STRETCH THAT THOUGHT

Nurul Hijah Jasman[1],*Nadzrah Sa'adan[1], Hawa Syamsina Md Supie[1], Muhamad Irfan Mokhtar[1] & Norhafizah Amir[1]

[1] Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), Johor Branch, Pasir Gudang Campus, Malaysia

*Corresponding author: nurulhijah@uitm.edu.my

ABSTRACT

Despite years of formal English instruction, many Malaysian ESL learners, particularly UiTM students, continue to struggle with idea generation, paragraph organisation, and coherent argument development. These difficulties are further intensified by writing anxiety, including fear of negative evaluation and low self-efficacy, which affect writing performance and task completion. Consequently, students often produce short and underdeveloped essays that do not fully demonstrate their understanding. To address this gap, **Stretch That Thought** was developed as an innovative learning kit that supports effective writing development through a structured, game-based approach. Unlike traditional vocabulary activities, the kit integrates a lexical chunk system specifically designed for paragraph development. It includes scaffolded cards for introduction, body, and conclusion paragraphs, guiding students to expand ideas through prompts such as topic sentences, supporting details, examples, and concluding statements. The Calm Card component further supports learners by incorporating pre-writing strategies to reduce anxiety. Through progressive scaffolding, students gradually transition from guided writing to independent writing. Its interactive format promotes engagement and collaboration, making it suitable for mixed-ability classrooms. Ultimately, Stretch That Thought enhances idea development while fostering more confident, independent, and effective writers.

KEYWORDS: ESL Writing Development, Game-Based Learning, Lexical Chunking, Paragraph Construction, Writing Anxiety

PROBLEM AND OBJECTIVE

Writing is one of the most challenging skills for ESL learners as it requires generating ideas, organising information, and expressing thoughts effectively. Research shows that many learners struggle more with idea development and organisation than grammar accuracy (Siu et al., 2024). As a result, students often produce short essays because they cannot expand their ideas into well-structured paragraphs. Writing anxiety further affects performance by reducing text complexity, limiting working memory, and lowering writing quality (Zhang, 2023). Fear of evaluation, lack of confidence, and difficulty expressing ideas in English also contribute to writing anxiety, highlighting both the cognitive and psychological challenges of writing (Yu & Zhou, 2022).

Many existing writing materials focus on grammar exercises, vocabulary learning, or model essays, but they do not explicitly teach students how to expand ideas step by step. Furthermore,

writing instruction often focuses on cognitive skills but does not address emotional factors such as anxiety and confidence. Therefore, there is a need for a teaching tool that supports both paragraph development and writing confidence.

The objectives of Stretch That Thought are:

1. To help students generate and expand ideas in paragraph writing. To guide students in organising paragraphs systematically.
2. To reduce writing anxiety through supportive writing strategies.
3. To increase students' confidence and independence in writing.

DESIGN DESCRIPTION

Stretch That Thought is a structured learning kit designed to help ESL learners develop paragraphs more effectively while reducing writing anxiety. It supports students in generating ideas, organising paragraphs, and expanding ideas systematically, as many ESL learners struggle more with idea development than grammar accuracy (Siu et al., 2024). The kit includes Introduction, Body Paragraph, Conclusion, Connector, and Calm Cards, each containing guided prompts, sentence starters, and lexical chunks to help students construct and expand paragraphs. The colour-coded cards also enhance understanding of paragraph structure.

The kit is used through a step-by-step paragraph-building process. Students first choose a topic, then use the Introduction Cards, followed by the Body Paragraph Cards to develop topic sentences, supporting details, explanations, and examples, before completing their essays with the Conclusion Cards. Prior to writing, students may use the Calm Cards, which provide planning strategies, brainstorming prompts, and positive self-instructions to reduce anxiety and encourage confident writing. Since writing performance is influenced by emotional factors such as anxiety and self-efficacy (Waked et al., 2023), the kit addresses both cognitive and affective aspects of writing.

Stretch That Thought is suitable for secondary, college, and university ESL learners, particularly in mixed-ability classrooms through progressive scaffolding. Weaker students benefit from guided support, while advanced learners gradually write more independently. Its unique strength lies in integrating paragraph scaffolding, lexical chunk learning, and anxiety-reduction strategies into one interactive, game-based kit that promotes idea expansion, student engagement, motivation, and independent writing.

