

## Developing Narrative Writing Skills via a Reading Programme for Low English Language Proficiency Undergraduates

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### ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the effects of a reading programme on the narrative writing skills of low English Language proficiency level undergraduates in a Malaysian university. A total of eighteen narrative texts closely associated with the undergraduates' personal experiences were prepared by the researchers for a reading-writing intervention programme. This quasi-experimental study involved 192 undergraduates who participated in a nine-week intervention programme. The pre-test and post-test mean scores indicated significant differences in the undergraduates' content development, lexical variety and grammatical accuracy. The findings show that there is an improvement in content, lexical variety and grammatical accuracy in students' essays. The undergraduates' improvement in the content development aspect shows that reading texts which supplement information common to the undergraduates' background will help them in their content development specifically and writing performance on the whole. The study also shows that the reading materials, vocabulary input and comprehension exercises helped the undergraduates to improve on their use of lexical variety and grammatical structure. The results support the notion that comprehensible input (Krashen, 1984) and appropriate language instructional exercises for writing intervention enable engaged learning by the students. The study therefore recommends that teachers should utilise authentic reading materials that are relevant to the

background knowledge of the students in teaching writing to low English proficiency level undergraduates.

**Keywords:** reading-writing; reading intervention; writing development; narrative writing; low-proficiency

## INTRODUCTION

Writing has always been regarded as an important component in language learning. All texts are inevitably made up of lexical and grammatical words (Quiller-Couch, 1916) that deliver a content or message. In texts, the lexical words help with the meaning formation while grammatical words enable one to arrange the meanings coherently. When the meaning is not presented clearly, then the message will not be articulated well. These basic conventions of writing need to be acquired by the learners for effective writing. However, low proficiency second language (L2) learners face challenges in completing writing tasks mainly due to lack of lexical and grammatical knowledge to put forth their thinking into words that convey a certain meaning or story. In acquiring a second language, writing skills is known to pose the greatest challenge to both the learners and the teachers. In a writing task, the learners are required to deliver their ideas, feelings, thoughts and experiences into text (Grabe, 2001; Hyland, 2003; Zainal & Husin, 2011). Likewise, the teachers need to convey and deliver the content. So, the teachers inevitably need the expertise and ability to teach the students to write (Hyland, 2003). Studies have shown that English as a Second Language (ESL) learners have the tendency to use their first language (L1) in their second language (L2) writing practices to make up for linguistic deficiencies. This commonly occurs when the students need to convey the complete meaning and the L1 is used as a writing strategy in their L2 writing tasks (Kim & Yoon, 2014). In their study, Kim and Yoon (2014) explored the extent to which Korean learners of English use their L1 in L2 writing tasks and how this use varies according to their L2 proficiency. They found that lower level students used their L1 more than the advanced students, an evident pitfall caused by several factors such as lack of vocabulary acquisition and interest.

Writing difficulties also affect the students' attitude towards writing (Ismail, Hussin & Darus, 2012). Students need to perceive the writing tasks positively in order to acquire the skills effectively. When the students perceive the text positively, they will then have a lower level of apprehension towards the writing tasks and thus increase their readiness to write (Abd Rahim, Jaganathan & Tengku Mahadi, 2016). The lack of vocabulary also contributes to the difficulty of writing for a foreign language learner (Astika, 1993; Santos, 1988) and it is one of the most important features that determines one's writing quality (Leki & Carson, 1994; Raimes, 1987; Walters & Wolf, 1996). Given the difficulties surrounding the conventions of writing, it is important for one to obtain the necessary input so that the attitude and perception towards writing is a facilitative one. The right input to deliver a fairly comprehensible output will enable the students to engage themselves with the text. Otherwise, the interest will be hampered. Studies have shown that having the right input of reading is important when a second language or foreign language is concerned (Renandya, 2007). Additionally, frequent reading and writing exercises have a positive impact on writing performance (Tsang, 1996). However, as mentioned earlier, the writing process poses problems to both native and non-native speakers. Non-native undergraduates face an added burden due to lack of vocabulary acquisition, inaccurate use of grammatical structure and poor command of lexical variety. Hence, one method of enhancing the grammatical and lexical mastery is via reading; a notion that gives emphasis to the impact of extensive reading (Renandya, 2007; Tsang, 1996).

