



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF
EDUCATION, PSYCHOLOGY
AND COUNSELLING
(IJEPC)

www.ijepec.com



EMBEDDING THE ELEMENT OF FUN IN TEACHING WRITING FOR ESL YOUNG LEARNERS USING BALLOON POPPING TECHNIQUE

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Article Info:

Article history:

Received date: 25.04.2022

Revised date: 20.05.2022

Accepted date: 10.06.2022

Published date: 15.06.2022

To cite this document:

Aziz, M. N. A., Ganasan, M. J., Mahmor, N. A., & Yusoff, N. M. (2022). Embedding The Element Of Fun In Teaching Writing For EsL Young Learners Using Balloon Popping Technique. *International Journal of Education, Psychology and Counseling*, 7 (46), 236-246.

DOI: 10.35631/IJEPC.746019

Abstract:

Teaching English to young learners is an arduous task but a meaningful one too. Teachers of young learners strive to provide fun and engaging instructions in the ESL classrooms as to augment students' language proficiency and development. In the effort to improve students' writing skills, there are a variety of methods that can be used in the classroom. However, mostly teachers adopt the traditional approach of paper and pencil technique which bores the students and lacks fun component in the classroom. To worsen the situation, students writing skills are still at a poor level. As such, this study embarks on a writing project using a balloon popping method which involves kinaesthetic and visual elements in amplifying the opportunity to pick up writing skills in a fun and engaging way. 35 primary school students participated in this study where a pre-test was carried out before the technique was introduced. This technique was carried out for 3 months and a post writing test was held afterwards. The results showed a tremendous increase in the grades where 85% of the students scored 70 marks and above in the post-test as compared to the pre-test scores. A semi-structured interview was also carried out with the group leaders and the teacher who taught them the technique in class. Reflection entries from the teacher were garnered to validate the post-test results. The students and teacher felt that this technique boosts students' learning motivation, injects fun in learning, improves process writing and provides

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platform for alternative assessment. Fun and engaging approach can be used in ESL classes to enhance and assist learning. Future learning modules for students should embed similar economical activities that can be done at home with parents and guardians.

Keywords:

Balloon Popping Method, ESL, Fun Writing, Young Learners

Introduction

English is an important language to be acquired by people in the world, thus, efforts are put to ensure learning and teaching of English is carried out as early as at pre-school level. Various activities are incorporated in the English syllabus at schools to ensure learning takes place and the target language is acquired at a proficient stage. In Malaysia, young learners are children aged 7 to 12 who are studying in the primary school. Teaching of English to young learners is a nationwide effort to escalate and improve students' proficiency in the English language. In relation to the curriculum used in the Malaysian schools, in the year 2017, the Common European Framework for References was adopted into national school English curriculum. With this move, textbooks, learning activities and assessment were also aligned to Cambridge curriculum. This is a great effort from the ministry in ensuring Malaysian students' English proficiency is on par with our neighbouring countries. Even though teachers are strongly encouraged to infuse fun learning in the classroom, they are still a huge number of teachers who religiously depend on the textbook (Manan, 2019). Teachers were aware of the concept of teacher creativity, but several limitations were discovered in actuality (Artini & Padmadewi, 2021). Besides that, teachers are burdened with clerical jobs that restrict them in not having ample time to properly plan lessons (Othman & Sivasubramaniam, 2019) and include creative teaching in the classroom. Relating to the reality of the classroom, Copland et al. (2014) pointed out that among the difficulties in teaching of writing for ESL young learners revolve around grammar, spelling and sentence construction. They added that it was a great challenge to get children to write correctly and another would be writing creatively. On the other hand, Adila Jefiza (2016) added that selecting learning materials for writing with young learners is an arduous task on teachers. It has to be appropriate and some teachers tend to neglect teaching of writing with young learners because it is challenging. In this backdrop, the critical question arises as to how effective and successful teaching and learning practices stand in the English as a Second Language (ESL) writing classroom for young learners. This article attempts to provide evidence from the classroom to show how fun writing activities can be incorporated to promote English language learning among young learners in Malaysia.

Literature Review

Writing Skill

Teaching of writing skill for the English is an arduous task ((Abkar Alkodimi & Mohammed Hassan Al-Ahdal, 2021; Moses & Mohamad, 2019). It involves tedious preparation and steps in ensuring the skill being understood and practiced by learners. Planning good lesson is part of warranting a smooth implementation of the lesson. Hence, a teacher is advised to adopt a good lesson planning strategy in delivering the content to his students (Auerbach et al., 2018). Teachers' views before and after teaching, interactive thoughts and decisions during teaching,

and theories and beliefs are all part of the lesson planning process. Furthermore, students' classroom behaviour, student success and outcomes, instructors' classroom behaviour and outcomes, and the structure of teachers' lesson plans all impact teachers' actions (Jantarach & Soontornwipast, 2018).

