



## Digital Writing in English Language Writing Instruction

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**Abstract:** *Our students in twenty-first century are highly digital literate. The widespread use of technologies such as smart phones, tabs and so on have influenced the way they learn in writing. Students nowadays prefer literacy in digital rather than print form. Teaching writing is challenging as students often find it boring and tedious if it is taught traditionally. Therefore, teachers need to incorporate technology into teaching writing. This study explores the use of digital writing to enhance students' learning in writing essays as well as motivate them to write and share their ideas with others. It was conducted as a case study among eight student teachers at an Institute of Teacher Education in Malaysia. Through the analyses of students' work, reflective journal writing and interview, the findings illustrate a clear preference by the students towards digital writing approach than the traditional writing in print form. The approach of digital writing encouraged more writing process on the part of student teachers with others and in turn, encouraged a collaborative learning environment and their motivation in writing. It is recommended as an alternative approach to teach English language writing to the students.*

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**Keywords:** Digital writing, English Language, instruction

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## **Introduction**

Teaching students how to write is a challenging task but it is a lifelong skill a teacher should impart to the students. There have been two main approaches in teaching writing. The traditional way of teaching writing is product-based approach where students are encouraged to mimic a model text, which is given at an early stage, then they write their first draft which is also the final product. Meanwhile, process-based approach to writing expose students to the various classroom activities which promote the development of language use such as brainstorming, group discussion, and re-writing. They write and rewrite their drafts a few times until they produce the final product. This study proposes the use of digital writing as an approach to teach writing as there is a shift to digital approach in view of the widespread use of technology. It is the aim of this study for students to use technology as a tool to help them write effectively and the objectives of this study are to find out:

1. the use of digital writing in enhancing the learning of essay writing among student teachers.
2. the use of digital writing in motivating the student teachers to produce essay.
3. the practicality of digital writing as an alternative approach to teach writing.

## **Literature Review**

Writing has always been a difficult task for individuals (Ghabool & Kashef, 2012) especially for students who learn English as a Second Language (ESL). In writing, students need to generate and organize ideas before translating them to readable text while keeping in mind the spelling, punctuation, grammar and other linguistic aspects. Therefore, to produce a piece of sound writing is undoubtedly a daunting task for most students. Considering the complexity of writing, English language practitioners play an important role in guiding students to produce good English essays.

According to Musgrove (2006), students do not like writing due to three reasons: they do not care, they do not know, or they do not see it. Firstly, they do not care because they do not see the importance of writing in their life. They view it as homework and a boring task and sometimes they just practice lifting or copying of ideas from the sample essays and hand in to their teacher. They write essays for purpose of examination and they do not realize that it can help them in their future advancement.

Moreover, they do not know ‘what’ and ‘how’ to write. Sometimes, a topic is given to them and they are asked to brainstorm for ideas by themselves. They are not sure what they should write under the topic and the correct way of writing. To worsen the scenario, students’ anxiety and boredom are heightened by the teachers who urge their students to produce grammatically accurate essays without exposing them to latest approaches to write them creatively (Kaur & Sidhu, 2012).

Furthermore, they do not see their errors especially grammatical errors. They think they have completed their writing task once they have done their concluding paragraph. The first draft is always their final work. They do not revise and edit their essays as they perceive that their teachers will correct the errors for them. The key to producing sound essays depends on the types and amount of strategies used, and on the regulation of the strategies for generating ideas or for reviewing what the writers have written (Ridhuan & Abdullah, 2009). Without good strategies or approaches, it is difficult to produce good essays.

In today’s age of accountability, English teachers are more likely to be held responsible for their students’ dwindling writing performance (The National Commission on Writing, 2003). Therefore, before student teachers are posted to teach in schools, efforts are much needed in advancing the student teachers’ writing competence (Tan, Emerson & White, 2006) and to better prepare them as future English writing teachers. Moreover, the importance of essay writing for student teachers is undermined by Grabe and Kaplan (2014) who stated that “students in English as a foreign language will need English writing skills ranging from a simple paragraph and summary skills to the ability to write essays and professional articles” (p. 25). Therefore, it is of main concern of this study to look into digital writing as an approach in ESL writing instruction to aid student teachers in producing better essays.

