

Exploring the Effects of an Online Writing Platform on Students' Performances in Narrative Writing

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Abstract

The main aim of this exploratory study is to investigate how the use of an online narrative writing platform enhances students' narrative writing. The popular social networking site Facebook was used as an attempt to transform the freely available social space into a tool for teaching and learning narrative writing. Students were instructed to create their narrative writing sample based on Labov and Waletzky's (1967) narrative structure. The research questions for this study are as follows: (1) What are the scores of students' online narrative essays before and after their engagement in the online narrative writing platform? (2) How do the students perform in the microstructures of their essays? (3) How do the students perform in the macrostructures of their essays? Although this study basically employed a qualitative, case-study research methodology, simple counts of numerical values denoting the students' scores of improvement in the quality of their writing were also used. Six Year 10 students from a Chinese Secondary School in the state of Penang participated in this study. Data sources included written assignments collected from an initial writing task, essays written before and after online interactions on the platform and essays from the final task. Additionally, interviews were conducted to explain and supplement the quantitative scores. Overall, the findings show that the use of the online narrative writing platform improved micro and macro aspects of students' narrative essays. The findings of this study have implications for the teaching and learning of writing skills in a webbed environment, especially in Malaysia.

Keywords: online writing, social interactions, constructivism theory, online collaborative learning environment, Labov and Waletzky's narrative structure.

Introduction

Good writing skills are important for students to excel academically and for career opportunities (Graham and Perin, 2007; Chow, 2007; Tribble, 1996). An underlying agenda of the 10th Malaysian blueprint (2010) is to improve the teaching of the English language with a new curriculum focusing on five skills (reading, speaking, listening, writing and grammar). Writing remains an important skill, and being able to write well is definitely an added advantage for students. However, writing is widely acknowledged as a laborious and daunting task for students in school (Chitravelu, Sithamparam and Teh, 2005; Tribble, 1996).

In the Malaysian context, students' achievement in the writing component remains at the unsatisfactory level (Saadiyah and Ching, 2009; Sharifah Nor, Rashidah and Aidah, 2010; Heng and Chan, 1996). This is evidenced by the poor achievement of students on the *Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia* (SPM), a public examination taken by Year 11 students (Sharifah Nor, Rashidah and Aidah, 2010). The students' poor performance in writing may be attributed to the limited time allocated in school to training and immersing students in the English language (Saadiyah and Ching, 2009). Furthermore, the limited time does not provide the opportunity for teachers to personally attend to the students' needs and interests. Hence, changes in teaching approaches should be aimed at addressing our students' eroding writing skills. Because the current generation is predominantly influenced by the digital communication environment, there is greater urgency for teachers to integrate the new means for pedagogical purposes (Norhayati and Nor Hasbiah, 2010).

The advent of Web 2.0 technologies led to the birth of online writing activities and greater collaboration among Internet users and other users, content providers and enterprises including educational institutions (TechTarget, 2012). Social networking sites stand out as one of the Web 2.0 tools because they facilitate writing and collaboration. Evidence from the literature suggests that social networking sites can help teachers to create a conducive environment for students to practice their writing skills, thus overcoming some difficulties in writing (Muhammad Kamarul, Norlida and Mohd Jafre, 2010; Norhayati and Nor Hasbiah, 2010). Writing is less burdensome with online platforms because teachers and students are able to interact and work at their own pace outside the

classroom hours (Ellison and Wu, 2008). When students and teachers collaborate, students who are weak and have difficulties organising their ideas will be able to obtain suggestions and comments (Harwood and Blackstone, 2012; Grosbeck, 2009). This will help students to generate more ideas and eventually improve their writing. With that advantage, students are expected to help them acquire the knowledge to overcome difficulties in writing (Murray and Horrigan, 2008).

