

Storybird: Engaging Learners in Building Simple Sentences

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Abstract- Major changes in technology have had an influence on education. In schools located on the outskirts of town in remote areas, technological advances are often ignored and the traditional way of teaching writing is considered the best option. Thus, pupils are hindered from maximizing their learning potential and creativity during writing activities. By incorporating Storybird, an engaging digital story writing website, it allows pupils to focus on the content of their writing aided by fun illustrations. This research aims to enhance pupils' writing skill and engagement in building simple sentences by using Storybird. The research design is action research which employed semi-structured interviews, anecdotal records as well as pretest and posttest in the form of worksheets. This research design is based on an action research model by Kemmis and McTaggart [5]. The data was collected from 15 pupils in three different primary schools in Sarawak, Malaysia located in Sebauh, Bekenu and Lubok Antu district respectively. The research results indicated that there was a positive improvement in pupils' writing skill in building simple sentences. They were also motivated to build simple sentences as they enjoyed the process of using Storybird. The pupils have also reflected positive engagement through collaborative learning in completing tasks using Storybird. Hence, Storybird is proven to help young learners with low English language proficiency to be more engaged in building simple sentences through collaborative learning.

Index Terms- Storybird, digital story writing website, simple sentences, writing skill, low English language proficiency

I. INTRODUCTION

The use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) has been proven to improve the process of teaching and learning in general. Nevertheless, the use of ICT in teaching writing skills in English as a Second Language (ESL) classrooms is still not very encouraging [13]. Therefore, the Ministry of Education (MOE) in the third thrust Education Transformation Plan Rural School Sabah and Sarawak have redoubled efforts to improve the development of physical facilities, internet access and virtual learning (e-learning) to enable teachers and students to make use of ICT in teaching and learning process [6]. Pertaining to the concern on writing skills, according to former education

director-general Khair Mohamad Yusof, results of Malaysia Primary School Achievement Test in 2016 showed the students' weakness in writing accurate and grammatically-correct answer and revealed that Primary 6 pupils have yet to achieve a level desired for writing in the English Language [8]. Thus, the use of the digital storytelling website, Storybird can fulfil the lack of ICT exposure among primary school pupils in the outskirt and rural areas while providing an engaging and meaningful atmosphere in learning writing. Moreover, technology should be used as a beneficial tool in promoting students' creativity [11]. It also provides a platform for teachers to improve their practices in teaching writing by incorporating ICT.

Therefore, the aims of this research paper is to enhance pupils' writing skill in building simple sentences by using Storybird. It also strives to examine pupils' perception of the use of Storybird to help them build simple sentences and enhance teaching practice by using Storybird to improve pupils' writing skill.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

In Malaysia, English is taught as a second language (L2) in primary and secondary schools. Much attention is paid by the Malaysian government towards the low language skills among Malaysian pupils [12]. Along with the establishment of the national policy which acknowledges English as the second language taught in schools, writing has been part of the teaching and learning of English in various levels of education.

Information and Communications Technology (ICT) in teaching and learning

A study was carried out by Yunus and Salehi to identify both advantages and disadvantages of using ICT in teaching ESL reading and writing [13]. The findings of the study revealed that attracting pupils' attention, facilitating students' learning process, helping to improve pupils' vocabulary knowledge and promoting meaningful learning were regarded as the most important advantages of using ICT in teaching ESL reading and writing.

Advantages of Storybird

A research on Storybird was conducted by Zakaria et. al. to identify students' experiences in using digital storytelling tool

called Storybird in writing English as a Second Language (ESL) narrative text [16]. The findings showed that majority of the respondents reflected their positive experiences in using Storybird in writing ESL narrative text. The use of Storybird helps pupils to develop their interest and a sense of authority in writing, knowing that they can write and express themselves via online tool. The application of Storybird has encouraged the users to create over 10 million picture books for the past few years as there are avid readers and talented writers who are inspired with the use of arts in storytelling [3].

In another study conducted by Yunus and Wan on the use of Storybird, concluded that Storybird was effective in improving students writing skill especially in developing creative ideas and critical thinking [12]. As Storybird offers the possibility to write collaboratively using various illustrations provided, learners gained new since they not only learn to write but also they have the authority of creating their own storybook.

III. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The research design of this research is action research, based on the Kemmis and McTaggart model. In this model, there are four main stages which are planning, acting, observing and reflecting. During the planning stage, pupils' writing problem was identified. The acting stage involves the implementation of Storybird to address the problem. The data of the outcomes were collected and analysed. Subsequently, reflections were done based on the observations. These steps were repeated by taking into account improvements that have to be implemented in the next cycle.

Pretest and posttest consisting of identical questions were employed to examine the changes in pupils' ability to build simple sentences as a result of using Storybird. The researchers documented anecdotal records of the post-implementation of Storybird on pupils' reaction and behavior towards the use of Storybird, pupils' interaction in their pair or group and when the posttest was conducted. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to investigate the pupils' perceptions on using Storybird to enhance their writing skill. 7 participants including 5 females and 2 males were interviewed regarding their experience of using Storybird in writing simple sentences. Consequently, the findings will be able to provide significant insights from different perspectives of proficiency levels.

