Build Me Up: Overcoming Writing Problems Among Pupils In A Rural Primary School In Belaga, Sarawak, Malaysia

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Abstract: This study aims to investigate the effect of the 'Build Me Up' in helping Year 5 pupils in a rural primary school overcome problems in constructing correct sentences. To achieve the aim of the study, a pre-test and post-test were used to collect the quantitative data required. Therefore, 16 pupils from a rural school in Belaga, Sarawak, Malaysia, with weak writing skills were selected to participate in this study. The analysis of the data indicated that the 'Build Me Up' tool did help the pupils overcome their problems in writing grammatically correct sentences. The use of 'Build Me Up' aids pupils in writing sentences using present tense, past tense, present continuous tense and past continuous tense correctly. Besides that, it also helps the pupils to understand the sentence pattern better in order to improve their writing. The findings of the study may be beneficial to ESL teachers and educators, as it can be as an alternative which can assist them in teaching writing. In addition, it also encourages the pupils to take charge of their own learning. It is suggested that future research should include the perceptions of the pupils and the teachers towards the tool as well.

Key Words: overcome, writing, writing tool, rural primary school, sentence construction

Abstrak: Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengetahui pengaruh *'Build Me Up'* dalam membantu siswa kelas 5 di sekolah dasar pedesaan untuk mengatasi masalah dalam membangun kalimat yang benar. Untuk mencapai tujuan penelitian ini, sebuah *pre-test* dan *post-test* digunakan untuk mengumpulkan data kuantitatif. Oleh karena itu, 16 murid dari sekolah pedesaan di Belaga, Sarawak, Malaysia, dengan kemampuan menulis yang lemah dipilih untuk berpartisipasi dalam penelitian ini. Analisis data menunjukkan bahwa *'Build Me Up'* membantu siswa mengatasi masalah mereka dalam menulis kalimat yang benar secara tata bahasa. Penggunaan *'Build Me Up'* membantu murid dalam menulis kalimat dengan menggunakan *present tense, past tense, present continuous tense*, dan *past continuous tense* dengan benar. Selain itu, juga dapat membantu siswa memahami pola kalimat dengan lebih baik agar bisa memperbaiki tulisan mereka. Temuan penelitian ini mungkin bermanfaat bagi guru dan pendidik ESL, karena dapat menjadi alternatif yang dapat membantu mereka dalam mengajar menulis. Selain itu, juga mendorong murid untuk mengendalikan pembelajaran mereka sendiri. Disarankan agar penelitian selanjutnya harus mencakup persepsi siswa dan guru terhadap alat ini.

Kata kunci: mengatasi, menulis, menulis alat, sekolah dasar pedesaan, konstruksi kalimat

English is taught as a second language in all Malaysian primary and secondary schools. The mastery of English is essential for pupils to gain access to information and knowledge written in English. The Malaysia Ministry of Education (MOE) in its efforts to improve the Malaysian Education Curriculum came up with the "Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025" (MOE, 2012). In line with the government's policy on strengthening English, the Blueprint endorses the implementation of the New Standard Curriculum in the primary and secondary schools in 2011 which sees additional time allotted for English subject (Darus and Subramaniam, 2009). This is due to the short time allocated for English subject under the old curriculum (210 minutes) is argued as one of the factors to low level of competency among Malaysian pupils (Fatt, 2007; Manickam, 2004).

The curriculum has been designed to produce pupils who will be proficient in the language. The content and learning standards that have been developed

in the curriculum are designed to help pupils acquire the language so that they can use it in their daily lives, to further their studies and for work purposes. The English language curriculum also stresses the development of literacy and critical literacy. This is to ensure that pupils who undergo primary schooling will be literate and be given a strong foundation in the language so that they can progress towards language proficiency at the secondary school level. Literacy is essential to prepare pupils to achieve personal growth and confidence in functioning as an effective and productive member of our society, in line with the goals of the National Philosophy of Education which seek to optimise the intellectual, emotional and spiritual potential of all pupils.

In Primary School level, it is compulsory for the pupils to sit for the Primary School Achievement Test, also known as *'Ujian Pencapaian Sekolah Rendah'* (UPSR) by the end of Year 6. Among the candidates, English has been one of the killer subjects because of the writing component. Writing has been widely regarded as a critically essential skill in the teaching and learning of English as a Second Language (ESL) as it is a comprehensive skill that helps strengthen vocabulary, grammar, thinking, planning, editing, revising, and other elements. According to Saed & Al-Omari (2014), writing also helps to improve all the other skills of listening, speaking and reading as they are all interconnected. Writing stimulate thinking, compel students to concentrate and organize their ideas, and cultivate their abilities to summarize, analyze, and criticize. It also give emphasis to constant learning in, thinking in, and doing reflection in the English language (Maghsoudi & Haririan, 2013).

