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THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THE VAW METHOD TOWARDS THE YEAR FIVE LEARNERS' WRITING

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Abstract

English writing is one of the most essential skills upper primary school learners need to possess especially among the upper primary school learners. However, they often struggle to produce proficient written essays during examinations. The researchers argued that to produce effective writing, learners must enhance their range of vocabulary. This paper sought to investigate how the VAW Method, a writing intensive course, improved learners' writing skills and vocabulary acquisition. This exploratory case study compared two groups of primary school Year Five learners from a primary school in Penampang to determine whether any changes occurred during the writing intervention program conducted online. Data was collected through pre- and post-tests to determine the learners' vocabulary and writing performance based on the score comparisons of both VLT as well as writing. The findings revealed that the VAW Method improved the learners' writing scores. This paper concludes with recommendations for practitioners and suggestions for future research.

Keywords: Vocabulary learning strategies, VLSS, writing strategies

1. Introduction

Writing is considered the most challenging language skill to master because it necessitates sophisticated thinking, creativity, and adherence to proper rules (Zahira et al., 2021). Mastering vocabulary and tenses becomes the primary key to producing good writing. Learners must select appropriate vocabularies to arrange words into sentences and develop them into paragraphs and use a compatible tense to express an event that occurred at a specific time. Many learners struggle with writing English text, especially in written form. For example, they may have difficulty expressing their ideas in writing and completing writing tasks. The learners' difficulties in expressing their ideas in writing are induced by their lack of ability to develop and organize their ideas into a good paragraph (Zahira et al., 2021). In teaching and learning English, many teachers simply assign writing tasks, such as writing about a person's character, and learners quickly focus only on vocabulary and grammar that can be used to complete the task. Learners have difficulty to generate ideas for what they are writing. In light of these concerns, this study sought to investigate the effectiveness of the VAW Method as the intervention program towards the learners' writing improvement by comparing learners' pre- and post-essays, as well as their vocabulary tests results.

The VAW Method is a writing method which was developed by the researchers of this study to aid the Year Five learners in upper primary school levels. This method emphasises writing skills and the importance of vocabulary development as one of the writing components. Figure 1 depicts the researchers' writing method in the current study.
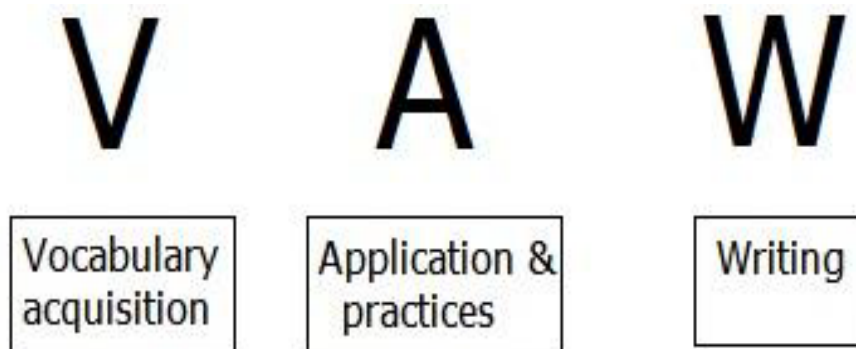

Figure 1. The VAW Method

In relation to the current study, the pandemic situation has impacted many Malaysian schools, forcing them to shift to online learning. As a result, the researchers developed a programme that can be used through online teaching and learning rather than establishing it in a classroom setting. It can still be useful even if the pandemic ends in the future. Even though the teacher will provide proper teaching and guidance via the online platform, learners will complete their writing tasks at home on their own, and there is a need to design the self-study method. The self-study method can provide learners with the advantage of easily comprehending the VAW Method because it includes both synchronous and asynchronous learning.

Although the researchers' study is multi-method, this paper only answers one part of the study, which is the writing scores and vocabulary levels as they affect the writing scores of Year Five learners. The writing data is measured by essay grading, which has become standard among all English teachers in Malaysia. The researchers chose topics related to examination questions prepared in accordance with the Malaysian Ministry of Education (MOE) standards. Meanwhile, the vocabulary level is evaluated using the Vocabulary Level Test (VLT), which is the closest instrument to a standardised vocabulary test currently available (Ebrahimi, 2017). In general, the VLT is used to assess receptive vocabulary knowledge at the lexical-level. The test is applicable to word-class category levels such as academic terms in 2000, 3000, 5000, and so on, with each level having 30 items (Susanto, 2017).