In the case of second language (L2) learning in the Malaysian context, undergraduates face difficulties in their writing tasks due to the problems faced in grammatical accuracy (Ghabool, Mariadass & Kashef, 2012), learning styles as well as a lack of vocabulary knowledge (Mokhtar, Halim & Kamarulzaman, 2011). Although the English Language subject is taught as one of the main subjects in the Malaysian school curriculum from primary to secondary levels, the communication proficiency level has been criticised, particularly for failing to meet the workforce needs (Sarudin et al., 2013). In the workplace, the written language is also seen as a major problem among graduates. The statistics for the year 2015, shows that about 66 per cent of 48,708 university undergraduates' achievement level in the 800/4 Writing component of Malaysian University English Test (MUET) was at Band 3 (modest users) while 14.38% achieved Band 2 (limited users). The more proficient users made up less than 17%; 15.9% were competent users (Band 4), 1.1% were good users (Band 5), and 0.01% were very good users (Band 6) (Malaysian Examination Council, 2017). Similar low achievement level in the higher bands – Band 5 and Band 6 has been observed in previous studies as illustrated in a study conducted by Atan (2007). The low achievement of students in writing is a great concern as various continuous efforts are made to increase the English Language proficiency level among Malaysian students. The present study is therefore, motivated by the proposition that a reading programme, when tailored with suitable reading input that is relevant and familiar to the readers' background will have an impact on the writing skills; particularly of low English proficiency undergraduates. Thus, this study was undertaken to investigate the effects of reading on low English Language proficiency undergraduates. The objective of the study is to investigate the effects of reading on students' writing in terms of content development, grammatical accuracy and lexical variety. The research questions based on the objective of the study include:

1. What is the effect of narrative reading on low English Language proficiency students' content development in narrative writing?
2. What is the effect of narrative reading on low English Language proficiency students' grammatical accuracy in narrative writing?
3. What is the effect of narrative reading on low English Language proficiency students' lexical variety in narrative writing?

## **REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

### **UTILISING NARRATIVE READING TO IMPROVE WRITING SKILLS**

According to Myles (2002), second language learners are exposed to social and cognitive challenges related to second language acquisition when writing. This could be the result of a person's inadequate skills in writing (Zorbaz, 2015). In the context of Malaysia too, studies have shown a relationship between anxiety and writing performance. For example, Daud and Abu Kassim (2005) in their study found that low performing students were more anxious than high performing students due to lack of vocabulary and experience of language use. On the same note, Clay (2001) emphasised the importance of practice in writing. Undergraduates who are provided with sufficient vocabulary and experience of language use will have lower level of writing apprehension and perform better in their writing tasks.

Other factors could be linked to the influence of the mother-tongue, inadequate reading practice and ineffective teaching methods. However, writing skills can be developed. Krashen's (1977) input hypothesis posits that with relevant reading input that is comprehensible, one's language proficiency can be enhanced. This notion underpins the theoretical basis of the study whereby the writing abilities of the students can be developed

via reading, given the comprehensible input that will enable the students to obtain the necessary vocabulary, grammatical structure and content for their writing. The undergraduates in the reading intervention programme have already been exposed to English language since their primary level of schooling. Thus, with the relevant input and instructional practices, the students will be able to enhance their writing skills. By exposing the undergraduates consistently to narratives through an intensive reading programme as mentioned earlier, the undergraduates' writing apprehension can be reduced and their writing skills can be further improved. Underlying the whole discussion of enhancing the writing skills among the undergraduates is habit formation. With comprehensible input and instructional practices, the students will be able to acquire the necessary vocabulary, lexical and grammatical knowledge which will assist them in writing.

In the context of enriching the undergraduates' vocabulary knowledge, as in the case of this study, the narrative genre was deemed appropriate. According to Hall-Mills and Apel (2012), narratives include short stories related to personal events or other life experiences. These personal events or life experiences provide the basis for writing in any academic classroom. The justification for using narrative texts is that this genre may instil an interest and motivate the undergraduates to write. In addition, this genre, as noted by Barthes and Duisit (1975), imposes a structure on the readers and enables them to acquire certain patterning to begin writing systematically. The repetition of the imposed structure will have an impact on the writing as the undergraduates are tuned with systematic instructional practices. Moreover, Stinnett (2013) exerts that the elements that comprise a story (i.e., character, setting, problem, and solution) could be incorporated into the undergraduates' writing as they could be associated with the writer's intended meaning. The narrative genre also has an impact on the cognitive aspects of the reader. According to Willingham (2004), narratives provide a familiar pattern for the readers to organise ideas as they can process the information more effectively in the cognition. This is the notion that underpins the reading-writing intervention programme for low English Language proficiency undergraduates in this study. A guided reading intervention programme with continuous systematic instructional practices will enable the undergraduates to acquire the necessary vocabulary, lexical variety and the grammatical structures provided during the intervention process.