VISUALS



Figure 1: Toolkit cover

The toolkit operates through a four-step instructional sequence:

1. Theme and Topic Selection



Figure 2: Themes

Learners engage in an element of gamification by spinning a wheel to determine a discussion theme. Based on the selected theme (Figure 2), the instructor assigns a relevant essay topic aligned with specific writing genres (e.g., descriptive, narrative, argumentative). This ensures variety while maintaining alignment with learning objectives.

2. Calm and Prepare

To reduce writing anxiety and improve cognitive readiness, learners select a Calm Card (Figure 3) featuring pre-writing relaxation techniques. The class performs the chosen activity collectively, fostering a focused and supportive learning environment before writing begins.

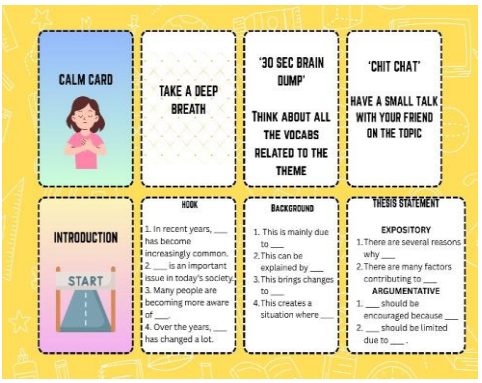


Figure 3: Calm and Prepare Cards

3. Body Paragraph Development

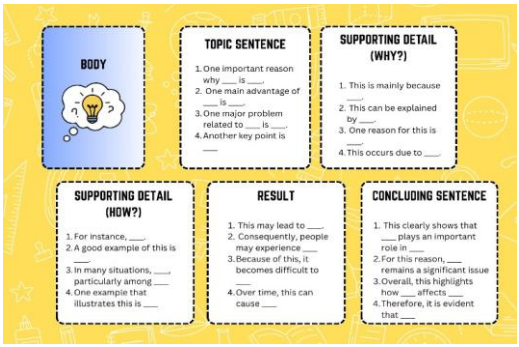


Figure 4: Body Paragraph Development Cards

Learners draw a Body Card (Figure 4) containing scaffolded sentence structures. Using these guided prompts, learners construct paragraphs by filling in key ideas related to the assigned topic. This step emphasizes idea organization, coherence, and the use of discourse markers.

4. Closing Construction

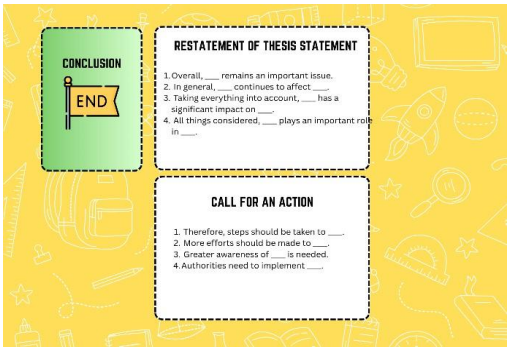


Figure 5: Concluding Paragraph Cards

Learners then draw a Closing Card (Figure 5) to complete the essay. With the help of scaffolded phrases, they formulate concluding sentences that effectively summarise and reinforce their main ideas.

