

**THE EFFECTIVENESS OF CONTEXTUAL LEARNING IN WRITING
AMONG YOUNG ESL STUDENTS.**

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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that the work in this project paper is my own except for quotation and summaries which have been duly acknowledged.

Date : 7th April 2005

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SPECIALLY DEDICATED TO :

MY BELOVED LATE PARENTS MR. E. THEVARAYA PILLAI AND MRS. M. SELLAMMAL

MY DEAREST HUSBAND MR. SUKUMARAN KARUPPIAH PILLAI

AND TO MY LOVING CHILDREN S. THARMENDRAN, S. DHARSHINI PRIYA, S. SANTHIRA RUPINI AND S. SAKTIVARMAN PILLAY

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ABSTRACT

This study conducted explains the use and the effectiveness of contextual learning in the teaching of ESL writing skill. The research methodology applied was experimental using the pre-test and post-test. Additional data was also gathered from questionnaire which provided further insight on factors that would affect the successful implementation of contextual learning in schools. The results indicated that the average and low ability group students gained by the implementation of contextual learning. Contextual learning too promoted collaborative and learner-centered learning environment when students engaged in writing process. The significance and implication of the results as well as direction for future research are also discussed.

ABSTRAK

Kajian ini mengkaji keberkesanan pembelajaran secara kontekstual dalam sebuah kelas penulisan Bahasa Inggeris, Tingkatan Satu. Kajian ini berasaskan kaedah eksperimen dengan menggunakan pra-ujian dan pos-ujian. Manakala maklumat tambahan diperolehi daripada soalan kaji selidik yang dijawab oleh kumpulan eksperimen. Ini mengemukakan dapatan yang lebih menyeluruh mengenai factor-faktor yang memberi kesan terhadap kejayaan penggunaan pembelajaran secara kontekstual di sekolah. Hasil kajian ini menunjukkan pelajar-pelajar di dalam golongan sederhana dan lemah mendapat menfahat melalui pembelajaran secara kontekstual. Pembelajaran secara kontekstual didapati lebih merangsang corak pembelajaran koperatif dan pembelajaran berpusatkan kepada pelajar dalam proses penulisan. Implikasi dan signifikasi hasil kajian, dan juga cadangan mengenai kajian yang boleh dilakukan seterusnya turut dibincangkan.

LIST OF TABLES

Tables	Page
2.1 Differences between Contextual Learning and Traditional Learning.	14
3.1 UPSR English results of the Control and Experimental Group	30
3.2 Marking and Grading Scheme according to the Perak State Education Department 2005	36
4.1 Demographic Distribution (Race and Gender)	38
4.2 Profile of subjects	39
4.3 Pre-Test scores of the Control and Experimental Group	40
4.4 Post-Test scores of the Control and Experimental Group	41
4.5 Pre-Test and Post-Test scores of the Control and Experimental Group	43
4.6 Ability Level and scores	44
4.7 The Overall findings on the students' performance by ability	47
4.8 Mean of Central Tendency of Pre and Post-Test of the Control and The Experimental Group.	48
4.9 Students' feedback on the Questionnaire	50

LIST OF FIGURES

Figures	Pages
3.1 The Research Design	30
4.1 Pre-Test scores of the Control and Experimental Group	46
4.2 Post-Test scores of the Control and Experimental Group	47

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ESL	English as a second language
CL	Contextual Learning
C	Control Group
E	Experimental Group
PMR	Penilaian Menengah Rendah
UPSR	Ujian Penilaian Sekolah Rendah

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

The new revised KBSM English Language Syllabus 2002 is based on three main areas of language outcomes. They are the interpersonal, the informational and the esthetic. According to the Curriculum Development Centre of the Malaysian Education Ministry firmly agrees that the mastery of appropriate listening, speaking, reading, and writing strategies can enable and develop the students to attain the interpersonal, the informational and the esthetic domains successfully.

Writing is considered as a problem-solving activity where the writer usually has to accomplish two main tasks : they are, generating ideas, and composing them into a structure adapted to the needs of the reader and the goals of the writer in accordance with the context of situation. Currently, there has been a gradual shift from the traditional language based writing to the study of composition techniques and

strategies. Reid (1993) states that the dramatic change in the teaching of writing in recent times began with the recognition of the needs of ESL students in the academic environment. This change would help students who were found to be unprepared for the written work required in academic classes to do better.

Teaching composition at primary level required teachers to concentrate on mechanical practice of the language which involves spelling drills, vocabulary, copying, or completing skeleton texts. All these are actually the very distinct features of traditional approach to teaching writing. However, according to Cox (1996), the process of writing refers to what children do, and it involves five stages : prewriting, drafting, revising, editing and publishing. The skill of writing for different audiences is also emphasized.

