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## **IMPROVING FORM 1 STUDENTS' SKILLS IN GENERATING IDEAS FOR ESSAY WRITING USING CIRCLE AND FLEE MAPS TECHNIQUE**

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### **Abstract**

This action research aimed to improve form one students' skills in generating ideas for English Language (EL) writing lesson using circle and flee maps technique. A total of 31 students from Form 1 Bestari were chosen as the participants of this action research. An initial survey was carried out using a simple writing task to identify whether the students managed to generate ideas for their essay. Based on the initial survey, it was proven that the students were having problems in coming out with ideas in their writing. A pre-test was then carried out to identify the students' ideas for writing prior to the implementation of the intervention. The intervention, using circle and flee maps were carried out for two weeks. A post-test was then carried out to determine the differences in the number of topic sentences and supporting details written by the students in their essays using circle and flee maps techniques. A survey was also administered to find out the students' perspective on the use of circle and flee maps. The findings from the quantitative and qualitative data showed significant improvement in the students' generation of ideas. More than 20 students managed to provide three topic sentences and at least six supporting details in their essays. Conclusively, by using the circle and flee maps, students were able to come out with more ideas and subsequently wrote better elaborated sentences in their essays.

**Keywords:** Writing Skills, Thinking Maps, Circle Map, Flee Map, Secondary School Students.



## Introduction

Writing has been considered as an essential skill in the teaching and learning of English as a Second Language (ESL) as it is a comprehensive skill that helps reinforce vocabulary, grammar, thinking, planning, editing, revising, and other elements. Saed & Al-Omari (2014) stated that writing also helps to improve all other skills as they are all interrelated. In Malaysia, English writing skill is a skill that is tested in every valid language examination at different levels of education. However, students find it difficult to compose in English as it involves many cognitive and linguistic strategies through the writing process (Maghsoudi & Haririan, 2013). They often struggle with constructing idea or being over-concerned about grammatical forms.

According to Firmansyah (2015), the major problem passed by students in writing are their inability to generate ideas making them lacking the ideas on what to write first. Other than that, they also had difficulties in making the paragraphs with the topic and choosing the suitable word due to lack of vocabulary.

Writing is the hardest skill to be taught compared to the other language skills – speaking, listening and reading as it is very hard to measure (Akinwamide, 2012). It involves a complex process: generating thesis statement, writing supporting details and elaborating the topic sentences, reviewing for mistakes made and making necessary editing after reviewing (Alsamadani, 2010, p.53 cited in Javid & Umer, 2014).

The mind mapping strategy can be considered as one of the effective strategies in teaching writing. It can act as an effective tool to aid in studying and organizing information as well as writing. DePorter and Hernacki (2007) (in Aini, et al., 2012:18) stated that mind mapping method is a method of recording the material we learn. Mind mapping is the creative way for the students to generate ideas, to note what they learn, or to plan new tasks.



Both of them also stated that there are a few advantages of mind mapping – flexible, focusing attention, improving the understanding and enjoyable. Having the students to develop mind mapping will also enables them to identify clearly and creatively what they have learnt or what they have planned (Silberman, 2009: 200 – 201). One of the initiator of the mind mapping, David Hyerle, insisted that brainstorming, organizers, and process maps are integral to “building conceptual links” in students’ understanding and recollection (Mona & Khalick, 2008).

To help students in generating ideas for their writing tasks, pre-writing stage is very important as this is the discovery stage in the writing process. It allows the writer to discover various pattern that will help he or she conduct a writing piece that is both original and fresh (Rohman, 1965:5). The best example or stage models of writing are the Pre-Write / Write / Re-Write model by (Rohman, 1965) and The Conception/ Incubation / production model of James Britton et al.(1975). Writers use pre-writing strategies in collecting information and reflecting upon it in the very early stage of writing – brainstorming session. Brainstorming session is one way of helping writers (in this case, the students) to overcome some problems they face in writing tasks. According to Scane, Guy and Wenstorm (1991), “brainstorming activities motivate students who do not usually want to write by creating a nonthreatening atmosphere (p. 14). Thus, before students start writing something, it seems reasonable to offer them the opportunities to think about the topic given. This brainstorming stage can assist students to achieve their prior knowledge and skills to apply to the writing task and find out what information they already have and what they still need (Rao, 2007).

