

Using Pictures and Guided writing Strategy to Improve Malaysian ESL Primary Students' writing Skill

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Abstract

Writing is an important skill that has to be mastered as it is a form of written communication. However, past studies have indicated that writing is the toughest among the other skills, especially among the ESL learners. Using a classroom action research study, this qualitative paper considered primary school students' perspectives on the benefits of using pictures and guided writing strategy to improve their writing skill. Convenient sampling selection was used to select 28 upper level primary school students for this study. Two instruments were specifically used to gather data: classroom observation and semi-structured interview. By following Kemmis and McTaggart's action research model, this study was conducted in two cycles where each cycle consists of four steps (plan, act, observe and reflect). The gathered qualitative data was then interpreted and analysed to enrich the credibility of the findings. Three themes were identified through field notes and they are the students' cognitive, behavioural and emotional outcomes when pictures and guided writing strategy is instilled in the writing lesson. The research findings revealed that there are significant developments that showed improvement in students' writing skill when pictures and guided writing strategies are used. This paper serves as a guide for researchers and educators who are interested in incorporating pictures and guided writing strategies in the ESL primary classroom that hopefully improves the interest and writing skills of the students.

Keyword : Esl Learner, Guided Writing, Pictures, Improvement, Writing Skill.

Introduction

The third wave of the educational transformation in Malaysia emphasises on the importance of creating opportunities and welcoming innovations to strengthen the English language proficiency among Malaysian English as a Second Language (ESL) learners (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2013). However, writing remains to be the most challenging skill to be mastered irrespective of the level of education (Nalini et al., 2020). Chai and Hamid (2023) reiterated this, highlighting that Malaysian educators' struggle to motivate their students in writing since the latter do not use the suitable pedagogical approach that is relevant to classroom learning. Unlike those traditional days, today's classes should be facilitated with fun and interactive media to enhance the learning process of the students. For instance, it would be better for teachers to use related pictures, words cards, posters and flashcards in the modern classroom to improve the overall language proficiency of the students (Nurlely et al., 2021). This is further suggested by Ermita et al. (2019), using picture based learning in the classroom often as it makes learning more interactive and engaging by giving room for more personalised learning to take place. Feng Lan et al. (2011) further elaborated that pictures and guided writing strategy are great tools that can be used in the classroom to effectively improve the writing proficiency of the students. Martarini et al. (2020) supported this, making it clear that the integration of pictures and guided writing strategy in the classroom increases motivation and lowers learning anxiety among the students in a writing lesson.

In the Malaysian education system, English is taught as a second language in schools which includes the four skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing). Writing is the most challenging skill to acquire since it is a complex process that requires the learners to think, plan and translate ideas into words (Yunus, 2019; Hidayati, 2018). Having a good writing skill is important for every individual as it helps him to grow and develop further in life. This echoes Fadillah (2020), who stated that writing is a main criterion that needs mastery for better academic performance and good work opportunity. In fact, Bora (2023) also stressed that writing is a compulsory skill that enables them to communicate, express and share ideas through written form. Possessing good writing skills will also indirectly promote and improve an individual's speaking skill (Bora, 2023). Therefore, it is essential for every individual to have a good grasp of the writing skill as it is the key that decides their position in the society and having a good writing skill will also aid in improving the speaking proficiency of an individual.

Most ESL teachers face challenges in developing students' writing skills. This happens because students are unable to express their thoughts and ideas clearly when it comes to writing. According to Farkhan et. (2020), it was found that lack of motivation among students in the writing task makes it difficult for them to compose the written product well. Educators should therefore tackle this problem by instilling more interactive and interesting instructional strategies when it comes to teaching the writing skills to ensure that the students are well motivated throughout the learning process. Weining (2016) suggested using instructional media like pictures or realia objects as helps in motivating and engaging students actively in the writing lesson. Furthermore, visual aids like mind maps can also be incorporated during the writing lesson so that students will not feel clueless or lost when it comes to writing as the students will be able to visualise the points and it gives them clues on what is expected to be written. Guided Writing strategy should also be incorporated during the writing process

so that the weaker students will have a guide on what they should write. This is further supported by Dieni (2022) who proposed to conduct guided writing sessions in the ESL classrooms as a way to increase the motivation among the students. The researcher also stressed that guided writing is an effective way that encourages students to write freely without having the fear of committing mistakes. Therefore, the findings from the above highlights the effectiveness of the use of pictures and guided writing strategy in encouraging and motivating students in writing. The aim of this study is to find the answers for the following questions: (1) What are the impacts of using pictures and guided writing strategy on Malaysian primary students' writing skill?, and (2) What are students' perceptions about implementing pictures and guided writing strategy in writing classes?