One of the most effective strategies of teaching writing is by contextual learning. Contextual learning or experiential learning is a mode of learning that combines content with the daily experiences of an individual, the community and working environment. This mode of teaching enables concrete learning by involving the students to do 'hands-on' and 'minds-on' activities and occur in close relationship with students' actual experience. Most people learn best through informal contextual experience (Caine and Caine 1991, Gardner 1982, Kolb 1984). Contextual learning can also be described as the REACT strategy which is an acronym for Relating, Experiencing, Cooperating and Transferring.

Having looked at the strengths of experiential or contextual learning, the researcher feels that it is worth looking at its impact on the teaching of writing among young ESL students and to ascertain that it will also be beneficial for their future

needs. Thus, this research project will look at the effectiveness of contextual learning strategy in writing.

1.2 Need for the present study

Efforts made by the Curriculum Development Center to introduce Contextual learning especially in Science and Mathematics is a break-through in our newly revised syllabus. This new learning strategy is widely used in all subjects in accordance with the 'real-life' learning situation. Students from the primary, secondary or even at the university level are very weak in writing. This may be due to the students' low linguistic proficiency or poor teaching methodology in writing.

Writing is an individual activity; no two responses to any written assignment are the same and no two students have absolutely identical problems in learning to write. Thus, there is a need to carry out this study especially in providing a strong foundation among students to better their writing skills.

Poor expression of ideas in writing is another factor that can be attributed to this problem. Writing lessons are carried out typically based on traditional product-based approach where students cannot successfully generate their ideas effectively. Students are not given the opportunity to discover and generate ideas for themselves and their teachers are mainly concern of the grammatical and spelling errors found in their writing.

At present the new revised KBSM syllabus aims to produce students who can express and develop their ideas well in their writing. Through the use of contextual

learning strategy, students are exposed to real-life situation whereby they use all their senses effectively to ponder their ideas. Teachers are merely the facilitator and the students can actively play their role to collect information needed. Having that in mind the researcher planned to use the students of Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan Muhibbah who are generally weak in writing to use contextual learning methodology in writing classes which will provide a stimuli for them to generate and express ideas better.

1.3 Statement of Problem

There have been numerous complaints from various quarters that students from the secondary school to tertiary level lack the ability to read, speak, comprehend and write effectively in English. What normally happens in our Malaysian school nowadays is that writing lessons are conducted in such a manner where each student works through the lessons or task individually after some explanation given by the teacher. Students are not exposed to writing in context whereby a real situation is created for them to help in their writing tasks.

The phenomenon “writing has been neglected” in most schools especially in the weaker classes is also another problem in the deterioration of writing. Some English language teachers assume that weak students cannot write and they become the victim of such phenomenon. However, despite the fact that writing is the most difficult skill to master due to its rules and conventions, surprisingly 70% of the Lower Secondary Assessment or Penilaian Menengah Rendah (PMR) examination format is based on

writing. So, students who are sitting for the exam should really equip well to master their writing skills in order to pass their examination. This is due to the fact that there is a close line between writing and success at school. If students are unable to write then learning across the curriculum and passing examinations will not be easy.

Some English teachers from various schools lamented that students are unhappy and reluctant to write composition. They cannot express and generate ideas well. Apart from that, there are many grammatical errors made through direct translation from their mother tongue to English. Students too repeat ideas due to loss of words, and lack of proper vocabulary. There are also weak sentence pattern, poor coherence and most of all they do not have the proper context to build a foundation in order to write better. On the other hand teachers spend more time trying to improve spelling, hand-writing and grammar, but very little time is allocated in teaching children how to write and compose successfully for different audiences and purposes.

One way to remedy this problem is by promoting contextual learning methodology especially among the average and weak students. This form of learning can help to enable them to get the experience and knowledge to be better ESL writers.

1.4 The Purpose of the present study

I had personally observed in science laboratory, home-science cookery and sewing classes and in Living Skill Education or Kemahiran Hidup workshops how students learn the skill in a lively manner. The students move around from one group to the other to exchange ideas and compare their task. This active manner of learning in the

laboratory and workshops makes me think that I could try out that kind of learning in English writing classes.

Thus, the main aim of this study is to use contextual learning among the average and weak students to enhance their writing skills. Contextual learning is based on experience which can enable students to do “minds-on” and “hands-on” activities. It could be valuable in helping teachers to realize that contextual learning can help students in writing composition lessons. As for students, it helps to show them the alternative in learning language especially in writing composition. It will also provide insights to the language teaching and learning in writing.

1.5 Research Question

The research was designed to shed light on the following research question :

1. Can contextual learning improve Form One average and weak students' writing performance ?

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

In Latin the word “con” means “with” and the word “textum” means woven. Taken together therefore, contextual learning refers to “learning that is woven with reality”, reality meaning real life conditions, situations or happenings.

