

PICTORIAL ARTWORKS OF STORYBIRD.COM AS WRITING PROMPTS TO BOOST STUDENTS CRITICAL THINKING AND CREATIVITY: STUDENTS' PERCEPTION

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Abstract: Expressing ideas in a written form is usually challenging for many students in ESL/EFL classes. In writing, L2 students may face common issues such as grappling with grammar aspects, coping with mechanics, making coherence, cohesion and generating ideas (Al Badi, 2015; Younes & Albalawi, 2015). Similarly, for the context of writing in L2 class in Study Program of English, Universitas Brawijaya, the students encountered common hurdles in composing good writing. One of the reasons causing many ESL/EFL learners to struggle in their L2 writing is the lack of critical thinking training (Chou, 2011). This study aimed to implement a strategy in the form of a writing prompt, namely *Storybird.com* in a writing class to help students generating ideas and boosting their critical thinking. The research problems covered the students' perception of the implementation of the writing prompts, and the implementation of the artwork prompts to boost students' Critical Thinking and Creativity in Writing. This study employed a qualitative research design. The subjects were 31 undergraduate students majoring in English, and the data were collected through document analysis and questionnaire. The results indicated that the implementation of the artwork prompts could boost students' Critical Thinking and Creativity in Writing.

Keywords: Writing, pictorial artworks of storybird.com, writing prompt, critical thinking, and creativity

INTRODUCTION

Expressing ideas in the form of written expression is usually challenging for many students in ESL/EFL classes. Along with the acquisition of the second language (L2), to write in L2, students might experience some social and cognitive challenges. For instance, Students may have little confidence to write in L2 compared to that in their first language. Moreover, language proficiency in L2 adds on to the quality of good writing. Some quandaries may contribute to this situation. In writing, students may face common issues such as: grappling with grammar aspects, choosing the appropriate vocabularies, coping with punctuation and mechanics, making coherence and cohesion, and generating ideas (Al Badi, 2015; Younes & Albalawi, 2015).

These give extra pressure for the students. Meanwhile, writing skills need to be consciously trained and take much time to practice, in order to have well composed, developed and analyzed written ideas. Writing skills is unique compared to other language skills. In writing, students need to have the ability to tell or represent their ideas or pieces of information in the form of any text genres, namely narratives, descriptive, expository, or argumentative. Thus

formulating new ideas can be difficult, since transforming or reworking information on written pieces is way more complicated compared to expressing ideas as it is in telling (Myles, 2002). Before the ability to present ideas in a written form, students are supposed to be equipped with some inputs and trained in how to start good writing. The organization, language use, and writing mechanics are required to be mastered by the students. As supported by Ellis (1997) in any second language learning context, there should be two prerequisites given to the classroom: L2 input available to the learners and a set of internal mechanisms to account for how L2 data are processed. It applies to any ESL/EFL learning context worldwide.

Similarly, for the context of writing in L2 class in Study Program of English of Universitas Brawijaya, students in writing class also encountered common hurdles in composing a good piece of writing. Notably, students who enroll for *Sentence Writing Class*, as one of the obligatory writing subjects which are instructed by the curriculum in the Study Program of English. They also face similar writing obstacles in writing which are overcoming difficulties in tackling writing skills and increasing language proficiency. In line with the ideas above this study explores on providing a strategic development for the students of *Sentence Writing Class* as an input on how to generate ideas and build their critical thinking before producing written text.

To reach this goal, the researchers introduce and implement the use of *Storybird.com* Artworks as writing prompts in the *Sentence Writing Class* to help students generating their ideas as well as boosting their critical thinking through creative exercises. As it is also supported by Burke&Tinsley (199) that proposed some creative activity using prompts for writing class, writing prompt can be implemented in some form of creative activities, for instance composing short stories, poem writing, fiction or non-fiction writing.

Storybird.com used under some considerations. *Storybird.com* is a website committed to providing a variety of colorful and vibrant artworks in the form of pictorial illustration that ignites the imagination and creativity of the users. It contributes to a free-write station, to prompt various writing tasks, or as a platform for peer creative writing exercises. In addition to that, the site promotes a purpose for writing as well as reading that is essential for classroom use.

This research attempts to explore writing classroom activities, and exercises on generating ideas upon the use of pictorial artwork writing prompt provided by *Storybird.com* to the second-semester students of the Study Program of English, Faculty of Cultural Studies, Universitas Brawijaya, who enroll the *Sentence Writing Class*.

To be more specific the research problems are elaborated as follows:

1. What are the students' perceptions of the implementation of artwork writing prompts provided by *Storybird.com* in the class?
2. How effective is the implementation of the artwork prompts to boost students' Critical Thinking and Creativity in Writing?

