

## **Selfie: Engaging Life Experiences into Writing**

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### **Abstract**

English language writing has always been a problem for second language learners to master. Developing learners' ability in writing is one of the major problems faced by educators in tertiary education. The learners will only use English language when they are asked to and only when the opportunity arises during classroom lessons. Generating ideas for writing has always been a major difficulty faced by learners in English language learning. This had led to many studies by researchers in suggesting ways in helping learners to write in English language. This study was carried out to examine the effectiveness of selfie photo in generating ideas for narrative writing among 40 undergraduate students undertaking an English proficiency course at a local university in Malaysia. The findings had shown significant improvement in learners' writing in term of ideas coherency and text length. It was observed that the learners had had the ability to come up with more number of words in writing when narrating self-experiences related to the captured selfie photo compared to normal classroom writing. As a whole, the use of selfie photo had improved learners' writing ability in terms of not only language proficiency, but also their level of confidence and classroom participation.

Keywords: selfie photo, narrative writing, generating ideas and self-experiences

### **Introduction**

Writing is a demanding activity, especially for the learners of second language and yet it is a skill that they have to master in order to do well in content courses, especially at the tertiary level of education (Nor Shidrah, Nuraihan and Noor Lide, 2005). Although some of the students develop

good language skills at school, the university makes particular demands on students' language and study skills. For a Malaysian to be considered socially and professionally competent, it has become increasingly important for one to complement one's proficiency in the national language with that of the English language. However, it is disappointing to see many undergraduate students in Malaysia still lack of the ability in mastering English language, particularly in the writing component.

Writing in an English language classroom acts as a nucleus to learning in the higher institutions. It allows students to improve their skill of English language writing and gain immediate feedback from the lecturers. Moreover, writing allows lecturers to monitor students' progress and diagnose students' problems subjected to their written assignments or reports. Writing tasks related appropriately to those students who need to write in English language in their social, educational or professional lives. Hence, writing is one of the many skills that students find most difficult. The skill of writing is said to be a skill which students are less proficient in (Hiew, 2012).

In other words, writing is said to be the least use as students do not see the immediate purpose for them to write and on how or to whom they will be writing for. Therefore, the context of engaging students to start writing is not seen as an important or necessary task.

### **Statement of Problem**

Writing has become a key determinant in academic opportunities awarded to students beyond tertiary education. Educators usually face challenges in adopting and developing a wide range of methods in teaching skills of writing in the target language. Most Malaysian students do not seem to be able to attain reasonable English literacy even after going through 11 years of learning English language in school (Naginder, 2006; Nor Hashimah Jalaludin, Norsimah Mat Awal and Kesumawati Abu Bakar, 2008, as cited in Normazidah, Koo and Hazita, 2012). It is more alarming to learn that many Form Five students, including those from international schools, struggle with even basic English grammar. This has indirectly caused many of these students struggled in sentences making during writing tasks.

At tertiary level, the ability to generate well organised and coherent essays is expected. Most of the course work assessments and examinations are in the form of essays. Therefore, effective writing skills are essential to the students. In fact, mastering the basic structure of an essay with its emphasis on a clear point and well organised, logical support, will help almost every kind of writing that a person does. As many of these students who are studying in the institutions of higher learning are not sure how to first generate and organise their ideas, how to express themselves fluently or to be able to write grammatical correct sentences, these have become a problem to the English educators of the subjects. Notwithstanding, students studying at different levels generally confine their revisions to local problems at the word and sentence level (McCutchen, Francis and Kerr, 1997; Ferris, 1995; Polio, Fleck and Leder, 1998, as cited in Mohd Sahandri and Saifuddin, 2009).

Thus, learning to write effectively has become a major significance in academia. Writing is a complex process and skills which cannot be learnt overnight. It requires practices and strategies as students need to explore ideas and thoughts as well as the language. Chow (2007) has stressed that writing is an important key skill that undergraduate students should master than any other key components. Therefore, the main objective of this study is to identify new instructional materials in activating students' ability to write in English language classroom. This study is carried out to determine the effectiveness of selfie photo in generating ideas for language writing among undergraduates in a local university. Through this, language teachers may be able to produce desired learning outcomes from the students in using the right stimulus.

