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The Role of Digital Technologies in Facilitating the Learning of ESL Writing among TESL Pre-Service Teachers in Malaysia: A Review of the Literature

Kee Li Li
Universiti Putra Malaysia, Malaysia

Abu Bakar Razali
Universiti Putra Malaysia, Malaysia

Nooreen Noordin
Universiti Putra Malaysia, Malaysia

Arshad Abd Samad
Universiti Putra Malaysia, Malaysia

Introduction

Writing tasks require complicated cognitive, language, motor, and social skills and this intensifies the challenges faced by many ESL learners including TESL pre-service teachers as they strive to gain writing proficiency (Govindasamy, 2014). Rahman (2017) notes that effective writing skills influence both academic and work pursuits. Thus, due attention must be given to efforts made in improving the TESL pre-service teachers' writing competence as well as their ESL writing instruction. The TESL pre-service teachers who will be teaching their future students the art and practice of writing should themselves be well-versed in writing practices. Therefore, emphasis on training TESL pre-service teachers in the Institutes of Teacher Education Malaysia (ITEMs) would increase their English language proficiency, including writing skills (Macalister, 2017). This brief report of Malaysian and international research stresses the importance of learning and understanding the TESL pre-service teachers' perceptions of and practices in writing, as well as the roles of digital technologies in facilitating their learning of ESL writing. In undertaking this review, we hope to identify gaps in the literature that can be addressed in future studies in our Malaysian context.

Review of Related Literature

All academic literature in this study was reviewed in a systematic manner by undertaking a thematic review of the literature. We conducted a literature search in the Mendeley database, which is an

application that shares references online collaboratively. Its advantages include the online literature search, full display of articles, and it uses an imported web database such as Google Scholar. A total of 35 articles were found using the keywords of "pre-service teachers" and "Malaysia." For "ESL writing," 197 articles were found, and 38 articles were found for "digital technologies." A total of 26 articles on research conducted in Malaysia consisted of 7 quantitative studies, 12 qualitative studies, 2 mixed-methods studies and 5 conceptual papers were selected for this review. 8 relevant international articles (i.e., 1 quantitative study, 3 qualitative studies, 1 mixed-methods study and 3 conceptual papers) were added to supplement the literature review. Seven studies conducted on TESL pre-service teachers pertaining to the role of digital technologies in their English language learning and of ESL writing were specifically discussed in detail. In sum, a total of 34 articles were included in this review.

Overview of ESL Writing Instruction

Writing skills are identified as the lowest English skills possessed by Malaysian learners because of their poor performances in English language examinations (Chitravelu, Sithamparam, & Teh, 2005). On top of this, many Malaysian ESL teachers struggle with the challenges of practicing effective writing instruction in their ESL classrooms (Pour-Mohammadi, Abidin, & Cheong, 2012). Alarmingly, TESL pre-service teachers also cite doubts on where and how to construct their essays owing to a perceived lack of support outside their writing classrooms (Said & Lee, 2014). To sum up, the students as well as teachers and teachers-to-be seem to be overwhelmed by the difficulty and complexity of ESL writing in Malaysian writing classrooms.

In today's age of accountability, English language teachers are held responsible for their students' dwindling writing performance (The National Commission on Writing, 2003). Therefore, before going out to service, proper instruction, guidance, and support are much needed in developing teachers' writing competence and in nurturing a positive attitude toward ESL writing (Tan, Emerson, & White, 2006). It is important to prepare these pre-service teachers for effectively teaching ESL writing. Kwan and Yunus (2014) argue that educators' weaknesses in writing is one of the contributing factors to their students' poor writing skills. The authors assert that the students might be misled by inadequately educated teachers who pass down common errors. In addition, Zakaria, Yunus, Nazri, and Shah (2016) stress the increasing difficulties in motivating ESL students to write essays and therefore, there is a need for teachers to think of ways to keep their students motivated in the process of learning ESL writing.

