

Using The SVO Grid Table as a Beginner's Guide to Write English Sentences and Improve Writing Skills among Low Proficiency Pupils in Primary School

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Abstract

The pupils in primary school are taught to learn English through skills such as listening, speaking, writing and reading. In a suburban school in West Malaysia, a group of low proficiency pupils were introduced to the SVO Grid Table to see the impact in learning one of the skills, the writing skill. It was aimed to help the pupils to write simple present tense sentences with subject-verb agreement. The focus of the SVO Grid Table is to guide low proficient pupils to write English sentences with subject, verb and object. There were two experimental and control group in the study and the instrument used was assessments. The findings indicated the experimental group showed a difference in their writing assessment marks. Overall, the SVO Grid Table shows a positive effect on the pupils' performance in writing simple sentences with the present tense. Lastly, the SVO Grid Table is hoped to give better impact on writing especially among low proficiency pupils in primary school and be used by teachers in the next future.

Keywords: English, Primary School, Low Proficiency, Writing, Subject-Verb Agreement

Introduction

Based on the researcher's personal experience in teaching the English subject, the pupils in primary school, especially those of age seven to nine were focused into sounding, blending and segmenting the English sounds. This was to cope with their speaking and reading skills where it has helped them to comprehend and respond in class. Moreover, they were taught to listen and speak in an authentic classroom environment. The English language was emphasised conversationally throughout an hour class each day and the use of mother tongue language was minimal. Meanwhile, the researcher found out throughout her years teaching the upper level, Level 2, which were of pupils from ten to twelve years old, the English subject was more focussed on writing comprehensively. They are taught to write with formats such as letters and emails. This was to guide them to prepare for the national examination when they are in Year 6, or twelve years old.

However, the issue was raised when the researcher notices the difficulty faced by the low proficiency pupils as they were not able to write effectively during their Level 2. These pupils needed a practical technic to write effectively with correct grammar. Therefore, two issues are brought up in this study to help these pupils making progress in their learning especially in writing English sentences.

Firstly, these low proficiency pupils were stepping into a 'huge gap' of what they have learnt throughout their 4 years of schooling. They made decent progress throughout Level 1, from Year 1 to Year 3. They were able to listen, speak, read and write with guidance. Once they were in Year 4, they were introduced to the KSSR textbook which emphasised on formatting writing. It was difficult for them to write comprehensively as before, they wrote with only 3 to 5 simple sentences. Yet, in Level 2, they were asked to write a minimum of 80 words per formatting essay.

Secondly, the low proficiency pupils were lack of vocabulary. Their CEFR textbook, which was used from Year 1 until Year 3 were more focused on conversational dialogues. This has encouraged the pupils to speak and respond confidently in English. However, as they upgraded to Year 4, the pupils faced more lengthy and complex vocabulary in the KSSR curricula textbook. The low proficiency pupils get demotivated sometimes as most words were likely not easy to comprehend and they were literally drowning in the sea of English. These low proficiency pupils were taken aback with the situation hence, most of them especially the low proficient were no longer motivated to learn the English language. According to Bandura (1989), the most important source of human motivation is cognitive engagement. Therefore, if the pupils continued to be demotivated in learning English, they might not be able to set themselves goals nor achievement. So, learning will never occur. Therefore, to help the pupils to write English sentences with motivation and ease, a beginner's guide is provided especially for the low proficiency pupils. The SVO grid table is a writing technique that is cost-free and can be easily used among English teachers and pupils. It is a suitable beginners' guide for low proficiency pupils who are having difficulty to write sentences with subject, verb and object. Besides, as a second language learner, it is necessary to motivate these young learners to write effectively with minor errors. According to Lumsden (1999), motivation is the ultimate product of the school experience; a meaningful, teachers who maintain high expectation and look for ways to help each student connect to the curriculum, and opportunities for choice and self-evaluation that foster the students' ownership of learning. Therefore, it is necessary to motivate the low proficiency pupils especially to write in English.

