



Utilizing the Synectics Strategy to Improve Writing Skills: An Action Research Study

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Introduction

Among the four basic language skills, writing is a challenging skill for both learners and teachers (Murphy, 2018). Particularly since it is a skill that requires the accurate use of critical components such as vocabulary, grammar, syntax and punctuation (Raimes, 1983). Paragas and Francisco (2020) further define writing as “the medium of communication that represents language through the inscription of signs and symbols” (p. 4). Writing requires skills, strategies, patience, and planning. In particular, creative writing demands good command of language—vocabulary, tenses, idioms and phrases—and literary devices. Most young learners avoid writing due to the complexity of expressing oneself and the time required for the planning of thoughts and ideas. Furthermore, the root problem lies with educators who, according to Goldstein (2017), have little to no training on how to teach writing and are weak writers themselves. Therefore, improving the writing skill continues to be a persistent matter of concern for language teachers.

The notion that a good reader is, by default, a good writer is nothing short of a myth (Pudewa, 2015). Ruhama and Purwaningsih (2018), however, posit that all learners could be good writers as long as they are taught using the form of learning that best suits them. On the other hand, writing is a skill that requires the writer to express thoughts, imagination, and visuals in a written form (Paragas & Francisco, 2020). Writing is communicating thoughts and ideas through the medium of written words (Harmer, 2007). Ruhama and Purwaningsih (2018) pointed out writing to be a “complex skill because students need to comprehend spellings, grammar, sentences, vocabulary, and structures as the unit in writing” (p. 176).

Good writing is often an outcome of good language skills, and the many requirements of its mastery—spelling, punctuation, grammar, sentence linking, and accurate text construction—often deter many young learners from making an effort (Bruning & Horn, 2000). Paragas and Francisco (2020) note that more students in a class hate writing than those who enjoy it. Moreover, learners find it challenging to adequately organize their thoughts and express their minds. They emphasize that writing engages cognitive abilities. Not only does cognition call for the generation of ideas, but also the articulation of



thoughts to be put down into words. Young learners seem to prefer engaging in speaking tasks more than in written tasks (Zerin, 2007). This is perhaps why it appears to be an inadequately developed language skill for most young learners. Despite the many challenges, teachers can motivate, encourage, and teach writing successfully using the writing rules of grammar, sentence structures and the correct forms (Gocen, 2019). It may particularly benefit the teaching and learning process for classroom activities to be tailored towards invoking the creative strength of young learners. Paragas and Francisco (2020) argue the need to employ myriad strategies and styles in teaching writing, especially since there is no one size fits all approach, and also because diversity in learning styles among students can impact the success of the teaching and learning process.

The Synectics teaching strategy is one of the information-processing models focusing on making sense of the concepts, facts, or information. The Synectics strategy targets the cognitive activity of students. Further, the Synectics strategy, as postulated by William Gordon (1973), helps develop students' creative thinking skills through the use of metaphors and analogies. Using the Synectics strategy in instruction allows a generation of new perspectives on the concept being studied (Joyce et al., 2014). Particularly, because this strategy allows students to train in the ability to link concepts and ideas. Abstract ideas are complicated for young learners to write about. The use of the Synectics strategy has been noted to have several benefits such as clarifying concepts (Abed et al., 2015; Khan & Mahmood, 2018), understanding new ways of comprehending intangible attributes of concepts (Ramos 2011), and benefits teachers in recognizing how students learn better (Abed et al., 2015), amongst others. The Synectics strategy mainly consists of phases—input, metaphorical process (personal analogy, direct analogy, and compressed conflict), and output feedback. Using the Synectics strategy in teaching writing seems like a promising strategy to improve students' writing abilities (Ruhama & Purwaningsih, 2018). Consequently, this study explores the Synectics strategy's usefulness in teaching writing in the selected context.

Resulting from the pandemic, many school-going students were deprived of quality academic tasks. The same was the case in the context selected for this study. Based on conversations with the participants' parents, it was identified that students' lack of motivation towards writing was widely prevalent. Given the time away from the familiar face-to-face class environment, the motivation to study was noted to be generally low. Writing received little attention because much of the writing tasks during the online classes were substituted with less complex, computer-assisted learning. This lack of emphasis on teaching writing provided the scope for the current study to be conducted. Consequently, the following research question was formulated: *How does the Synectics strategy improve school students' writing skills?*

Methodology

This study used a qualitative approach to answer the research question. As such, action research was selected as the suitable design. The following sections discuss the methodological aspects of the study.

Context

The campus on which the study was conducted is an educational institution that houses postgraduate married students. Most of these married students have their spouses and children living with them. An added facility on campus is an academy in which children of these graduate students were enrolled. Social distancing and stringent face-to-face meeting restrictions were imposed during the pandemic lockdown. When these pandemic restrictions were relaxed, there was an opportunity for this study to be conducted.

