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FRAME BY FRAME: EMPOWERING ESL LEARNERS THROUGH VISUAL WRITING

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the use of storyboard templates as a visual learning tool to support ESL students in writing the CEFR-aligned PT3 English Essay (Part 1). Storyboarding allows students to visualize, plan, and organize their ideas in sequence, helping them write with greater confidence, creativity, and clarity. Rooted in cognitive and constructivist learning theories, and aligned with the multiliteracies approach, the method promotes student-centered, multimodal engagement. A qualitative research design was employed using semi-structured interviews to investigate students' perceptions and the impact of storyboard use on their writing process. Thematic analysis of the data revealed three major themes: (1) improved writing skills in terms of structure and fluency, (2) enhanced confidence and time management, and (3) mixed reactions toward the fixed visuals and limited writing space. While many students appreciated the storyboard's guidance, others expressed a desire for more creative freedom. Nevertheless, most acknowledged its usefulness in supporting idea development and essay planning. Some students even recommended its application in other subjects, such as Malay Language and History. This research highlights the pedagogical value of visual tools in language instruction and suggests that storyboarding offers a practical, accessible shift from traditional text-heavy approaches to a more engaging, student-focused writing model.

Keywords: *ESL writing, storyboard technique, CEFR PT3, visual literacy, student perspectives*

INTRODUCTION

Writing is widely regarded as the most challenging of the four language skills for English as a Second Language (ESL) learners in Malaysia. It demands not only linguistic accuracy but also the ability to generate, organize, and express ideas clearly. Despite years of English instruction, many secondary school students continue to struggle, particularly with the CEFR-aligned PT3 Essay Part 1, which tests narrative and descriptive writing (Alih et al., 2021). Among the contributing factors are limited vocabulary, weak grammatical knowledge, and a lack of effective writing strategies (Fareed et al., 2016). To address this challenge, this study introduces the storyboard technique, a visual-based learning strategy designed to support idea generation and organization through sequenced images.

Storyboards offer a multimodal approach that helps learners translate visual cues into structured written narratives, making writing more accessible, engaging, and less intimidating (Hasan & Wijaya, 2016; Shabiralyani et al., 2015). This method aligns with cognitive and constructivist learning theories, which emphasize the importance of activating prior knowledge and constructing meaning through learner-centered activities (Smeda et al., 2014).

The existing literature highlights the persistent nature of ESL writing difficulties and identifies several strategies that have shown promise in improving writing performance. Techniques such as brainwriting (Yulianti et al., 2019), Language Learning Strategies (LLS) (Kakoty, 2020), and visual aids (Sakkir, 2020) have been found effective in enhancing both learner engagement and writing outcomes. In particular, visual strategies like storyboarding have demonstrated the potential to increase students' motivation, support vocabulary development, and improve overall writing fluency (Gutiérrez et al., 2015). Research shows that storyboarding fosters critical thinking, creativity, and collaboration, especially among learners in rural or low-proficiency contexts where exposure to English is limited (Gobel et al., 2013; Ler, 2012). Studies also confirm that the technique enhances syntactic complexity, writing confidence, and classroom participation, compared to more traditional, text-heavy instructional methods (Uematsu, 2012). Moreover, storyboarding allows for differentiated learning experiences, making it suitable for students with varied learning styles and needs.

In this study, a qualitative approach was employed to explore ESL students' perceptions and experiences with the storyboard technique. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with selected students to examine the impact of using storyboard templates in writing CEFR PT3 Essay Part 1. The data were analyzed thematically to identify recurring patterns, benefits, and challenges associated with this strategy. This research aims to contribute to the growing body of evidence supporting multimodal learning tools in ESL education. While the findings are based on a small sample and limited geographic context, they are expected to offer valuable insights for educators seeking more effective, student-centered approaches to teaching writing. By exploring how storyboards influence students' writing processes and confidence, the study highlights the potential of visual-based instruction to transform the ESL writing classroom and bridge the gap between visual thinking and textual expression.

METHODS

This qualitative study was conducted at a secondary school in Kulai, Johor, Malaysia, where Malay is the primary medium of instruction. English is taught five times per week, with two periods allocated specifically for CEFR PT3 writing lessons. The focus of the writing assessment is divided into two parts, aligned with A2 and B1 CEFR levels. Purposive sampling was used to select three ESL students from Form 2 Camar based on their writing proficiency levels, as measured by their CEFR PT3 Essay Part 1 scores in a recent school assessment (UPK1). The selected participants represented A2 to B1 proficiency levels, ensuring relevance to the research objective of exploring perceptions and impacts of storyboard use in writing instruction. Semi-structured interviews served as the main data collection tool, allowing flexibility in question delivery while maintaining consistency across respondents. Each participant was interviewed individually for approximately 25–30 minutes after school, with parental and school consent. A total of 31 interview questions were prepared, categorized under five themes:

introduction, perceptions of storyboard use, impacts on writing performance, challenges, and conclusion. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, involving segmentation, categorization, and relinking of interview transcripts to identify recurring themes and patterns. Initial themes were drawn from the interview structure and refined through multiple readings of the transcriptions. Ethical procedures were strictly followed. Participants were informed of the study's purpose, ensured confidentiality, and provided written consent. Participation was voluntary, and respondents retained the right to withdraw at any point. Interview recordings were securely stored and used solely for research purposes. This methodology aimed to gain meaningful insights into the effects of storyboard techniques on ESL learners' writing proficiency within a real classroom context.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study explored ESL students' perceptions and the impact of using the storyboard technique to enhance their writing proficiency in CEFR PT3 Essay Part 1. Through semi-structured interviews with three students, several key themes emerged, reflecting both the benefits and challenges of implementing storyboard-based writing instruction. All participants initially identified writing as the most difficult English language skill due to grammar issues, limited vocabulary, and difficulty in generating ideas. However, their perceptions shifted positively after being introduced to the storyboard. Students reported that the visual prompts helped them understand essay structure more clearly, organize their thoughts, and manage their time more effectively during writing tasks. The use of pictures as a visual guide was particularly helpful in reducing planning time and building confidence, especially in a high-stakes writing context. The visual prompts helped them better understand essay structure, organize ideas, and manage their writing time more effectively—especially for CEFR Part 1. These results align with previous research highlighting the effectiveness of visual aids in enhancing comprehension and writing performance (Hasan & Wijaya, 2016; Gutiérrez et al., 2015).

Despite these positive effects, the students also expressed certain limitations. One recurring concern was the restricted writing space provided in the storyboard template, which limited their ability to elaborate or expand on their ideas. Moreover, some students felt creatively constrained when their own ideas did not align with the sequence or content of the storyboard images. Additionally, unfamiliar or unclear pictures posed further challenges, especially for students with limited vocabulary who struggled to describe the visuals in English. These difficulties were compounded by their tendency to translate from Malay to English, leading to further hesitation or confusion during the writing process.

The impacts of using storyboards in the ESL classroom were categorized into three areas: advantages, disadvantages, and challenges. Among the advantages, students showed improvement in writing structure, idea development, and overall engagement. They appreciated how the visuals provided direction and helped them stay focused. The disadvantages, however, stemmed from the lack of flexibility in idea expression and the difficulty in interpreting certain visuals, which sometimes hindered the writing process. Challenges were primarily related to the physical constraints of the template (e.g., limited space) and the need for clearer, culturally relevant images to ensure comprehension.

In summary, the storyboard technique was perceived as both a supportive and restrictive tool. It helped students write more efficiently and with clearer structure, but it also limited creativity when the visuals or format did not match students' intended content. The study concludes that while storyboard is a useful instructional tool for improving ESL writing, its effectiveness depends significantly on thoughtful implementation—particularly in the selection of visuals and the design of the template. Students suggested extending storyboard use to other parts of the English exam, and even to subjects like Bahasa Melayu and History, where visual prompts could similarly aid comprehension and idea development- suggesting cross-disciplinary benefits (Martikainen, 2017).

CONCLUSION

This study examined ESL students' perceptions and the impact of using storyboard techniques for writing CEFR PT3 Essay Part 1. The findings revealed both positive and negative responses. Students found storyboards helpful for organizing ideas, understanding essay structure, and improving time management. The visuals acted as a guide, allowing them to generate ideas more easily and focus their writing efforts. These results support prior studies that show visual aids enhance comprehension and writing fluency by providing a clear and engaging structure. However, limitations were also noted. Students expressed frustration with the restricted writing space in the storyboard template and the lack of freedom to express personal ideas. Some felt constrained when their thoughts did not align with the pictures, and unfamiliar visuals made it difficult to find the right words due to limited vocabulary. These challenges align with previous research indicating that a lack of vocabulary and inappropriate image selection can impede writing performance.

Despite these drawbacks, students were optimistic about the method's broader application. They suggested that storyboards could benefit not only English classes but also subjects like Malay Language and History. The study demonstrates that integrating visuals can enhance student engagement, creativity, and narrative skills across subjects. This research contributes to a growing body of literature advocating for multimodal learning. It encourages educators to shift from traditional instruction to visual-based approaches that are more inclusive and engaging, particularly for ESL learners. For future research, it is recommended to extend the use of storyboard techniques to CEFR Essay Part 2, which involves more complex writing tasks. Expanding the scope would help explore how visual strategies can support students in navigating higher-level composition and overcome challenges in other academic contexts.

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