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The Use of Substitution Table in Teaching Writing Among Primary School Students

Mohammed Z. M. Qaddoura*

University Technology Malaysia, Skudai, Johor 81310, Malaysia

Email: m90.qaddoura@gmail.com

Abstract

This action research was conducted with the aim to enhance the teaching of writing skills by using the substitution table as a teaching technique to improve teaching writing skills, consequently leading to an improvement in Second Language learners' writing skills in the English Language. The substitution table was used to teach pupils the rules about writing simple sentences correctly besides training and drilling them in wiring simple sentences. Participants of this action research were ten students of Year 3 from one of the schools in Pasir Gudang district, Johor. The data was collected via document analysis. Results showed that use of a substitution table facilitated in teaching about writing skills, which consequently led to the improvement in the pupils' simple sentence writing skills. The researcher discovered that pupils were interested and motivated when teachers used the substitution table to teach writing simple sentences. They also managed to write simple sentences without any errors.

Keywords: Writing skills; substitution table; improve; motivate; primary school.

1. Introduction

English is essential in Education and students are expected to use it meritoriously. However, teaching writing poses a great challenge to the teachers as they are the main character in delivering the content to the students, especially to second language learners. According to Nuan, producing a coherent, fluent and extended piece of writing is considered as the most challenging task and it is more challenging for second language learners [1].

* Corresponding author.

Liza Abdullah stated that complacency in writing using the only sentence pattern they know makes the students stick to them. Students prefer to play safe and use simple sentences in writing as they had been trained to write in such an order to avoid ungrammatical sentences [2]. Writing sentences is very complicated as many aspects have to be taken into consideration in the development of writing. One of them is writing by putting more emphasis on how to vary sentences in writing. Having a problematic sentence pattern in one's writing will make the writing more appealing to the readers in which it claimed to be able to "sweeten up" their writing (Edmundschool.net, n.y.). Students are expected to produce a variety of sentences by following correct structural rules of writing sentences. Unfortunately, they fail to understand the proper meaning of the verbs used in sentences owing to lack of exposure. In the context of Education, using the substitution table could help the students master the learning of writing. The substitution table is one of the devices for generating correct sentences [3]. The teacher has control over sentence patterns to be used by learners. Ngadda stated that the substitution table provides useful practice for learners in the transcription to the writing of sentences on a given design. Thus, this concept paper highlighted how the substitution table helps students in mastering correct sentence patterns [4].

1.1. Approaches to Teaching Writing

Writing skill is an essential literacy skill for young learners to master a language. However, according to Graham, writing is perceived to be 'highly complex, cognitive and self-directed activity since it requires multiple processes such as the organisation of ideas with accurate use of grammar and semantic [5]. Owing to its complexity, writing is regarded as a challenging task to be mastered, especially for second language learners, in order to become a good writer of the target language either academically or professionally. Therefore, proper writing strategies can enhance writing performance and reduce attentional overload [6].

1.2. Concept of controlled writing

Developing one's writing skill is a process that necessitates extensive training and practice. The teacher plays a vital role in helping students create viable strategies for getting started, drafting, revising and editing [7]. One of the writing approaches is controlled writing or guided writing. Brindley and Schneider pointed out that writing instruction should evolve into a more effective set of techniques and strategies that include modelling, shared writing, taught writing and interactive writing [8]. Pinnell and his colleagues stated that through guided writing, learners are given support during each stage of the writing process. This support enabled the learners to acquire and improve their writing skills throughout the process slowly [9,10]. Guided writing aims to provide support for beginner writers to help them in improving their writing and working independently. Holdich and Chung pointed out that guided writing offers more excellent opportunities for young writers to make valuable connections between text, sentence and word level decisions and help children shape and redraft texts with particular criteria in mind [11]. This research study involves students of age 10. Therefore, the teachers need to build a strong foundation in writing for the children to help them master the writing skill and reduce anxiety to write.

1.3. Concept of drilling

Writing requires the learners to practice and produce the language in the written form. Two approaches involve in writing; the process approach and product approach. For very young age children, Swanto indicated that the product approach is more suitable as the approach emphasises on the accuracy of the sentence during the entire process of writing [12]. Therefore, in order to promote pupils' writing performance, teachers need to drill the children in writing sentences following correct structural rules and grammar. Repetitive drills provide writers extensive opportunities to practice writing sentences with the existence of support throughout the process. Drilling technique has been practiced in the classroom for years. This repetitive method is the most effective method to be used in teaching a second language. This claim is supported by Brophy who stated that drill and practice activities should not be downgraded. Both these activities could bring out compelling performance if they are carried out properly as they form part of the most basic foundation of writing practice [13]. In teaching young children, repetition, familiarisation of the content and the structure are significant. Thus, the teachers must endeavour to drill the students to use the language and make it familiar so that they can write effectively.