### **Literature Review**

Research on the process of writing has become the major focus of second language (L2) writing research since in the 1980s and one of the earliest researches was done by Arndt (1987). Students who learn English composition as a second or foreign language, struggled with many structural issues including selecting proper words, using correct grammar, generating ideas, and developing ideas about specific topics. More importantly, they have trouble developing functional language skills, such as proper natural language use in different social contexts and using language in creative ways. Thus, using the right writing strategies seems

particularly important because many researchers (Zamel, 1982; Raimes, 1985; Arndt, 1987; Victori, 1995; Beare, 2000) claimed that it is the writing strategies that primarily separate successful from less successful writers apart.

### ***Past Researches in Writing***

Research on writing skills and strategies in writing had been carried out by various researchers throughout the academic world. Many of these researchers looked into how writing works with various respondents from different background. However, most researchers agreed that there are still many more to be studied when doing research into writing component.

Some researchers on writing, included Wenden (1991) whose research involving eight students of English as a second language (ESL), stated that metacognitive strategies are mental operations or procedures that learners use to regulate their learning. Learners are said to be directly responsible for the execution of a writing task that includes planning, evaluating and monitoring. Wenden (1991) went on to say that cognitive strategies are mental operations or steps used by learners to learn new information and apply it to specific learning tasks. This information is then used to deal with the obstacles encountered along the way.

Zhang (2004), on the other hand, studied on three groups of subjects from three cultural backgrounds to show that socio-cultural context shapes the writer's ideology and the writer's sense of self. The focus group was made up of native Chinese speakers writing in English (CE group) as a foreign language while the other groups, used for contrastive purposes, were made up of native Australian English speakers writing in English (AE) and native Chinese speakers writing in Chinese (CC group). It was said that the stance and position a writer takes towards different topics results in differences in text types and reveals the cultural contexts in which the essays were written. The results showed that socio-cultural context also shaped the idea of the individual writer in what to write, how to write and what rhetorical conventions are available to be used, as well as what text types are preferred in the different situations.

In a research carried out by Hyland (2003) on 240 doctoral and masters' students in Hong Kong, it was found that a model of metadiscourse as the

interpersonal resources required to present propositional material appropriately in different disciplinary and genre contexts. The analysis suggests on how academic writers use language to offer a credible representation of themselves and their work in different fields, and thus how metadiscourse can be seen as a means of uncovering something of the rhetorical and social distinctiveness of disciplinary communities.

In further support to this study, Kim and Kim (2005) in a study on a group of Korean University had found four problems in university writing classes: 1) a heavy emphasis on grammatical form, 2) overemphasis on final product, 3) lack of genre-specific writing across the curriculum and 4) the need for more diverse types of feedback. In context of the English as a foreign language (EFL), where exposure to English is extremely limited, more effective approaches to writing and teachable skills should be applied to writing instruction such as balanced instructional and curricular approach of the process and genre-based approach to teaching.

### *Using Pictures as Writing Prompt*

The literature on what constitutes a good picture for eliciting quality writing samples indicates that picture content is the primary characteristic that should drive the selection of pictures. Subject matter that is familiar and personal, for example, baking a cake, triggers scripts that children can use to generate writing (Bates, 1991; Cleaver, Scheurer and Shorey, 1993, as cited in Schweizer, 1999).

Andrzejczak, Trainin and Poldberg (2005) conducted a study to look at the benefits of integrating visual art creation and the writing process. The qualitative inquiry uses student, parent, and teacher interviews coupled with field observation and artifact analysis. Emergent coding based on grounded theory clearly shows that visual art creation enhances the writing process. Students used more time for thought elaboration, generated strong descriptions and developed concrete vocabulary. The advantages of using production of art and artwork in the pre-writing process provided a motivational entry point, a way to develop and elaborate on a scene or a narrative.

Gutiérrez, Puello and Galvis (2015) shared their experience and the results of an action research in the field of EFL writing, especially with

colleagues and teachers interested in developing innovative strategies to teach writing at any level of tutoring. It reports on the use of picture series technique to improve the narrative writing skill in 20 participants from the ninth grade at Institución Educativa Simón Araujo in Sincelejo, Colombia. The obtained results through descriptive statistics (Mean) indicated that there was a significant difference between the group which was taught through pictures series technique and process-based approach over the one which only received process-based instruction.

The researchers concluded that the intervention with picture as visual art and picture series technique improved the overall growth of writing skills among the respondents, specifically in the areas of logical sequence and ideas exposure.