Literature Review

Writing and Guided Writing

Writing is often a problem among the ESL learners and many types of research have been carried out in this field to address a suitable method in assisting the students in writing (Yunus et al., 2018). Writing is needed for many purposes where it is also used especially during this modern period where socialising also takes place through various online social media that requires one to use the writing skill. However, learning to write requires a systematic process where it is not acquired naturally unlike the speaking skill (Samaiya, 2022). Because of that, educators are continuously innovating strategies to help students learn and achieve the minimal target of the requirement needed for writing. In schools, the problem that is mostly faced among the ESL students is their difficulty to translate ideas into words. Sarifah and Apsari (2020) clearly explained that most writing lessons in the classroom turn out to be a failure because most students face difficulties in generating ideas and constructing the words into sentences as they find it difficult to organise their ideas well. Therefore, it always falls back on the responsibility of the educators in finding ways to help students to connect their ideas in providing a good piece of writing.

Writing is the most challenging skill compared to other language skills. In fact, it has often been a major problem among the ESL students, especially when they are told to write independently without any assistance (Faya, 2020). This is concurred by Richard and Renandya (2002), arguing that writing is the most difficult skill for the second language learner because not all would be able to write well without any given assistance. Teachers most often find it challenging when assigning writing activities since the latter find it difficult to complete essay writing tasks without any assistance. Often, writing lessons are not likely to achieve the learning objective since students are unable to write on their own. Guided writing is carried out through the scaffolding techniques in guiding learners to construct sentences. This method benefits all ages of learners, especially the weak ones (Khusniyak, 2019).

During the guided writing stage, teachers would provide ideas and feedback to the students on improving the given writing task. This does not only assist the students, but also gives opportunities for them to share and brainstorm ideas. This is strongly supported by Dieni (2022) who opined that guiding students in the writing stage is the most important stage in writing since it provides opportunities for them to try, engage and also participate actively in the writing lesson. Small steps taken in guiding the students to write will definitely help them to become independent writers. Dieni (2022) highlighted that students perform better if assistance is given when it comes to writing since it provides psychological and cognitive support. This proves that guidance and assistance given in writing lessons gives motivation

and encouragement to write. Thus, constant guidance and support should be given in the writing lessons as it is a significant step in improving the writing skills of the students.

Pictures, Visual Aids and ESL writing

With the rapid changes in this modern era, there is a need for educators to continuously consider the use of instructional media to gain students' attention rather than using the conventional chalk-and-talk approach. Visual aids and pictures play a role in drawing students' attention to the lesson as they are able to see and relate to the content of the learning. Pictures and visual aids such as charts and graphs will not only capture their attention but also help comprehend lessons better (Nashruddin, 2022). Nashruddin (2022) pointed out that pictures and visual aids in the writing lesson helps in giving clues and ideas to the learners on what they should write. Ermita et al. (2019) concurred that pictures help students to generate ideas in choosing the right words and putting them into sentences. A study conducted by Widyaningrum and Octavita (2019) revealed the effectiveness of pictures in improving ESL students' overall writing skills. Pictures and visuals capture their attention and motivate them to be actively involved in the writing lesson. Thus, the strategy of using pictures and visuals plays a vital role in engaging students actively in the lesson. Classroom instructions that include pictures and visuals do not only help students to write better but also act as a medium to increase their interest and motivation towards the lesson (Ermita et al., 2019). The points above clearly explain the importance of utilising pictures and visuals in the writing lesson as it helps in developing and sustaining students' attention and motivation in writing.

The saying "A picture portrays a thousand words" is rather true in this context as it enables a person to perceive multiple ideas with the use of a picture. The use of pictures allows one to convey the meaning or message more accurately than verbal explanations. Nurlily et al. (2021) suggested using pictures and visuals in ESL writing lessons to allow students to generate new ideas to write. With visuals, students do not need to be told what they are supposed to write as they will be able to visualise it through the assistance of pictures. Pictures and visuals help students to keep themselves on track when they write as they will be able to follow through the visuals and write confidently based on the visual information that they see. Faya (2020) further agreed, explaining that the use of pictures and visuals transforms abstract ideas into realistic form that enables students to write confidently. Findings in a study done by Goncalves et al., (2023) indicates improvements in students' written performance when pictures are used in the writing lesson. This reiterates Nashruddin (2022) who also demonstrated the significance of pictures in developing students' writing skill. All these reiterate clearly that the use of pictures and visuals is essential to facilitate imagination and thinking skill of the students in the writing lesson.