The term contextual learning has been used by contemporary scholars to define and describe a number of theories regarding teaching and learning that include the role of the teacher, the role of the student, and relevant learning practices which will help student make connections from the classroom activities to their own lives. This is very necessary for their future life. Many of the concepts of contextual learning were endorsed both by John Dewey (1933) and William James (1899).

This chapter discusses the contextual learning strategy in writing skills which has been lately introduced in the revised syllabus by the Curriculum Development

Centre into Malaysian schools. It is believed that this will help students to develop the ability to explore, generate and express new ideas through writing.

Contemporary contextual scholar, Dale Parnell in 1995 called William James the Historical Father of Contextual Learning. In his series of essays and talks to teachers, James described the “older pedagogic method of learning as learning things by rote, and “reciting them parrot-like in the schoolroom” (1899 p 733). He suggested that “students must keep notebooks, make drawings, plans, and maps, take measurements, enter the laboratory and perform experiments, consult authorities, and write essays”. (p 734)

James also believed that teachers must vary their lessons in order to excite students, ask questions in different ways and change data used in numerical problems. He also admonished teachers not to preach to pupils but rather “to get pupils both to think; to feel, and to do” (p 753). A good teacher, James believed, will help students make connections between the new lesson and children’s experience and that “the shuttle of interest will shoot backward and forward, weaving the new and old together in a lively and entertaining way” (p 769) so that students connect learning with something already there. Connections to what one already knows is vital to the students.

John Dewey's philosophy of learning paralleled James'. He believed that students must connect what they learn in a classroom and their own preparation for community life. Students should not learn something for the remote future or because the teachers say that it is important. According to Dewey (1933), learning in this way

“does not become a part of the life experiences of the child and so are not truly educative” (p 431).

Dewey also endorsed the teamwork component that contemporary scholars define as essential to contextual learning. In 1899, Dewey endorsed teamwork and cooperation as important to solving problems. Both Dewey and James emphasized the importance of the teacher serving as a facilitator to learning, with students' activity receiving the information and applying it to his life, making connections among disciplines, and the importance of teamwork.

2.2 The REACT Strategy

The concept of contextual learning as learning that occurs when knowledge is placed in a frame of reference, a point a person already knows or understands is further explained by Souders (1999). “Every person is different”, said Souders. “Start with something a student understands and build on it”. He cited two key statements that help define contextual learning :

- The mind seeks meaning in the environment in which a person is located.
- The mind seeks meaning through searching for relationships that make sense and appear useful.

The word REACT has often been used in the education circle as an attractive acronym by which teachers can promote contextual learning where R refers to “Relating”, that is learning in the context of life experience. It is the kind of contextual learning that typically occurs with very young children. As children grow older,

however, providing this meaningful context for learning becomes more difficult. The curriculum that attempts to place learning in the context of life experiences must, first of all, call the student's attention to "relate" everyday situations to new information to be absorbed or a problem to be solved.

E stands for “Experiencing” that is, learning in the context of exploration, discovery and invention and the chance to observe and it is the heart of contextual learning. The teacher should provide as many hands-on-experience as possible. No matter how well a teacher explains, the best way to reinforce learning is by getting students engaged first hand.

On the other hand A stands for “Applying”. Applying concepts and information in a useful context often projects students into an imagined future or into an unfamiliar location. This happens most commonly through text, video, labs, and activities, although, in many schools, these contextual learning experiences will be followed up with firsthand experiences such as outings, and mentoring arrangements. Students should be led to understand that the knowledge or information they obtain in the classroom can be used in their daily lives, not merely to be regurgitated during examination. Learning is for life.

C stands for “Cooperating” that is learning through the context of interpersonal communication, sharing, and responding with other learners. It is a primary instructional strategy in contextual learning where students are encouraged to share, respond and communicate with other learners who may have different views, opinions or life experiences. This sharing is done through group work or team work which then

provide students immeasurable opportunities to talk to one another, plan their work, pool their resources, and decide on their mode of presentation.

T stands for “Transferring” that is learning by using knowledge in a new context or situation. A teacher should always be aware of what the students already know and then motivate them to build new knowledge upon their existing “database”. Knowledge can also be transferred from the classroom to daily life.

In summary REACT is a method of teaching which emphasizes the importance of teachers making connection between students' life experiences and what is being taught.

2.3 Experiential Learning

Stephen Brookfield (1983 : 16) has commented that writers in the field of experiential learning have tended to use experiential learning in two contrasting senses. The first type of experiential learning is the sort of learning undertaken by students who are given a chance to acquire and apply knowledge, skills and feelings in an immediate and relevant settings.