It is important to note that technology itself cannot be a replacement for effective teaching and learning activities. Any proposal for effective teaching and learning activities needs to be carefully considered for its technology, as well as its pedagogical practices. In the present study, Facebook is not a solution for writing problems. The solution lies in effective learning based on the interdependence of the pedagogical practices and learning tools. Therefore, this study aligns pedagogical practices with the evolving nature of technology, as the current social networking sites will become obsolete one day. When the new social networking sites appear, the pedagogical practices and learning theory that are suggested in this study can be considered in a newer platform. Therefore, the social interactions, online-collaboration, and Labov and Waltezký's (1967) narrative structure employed in this study can also be used in other social networking sites such as My Space, Google Docs, Bebo and newer platforms that may appear in the future. The innovative hypothetical platform of this study is called the online narrative writing platform, which includes hypothetical virtual spaces, the tutor platform and learner platform, embedded within the Facebook environment. The tutor platform is the virtual online space within the Facebook environment where the teacher provided instructions, titles, model essays, tips and suggestions on narrative writing. On the other hand, the learner platform is where the students wrote and uploaded their initial essays (or first drafts), interacted with their peers and teacher, and finally, wrote and uploaded their final essays. Interactions between the teacher and students took place in both the tutor and learner platforms to encourage collaborative learning. In both platforms, the teacher and students were given the opportunity to express their opinions and comments regarding the essays posted. In other words, there is a joint effort between the teacher and students to improve the students' narrative writing.

The research questions for this study are:

1. What are the scores of students' online narrative essays before and after their engagement in the online narrative writing platform?
2. How do the students perform in the microstructures of their essays?
3. How do the students perform in the macrostructures of their essays?

Constructivism Theory

According to Wertsch (1997), from the perspective of constructivism, students play a crucial role in constructing knowledge. Students are encouraged to explore, experience and experiment with knowledge based on previous knowledge by interactive actions (Shieh, 2010). In the constructivism learning theory, learners are able to also construct meaning by using cultural artefacts and do not solely depend on interaction with other individuals (Salomon and Perkins, 1998). The artefacts may be technological tools. In this regard, the Web 2.0 tools offer a tremendous amount of software for learners to experiment and build their own knowledge (Zhang et al., 2004; Leflore, 2000).

In constructivist theory, there are two important schools of thought, namely, cognitive constructivism and social constructivism. These two strands have been proposed by Piaget and Vygotsky, respectively. According to Piaget (1976), children learn effectively when they are taught to construct knowledge in a meaningful and effective way. Piaget's theory of cognitive development claims that individuals cannot be spoon-fed with information. Instead, there is a need for students to make an effort to construct their own knowledge. Teachers need to provide a stimulating environment for students to learn effectively. In the learning process, students should be allowed to explore new ideas and concepts, have hands-on experiences and try to figure out solutions to problems. Therefore, in the present study, the online narrative writing platform helps students to discover various ways of constructing a high-quality piece of

writing with the help of other available online facilities, such as related articles, spell checks and online dictionaries.

From the perspective of social constructivism, human learning presupposes a specific social nature and is a process by which children grow into the intellectual life of those around them (Vygotsky, 1978). With guidance from teachers and peers during social interactions, learners can understand concepts and ideas that they cannot grasp on their own. The notion of scaffolding is also crucial in Vygotsky's theory (1978). Scaffolding comes from knowledgeable individuals who produce a supportive environment to help learners and extend the learners' current skills and knowledge to a higher level (Vygotsky, 1978). Vygotsky's social constructivism theory supports the use of online writing in education. The online narrative writing platform as designed in this study is considered 'very social' because it encourages social interactions between the teacher and students, as well as between the students and their peers, to focus on feedback on posted essays. Furthermore, the use of the online narrative writing platform permits learners to continue their learning activities through collaborative learning outside the classroom.

Web 2.0

The plethora of Web 2.0 tools can be classified according to its temporal nature, either synchronous or asynchronous, or can be classified as either freely available (open source materials) or commercial. Some examples of commercial online writing tools are *Babylon*, *Master Writer*, *eXpert Communicator* and *StyleWriter Professional* (BrotherSoft, 2012). There are also numerous popular Web 2.0 tools that are freely available for users. Some of these tools include blogs, wikis, discussion boards, e-mails and Facebook. In the face of costly, commercially available writing tools, which are difficult for schools to purchase, innovative uses of these freely available, open-source writing tools would be welcomed. With this factor in mind, the researcher has innovatively created a simple and inexpensive online narrative writing platform that is accessed through Facebook.