#### **IMPLEMENTING THE READING-WRITING INTERVENTION PROGRAMME**

The Reading-Writing programme is designed to investigate the reading and writing relationship among low proficiency English Language learners. The implementation of the programme is an attempt to enhance and develop learners' writing skills through reading and exposing the learners to development and organisation of ideas, and language conventions. As mentioned earlier, narrative texts are used as they are easily understood and can be used with almost any learner of English (Widdowson, 1983). The Reading-Writing programme is developed based on studies that found reading helps in developing content for writing (Belcher & Hirvela, 2001; Cobine, 1995). Reading also contributes toward grammatical accuracy, sentence structure and knowledge of vocabulary (Catts, Fey, Zhang & Tomblin, 1999; Fuqua, 2015; Hirvela, 2004). Studies have indicated links between reading and achievements in writing (Baker & Brown, 1984; Berninger & Abbott, 2010; Catts et al., 1999; Cobine, 1995; Fuqua, 2015; Pakhiti & Li, 2011). Besides enriching the vocabulary knowledge (Walters & Wolf, 1996), the effect of reading on writing is that it helps the learners to engage in meaningful communication. When one reads meaningfully, it facilitates the interaction with the text. The reading materials for the programme were selected according to the needs, interest and language ability of low English proficiency undergraduate students to enable them to interact with the materials. The reading materials

were also selected to facilitate their writing process. These materials were utilised with the appropriate language instruction so that the students would be guided systematically. A study by Abadikhah and Ahangar (2015) showed that when the content of the text is combined with the appropriate language instruction, it affects the accuracy of the production and benefits the students in terms of retaining their attention. Although the study focuses on communicative production, the focus on appropriate language instruction and suitable text are important aspects highlighted in the study.

Language learners are able to use the resources from reading materials to help them with writing (Tsai, 2006). In L2 context, as in the case of this study, Krashen (1984) argues that reading helps L2 learners acquire the necessary language constructs such as grammatical structures and rules for writing, and facilitates the process of language acquisition. Krashen's (1984) input hypothesis notes that a comprehensible input is necessary for language acquisition, and given the knowledge base for the written text, mainly for utilising the necessary grammatical structures and discourse rule for writing comprehensible input, Krashen (1984) believes that acquisition will take place effortlessly and involuntarily. Krashen's (1984) theory is based on cognitive development and his core belief is that teaching is most effective when it engages learners. Hence, the preparation of the narrative texts are based on the notion that when undergraduate students are familiar with the background of the texts, then the students will be able to engage more easily with the texts. Tsai (2006) suggests that there is a need for creating a responsive learning environment, which encourages employing methods that are culturally sensitive and locally productive in the students' learning of English in the era of change. Narrative texts were used in this exploratory study as such texts often have content of general interest, and only require relatively neutral background knowledge for interpretation, have relatively unmarked organisation of text and have a flexible schemata (Tsang, 1996) as well as allow readers to focus their attention and build personal connection (Nathanson, 2006).

To sum up, through reading, the undergraduate students in this reading intervention programme will be able to acquire the vocabulary knowledge, grammatical structure as well as the rhetorical features of the texts as described by Tsai (2006). The Reading-Writing programme was implemented for nine weeks. The students in the groups were given a pre-test in the first week, and a post-test in the tenth week of the course. During the nine weeks, the groups had a constant and consistent schedule of reading exposure for three hours a week. In this programme, the students had an input-based reading activity and an output-based writing activity. During the 9-week intervention, narrative reading texts developed by the researchers were used as the basis for comprehension questions and discussions. The intervention for nine weeks comprised two short narratives per week on the same theme with different levels of difficulty (refer Table 1). In total, 18 narratives were explored. A variety of reading texts based on three themes for the narratives were chosen – ranging from happy and sad events, to frightening experiences. The themes were selected based on the interest and their appropriateness for university undergraduates and their background for further exploration in the classroom. The purpose of reading was usually related to pleasure, information, and general understanding. Questions and problems that are related to grammar were dealt with by the teachers in context. During the programme, the teaching of grammar was inclusive but not taught in isolation. This is due to several reasons; firstly to give emphasis to the reading of the text and secondly, to allow the undergraduate students to be familiar with the grammatical structure indirectly; an approach aligned to the communicative approach of language learning whereby grammar is taught incidentally and not in isolation. The written exercises in general were focused on writing short paragraphs and essays, and these written exercises were given to the students every week with increasing level of difficulty as shown in Table 1. The students practised writing the sentences in the reading

texts when answering comprehension questions based on the texts. After answering the comprehension questions, the student wrote essays on similar topics. These exercises were subsequently marked with particular attention given to the aspects under study; mainly content development, lexical variety and grammatical accuracy. To facilitate the collection of data and analysis, meetings among the researchers were conducted on a regular basis.

TABLE 1. Titles of reading texts according to levels of difficulties

Level	Titles
One (150 words)	Our first day in Yogyakarta The mystery of Stonehenge A scary night My best friend, Cat The value of education Never give up
Two (350 words)	A cherished childhood memory That night that changed everything Yogyakarta, the student city School excursion Counting the calories in Malaysian Food A visit to the waterfall
Three (500 - 600 words)	A special bond from the hospital Being friends Do not litter your home Smoking kills! Anyone for a selfie? To believe or not to believe.

Below are excerpts of the reading texts used during the Reading-Writing programme. The meanings of the words in the texts are provided to help improve the vocabulary knowledge of students.

