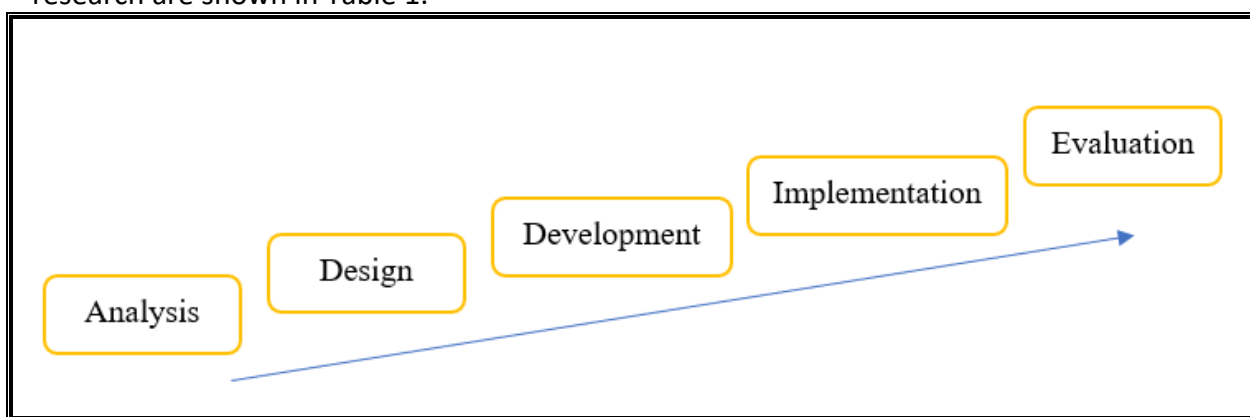


Figure 1: ADDIE Model

ADDIE Model	Procedures
Analysis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identifying the problems.
Design	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Choosing a medium (Microsoft Word). Listing the items and features to be included. Creating the templates with Visual Basic Application (VBA) and simple coding.
Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Finalizing the template. Running coding and VBA test.
Implementation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Conducting a pre-test. Introducing Micro-W to the pupils. Uploading Micro-W into Google Classroom or Telegram. Conducting writing exercises using Micro-W.
Evaluation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Conducting a post-test. Distributing questionnaires through Google Form. Evaluation.

Table 1: Procedures of the research

In the first phase, the researchers identified the samples' problems in narrative writing in a new normal. After the analysis, the researchers designed the teaching and learning materials that can improve the samples' narrative writing. Microsoft Word was chosen as a medium and the items and features were listed to be included in the template. Then, the template was created with Visual Basic Application (VBA) and simple coding. During the development stage, the researcher validated the teaching and learning material namely Micro-W with knowledgeable others such as fellow teachers and lecturer for improvements. After that, the template was finalized and a trial test was conducted to check on the functionality. The implementation stage is where the pre-test and post-test were conducted to identify samples' improvement in writing before and after using Micro-W. The last stage of evaluation was where the researchers distributed the questionnaire through Google Form and evaluated the effectiveness of using Micro-W as a teaching and learning writing tool.

Samples

The samples were 30 Year 5 of low intermediate studying in an urban and a rural primary school in Selangor. There were 20 samples from the urban area and 10 samples from the rural area respectively. Purposive sampling was chosen because the data can be generated specifically according to the aim of the research (Palinkas et al., 2016). The basis of this choice is because the researcher aims to investigate the effectiveness of using Micro-W in the teaching and learning of narrative writing to primary ESL learners in urban and rural areas.

Instruments

Pre-test and post-test

The main instrument used in the research was a test which consisted of a pre-test and post-test. The purpose of using these tests is to measure the changes from the intervention used (Dimitrov & Rumrill, 2003). Pre-test and post-test were conducted before and after the use of the Micro-W respectively. The researchers used a fill in the blank exercise template for narrative writing with choices of answer given. The content for the narrative writing is adapted from the CEFR English Year 4 textbook from the topic 'Days'. The Micro-W developed for this exercise included various features in one template as shown in Figure 2.