In this study, the researcher used Facebook as a platform to enhance narrative writing skills. Facebook can be a suitable platform for writing because it is a popular social networking site for students (Gabarre et al., 2013; Cloete, Villiers and Roodt, 2009). To use Facebook, one need not

necessarily use all of its features. It is sufficient to use it to accomplish the planned task. In the case of using Facebook to encourage narrative writing among students, only features such as Groups, Comments and Walls need to use. This is similar to the utilisation of Microsoft Word, which has hundreds of features, although only a few features are needed to accomplish a simple writing task.

Labov and Waletzky's Narrative Structure (1967)

In this study, Labov and Waletzky's narrative structure was used by the teacher on the tutor platform to guide students in writing their narrative essays. Labov and Waletzky's narrative structure is known to be a productive model in the teaching of narrative writing (Toolan, 1988). According to Labov and Waletzky (1967), the temporally sequenced structure, consists of six parts: (1) Abstract, (2) Orientation, (3) Complicating Action, (4) Resolution, (5) Evaluation and (6) Coda. The six stages offer information on the type of linguistic forms that each stage typically takes. The systematically organised information helps students to write better and increases the students' awareness of the criteria for good narrative writing.

The following illustrates Labov and Waletzky's six-part structure, which was uploaded in the tutor platform for the participants.

Abstract: What is the story about?

Orientation: Who, when, where, what?

Complicating Action: Then what happened?

Result of resolution: What finally happened?

Evaluation: So what, how is this interesting?

Coda: That's it. I've finished and am "bridging" back to our present situation.

Some studies have shown teachers using these structures as guidelines to teach narrative writing. For example, Siew (1995) utilises the structures to assess the written narratives of high school students and reports that students are able to improve their grammatical structures. Another study by Stirling, Barrington and Douglas (2007) observes the written narrative ability of a child with autism after a period of 15 months and demonstrates that the child developed narrative skills. A study by Kigotho (2002) claims

that students in Kenya are able to write coherently after receiving guidance from Labov and Waletzky's narrative structure.

In essence, Labov and Waletzky's narrative structure can be used strategically in English as a Second Language (ESL) settings to make the subject more relevant, purposeful and meaningful to learners. The structure suggests a basic model that is clear and replicable, allowing the formation of a more complex narrative (Toolan, 1988). The narrative essays in this study are rated based on the micro and macrostructures. The macrostructures refer to organisation and content. The students who are able to follow Labov and Waletzky's structure will be able to score well for organisation and content aspects. The microstructures refer to vocabulary, language and mechanics.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative case study research design to explore the use of the online narrative writing platform. Six students within a specific class from an urban National Type Chinese School were involved in the study. The students are from the Year 10 class known as Form Four Science. The students were selected based on their Year 9 standardised public examination, *Penilaian Menengah Rendah* (PMR). The Form 4 students were selected by the Head of the English Panel after consulting with the Principal, as this study was expected to benefit the students' performance in their Year 11 public examination (SPM) the following year. Furthermore, the Form Four students were not sitting for any government examinations in the year of the present study. The students were of mixed abilities to create an environment in which students could interact with others who were more competent. According to Vygotsky (1978), a student learns better if he or she is able to interact with others who are more knowledgeable and competent.

Instruments

Data for this study were obtained from written assignments (see Table 1 for the schedule). Before using the online narrative writing platform, each of the six students wrote a narrative essay. This was known as the initial task. After six weeks of instruction, the students were again asked to write a narrative essay in the final task. Between these two writing tasks, which

were conducted in the classroom, the students were given three tasks online and instructed to write a narrative essay for each task based on Labov and Waletzky's narrative structure. For each task, the students were required to write an essay before and an essay after the interactions in the online narrative writing platform. Thirty-six essays were collected before and after the social interactions in the online narrative writing platform, and twelve more essays were collected from the initial and final task. A total of 48 essays were collected for analysis. A semi-structured interview protocol was used to conduct the interview with six students and the teacher after the participants were engaged in the online narrative writing platform. Individual interviews helped students to convey ideas confidently and comfortably (Yin, 2009). The individual interviews lasted approximately 15 minutes for each participant.

