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Using Google Apps as Learning Strategy to Enhance ESL Writing

Hasniza Basri[1], Harwati Hashim[2]*, Melor Md. Yunus[2]

[1]SK Bebuloh, Labuan, Malaysia
[2]Faculty of Education, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Bangi, Malaysia
Email: *harwati@ukm.edu.my

Abstract

ICT has given a lot of assistance to advance teachers' pedagogical approaches. Every moment our education strategies have been evolving with the advent of new technology that simplifies teachers' workload in preparing materials and aids students engaged in their learning. In fact, there are lots of research papers about the effectiveness of using ICT that could engage students in their learning. Writing, known as the hardest skills to master by students as it could be a boring and labouring task. Furthermore, the lack of vocabulary had contributed little confidence and high level of anxiety that made them struggle to write. Based on Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis, learners with low affective filter, high motivation, self-confidence and a low level of anxiety are better equipped for success in second language acquisition. It is believed that ICT integration using Google Apps in the learning process would enhance students' writing skills. Thus, this conceptual paper attempts to discuss the potential benefits of using Google Apps as learning strategy to enhance ESL writing. Some implications and recommendations are also discussed in the conclusion.

Keywords

ICT, Affective Filter Hypothesis, Learning Strategy, Anxiety, Google Apps

1. Introduction

ESL writing difficulty among students seems a non-stop issue as far back as I can remember. Huang (2008) reported differences in scores between ESL and native English students in the provincial English examinations in Canada. This result supported the idea that ESL writers might encounter certain hardship when attempting to write in English. Gilmore (2009) posited that it is a painful for many

students writing in their mother tongue and their hardship are worsening when writing in the second language.

In Malaysia, poor ESL writing among students is a continuous debatable issue (Hashim & Isa, 2012). In Malaysian education context particularly primary school ESL setting, a competent English writer could be generally described as an individual who has good penmanship skills (Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia, 2012). He or she also would be seen as one who could write confidently especially at expressing the critical thoughts in clear manner. However, at the current scenario in certain Malaysian ESL classrooms, the learning situations might not reflect as comprehensive as the description in Malaysian English syllabus such as "*Kurikulum Standard Sekolah Rendah*" (KSSR). Moreover, many studies have clearly shown persistent weakness in written English of Malaysian ESL students. According to Jalaludin, Ibrahim, & Awal (2013), students' interest toward English writing was declining especially students in rural area. Siti Hamin Stapa et al. (2007), in their study reported a very weak writing literacy level among the Form two students in rural schools in Johor. The issue is prominent as English is now the language of instruction at all level of education in Malaysia from primary to tertiary level. This language skill assumed to be of great importance to academic success since it is the commonest assessment measure for academics to evaluate their students, and students' weak writing ability may put their academic success considerable at risk (Tan, 2011 as cited in Azim 2018). Thus, it is prevalent to find ways to improve students' writing skill.

2. Intricacy of English Subject

In Malaysian education context particularly primary school ESL setting, a competent English writer could be generally described as an individual who has good penmanship skills (Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia, 2012). Students' poor performances in ESL writing are due to many factors. Nonetheless, this paper focuses only on the intricacy of the subject that leads to poor ESL writing. Writing, known as the hardest skills to master by students as it could be a boring and labouring task. The lack of vocabulary and grammar knowledge had contributed little confidence that made them struggle to write. Azimah (1998), Maros et al. (2007) and Vahdatinejad (2008) are among the researchers who have verified that students are still having difficulty in using correct English grammar in their writings. Darus et al. (2012) also verified on students having difficulty in doing writing task and have resulted that they disliked doing it. In addition, through the interview sessions with some lecturers, they claimed that their findings indicated majority of students have some negative attitude towards writing. This probably occurs due to the inappropriate selection of learning techniques besides the use of teaching methodology in the classroom.

Gupta & Woldemariam (2011) emphasised teachers' prominent role in improving the students' writing skill by informing them about the important of reasonable writing skills for their career progress. They further suggested teachers

to organize efficient writing courses that help improving students acquire the skill and knowledge in writing strategies. Darus et al. (2012) have also suggested a special online writing program which can help to enhance learners' writing ability and interest.

Therefore, intricacy of English subject can be solved through appropriate use of Information Communication technology (ICT). It is trusted that ICT usage could entice students' interest towards writing and improve students' ESL writing.

3. Information Communication Technology (ICT)

Conventionally, teaching and learning was teacher-centred where face to face contact with teacher's matters as opposed to current practises whereby student-centred learning is encouraged. KPM (2017) has stated that 21st Century Learning is a student-centred approach in the learning process based on elements of communication, collaboration, critical thinking, creativity and values and ethical applications. Hence, it emphasized the need to redesign the education system and transform the learning and teaching delivery. Reigeluth (2012) considered this change as a paradigm change; from existing situation need change in the mind set of not only stakeholders and community but teacher and student. There is an argument that it isn't necessary to use ICT in the 21st century learning. Indeed, using ICT is not necessary in the 21st century classroom. As long as the teacher integrates the element of 4Cs and value in the lesson.