**Research Method**

This study was conducted at one of the local university in Malaysia. This research site was chosen with an intention to examine the effectiveness of using selfie photo in generating students’ writing skills of this university in term of organisation, length and language used. A total number of 40 ESL students undergoing the highest level of language proficiency course in the current semester were selected in this ‘One-group Pre-Post Test Experimental design’ study. However, five respondents were left out as they were absent during the test day. This study comprised of a total of 33 female and seven male respondents participated in two tests assigned in class during lectures.

Pre-test	Treatment	Post-test
O	X	O

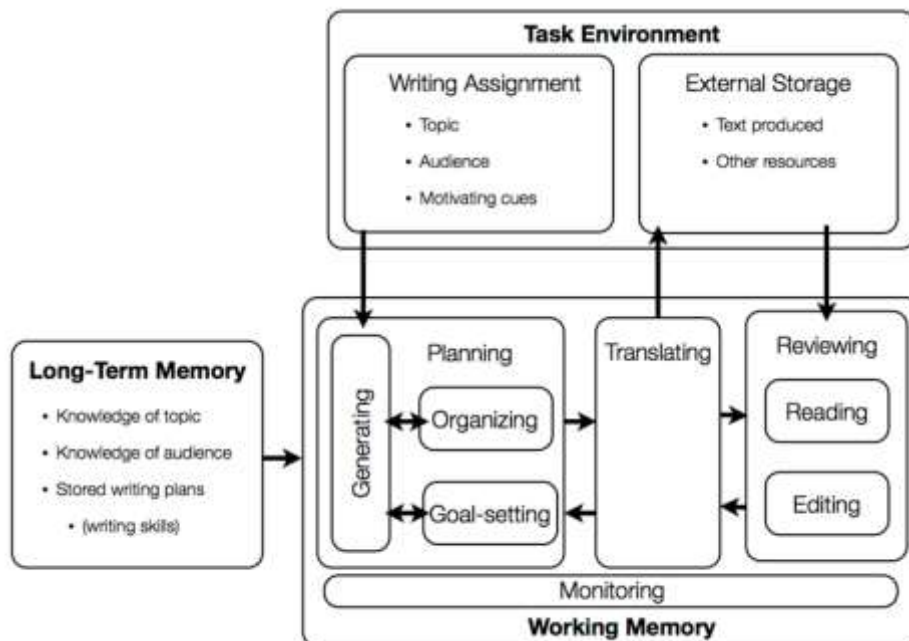
**Figure 1** One-group Pre-Post Test Experimental design

***Theoretical Framework***

The framework proposed by Flower and Hayes (1981) was used in this study to identify composing as a complex problem-solving activity and responding to a rhetorical situation in the form of a text. The ability to write well is not a naturally acquired skill; it is usually learned or culturally transmitted as a set of practices in formal instructional settings

or other environments. Writing skills must be practiced and learned through experience. Writing also involves composing, which implies the ability either to tell or retell pieces of information in the form of narratives or description, or to transform information into new texts, as in expository or argumentative writing (Myles, 2002).

The work of Flower and Hayes (1981), largely known as cognitive process model, represents the internal process of the writer's mind and looks at composing as a complex problem-solving activity. Through the use of pictures, to the like of selfie photos in this study, may then be able to manipulate student's motivation in communication and somehow generate opportunities for students to express themselves. Through this, language educators may be able to produce desired learning outcomes from the students using the right stimulus.



**Figure 2** The cognitive process model of the composing process (Flower and Hayes, 1981)

### *Procedures*

Throughout the 14 weeks, the respondents were taught using a coursebook specially developed for all the students undertaking the course. Lecturers

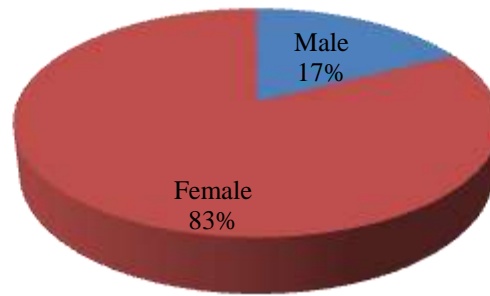
were required to give lecture of every chapter found in the coursebook in the hope that the students will have ample knowledge in using English for their daily purposes. At the beginning of the study, the respondents were asked to outline ideas for writing in order to measure their overall writing performance (development of ideas and language proficiency). The researcher had then provided another writing task to the respondents to be completed in the next lesson. The respondents were told to bring along a selfie in related to the assigned topic for the next class. Hence, the respondents were then asked to write a narrative essay in relation to the selfie photo.

