

Improving Children's Writing Skills through Digital Story Prompts and Feedback

Final report

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1. Practical context

Gudon National Primary School in Sabah, Malaysia is located in a small village, in a suburban area about 10 kilometres away from Kota Kinabalu, the capital city of Sabah. It is a small school with 500 students and 35 teachers.

The participants of this research are 31 students in my Year 6 class, aged 11 – 12. They come from middle and low-income families. The students are in the upper elementary level.

As Year 6 students, they have to sit for the compulsory national Primary School Achievement Test, which is known among Malaysian primary students by its acronym UPSR. The test is held in September every year. English is one of the subjects tested in the UPSR. Most of my students find that the most challenging item in the UPSR English paper is Section C, where they are required to write a short story of around 100 words (see Appendix 1). Although they do have the basic proficiency required to score reasonably well on the item, most of the students have very little confidence in their ability to answer the questions. The maximum mark for the item is 15, yet my students' average score (when they do practice tests) is only around 2 or 3.

2. Overall aims of research

I believe that my students have so much potential to be better writers, but the pressure of tests and examinations had made writing activity impersonal with little sense of communications. As a result, my students lacked the motivation to write and they had become reluctant writers. In response to this problem I wanted to explore ways of making writing in English a positive experience for them and of improving the quality of the writing they produce. My students love communicating with each other through their mobile devices and the Internet excites them. I wanted to utilise my students' interest in technology and the Internet and make writing activities more engaging, more personal and more meaningful for them. For this reason I decided to experiment with digital story prompts and to examine their impact on my students' writing.

3. Background reading

Reluctant writers often have difficulty expressing their thoughts coherently because they spend too much time rummaging through the dictionary, or get trapped in the endless act of writing a line and then scratching it out again and again (Sledd, 1993). Also, according to Sledd, a reluctant writer who is asked to revise his or her writing would normally “conduct an uncertain error patrol and resubmit essentially the same piece” (p. 29). Sledd also identifies reluctant writers as those who have difficulty working collaboratively. According to Graves (1995: 36), reluctant writers “begin to associate the act of writing with their struggles with mechanical skills such as handwriting, spelling and punctuation.”

How do reluctant writers compensate for their writing problems? They do so by avoiding the task. Rather than risk failure, reluctant writers simply give up (Mather & Lachowicz, 1992). According to Carignan-Belleville (1989), the motivation to write comes from successful first experiences. But what happens when previous school experiences bring only failure? Students then often continue to experience failure in writing because of a lack of self-confidence (p. 57).

To help my students regain this confidence, I decided to use stories. Stories are excellent tools for motivating reluctant writers to write because they can create a happy and enjoyable learning environment (Mart, 2012). Martinez (2007) points out that using stories is a great way of introducing, practising, and improving target language skills.

How can technology help? According to Yancey (2004), helping writers develop fluency and competence in a variety of technologies is a key part of teaching writing in this century. According to

a study by the National Literacy Trust, children who write on blogs, use text messages or engage in social networking websites are more confident about their writing skills compared to children who have limited access to these technology platforms (Clark & Dugdale, 2009). In this research, I combined the potential of technology with the use of writing prompts to help my students to be more creative in creating stories. A writing prompt in this research refers to any stimulus that can assist students in writing stories. It can be in the form of an image, a sound clip or a video. Another important way technology can help in making writing more engaging is through its ability to provide platforms for students to give and receive feedback on their writing, both synchronously as well as asynchronously (Scott, 2009). In this research, synchronous feedback was given and received through the class WhatsApp group while asynchronous feedback was given and received through the class blog.

4. Methodology

4.1 Teacher Research

This is teacher research, which is practical and action-based. This type of research enables me to follow my interests and needs as I investigate what my students and I do. The following are the steps involved in this research:

1. Identify the problem in my classroom (my teaching, and/or my students' learning).
2. Develop questions and examine my assumptions.
3. Plan my intervention strategies and data collection methods.
4. Gather, analyse and interpret data.
5. Write a report on my findings and share it with my colleagues and other teachers.

4.2 Interventions

The intervention strategies that I used in this research can be divided into three stages. The first stage consisted of classroom activities which focused on introducing my students to digital prompts for writing. In the second stage I involved my students in mini projects to create their own digital story prompts. In the third stage, my students created stories and shared them with one another. In all three stages, the students were given the chance to make the writing activities interactive by constantly providing feedback to others and receiving feedback from others.

The data for this research was gathered through students' reflective journals and students' scores in a pre-test and post-test. The project started in January 2015 and ended in February 2016.

Figure 1 provides a summary of the procedures and platforms as well as the data collection methods that I used in this research.