Writing skill is a specific ability that helps one to put own thoughts into words in meaningful form and able to deliver the message intended in the writing (Nunan, 1999). Therefore, to help the young beginner's with lower proficiency, the SVO grid table is initiated based on a few past studies. In the past study by Koot Van Wyk (2015); Ariffin, Ismail, Kadir, & Kamal, 2018; Alamri, (2018), the researcher recommended a tool to teach writing. He suggested a grid-like technique for pupils who have problems with subject-object-verb writing. Besides that, an earlier study by Crealock (1993) proposed a Grid Model approach to writing has helped his students who were having learning difficulties.

However, the issue is still underexplored hence, with this study it is wished to broaden the scope on teaching writing with grid. This is dues to there was still limited study in the same focus of area. It is wished to contribute to the teaching world and give ideas to other educators in teaching writing specifically. As shown, this study in focus on writing simple English sentences with a writing technique called as the SVO Grid Table.

In this study, the aim is to get the pupils to write simple present tense sentences. With the prior knowledge and vocabulary they had throughout 4 years of schooling, the SVO Grid Table helped them to organise ideas and construct sentences based on the pattern provided; the subject, verb and object. This is to help the pupils to write simple present tense sentences in subject-verb agreement.

The SVO Grid Table uses a grid-like table that has 3 columns of subject, verb and object. It is to focus on the subject-verb agreement. In previous studies, they were researchers who also focused on the subject-verb agreement. In 2009, Nayyan and Jusoff studied subject-verb agreement to enhance teaching methods and to find ways to help students to improve writing. Other than that, in 1996, Changuoy and Negro studied on subject-verb agreement errors in written production. They found out that there were conditions that made adults and children make an error in subject-verb agreement. According to Changuoy and Negro (1996), the subject-verb agreement is an automatic process in adults, it is expected for them to remember more words than children meanwhile children would recall fewer words when subject and object pronouns mismatched because an important cognitive load is required to make the verb agree with correct pronouns.

The SVO Grid Table uses grid-like tables to help pupils in writing. In the previous study, a compositional grid is used as a learning tool for freshman university students to assist those who have problem with SOV in ESL and their mother tongue language (Koot Van Wyk, 2015). Besides that, in a study by Crealock (1993) the grid model is used for writing skill in helping students to generate ideas, organize thoughts, to start writing and revising once it is written. It seems that whichever studies related to SVO Grid Table require a set of steps for implementing the technique. According to the cognitive theory of Robert Gagne (1965), there were nine levels of learning model that is suitable for teaching and learning. The SVO Grid Table applies Gagne Cognitive theory. The first step is the reception. In this study, the SVO Grid Table itself is meant to attract the attention of the pupils. The grid table indicates that a writing lesson is "about to start". The second step is the expectancy. Having to tell the pupils to the purpose of the grid is important. Each column in the grid has its own purpose, to fill in words as subjects, verbs and objects. The third step is retrieval. This happens when the pupils relate what they have learned previously with the new information. For instance, the pupils use their prior knowledge to fill the subject and object columns but unable to find a suitable vocabulary for column "verb". Hence, the pupils should refer the dictionary to find a suitable verb with correct tenses. The fourth step is selective perception. Once the pupils are able to follow demonstration of the first row of SVO Grid Table, it encourages them to write more, by filling in more columns with suitable subjects, verbs and objects words. The fifth step is the semantic encoding. This is the most important step of the entire learning process. This is because, once the pupils have filled the SVO Grid Table, they are required to transfer their learning into sentences or paragraph writings. It somehow brings the practicality of the grid table into success which is to create a paragraph of sentences. The sixth step is responding. This is where the pupils' work will be checked. The seventh step is reinforcement. The pupils will guide after a few exercises and feedbacks are given on their learning efforts. The eighth step is retrieval. At every exercise given, marks will be given. The score is given on actual performances. If they perform badly, they are asked if there have any difficulties throughout the learning. If they do then, they need to repeat the exercise again to help them in better performances in writing. Lastly, the ninth step is a generalization. This is the step where they are given assessment. It is hoped that the knowledge they have gained is retained and able to transfer in examination with UPSR formats. The whole learning process through Gagne's

learning theory is practical hence pupils could be independent on their own learning once they have acquired the skills and knowledge through this SVO Grid Table technique. Lastly, it is also to see the difference in writing assessment when the SVO Grid Table is used by both experimental and control groups.