Dar and Khan (2015) elucidated that all English teachers teaching pre-school through secondary level were given a new KSSR aligned Common European Framework of Reference, or CEFR, for English language. They added that the new KSSR-aligned curriculum has steadily changed learning and teaching approaches in comprehending English context, making learning more viable and enjoyable. Nonetheless, writing is the most difficult portion of learning English as a second language in school in all four aspects of language development.

Naiman et. al (1978) provided typical characteristics of second language learners as depicted in Figure 1 below. They explained that a positive task-oriented learners possesses high confidence and is willing to embark on challenging task. Meanwhile, an ego involved learner finds it imperative to be successful in learning. There are also learners to find a need for achievement by overcoming difficulties and achieving success. Finally, a learner with high aspiration is ambitious and possess high proficiency in achieving success in learning. These characteristics as explained by Naiman is evident among second language learners and it is the teacher's job to assist them with fun and engaging activities in the classroom to make learning doable and achievable.



Figure 1 : Characteristics of Second Language Learners

Fun Writing Activities

Children must be given authentic writing opportunities. All aspects of the learning process should encourage them to write creatively and provide proper contexts for their development (Bulut, 2017). The goal of writing is to enable learners to communicate their ideas to the readers. This can be materialized if the environment they are writing is non-threatening and supportive. Correspondingly, it is imperative for teachers to provide such platform for ESL learners to practise their writing skills.

Azhima (2020) in her study with young learners suggested art and crafts as one of the best ways to introduce language skills as children's nature is to play. Learning by playing will make them remember concepts easily and it aids in their language development process. In another similar study, Niño and Páez (2018) shared their experience using acrostics, calligrams, comic strips and posters with twenty eight fifth graders in a public school in Colombia in the effort to promote fun writing activities. Their participants exclaimed that they were encouraged to write in English and take varied perspectives on themes of interest because of the benefits of fresh information gained about a variety of topics relevant to their life.

Methodology

In this qualitative study, a school in Penang Island was chosen as the premise for the study because the school bagged home trophies and cash in the English camp competitions in the last three years in Penang. A consent letter was sent out to the school headmaster to request for participation in the study. Besides, the class was also chosen purposively to participate in this study because the teacher used the same writing modules developed by the district language officers for English enhancement project. The class was taught the English writing skill in relation to sentence construction and essay writing using the balloon popping method. All the students who participated in this study gave their consent form which was acknowledged by their guardians and parents as part of abiding by the ethical consideration in this study. Hence, a pre and post-test was carried out to compare students' progress in writing achievement prior and upon completion of this study.

Balloon Popping Method

In every class, the teacher prepared 12 balloons for each group. In each balloon, a sentence strip would be included. When the students popped the balloons, they had to rearrange the sentences to form three meaningful paragraphs based on the pictures given. Total sentences for each group would be 12 sentences comprising an essay of three paragraphs each. While working on the sentences, the students would discuss to coin the sentences into correct and meaningful paragraphs. This technique was carried out in every essay writing lesson for three consecutive months.

Interview with The Group Leaders

The researchers conducted a semi-structured interview with the 7 group leaders. They were asked on the effectiveness of the balloon popping method and how it helped them in learning the writing skills. They were also asked on group collaboration strategy while working on the balloon popping activity and how feedback from friends helped them in improving their writing proficiency.

Interview with the English teacher

The English teacher was also interviewed to understand the views of the teacher and the improvement of the students in her class. Interview protocol focused on the student engagement, collaboration and improvement in the target language.

Reflection from the English Teacher Based on The Lessons

The teacher also wrote reflections based on the lessons after each class. The reflections written by the teacher followed Gibbs Reflective Cycle method where in each reflection, the teacher identified her strength and weaknesses and improved her lessons therewith.

Before the data were analysed, the researchers made sure that codes were assigned categorically to the emerging patterns of data (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Researchers argued and consolidated their opinions with an expert in ESL to avoid bias in interpretation. Upon getting the approval from the expert, the researchers followed strictly comments and queries raised by the expert before sharing the analysis with the teacher and students to confirm the findings. In maintaining standard language in the verbatim (Creswell, 2008), the researchers appointed a translator who had a degree in Bahasa Malaysia and English translation to translate the interview transcripts which were retrieved from the interview sessions with the students. The researchers also worked hand in hand to ensure triangulation of data was correctly done by

integrating findings from all three data sources in this study. The teacher and students' names were changed to help preserve anonymity.