Despite the various approaches in the teaching of second language (L2) writing (for example, the product-based approach and the process-based approach), the focus has shifted to ICT skills such as digital literacy. Kochhar-Bryant and Heishman (2010) stated that literacy has traditionally been defined as “the ability to read and write” (p. 188). Digital literacy, therefore, has required the knowledge on how to use technologies for research, reading and writing. Writing now includes composing in multiple modalities, including hypertexts, images, audio and video. It also includes greater attention to rhetorical principles for design and layout. Digital writing provides opportunities for students to engage in civic and professional discussion, to compose in collaborative, interactive environment and publish writing. The new genres of writing can be composed in digital environment such as blogs, wikis, web sites, emails, e-books, social media and so on. It can also be composed in digital media format by using software that supported digital writing.

Information and Communication Technology (ICT) is used in teaching writing for its promising and prominent impact on students’ writing (Deore, 2012). In a study by Yunus, Nordin, Salehi, Embi, and Salehi (2013), the advantages of using ICT in writing were that it could attract students’ attention, facilitate students’ learning process, it helps to improve students’ vocabulary and promote meaningful learning. In addition, Cahyono and Mutiaraningrum (2015) advocated that with the advancement of ICT, there is hope that students’ learning of writing could be further improved.

Successful writing depends much on the execution of strategies in the process of writing (Maarof & Murat, 2013). Therefore, the digital writing has become a project in this study in which students compose an essay for visual delivery. The student teachers compose either narrative, expository, descriptive, argumentative or persuasive essay using images and texts. The digital writing is made possible with the availability of *Storyjumper* software to produce e-books. This type of writing requires planning, research, problem-solving, drafting, feedback and revision before the final product is produced by the student teachers. It provides them with comprehension into the purpose of conventions that they often struggle with in print writing. Digital writing is advantageous because it reinforces traditional writing skills, improves digital writing skills and prepares students for the future of writing.

There were past researches that had shown the impact of using digital writing as an instruction. Rowsell and Decoste (2012) had found that digital writing could increase their students' understanding of writing through imagery, sounds, materials, gaze and angles. These are the elements or effects their students needed to practice in their writing. They found that when they shifted to this type of writing approach, their students were more interested, engaged and invested in the activities. Another research carried out by Pruden, Kerkhoff, Spires and Lester (2016) revealed the contributions of digital writing to the students. Through a digital tool of *Narrative Theatre*, the researchers found that it promoted interest among the students, scaffolded the writing process: prewriting, draft writing, revision, editing, evaluating, and publishing, and increased their self-efficacy as writers. However, there were few related studies in Malaysia especially in the context of institute of teacher education. Therefore, this research seeks to study the use of digital writing as an instruction in the local context.

### **Research Methodology**

This study adopts a case study with qualitative approach. Yin (1984) defined the case study research method as “an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context; when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not evident; and in which multiple sources of evidence are used” (p.23).

There were eight student teachers of PISMP June 2014 intake that were selected as the target group for this research. All of them were females. They consisted of four Malays, two Chinese and two Indians. The student teachers were in their seventh semester of the four years programme for Bachelor in Teaching that was conducted by one of the Institutes of Teacher Education in Malaysia.

The course Developing and Using Resources for the Primary ESL Classroom (TSL3113) encompasses 3 credits with a total of 45 hours face to face interaction in the seventh semester of their degree program. A total of 20 (i.e., face-to-face and non face-to-face interactions) hours was allocated for the development of resources for teaching, including for writing skills. As a continuity from the course, eight student teachers had opted for the use of *Storyjumper* in producing different types of essays for

upper primary school students' usage and it was also an innovation project of the student teachers at the Institute level. Therefore, the student teachers had to produce the essays in digital form by using *Storyjumper* in the duration of one month.

