

Implementation of Guided Group Academic Writing Using Online Learning Tools

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ABSTRACT

Writing is an important skill necessary for students pursuing a higher level of education. The challenge for second language learners would be to write accurate academic essays as required by the course for students that has been aligned to the Common European Framework (CEFR) B1 standard since 2015 at a public institution of higher learning. The academic English course offered at a public institution of higher learning was subjected to a guided academic writing using online tools by Harju and Åkerblom (2017) description of the teacher's role in facilitating learning to achieve the intended learning outcome which is to write an academic essay focusing on its features. The participants in this study were second year undergraduates in the second semester of their study who struggled to write an essay early in the semester. This study used a quantitative analysis collected from 10 participating students ($n=10$). The results found that the students made improvements to the feature of their essay and their feedback of the intervention were processed using frequency analysis indicated a hundred percent preference of the students to learn by their own discretion guided by the instructor and supported with online learning tools.

Keywords: Group, Guided, Online learning tools, Writing

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INTRODUCTION

Learners today collaborate to produce an academic writing. Yarrow and Topping (2001) found in their comparison that learners who wrote as a group has better quality compared to individual writing. In addition, they also found that there was improvement to the students' positive self-esteem in writing with a partner or a group. Vanderveen and Wells (2012) stated that collaborative learning using online tools such as Google Docs for students essay writing was useful to monitor the progress and changes made to improve their writing.

As an effort to corroborate with previous researches on the benefits of using peer writing (Harju & Åkerblom, 2017; Huskin, n.d.; Vanderveen & Wells, 2012; Yarrow & Topping, 2001), this study validated the findings made through the use of qualitative approach where the data were analysed through the students' overall writing performance through assessment. In addition, group writing should be continued for teaching and learning as the tasks provided to the learners would be meaningful for them to actively seek for information compared to the all-knowing teacher.

This study involved a group of second year students taking an academic English course. They were involved in the guided group academic writing using online learning tools through three objectives. The first objective was to determine whether the students writing features had improved through the instructor's intervention through guided learning activity when they wrote an argumentative essay. This was due to the problem with their first essay on Colours and Cultures in Malaysia that had incorrect features ranging from a weak hook, inaccurate thesis statement, and ambiguous supporting details. These issues were largely attributed to the poor use of transitional words and weak vocabulary.

The second objective aimed to identify pedagogical factors that influenced the guided group academic writing that focused on outcome. This is in line with Harju and Åkerblom (2017) who argued that learning in the 21st century is accomplished by giving a greater autonomy for learners to achieve the learning outcome by their own initiative over a teacher centred classroom.

Lastly, the study aimed to use an online learning tool such as E-learning Enrichment and Advance Platform (eLEAP) and Google Docs to see if the use of these tools can make significant improvement to the students

learning. The intervention made focused on using selected videos from Youtube to supplement or used as a trigger to give a clearer idea on how to write accurate features of an essay.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The subject in this academic English course in this study was CEFR aligned to B1. This level referred to learners who “Can write straightforward connected texts on a range of familiar subjects within his field of interest, by linking a series of shorter discrete elements into a linear sequence” (Council of Europe, 2018, p. 23). The marking scheme used to grade students’ assessment for this writing course was based on the Cambridge CEFR B1 Assessment in terms of language, content, and organization. Communicative achievement was not applicable as this particular descriptor is for assessing speaking assessment, not writing in relation to this study. The textbook used for this course is *Weaving it Together 3* (4th Edition) published by National Geographic Learning with Cengage Learning and the material was benchmarked to be suitable for B1 learners. The book contains a diverse set of topics ranging from food, customs, environment that are supplemented with reading comprehension exercises and writing of genres such as expository, argumentative and cause and effect. Over the course of 14 weeks in a semester, the students were also taught on American Psychology Association (APA) style 6th edition citation and referencing.