Narrative writing, as mentioned by Ahola (2004), enables students to enjoy the writing process when they are able to write about topics relating to their lives. As a result, many teachers in schools, often begin a new writing course with some form of narrative writing. The writing essays were being assessed using the 6-band scale (refer to Appendix). It is also hope that this study will enlighten English language lecturers at the university to opt for strategies in helping these students in preparation to write a good piece of essay during examinations. Students may then be able to apply similar features learned into their writing piece. Through this, the improvement in language use will go in-line with the content when students are able to judge the features of their writings.

### **Discussion and Analysis**

This study was carried out in order to determine the effectiveness of selfie photo in generating ideas for English language writing among undergraduates in a local university and whether the selfie photos which were being used as a treatment in this study may affect these undergraduates' writing performance in term of content organisation, length and language used. This study also looked into the suitability of the type of selfie photos being used which were to be the instructional materials in enhancing undergraduates' ability to generate ideas in writing task.





**Figure 3** Distribution of respondents

There were 40 respondents participated in this study as shown in Figure 3. A total of 33 female degree students and seven male degree students had signed up for English Language 4 (EL4) as part of the university requirement. All the 40 students are Malaysian and were exposed to Malaysia Education System before enrolled at the institution of higher learning.

#### ***Analysis of Respondents' Essay Writing***

All the 40 essays from the respondents were scored independently by the rater to show the effects of selfie photo (treatment) towards the students' writing. The papers were rated on a holistic 6-band (1 to 6 scales) in which Band 6 is the higher scores. A total of 20 marks were allocated for content as another 10 marks were allocated for language. In this section, the data was analysed based on both content and language scores. A set of hypotheses was set to show changes to the study in term of content (ideas and length) and language.

Alternative Hypothesis ( $H_a$ ) = There is a significant difference between the development of content and language in students' writing performance.

Null Hypothesis ( $H_0$ ) = There is no significant difference between the development of content and language in students' writing performance.

***Effects of Selfie Photo on Writing Content***

Writing, according to Nor Shidrah, Nuraihan and Noor Lide (2005), is a demanding activity especially for learners of a second language and yet it is a skill that they have to master in order to do well in content courses especially at the tertiary level of education. Hence, with the use of selfie photo, it is hoped that it could be able to trigger respondents' ability in narrating their story into essay.

**Table 1** Paired samples statistics for content

Pair 1	Mean	N	Std. Deviation
Precontent	13.03	40	0.800
Postcontent	16.65	40	0.533

**Table 2** Paired samples test for content

		Paired Differences				<i>T</i>	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference					
				Lower	Upper				
Pair 1	Precontent - Postcontent	-3.625	0.705	0.111	-3.850	-3.400	-32.527	39	0.000

Based on Table 2, the results showed that there was a significant difference of  $-3.625$  between the mean scores of pre-content and post-content. The pre-content mean score in Table 1 was 13.03 with standard deviation of 0.800 whereas the post-content score recorded an improvement of 16.65 with standard deviation of 0.533. From Table 2, the *t*-value had showed significant difference of  $-32.527$  when *p*-value was set at the level of 0.05. Therefore, null hypothesis was rejected and alternative hypothesis was accepted where there was a significant difference in students' writing performance in term of development of ideas and text length.

*Effects of Selfie Photo on Writing Language***Table 3** Paired samples statistics for language

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	Prelanguage	5.80	40	0.516	0.082
	Postlanguage	7.95	40	0.316	0.050

**Table 4** Paired samples test for language

		Paired Differences				<i>t</i>	df	sig. (2-tailed)
Pair 1	Prelanguage - Postlanguage	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	-25.488	39	0.000
					Lower			
		-2.150	0.533	0.084	-2.321 -1.979			

Table 4 showed the paired differences and the results indicated a significant difference of  $-2.150$  between the means score. The results indicated a significant difference in an overall writing performance in both pre-test and post-test at 0.05 level,  $t=-25.488$ ,  $p=0.000<0.05$ . This showed that the treatment of applying selfie photos into writing classes had brought a significant improvement in term of scores. Therefore, null hypothesis was rejected and alternative hypothesis was accepted.

**Conclusion**

Many Malaysian writers were said to be lacked of ideas and content development when one comes into writing. As stated by Gashout (2014), in writing, student who are the writers must get used to drafting, revising and re-drafting for several times before producing a final piece. In contrary, the focus of most writing tasks assigned in English language classroom had placed heavily on the final product rather than the process of writing the essays. Based on the data tabulated above, it was found that there was a significant difference between the treatment and respondents' writing performance. The used of selfie photos as writing activity has

proven to be an effective strategy in helping tertiary students in generating ideas for writing in English language classroom. With this study, lecturers who conduct English proficiency courses in tertiary institution could apply selfie photos as instructional material for their students during writing activities in the classroom.