In this examination, candidates are assessed on their ability to construct different written texts with various rhetorical styles, use of language functions for different purposes and lastly task fulfillment which would assess pupils' ability to write on topic by providing sufficient relevant content. Hence, pupils find composing in English is difficult because it demands them to apply many cognitive and linguistic strategies of which they are uncertain (Maghsoudi & Haririan, 2013). Even when they write, their ideas are disorganized because of their anxiety and uncertainty. In addition, they may have some ideas for writing, but the difficult part is transforming it into proper and grammatically correct written form. Firmansyah (2015) stated that the major problems faced by students in writing are their lack of ability to generate ideas, difficulty in making the paragraphs with the topic and

struggle in selecting the words caused by lack of vocabulary. According to Melor & Chan (2016), this could be due to the teaching methods employed by the teachers, the types of responses students receive from books and instructors, the types of writing activities done in the classrooms, or lack of chances to practice writing.

Despite all the measures taken to improve our education performance, still, it was to no avail. The 2004 School Certificate Examination Report on English Language 2 (MOE, 2005), revealed that majority of the candidates have yet to master the writing skills in English. It was reported that pupils' writing skills at the UPSR level in guided composition in vernacular schools are far from satisfactory (Sia & Chuah, 2004, as cited in Samuel & Bakar, 2006). Pupils in rural area performed even worse than those in urban schools. As reported by Nooreiny et al. (2003) and Talif & Edwin (1990), the level of English proficiency in rural schools is much lower than the level in the urban schools although students went through the same curriculum. Despite poor proficiency in English, the pupils in rural area shows interest towards learning English. Studies done by Siti Sukainah & Melor (2014) and Melor & Nur Rashidah (2011) discovered that in general, students in rural areas like, and are interested to learn English. So why such thing happened? Several studies done revealed that students are well aware of the importance of English (Thang et al., 2011) but they tend to put minimal efforts into improving their English proficiency (Siti Sukainah and Melor, 2014, Melor and Nur Rashidah, 2011). With the introduction of the new format for UPSR English paper in 2016, writing becomes even a bigger nightmare for the pupils, including the teachers as the English paper are now divided into two papers (English Paper 1 and English Paper 2). Based on the new format, writing components have significantly large weighting (60%) of the examination total score for Paper 1 and for Paper 2, they are evaluated 100% on their writing skills.

Mustapha (1998) claimed that a great number of Malaysian students are passive learners. Pupils, especially in the rural areas are indeed passive learners. With limited facilities and unconducive environment in the rural area, pupils are becoming increasingly dependent on their teachers. Teachers on the other hand find that writing is the hardest skill to be taught as writing skills are hard to measure, compared to other language skills such as speaking, listening and reading (Akinwamide, 2012). Alsamadani, 2010, p. 53 as cited in Javid & Umer, 2014 also stated that writing "is a

complex, challenging, and difficult process" because it includes multiple skills such as generating thesis statement, writing supporting details and elaborating the topic sentences, reviewing for mistakes made and making necessary editing after reviewing. This complicated process makes writing the hardest skill to be taught. Melor & Chan (2016) also stated that writing is rather difficult because it is interrelated to other language skills and it also requires comprehensive knowledge of grammar, suitable choice of words or phrases, writing mechanics, organizational skills and writing styles. This study hoped to be beneficial to ESL teachers and educators, as the 'Build Me Up' can be as an educational tool which can assist them in teaching writing. Besides that, it also encourage the pupils to take charge of their own learning.