Methodology

Research Design

This research was a classroom-based action research which determined the usefulness of pictures as a guided writing strategy to improve students' writing skills. By using Kemmis and McTaggart's model (1988), this qualitative research underwent two cycles. Both cycles employed a qualitative approach to allow data collection where classroom observation and semi-structured interview were conducted on the selected upper level primary school students. The findings from this survey provides explanations on students' writing

performance when pictures and guided writing strategies are included in the lesson. The diagram of the model is illustrated in Figure 1.

There are four steps involved namely the plan, action, observation and reflection stage. The movement from one step to the other allows progression to take place. Action research focuses on studying what is happening in the classroom throughout the entire learning process (Tshewang Rabgay & Kidman, 2023). It is a way in which researchers are able to identify and rectify problematic areas that they wish to focus on. Action research is important in the field of education as it allows room for educators to implement various strategies to improve the quality of teaching and learning (Bergmark, 2020).

Initially, a writing lesson based on the students' proficiency level was planned where the researchers considered the type of writing tasks to be given. The required teaching and

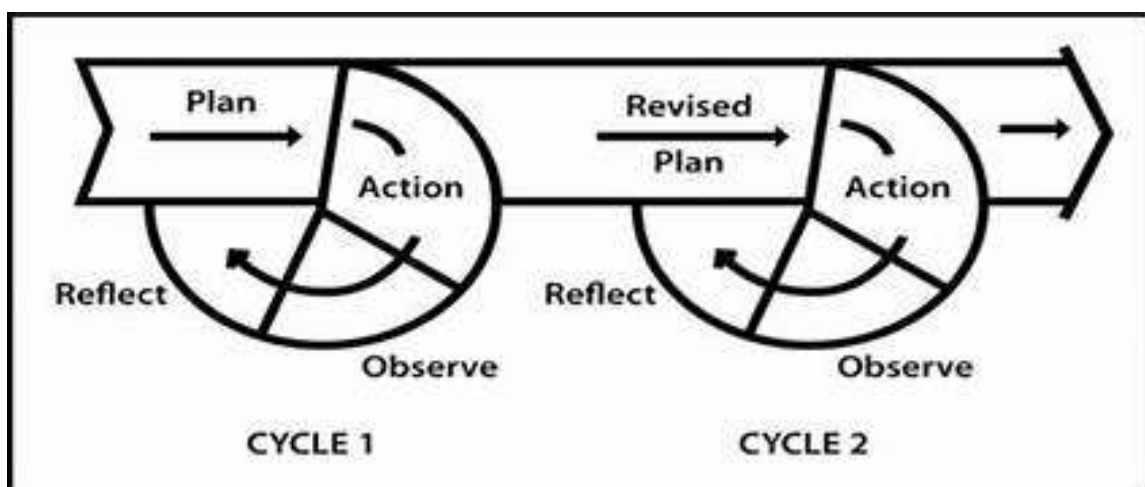


Figure 1 : Kemmis and McTaggart's (1988) Action Research Model adapted from (Dieni, 2022)

learning materials were prepared at this stage to maximise learning potentials and achieve academic goals (Tyagi, 2020). Then, the researchers distributed the writing task to the students. However, pictures and guidance were not provided at this stage. The students would have to write and submit the task at the end of the lesson. The researchers focused on observing the students' behaviour throughout the action stage. The observation stage is important to identify students' abilities in completing the given writing task. Classroom field notes were taken by other teachers during the lesson. Participating teachers took note of students' learning and motivation towards accomplishing the writing task. In the reflection stage, the effectiveness of the lesson was shared, which is crucial in lesson planning because it helps educators to evaluate the teaching session to ensure the objective of the lesson is achieved. Shulman (2021) emphasised on the importance of post-lesson reflection as it is a progressive way for teachers to improve and develop the quality of their upcoming teaching sessions in the classroom. Figure 2 indicates this.