Participants

Due to the pandemic restrictions, group meetings were limited to small sizes. Therefore, convenience sampling with maximum variations was used to select participants. There were ten students from grade 4

to grade 6 (see Table 1). Participants were selected based on their willingness to participate and on approval granted by their parents.

TABLE 1

Demographic Profile of the Participants

Participants	Gender	Age	Grade
SP1	Male	10	3
SP2	Female	10	3
SP3	Male	11	4
SP4	Female	11	4
SP5	Female	12	5
SP6	Female	12	5
SP7	Female	12	5
SP8	Male	12	5
SP9	Male	13	6
SP10	Male	13	6

Ethical Considerations

The ethical considerations were established by using Brinkmann and Kvale (2009) Ethical considerations framework—informed consent, confidentiality, consequences, and role of the researcher. Informed consent was obtained from the participants' parents. To ensure confidentiality, pseudonyms are used throughout this paper. Additionally, the strict adherence to the institution's pandemic protocol, such as social distancing, wearing face masks at all times, and providing hand sanitizers, was maintained. No participant experienced any physical or emotional harm as a result of this study.

Trustworthiness

This research referred to the trustworthiness framework of Lincoln and Guba (1985). The framework includes credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of the research. Trustworthiness in a qualitative inquiry aims to support the argument that the “findings of an inquiry are worth paying attention to, worth taking account of?” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 290). The researchers used strategies such as triangulation, member checking, and peer debriefing to ensure the study's trustworthiness.

Research Design

Action research is a cyclical process involving a method of systematic enquiry usually employed by teachers to research their own classrooms. Action research focuses on “the social situation that is being researched ... aims to develop both the practical situation and the knowledge about the participants' practice (Altrichter et al., 1993, p. 5). The steps in the action research process are presented in *Figure 1*. This was selected as a suitable design for the study because the purpose was to see how the Synectics strategy, as an intervention, could help improve writing skills.



Figure 1. Steps of action research used in this research.

Data Collection and Data Collection Procedures

The data collection was done using in-depth interviews, observations and analytical memos. The full course of this action research—four cycles—spanned over a month. However, this paper reports the findings from the second cycle alone. This particular cycle was scheduled during the lesson session that lasted for 3 hours. The data collection tools included a semi-structured interview guide, observation guide, and analytical memo. A semi-structured interview protocol and guidelines were formulated. The in-depth interview aimed at understanding the Synectics strategy's effectiveness in improving the students' writing skills. Figure 2 illustrates the data collection procedures in each of the four cycles of the research and explained subsequently.



Figure 2. Data collection procedures.

Consent

Since the participants were minors, their parents signed informed consent forms before they participated in the study

Intervention

The Synectics teaching strategy was used during this intervention step in the following phases.

Phase 1: Students were given a topic and asked to write a short paragraph within a given time. It is important to note that the students were given the liberty to write anyhow they knew and then put aside the paragraph once done.

Phase 2: The teacher explained and demonstrated the use of different analogies—direct analogy, personal analogy, and compressed conflict. Students were then encouraged to participate in pairs or in groups for better understanding and contribution. In the groups, they were asked to generate analogies and various word forms to express their thoughts. Students were then asked to rewrite the paragraph using any and as many of the analogies and compressed conflicts generated.

Phase 3: The students were then asked to compare and share the first and second paragraph writing.

Observation

During the interventions, the researchers made observations as partial participant observers using memos to record details.

Interviews

Individual interviews were conducted at the end of the intervention, which was part of the data for this study. The data analysis was then carried out using the Data Analysis framework of Merriam and Tisdell (2015) — consolidating, reducing, and interpreting. The data gathered through semi-structured interviews, observations, and analytical memos were consolidated, reduced into codes, and different codes were categorized into themes. The themes generated were then interpreted with support from the existing literature.

Findings and Discussion of the Study

The following themes were derived from the data analysis.

Theme 1 - Critical Thinking Skills

During the intervention, participants were most eager to share their thoughts and ideas; working together to identify suitable descriptions while analyzing words' effectiveness. This echoed some of the critical thinking concepts put forth by Paul and Elder (as cited in Khairuddin et al. 2021) —the ability to think rationally, reasonably, and emphatically. (p.68).