Research Questions

The following research questions were formulated to accomplish the study:

- i. Is there any difference in writing assessment when the SVO Grid Table is used by the experimental group?
- ii. Is there any difference in writing assessment when the SVO Grid Table is not used by the control group?

Methodology

Participants

The subjects of this study comprised 10 pupils of second language learners with low proficiency in English. Their medium of language is Bahasa Malaysia and English is used only in class with the interaction of 5 hours per week in class. They may have been exposed to English since 7 years old but when they are transferring from Level 1 to Level 2 of primary school learning, it is found out the transitional learning is not smooth, as there is a huge gap between the CEFR and the KSSR curriculum. Moreover, the choice of vocabularies presented in learning materials such as the textbook is more complex. The participants were selected through purposive sampling and are assigned to control and experimental groups respectively. This was to adhere to a shorter period of implementing the technique which is in 2 months time.

Instruments of the Study

To collect the data required, two assessments were employed. The first assessment was in March. This is to get the individual performances on writing before any techniques were taught. Then, the second assessment was in May. This is after the SVO Grid Table technique was employed to the experimental group.

Procedure

Pilot Study

A pilot study was carried out with 10 pupils of low proficiency of second language learners before the main phase of the study for the SVO Grid Table to be employed and taught during the main research. The participants were taught using the chalk and talk technique from January to March. Then, in March, they were given an assessment to get their individual performances on English writing. During the study, two groups were selected and both groups are given an equal amount of teaching on vocabulary. The vocabularies learned was either guided by the teacher or searched by themselves through a dictionary.

Main Study

The main study was carried out with 10 pupils of low proficiency of second language learners. The study was carried after the implementation of the March assessment. The period allocated for both control and experimental groups was the same which was approximately in 2 months. Below were the steps in administering the study:

Pre-test: A pre-test was administered 2 months after teaching and learning in January and February. The test was called the March assessment and it was done before commencing the main study to both control and experimental groups. Throughout the pre-test, the teacher used chalk and talk technique in writing essays. The pupils depend on the dictionary or their teacher for any unfamiliar vocabularies. Furthermore, they were routine to read samples of essay and at times copied them into their exercise books. Then, when they were familiar with the content of the essay, they were guided to change or substitute words so the essay sounded more like theirs. After that, in March, their performance was measured through March assessment and marks were recorded.

Control Group: The control group was observed within two months after the March assessment was administered. Within April until May, all the 5 participants continued with the chalk and talk learning. The technique was followed until another test in May was administered.

Experimental group: The experimental group was observed in the same period as the control group. Within April until May, they were routined to the following steps of SVO Grid Table.

1. Pupils were introduced to the format of the SVO grid table.
2. Pupils were briefed on how to fill in the subject, verb and object columns.
3. Pupils studied the given stimulus. Then, they recalled the vocabularies to fill in any columns that they knew. Any columns that were unable to fill in was assisted by the teacher or by themselves through the use of a dictionary.
4. The pupils wrote in rows of the SVO grid table according to the given stimulus.
5. The pupils transferred what they had written into sentences or paragraph writing.
6. The pupils' works were checked.
7. Feedback was given by the teacher. The whole steps 1 until 7 were repeated again until they were ready for the May assessment
8. Exercises were checked and scores were given. This was meant to check their learning progress and the result of the control and experimental group was compared.
9. The May assessment was administered as post-test.