The researcher first created a Facebook group account named Narrative Writing II for the participants and the teacher. All of the students and the teacher were notified automatically of any post contributed by the members. The students' essays were rated by three raters, and average scores were calculated. The researcher took the approach of simple quantitative descriptions of the scores for the written assignments. The scores represented qualitative information, including organisation, content, language, vocabulary, mechanics and total. The written assignments were analysed based on Tribble's Writing Assessment Scale (1996), which evaluates all of the above aspects. The highest scores were 20 for content, organisation and vocabulary, 30 for language and 10 for mechanics.

Analysis and Findings

The written assignment tasks were considered to be successful because all six of the students were able to complete the three assigned tasks. The letters O, C, L, V, M and T refer to organisation, content, language, vocabulary, mechanics and total, respectively. Students numbered 1–6 were represented by the following pseudonyms: S1- Valentini Belbo; S2- Monster Kblue; S3- Catelite Nina; S4- Peony Moon; S5- Deer Tommy; and S6- Joyce Chee. In the next section, the scores for the initial and final task will be discussed, followed by a discussion of scores for the essays written before and after the participants' engagement in the online collaborative learning environment. The work submitted by S3 will be

discussed in greater detail to illustrate the trends in the students' essay scores.

In the initial task, it was found that the errors made by the students were generally related to vocabulary, language and mechanics. However, for the final task, improvements were observed in each of these aspects. The use of idioms, better word choices and better sentence structure was evident in the final task. The scores for the initial and final tasks, as provided by the three raters, are shown in Table 5. For example, S1's language score improved from 18 to 23, the vocabulary score improved from 12 to 18 and the mechanics score improved from 6 to 7. There were also improvements observed in the content and organisation aspects in the final task. For example, the organisation score for S1 improved from 13 to 17 while the score for content improved from 12 to 16. In addition, the organisation scores for S6 increased from 15 to 18, and the score for content improved from 16 to 18. Thus, it can be concluded that the online narrative writing platform helped the students improve their narrative writing. Overall, the scores in the final task were higher compared to the initial task. The following section presents the scores for each task given in the online instruction. For each task, the students posted one essay before and one essay (the improved version) after their interactions in the online collaborative learning environment.

As shown in Tables 2–4, the scores for the content and organisation aspects of the essays before and after the interactions in the online narrative writing platform for Task 1 to Task 3 were nearly the same. For example, in Task 3, S1, S2, S3 and S4 scored 15 marks for the organisation aspects of the essays before interactions in the online collaborative learning environment, and similar scores were found after the interactions in the online collaborative learning environment. For the content aspect, S1, S2 and S4 scored 15 marks before and after their interactions in the online collaborative learning environment. The only score that improved was from 14 to 15 for S3.

However, for the aspects of language and vocabulary, there was some increase in the scores. The social interactions seemed to have encouraged students to make the necessary changes to improve the quality of their essays, especially for Task 1 and Task 2. The scores for vocabulary and language increased by one or two marks for most of the participants.

However, there was no change in the score for mechanics. In Task 3, changes in scores were not that evident. It was found that there were fewer interactions related to this set of essays. The students made a few comments related to vocabulary and sentence structures, but the interactions showed that students basically complimented each other's essays without giving specific constructive comments for improvement.

Macrostructure of the Essays

Details from S3's essays, as illustrated below, demonstrate her grasp of Labov and Waletzky's narrative structure. The organisation and content aspects were nearly the same for her essays written before and after the interactions in the online collaborative learning environment. Her essay collected from Task 1 contained an abstract that provided readers with a clear summary of the essays. For example, "*I realised what is the meaning of embarrassing after an incident happened*". The abstract from Task 2 was also clear, as the title of the essay began with "*students were unloading the luggage*". Task 3 presented a slightly different picture in the abstract. In Task 3, she used the flashback technique until the end of the story and provided the readers with a clear idea of what the story was about at the end of the essay, likely because the instructions required the students to write a story ending with "*tears welled up in his eyes*". Therefore, the abstract basically gave details of what the story was about. For example, "*Pak Ali is a resident in Kampong Balak. He was a farmer...*".