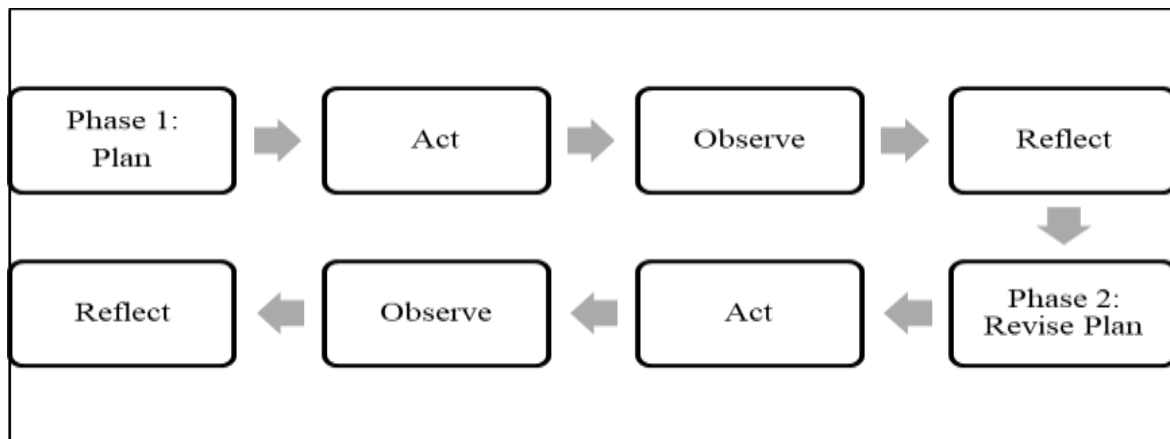


Figure 2 : Kemmis and McTaggart's (1988) Action Research Model

In the second phrase, the researchers designed a plan to improve the previous lesson. Upon reflecting on the first cycle, the researchers distributed the same writing task to the students. Pictures were then prepared at this stage to enhance students' writing skills. Replanning the lesson is an opportunity for educators to modify the lesson in order to suit learners' needs to achieve the goal and objective of the lesson (Faroun, 2020). Students were given guidance in completing the writing task, which was to be submitted at the end of the lesson. During this process, their behaviour was closely observed. The observation stage is important in identifying students' abilities in completing the given writing task. Faroun (2020) made it clear that educators should observe students' abilities and capabilities during the learning stage to check on the effectiveness of the lesson. Classroom field notes on students' impacts of writing when pictures and guided writing strategies are used in the lesson were taken by other teachers while the lesson was conducted. At the end of the second cycle, a semi-structured interview was carried out among the randomly chosen students to understand how they felt about the writing task given with pictures and assistance. Some of the students were also then selected based on convenient sampling for an interview, which serves as a data collection method because it has the benefits of giving an individual's detailed personal accounts that is beneficial to the research studies (Dörnyei, 2007). This semi-structured interview focused on students' emotion when writing the guided essay. The interview was specifically audio recorded. The second phrase was later followed by a classroom observation, aimed to investigate students' motivation and interest upon writing when both pictures and guided writing strategy is included in the writing process.

Sampling and Population

Based on the population of 80 Year Five students from a government primary school in Mantin, 28 are selected as the sample of this study. All 28 samples are studying in a Chinese vernacular school located in Mantin, Negeri Sembilan where Chinese is the mother tongue of most participants. Negeri Sembilan is a small state located in the southwest of Peninsular Malaysia. These participants were selected from the same class using convenient sampling selection. According to Etikan (2016), convenient sampling is known as non-random sampling where the respondents are chosen based on accessibility, availability and convenience of the researcher. In the first instrument, the upper primary level pupils were selected consisting of 10 boys and 18 girls (N=10; M=10; F=18). Consent from the head of department and respective guardians were obtained before the research was conducted since it is an ethical

requirement to carry out a research (O'Reilly & Dogra, 2017). Table 1 lists down the demographics of the participants.

Table 1
Distribution of Pupils' Demographic

Demographic Profile		Number	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	10	36
	Female	18	64
Race	Malay	5	18
	Chinese	20	71
	Indian	3	11

For the second instrument, five interview participants were randomly chosen from the total sample to take part in a semi-structured interview session (N=5; F=3; M=2). They are from the same class as the other respondents. The interview was conducted to understand their perceptions about implementing pictures and guided writing strategy in the writing classes. The interview was audio recorded.