2. Problem Statement

Writing is presumed to be the most challenging skill for language learners to learn, despite its importance, as it involves the creative process of expressing one's thoughts, and using standard forms of grammar, syntax, and vocabulary (Yusuf et al., 2019). The issue of low literacy attainment in English among Malaysian learners has been thoroughly researched. A review of research on English language learning in Malaysian schools unveils that the great influence of the national language, Bahasa Malaysia, is one of the major obstacles to learning English (Jalaludin et al., 2008). Others have pinned Malaysian learners' poor performance of learners with the acquisition of English language proficiency to what they have rightly specified "privileged examination" (Koo, 2008, p. 56). Learners who emerge from the school framework as in those who pass exams and advance to tertiary level without the ability to interact in English language fruitfully (Musa et al., 2012). Thus, this study aims to help the Year Five learners to improve their writing performance.

The researchers argued that the element of vocabulary should be prioritised in improving learners' writing performance. Nonetheless, previous research has shown that a lack of vocabulary knowledge causes L2 learners to struggle with writing (Chew-Wei, 2017). All whilst, vocabulary is also important in improving writing quality (Solati-Dehkordi & Salehi, 2016), as it represents one of the key factors that could optimise learners' proficiency levels. Learners in the Malaysian primary school context appear to lack opportunities for learning English (Razali et al., 2017), which limits their ability to learn English vocabulary and forces them to rely on translation. According to Rosidawati and Parilah (2016), not all learners can comprehend the meaning of new words and memorise them, leading to one of the linguistic issues that learners encounter when writing: a lack of appropriate and diverse vocabulary.

Furthermore, teachers are expected to be mediators of the teaching and learning process in the classroom, as stated in the Malaysian Education Blueprint 2013-2025 (MOE). Teachers must recognize the major part of learners' writing strategies in order to formulate and schedule practical lessons that are relevant to the learners' competency level (Bangkam & Hashim, 2020). Effective language learners understand their own learning strategies and why they use them (Hardan, 2013; Melor & Siti Sukainah, 2014). The researchers employed a method and intervention programme that can instruct and guide the learners in the current study. Cole and Feng (2015) stated that writing has always been regarded as an important skill in English language acquisition due to the fact that it reinforces grammatical structures and

vocabulary that educators strive to teach their students. Therefore, to be an effective writer with a high writing level, a learner must have good grammar and a broad vocabulary.

In the current study, the researchers also aimed to identify the writing strategies used by high achievers to be used as input in the development of the VAW Method. Raoofi et al. (2014) conducted research on university students' L2 writing strategies in their qualitative study. The goals were to explore writing strategies and identify Malaysian ESL writers' writing strategies (English as a second language) college students at different levels of proficiency. They utilised interviews as the data collection instrument in this study. In data analysis, they employed a typology based on Mu's (2005) taxonomy of L2 writing strategies. The first finding revealed that the learners used various writing strategies. As a result, all participants engaged in pre-writing activities. High achiever writers indicated utilising more metacognitive strategies such as organising ideas as well as revising content than low achievers.

According to a study conducted by Weng et al. (2016) on the effective Language Learning Strategies (LLS) used by successful Year Five ESL learners in Mukah, Sarawak, learners from rural areas choose to take class notes in their first language or Malay language, which they anticipate will assist them grasp the target language better. This demonstrated how most L2 learners still rely on their L1 to complete writing tasks. When compared to native speakers, L2 learners should be regarded as multicompetent language users as opposed to inadequate L2 users, based on the belief that the L1 and L2 coexist collectively in the learner (Cook, 1999, 2001; Scott & De la Fuente, 2008).

3. Research Question

i. This study centralised on measuring the effectiveness of the VAW Method towards the Year Five learners in a primary school. The following is the research question of the current study:

ii. "Does the VAW Method significantly affect the Year Five learners' writing scores in their English writing?"

4. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to see if the VAW Method could positively affect the writing abilities of primary school learners. The preferences of post-UPSR learners, especially high achievers, for vocabulary learning and writing strategies, were used as input. These post-UPSR learners have completed primary school and are now enrolled in secondary school as Form One learners. They should be aware of the learning strategies that have enabled them to achieve good results on the UPSR English writing paper.

5. Research Methods

This study centralised on measuring the effectiveness of the VAW Method towards the Year Five learners in a primary school.

5.1. Research design

This exploratory practise case research compared two groups of Year Five learners at a primary school in Penampang, Sabah.

5.2. Research participants

In this study, the researchers used purposive sampling, which means that the sample was chosen to fit a specific profile. The researchers chose 30 subjects from a primary school, aged between ten and eleven as the experimental group and 30 subjects from the same school as the control group. The most important selection criteria for the case study group was their access to digital tools, such as a computer or laptop, a mobile phone, and the internet, as this intervention would be executed online. Prior to the intervention, all 30 subjects in the experimental group and 30 in the control group were assessed in terms of vocabulary acquisition and writing composition using a pre-test, followed by a post-test after the intervention. The researchers intend to assess the VAW Method's effectiveness in improving written productions after accounting for the strategies preferred by high achievers. The writing scores will determine the success of the VAW Method programme. Pre- and post-tests were administered online before and after the intervention to collect data on the samples' vocabulary size and level of written production.

5.3. Data collection

The instruments used for data collection were the pre- and post-tests for vocabulary and writing. The vocabulary and writing pre-tests were administered prior to the intervention, and both post-tests were administered after the intervention. Both tests were conducted independently through an online platform, with a total of 60 learners taking part. Learners were given thirty minutes to complete the Vocabulary Level Test (VLT) and an hour to complete the writing test. The vocabulary level was assessed using the Vocabulary Level Test (VLT), which was adapted from Wang and Yamat (2019) version of Nation's Vocabulary Levels Test (1983). The adapted test was created based on the upper primary school's English syllabus for the Standard-Based Curriculum and consists of three sections. Section 1 concentrated on adjective words, Section 2 on nouns, and Section 3 on verbs. The writing scores would reveal the learners' writing ability. The researchers have decided to use the UPSR English Paper II scoring scheme, which is commonly used in Malaysia.

5.4. Data analysis

The VLT papers were collected and graded, with the results becoming available immediately after the test. The data was then analysed using the SPSS statistics software programme. The writing test were assessed and checked to obtain results based on the specified rubric, which were then recorded and tabulated in SPSS.

5.5. Procedures

By referring to the procedures of the VAW Method Program (Figure 2), questionnaires were used in the early stage to collect information about the post-UPSR learners' vocabulary learning and writing strategies to determine their learning preferences. Based on the analysis of the questionnaires, the VAW Method was then developed. During the writing process, the Year Five learners in primary schools, who constituted the next sample of the study, used the VAW Method that was created based on the suggested strategies generated by the questionnaire analysis. The following procedures of the VAW Method Program would explain the path of the current study.
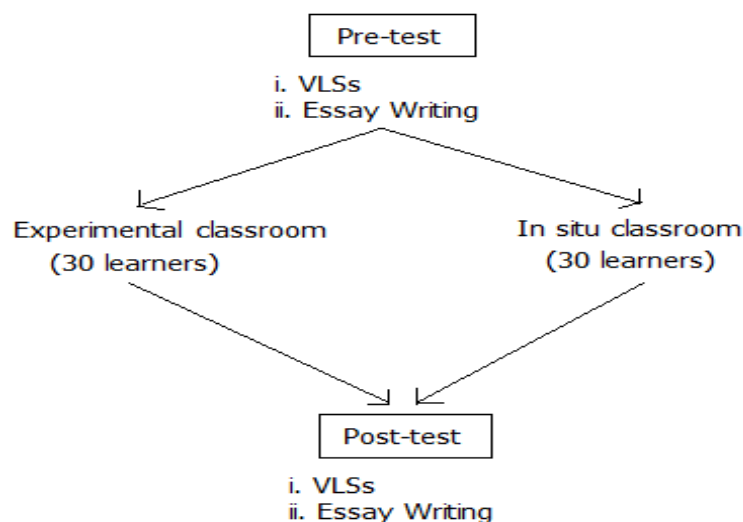