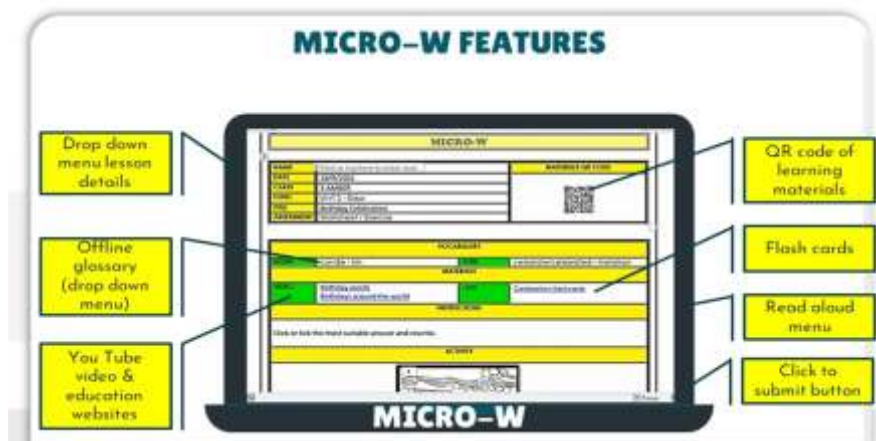


Figure 2: Micro-W Features

Questionnaires

The samples' engagement, motivation, understanding, and knowledge in learning writing using Micro-W were evaluated using a 4-point Likert scale questionnaire in the evaluation stage. Each section consists of three question items. Each question item is evaluated based on four scales namely 1 (strongly disagree), 2 (disagree), 3 (agree) and 4 (strongly disagree). Qasem et al. (2014) stated that there was no effect of the number of alternatives on the reliability and validity in Likert scale. Therefore, the researcher decided to use a 4-point Likert scale to get the samples' responses after using Micro-W.

Findings and Discussion

Pre-test and post-test

The pre-test and post-test were conducted to identify the effectiveness of using Micro-W to improve the samples' narrative writing skills before and after the intervention. The marks for pre-test and post-test were collected and analysed using statistical analysis. A paired samples t-Test was conducted to compare marks between pre-test and post-test before and after using Micro-W. The results were divided into two areas which are the urban area and the rural area respectively to identify any significant difference between these two areas and to check on the reliability of the intervention when used in different conditions and areas.

Table 2

Paired samples statistics for urban area

Pair 1	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Mean	Error	Sig (2-tailed)
Pretest	44.60	20	7.728	1.728		.000
Posttest	53.60	20	8.792	1.966		

Based on the analysis of paired samples statistics and test from the urban area, there was a significant difference in marks for pre-test ($M=44.6$, $SD=7.73$) and post-test ($M=53.6$, $SD=8.79$) conditions; $t(19) = -18.49$, $p=0.000$. These results showed that after using Micro-W, the marks for narrative writing had increased. Specifically, it suggests that Micro-W is effective to improve narrative writing skills when used in the urban area.

Table 3

Paired samples statistics for rural area

Pair 1	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Mean	Error	Sig (2-tailed)
Pretest	45.50	10	7.764	2.455		.000
Posttest	57.00	10	8.654	2.737		

Based on the analysis of paired samples statistics and test from the rural area, there was a significant difference in marks for pre-test ($M=45.5$, $SD=7.76$) and post-test ($M=57.0$, $SD=8.65$) conditions; $t(9) = -10.57$, $p=0.000$. Similar to the urban area, these results showed that after using Micro-W, the marks for narrative writing had increased. Thus, it also suggests that Micro-W is effective to improve narrative writing skills when used in the rural area.

The results of the pre-test and post-test for both urban and rural areas showed that Micro-W can be used as an alternative writing tool for teaching and learning of narrative writing especially during distant learning. The factors that might contribute to the increment in results are because Micro-W template is user friendly and accessible both online and offline and has many self-directed learning features. The base template of Micro-w which is Microsoft Word is a widely used word processor package that aids the teacher to prepare and produce a writing document easily (Bawa et al., 2021). Teachers can utilize the built-in system and VBA in Microsoft Word to create teaching aids and learning materials that suit the students' needs. Furthermore, it is easily accessible and can help the students to write the words correctly as the program has stored the words and characters in its memory (Drougas, 2021). Nowadays, Microsoft Word is also available in computers and mobile phones which makes it accessible in urban and rural areas.

Questionnaires

There were two questionnaires distributed through Google Form. The first questionnaire was given before the intervention to identify the information on demographic and learning medium. Another questionnaire was distributed after the intervention consisting of four sections which are the samples' engagement, motivation, understanding and knowledge respectively towards the use of Micro-W in learning narrative writing.

i. Demographic Data

The background of the samples and the breakdown of the number of percentages of the samples involved in the study are shown in detail in Table 4. There were 30 samples who responded to the questionnaire.

Table 4

Samples' Background Information (N=30)

Information	n	%
1. School Location		
Urban	20	66.7%
Rural	10	33.3%
2. Medium of Learning		
Laptop/Computer	13	45.3%
Mobile phone	17	56.7%

The Micro-W template has been designed in two versions which are the computer version and the mobile version as many samples used the two devices as a learning medium. Based on the information collected, there are a total of 20 samples (66.7%) consisting of learners from urban areas while the remaining 10 samples (33.3%) were learners from rural areas. 13 samples (45.3%) used laptops or computers and the remaining 17 samples (56.7%) used mobile phones. According to Schleicher (2020), this Covid-19 crisis has revealed many inadequacies and inequalities in the education system which include in terms of network and internet access, the availability of devices required for online learning, the environment that supports online learning as well as the imbalance between resources and needs. Thus, the information on the medium of learning was collected to determine the most suitable Micro-W version to be given to the samples according to their learning medium. School location information was also collected to check on the effectiveness of using Micro-W in improving the narrative writing skills and engagement in learning narrative writing in both urban and rural areas.

ii. Analysis of questionnaires

Data was collected and analyzed using the SPSS system. One Sample t-Test was used to assess the level of engagement, motivation, understanding, and knowledge of the samples. Each section consists of three question items evaluated based on a 4-point Likert Scale Model. Each question item is evaluated based on four scales namely 1 (strongly disagree), 2 (disagree), 3 (agree) and 4 (strongly disagree). There were 20 samples from the urban area and 10 samples from the rural area respectively. However, the data was calculated as a whole regardless of the demographic factor. Results of the analysis can be summarized as below.