Data Collection Instruments

Classroom Observation

In order to gather credible data from the classroom observation, field notes, which were adapted from Çınar, Erişen and Çeliköz (2022), were used. There are four categories of observation: students' cognitive outcomes (CO), their behavioural outcomes (BO), their emotional outcomes (EO) and weaknesses from using pictures and guided writing strategies.

Semi-Structured Interview

Adeoye-Olatunde and Olenik (2021) explained that semi-structured interviews are often entailed with interview protocols that consist of a set of questions that adhere to the objective of the research. The questions of the interview were adapted from Emilia and Abdul Hamied (2022). The interview consisted of six open ended questions regarding pupils' perceptions about implementing pictures and guided writing strategy in the writing classes.

Data Analysis Method

From the classroom observation, field notes were gathered that provided related contextual information to the study. As of the semi-structured interview, the recorded interview was transcribed and examined using conventional content analysis. According to Gheya and Jacobs (2017), content analysis was introduced by Barelson in 1952 that aims to analyse specific contents of messages where it involves the process of identifying themes and patterns in data (Shava et al., 2021). Shava et al. (2021) further added that content analysis breaks down the raw data to answer research questions. The content analysis for this study was done by comprehending the interview findings based on the transcripts. Then, the

patterns of the findings were identified and arranged into categories. This was done in order to highlight the keywords that are related to the study.

Validity and Ethics

The semi-structured interview was used since it draws out the participants' personal opinions that might be beneficial to the study (Dörnyei 2007). Overall, the semi structured interviews enabled the researchers to explore the respondents' perspectives on the topic. Several precautions were taken to ensure that the interview questions passed the validity and reliability tests. The semi-structured interview questions were validated to ensure its comprehensive nature. Confidentiality and privacy were further ensured. As for classroom observation, inter-rating was administered to avoid bias perspectives when observing learning. Cole (2023) mentioned that inter rating indicates the degree of agreement among different raters in order to avoid biases towards the findings of the study.

Findings and Discussion

Impacts of using Pictures and Guided Writing Strategy on Malaysian Primary Students' Writing Skill

The classroom observation enabled answering the first research question, which is to identify the impacts of using pictures and guided writing strategy on Malaysian primary students' writing skill. Table 2 illustrates the outcomes of the students' data obtained from the field notes through classroom observation. Three themes were identified through field notes. They are the students' cognitive, behavioural and emotional outcomes when pictures and guided writing strategy is instilled in the writing lesson.

Table 2

Classroom Observation Field Notes on Impacts Before and After using Pictures and Guided Writing Strategies in Writing Classrooms, Adopted From Çınar, Erişen & Çeliköz (2022)

Categories	Elements	Before	After
Cognitive outcomes (CO)	Struggle to write independently.	✓	
	Unable to connect or link ideas well.	✓	
	Able to link & connect writing ideas.		✓
	Able to write effortlessly with pictures and guided writing strategy.		✓
Behavioural outcomes (BO)	Felt lost and sleepy during the writing lesson.	✓	
	Reluctant to write	✓	
	Tried to complete the task independently.		✓
	Participated actively throughout the writing lesson.		✓
Emotional outcomes (EO)	Has no interest in the writing lesson.	✓	
	Students feel clueless and nervous.	✓	
	Shows excitement in the writing lesson.		✓
	Has motivation & interest towards writing.		✓
	Encourages collaboration among teachers & peers.		✓
	Boost students' confidence in learning.		✓
Weaknesses	Students are passive and rely too much on guidance and assistance.		✓
	Some weaker students do not want to write when they are not given clues or guidance.		✓

Table 2 shows the impact of pictures and guided writing strategy in the writing classroom. Based on the data obtained from the classroom observation, it is noted that the students had significantly improved in the cognitive, emotional and behavioural learning outcomes. As portrayed in the table above, it is clear that the students exhibit positive learning outcomes when both pictures and guided writing strategies are incorporated in the writing lesson. Some of these improved learning attitudes can be seen within the categories of to cognitive, behavioural and emotional outcomes which include the ability to write effortlessly (CO), connect between ideas (CO), hinder from falling asleep (BO), keeping abreast with the writing task (BO), willingness to write (EO) and keeping focused (EO). These improvements indicate that the use of pictures and guided writing strategy impacts students' writing abilities. Thus, pictures and guided writing strategy is a success in the ESL writing lesson.