The researcher provided input as revision to the student teachers pertaining to essay writing in order to prepare them for the project. Firstly, input on essay writing was given by introducing the necessary parts in an essay which included the writing of thesis statement, introduction, topic sentence, supporting details and conclusion. The student teachers identified thesis statements in different texts and essays and wrote down the thesis statements. They carried out a research on different ways of writing introductory paragraphs, body paragraphs and conclusions.

Then, the researcher provided input on five different essay types and their format: narrative, argumentative, descriptive, expository and persuasive essays. The student teachers analyzed features of the five types of essays.

The student teachers then were required to determine one essay type to write on for the innovation project. The essays were to be written for target group of upper primary school students as to be shared with them later on. The researcher taught writing using *Storyjumper* as part of the project. Then the student teachers engaged themselves in digital writing in the Language Laboratory. They selected images and designed the layout for their digital essays. The digital essays were the student teachers' own composed and designed products in which they wrote their own essays by inserting the images and texts. The essays were written in digital form by using *Storyjumper*, a website available online for free. They also peer edited their friends' digital writing. After that, they presented their digital writing in the class.

The student teachers wrote reflective journals after their presentation. Then, a focus group interview was carried out some time later to gather more information about their views and opinions of the use of digital writing as an approach for them to write their essays.

The data collected for this study were student's work, reflection writing and interview. Qualitative data is presented in narrative, descriptive and non-written forms. Sources of qualitative data include field notes, maps, journals, surveys and et cetera. Analysis of such data involves going through a large quantity of language and images recorded in the data sources with a fine-tooth comb to locate information of interest. Creswell (2012) viewed the analysis of qualitative data as a process that required the researcher to understand how to make sense of text and images in order to form answers to the research questions. The researcher did so by organizing the data according to themes, summarizing the findings and interpreting the data. In this study, students' work, their reflective writing and interview responses were gathered as the main instruments.

When students create a document as a product of learning, this document falls under the categorization of students' work (Curtis, Dempsey & Shambough, 2010). In this research, students' work consisted of the digital essays produced by the student teachers. The essays were of different text types; narrative, expository, descriptive, argumentative or persuasive essays.

Journal writing has a long and reliable history in the arts and humanities, and it provides qualitative researchers with a powerful heuristic tool and qualitative researchers may learn a great deal from this (Janesick, 2011). Private documents such as journals represent a good source for text (word) data for a qualitative study (Creswell, 2012). Similar to journal writing, the researcher used reflection journal writing as one of the data collection methods to find insights into how effective the digital writing was in assisting the student teachers to produce better essays. According to Farrah (2012), reflective journal writing acts as an informal place where learners can write their own reactions to their experiences and it can be an instrument that aids learners in making better sense of their experiences by summarizing them and actively trying to understand them.

The advantage of interviews is that they provide useful information when researchers cannot directly observe participants, and they permit participants to describe detailed personal information such as voicing their best experiences (Creswell, 2012). In the same vein, Alshenqeeti (2014) stated that the effectiveness of interviews has long been recognized in the field of social science research. The researcher used focus group interview in this study. Berg (2007) argued that a particular strength of this type of interviewing is that participants may “develop ideas collectively, bringing forward their own priorities and perspectives, to create theory grounded in the actual experience” (p. 45). The researcher used the interview method to obtain information about the views of the participants towards the effect of digital literacy on the student teachers’ essay writing and their motivation in using it.

## **Results and Discussions**

The students’ digital writing, reflective journals and interview responses were analyzed through coding and categorization until themes emerged. The following discussion is organized into three themes: (a) increased skills and quality in writing digital essays, (b) increased motivation among students in writing essays, and (c) practicality of using digital writing as an alternative approach to teach writing.