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative research design since the data obtained were explained descriptively. This research aimed to understand the "complexity" of the data (Kervin et al., 2006, p.35) through interpretation and reflection to establish the meaning (Cliff, 2012). The data were gathered through document analysis and questionnaire. Moreover, Patton (2002) defined qualitative research as an attempt to understand different interactions in a particular situation. It was further explained that the purpose was not necessarily to predict what might happen, but rather to understand in depth the characteristics of the situation.

The subject of the study was 31 undergraduate students majoring in English at Study Program of English, Faculty of Cultural Studies, Universitas Brawijaya who were taking a Sentence Writing course in the academic year of 2017. In this study, the sample used a purposive sampling technique. Cliff (2012) said that purposive sampling is conducted to meet the aim of qualitative research which describes occurrences in a particular setting. In recruiting the sample a qualitative researcher might "use his or her judgment as to which segments should be included," (Charles & Mertler, 2002, p.151). As Cliff (2012) stated that there is no a strict parameter to choose a particular technique, some data gathering techniques which are applicable for qualitative research can be in the form of observation, interviews and document analysis.

The document analysis covered the results of the students' pictorial artworks that were explained descriptively. Then, the questionnaire was developed in order to get information about the use of the *storybird.com artworks* as a prompt to enhance the students' creativity in writing in order to help the students in generating their ideas as well as boosting their critical thinking through creative exercises. Since there has not yet been a study about the students' perception toward the implementation of using *storybird.com artworks* as a prompt to improve the students' creativity in writing, so the researchers invented the questionnaire themselves. The questionnaire has been peer-reviewed for validation. Afterward, the questionnaire was tried out. Then, the questionnaire was distributed to students. After that, the researchers analyzed those data in order to answer the research problems.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings include the result of the questionnaires on the students' perception of the implementation of Storybird.com in writing class. Students' general responses regarding the use of Storybird.com were derived from the questionnaires distributed among them. The questionnaires consisted of open-ended questions designed in such a way to encourage answers using the subjects' knowledge or feelings. The responses covered students' opinion regarding the use of Storybird.com in general, the advantages of using Storybird.com, the disadvantages of

using Storybird.com, students' suggestion in using Storybird.com, and students' opinion on whether they agree on the use of Storybird.com in English writing class.

In response to the use of storybird.com as a learning tool in writing class, the answers varied but mostly favorable. Students believed it could stimulate creativity and improve their writing skills. These answers were given by six students respectively. Then, five students found that storybird.com could boost their imagination and the other five students revealed it could motivate them to be productive in writing. Besides, three students said that it contained a lot of interesting pictures. Two students found the website to be practical and easy to use. It did not require paper and pen since the writing was done online, directly on the web. Other two students provided generic answer stating that storybird.com was useful. Two students stated that storybird.com was a little bit difficult to use. The website provides a wide range of artworks contributed by hundreds of artists. Perhaps it made some students confused in choosing which pictures to use in writing a story. To sum up, almost all the students gave positive responses stating that storybird.com was useful, interesting and practical. Therefore it could boost their imagination, creativity, and productivity in writing.

Related to the students' opinions about the advantages provided by storybird.com as a learning tool in writing class, eight students responded that the web improved their writing skill whereas seven students stated that the web helped them create stories. It was also revealed that storybird.com boosted their imagination and contained a lot of interesting pictures. These answers were given by five students respectively. Moreover, four students asserted that the web made them creative. Another advantage was also revealed by two students who said that storybird.com was easy to be operated. As stated earlier, expressing ideas in the form of written expression is particularly challenging for many students. Generating ideas itself is not easy; let alone writing them down in a decently-crafted composition. Students need prompt in helping them generate ideas, and pictorial artworks in storybird.com might serve what students need. The students' responses to the second question revealed that the web contained a lot of exciting pictures which could boost their imagination and help them create stories and become more creative and their skill in writing improved. This finding has been one of the concerns of pedagogical writing. Therefore, as it is suggested by Myles (2002) that L2 writing instructors should create a pedagogical writing class that combines both strategy and language skill development when working with students, eventually, this would help students to progress not only on their writing process but also on their linguistic repertoire.

Some of the disadvantages of Storybird.com implementation were also revealed. There were eight students concerned on the accessibility of Storybird.com which could be easier on PC rather than on mobile gadgets, followed by eight students stating that internet connection was necessary in order to be able to work with it. Due to the modes, this website has two features, a free temporal sign-up, and permanent paid access. Of course, the two features provided different benefits that students might want to access. Then, they felt overwhelmed once they

had an account and were assigned to create a particular task, which was composing a Picture Book and used the available pictorial artworks as clues to generate ideas. They were confused with choosing which pictorial artworks to use. The final response toward the drawback of the Storybird.com was the accessibility to print the pictures. The whole story needs to be rated before printing. Some conditions were applied before the students' works could be printed.