However, a number of studies have proved that ICT integration in the 21st century classroom is benefited (Hashim & Yunus, 2010; Hashim, Yunus, & Embi, 2018; Yunus, Hashim, & Hashim, 2019; Yunus, Salehi, & Chenzi, 2012; Yunus, Hashim, Embi, & Lubis, 2010). Omar et al. (2012) pointed out that the social media used in their study as a promising virtual tool and conducive enough to promote constructive interaction among ESL learners that lead them to play active role. Barr & Miller (2013) emphasized the need of technology-rich environment that foster interaction and connectedness to the international community. The apps used in the lesson was able to keep the students engaged with the attractive features provided and kept them abreast with new knowledge in an interesting manner (Mohamad et al., 2018). Moreover, it is able to address students acquired skills like critical thinking and problem solving. The list of ICT components is exhaustive. One of the components that relevant to this study is cloud computing.

4. Cloud Computing

Cloud computing is a trend of information technology (IT) industry development especially in this fourth industrial revolution age. It is a key terminology in the IT world and has been applied in different sectors including the educational sector. Gartner defines cloud computing as a style of computing in which scalable and elastic IT-enabled capabilities are delivered as a service using Internet technologies. Any online activity like accessing data or using a software program can be done from different devices regardless of the on-ramp to the Internet, as

in Figure 1 (Gartner, 2013). Cloud computing is being applied in education by outsourcing their student email provision (Sclater, 2010). It is known that both Google and Microsoft offer email services for free to the educational sector in many countries. These two companies provide email as a part of larger applications suites which are usually made available to students alongside email. Google Apps for Education and Microsoft Live@edu contain tools for communication and collaboration, office tools for working with documents, and space to store and synchronize data on demand. Nonetheless, Google Applications for education will be the focus in this paper.

5. Previous Studies in Using Google Apps in Education

There are several studies related to Google Apps in education. The studies involved using Google Apps for various settings that includes higher educations, medical course and school (Al-Emran & Iqbal, 2016; Lawrence & Lee, 2016; Zhou et al. 2012; Railean, 2012). It reported positive impact and was proposed as a pedagogical model that established student-centred and collaborative learning (Ferreira, 2014). Whilst, Railean (2012) posited it as a powerful tool to develop knowledge and social skills. Google Apps have a notably impact on performing the work in the higher educational settings (Al-Emran & Iqbal, 2016). Students also showed positive participation in their learning (Zhou et al., 2012; Lawrence & Lee, 2016). Google Apps offer to learners and teachers' communicational tools that can be used as collaborative scenarios to introduce, practice and assess any language topic (Railean, 2012).

6. Current Use of Google Apps in Education

Many free applications such as Google doc, Google classroom, Google Form, Google Drive, YouTube and etc. are available through Google and can be accessed using appliances such as desktop, laptop, smart phone, tablet and Chromebook. With the rise of online learning and technology, Revere & Kovach (2011) posited that innovative programs and activities developed to create learner-centered environment and to enhance learning outcomes as many educators believe that their role is to add value to their students' learning experience. Widodo (2017) mentioned that Google Apps for Education (GAFE) is an information technology solution that can be utilized by schools/colleges to communicate and collaborate in real time. Ideas can be shared by students and lecturers/teacher more quickly and effectively in obtaining information. In his study, Widodo analyzed and designed a learning management system for math education to implement online learning allocated by Google Apps for Educations. In another study by Lindh & Nolin (2016) they reiterated that GAFE is a dynamic tool for teachers as it becomes a facilitator for surveillance practices like rating, ranking and ordering students. The task to overview, sort and compare students becomes much easier with this kind of technology. Furthermore, online behaviour, documented and quantified through GAFE is more preferable than classroom activities.
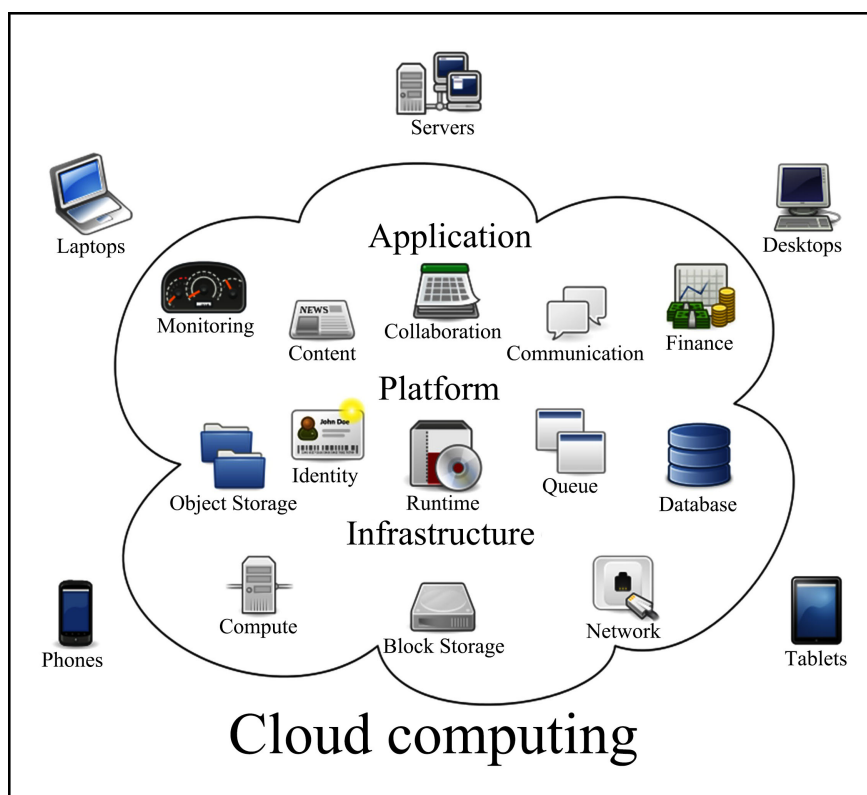
Figure 1. Representation of cloud computing.
([source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cloud_computing](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cloud_computing)).