1.4. Substitution table

The substitution table is a part of the drilling process where it trains pupils to have a concrete skill in constructing sentences. During drilling, the teacher emphasises on repeating structural patterns through practice. The sentence pattern is a useful guide for the learner. Unless he/she has reached a certain stage at which he/she is familiar with grammatical terminology, the substitution table is probably more valuable. Zerin declared that the substitutions table will be an effective method to help pupils learn the structural pattern of sentences [14]. Through practices using the substitution table, pupils will be able to get the designs and later practice it in their daily writing process. In teaching the English Language as a second language to the young learners, motivation is an important factor where the pupils must be safe and confident in their process of learning the skills in the language. By using the substitution table technique, the pupils become motivated as they will master the structural pattern in writing sentences and by using the skill, they will be confident to construct sentences on their own in their daily learning. Substitution tables will help young learners master the skill and when they have confidence, they can work independently in writing skills. For learning or teaching the second language to young learners, motivation is an essential factor to achieve success [15].

2. Research Aim and Methodology

2.1. Research Objectives

The research objectives for this study are as follows:

- a) To improve the teaching of writing English as Second Language among Primary Year 4 pupils.
- b) To examine the significant difference before and after using the substitution table in writing.

2.2. Research Questions

The research questions for this study are as follows:

- a) To what extent does the substitution table help improve the teaching of writing English as Second Language among Primary Year 4 pupils?
- b) Is there any significant difference before and after using the substitution table in teaching writing English as Second Language among Primary Year 4 pupils?

2.3. Research Methodology

Controlled drilling may have the potential to help the pupils in constructing the correct order of sentences. Ngadda stated that the aim of teaching-controlled writing is to limit the number of mistakes as much as possible in their writing. Grammatical exercises, controlled task and manipulation are introduced to the students before they are allowed to attempt a paragraph of their own [16]. The task is accomplished by using the following drills: 1) pattern drills, 2) substitution table drills and 3) controlled writing frame. Thus, the substitution table is used to generate isolated sentences for the teaching of writing to the pupils. This research study is a small-scale study that involved a minimum group size of participants. It was hoped that this study would be helpful for the teachers as they can be aware of controlled writing to develop pupils' writing skills. For this study, a total of 10 pupils of Year 4 in Sekolah Kebangsaan Seri Kota Puteri in Pasir Gudang District were involved. As far as the pupils are concerned, English is regarded as a foreign language because the pupils are Lebanese. English is their third language after their mother tongue and national language, Bahasa Melayu. The rationale for choosing this group of pupils was basically that they are always struggling to write even simple sentences. Most of the pupils know the sentence structure rules of Subject-Verb-Agreement. However, the sentence form is semantically incorrect. Therefore, the substitution table was introduced to them. The instruments used in this study were pre-test and post-test. The test made up of 10 questions where only verbs were given. The pupils were required to construct sentences based on the verbs given. The verbs were taken from Dokumen Standard Bahasa Inggeris Tahun 4. Following the pre-test, the researchers examined the word order in each pupil's sentence structure. After that, the researcher introduced the substitution table to the pupils as a help to write the correct structure of English sentences. When non-native speakers of English, who have learnt it the hard way, are exposed to the substitution table generally do not find them difficult. Working with the substitution table, often only for a short period, is one way of learning language [17]. Document analysis was carried out to analyse data collected in terms of 1) sentence structure order (Subject – Verb – Agreement) and 2) semantic sentence.

3. Findings

This research was conducted to identify the improvement in the teaching of writing for ESL among Primary Year 4 pupils as well as to examine the significant difference before and after using the substitution table in writing. A pre-test and post-test was conducted to answer the second objective. The researcher discovered and concluded that year four pupils have a problem in understanding the meaning of verbs within the sentences. The examples include: I borrow into my school and I told to the car. Such issues are disturbing for the teacher first and then the student as the understanding of the meaning of the verb is essential to build a sentence in the English language. In this study, 7 of the ten students did not understand how to use the verb in the sentence

while writing to give the correct meaning of the sentence. What has been observed is that the students follow the rules and instructions of proper writing and grammar while writing which means that they understand the rules of writing and grammar. However, the problem remains in understanding the meaning of the verb in the sentence and how it is used. Regarding three students who responded correctly in the preparatory test, most probably they have prior knowledge of the correct grammar rules and how to use the verb in the sentence. The examples of their answers are: (1) I borrow my friend's pencil, (2) I borrow a book from school and (3) I borrow a book from the library. The syntax and semantic were very acceptable for their other peers and their age as kids. Three students out of 10 students are initially accepted but not much because this proportion in the classroom without continuous improvement will deteriorate further and become worse. Differences became very apparent in the post-test after teaching students to use alternative tables in the sentence structures and how to use the verb in the sentence while writing. It can be said that the efforts are starting to reap results. The difference came in two directions. The seven students whose levels were unacceptable and suffered from the use of verbs in the syntax of sentences during writing at first, they were directing the problem of understanding the meaning of the verb to find its proper place in the sentence. They mastered the syntax of the sentence. The following examples illustrate the difference in the post-test: (1) I borrow the book, (2) I have my book in the class and (3) My father decorates the bed. These examples have been obtained from the same students' paper whose examples were previously mentioned. This remarkable improvement in the performance of the seven students is due to their practice of using substitutions tables in understanding sentence structures during the writing and explicitly understanding the meaning of the verb in line with the sentence components. The alternative tables make it easier for the student to understand the meaning of the space in the sentence and provide the student the available alternatives that can be used to construct the sentence and give it meaning.