### ***Increased Skills and Quality in Writing Digital Essays***

Results of the qualitative data indicated that the digital writing enhance the learning of essay writing among the student teachers. Some changes in the presentation and quality of the essays were noticeable in the students’ work. A participant’s essay was presented in the form of an e-book with an attractive cover page as illustrated below.



**Figure 1. The cover page of a participant's digital essay**

This was definitely more appealing when compared to the conventional method of writing essays by using pen and paper. Here, the participant used the images of an accident to convey the message of the narrative essay. The damages of the transports and the anger of the people involved in the accident were clearly portrayed via the image. Through her digital writing, the participant was able to make her story interesting by using the images and colours so that others could read it.



**Figure 2. The content of the digital essay written by the participant**

Figure 2 shows the content of the narrative that another participant had written. Here, the words ‘was’, ‘adored’, ‘planned’, ‘felt’ and ‘suggested’ were written in the past tense as this is a narrative. Good vocabulary or phrases such as ‘underachievers’, ‘delicacies’, ‘taken to heart’, ‘consensus’ and ‘inevitable’ were used by the participant.

Then, this participant ended her narrative with a statement which could actually engage her readers in thinking ability with the following two paragraphs:

Just before the party ended, I was given the honour of presenting our farewell gift to Ms Lina. When she unwrapped the gift, we saw tears rolling down her cheeks. She was truly and deeply moved. Then, each and every student shook hands with Ms Lina for one last time. The heart was heavy yet the parting was inevitable.

I felt sad as I could not bear to part with such a wonderful teacher. Without Ms Lina's varied approaches in teaching us English, it would be hard keeping the class motivated. Then, I suggested some ways to Ms Lina on how to keep in contact with her students. We came to a consensus in the end and everyone was happy about it.

From the paragraphs in the digital writing, the language use in the narrative was accurate all the time. The statement at the end of the narrative was actually a strategy that requires the readers to use their higher order thinking skills to predict what were the possible ways to keep in touch with their teacher that the students had thought of and what would have been the best alternative that the teacher and their students opted for in the end.

Therefore, the students' work showed improvement in the aspect of the language use, organisation and content. Narrative essays were basically written in past tense and its style of writing is different from expository essays. Expository essays were generally written in present tense. The essays written reflected well the organisation of five-paragraph essay which started with the introduction that ended with a thesis statement. The three body paragraphs started with topic sentences followed by the elaborations and examples. The essay ended with a concluding paragraph which included restatement of the thesis statement, calling for action and suggestion, all of these are noticeable in the students' work (i.e., expository, descriptive, argumentative and persuasive essays).

These essays were first written by the student teachers and then edited by their peers before the essays were finally published into e-book form. This is in line with Lu and Bol (2007) who stated that peer review has been used in teaching writing for several decades, and it has been found to be helpful in student learning. In short, the essays published went through the process writing more apparently compared to the traditional method of essay writing. Student teachers no longer presented their first drafts of essays as their final work in this innovation project.

The findings of this study seem to support Hiradhar (2013) who stated that the writing skills of ESL learners at the tertiary level could be enhanced via the administering of the suitable technology-enriched language programme. In this research, digital writing was executed with the availability of the software. Features such as easy accessibility, easy usability, a degree of autonomy, resource variety, authenticity, cognitive familiarity, sharing, interaction, and opportunities for self-improvement were made possible for the student teachers via digital writing and these had helped to improve their essay writing.

One of the student teachers stated in her reflection writing that she gained more knowledge in writing and technology skills and good teamwork as the contribution was from everyone when peer editing was done. Another student teacher added that this innovation project was different from the conventional project when she compared it to the other projects she had seen before. She also gained new experiences when using digital writing in essay writing.