By having the brainstorming session in the pre-writing stage, it is hoped that students will get the opportunity to see their ideas down on paper before they actually begin to write. Schultz (1991) stated that in order to further help students in the brainstorming session and



the planning stage of writing, the use of mind mapping format such as flow charts, tree, boxes, arrows and other notes ease the cognitive load on attention and working memory, yet allow the writer to keep moving. Furthermore, he also argued that the mapping process helps language learners to visualize their ideas as multidimensional constructs that imitate the movement of thought itself. Without a doubt, the wide acceptance of Pre-writing has helped improve the teaching of composition by calling attention to planning and discovery as legitimate parts of the writing process.

In the context of Malaysia education, The Ministry of Education Malaysia and Agensi Inovasi Malaysia (AIM) have also introduced i-Think programme which promotes critical, analytical and creative thinking in the learning process by using eight thinking maps. These thinking maps can be applied in virtually any lesson to assist the teaching and learning and transform the culture of current education.

For the purpose of this study, Thinking Maps (specifically Circle Map and Flee Map) are being used in the pre-writing stage (plus the brainstorming session) in helping students to generate ideas in writing essays. These Thinking Maps are chosen as they are linked to specific cognitive process.

- 1) Circle Map – is used for defining in context (brainstorming session)
- 2) Flee Map – a hybrid map that combines the Flow Map with the Tree Map to create a graphic organizer that can be used prior to writing an essay (planning / drafting stage).



## **Problem Statement**

English Language is one of the core subjects taken by all Malaysian students from primary to secondary levels. The subject focuses on four main skills (reading, writing, speaking, and listening) and writing is the most essential skill being given emphasis during the teaching of the subject. (Scane, Guy & Wenstorm, 1991) stated that writing skill help stimulates thinking and compels students to concentrate and organize their ideas and cultivates their abilities to summarize, analyze, and criticize.

However, students find composing in English is difficult because the writing process demands that they utilize many cognitive and linguistic strategies of which they are uncertain (Peregoy & Boyle, 2005). Writing also involves some aspects which students need to master before they can really write. Those include the mastery of spelling, grammar, punctuation, and capitalization. Apart from that, writing demands higher-order composing skills (Westwood, 2008). It involves the ability to sequence and to express the content of the writing.

In this study, a pre-test was conducted to evaluate the students' initial writing abilities and thus, verify the problems of lacking in generating ideas. Students did not plan what to write and therefore resulting in the inconsistency of ideas in their essay. Most of the essays were unorganized (in terms of the idea) and some did not have enough elaborations (supporting details).

Considering the problems identified above, it was necessary to find a way to solve the problem. Hence, thinking maps were chosen to be used as a tool in consolidating the students to write better elaborated essay. The Circle and Flee Maps technique were used to find out whether they can improve the students' (Form 1 B) skills in generating ideas for essay



writings especially in the brainstorming session and pre-writing stage. Therefore, this study would like to investigate the following questions:

- a) Does the Circle Map help students to brainstorm for ideas?
- b) Does a Flee Map help students to plan / draft out their essay?
- c) Do students able to provide the topic sentences (main ideas) and supporting details with the help of the flee map?

## **Literature Review**

### **Writing Skills**

Writing is a means of communicating ideas to people. Not only it is essentially important in language class, but also in other classes of other subjects as it is one of the language skills that will never become obsolete in education (Riswanto & Putra, 2012). It stimulates thinking, compel students to concentrate and organize their ideas, and cultivate their abilities to summarize and analyse. Graham and Harris (2005) stated that writing is the primary platform for students to express their knowledge, and a means for students' self-expression of their creativity. Conley (1995) asserted that writing makes our thoughts and experiences vivid and long lasting as well as helps us learn things in every subject area.

However, writing is also the most difficult skill to acquire as writing demands a number of skills and conventions like organizing and developing ideas and information, choosing the right vocabulary and also the practice of accurate grammatical devices to focus and emphasize ideas (Nik et al., 2010, Yunus et al., 2013).

Pratt (1987) pointed out that although learners do practice writing regularly, they are still weak in it as there is a noticeable imbalance on favour of grammar, punctuation, and



spelling. He also indicated that the methods and strategies of teaching writing inside the classroom should be practical and convenient for the students so that they are able to express themselves logically in written form.

### **Mind Mapping Technique**

The methods and techniques of teaching writing need to be revised and adjusted. Accordingly, teachers use different teaching and assessing strategies when it come to teaching this skill. Recently, mind mapping has been used as a tool for learning and teaching different language skills. Popularized by Tony Buzan, mind mapping is an effective diagram with the function of organizing ideas and representing words or ideas. The mind mapping strategy can be used to explore a wide range of topics in writing and also used in every types of writing such as narrative, descriptive, recount, persuasive and argumentative (Riswanto & Prandika, 2012).