Findings

Table 1 shows the pre and post test results of the students essay writing test.

Students	Pre-Test Results	Post-Test Results
<i>Qhairin</i>	35	70
<i>Swee Eng</i>	30	70
<i>Fatin</i>	35	70
<i>Manju</i>	45	75
<i>Din</i>	70	90
<i>Ila</i>	55	75
<i>Ramesh</i>	55	70
<i>Yani</i>	40	40
<i>Dila</i>	45	80
<i>Fendi</i>	40	75
<i>Wong</i>	35	70
<i>Parthiban</i>	30	75
<i>Siti</i>	35	75
<i>Nisha</i>	55	85
<i>Irhash</i>	60	80
<i>Alex</i>	55	85
<i>Shia Yin</i>	50	70
<i>Zalina</i>	50	70
<i>Fattah</i>	55	65
<i>Azizul</i>	45	70
<i>Ifah</i>	30	65
<i>Tiban</i>	60	85
<i>Eliesa</i>	70	80
<i>Salim</i>	80	90
<i>Kana</i>	55	60
<i>Aliff</i>	45	70
<i>Marwati</i>	40	75
<i>Zarif</i>	40	70
<i>Darin</i>	45	75
<i>Rayyan</i>	40	75
<i>Danish</i>	35	76
<i>Imee</i>	30	70
<i>Hafiza</i>	35	70
<i>Muhammad</i>	60	80
<i>Furqan</i>	75	95

Table 1: Pre and Post Test Results

The table explains that more than 90% of the students were able to score 70% and above in their post-test after they were introduced to the balloon popping method in sentence construction.

Theme 1: Boosting Learning Motivation

Since the English language has always been thought as a killer subject in schools, the students tend to avoid using English and are afraid of learning the subject. With this teaching technique which was embedded with fun while learning, students' motivation towards learning the target language seemed to have increased. Students felt that they were more motivated to learn English and they don't feel shy anymore.

“I think my friends and I can make sentences without mistake because there is so much of help offered in the sentences that teacher already gave in the balloons.” (Leader 2)

“Our group got the least marks earlier but when we do the game a few times in class, our marks improved and we scored the highest marks recently. We feel so good. (Leader 4)

The teachers also felt the same when this technique was introduced to the students. It made the class livelier and more positive noise was coming from the corners of the class.

“In my class, I usually see my students keeping very quiet and I had to probe a lot. But when I introduced balloon popping technique, it does not only create noise (from the balloon) but also my students looked so cheerful. I think it is effective. (Teacher Salmiah)

“Students in Class 5B did perform better in sentence construction activities after I introduced the technique. They are more confident in saying out the sentences too. (Reflection 2)

The teachers also agreed that there was a boost in confidence and motivation in learning English among the students even though they were seen struggling in their proficiency.

Theme 2: Injecting Fun in Learning

All the students mentioned that they had fun blowing the balloons, putting the sentence strips in the balloons and popping them before the sentence strips were arranged to form meaningful sentences.

“Our group got almost all the sentences correct. So happy with this technique that teacher taught us.” (Leader 2)

“I think it is so much of fun to burst the balloon. Class is like party. But a learning party.” (Leader 5)

Active student participation was also mentioned by the teachers during the interview. Students were in jovial mood which encouraged learning the target language in a non-threatening environment.

“I can hear students laugh and cheer. When I asked them if they like this technique, all roar in agreement.” (Teacher Salmiah)

“It is seen as a fun learning in my class when my students were active, and they enjoyed the lesson.” (Reflection 4)

When learning is fun especially for a second language, students will grasp the knowledge much better and in a positive way. It helps them develop the writing skills in a positive and non-threatening environment.

Theme 3: Improving Process Writing

The teacher distinctly explained that there was tremendous improvement in process writing steps among the students with the use of balloon-popping sentence writing technique. It was due to:

“..they must check their work from word level to sentence level. They worked collaboratively in their respective groups.”
(Interview- Teacher Salmiah)

The students also elaborated that they were able to prepare drafts of their work before they share them among their group members prior to submitting the task for evaluation by the teacher.