The presence of time orientation in S3's essay provided the readers with information about the characters, time, events and settings. For example, to indicate time orientation, she used "*Last Sunday*". The complicating action was found in all three of the essays written by S3. A complicating action answers the question "then what happened" (Toolan, 1998: 152). A description of events was also used by S3 in Task 1 to build up the complicating action. This attempt was obvious in her essay, where she wrote "*On that day, my mother and Aunt Clara woke up earlier than usual...*". An evaluation highlights how the writers manage their ongoing events. At this point, the narrator stepped out of the story to provide comments, as suggested by Toolan (1998), to delay the forward movement of the events in the story (Cortazzi, 1993).

Microstructures of the Essays

Microstructures refer to vocabulary, language and mechanics. There were grammatical errors in all three essays written by S3 because she did not utilise correct verb tenses. For example, the phrase “*pick it up*” (Task 1) should be “*picked it up*” and she used incorrect words, such as “*nutrition food*” instead of “*nutritious food*” (Task 1). However, in Task 3, she used the idiom “*give me a cold shoulder*”. The use of idioms definitely improved the scores for vocabulary. An examination of the students’ social interactions on the platform showed instances of them correcting each other. Students realised their mistakes and made the necessary changes in their essays after the online collaborative learning environment. However, the present paper does not focus on the interactions to give an indication of improvement in narrative writing, but rather focuses only on the scores.

Discussion

This paper has demonstrated that the online narrative writing platform enhanced the students’ writing performance to some extent. The outcome of the students’ written assignments highlighted that they had a good understanding of the six elements of Labov and Waletzky’s narrative structure, as the students applied the elements in all of their narrative writing tasks. The students’ structure was well organised from the introduction to the conclusion, and the students showed that they did not have any major problems in their written narrative essays using Labov and Waletzky’s narrative structure. This was likely why the scores for the content and organisation aspects of the essays before and after participation in the online narrative writing platform were nearly the same. From the findings, it was evident that using Labov and Waletzky’s narrative structure to guide narrative essays in the macro aspects of narrative writing was a successful endeavour. This finding is consistent with the views of Stirling, Barrington and Douglas (2007), Siew (1995) and Kigotho (2002) who found that Labov and Waletzky’s narrative structure could be used successfully to teach narrative writing. Labov and Waletzky’s narrative structure can indeed be used as a guide for narrative writing in the asynchronous online writing platform, and this further supports Leflore’s (2000) idea that web-based technologies can assist students in their mental schemas and can help them gain better

understanding of teaching and learning activities. The online narrative writing platform supported the students in developing mental schemas, encouraged them to build and discover new ideas and helped them to achieve better understanding, as suggested by Piaget's (1976) cognitive constructivism theory. A further explanation for the students' improvement in their narrative writing is the concept related to scaffolding and the zone of proximal development, which is Vygotsky's (1978) social constructivism theory. The clear instructions in the tutor platform, which were based on Vygotsky's social development theory on scaffolding, helped the students. Labov and Waletzky's narrative structure, model essays, tips and suggestions that were uploaded on the tutor platform helped the students to build a concrete organisation and served as an important guide as they started writing their essays. The clear instructions in the tutor platform significantly supported the organisation and content of the students' essays. In terms of microstructures, specifically in language and vocabulary usage, there were a considerable number of incorrect applications of verb tenses, sentence structures, modals, verbs and conjunctions. Grammatical mistakes began to surface when the students started to write their individual essays. However, as illustrated in the scores (Tables 2–4), the social interactions in the online narrative writing platform helped students to improve the vocabulary and language aspects of their writing. The students considered the ideas and suggestions highlighted in the interactions and completed their tasks independently. Writing quality also improved after the interactions. The scores for the essays after the interactions confirmed that the interactions were important for improving the students' writing. One possible explanation for this finding lies with the argument that the social interactions in the online collaborative learning environment were a "dialogic space" where students could think, contribute and act collectively and where creative thought and reflection could take place (Wegerif, 2007). Wegerif terms the online space for interactions as "a cacophony of voices offering countless opportunities for dialogic engagement with multiple perspectives on every topic" (Wegerif, 2007: 181).

Conclusion

Our findings encourage us to continue in the direction of the research initiated at the very beginning of this study, as the use of the online narrative writing platform successfully improved the students' macro and

micro aspects of narrative writing. The positive results achieved in the writing task were based on the constructive and fruitful interactions in the online collaborative learning environment. The collaboration among the students and between the teacher and the students created a rich and supportive environment for students to improve their narrative writing. Therefore, to encourage writing, our attention should be drawn to online writing platforms that are available with innovative pedagogical practices. It is noteworthy that our study confirmed that Labov and Waletzky's narrative structure can be used in the online writing environment to guide students in their narrative writing.