Railean (2012) claimed that Google Apps can be useful to develop metasystems thinking, an approach that represents an alternative paradigm to systems approach through collaborative learning and self, peer and group assessment. Although lots of study emphasized the Google Apps for study Math, Science and Technology, a study on how these apps could enhance ESL students' writing skill need to be emphasized too.

7. Related Theories

It is inevitable to apply learning theories and strategies in developing means of learning instruction. Application that are developed based on strong educational theories would increase the application potential in helping students to learn.

7.1. Effectiveness of Strategy Intervention

Writing is a daunting task for ESL learners and it is a demanding skill that has also generated interventions aiming to enhance learners' strategic repertoires and capacities. Sengupta (2000) emphasized on revision strategies that had measurable influences on L2 secondary school learners' writing performance.

Assisted Writing is one of the strategy to improve student writing through the assistance of an instructor for planning, drafting, and revising (Graham & Perin, 2007, cited in Denton, 2012). Cloud technologies is said to be able to eliminate logistic challenges which is cumbersome and time consuming. By authoring a

paper with Google Docs enables users to share their work so that another person can monitor, comment or make changes. Other features include chat, and collaborative emailing. Another advantage is the feature see revision history, which permits viewers to observe all of the changes made to a paper over time with no separate drafts needed (Denton, 2012). Amongst the apps, Google Docs is believed to be able to enhance students' writing skill and further research would be conducted to study on students' perceptions in doing writing using the said apps.

Therefore, Google Apps have the potential to be used as learning strategies provided that the educators know the unique features of the apps and are creative enough on the usage.

7.2. Krashen's Affective Filters Hypothesis

Krashen's five hypotheses in learning process are the Acquisition/Learning Hypothesis, the Natural Order Hypothesis, the Monitor Hypothesis, the Input Hypothesis, and the Affective Filter Hypothesis. In this paper, a conceptual framework of using Google Apps for ESL writing task as illustrated in Figure 2, is taking into consideration the fifth hypothesis of Krashen's theory of second language acquisition which is the Affective Filter hypothesis. The outer layer represents conducive learning environment where the students feel comfort without any worries towards the learning. The second layer shows ICT tools and apps are used which provide fun elements and ultimately the objective could be achieved as it is said that learners with low affective filter, high motivation, self-confidence and a low level of anxiety are better equipped for success in second language acquisition thus, could enhance their writing skills.

Lightbrown & Spada (1993) reiterated that acquisition won't happen if a learner is in the state of tense, angry, anxious or bored in which the filter will be up. Consequently, it will be down when the learner is relaxed or motivated. ICT integration in learning seem to reduce the level of anxiety among the students.
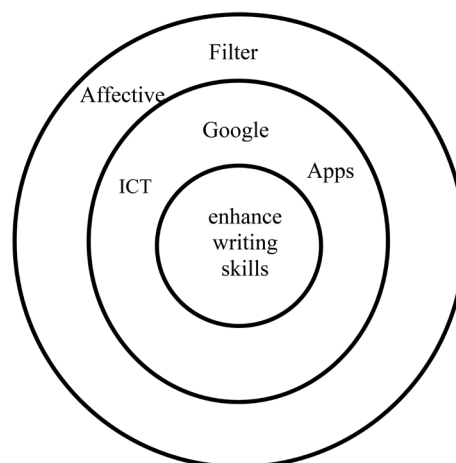

Figure 2. A conceptual framework of using Google Apps in ESL writing.

Huang & Huang (2013) suggested that student anxiety can be reduced with a multimedia environment. Besides, it provides a less stressful classroom environment. Revere & Kovach (2011) claimed that student engagement in the learning process could be fostered when the technology is used appropriately. This is supported by Sharif et al. (2018) where an interactive learning using Youtube could foster confidence among ESL students in fun learning environment.

8. Implication and Conclusion

This concept paper had aimed to describe issues and factors that lead to Google Apps integration in overcoming the challenging task in ESL writing. Notably this study had identified and discussed the capacity of ICT as a useful tool that could be a learning strategy to enhance learning. A conceptual framework of Google Apps has been proposed based on selected theories. The proposed conceptual framework could be used to execute ESL writing task in a comfortable and conducive environment. Nonetheless, further studies will be conducted using one of the apps to implement and investigate the proposed framework.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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