At the moment, there is not much studies being done especially in rural Primary School, specifically in Sarawak state. Therefore, this study aims to investigate the effect of the 'Build Me Up' in helping Year 5 pupils in a rural primary school in Belaga, Sarawak, Malaysia, overcome problems in constructing correct sentences. In order to facilitate the investigation, the following research question was formulated "How effective is the 'Build Me Up' in helping Year 5 pupils overcome problems in constructing correct sentences"

Writing Skills

Writing has been widely regarded as a critically essential skill in the teaching and learning of English as a Second Language (ESL) as it is a comprehensive skill that helps strengthen vocabulary, grammar, thinking, planning, editing, revising, and other elements. Riswanto & Putra (2012) stated that writing is one of the language skills that will never become obsolete in education. It is both essentially important in language class and other classes of other subjects. Ahangari and Behzady (2011) mentioned that writing is one of the best ways to keep track of learning. Writing is also one of the most difficult skills for the students to acquire as writing requires a number of skills and conventions like organizing and developing ideas and information, choosing the right vocabulary accurately to eradicate the ambiguity of meaning and also the practice of accurate grammatical devices to focus and emphasize ideas (Nik et al., 2010, Yunus et al., 2013). Furthermore, writing demands the writer to choose the choice of vocabulary carefully and have a comprehensive knowledge of grammatical patterns in order to be able to write sentence structures that are pertinent to the

subject matter (Ali & Yunus, 2004). In addition, writing also involves composing, which implies the ability either to tell or retell pieces of information in the form of narratives or description, or to transform information into new texts, as in expository or argumentative writing (Myles, 2002). As stated by Dunsmuir et al. (2014), the key domains of writing reflect a focus on ideas development (rhetorical skills), vocabulary, sentence structure and grammar (writing processes), spelling, punctuation and handwriting (mechanics). Therefore, ESL students should practice frequently on their writing. In Malaysian context, English is taught as a second language in all Malaysian Primary and Secondary schools. Writing is an integral and necessary skill when learning a second language as communication is not only done orally. Writing is necessary if a person is looking to study or work in a particular country. Writing also results in increased practice using the language. Writing also results in increased practice using the language. This is due to the fact that writing skills is interrelated to other language skills.

Writing Tool & How Does It Help?

Genhard (1996) claimed that teaching materials "contextualize" the language learning. This will definitely increase pupils understanding on the input learnt. Furthermore, the teaching materials help to bridge the gap between the language being taught in the classroom and the language used by real people. Being explorative and fun are essential parts of students' learning experiences. Interactive learning environment also helps the students to develop positive learning behaviours in the learning process (Lau & Lee, 2012)

METHOD

This part mainly deals with the methodology used in this study, which consists of three sections namely the research design, research instrument and implementation.

This study employed a pre-test and a post-test to collect quantitative data to measure the effectiveness of using 'Build Me Up' in overcoming problems in writing grammatically correct simple sentences. The candidates of the tests consisted of 16 Year 5 pupils of a rural school in Belaga, Sarawak, Malaysia. The background of these pupils ranged from very limited users to below average users based on their examination results. All of the participants are 11 years of age.

The Pre-Test and Post-Test were made up of four sections 1) write three sentences using Present Tense, 2) write three sentences using Past Tense, 3) write three sentences using Present Continuous Tense, and 4) write three sentences using Past Continuous Tense. The results were then compared based on their grades to assess the effectiveness of the 'Build Me Up' in helping the pupils overcome problems in writing simple sentences which are grammatically correct. The *Kurikulum Standard Sekolah Rendah* (KSSR) grading system was used in determining their grades. Paired Samples T-Test was also employed to investigate if there was a statistically significant improvement in pupils' mark after the implementation of the 'Build Me Up'.

The intervention programme was carried out in four weeks. Each week consisted of two sessions where each session lasted for one hour (8 hours in total). The procedures were further explained in Table 1.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Demographic Data

There are 8 female (50%) and 8 male (50%) participants who underwent the intervention process.

All the participants are 11 years of age. In terms of their language proficiency and writing competency, all participants ranged from very low to below average users and they have weak writing skills based on their examination results.

Pre-Test and Post Test

Pupils' marks for the Pre-Test and Post-Test were shown in Table 2. The grading system were based on the new *Kurikulum Standard Sekolah Rendah* (KSSR) grading, which was enforced by Malaysia Ministry of Education (MOE) starting 2015.

The pre-test results showed that only 31% (5 pupils) passed the exam and 69% (11 pupils) failed. Two of them did not managed to score any marks. From this test, it proved that the pupils have problems in writing grammatically correct sentences. With the utilization of the Build Me Up, pupils showed great improvement in their scores. The post-test results is a reversal of the pre-test results where 69% (11 pupils) passed the test and 31% (5 pupils) failed. Four of them even managed to get full marks for the post-test which is considerably a substantial improvement for the kids in their writing.