“We all share our work even though it was not correct. Friends will see our work and continue on it. We will do other paragraphs when everyone in the group got it right.”
(Leader 1)

“I saw some steps of process writing being reinforced in the groups while the students worked on the essay construction. I see editing is done by the little teachers in class. This is a good effort. (Interview – Teacher Salmiah)

Theme 4: Providing Platform for Alternative Assessment

One theme that was striking out the most was that this technique of teaching opened up a new platform for alternative assessment to be embedded in the classroom. Among the variations of alternative assessment that was evident in the analysis were self and peer assessment and immediate feedback from peers.

“I always checked our group’s handwriting and spelling before it was sent to the teacher” (Leader 7)

“I introduced peer assessment indirectly in class where my students have to give marks to other groups.” (Interview – Teacher Salmiah)

The students felt that this form of assessment used in the class was less threatening and more positive in nature as they already felt scared in learning English which has been thought as a killer subject.

“My students said that they were surprised that their friends could award marks just like me. They even double-checked if my scores were the same with what they classmates awarded them with.” (Interview – Teacher Salmiah)

“My friends and I are very poor in English. We are always scared in English class. But when we learn this popping technique, we feel less scared and we enjoy ourselves learning how to write better.” (Leader 1)

The technique introduced by the teacher does not only support learning of the target language but it also inadvertently invites for alternative assessment to be used in the classroom of the 21st century.

The themes are presented in Table 2 as to summarize the findings.

Theme	Description
1	Boosting learning motivation
2	Injecting fun in learning
3	Improving process writing
4	Providing platform for alternative assessment

Table 2: Themes Emerging from The Study

Discussion

The students in this study pointed out that game-like learning activities boosts their motivation to learn. It is indeed the 21st century teaching and learning strategy that is suggested by the Ministry of Education to be incorporated in the classroom. Nand et al. (2019) expounded that using gamification was effective in improving learning objectives with their participants. In this current study, the researchers do not focus on the learning objectives but rather paid closer attention on the balloon popping method which enhanced sentence construction activities.

Since the element of fun is also what Teacher Salmiah advocates, it is clear in this study that it brings positive outcome among the students in acquiring the second language. An-nisa and Suwartono (2020) in an Indonesian school concluded from their study that injecting fun in learning English really assists pupils in having fun while learning the language. It also aids pupils in avoiding language learning monotony and boredom. It is the teacher's creativity that sparks the light to enrich the classroom with a non-threatening environment to allow learning of English to occur in a natural context.

By using the balloon popping method, it has indirectly guided the learners to practice process writing skills which involves pre-writing, editing, reviewing and publishing their work before it was opened to be checked by other members in the class. This is an outstanding finding that emerges from the data whereby in previous studies (Yeung, 2019; Spanou & Zafiri, 2019), process writing was a conscious stage that was predetermined by the teachers when students were working on writing task. On contrary, in this study, the students naturally worked together in their groups to review their work before submitting it to the teacher. Muhammad Noor and Nurahimah (2016) emphasized that their participants were able to improve on their mechanics of writing when process writing was paid attention to.

Another key finding that is worth noting from the study is that using balloon popping method provided room for alternative assessment, precisely peer and self-assessment techniques to be used with the young learners. Since each group member was given a role to exercise in completing the assignment, they dutifully provided immediate feedback to their group members in improving their written assignment before it was handed in. Fathi and Khodabakhsh (2019) elaborated that since their participants were introduced to peer and self-assessment strategies, they were able to intensify their feeling of autonomy, agency, and self-control, which aided them in critically analysing their own written drafts and striving to improve their assignment. It was also interesting to note that in a recent study by Baharom and Shaari (2022), their participants were asked if their assignment were not graded by their teacher but instead their classmates, the responses given were quite surprising. Some of them informed that they would not give their best if it was only assessed by peers. This shows that in Malaysian context, alternative assessment is still in its infancy and more research should be carried out in amplifying the benefits of alternative assessment to the public to supplement them with the correct information on alternative assessment.

Conclusion

Two conclusions can be drawn from this experimental study. Firstly, embedding fun in teaching of writing to young learners is an effort that has been suggested in the CEFR syllabus that is being implemented in schools currently. As such, it is the teachers call to make to fully materialize the aspiration. Secondly, in the effort to promote and accentuate the English language in Malaysian schools, there must be more research conducted to help teachers see that

English can be taught in multiple ways other than just abiding religiously to the textbooks. Pedagogical courses should be conducted periodically to cascade latest trends in teaching of English to young learners so as to produce younger generation who is competent in the English language.

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