Table 5:

Summary of One Sample t Test (N= 30)

Dimensions of Questionnaire	Mean	T value	P value
Engagement	3.7222	40.887	.000
Motivation	3.6331	37.561	.000
Understanding	3.6774	39.979	.000
Knowledge	3.6333	39.903	.000

The result in Table 5 showed that engagement has the highest mean among all the other dimensions which is 3.7222. Most of the samples agreed that using Microsoft Word as a medium of learning is not difficult and user friendly and when integrated with Visual Basic Application (VBA) to create multimedia learning, enhanced the learning experiences. Multimedia is an essential element of a good computer-assisted skill-building software (Ibragimovna, 2019). The use of multimedia in teaching and learning can provide a good atmosphere for English language instruction depending on the availability of resources and information (Kumar et al., 2021). Thus, adding multimedia elements in Micro-W is proven to get the samples more engaged in learning writing.

The lowest mean out of all the dimensions is motivation which is 3.6331. Although it has the lowest mean, it is considerably high. Most samples agreed that using Micro-W in learning writing increases their motivation. According to Herdi (2015), media used in teaching and learning of writing support the teacher to handle the material and increase student's motivation significantly. The motivation section showed an upward trend mainly because of the features of Micro-W which integrated VBA and various teaching and learning materials to assist the learners autonomous learning especially during distant learning where teachers' assistance is very limited. Guan et al (2018) also added that multimedia can help in developing the learner's independent learning ability. The various multimedia features and media embedded in Micro-W managed to assist most of the samples for self-directed learning at home hence, kept them motivated to complete the tasks given.

Micro-W is also helping the samples to understand the writing tasks better. The mean of the understanding section is 3.6774. This is because learning narrative writing could be challenging especially during distant learning. According to Ien et al (2017), most Malaysian

students are having difficulties in producing a good narrative composition, as it requires them to describe an incident. Students also need to broaden their knowledge when writing narrative texts (Grenner et al., 2020). This could be done with progressive learning at school. However, school closure and learning from home have been enforced as a measure to control the spread of Covid-19 (Sintema, 2020). Due to distant learning, teachers' assistance and face to face interactions are limited thus hindering the instructional strategies and understanding of the writing process and elements. Charles and Natalia (2016) reported that multimedia integration improved and facilitated the writing ability and skills in English. Hence, based on the findings, the features in Micro-W were able to aid the learning of narrative writing.

The mean for the knowledge section is 3.6333, slightly less than the understanding section. In fact, these two sections are highly related because when the knowledge increases, the understanding also increases. Materials used in teaching and learning narrative writing influenced the students' interest in learning (Siddek & Ismail, 2021) and it should be relevant to the student's environment for them to write it well (Herdi, 2015). The main factor affecting the result of this section is also because of the integration of multimedia learning in Micro-W. The instructional strategies and the teaching and learning materials are partially converted into multimedia to assist the learners. According to Leow and Neo (2014), multimedia-based educational programmes are in demand in various fields of learning as it promotes new ways in delivering information due to the accessibility and reusability to cater to various types of learners. As the trend increases, multimedia is commonly used to assist the learning so that the learners can get new knowledge and skills in a fun environment (Guan et al., 2018). Although the Covid-19 restrictions had been enforced, the limitation can be overcome with the help of multimedia. Thus, the integration between the conventional approach and multimedia learning as emphasized in Micro-W can be a useful teaching and learning writing tool.

As depicted in the table, all the dimensions of the questionnaire are significant because the p value is lower than 0.05. Thus, it means there are positive increments and effects to the samples in all the dimensions after using Micro-W.

Conclusion

Based on the findings of this study, it is evident that most samples have shown improvement in narrative writing skills and increase in engagement in learning writing. The increment of scores in post-test and positive feedbacks garnered, showed that Micro-W should be utilised in teaching and learning process. Micro-W is easily accessible in rural and urban areas and the VBA features used in Micro-W are also able to aid teaching and learning process in the pandemic as it promotes autonomous and interactive learning.

This research corroborates the current shift in the education paradigm into a self-directed learning environment due to the pandemic. The usage of multimedia and technology become vast and both teachers and learners need to adapt to the evolving education system. Further research should be conducted in a larger sample group to validate the findings and the effectiveness of Micro-W. Furthermore, this research can be conducted at secondary and tertiary education levels and extending the usage of Micro-W to other language skills other than writing skill such as reading skill and listening skill in ESL learning. This research is significant because it provides a structured writing system for the teaching and learning of narrative writing that is beneficial to both learners and teachers. Microsoft Word is a reliable platform as it is widely and easily used, thus, innovation and improvisation are highly

demanded to cope with the new normal. In a nutshell, the use of Micro-W has proved effective to improve narrative writing skills especially in the new normal.

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