Table 1. Steps and Procedures

STEP	ACTIVITY
Step 1 (Week 1) 4th August 2016	• Revisit previous lessons on tenses (Present Tense, Past Tense, Present Continuous Tense, Past Continuous Tense) • Pre – Test
Step 2 (Week 2- 1st Session) 9th August 2016	• Teacher introduced the *Build Me Up* to the pupils. • Explained (with demonstration) how to use it. • Explained why pupils need to use it/the purpose of the *Build Me Up.*
Step 3 (Week 2 – 2nd Session) 11th August 2016	• Constructing simple sentences using Present Tense • Teacher showed some example • Pupils explore the *Build Me Up* and build their own sentences. (In groups) • Discussion on their works.
Step 4 (Week 3 – 1st Session) 16th August 2016	• Constructing simple sentences using Past Tense • Teacher showed some example • Pupils explore the *Build Me Up* and build their own sentences. (In groups). • Discussion on their works.
Step 5 (Week 3 – 2nd Session) 18th August 2016	• Constructing simple sentences using Present Continuous Tense • Teacher showed some example • Pupils explore the *Build Me Up* and build their own sentences. (In groups) • Discussion on their works.
Step 6 (Week 4- 1st Session) 23rd August 2016	• Constructing simple sentences using Past Continuous Tense Teacher showed some example • Pupils explore the *Build Me Up* and build their own sentences. (In groups) • Discussion on their works.
Step 7 (Week 4 – 2nd Session) 25th August 2016	• Post- Test

Table 2. Pupils' Pre-Test & Post-Test Marks

Pseudonym	Pre-Test	Grade	Post-Test	Grade
S1	17%	E	42%	D
S2	50%	C	**100%**	**A**
S3	58%	C	**100%**	**A**
S4	25%	E	58%	C
S5	8%	E	25%	E
S6	8%	E	16%	E
S7	25%	E	67%	B
S8	50%	C	**100%**	**A**
S9	67%	B	**100%**	**A**
S10	0%	E	8%	E
S11	33%	E	75%	B
S12	42%	D	83%	A
S13	33%	E	75%	B
S14	25%	E	42%	D
S15	0%	E	8%	E
S16	8%	E	25%	E

Table 3. Paired Samples Statistics

	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pre-test	28.06	16	20.898	5.225
Post-test	57.57	16	34.441	8.610

Table 4. Paired Samples T-Test

	Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
				Lower	Upper			
Pre-test – Post-test	-29.688	15.270	3.817	-37.824	-21.551	-7.777	15	.000

Paired Samples T-Test

A paired-samples t-test was conducted to compare the pupils' scores for the pre-test and posttest. Based on Table 3 and Table 4, there was a statistically significant improvement in pupils' marks before the implementation (M=28.06, SD=20.898) and after the implementation of the Build Me Up. (M=57.57, SD= 34.441); (t= -7.777, p=0.000).These results suggest that the Build Me Up did help the pupils in overcoming their problems in writing.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the effect of the 'Build Me Up' in helping Year 5 pupils in a rural primary school in Belaga, Sarawak, Malaysia overcome problems in constructing grammatically correct sentences. The data collected indicated that the 'Build Me Up' tool did help the pupils overcome their problems in writing grammatically correct sentences. The use of 'Build Me Up' aids pupils in writing sentences using present tense, past tense, present continuous tense and past continuous tense correctly. Besides that, it also helps the pupils to understand the sentence pattern better in order to improve their writing.

Having made aware of the sentence pattern and the tool that they can use, it is hoped that pupils in the rural primary school would utilize them to maxim-ize their potentials and improve their writing skill. Besides, the findings of the study may be beneficial to ESL teachers and educators, as it can be as an alternative

which can assist them in teaching writing. It is in the hands of the teachers to explicitly teach them to the pupils so that they could become independent learners. Furthermore, it also encourage the pupils to take charge of their own learning, be it in school or at home since they already have the materials and they know the sentence patterns. In addition, parents can even take part in their children's learning at home by doing it together with them.

Writing for many is the most difficult tasks since it requires a lot of on-going practices. Successful writers are often known to be regular readers, so reading habits should be instilled at a very early age by doing a lot of activities that promotes reading. Siti Sukainah & Melor (2014) proposed that such activities should be carried out continuously in school as reading proficiency improves writing proficiency.

Although the present study suggests that the Build Me Up is beneficial to the pupils of a rural primary school in Belaga, Sarawak, Malaysia, there are areas that need to be studied further. It is suggested that future research should include the perceptions of the pupils and the teachers towards the tool as well. Researchers should also consider having a large sample of study which includes more rural schools in the same area.

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