The student-centred approach is important and needs to be applied across all levels of learning institutions. However, there is real concern whether the educators know what student-centred approach is, so as to apply it (Estes, 2004). Cuban (2001) even asserted the use of the student-centred teaching approach as an ideal that eventually will weaken over time despite its benefit to student learning. The implementation of the student-centred approach is a crucial and part of government policy (Malaysia Ministry of Education [MOE], 2013). In addition, the major benefit of this approach is that it would allow the instructor to have greater freedom in designing tasks to achieve the necessary learning outcomes and could elicit diverse set of responses from the students (Porath, 2014). Soo (2015) pointed out that a set of clear rules in completing a task and maintaining group harmony can make the learners work together even though they might have peers who have lower proficiency compared to the rest. Phillipakos (2017) highlighted that effective learning can be achieved through three steps. The first is in making it clear to students about the graded criteria for the writing assessment. Second, is genre evaluation where the features of a specific essay that describes its purpose are made clear while the third step is maintaining students’ motivation to keep them focused in completing the objective of the task. Berling (1991) also pointed out the need for instructors to “decentralise” their roles as the instructor to the students. Harju and Åkerblom (2017) also concurred with a similar finding to emphasise that instructors should not place a rigid emphasis on the framework and structure in the learning of writing, but give the students a weaker framing of writing knowledge for them to develop the product as a group. One common agreement among scholars is the need to explain the standards of assessing to the learners to fulfil the expected outcome of the course in order for them to function effectively as a group to produce a quality piece of writing (Cuban, 2001; Estes, 2004; Harju & Åkerblom, 2017; Phillipakos, 2017; Soo, 2015). This shared perspective features the need for a more progressive, and efficient role for the instructor to implement guided group academic writing activities where learners expectation of learning is different due to the use of technology. There is therefore, a need to improve current practice and delivery of the academic English course.

There are a myriad of online learning tools available of the internet for students and instructors such as blogs, and Wikipedia (Velasco, 2018). Such variety poses a challenge in the selection of tools that fit the requirement of the prescribed task. Google docs was found to be the appropriate tool for writing as it encourage seamless group learning that does not overwhelm learners compared to discussion threads (Morrison, 2014). Vanderveen and Wells (2012) too supported the use of Google Doc for peer writing activities, as it is user friendly due to the familiarity of the feature of the program similar to Microsoft Word. Moreover, such online learning tools support learning outside the classroom and improve the students’ accessibility to information relevant to their learning for a course (Palak & Walls, 2009). Besides, they are familiar with asynchronous communication tools such as Facebook and Twitter to get the latest information to follow the current trend and happenings around them (Black, 2012). Bryant and Bates (2015) concluded that the use of online learning tools encouraged student enquiry, and create space for learners to challenge each other and innovate knowledge in the process. This study used Google Docs and the instructor participated to monitor and give minimal advice through comments for improvement. Additionally, the students also used eLEAP, the university’s online learning platform for the students to share their files, and chat to exchange information with their peers.

Guided Group Writing

The grading criteria for their assessment and the features that must be included in a five-paragraph essay were explained to the students at the first week of the course. These features included the hook, background information, thesis statement, topic sentences, supporting details, and concluding paragraph. The following week focused on developing the thesis statements. Students were taught to write simple sentences to define their topic sentence ideas before rewriting them into one compound sentence. At week three, they wrote an expository essay as a group on the topic of Colours and Cultures in Malaysia. They were required to submit it via eLEAP and for future reference to use as trigger to write the five-paragraph essay. The quality of the group writing after week three was found to be weak in terms of its features. The thesis statement was unclear, the topic sentence was not relevant to the essay, and supporting details were poorly connected due to limited use of transitional words and limited vocabulary.

Intervention in the form of a guided group academic writing started in week four. Each student was assigned a paragraph of an argumentative essay in class. They were asked to enquire one each other to create a complete puzzle of the fragmented argumentative essay. They were then instructed to label the features of the puzzle they had matched to its content. The next step was to divide them to their respective groups for the graded argumentative essay which must be submitted in three weeks. The following weeks were on APA style 6th edition citation and referencing followed by presentation skills where they had to present the graded argumentative essay after week seven. The detailed progress of the group for the first seven weeks during the course activity is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Course activity for the first seven weeks

| Week | Course activity |
|------|--|
| 1 | Topic sentence, supporting details and concluding sentence based on the theme in Unit 1: Symbols |
| 2 | Thesis statement writing |
| 3 | Write a hook and background information and concluding paragraph and complete Colours and Cultures in Malaysia. Submit on eLEAP. |
| 4 | Writing argumentative essay for assessment |
| 5 | Citation and referencing |
| 6 | Presentation skills |
| 7 | Submission of argumentative essay assessment |