Essay writing is still a major challenge for many pre-service teachers of English (Ahmed, 2010). Zamel (1985) cautions that writing teachers tend to neglect the actual writing process and confuse their students in that they focus on identifying grammatical inaccuracies over making students understand the principles of process writing. Teachers who are trained in and profess to use a certain approach (e.g., process-based writing approach) in the classroom may not do so in reality because the espoused approach might not be realized through classroom practice (Nunan, 1987). Teachers will be able to teach writing better if they have gone through the writing process personally because a teacher's writing experiences will complement his or her writing pedagogies (Graves, Tuyay, & Green, 2004). Yunus, Salehi, and Nordin (2012) state that it is highly anticipated that ESL teachers must be ready to teach ESL writing well and effective writing instructors are much needed in their writing classrooms. In order to create a long-term effect, continuous effort is needed in gradually and systematically improving teachers' ESL writing proficiency (Yunus, Salehi, & Chen, 2012). Therefore, the need to reinforce teacher education arises, in which the writing weaknesses among the TESL pre-service teachers must be determined and addressed in the first place.

Issues in ESL Writing Instruction

The official syllabi have outlined that the process-based writing approach is to be used in Malaysian ESL writing instruction (Annamalai, 2016), nonetheless, the purpose and process of writing are often neglected in actual classroom teaching. On top of that, many Malaysian writing teachers are found to prefer the product-based writing approach although there are adverse views of it (Tan et al., 2006). In addition, Malaysian teachers find it hard to adopt and develop suitable instructional approaches to produce results in effective ESL writing instruction (Rahman, 2017). Palpanadan, Ismail, and Salam (2015) forewarn the risk of merely paying attention to the final work in writing and not taking into account the process of reaching the final product. In contrast, the process-based writing approach involves the writing stages of brainstorming, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing in a recursive manner (Siu, 2007), which is deemed more suitable to develop the students' writing skills. However, due to constraints faced implementing the process-based writing approach (i.e., limited resources for teaching the process-based writing approach, large class sizes, and the fact students are overly dependent on their teachers) (Mukundan, 2011), the approach has since been overlooked and effective scaffolding is missing from the simplified version of the writing process (Annamalai, 2016). Writing instruction in Malaysia has since become dependent on the product-based writing approach, and as a result, writing remains ineffective for Malaysian graduates and this causes them to be overwhelmed by the literacy expectations of tertiary education (Mansor, 2007).

Matsuda, Saenkhum, and Accardi (2013) suggest that when addressing the students' needs, it is crucial to know the teachers' specific needs first. For that reason, the numerous problems outlined above have to be rectified by starting with teacher education, especially TESL pre-service teachers education. In fact, Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad, the Malaysian seventh Prime Minister stresses the need for the Malaysian government to decide on a novel way of teaching (Tan, 2018). Therefore, a more comprehensive way of teaching ESL writing is much needed to raise the standard of the English language skills among Malaysian students across all levels, especially of TESL pre-service teachers in ITEMs, and particularly their writing knowledge and skills.

Importance of Digital Technologies in ESL Writing

The Malaysian national English language education policy, The English Language Education Reform in Malaysia: The Roadmap 2015-2025 Shift 7, advocates the importance of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) to scale up quality learning across Malaysia (English Language Standards and Quality Council, Ministry of Education Malaysia [MOE], 2015). Therefore, it is of the utmost importance for teachers in all learning institutions in Malaysia to look for possible ways to incorporate ICT into their classrooms, particularly in the field of ESL writing.