In general, narrative writing is one of the many writing styles being put into practice in the current curriculum. Incorporating selfie photos as an activity for writing classroom will allow tertiary education students to work on their own pace and indirectly trigger them to learn the skills. With the time and contact hours a student might have at the institution of higher learning, they should be able to practise writing English language on their own rather than relying too much on their lecturers. Notwithstanding, there is a need for English language educators to look for new strategies and teaching techniques in making the classroom fun and interesting for their students. Hence, with the use of pictures, to the like of selfie photos, have shown to have the ability to manipulate student's motivation in communication and have generated opportunities for students to express themselves.

The results of this study suggested that English language educators should be aware of the approaches to be applied into teaching writing at tertiary level. The importance of narrative writing is to enable writers to deliver their messages successfully. A variety of approaches could be applied on students in mixed ability groups. Massive practices on textual organisation and writing style could be emphasised. Educators could encourage students to write longer text gradually after a series of practices assigned. Through this study, the results indicated that the use of selfie photos could help students to generate ideas for writing activities and this, in return, helps educators to cultivate better usage of English language in the classroom.

## Appendix

## Sample Marking Guide

BAND	6	5	4
MARKS	20 – 18	17 – 14	13 – 10
<b>CONTENT</b>	<b>Fulfils task very competently:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Shows <b>excellent</b> response to the task</li> <li>Develops ideas effectively, info. effectively linked</li> <li>Shows mature treatment of the topic</li> </ul>	<b>Fulfils task competently:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Shows <b>good</b> response to the task</li> <li>Develops ideas reasonably well, info. well-linked</li> <li>Shows reasonably mature treatment of the topic</li> </ul>	<b>Fulfils task satisfactorily:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Shows <b>satisfactory</b> response to the task</li> <li>Develops ideas satisfactorily, info. linked</li> <li>Shows satisfactorily mature treatment of the topic</li> </ul>
MARKS	10 – 9	8 – 7	6 – 5
<b>LANGUAGE</b>	<b>Displays very confident control of language:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Uses wide variety of sentence structures effectively</li> <li>Very appropriate and varied vocabulary</li> <li>Able to link ideas very effectively</li> </ul>	<b>Displays reasonable confident control of language:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Some variety of sentence structures</li> <li>Appropriate and varied vocabulary</li> <li>Able to link ideas effectively</li> </ul>	<b>Displays satisfactory control of language:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Some variety of sentences but tendency to use simple sentences prevail</li> <li>Reasonably appropriate and varied vocabulary satisfactorily</li> <li>Able to link ideas satisfactorily</li> </ul>

*(continued on next page)*

**Appendix** (*continued*)

<b>BAND</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>MARKS</b>	<b>9 – 7</b>	<b>6 – 4</b>	<b>3 – 0</b>
<b>CONTENT</b>	<b>Fulfil task modestly:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Shows <b>modest</b> response to the task</li> <li>Develops ideas but with some effort, info. modestly linked</li> <li>Shows modestly mature treatment of the topic</li> </ul>	<b>Fulfil task in a limited way:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Shows <b>limited</b> response to the task</li> <li>Hardly develops ideas, info. poorly linked</li> <li>Hardly shows mature treatment of the topic</li> </ul>	<b>Does not fulfil task:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Shows <b>very limited</b> response to the task</li> <li>Mere mention of stimuli given</li> <li>Shallow and immature treatment of the topic</li> </ul>
<b>MARKS</b>	<b>4 – 3</b>	<b>2 – 1</b>	<b>0</b>
<b>LANGUAGE</b>	<b>Displays modest control of language:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Limited variety of sentences, generally simple structures</li> <li>Modestly appropriate vocabulary but these are mainly simple</li> <li>Attempts to link ideas but not quite satisfactorily</li> </ul>	<b>Displays poor control of language:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Hardly any variety of sentences – mainly simple structures</li> <li>Hardly any appropriate vocabulary and no variety</li> <li>Hardly any attempt to link ideas</li> </ul>	<b>Displays very poor control of language:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>No variety of sentence structures at all</li> <li>Inappropriate vocabulary and no variety</li> <li>No attempt at linking ideas</li> </ul>

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