It helps me think about the topic differently and from a different perspective. I like playing with words to describe an idea of the normal. (SP8)

During the writing process, I could weigh the pros and cons of using particular words to best fit the description I'm looking for. (SP9)

This strategy helps me learn to analyze different objects I would have never considered comparing. It really helps in giving me words to describe something better. (SP10)

The analogies helped me relate/connect (the topic) culture with different objects. (SP5)

The analogies make me think and connect with the lesson. (SP1)

Applying the Synectics strategy in teaching allows students to describe and compare things critically using analogies. There is a need for instructional strategies that enhance critical thinking skills in understanding abstract concepts (Quitadamo & Kurtz, 2017). Collaborative activities can also improve students' critical thinking skills (Sharadgah, 2014), which is one of the key components of the Synectics teaching strategy.

Theme 2 - Metaphoric Thinking

Metaphoric thinking results from a direct comparison of two unrelated things. It also indirectly links objects or things that are seemingly different but creates similarity in order to express an idea from a new perspective leading to a better understanding. Fraser (2006) also describes metaphor curves as a way to “impress a concept or idea through the powerful image or vividness of the expressions” (p. 96). The ability to use metaphor in writing reveals clarity on the thought process of the students' writing (Boyd, 2012). Ortony (1975) posits metaphors as necessary and not just nice for creative writing. The participants indicated that the task of generating analogies made them think beyond the articulation that they had used in the first paragraph writing.

I like this strategy. We learnt words and expressions that I would have never thought of using. This helps me better understand the topic, and it does sound nice to use it in my writing. (SP2)

I enjoyed learning words using compressed conflicts. I feel compressed conflict words somehow express the ideas better. It gives deeper meaning to the paragraph writing. (SP9)

Using personal analogy to express my ideas is satisfying. I feel like I express myself better and sound nicer in my writing. (SP4)

The different activities of analogies allow me to come up with words and unusually express my ideas but beautifully. I now like writing. (SP3)

I like the activities of creating words for our writing. There is nothing wrong or right, and we worked together as classmates to bring better expressions. (SP5)

From these excerpts, we can see that using metaphoric language increased students' writing interest, resulting in better writing (Liu, 2019). Therefore, the use of analogy in the Synectics strategy potentially allows one to think metaphorically. Additionally, it "gives students the freedom to actualize their thinking process rationally" (Suwartini et al., 2021, p. 155). Participants could create interesting analogies of objects and things they would otherwise not have thought of. Utkina (2016) further added that improving analytical skills of metaphor formations helps improve writing skills. Through practice and classmates' prompts, students could rewrite a paragraph including the many analogies identified and created. Liardet (2013) concluded that being able to interpret and express using metaphors reduces linguistic errors.

Theme 3 - Creativity

One crucial aspect that was noticed among the participants was the satisfaction of being able to write their thoughts, and express their ideas and imaginations without fear (observation memo). Nasir et al. (2013) echoed this thought, stating that Creativity in writing is being able to see things from a different perspective and expressing them clearly. Boden (2001) defined creativity as "the ability to come up with new ideas that are surprising yet intelligible, and also valuable in some ways" (p. 95). Participants expressed that using the Synectics strategy inadvertently assisted their writings being crafted better with analogies disposing of the ideas beautifully. The following excerpts identified during the in depth-interviews concur with these thoughts.

My writing became more expressive. (SP1)

It is interesting because that was exactly our lesson. (SP3)

They helped me better describe the topic (culture) by using new vocabularies...I like that we were given the freedom to write our imagination and express them how we want. (SP9)

I could explain things differently and add new vocabulary and expressions to make it more interesting and attractive. (SP7)

I feel like I'm decorating my writings, but with different vocabularies and analogies we learnt.

My imagination is getting wilder in a good way...all I'm thinking now is how to describe things with analogies...because this makes the writing beautiful. (SP2)

Lucas et al. (2013) posit Creativity as inherent to students. Often, due to teachers' practices that do not tap into this skill, it "lies dormant in most students" (Liu & Schonwetter, 2004, p. 806). Hence, teachers must awaken and nurture the creative minds of the students through facilitating various "thinking tools" (Liu & Schonwetter, 2004, p. 804), such as the use of Synectics in teaching. Tok and Kandemir (2015) and Mohammad (2019) confirmed in their studies that writing among students improved creatively after an intervention or coupled with different strategies. Consequently, creativity in writing thus can be attained when integrated with different analogies found in the Synectics teaching strategy.

Conclusion

From this study, we see that the Synectics teaching strategy supports the development of higher order thinking skills that are transferred into the writing process. When students' thinking is stimulated, it directly affects their creativity in writing. Furthermore, the use of the Synectics strategy as implemented in this study improves the perspectives of students. During the intervention in this study, students were stimulated to think critically, creatively, and cooperatively. It was observed that students clearly acknowledged their fear of writing to their group members and were able to provide support for each other. Peer support during the interventions and appropriate topics for the age group were noted to create opportunities for students to attempt writing creatively, critically and metaphorically.

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