

LEARNERS' PERCEIVED EFFECTIVENESS OF ONLINE JOURNAL WRITING AS A PART OF THE HIGHLY IMMERSIVE PROGRAMME

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ABSTRACT

Journal writing is a well-established technique used in enhancing writing skills among second language learners. Through the effort in trying to ensure the Highly Immersive Programme (HIP) is not disrupted due to the Movement Control Order following the outbreak of the Covid-19 Corona virus, the nature of journal writing was transformed from the traditional method of pen and paper to online journal writing. As such, the need to know if students still found the technique effective emerged, as online journal writing do not share the same characteristics with traditional journal writing. Therefore, the aim of the study is to discern the effectiveness of online long-term journal writing from the perspective of the learners and to identify their preference between the online and traditional journal writing methods. The mixed method research approach utilising questionnaires and interviews which was carried out on all students involved in the HIP outreach programme (n=60) revealed that overall, learners have positive perception towards online journal writing. In addition to that, the discovery of their choice between both methods was unpredicted and shed light on matters that need attention from instructors. The significance and the implications of the outcomes in this study are discussed. Further research on crucial points of journal writing are suggested.

Key words: Online journal writing, writing skills, extensive writing.

INTRODUCTION

Post-independence language policy in Malaysia influences the language policy act that was introduced in 1961 and the national Language. Act 1967 acknowledged Malay language as the national language and English as the second language in Malaysia. Hence, shared language of a nation became the fundamental tool to unite the people of the country in a nation building efforts.

Narrowing on the education area, the Ministry of Education in Malaysia recognizes that change is unavoidable on the possibility that one expects to stay aware of current advancement and improvement (Don, 2015). To guarantee that schooling carries a consistent development to the improvement of a country as a whole, Malaysians need to have the fundamental component for worldwide correspondence; which is to be proficient in the English language. The significance given to the English language in the nation is sufficient to make Malaysians attempt to master the language to at least proficient user level.

The Malaysian education framework involves the pre-school, primary, secondary, tertiary and post-graduate levels. Contrasted with different levels, which practice certain degree of adaptability, primary and secondary levels have fixed duration of study; with six and five years, accordingly. The Malaysian government gives 11 years free education through government-supported schools (SchoolMalaysia, 2019).

Malaysia adopted a policy of promoting Malay language after the independence in 1957 and the existence of vernacular language is guaranteed by the legislation. However, the pupils of the vernacular school will also learn English and Malay Language. In the early 2000s, advancement in science and technology and poor command of English language raised concerns of Malaysia's aspiration to become advanced technologically and for graduates to be able to express themselves effectively at international level. The reversal of introducing English as a medium of instruction to teach Science and Mathematics took place and various policies and strategies were introduced to enhance the proficiency of the English language. Thus, under the Malaysian Education Blue Print 2013-2025 a program called MBMMBI was introduced. Two programmes that were introduced were the Dual Language Programme and Highly Immersive Programme where English is widely used in encouraging environment for learners to practice English.

Writing skill has been regarded as the most challenging skill among Malaysian learners. The Cambridge Baseline Study that was conducted in Malaysia revealed that learners are weakest in writing after speaking skill. Journal writing is a well-established technique used in enhancing writing skills among second language learners. Through the effort in trying to ensure the Highly Immersive Programme (HIP) is not disrupted due to the Movement Control Order following the outbreak of the Covid-19 Corona virus, the nature of journal writing was transformed from the conventional method of pen and paper to online journal writing. Studies (Muthuprasad, 202; Kobayashi, 2017) have shown that students generally prefer online learning methods when asked, compared to conventional ones. As such, the need to know if students still found the technique effective emerged, as online journal writing do not share the same characteristics with conventional journal writing.

Therefore, this study aims to discern the effectiveness of online long-term journal writing from the perspective of the learners and to identify their preference between the online and traditional journal writing methods. In accordance to this, the research questions that guide this study are as follows

1. What are the learners' perceived effectiveness of online journal writing?
2. Which platform is preferred between online and traditional journal writing?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Writing is an activity which requires “the ability to master grammar vocabulary, and accuracy in using the language” and has always been part of any language curriculum (Harmer, 2004). The reason for this is that writing requires higher order thinking skills where learners are required to express themselves in writing to communicate (Aryana, 2018). Writing is a skill that is difficult to acquire due to lack vocabulary and grammar use.