The focus group interview conducted showed positive responses regarding the use of digital writing in writing essays. Students commented that their grammar was improved tremendously. In addition, the peer editing helped in making the essays better because peers could spot more grammatical errors than the writers themselves. One commented, "As I keep on referring to my essay, I can spot some grammatical errors in it. However, my friends found out more for me!" and another also agreed that "By using the website of *Storyjumper*, I can feel that I am more motivated to write, as I want to perform better!" As supported by Pruden et al. (2016), digital writing scaffolded the writing process, the student teachers were able to write a few

drafts before they proceeded to publishing, thus increased their self-efficacy as writers with the help of their peers.

### ***Increased Motivation among Students in Writing Essays***

The use of digital writing also increased motivation among the student teachers. They were motivated to write essays in paragraphs and made their essays more coherent and cohesive. It also enabled them to use technology as they felt excited to write essays because they could publish the essays in e-book form, with visuals and pictures. Also, the book flipped from one page to another as it was interactive. This was supported by Yunus, Nordin, Salehi, Sun and Embi (2013) who stated that attracting students' attention and promoting meaningful learning were regarded as the most important advantages of using ICT in teaching essay writing.

The innovation project allowed the student teachers to learn in a fun way too. All the student teachers commented that the activity was a new method of writing essay in a more interesting way. One commented, "The method adapts to students' needs and learning styles." and another said, "The essay can be modified, it is so flexible." One more said, "It is more interesting due to its interactive features."

Compared to the traditional way of writing essays, digital writing was much preferred by the student teachers because the writing process became more effortless due to the fun elements in it. This is supported by Pruden et al. (2016) and Rowsell and Decoste (2012) who had found that their students were more interested to write digitally as they could explore with the different elements found in the technology tools and this could motivate the students to write essays.

### ***Practicality of Digital Writing as an Alternative Approach to Teach Writing***

Digital essay writing was practical as an alternative approach for teachers and educators to teach writing. Traditionally, the teacher and students worked with hardcopies of essays. After being checked and marked by the respective teachers, the essays piled up in the form of books and consumed a lot of space in the staffroom. In contrast, digital essay writing offered an alternative platform for the students to craft their essays. In this research,

the digital essays produced by the student teachers were kept in the form of softcopies online. The essays were duplicable and could be shared with the others. The essays were durable and long lasting. This is supported by Kohler (2015) who stated that the creation of electronic text is starting to become a more normalized medium for writing.

Meanwhile, the interview conducted showed encouraging responses regarding the practicality of teaching essay writing in a digital way. The student teachers commented that they saved a lot of paper in the process of completing the innovation project. One commented, "Previously I prepared a file with many pieces of paper in it, however, this time around the softcopy is just enough." The student teachers noticed the practicality of digital writing as another added that "The essays are durable and cost efficient." One more said, "The essay can be shared online."

## **Conclusion**

The findings showed that the student teachers enhanced their learning by producing essays with better quality. The essays which underwent apparent process writing eliminated grammatical errors as many as possible thus resulting in producing essays which were more legible compared to those produced using the traditional method of writing the first draft which is the final product. The student teachers were also more motivated to produce essay in digital form as they could insert their own selected images and designed their own digital essays in different layouts. They had felt personal engagement in writing digitally. They could also present their coursework in a more practical way and the use of digital writing can serve as an alternative approach in instruction.

Student teachers were active learners; to learn by doing, to learn through practical experience rather than learn facts by rote. Learning has become more meaningful to them rather than formal. The most effective learning takes place because it is relevant to the individuals as the student teachers produced their very own digital essays. As a conclusion, classroom instructor should keep in mind their students learning and offer instructions that can make them more enjoyable and motivated to write in the future.

Future research could examine the use of other digital tools in teaching writing. Besides teaching writing, the use of digital tools could be used as an instructional method in teaching reading. Further, a discussion about the content of the essays regarding all the aspects of the writing elements (such as punctuation and grammar) perhaps could have led to further improvement in writing.

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