Figure 2. Procedures of the VAW Method Program

Thirty learners participated in the online experimental classroom, while the in-situ group learned in another online classroom. The pre- and post-tests were administered before and after the teaching and learning sessions, including vocabulary learning strategies (VLS) and essay writing tests. The tests evaluated learners' vocabulary and writing abilities before and after the implementation of the VAW Method program. To ensure that the performance levels could be reasonably evaluated and compared, the questions used for both aspects were exactly equivalent.

Regarding the teaching and learning execution, the 20-hour intervention sessions were conducted online using the VAW Method Program. The in-situ classroom focusing on writing practices was implemented within two weeks to complete the same duration. The in-situ lessons focused on getting learners to practise writing without using the VAW Method but instead focused on techniques commonly used in traditional classrooms, such as vocabulary learning, grammar, sentence building, and essay writing. The experimental classroom, on the other hand, also focused on these elements (vocabulary learning, grammar, sentence building, and essay writing) but used the VAW Method as the writing instructional tool throughout the process.

6. Findings

Pre- and post-tests are used to assess knowledge gained from a training course. The results of pre- and post-tests were displayed in this section.

6.1. Vocabulary level test (VLT)

According to Table 1, the Mann-Whitney test is used to determine the significance of a comparison between experimental and control data for VLT data. The significant result is the Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed) less than 0.05, as shown in the table. Because the P-value=0.000 is less than the level of significance (a) = 0.05 which states that there is no significant difference between the experimental and control groups. This also suggests that the effect exists in the population, as presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Mann-Whitney Test

	Ranks			
	Group	N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
	Experimental	30	15.57	467.00
Difference	Control	30	45.43	1363.00
	Total	60		
	Test Statistics[a]			
				Difference
	Mann-Whitney U			2.000
	Wilcoxon W			467.000
	Z			-6.751
	Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)			0.000

a. Grouping Variable: Group

6.2. Essays

Since the normality check for the essay data indicates that the data are normally distributed, the sample t-test is used to compare the two groups, experimental and control. According to Table 2, the t-test result compares the means of the experimental and control groups. The above result indicates that the result is significant, with a p-value/sig. (2-tailed) less than 0.05. In summary, the variables used to compare group means show a significant value. It means that the group's mean is significantly different between the experimental and control groups in this study (refer Table 2).

Table 2. T-test

	Group statistics				
	Group	N	Mean	Std. deviation	Std. error mean
	Experimental	30	-8.0000	3.10728	0.56731
Difference	Control	30	-4.0667	2.13240	0.38932
	Independent samples test				
	Levene's test for equality of variances		t-test for equality of means		

		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean difference	Std. error difference	95% confidence interval of the difference	
									Lower	Upper
Difference	Equal variances assumed	3.287	0.075	-5.717	58	0.000	-3.93333	0.68805	-5.31061	-2.55606
	Equal variances not assumed			-5.717	51.357	0.000	-3.93333	0.68805	-5.31441	-2.55225

7. Conclusions

The VAW Method used in the intervention program by the Year Five learners in a primary school in Penampang, which being tested and compared between control and experimental groups in the pre- and post-tests, to answer research question for the current study. Essentially, the VAW Method emphasises techniques that are relevant to the case of teaching ESL writing in Malaysian English education, as well as approaching the best strategies that have been effectively proven by high achievers from previous language users or learners. The current study concluded that the VAW Method effectively helped Year Five learners improve their vocabulary and writing performances based on the findings.

It is suggested that future research look into the causes of vocabulary learning problems in depth. Future research may also look into teachers' perspectives on the instructional methods they use in language classrooms and the challenges they face when teaching vocabulary to learners. This study, hopefully, will increase awareness among learners, recognize the value of learning vocabulary and writing, and encourage not only educators but also learners to resolve their problems by approaching the proposed strategies. This study also suggests that Year Five English teachers and learners collaborate to find any and all means of assisting learners in expanding their vocabulary knowledge and improving their writing performances.

Acknowledgments

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