The argumentative essay for the academic English language course has a maximum number of three students per group. The group comprised of the same gender that was coincidental and this gender-based composition is not relevant to the purpose of the study. The three groups for the argumentative essay assessment and the topics assigned to the students were as follows:

1. Superstitions in our culture have positive impacts on our lives,
2. Everyone should travel by public transport to reduce air pollution.
3. Superstitions in our culture have negative impacts on our lives.

Google random number generator was used to randomly assign the topics. The male students ($n=6$) were divided into two groups ($n=3$) and one was assigned to write topic no. 1 and the other topic no. 2 as stated above while the female students ($n=4$) wrote on topic no. 3. All groups used Google Doc to add and edit the content of their argumentative essay. The marking scheme used to assess the students' essay was based on the Cambridge English CEFR B1 achievement scale. The assessed features included content (21%), organization (10%), language (10%) citation and references (9%). The students were given a period of three weeks to complete their essay and submit a print copy to the instructor. The completed and submitted essays were compared with their previous essay on Colours and Cultures in Malaysia (CCM) to determine if there were any improvements to these students' writing.

A questionnaire was distributed and the data collected included the students' personal information such as their Malaysian University English Test (MUET) band result, the programme they are studying at university, and most importantly, how the guided group writing and technology had affected their writing. Four point Likert scale was used instead of five because neutral or unsure or do not know response has no significance in acquiring the students' feedback (Krosnick & Presser, 2012). As observed by Krosnick and Presser (2012), the options for neutral, unsure or do not know are unnecessary where respondents' biasness or poor motivation in participating can affect the study. The instrument used to collect the data from the students in this study required their views

on an item in the questionnaire (*strongly disagree=1, disagree=2, agree=3, strongly agree=4*). Data on the implementation of the course instructor lesson and online learning environment data were analysed using frequency analysis and presented as Table 1 and 2, respectively.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The data presented in a column chart from the questionnaire in Figure 1 revealed that seven of the students obtained a Band 3 MUET result while the remainder were Band 2 with three students. These students' proficiency was a mix of below average and average in the mastery of the English language for higher education.

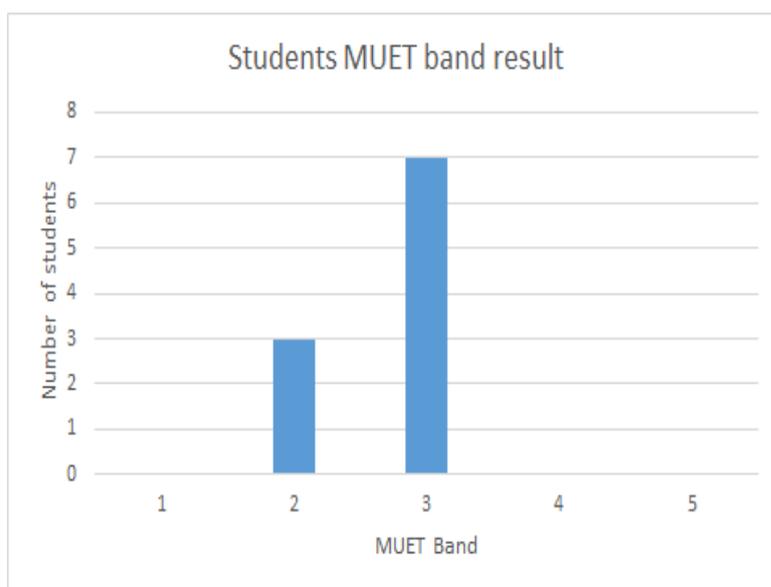


Figure 1. Participating students MUET band results used in the study

This study suggested that peer guided learning had improved the students writing as stated in Figure 2. The marks for these groups of students' essay were compared, which were Colours and Cultures in Malaysia (CCM), the expository essay and the student argumentative essay in which the selected topics were "Superstitions in our culture have positive impacts on our lives (SSC[+])", "Everyone should travel by public transport to reduce air pollution (EPT)" and Superstitions in our culture have negative impacts on our lives (SSC[-])". The percentage of comparison of the students' previous essay to the argumentative essay are shown in Table 2.