The second type of experiential learning is ‘ education that occurs as a direct participation in the events of life’ (Houle 1980 :221). It is learning that is achieved through reflection upon everyday experience.

Much of the literature on experiential learning, “ is actually about learning from primary experience, that is learning through sense experiences” (Jarvis, 1995 : 75) .

2.4 Contextual Classrooms

Caine and Caine (1991) wrote new information must be significant to students and connected to their personal experiences. Referring to their connection as map learning, they stated it is vital to “help students relate the material they need to know to what they already know” (p. 51). They also advocated giving students real experiences, providing physical movement, social interactions, and practical projects to complete the connection.

Teaching in this way has many advantages. Caine and Caine (1991) gave three reasons for this approach. First, the brain searches for common patterns and connections. Second, every experience contains within it the seeds of many, and possibly all disciplines. If students are studying about Malaya in a history class, literature, art, music, and geography can become a part of the historical study. Thirdly, the student has a much better chance of grasping what is learned since the same message is packaged in many different ways.

To bring the class to life in the mind of the students, Caine and Caine (1991) described a German class. English was a foreign language of the students. The classroom also reflected Germany through German artifacts and posters of Germany. Students in this class translated fairy tales and sang German songs. Caine and Caine (1991) asserted the effectiveness of this technique. They asserted that “students in these classes won first, second, fourth and sixth places in the state language contest “ (p 116).

This total immersion in German culture is but one example given by Caine and Caine in order for students to make connections and become totally involved in

learning. While Caine and Caine (1991) agreed that students must be exposed to subject matter in many different ways, they believed that a great number of the experiences “must be complex, real projects” (p 120). This project method has added advantage of connecting content to the students’ everyday learning. He believed the project method enables the teacher and students to “model or demonstrate the subject, bring in experts, engage in genuine problem solving, interview authorities, and create learning games “ (p 120).

A good example of authentic learning that motivated students is by placing them in cooperative groups whereby each group is assigned of different task. Firstly, the classroom became noisier as students exchanged ideas and learned to work with each other. Secondly, the role of teacher changed to that of a facilitator. No longer was the teacher at the front of the room dispensing information but rather moving from group to group serving as a listener, making recommendations and sitting among the students as a group member.

The traditional form of teaching, on the other hand, stresses more on rote learning and memorizing grammatical rule. The teachers were the main source of information provider and the students play a very passive role in just receiving the information. Teachers decide everything for the students. The content of their teaching is typically focused on language and logical-mathematical intelligences only. All the teachers practice on the same type of methodology, that is by giving lectures and their feedback is only by assessing question and answer only.

Thus the differences between contextual learning and traditional learning in classrooms can be summarized in the following table. (Table 2.1)

Table 2.1**Differences between Contextual Learning and Traditional Learning in****Classroom**

Topic	Traditional Learning	Contextual Learning
Learning Outcomes	Transfer of information. Fills students with deposits of information until needed.	Find, build on and apply the information received to the real world. Relate information with prior knowledge.
Teacher's role	Information provider	Facilitator and mentor
Student's roles	Passive information receivers through lectures and reading	Active in finding and building on the information gained through real activities in everyday life.
Content	Caters for language and logical-mathematical intelligences only	Caters for multiple intelligences
Methodology	Lectures / question & answers	Inquiry, findings and application
Evaluation	Testing for facts	Based on achievement and problem-solving

Source : Contextual Teaching And Learning by Alan Blanchard, Ph.D.

2.5 The role of the teacher

John Goodlad (1970) believed there should be a checklist of reasonable expectations for schools in the teaching methodology. One of those expectations is that classroom instruction would be guided by an emphasis on learning how to learn. Rather than the teacher telling students, they should be given the opportunity “to explore, to try, to inquire, and to discover for oneself “ (p 13).

Bruner also believed that the key to finding meaning for students lies with the role of the teacher. In 1986, he wrote about a favorite teacher who spoke to the class about a puzzling fact that water changed from liquid to solid. Immediately, Bruner felt the teacher’s sense of wonder and realized later that “she was an event not a transmission device” (p. 126). He believed that outmoded pedagogy viewed the process of education as a “transmission of knowledge and values by those who know more to those who knew less and knew it less expertly” (p 123) and that “the pedagogy that resulted was some view of teaching as surgery, suppression, replacement, deficit feeling, or some mix of them all” (p 124)

Caine and Caine (1991) in their brain-based research identified the importance of the role of the teacher in facilitating learning. They view educators “as generators of meaningful information, connecting, and linking knowledge who can not only use the appropriate software but far surpass its performance in interactive questioning and explanations of information” (p 23).

All these scholars view the teacher as a facilitator of learning, as one who is able to inspire students to become involved and who creates a classroom environment that includes much more than simply dispensing knowledge. As the role of the teacher