Hyerle (2011) also stated that using the Thinking Maps promote metacognition and continuous cognitive development for students across their academic careers as well as adds an artistic and kinesthetic component for students who learn effectively with the specific multiple intelligences. Through his research, Hyerle also found that Thinking Maps help close the achievement gap, as they “can help students (below gred level) self-regulate their own learning and be more successful in the game of school because Thinking Maps serve as a device for mediating thinking, listening, speaking, reading, writing, problem solving, and acquiring new knowledge”.

Hyerle (1996) in his article reported that the teachers agreed that the maps (Thinking Maps) has successfully helped students develop their thinking processes and their ability to



organize ideas, improved the quality and quantity of their writing, and also motivated them to learn.

In Villalon and Calvo's (2011) concepts maps are discussed as a means of scaffolding university-aged student's ideas in writing, as well as their metacognitive skills. Their study also illustrates that the use of concept maps is beneficial to even the oldest of learners in a college setting, and although precise Thinking Maps were not used in this study, the idea of a graphic organizers to "map out" tough process is universal.

Additionally, Mercer (2002) argued that mind mapping helps students to see the relationship among ideas and connect known information with new information; it is a valuable tool for developing the vocabulary and the conceptual understanding of students. Moreover, Johnson (2000) asserted that mind mapping builds on schema. It draws on prior knowledge and allows students to recognize concepts and see the relationship among the components. Mind mapping begins by assigning a topic to students, then asking to list everything they know that is related to the topic. Next step, the students think of ways to classify words into categories. Finally, students analysed the topic, related words and headings for the ideas to be incorporated in the writing composition.

To sum, mind mapping is credited as a tool that can guide students through the four stages of the writing process (prewriting, drafting, editing, and revising).



## **Methodology**

### **i) Participants**

This research was conducted among the Form 1B students of SMK Tun Hussein Onn which consists of 21 boys and nine girls. They were eleven Malays (seven boys and four girls), seven Chinese (six boys and one girl) and 12 Indians (eight boys and four girls). This class also contains of mix abilities students ranging from low to high intermediate level of proficiency.

### **ii) Research Instruments**

To accomplish the research goal, an initial survey was conducted to verify the problem statement of this research. A simple writing task (short essay) was given to the students for this purpose. A pre-test was then administered to the students. It was a 60-minutes in-class writing lesson for the students to generate an essay based on the given writing prompt. The writing prompts used in this study followed the PT3 format question on guided writing section (Question 6).

One week after the pre-test, students were trained to use the circle and flee maps in the brainstorming session and pre-writing stage of the writing process. Explicit explanation were given on the planning process of writing as it involves multi tasks such as planning, drafting, and editing (Rohman's Stage Model of Writing Process). However, focus was given mainly on the pre-writing stage (brainstorming and planning) as the study would like to see how students generate ideas with the help of the circle and flee maps and to improve on it. During the course of intervention, each student was given pictures to use as guide to write their compositions (guided composition).



In the following weeks, each student needs to produce two essays. They had 50 minutes to complete each essay during class hour. They need to brainstorm for ideas or suitable vocabulary / phrases using the circle map and provide the main idea, topic sentences and supporting details using the flee map on their own (individual task). They were allowed to ask for assistance (from the teacher or friends) if they were having any difficulties. This enabled the researcher (teacher) to assess whether students understood the function of both maps, and their understanding of instructional content.

Then, the students were given a post-test on the similar writing prompt given during the course of the intervention. They were to complete or produce the essay on their own in 50 minutes.

### **Data Collection**

In order to examine the effectiveness of using the circle and flee maps in helping the students to generate more elaborated ideas, and to answer the research questions, different types of data collection tools were used. According to Mills (2003), researchers should “collect data that is appropriate and accessible” (p. 15). In this study, a pretest-posttest task assessment, a checklist and a questionnaire were used.

#### **i) Post Test**

The post test was administered to determine the quantity of the topic sentences and supporting details contained in their writing task (essay) and whether the students’

managed to use the circle and flee map effectively in helping them to generate ideas for the task.



## ii) Checklist

A checklist was used simply because it offers systematic ways of collecting data about specific behaviour, knowledge and skills. For the purpose of this study, the checklist was designed to determine the frequency of the number of topic sentences and supporting details that the students were able to generate during the pretest-posttest task given to them. The focus was more on the development of the topic sentences and the supporting details rather than the accuracy of the language itself. Thus, the grammar and mechanics of writing were not taken into consideration for this study.