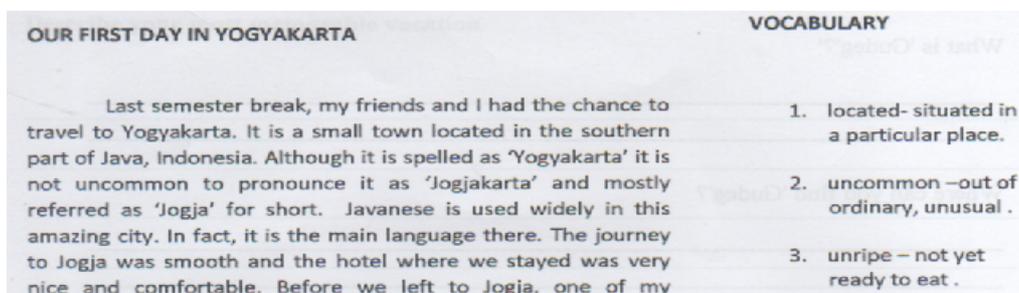


FIGURE 1. Sample reading text 1

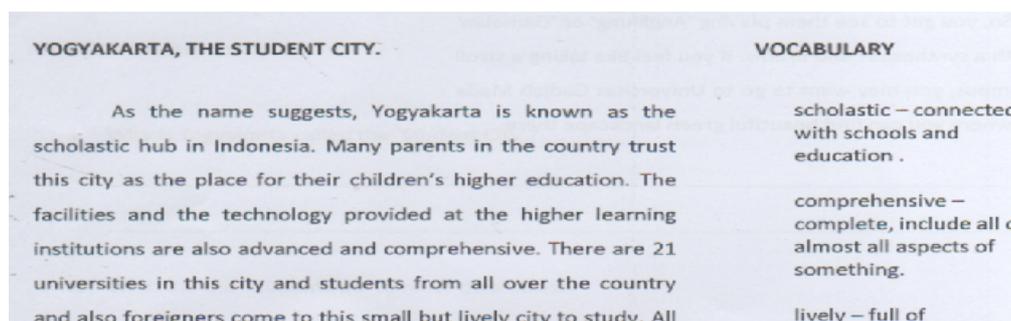


FIGURE 2. Sample reading text 2

Below are examples of comprehension questions based on the reading texts. The students practised writing the sentences in the reading texts when answering the questions.

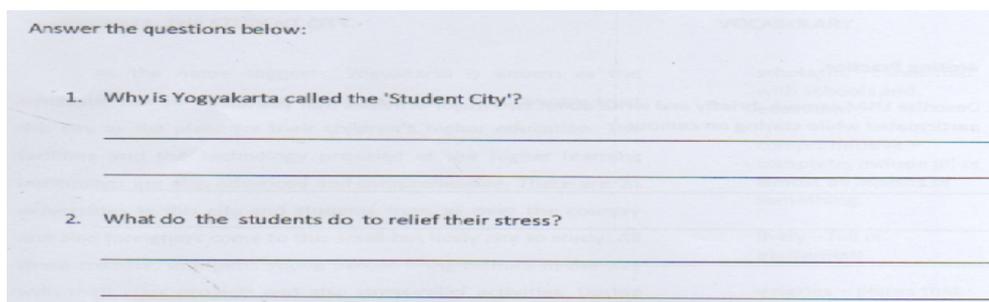


FIGURE 3. Sample comprehension questions

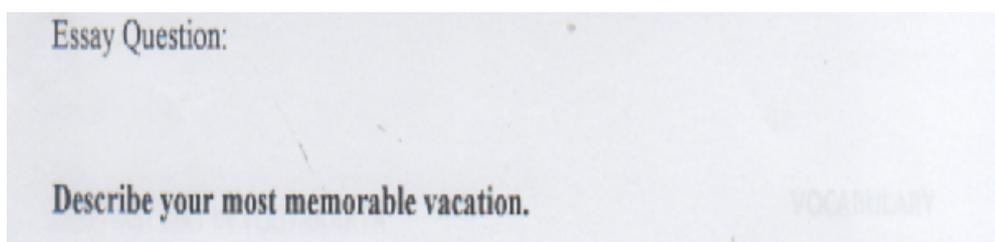


FIGURE 4. Sample writing question

## METHODOLOGY

### PARTICIPANTS

The participants were 192 first-year undergraduate students from various disciplines enrolled in a Preparatory English course at a Malaysian university. All the participants had about twelve years of ESL instruction prior to their admission into the university. The students who participated in the study were those categorised as ‘limited’ (Band 2) and ‘extremely limited’ (Band 1) users according to the Malaysian University English Test (MUET). A group of four teachers were involved in the study; each teacher with a group of 20-25 students. Several workshop sessions were conducted to standardise the teachers' approaches to teaching reading and writing to the groups, and to discuss and standardise the marking of students' essays (writing). Focus group interviews were also carried out with the students to triangulate the data.