The online platform used in this study should be replicated in other settings to investigate whether similar findings emerge. Because the study was limited to a small group of students, there is potential for future research to consider a broader range of schools in Malaysian settings. This will enhance the understanding of the research and potentially broaden any generalisations. Future studies can also be conducted to study other aspects of language besides narrative writing. Narrative writing is one form of writing that students need to acquire in school. If the online writing platform is to be extended to Malaysian ESL students, there is also a need to conduct research related to other types of essay writing, such as factual essays, expository essays, descriptive essays and speeches.

APPENDICES

Table 1 Schedule of the initial task, use of the learner and tutor platform and final task

Week 1	Writing in class Title: A narrow Escape	INITIAL TASK		
	Tutor Platform	Learner Platform	Learner Platform	Learner Platform
Week 2–3	Title: Describe the most embarrassing experience you have had Material 1	First draft (1)	Online Collaboration with peers and teacher	Final draft (1)
Week 4–5	Title: Write a story beginning with the “students were excitedly unloading their luggage” Material 2	First Draft (2)	Online Collaboration with peers and teacher	Final draft (2)
Week 6–7	Title: Write a story ending with “tears welled up in his eyes” no extra material given	First Draft (3)	Online Collaboration with peers and teacher	Final draft (3)
Week 10	Writing in class Title: Saved at Eleventh Hour	FINAL TASK		

Table 2 Students' average scores for narrative writing Task 1

AVERAGE SCORES												
STUDENT	BEFORE COLLABORATION						AFTER COLLABORATION					
	O	C	L	V	M	T	O	C	L	V	M	T
S1	15	16	18	11	6	66	15	16	19	12	6	68
S2	14	15	17	13	6	65	14	15	18	15	6	68
S3	15	15	22	15	6	74	15	16	23	16	6	76
S4	14	14	18	13	6	65	14	14	20	15	6	69
S5	14	14	16	14	6	64	14	13	17	16	6	65
S6	17	18	23	16	6	80	17	18	24	17	6	82

Table 3 Students' average scores for narrative writing Task 2

AVERAGE SCORES												
STUDENT	BEFORE COLLABORATION						AFTER COLLABORATION					
	O	C	L	V	M	T	O	C	L	V	M	T
S1	15	16	15	15	6	67	15	16	17	16	6	70
S2	14	15	15	14	6	64	14	15	16	14	6	65
S3	15	15	17	14	6	67	15	15	18	15	6	69
S4	15	16	18	14	6	69	15	16	19	15	6	71
S5	15	16	19	15	6	71	15	15	20	16	7	73
S6	17	18	24	18	6	83	17	18	25	18	6	84

Table 4 Students’ average scores for narrative writing Task 3

AVERAGE SCORES												
STUDENT	BEFORE COLLABORATION						AFTER COLLABORATION					
	O	C	L	V	M	T	O	C	L	V	M	T
S1	15	15	20	16	7	73	15	15	20	16	7	73
S2	15	15	17	15	7	69	15	15	18	16	7	71
S3	15	14	17	15	7	68	15	15	18	16	7	71
S4	15	15	16	16	7	69	15	15	16	16	7	69
S5	14	15	15	14	7	65	14	15	15	14	7	65
S6	16	18	21	19	7	81	16	18	21	19	7	81

Table 5 Students’ average scores for initial and final tasks

AVERAGE SCORES FOR INITIAL AND FINAL TASKS												
STUDENT	INITIAL TASK						FINAL TASK					
	O	C	L	V	M	T	O	C	L	V	M	T
S1	12	12	18	12	6	60	17	17	23	18	7	82
S2	17	17	20	16	6	76	18	17	26	16	7	84
S3	14	14	19	12	6	65	18	19	24	18	7	86
S4	12	13	17	12	6	60	18	16	25	16	7	82
S5	13	12	18	12	6	61	17	16	18	15	7	73
S6	15	16	23	17	6	77	18	18	23	18	7	84

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