## iii) Questionnaire

A questionnaire was administered to all participants at the end of the study to find out the students' perspective on the use of circle and flee maps in generating ideas for writing.

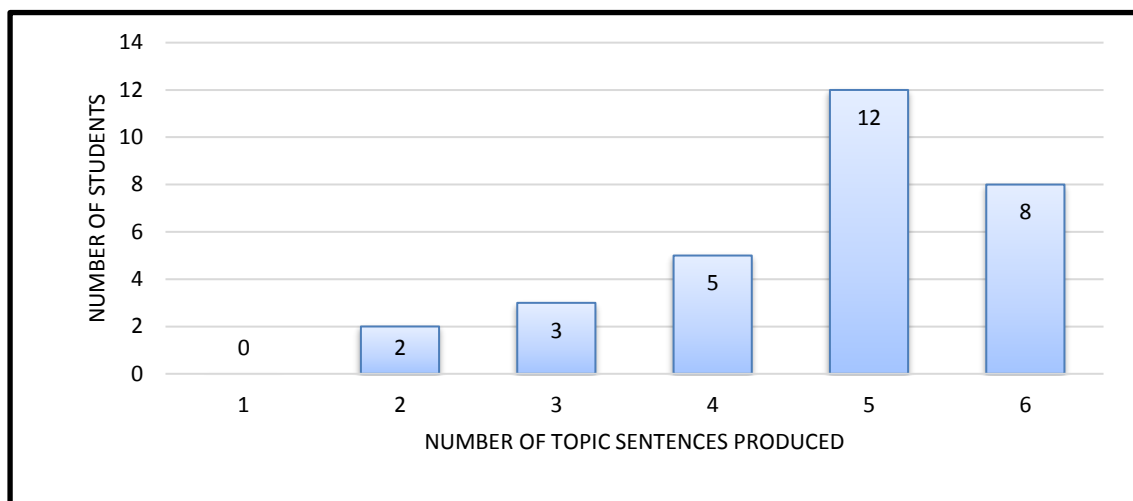
## Findings

The aim of this study is to determine whether the students' were able to generate ideas in essay writing using the circle and flee maps.

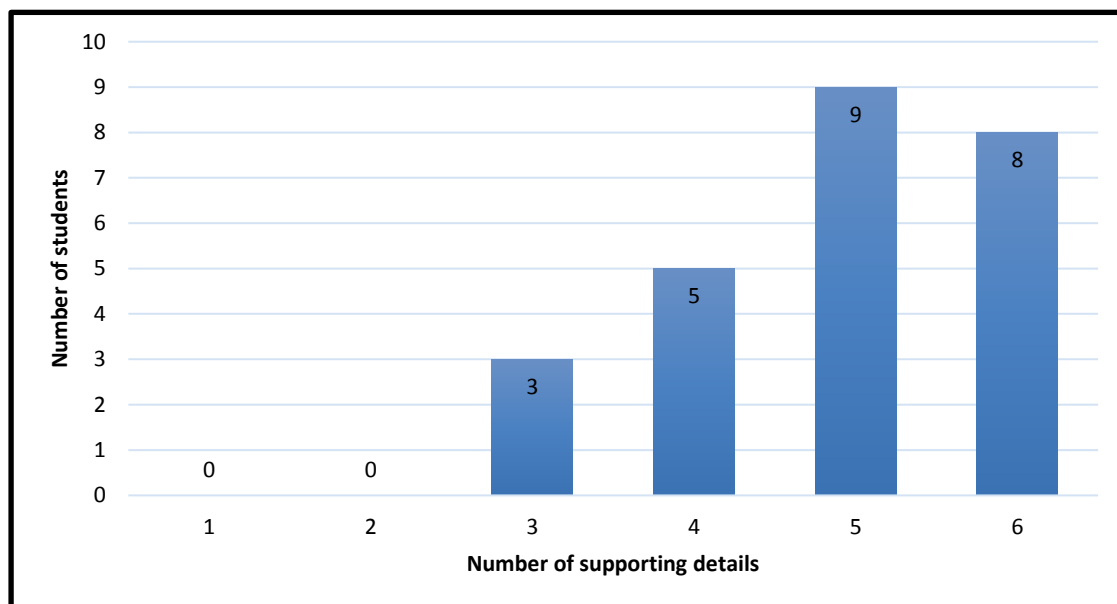
Generally, the Form 1 Bestari students of SMK Tun Hussein Onn managed to come out or produce with three topic sentences in their essays (20 out of 30 students). Eight of them get were able to produce two topic sentences and only two produced one topic sentence (see Table 1). In terms of the amount of supporting details, 16 out of 30 students managed to extend their essays with five to six supporting details. Eight of them elaborated



their points with three to four supporting details. The rest can only provide one to two supporting details for their essays (six of them) (see Table 2).