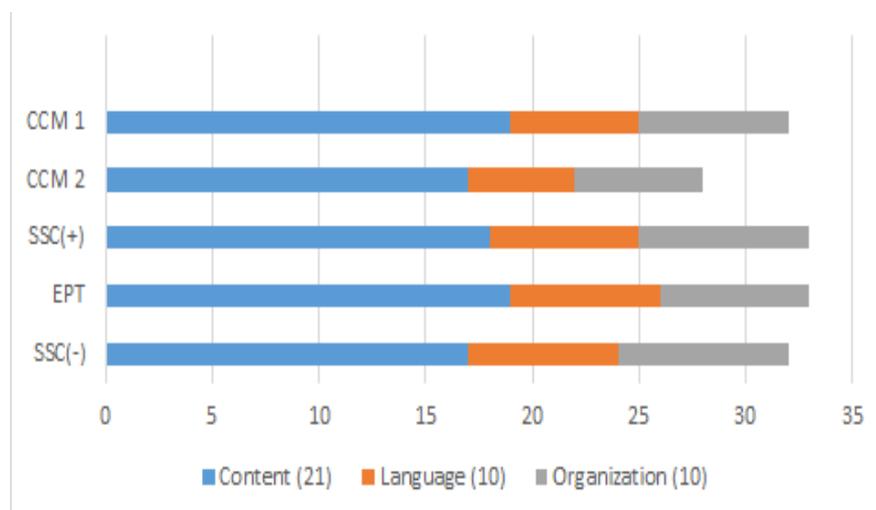


Figure 2. Comparison of students group writing marks according to assigned topics

Table 2. Comparison of the students' previous essay to the argumentative essay

| Feature | Content | Language | Organization | Total |
|------------------|---------|----------|--------------|---------|
| CCM 1 vs SSC(+) | 94.74% | 116.67% | 114.29% | 103.13% |
| CCM 1 vs EPT | 100.00% | 116.67% | 100.00% | 103.13% |
| CCM 2 VS SSC (-) | 89.47% | 116.67% | 114.29% | 100.00% |

A comparison between Figure 1 and Table 2 showed that the students' language and organization improved after the intervention through the guided writing activity over the course of two weeks. The marks awarded for language and organisation showed an increase of at least 16.67% and 14.29%, respectively. In addition the total marks the student acquired too had increased by at least 3.13%. The marks for EPT content indicated no difference when comparing their previous essay to the latest. However, two groups of students ($n=7$) showed a decrease in terms of their content with a reduction of 5.26% for the group assigned on CCM 1 and SSC (+) while CCM 2 and SSC (-) fared worse with a reduction on 10.53%

The likely reason why the group assigned with the SSC (+) and SSC (-) topic showed a decline in the content is likely because of the subject matter in question of the assessment. The topic on superstition may not be a familiar topic because of the culture and taboo associated to the topic limits the group from expressing their ideas to establish a common ground. This is different for the group assigned on the topic EPT because public transport is a familiar topic for students in public institution of higher learning where they commute using the bus regularly or use any forms of public transport.

The question items in Table 3 investigated on factors in the teaching approach that contributed to the student writing. The data which were processed using frequency analysis indicated the students' opinion that they have control over the materials, learning process, and able to produce an academic essay where all students strongly agree to all the items in the questionnaire. The findings in this table clearly indicate that these learners preferred to be in control of their learning. This finding is reflected in the data where the mean (4.00), median (4.00) and std. deviation (.000) are equal indicating that they strongly agreed to a guided group writing activity. This finding justifies Harju and Åkerblom (2017) view on the process of implementing a group writing activity for students. They need to be guided in terms of the course purpose, course outcome, assessment criteria, enquiry based learning between their peers and instructor, and a promotion of self-directed learning ultimately benefits the students in the learning process (Harju & Åkerblom, 2017).