### INSTRUMENTS AND PROCEDURES

The exploratory study had a pre-test and post-test instrument. A pre-test was administered at the beginning of the course and a post-test was administered after nine weeks. The pre-test was administered to evaluate the students' initial writing skills, while the latter was administered to measure the effect of reading on the students' writing achievement. The students wrote narrative essays of about 250 words on “The best memories of my school life” for the pre-test and the post-test to show their level of writing ability. As mentioned earlier, for the intervention purpose, reading texts were prepared by the researchers with repetitive patterning to enable the students to utilise the necessary lexical and grammatical structures when writing narrative essays. The tests duration was one hour, and both tests were graded according to the writing scale used by the university. The scores were also administered by three raters. To measure the writing performance of the students, the university's marking

scale for writing was used besides the guideline by English Expository Writing Rubric (2011) that was adapted and discussed by the teachers for assessment purpose. The measures cover three components of writing performance including content, lexical variety and grammatical accuracy. Table 2 below illustrates the allocation of marks.

TABLE 2 Components for assessing the writing tasks and marking rubrics

Components	Description	Mark allocation
Content	ideas are clearly focused on topic specified	4 points
	most ideas are focused on topic but important facts and information was either unclear or omitted	3 points
	ideas are generally related to the topic with the presence of some irrelevant and repetitive facts and details	2 points
	few facts related to topic with little evidence provided	1 point
Lexical Variety	word choice and tone that is purposeful, precise and clear	4 points
	most part clear and specific with appropriate tone	3 points
	general word choice with little establishment on the appropriate tone	2 points
	vague or limited word choice with inappropriate tone	1 point
Grammatical Accuracy	consistent command of grammar – (spelling accuracy, punctuation, tenses, subject-verb agreement and discourse markers)	4 points
	adequate command of grammar	3 points
	partial command of grammar	2 points
	poor command of grammar	1 point

Based on these criteria, three raters marked the essays, giving a score for each aspect out of 4 points, with a total of 12 points, depending on the degree of similarity between the students' essays and the standard descriptions given in the writing scale. The final scores were vetted and cross-checked.

Over the nine weeks, the undergraduate students were given progressive reading texts in three phases ranging from level 1 to level 3. Level 1 texts consist of 150 words; level 2 texts with 350 words while level 3 texts consist of 500-600 words. At the end of each phase, the undergraduates were given progressive written tasks; a short paragraph of less than 100 words in week 3 (Level 1); a short essay of not more than 200 words in week 6 (Level 2) and a short essay of about 300 words in week 9 (Level 3). The written tasks were provided as a form of continuous writing practice.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

TABLE 3. Paired Samples Statistics

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	Content Pre	2.4323	192	.61021	.04404
	Content Post	2.6667	192	.59080	.04264
Pair 2	Lexical Pre	2.2240	192	.55753	.04024
	Lexical Post	2.4115	192	.54386	.03925
Pair 3	Grammar Pre	1.9792	192	.56936	.04109
	Grammar Post	2.1302	192	.58670	.04234

Paired samples t-tests were carried out to compare the pre-test and post-test scores of the undergraduate students. Table 3 displays the mean scores of the pre-test and post-test scores in the three writing components: content, lexical variety and grammatical accuracy. As the descriptive data in Table 3 shows, the post-test mean scores of the students were much higher than the pre-test mean scores in all essay writing aspects. The students improved most in the content aspect in which their mean score increased from 2.43 in the pre-test to 2.66 in

the post-test. The mean score for lexical variety increased from 2.22 to 2.41 and the mean score for grammatical accuracy increased from 1.97 to 2.13.

TABLE 4. Paired Samples Test

		<b>t</b>	<b>df</b>	<b>Sig. (2-tailed)</b>
Pair 1	Content Pre –Post	-5.506	191	.000
Pair 2	Lexical Pre - Post	-4.831	191	.000
Pair 3	Grammar Pre - Post	-4.538	191	.000

Table 4 shows that a paired t-test performed on the mean scores of the pre-test versus the post-test indicates a significant difference in the content scores for the pre-test ( $M = 2.43$ ,  $SD = 0.61$ ) and the post-test ( $M = 2.66$ ,  $SD = 0.59$ ),  $t(191) = -5.50$ ,  $p < .05$ , and the magnitude of the difference in the means is large (eta squared = 0.136), which means that the content variable explains 13.6 per cent of the variance in the writing test scores. There was also a significant difference in the lexical variable scores for the pre-test ( $M = 2.22$ ,  $SD = 0.55$ ) and the post-test ( $M = 2.41$ ,  $SD = 0.54$ ),  $t(191) = -4.83$ ,  $p < .05$ , and the magnitude of the difference in the means is fairly large (eta squared = 0.108), which means that the lexical variable explains 10.8 per cent of the variance in the writing test scores. Finally, there was a significant difference in the grammatical variable scores for the pre-test ( $M = 1.97$ ,  $SD = 0.56$ ) and the post-test ( $M = 2.13$ ,  $SD = 0.58$ ),  $t(191) = -4.53$ ,  $p < .05$ , and the magnitude of the difference in the means is moderate (eta squared = 0.097), which means that the grammatical variable explains 9.7 per cent of the variance in the writing test scores. As the effect size indicators show, the students improved most in the content aspect (eta squared = 0.136) followed in descending order by lexical variety (eta squared = 0.108) and grammatical accuracy (eta squared = 0.097).