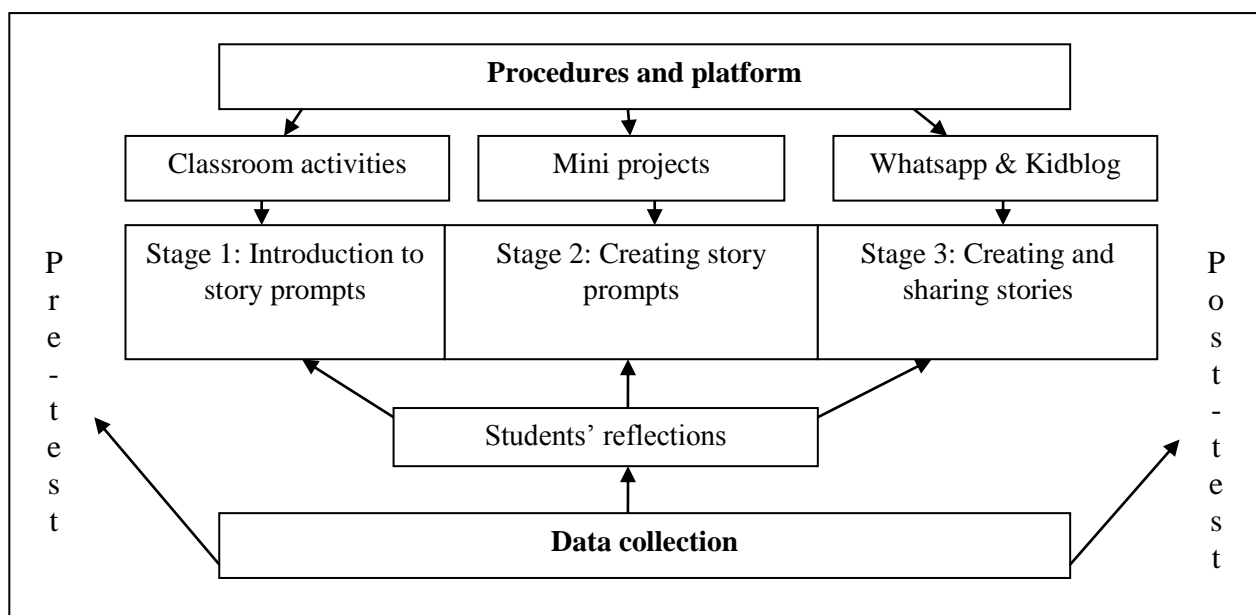


Figure 1: Design of the project

Stage 1: Introduction to story prompts

A story prompt refers to any stimulus that can assist students in writing stories. A good story prompt or stimulus for story-writing should be able to ignite students' creativity in producing stories by prompting them to be more imaginative. A digital story prompt is a stimulus that is created digitally through the use of software or mobile apps and functions. The digital stimulus for story-writing can be presented in the form of images, videos or audio files. In this stage, I gave the students opportunities to explore a variety of visual and audio stimuli for story writing. I achieved this by bringing into the classroom images, videos and sounds that could stimulate the students' imaginations and inspire them to create stories. Below is an example of an activity that we did in the classroom to introduce the students to the idea of digital story prompts.

Sample Activity: The Pandographer (Mental Picture Dictation)

- a) I told the students that I had a very interesting image on my smart phone, and that I was going to show it to them.
- b) The students were eager to see the image, but I told them that I would show it to them later. Before they could see it, they would have to listen to a description of the picture. They would have to use their powers of imagination and try to picture the image in their heads.
- c) I read out a brief description of the picture. The students listened to the description.
- d) I divided the students into small groups of four or five. The students had to write a few sentences about the picture, based on the description that they had just heard.
- e) The students compared the descriptions that they had written with other groups.
- f) I revealed the picture and elicited feedback from the students.
- g) At the end of this activity, the students wrote their reflections in the reflection sheet provided (see 5.1 for more details).

(Adapted from 'Mental Picture Dictation' in 'Images' by Jamie Keddie, 2009, pp. 15 – 16)

Figure 2 is the image that I used in the sample activity as described above.



Figure 2: The Pandographer by Bert Hardy (<http://thephotographersgallery.org.uk/berthardy>)

Stage 2: Creating story prompts

The second stage started when students were already familiar with the use of a variety of interesting stimuli as prompts for writing stories. The students tried to find or create their own images, videos and sound clips to help them write stories. The students were allowed to use available images, videos and sounds that they could find either online or offline. Below is an example of a mini project that the students conducted during this research project.

Sample Mini Project

For this mini project, the class was divided into groups of four or five. The procedures were as follows:

- a) Students walked in their groups for a short tour around the school.
- b) Students used their smart phones to capture images, take videos or record sounds that they thought could tell an interesting story.
- c) Students went back to the classroom and worked with their groups. They shared with each other what they had captured on their smart phones.
- d) Each group selected an image, a video or an audio file and created a story out of it.
- e) Representatives from each group shared their stories with the rest of the class.
- f) Students wrote their reflections on this mini project in their reflective journals.

Below is an image that was selected by one of the groups:



Figure 3: An image captured by the students for the mini project

Below is a short descriptive paragraph that the students created based on the image:

There were three friends. They were sitting together on one bench. They had long hair. They wore red dress. They were beautiful, but plain. They wanted more colours. They were bored because they were green. They wanted to sit on grasses. Yes, they were sitting on grasses now but the grasses were not real! They wanted to run away but they had no legs. They had no arms, too. They had nothing.