4. Discussion

Teaching writing skills has always been a debate among the teachers; whether it should be taught formally or informally, structured and unstructured rules and many other issues. Throughout studying other researches and articles on teaching writing in a second language classroom, we found that teachers had used various types of methods and approaches to ensure that Second Language learners are able to enhance their competency in writing. According to my own experience as a teacher in a primary school, the researcher realises that to motivate the students to write effectively, we need to make sure that the pupils know the basic rules and structural pattern of writing. The pupils need to have confidence which will motivate them to excel in their writing skills. Thus, to set up their essential writing skills, the teacher requires a drilling procedure. This approach is a medium for students to develop their fundamental writing skills where they practice the appropriate structured style of writing and consistent grammar rules of writing and also create confidence in writing skills. Based on that, we reached to the conclusion that the substitution table does help Second Language primary school learners digest and enhance their writing skills. Substitution table is a form of behaviourist approach to Second Language Acquisition. Lively, the use of the table for the teacher to point a ruler at one item in one column and, at the same time, reading aloud an item and pointing to (or naming) a student anywhere in the room, the student has to form a sentence that includes both the spoken item and the one that was pointed out. The principle behind substitution table is that the students pick one option from each column to create several sentences. The creation of such tables can be difficult, particularly for novices, but the end result is that your

learners, in the lesson, are spending at least a quarter of an hour working independently once you've done your work. The view that language could be construed as a network of relationships goes back to Ferdinand de Saussure, who proposed two ways in which language elements relate to one another: syntagmatically (as chains) and paradigmatically (as slots). In 1916, Harold Palmer recommended that each sentence produced by the substitution table should be 'examined, recited, translated, retranslated, acted, thought properly and concretised. The researcher realised that there was a flaw in our method that we would like to improve on. Substitution table is a straightforward yet systematic way to guide and train pupils to write simple sentences correctly. The main feature of a substitution table is the ability to train pupils in building sentence patterns. It consists of several text columns, each one of which is formed by words that can play the same role within the sentence. The limitation that we had identified from the research was that the substitution table was not suitable to be used for all levels of pupils. The pupils with quite advanced level of proficiency and learning style were not interested and motivated enough for using the substitution table. They found that using the substitution table was just wastage of their time and holding their potential to be creative. The reason was that using the substitution table only allows the pupils to write a minimal type of sentence, whereas these advanced pupils were trying to be creative by including more complex ideas and making it become a compound or complex sentence. The pupils with advanced proficiency learn best by exploring and taking challenges. Thus, I would like to undertake further action researches in the future by focusing on using the table in guiding advanced proficiency level pupils to write sentences. There are various types of scaffolding activities that are given to the pupils; providing visual guidance and sentence starters, for example a list of vocabulary, and providing a table to write sentences. By preparing such types of activity, these advanced pupils will feel the challenge to explore the words and the ideas, classify them in the table and later create a complete sentence. Also, further research, designing the model of the table that is used for the advanced level pupils, is highly mattered. The table should be a rigid table where the parts of sentences are fixed, but it will be a more open type of table where the pupils themselves can explore and put all their ideas into different columns such as the verb, subject, object and others. This process is one kind of scaffolding process where the teacher can guide the pupils step by step before they come up with full complete work. The main purpose of scaffolding is to give support and guidance to the pupils to build a strong foundation in their writing skill. The support given will be reduced slowly until the pupils can accomplish the given task independently.

5. Conclusion

This action research aims to enhance the writing skills of Second Language learners by using the substitution table as a teaching technique. The study involved ten students of Year 3 from one of the schools in Pasir Gudang district, Johor. The data was collected via document analysis. Results showed that substitution table was useful in teaching writing skills, which ultimately improved their simple sentence writing skills. Controlled drilling and practicing have been found to be very useful in improving the writing skills. The students with advanced level of proficiency were not interested in using the substitution table as they perceived it to be wastage of their time. On the other hand, the students with poor level of proficiency found the use of substitution table very useful as they were able to write error free sentences by using substitution table. During this process, the teacher has to guide the student in each step so that they can come up with well-structured and grammatically correct sentences. This study revealed that a standard type of teaching cannot be given to all students. The students should be

categorised according to their level of proficient and then teaching methodology should be devised to make it useful for them.

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