**Table 1**



**Table 2**



### **Questionnaire / Students' Respond Survey**

The answers to the questionnaire were based on the Linkert Scales. It was to find out what the students think or their perception on using both maps in helping them to generate ideas for writing essays. Analysis of the students' responses to the questions revealed positive attitude towards the use of both thinking maps as aid to their writing tasks. Almost all of the students agreed that the circle and flee maps were useful in the brainstorming and pre-writing stages (90%). They found that these two maps have helped them in generating more appropriate vocabulary, and useful phrases when writing the essay (task) given and thus organized their ideas and thoughts (80%). They also enjoy using them at those stages. 24 of the students (80%) stated that they managed to plan better with the help of these two maps and therefore can write longer essays. However, four of them found that the use of the flee map was a bit difficult to be doing it alone. Perhaps, if they are doing it collaboratively then they would feel it easier to carry out the task or activity.

### **Discussion**

Based on the research findings above, it can generally be depicted that most the Form 1 of SMK Tun Hussein Onn students perceived thinking maps technique as an effective strategy in helping them to generate ideas and lead them to write better and also proved to bring positive results towards the students' writing skills. This is in line with those seen in the previous research which conclusively proved that mind mapping technique can enhance students' writing ability: Lee (2013) investigating the use of concept mapping technique in a course module for Korean language learning with American college students; Ojima (2006) examining the effects of concept mapping as pre-task planning with three Japanese ESL writers; Lin et al. (2004) studying the impact of computer-based concept mapping as a pre-



writing strategy for middle school students; Pishgadam and Ghanizadeh (2006) investigating the effects of concept mapping as a prewriting activity on EFL learners' writing performances.

The use of the flee map has helped the students to be more organized in terms of planning on what to write. This is supported by Naqbi (2014) who claimed that mind mapping may impact on students' abilities to plan and organized their ideas for writing tasks. This is also in alignment with Saed & Al-Omari (2014) who stated that mind mapping provided the students the chance strengthened their view points with ample ideas before they moved on to writing.

In addition, the use of both thinking maps has helped students to generate the required number of topic sentences and supporting details outlined for this study. Lin (2003) in her study also found that concept map was beneficial for generating ideas in persuasive writing. The circle and flee maps used in the course of this study, may have helped the students focus their attention on the topic and choose appropriate ideas for their given writing task as well as see the relationship between the main ideas (topic sentences) and the supporting details.

This technique would be an effective tool to help students in planning and organizing their writing as it encourages them to gain an in-depth understanding of the writing topics. Thus, it may have the potential to have significant impact on the quality of writing when used as a learning activity in a pre-writing phase of composition (Lee, 2013).

Therefore, the English Language teachers in the secondary school should be encouraged to incorporate these maps (circle and flee maps) in their classes during the writing lesson. Thinking maps should be accentuated as one of the teaching technique at the pre-writing stage to motivate students and activate their prior knowledge which is useful for



generating ideas. Students, on the other hand, are also encouraged to use them at their pre-writing phase which will help to organize their thoughts and intensify their writing skills.

## **Conclusion**

The study findings provided the evidence that pre-writing and brainstorming stages have helped engage the students in thinking about the topic and activate their prior knowledge to generate ideas. Consequently, the use of the circle and flee maps during these stages also proved to be a viable strategy to help students' writing planning process and improved their composition as they were able to write longer elaborated essay in the end.

However, there are still some imminent limitations. Due to the time constraint, only a small size of students was involved in this study. It should be extended to involve more students of different levels in the school in order to get more conclusive result. The study can also be extended to students in different schools in order to make generalization over larger groups. Secondly, this study only focuses on the generating of ideas in writing through the use of the two thinking maps. The aim is only to determine how many topic sentences and supporting details the students managed to come out (the content). The other components of writing performances like grammar, language use or mechanics, were not taken into consideration thus making it accessible for further studies.

Therefore, in the future, it is recommended that a more elaborated study should be further conducted on the effects of thinking maps on developing other writing skills (paragraphing or writing mechanics) among students at different levels.



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