Glazier (1994) claims that EFL learners’ success in English writing yields advantages throughout one’s career. Harmer (1992) pointed out that writing is a challenging skill that most learners fear. On the other hand, White and Arndt’s (1991) believe that journal writing is an operative and fruitful method of arousing interest in writing that develops fluency and accuracy in expression. Barjesteh (2011) explains on diary writing, that is a free writing where learners could write freely without being assessed can have a positive impact on EFL learners’ attitudes towards writing skill. On the other hand Allison (1998) stated that when second language learners are free to choose, they are keen on language learning without much problems.

Fegerson (1992) explained that to write well one need to practice. Keeping a daily writing or journal is an effective way to improve students’ writing skill. Some learners are passive when comes to writing and generally lack of ideas and vocabulary that lead to poor sentence organization. Hamp and Heasley (2006) advocated that to become a good writer by suggesting keeping a journal or notebook to write ideas daily to enhance writing skills since more opportunities are given to write is as part of active learning. According to Tin (2004), writing for leisure or for creative purposes could change students’ perception on writing, lower their anxiety, and enhance writing ability.

Moon (1999) identifies many purposes of writing journals is a platform to provide space for learning to quality of learning, besides understand one’s learning process that involves active participation.

A study conducted by Campbell (1998) on journal writing demonstrated that it could help the second language learners develop their oral and writing ability. Moreover, another investigation led by Chung (2001) uncovered that journal writing assisted with improving learners’ writing familiarity, and uplifted their perspectives toward writing in Korean. Furthermore, Gallagher’s examination (1997) demonstrated that journal writing practice created attachment and text association among the Japanese learners considering English as a foreign language that they were highly unfamiliar with.

To encourage learners to write of journals, Lagan (2000) claims that spending time on journal writing aids learners to “develop the habit of thinking on paper” and give them the point on how ideas could be explored in the process of writing.

Lagan (2000) viewed journal writing as a medium to enhance accuracy and fluency. According to Ngho (2002), a supportive learning atmosphere is created between teachers and learners and motivation to express themselves in writing are some advantages of journal writing. White and Arndt (1991) further explained that writing also aids in learners being conscious of expressing spoken communication in writing. In addition, Jarvis (2005) claims that journal writing reduces the pressure of writing and instills thinking skills. On the other hand, journal writing also helps the students to apply their own values, experiences, and beliefs.

The main value of journal writing lies in encouraging and cultivating reflective thinking skills that motivate a learner to write extensively on their own.

Tuan (2010) mentioned that journal writing is a broad action to sustain learners’ writing inspiration and lift their writing ability just as to build compatibility among students. In addition, by responding and providing feedback to the students’ entries, teachers can quantify every student’s capacity and needs so teachers could revise their methodologies in the classroom to offer help in learning. The Highly Immersive Program (HIP) is a program presented under the MBMMBI strategy that planned to improve the English capability of learners through expanded exposure to English and teach positive practices towards the learning and use of the English language. HIP is in line with the aspirations stated in the Malaysia Education Blueprint (MEB) 2013-2025. HIP is definitely not another new program since it was around in 1999s that required all schools to arrange English language support exercises for learners to expand their exposure to the language. HIP permits a profoundly vivid language-rich climate to be created for the learners. In such a climate, learners are purposely and repetitively presented with the English language through an assortment of exercises both in and out of the classroom (Warr, 1995).

This creates the need to produce people who are equipped to satisfy the needs of the globalized economy where English is utilized as the international language of correspondence. To guarantee that each individual is equipped in the utilization of English, there is a need to start a profoundly vivid English-rich climate in schools. In guaranteeing better results, collaboration between schools, guardians or parents and societies are similarly critical in advancing English capability among Malaysian learners. Ansawi (2016) claims that the execution of HIP will slowly tap learners’ interest to be capable in the English language.