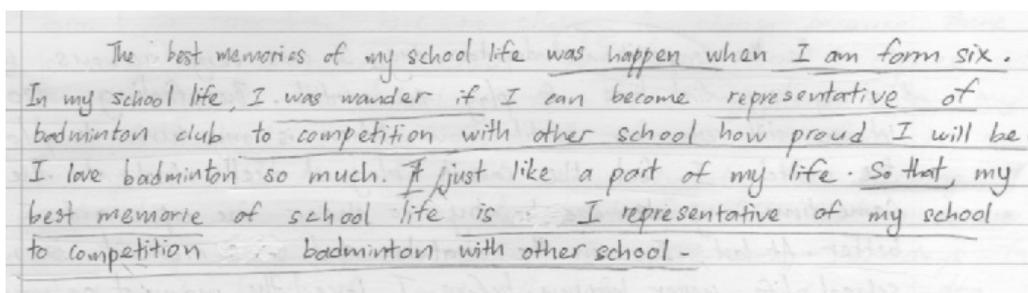
These findings are generally consistent with previous studies that showed a positive impact of reading in developing content for writing (Belcher & Hirvela, 2001; Cobine, 1995). The findings are also supported by Tsang (1996) who found that reading and frequent writing practice improved writing performance. Students' responses showed that the reading of narratives that are familiar to the students' background helped them to sustain interest as the students have experienced similar experiences that they read. Below are students' responses regarding their reading materials:

“...Story about myself make me easy to write essay related to me.”

“I like the story “Anyone for a selfie” because nowadays, this selfie habit is more closer to the teenager and I am also from a teenager category”

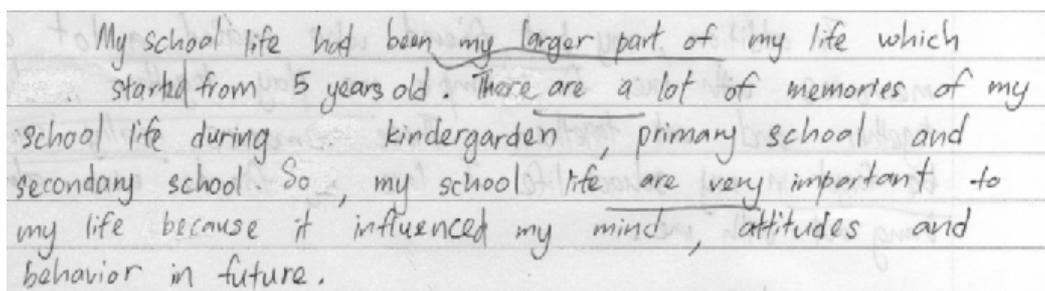
“I like the story because it is something like our routine life”

The improvement of grammatical accuracy, sentence structure and knowledge of vocabulary through reading has also been reported in several studies (Catts et. al, 1999; Fuqua, 2015; Hirvela, 2004; Tsai, 2006). This was because of the repetitive instructional practices in class that helped them recall the contextual words and structures that could be used in their writing. In the stories introduced, the vocabulary list for the theme selected was provided. Thus, in the three texts that were based on adventure for example, the vocabulary and similar structures were repeated. The samples below are the introductions of the pre-test and post-test essays. There is an improvement in the post-test introduction with more details provided.



The best memories of my school life was happen when I am form six. In my school life, I was wander if I can become representative of badminton club to competition with other school how proud I will be. I love badminton so much. It just like a part of my life. So that, my best memorie of school life is I representative of my school to competition badminton with other school -

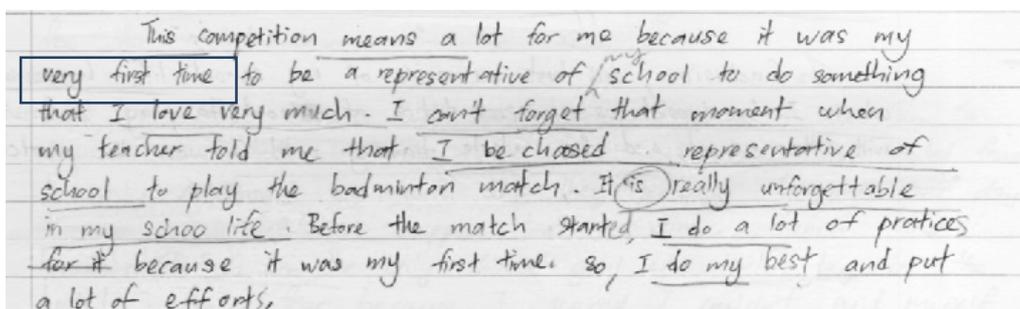
FIGURE 5. Sample student writing 1 (Pre-test)