Table 1: Participants and the location of their respective schools

School location	Participants
Sebauh, Bintulu, Sarawak	P01
	P02
	P03
	P04
	P05
Subis, Miri, Sarawak	P06
	P07
	P08
	P09
	P10
Lubok Antu, Sri Aman, Sarawak	P11
	P12
	P13
	P14
	P15

Research Participants

The participants of the study included fifteen 9-year-old pupils from three different schools of the state of Sarawak, Malaysia. The schools are located in Sebauh, Bekenu and Lubok Antu district respectively. Purposive sampling method was employed with the intention of exploring pupils' experiences in using Storybird in building simple sentences. The participants were measured in their writing ability based on their past examinations from this year. All the participants fall into the category of low English language proficiency level.

Procedures

One hour English lesson was used to teach the simple sentence structure and conduct pretest. Teaching aids such as colored words cards were used during the lesson. The participants were then given pretest in the form of worksheets. They were required to build eight simple sentences correctly based on the subject given for each sentence. To solely measure their writing ability in building simple sentences, no visual aid were given during the lessons as well as in the worksheets. Participants were grouped in pairs or group of three. Since none of the participants had experience in using the tool, the researcher conducted step-by-step tutorials on how to use the tool were shown. After the participants have familiarized themselves with the tool, they were instructed to sign up for Storybird. Subsequently, they were assigned a writing task based on the theme, 'Friendship'. The participants were asked to complete the task individually in the first 30 minutes. Next, 45 minutes were allocated for them to work collaboratively among themselves to maximize language learning experience. At the end of each session, the participants were requested to publish their story online.

Data analysis techniques

Central tendency of descriptive statistics is selected to analyse the data of pre- and post-score of simple sentence construction test using Statistical Package of Social Sciences

(SPSS). The semi-structured interviews and post- implementation anecdotal records were transcribed and analyzed thematically.

Findings and Discussions

Participant	Pre-test score	Post-test score
P01	7	11
P02	6	10
P03	4	9
P04	9	12
P05	9	13
P06	9	13
P07	8	10
P08	6	9
P09	9	13
P10	9	11
P11	3	7
P12	7	10
P13	9	13
P14	4	7
P15	8	11
Mean (M)	7.13	10.6
Standard Deviation (SD)	2.10	2.03

Using Statistical Package of Social Sciences (SPSS), the following are the results of this analysis; pretest, N=15, M= 7.13, SD=2.10 and post-test, N=15, M= 10.6, SD= 2.03. The results show that the participants’ scores are more consistent and higher during post-test.

From the semi-structured interviews and anecdotal records based on the 3 schools, similarities were identified from the responses and observations and themes were formed. The use of illustrations in Storybird plays a role by providing visual stimulants for pupils to relate vocabulary with the illustrations. They will then be able to build simple sentences. The notion is supported by the following responses from participants as stated below:

P02: *“I look at the picture and see what is happening. Then, I write the sentences.”*

P07: *“I look at what the characters are doing in the picture.”*

P15: *“The pictures help me to know the actions and objects to write.”*

These responses have also been reflected in the anecdotal records in three schools whereby it is written that pupils were able to relate and figure out the appropriate words for the verbs and objects based on the situation shown in the picture that they have selected. Pupils appeared to be confident in constructing simple sentences as they were able to recall the words used in the activity.

Pupils’ motivation for writing simple sentences using illustrations increased as they were given the autonomy to choose the attractive illustrations which they find suitable. From the interviews with the pupils, it can be concluded that they have developed an interest in learning English using Storybird as it became easier and more purposeful for them to build simple sentences correctly. This is evident in the responses from participants as follow:

P06: *“It was fun because it has beautiful pictures.”*

P08: *“I feel happy because now I have picture to help me build sentences.”*

P12: *“I enjoyed making the sentences because I can choose the pictures for the sentences.”*

The anecdotal records have stated that pupils were enthusiastic about selecting illustrations which they can base the simple sentences on. Majority of the pupils find that it was exciting for them to select illustrations that they want to use.

Pupils have gained confidence and established positive engagement through collaborative learning in completing tasks using Storybird. Pupils were able to help their partners or group members to select the appropriate illustrations, coming out with the correct vocabulary and building grammatically correct simple sentence. These conclusions were reflected in pupils’ responses as shown below:

P09: *“..we can choose the pictures together and make sure we make the correct sentences.”*

P11: *“..my friend can help me to make sentences when I have problems.”*

P15: *“..we can write the correct sentences because we helped each other.”*

Based on the anecdotal records, pupils were seen to be helping their respective partners or members to translate the vocabulary from their native language to English. Pupils took turn to build simple sentences and they helped to check for errors made by the partner or group members.

The major themes that can be concluded from the analysis of the semi-structured interviews and anecdotal records are as follow:

- i. illustrations in storybird provide visual stimulants for pupils to relate with relevant vocabulary
- ii. autonomy in activity leads to increase in motivating in building simple sentences
- iii. confidence and positive gained through collaborative learning

IV. CONCLUSION

The innovation of Storybird in this research as a teaching and learning strategy has helped to improve pupils’ writing skill in building simple sentences. This was achieved by engaging pupils to learn writing in a fun and creative manner. The skills gained can then be expanded by encouraging pupils to write more complex sentences which will eventually be used to produce coherent stories. Storybird is a great tool for teaching creative or narrative writing especially for young learners [1].

By giving pupils access to a wide range of web-based tools, Storybird allows pupils to publish work and engage with real life context as a form of empowerment from the teacher [11]. This research hopes to deliver insights to Malaysian schools with less exposure of ICT on the benefits of implementing such ICT tool to improve pupils’ writing skills and also provide a new interesting approach to teaching and learning.

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