The achievement of the HIP generally relies upon the blend of four crucial components that include the school head, instructors, students, parents or guardians and local community other than a strong part in the language capability of learners. To accomplish the aims, school organizations need to complete four classifications of exercises to be specific in class, out of class, during class and outreach programs.

Guo (2011) stated that activities such as out of class projects create room and motivation for learners to learn English from the surroundings. On the other hand, teachers could guide the learners while this process is taking place.

The introduction of HIP program in 2016 has called different perception of the implementation especially the outreach program where learners can write extensively on their own. In the ESL classroom one skill that has been always dreaded is writing skill as pupils lost for ideas. Sia (2012) identified an issue that is expected in class is that some students take longer time to write an essay or do not complete writing an essay. Since writing is a skill that requires practice Thus, to enhance learners' writing skills, the journal writing was implemented to encourage learners to write freely and to upgrade their writing skills.

	t	df	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference
READY	24.479	38	3.19658	.21850
PERCEPT	38.833	38	3.42735	.16249
ACCEPT	44.328	38	3.26496	.12332
BEHAVIOUR	45.542	38	3.22121	.12211

FINDINGS

The first aim of this study is to find out the perception's students have towards online journal writing. The findings of the focus group interviews revealed that students were positive towards the writing technique. The specific keywords used by the students in describing their perceptions were recorded and were thematically analysed. The framework below illustrates the findings of the interview.

Table 1: Themes on Students' Perceptions

Theme	Sample Positive Feedback	Sample Negative Feedback
Affective Factors	<i>Comfortable expressing ones story, afraid being judged</i>	<i>I didn't enjoy it.</i>
	<i>Enjoyed.</i>	
	<i>Able to express well</i>	
	<i>Able to forget sorrows</i>	
	<i>Find joy in writing journal</i>	<i>it's somewhat boring to me</i>
	<i>Express feelings</i>	
	<i>Yes because it can release my tension after doing something that can make me stress.</i>	
Writing Skills	<i>Identify ones weakness</i>	
	<i>Because I can improve my writing skills.</i>	
	<i>Improve writing skills</i>	
	<i>Able to correct sentences</i>	
	<i>Able to be more creative</i>	
	<i>Motivated to write</i>	
	<i>Able to write confidently</i>	
	<i>Generate ideas</i>	
<i>Vary sentence pattern</i>	<i>I think it's hard for me.</i>	
Language Proficiency	<i>Practice using new vocab</i>	<i>It is hard for me.</i>
	<i>Improve grammar skill</i>	
	<i>Learnt new words</i>	
Content		<i>I have no idea how to write about my day</i>
Others	<i>I can share things I do in my daily life</i>	
	<i>Gain extra knowledge</i> <i>Helps to read extensively</i>	

Table 1 shows the tabulation of the themes emerged from the feedback received from the learners through the focus group interviews. It could be seen that learners' responses could be thematically categorised into three distinct themes, namely "Affective Factors", "Writing Skills" and "Language Proficiency" and one general theme, namely "Others".

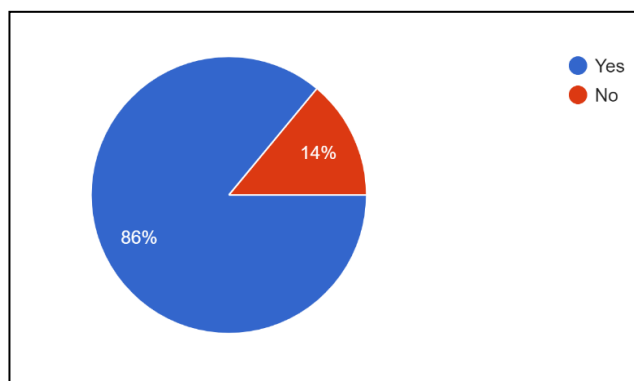
It could be seen that, when asked about their perceptions on online journal writing, most learners expressed their positive perception in relation to "Affective Factors" which encompasses their feelings, emotions and other psychological elements; and "Writing Skills" which encompasses writing style, vocabulary, grammar, proficiency and creativity. Learners also voiced out their positive perceptions in relation to "Language Proficiency" which covers the advantages of journal writing towards the mastery of English language; and "Content" which covers the idea and subject matter of their writing. The positive feedback given by students

illustrates the benefits of journal writing. The comments given in the affective factor category shows that students enjoy writing journal. This is a positive outcome as in the long run, students who enjoy writing will experience enhanced fluency in it.