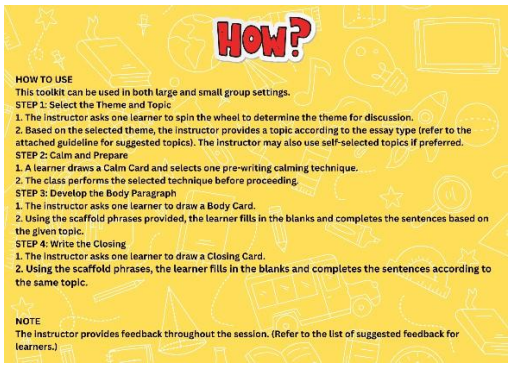


Figure 6: How to Play

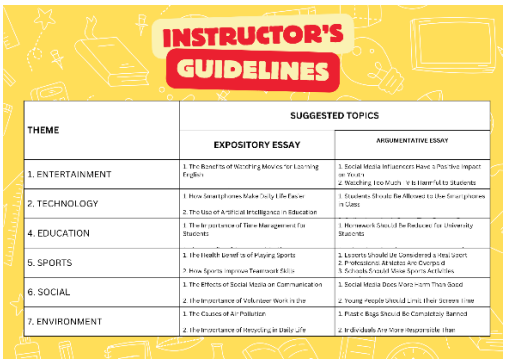


Figure 7: Instructor's Guidelines

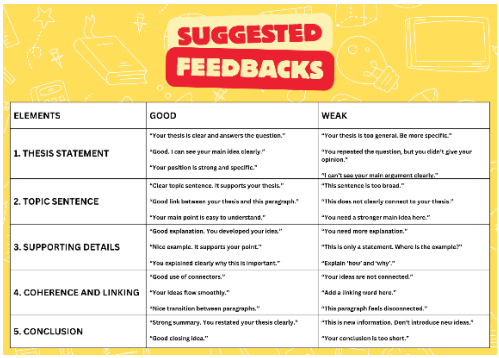


Figure 8: Suggested Feedbacks

In addition to the activity materials, the toolkit also includes a "How to Play" guide (Figure 6), which provides clear instructions for conducting each stage of the activity, ensuring consistency and ease of use. It is further supported by instructor guidelines (Figure 7) that assist teachers in selecting topics, managing classroom interaction, and adapting the activity to different proficiency levels. To enhance learning outcomes, the toolkit also offers suggested feedback (Figure 8), enabling instructors to provide structured written corrective feedback on language use, content development, and organization.

NOVELTY AND UNIQUENESS

The novelty of Stretch That Thought lies in its integration of paragraph scaffolding, lexical chunk learning, and writing anxiety reduction strategies in a single learning kit. Many existing writing materials focus primarily on grammar exercises, vocabulary lists, or model essays, but they do not explicitly teach students how to expand ideas into structured paragraphs step by step. Recent research has shown that effective writing instruction should support both cognitive processes such as idea organisation and linguistic development, as well as affective factors such as motivation, confidence, and anxiety (Teng, 2022).

Writing self-efficacy and emotional factors significantly influence students' writing performance and engagement (Bruning et al., 2023). However, many classroom writing tools focus primarily on language accuracy and essay structure while overlooking students' emotional readiness. Stretch That Thought addresses this gap by combining structured paragraph development with anxiety-reduction strategies through its Calm Card component. Its game-based, interactive format promotes active learning, motivation, participation, and collaboration, particularly in language learning contexts (Plass

et al., 2022). The kit also employs progressive scaffolding, enabling students to transition gradually from guided to independent writing. Suitable for mixed-ability and learner-centred classrooms, Stretch That Thought functions as a comprehensive learning support system that addresses both the cognitive and affective dimensions of writing development.

BENEFITS TO MANKIND

Improving students' writing ability is important because writing is a key skill for academic success, workplace communication, and knowledge development. This learning kit helps learners overcome common writing difficulties such as generating ideas, organising paragraphs, and developing supporting details. By providing structured guidance and interactive learning, the kit helps students become more confident and independent writers. It also supports teachers by providing a practical tool to teach paragraph writing more effectively in mixed-ability classrooms. In the long term, improving students' writing skills can enhance academic success, communication skills, and employability, as writing is an essential skill in higher education and the workplace.

COMMERCIAL POTENTIAL

The product has strong potential in the education market, particularly in ESL classrooms, writing courses, and language learning centres. It can be commercialised as a physical classroom kit, printable teaching materials, or a digital learning application. One competitive advantage is its focus on paragraph development and writing anxiety, which are often not directly addressed in existing grammar-focused writing materials. It is also scalable because it can be adapted for different proficiency levels, from secondary school to university students. Possible business models include educational kit, teacher training workshops, and digital learning subscriptions.

CONCLUSION

In summary, this innovation addresses common writing challenges faced by ESL learners, particularly difficulties in idea generation, paragraph organisation, and writing anxiety. By combining scaffolded paragraph development, lexical chunk support, and anxiety-reduction strategies, the kit provides a structured and supportive approach to writing instruction. The interactive and game-based format also helps increase student engagement and participation in writing activities. With further development, the innovation can be expanded into digital learning platforms, mobile applications, and teacher training modules, allowing wider implementation in different educational settings.

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