Gentner (2018) believes that 21st century learners who are exposed to various technologies prefer the utilization of digital technologies compared to the conventional method of writing. For instance, Web 2.0 tools are preferred due to the flexibility they encompass (i.e., user-generated layouts, ease in functionality, and system integration). Learners can operate the sites at any time and from anywhere with multiple devices, generate their own content, collaborate with peers, and share their work with online audiences. Yunus, Salehi, and Chen (2012) state that the use of technologies in writing instruction has changed the writing mode and how it is taught by explaining that teachers are given more options for materials selection to match the writing process with the emergence of digital technologies. Also, Zakaria et al. (2016) highlight how student collaboration in writing is made possible with the presence of digital tools. They highlight that online tools promote more personalized writing for the students and allow them more freedom to showcase the originality in their essays. Meanwhile, Lee, Said, and Tan (2016) point out that scaffolding strategies in the writing process are enhanced by the existence of digital technologies. From

these studies, digital technologies seem to provide a helping hand in the execution of the process-based writing approach in ESL writing instruction.

Online writing software and related strategies prompt teachers to teach their students digital writing which can be shared online as part of their learning experience (Tan et al., 2006). Students are encouraged to regard writing as a process rather than just a product with the existence of revision freedom (Neu & Scarcella, 1991). The presence of digital tools enables writers to collaborate and this has resulted in the enhancement of writing skills among ESL students because when they write using digital online tools, they show creativity by including their own voice in the essay, thus gaining a sense of authorship for their essays (Zakaria et al., 2016). In other words, students' creativity is manifested through the use of digital technologies in the learning of ESL writing.

Razali (2013) posits that teachers' conceptions of their students' responsiveness toward digital technologies and the schools with high accessibility to digital tools do contribute to the effectiveness of using digital technologies in their ESL writing instruction. Meanwhile, according to Majid (2011), the utilization of digital technologies encompasses interesting features (i.e., interactivity, collaboration, and file sharing) which can encourage students' participation as it provides continuous motivation along the learning process. Yunus, Nordin, Salehi, Embi, and Salehi (2013) support that in the teaching of ESL writing, digital technologies provide assistance in achieving teaching objectives. Yunus et al. (2013) further emphasize that the integration of digital technologies in the teaching of ESL writing can promote autonomous learning, such as searching for educational related materials online and self-discovery skills. In sum, the utilization of digital technologies in ESL writing has increased over the years and brings evident benefits, especially in developing ESL students' writing competence (Rahman, 2017).

Review of Studies on Digital Technologies in Facilitating the Learning of ESL Writing among TESL Pre-Service Teachers

On a general basis, studies on the use of digital technologies in the learning of ESL writing yield positive results from the perspectives of TESL pre-service teachers. Noordin, Samad, and Razali's (2008) study surveyed 60 TESL pre-service teachers pursuing a degree course at a local public university to elicit their views on the practicality, feasibility, and usefulness of *WebQuest* (an inquiry-oriented lesson format integrated with Web-based information) in the teaching and learning of ESL writing. The study reports positive results pertaining to the use of this technology tool. The TESL pre-service teachers welcome the use of *WebQuest* in ESL writing instruction as it promotes constructive problem solving and social interaction, and it scaffolds their writing process. Additionally, Chan, Sidhu, Shah, and Aziz (2011) carried out a quantitative study using surveys on 70 TESL pre-service teachers in a Malaysian public university. The TESL pre-service teachers show positive attitudes, average competency and are sufficiently prepared for the integration of ICT in their English language instruction, therefore, training in ICT should be continuously conducted to ensure teachers are equipped with the latest technologies.

Furthermore, Yunus, Salehi, and Chen (2012) conducted a qualitative study (using online discussion boards) on 15 third-year TESL pre-service teachers in a Malaysian public university to gather their opinions on the use of *Social Networking Services* (SNSs) in writing classrooms. SNSs are found to enhance the interaction, planning, and obtaining of information thus aiding the TESL pre-service teachers in writing their essays. Yunus, Salehi, and Nordin (2012) employed a similar methodology in order to gather views of 30 third-year TESL pre-service teachers from a local state university on using *Paragraph Punch* (a step-by-step writing improvement software) in ESL writing instruction. The survey reveals TESL pre-service teachers' positive views on the use of *Paragraph Punch* as it promotes better development and paragraph organisation.