My school life had been my larger part of my life which started from 5 years old. There are a lot of memories of my school life during kindergarden, primary school and secondary school. So, my school life are very important to my life because it influenced my mind, attitudes and behavior in future.

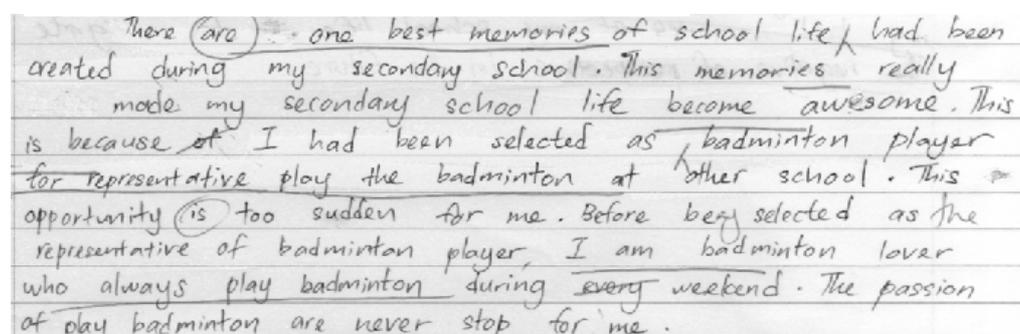
FIGURE 6. Sample student writing 2 (Post-test)

The following samples show that the student's word choice is more appropriate. The student used the word 'selected' in the post-test instead of 'choosed' which was used in the pre-test. There is a greater variety of words used in the post-test. The ideas of the post-test sample are more developed compared to that of the pre-test sample. The post-test sample shows an improvement in the construction of sentences by the student.



This competition means a lot for me because it was my very first time to be a representative of school to do something that I love very much. I can't forget that moment when my teacher told me that I be chased representative of school to play the badminton match. It is really unforgettable in my school life. Before the match started, I do a lot of practices for it because it was my first time, so, I do my best and put a lot of efforts,

FIGURE 7. Sample student writing 3 (Pre-test)



There (are) one best memories of school life had been created during my secondary school. This memories really made my secondary school life become awesome. This is because of I had been selected as badminton player for representative play the badminton at other school. This opportunity is too sudden for me. Before being selected as the representative of badminton player, I am badminton lover who always play badminton during every weekend. The passion of play badminton are never stop for me.

FIGURE 8. Sample student writing 4 (Post-test)

Overall, the results show a positive impact of the Reading-Writing programme in enhancing the undergraduate students' performance in the aspects of content, lexical variety and grammatical accuracy. Firstly, the selection of stories is an important factor for consideration so that the students can relate their experiences and background knowledge to what they are reading and later write about their own experiences according to the topic given. Secondly, the repetitive vocabulary and sentence structure will assist the students in their writing. The feedback from the focus group interviews indicated that the reading texts used in the classroom helped them to develop the necessary ideas relevant to the topic.

"... we got a lot of useful information and we can put it in our essay."

"...every essay teach me how to elaborate my point, from introduction to climax of the story."

"...example of the story give me input of how to write the essay."

"... story that we learn helped us in writing. Because we can gain more knowledge, we can have more skills to write story."

From the Reading-Writing intervention, the students acquired a generic input of a story line (in this case, the setting and plot of a narrative based on the reading material provided). The reading of similar stories and exposure to repetitive structures enabled them to utilise these structures to develop similar lexical and grammatical structure that was relevant for their own writing. For example, under the theme of friendship, the use of adjectives and their order when describing an object were provided

My best friend, Cat – "... Cat was a fat male cat with thick smooth gold hair. Because of his big tummy, Cat was often mistaken for an expecting female..."

For structures, the subject-verb agreement examples were repeated in stories under the different themes.

The results showed the positive impact of the Reading-Writing programme which significantly influenced the undergraduate students' ability to present more ideas and details to enhance content. The reading programme also facilitated the respondents in selecting the appropriate vocabulary for the different topics provided. Although there was a slight improvement in the students' writing in the aspects of grammar and lexical variety, the low English Language proficiency students were able to produce a coherent story during their writing practices. Responses from the students regarding the programme are provided below:

"When we read all of this story, we can know a little bit about the sentence structure."