However, there are also observed weaknesses using pictures and guided writing strategy in the writing lessons. One, students started to rely heavily on guidance and assistance. It is also a highlight that a few weaker students were reluctant to write when they are not given any clues or guidance. In order to overcome this situation, Bean and Melzer, (2021) suggested that teachers should evoke students' critical thinking skills by encouraging them to participate and share ideas actively as an effort to engage them actively in the learning process. Besides, teachers could also mix and group the students according to their level and abilities. In that case, the students who are good in writing will be able to assist the weaker students. Greater classroom discussions among students increases the quality of students' writing (Bean & Melzer, 2021). The teacher should therefore engage and encourage the students to share and voice their opinions in completing the writing tasks rather than being a passive learner. As a result, more concerns should be given to tackle this matter so that the upcoming writing lessons will be able to take place effectively.

Students' Perceptions about Implementing Pictures and Guided writing Strategy in writing Classes

In addition to the classroom observation, a semi-structured interview was carried out among the students in order to answer the second research question of what are students' perceptions about implementing pictures and guided writing strategy in writing classes

Promote Students' Participation

Widyaningrum and Octavita (2019) suggested that visuals should be used more often in the writing classroom as it facilitates students' learning and helps in elevating effective pedagogical practices. One of the students claimed that pictures and guided writing strategy increased their involvement and participation in the writing lesson:

I involve myself actively in the writing lesson when pictures and guided writing strategies are used because I am able to express my ideas based on the pictures that I see. (Participant 2)

This is supported by another student who agreed that pictures and guided writing strategies allows them to be engaged in the lesson compared to the ordinary writing lesson. She declared:

I am active in the lesson when there are pictures. I feel really sleepy and don't feel like writing when there are no pictures and guidance given. (Participant 4)

The use of pictures and guided writing strategy improves students' participation and involvement in the lesson. However, excessive use of pictures and guidance may reverse this effect as some weaker students may not want to try writing without any assistance. (Yulianti et al., 2019) proposed that students' participation can be better increased with social engagement, when students' share or discuss ideas with peers instead of working on their own.

Improves Students' Motivation in writing

The findings from the study conducted by Erniwati et al., (2022) showed a significant impact of pictures in students' motivation when it comes to writing. Besides, students' engagement and motivation is also heightened when guided writing strategy is included in the lesson (Feng Lan et al., 2011). Some students acknowledged that both pictures and guided writing increases their motivation and desire in writing:

I feel writing is so much fun and easier when the teacher uses pictures and gives simple guidance. (Participant 1)

Another student reported that he finds it difficult to comprehend the task when there are no pictures and guidance:

I feel eager to write when the teacher shows pictures and provides me guidance in writing. (Participant 5)

The student agreed and made a statement that pictures and guided writing strategy improved their eagerness in writing. This is an important element to be achieved because both motivation and eagerness in learning fosters the academic competency of the students (Arief, 2021).

Provides Greater Ideas for Students in writing

Another benefit of using pictures and guidance in the writing lesson is that it gives students ideas in composing the written work. Based on the interview, one of the students agreed that they have difficulties in writing when pictures and guidance are not provided.

I have no idea on what to write and often feel blank when there are no pictures and guidance given. (Participant 3)

In this case, the student admitted that they find it difficult to write when pictures and guidance are not provided for them. One of the solutions to overcome this is by integrating pictures and guided writing strategy in the writing lesson. Listyani, (2019) opined that pictures provide contextual cues that enable learners to create and develop ideas. On the other hand, guided writing strategy facilitates and scaffolds the learning of the students (Alwahibee, 2019). A study conducted by Alwahibee (2019) shows significant improvement in students' writing when pictures and guided writing strategy are incorporated as it provides greater ways for students in developing their ideas.

Conclusion

The results of this study revealed that the use of pictures and guided writing strategy is effective in improving students' writing skills. The findings from interview and classroom observation found that students' are able to write better when pictures and guided writing strategies are incorporated in the writing lesson. Hence, teachers and educators should consider employing pictures and guidance in the writing lesson to better increase and develop students' writing skill. The limitation of this study is that it was only limited to a small group of students as only 28 respondents were involved in this study. Therefore, future research should further look into larger samples, other class groups or educational levels to acknowledge the effectiveness of the use of pictures and guided writing strategy in improving students' writing skills.

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