Samani, Baki, and Razali's (2014) qualitative case study was conducted using semi-structured interviews on 14 purposely selected TESL pre-service teachers from a public state university. They reveal that most TESL pre-service teachers believe teachers play a key role in the successful implementation of

Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) programs. If teachers are able to comprehend the roles of CALL programs in education and understand the challenges they face in using CALL programs, the implementation of digital technology will be successful, and they will benefit from it. In addition, Lee et al. (2016) conducted a mixed-methods study (i.e., analyzing students' online discourses, task reflections, log files, and digital artefacts) on 16 TESL pre-service teachers at one ITEM. They found that *The Writing Portal* (a one-stop online writing platform) promotes collaboration among TESL pre-service teachers by adequately supporting the writing process with useful resources and digital tools.

Yee and Kee (2017) conducted a case study on eight seventh semester TESL pre-service teachers from one ITEM using digital essays' task, reflective journal prompts and interview questions to explore the use of digital writing in enhancing the TESL pre-service teachers' ESL writing. The findings illustrate that the pre-service teachers prefer digital essays over traditional writing. The digital essays, published online using *Storyjumper* (a free online website to publish digital writing), show improvement in organization, language, and content.

In contrast, the inclusion of digital technologies in teaching practice is bound by certain limitations (Aziz, 2008). Noordin et al. (2008) outline how supervision and monitoring of the online progress might be lacking among TESL pre-service teachers. Insufficient and faulty ICT facilities in schools also act as stumbling blocks to the teachers' efforts of integrating digital technologies into their lessons (Chan et al., 2011). Similarly, Yunus, Salehi, and Chen (2012) state that some of the constraints faced by the TESL pre-service teachers are weak connectivity to the Internet, unsatisfactory facilities, and limited time for teacher and student interaction. Yunus, Salehi, and Nordin (2012) suggest that improvisation with technological tools is required from the aspects of interactivity (i.e., enable concurrent use with other applications) and layout (i.e., enable minimizing of window when the program is running) to further enhance the writing process.

Conclusion

The review of past studies indicates that TESL pre-service teachers are open to the idea of using digital writing tools in ESL writing instruction (Chan et al., 2011; Lee et al., 2016; Noordin et al., 2008; Samani et al., 2014; Yee & Kee, 2017; Yunus, Salehi, & Chen, 2012; Yunus, Salehi, & Nordin, 2012). However, the use of these tools is not without limitations which in turn calls for more future studies to be conducted to find out how to use them more effectively in ESL writing instruction (Chan et al., 2011; Lee et al., 2016; Noordin et al., 2008; Samani et al., 2014; Yee & Kee, 2017; Yunus, Salehi, & Chen, 2012; Yunus, Salehi, & Nordin, 2012). Further research should focus on investigating how these limitations can be minimized in Malaysian teacher education.

The Authors

Kee Li Li is currently pursuing her doctoral degree in the field of TESL at Universiti Putra Malaysia. Kee's research interests include ESL writing, English grammar, and literature.

Faculty of Educational Studies,
Universiti Putra Malaysia,
43400 UPM Serdang,
Selangor, Malaysia
E-mail: lilikee3530@gmail.com

Abu Bakar Razali, Ph.D. works as a senior lecturer at the Faculty of Educational Studies, Universiti Putra Malaysia. Abu Bakar's research interests are on the teaching and learning of English as a second language, particularly in writing instruction and educational technology.

E-mail: abmr_bakar@upm.edu.my

Nooreen Noordin, Ph.D. is a senior lecturer at the Faculty of Educational Studies, Universiti Putra Malaysia. Nooreen's research interests are on language learning technology, content-based instruction, and learning styles.

E-mail: nooreen@upm.edu.my

Arshad Abd Samad, Ph.D. is the Director of Centre for Advancement on Language Competency (CALC) and an Associate Professor at the Faculty of Educational Studies, Universiti Putra Malaysia. Arshad's research interests are in the field of TESL, especially in grammar instruction, language acquisition, and testing.

E-mail: arshad@upm.edu.my

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