"It teach me how to use the right grammar, and words to place at a suitable place."

"I can learn vocabulary, such as idioms, e.g. bon voyage."

"New vocab that use in the story can be used to write our essay."

"When we do the writing about selfie and we can use point from 'Anyone for Selfie'."

"Short story helps us generating ideas because we can get more general knowledge from there. So we can write more ideas."

The students' responses show that the reading materials used did help them in their narrative writing by providing them with ideas for content, appropriate words and sample sentences.

## CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study investigates the impact of a Reading-Writing programme on the writing skills of low English proficiency university students. The findings showed that the students had significantly higher post-test scores for content, use of lexical variety and grammatical accuracy at the end of the Reading-Writing programme. Several conclusions can be drawn from this study. The reading intervention enhanced the low English proficiency students' vocabulary knowledge and thus the apprehension to write was reduced. As mentioned earlier in the literature, studies by Leki and Carson (1994) as well as Walters and Wolf (1996) emphasised that having good vocabulary knowledge is pertinent in enhancing students' writing quality. The findings of this study illustrate that students who are provided with the appropriate sample texts and vocabulary for writing narratives and are exposed to similar narratives repeatedly would be able to improve their writing performance. When the students are provided with familiar topics complementing the narratives they have read, they are able to reflect, relate and translate their own experiences. Thus, with the organised and systematic language input, the students will be motivated to attempt to write and subsequently work towards producing a better writing output. They are also able to put their thoughts into words as they have acquired the vocabulary input indirectly and obtained sufficient background knowledge to work further on the task given. These words provide a base for them to express their thoughts.

Although the mean score differences in the lexical, content and grammatical aspects are quite small, the differences are significant, given the low English proficiency level of the students. This is because, some of the students who had a higher level of anxiety in writing were able to engage in classroom discussions and provide some output in their writing tasks. This was identified in the pre-test and post-test essays as well as their feedback given in the interview sessions. As mentioned earlier, the students in the study have been exposed to English Language since primary years, yet their writing proficiency level is low. However, when a relevant input (in this case, from reading texts) is provided to the students as posited by Krashen (1984), the students will be able to deliver an output based on similar patterning that has been consolidated to them via reading; both directly and indirectly. While this calls for a review of the use of suitable and relevant materials, there are several other recommendations that can be considered for future research. Firstly, a longer intervention period may yield more significant effects if carried out methodically. This is because with a longer time, the rehearsal of the pattern of ideas, sentence structure and use of appropriate vocabulary will be sustained. Moreover, the students will be familiar with using these patterns when they are retrieved for necessary writing tasks. Secondly, the increase in new vocabulary knowledge among the students should also be considered when administering the intervention. ESL teachers should expose the students to the use of new words encountered in the narrative texts so that they have confidence in using the new lexical variety in their writings. When the acquired vocabulary is utilised frequently and systematic instruction practices are provided repeatedly, there will be retention of the patterning in their writing process. This will encourage the students to explore the use of multiple synonymous words for their writing, hence enabling them to improve on the lexical aspects as well as enhance their creativity further.

Thirdly, when certain grammatical structures are used repetitively, the students will be more aware of the pattern in the text. Thus, this study recommends that the ESL teachers incorporate the teaching of grammar using examples from texts in their classes. In summary, the process involved in a writing task needs a long duration as well as the right input to deliver a productive output. This is pertinent for ESL learning and teaching. Reading texts and writing essays with similar topics to the texts will help the students to develop their ideas

and increase their word choice. The texts will also help the students in structuring their sentences based on the model provided by the texts. If reading the texts is aimed to equip the low English proficiency undergraduate students with an input for writing, the students should be exposed to an appropriate model of the target language at an appropriate level. This will enable the students to develop content in writing as noted by Krashen (1984). The programme should also expose the students to a variety of appropriate vocabulary and grammar to improve their use of the language. A long-term exposure to reading texts is also recommended to help the students improve their writing skills according to their needs. The duration of the Reading-Writing programme carried out is also considered to be short for students who need a more vigorous and relevant approach to improve their proficiency level. As such, it is recommended that future research should take full consideration of a longer time frame for intervention and be implemented among a larger number of students.

This study is limited to the use of narrative texts and writing narrative essays. An investigation with the use of different genres is also necessary to identify the impact of reading on the writing practices of the students. Nevertheless, there are several implications derived that are significant for teachers, course designers as well as material developers. In empowering low English proficiency students' writing skills, a systematic instructional practice needs to be followed so that the students will be directed to progress in their writing tasks. With repeated instructions, the students will be able to plan out a "sketchpad" of the narrative that they intend to deliver based on their prior knowledge and discussions during the reading intervention. This will enable the reading programme to have a positive impact on the writing performance of the students as the intervention provides the necessary experience, exposure and knowledge to the development and organisation of ideas and the accurate use of grammatical structure in producing a narrative writing.

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