It is worth noting that there were also a few negative responses on their perception of online journal writing. It was found that learners felt that the activity bored them and that it was too difficult for them. Further enquiries revealed that learners found it difficult because they had no idea on what to be included in their writing and they found expressing in the target language challenging. Besides that, learners also found the activity boring because it was their least preferred skill among the four language skills. However, the negative responses were scarce and therefore is negligible.

These results are in accordance to Tin (2004) who mentioned that writing for leisure or for creative purposes could change students' perception on writing, lower their anxiety, and enhance writing ability.

Concerning the second aim of this study, the learners were asked about their preference between online journal writing and conventional journal writing. The chart below illustrates the responses that were received for the question "Do you prefer online journal writing compared to conventional journal writing?".



The chart shows that 86% (n=53) of the respondents claimed that they prefer online journal writing compared to the conventional journal writing. This is not uncommon as the literature has proven the preference of learners when they have a choice to choose between online or conventional teaching. As such, these findings are in line with Muthuprasad (2021), Kobayashi (2017), Ilgaz (2017), Bali (2018) and Dumford (2018). Online learning has not been part of the Malaysian education system before the Covid-19 pandemic that started in 2020. Since then, teachers and learners of all education levels have been exposed to online learning platforms and were required to utilise these platforms for teaching and learning. Due to its nature and convenience, learners find it more appealing and is often the preferred option compared to the conventional one. Specifically, students are at the convenience of writing, erasing and re-writing without any hassle; of automatic spelling and grammar check; and of faster and smoother finished work. Besides that, students are also equally exposed and have equal experience between typing using keyboards or keypads and handwriting.

Given the abovementioned convenience and advantages of typing, it was found that seven students still preferred handwriting their journal entries. When asked about their choice, they mentioned the unavailability of a laptop or phone with them at all times and the freedom to decorate their journal as how they like. Apart from that handwriting also improves memory recall and conceptual understanding of what is being written (Dumbford, 2018). As such, students benefit either way. Therefore, it could be concluded that most students prefer online journal writing compared to the conventional method.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study aimed to investigate learners' perception on online journal writing and their preference between online and conventional journal writing. It was found that students have positive perception towards online journal writing and they prefer the said method compared to the conventional way of journal writing. It was evident that the learners who were respondents to this study experienced the benefits of journal writing in terms of affective factors, writing skills, language proficiency and writing content. Writing a journal not only improves one's writing ability but has significant progress in communication, besides overcoming negativity. On the other hand, engaging in journal writing is a habitual activity that helps one to self-discovery. In addition, writing something on a daily basis becomes a daily practice that can overcome the anxiety of writing and upgrade one's writing in general. Journal writing is a platform where a student can record and formulate ideas freely. Thus, students can overcome writing challenges by writing freely without much difficulty.

The Malaysian secondary school students' writing efficacy could be addressed by focusing on journal writing extensively as part of out of the classroom practice as learners express a positive attitude via online journal writing. To inculcate the interest to write begins from the language teacher as they are the role model who can inspire the learners to write. Thus, teachers should motivate and encourage learners to write without the fear of being ridiculed. A conducive environment would attract learners to express themselves freely. In addition, teachers should praise learners work in order to motivate them in writing. Moreover, journal writing also strengthens a close relationship between teachers and students.

On the other hand, making it habitual could enhance their writing skills. Teachers should introduce writing journal as out the class activity collectively that involve every learner so that they can start writing extensively. Second language learners should use the opportunity to write so that they find it interesting and yield better results in terms of writing ability.

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