Research Findings and Discussion

Findings

To analysed the data, the marks for March and May assessment was compared. The following Table 1 showed the marks for both control and experimental groups. Note that the performances were by the low proficient pupils who were still learning and struggling in the English.

Table 1:

The marks for March assessment and May assessment for the experimental group

Participant	March assessment	May assessment
1	18	48
2	14	46
3	15	48
4	14	46
5	16	48

The following data were analysed from the experimental group. Table 1 showed the marks for participants 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5 for their March and May assessment. Participant 1 scored 18 for March assessment and later passed the May assessment with 48 marks. Participant 2 scored 14 during March assessment and later passed at 46 marks for May assessment. Participant 3 scored 15 in the previous March assessment and later passed with 48 marks for May assessment. Participant 4 scored 14 in March assessment and later scored 46 for May assessment. Finally, participant 4 scored 16 in last March assessment and later passed 48 marks in May assessment.

Table 2:

The marks for March assessment and May assessment for the control group

Participant	March assessment	May assessment
1	14	32
2	13	33
3	18	36
4	18	36
5	12	29

The following data showed that participant 1 in the control group scored 14 in March assessment and later 32 for May assessment. Next, participant 2 scored 13 in March assessment and later 33 for May assessment. Meanwhile, the third and fourth participants scored 18 for the March assessment and later scored 36 for May assessment. Lastly, the fifth participant scored 12 for March assessment and later 29 in May assessment.

Discussion

Based on the findings, it answered the first research question, concerning the difference in writing assessment when the SVO Grid Table is used by the experimental group. After the implementation of the March assessment, most pupils scored below 20 marks. This was after 2 months of learning in January and February. Later, after the March assessment, the pupils were taught as control and experimental groups for about 2 months. The findings showed that pupils in the experimental group had differences in their May assessment marks. The marks were increased fairly and 5 of them passed with minimum marks. It was the first achievement for them after failing the March assessment. The SVO Grid Table has helped these participants to generate ideas, write sentences step by step following Gagne's theory and later making success to pass their assessment. It seems that these participants were making their progress slowly but surely. They were able to write with confidence after

numerous exercises and able to notice the mistakes once feedbacks were given. In fact, they were able to avoid simple mistakes like forgetting the articles and prepositions during sentences construction. The whole situation had agreed to Crealock (1993) where he said that the grid model in his study was used for writing skill in helping students to generate ideas, organizing thoughts, to start writing and revising once it is written. With that positive effect, it is hoped the use of SVO Grid Table is continued during lessons and ample time are given until the pupils will be able to write English essay with ease.

Meanwhile, for the second research question, there was a difference when the SVO grid table was not implemented in their group. Their marks did increase for May assessment but still below the passing mark at 40. They were still struggling to generate ideas, unable to identify the tenses of the verb and there were even missing articles and prepositions in their writings. Therefore it showed that though they were guided with the vocabularies content, they still need to be guided in putting their sentences in the pattern. This showed that their cognitive load needed organisational steps so it could be maximised and benefited in their learning. In fact, applying Gagne 9 steps in learning may help their learning cycle becoming practical and intelligent and eventually help them to acquire skills and knowledge in a practical way.

Conclusion and Suggestions

The SVO Grid Table is implemented through Gagne 9 steps which help the low proficiency pupils to be organized in writing. It helps them to develop and bond their prior knowledge with their current understanding and later be able to transfer the information in the form of simple sentences. The process of implementing this writing technique is acceptable by young low proficiency pupils therefore, it is hoped to give better and positive effect in writing skill. Not only that, the use of the SVO Grid Table has helped to motivate these low proficiency to write simple English sentences with subject-verb agreement. It is a prolonged effort by both the pupils and the teacher.

Hence, the research suggests that the SVO Grid Table should be used by other teachers who also having difficulty to teach writing for their low proficient pupils. It is hoped the positive effect from this study would encourage other teachers to try the same writing technique in the next future.

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