There were some suggestions given by the students toward the use of Storybird.com in supporting the teaching and learning activity in a writing class. The first suggestion was on the availability of pictures for the free mode in Storybird.com. It should be added more compared to that of paid mode. Then, they suggested that Storybird.com should have provided more pictures options on the same theme. The third, Storybird.com should contain a grammar checker option. The last suggestion was on how a teacher could give more assignments to classroom account in Storybird.com.

The suggestions were in line with some supporting reasons upon why Storybird.com used as one of the teaching and learning techniques for writing class. There were ten students stated that Storybird.com could improve the students writing skills. Another ten students argued that storybird.com was a useful tool for teaching and learning activity. Moreover, six students claimed that Storybird.com made them more creative. Five students supported that Storybird.com was exciting teaching and learning techniques for writing class.

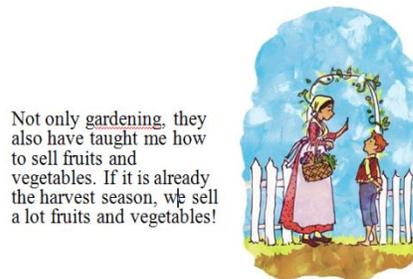


Figure 1. The sample of the student's work

The study results indicated that students had a positive impression on the implementation of Storybird.com and it was proven that pictorial artworks of Storybird.com to be as a critical thinking activity booster. The artworks and writing activities provided by Storybird.com functioned as a learning scaffold for them to build their critical thinking. With the help provided by the website in the form of many pictorial artworks, learners can reach capabilities that exceed their limits, as has been stated by Vygotsky (1978) as the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). As it is supported by Chou (2011), being a critical thinker, it will enable students to generate ideas more effectively as a part of developing a writing strategy. The artworks of Storybird.com were also useful writing prompts since they stimulated students' creativity in presenting their ideas in written form. Annkroeker (2017) believed that writing derived from prompts may trigger a surprising number of ideas, that students might not be able to generate from merely on their own.

Further, Mahyuddin et al (2004, in Sirkhani and Fahim, 2011) added that language learners with critical thinking ability are capable of thinking critically and creatively in order to achieve the goals of the curriculum; capable of making decisions and solving problems; capable of using their thinking skills, and of understanding language or its contents. Moreover, it is possible to teach critical thinking skills to adult learners. Critical thinking needs to be taught explicitly and implicitly (Emerson, 2013). Thus, teaching activities including critical thinking components delivered implicitly or explicitly can improve the students' critical thinking skills. It is evident that teaching adult learners critical thinking skills is possible and it works to improve thinking and creativity.

This current study stood out in some points compared to the two previous studies. To the study conducted by Alfaki (2014), *University Students' English Writing Problems: Diagnosis and Remedy*. This study used the same research design as a descriptive qualitative one. Since this study was to see the reality faced by students in writing class, both studies also proposed modification mechanic and linguistic aspects in students' writing. However, Alfaki's study did not implement a guided mechanism as it was applied in the current study. Compared to the second previous study, Shaarawy (2014) entitled *The Effect of Journal Writing on Students' Cognitive Critical Thinking Skills: A Quasi-Experimental Research on an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) Undergraduate Classroom in Egypt*, this study did not apply a quasi-experiment to the students of writing class to see the different result on the improvement toward the methods of writing modification. Instead, it implemented strategy development in writing skills for all the participants in the writing class.

This study aims to explore writing classroom activities, and exercises on generating ideas upon the use of pictorial artwork writing prompt provided by Storybird.com as innovative writing prompts source that is eligible to be used in writing class. These were as gap fillings from the two previous studies both as the scientific and practical significance. Thus, the present study was very beneficial to be conducted for a local context in the Study Program of English Universitas Brawijaya, which relatively has similar characteristics of EFL students.

CONCLUSIONS

The students' perception of the implementation of artwork writing prompts provided by *Storybird.com* in the class were positive. They could improve their writing skills by doing writing exercises. The implementation of the artwork could boost students' Critical Thinking and Creativity in Writing. The results of this study can be used as one of the additional resources for the teaching and learning of writing course in the Study Program of English. The students could have more confidence in composing, developing, and analyzing a piece of writing by having improved writing strategies as well as writing proficiency in L2. It is expected that these current study findings could contribute to the richness of pedagogical writing for ESL/EFL context.

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