The data as shown in Table 4 enquired whether online learning tools such as ELEAP and Google Docs helped to improve these students' writing as a group. The mean and standard deviation on two items in the questionnaire on the use of ELEAP and Google Doc were reported at 3.80 with a standard deviation of .422. There is a need to note that online learning tools are meant to support or supplement the activity. Furthermore, the instructor does not edit the Google Doc frequently because it is the learners' responsibility to take control and manage their own learning while the instructor advises them on the Google Doc to improve their writing based on the CEFR B1 writing rubric. The learners' however do strongly agree that the use of Google Doc did help with the students writing. The data on setting specific dates over the course of two weeks with an interval of reviewing the students writing every five days because the argumentative essay must be completed within 2 weeks (week 7-8) was rated with a mean, median and standard deviation of 4.00, 4.00 and .000 respectively. These findings indicated the instructor's effort and agreement with the students that they needed to show progress at specific dates in weeks seven and eight of the course. Similarly, the instructor uploaded relevant videos to supplement their learning for the course in week two until six as stated in Table 1.

Further, the findings suggested that using online learning tools gave these students space for interaction (i.e. eLEAP) and to explore new information. The viewing of the suggested videos set by the instructor as a start enabled them to explore new ideas to develop more complex ones when writing and interacting with one another as they utilised Google Doc to write their essay. Additionally, the small sized group ($n=10$) students in this class which formed smaller groups for the argument essay were able to align their interest in accomplishing the task towards a common learning goal (Huskin, n.d.). This finding showed that these learners preferred guidance as opposed to instruction in their learning.

Table 3. Students perception of the student-centred lesson for academic writing

| | My course instructor provides clear explanations of the grading criteria for the argumentative essay assessment. | My course instructor outlines the lesson for argumentative essay and gave me tasks to better understand the essay. | My course instructor uses clear examples to help me understand argumentative essay. | My course instructor allows me to ask questions and answers satisfactorily in class. | My course instructor asks me questions relevant to the argumentative essay. |
|----------------|--|--|---|--|---|
| N | 10 | 10 | 10 | 10 | 10 |
| Mean | 4.00 | 4.00 | 4.00 | 4.00 | 4.00 |
| Median | 4.00 | 4.00 | 4.00 | 4.00 | 4.00 |
| Std. Deviation | .000 | .000 | .000 | .000 | .000 |
| Range | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Minimum | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 |

Table 4. Students perception of the online learning tools used

| | My course instructor's use of ELEAP is helpful for my learning. | My course instructor's use of Google Doc to help my writing is helpful. | My course instructor edit my Google Doc writing frequently. | My course instructor set dates for reviewing our essay in Google Doc. | My course instructor's uploaded video on argumentative essay is helpful. |
|----------------|---|---|---|---|--|
| N | 10 | 10 | 10 | 10 | 10 |
| Mean | 3.80 | 3.90 | 3.80 | 4.00 | 4.00 |
| Median | 4.00 | 4.00 | 4.00 | 4.00 | 4.00 |
| Std. Deviation | .422 | .316 | .422 | .000 | .000 |
| Range | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 |
| Minimum | 3 | 3 | 3 | 4 | 4 |

CONCLUSION

The instructor does play a role to guide students' understanding and give them opportunities to apply what they had learnt into practice in every class. Additionally, the instructor too must make the additional effort of using online learning tools to guide the students learning beyond the classroom. Ultimately, the combination of the instructor's effort and use of online learning tools would ensure the achievement of a course's outcome.

This study, which focused on writing, offered insights into improving the students' overall writing skill as aligned to the CEFR descriptors that measures mastery of the language. Students would prefer the opportunity for activities that guide their learning over time to develop the skills needed for the course. Such guidance involves description of the grading criteria, task relevance, instructor's knowledge and the opportunity to ask and respond to questions. Additionally, it should be noted that the topic to assign the students must be a subject they are familiar with to improve the reliability of the intervention to validate the effectiveness of guided group academic writing.

Nevertheless, there is a need to increase the validity of this study through increasing the number of participants to improve the overall reliability of the guided group academic writing approach implementation in classroom. The findings from a small number of participants ($n=10$) cannot be generalised to indicate the effectiveness of online learning tools in guided group academic writing. However, this study can provide a basis for future research in the area.

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