Stage 3: Creating and sharing stories

To make sharing stories easier, three platforms were set up to allow the students to communicate and interact with me and their peers.

Platform 1: WhatsApp Group

The students had a WhatsApp group that they called ‘The Story Makers.’ The students used it to share story prompts and brainstorm ideas for stories based on the prompts. They also used it to discuss mini projects based on story prompts. This platform was mainly used outside the classroom, after school hours when the students were at home. I scheduled the day and time for different groups of students to have synchronous interactions with me and with the members of their groups.

Platform 2: Class Blog

Kidblog (<http://kidblog.org/>) was used as the platform for the classroom blog. The class blog was named ‘The Story Makers’ (<https://kidblog.org/class/TheStoryMakers/>). The students used the blog to share their stories and story prompts. I encouraged the students to read and comment on each other’s blog posts. Through this platform, students were able to not only share their stories with one another, but also to give and receive feedback on their work. I gave the students freedom to post any stories they liked. I also used the blog to conduct follow-up activities based on the lessons that had been done in the classroom. For instance, the students would be asked to post a story based on a story prompt that they had used in the classroom earlier.

5. Findings and discussion

Throughout the research, students were engaged in a variety of story-creating activities, both inside and outside the classroom, which gave them the opportunities to explore, to experiment, to share and to give and receive feedback. The main activity was writing and the main tools used were digital resources and technology devices. The overall aim was to reduce reluctance to write among the students by making writing activities more personal, interactive and meaningful.

The impacts of these intervention strategies were examined through the students' attitudes towards writing and the students' performance in pre and post tests. I also made a comparison between the students' scores in the January practice UPSR test with the students' actual results in the UPSR test in September.

5.1. Students' attitudes towards writing

The students' attitudes towards writing were examined through their written reflections. To guide the students in writing down their reflections, I gave them a sheet containing one or two questions to consider, normally right after we completed an activity or a mini project. The questions were in English, but I provided the Malay translations (see Appendix 3 for an example of the reflection sheet). The students had the choice of whether to respond in English or in Malay. As I went through the students' reflections, I noticed several common answers. I put the same answers under the same categories. I counted the number of answers in each category and converted it into percentage.

Figure 4 summarises the students' responses towards the question: How do you feel about writing? I asked the students to reflect on this question at the beginning of the project, before conducting any the intervention strategies.

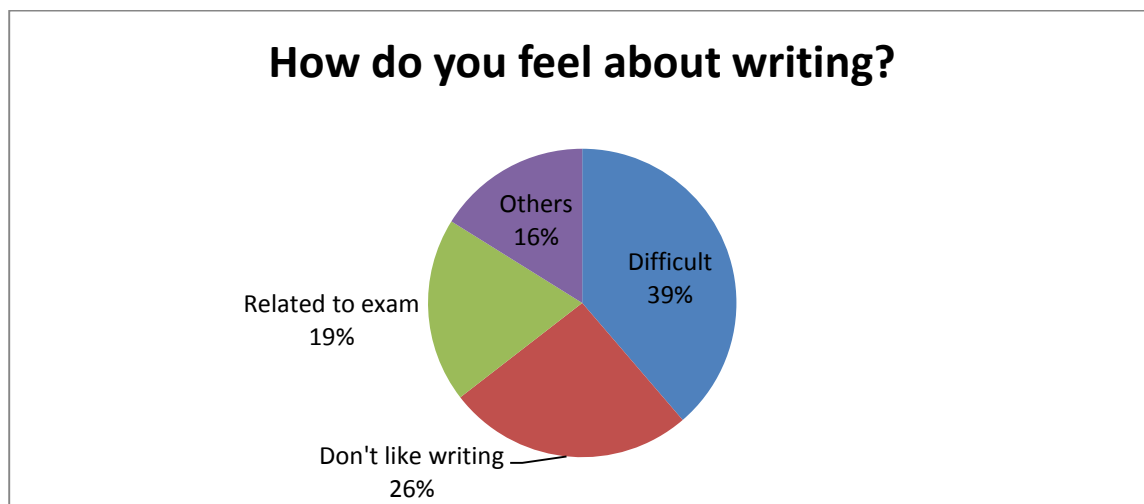


Figure 4: How students felt about writing before the project

Most of the students' reflections contained words and phrases like 'difficult', 'hard' and 'don't like writing'. They also associated writing with Section C and the UPSR test. Here are some excerpts from the students' reflections:

I don't like Section C because it too hard for me. I don't know how to write stories. Very difficult.

I like play games COC on my phone but I don't like writing. But writing is important for learning so I have to do for UPSR.

Figure 5 summarises the students' responses towards these questions: How do you feel about today's writing activity? Did you enjoy it? Why? I asked these questions right after the students completed the mini project outside the classroom.

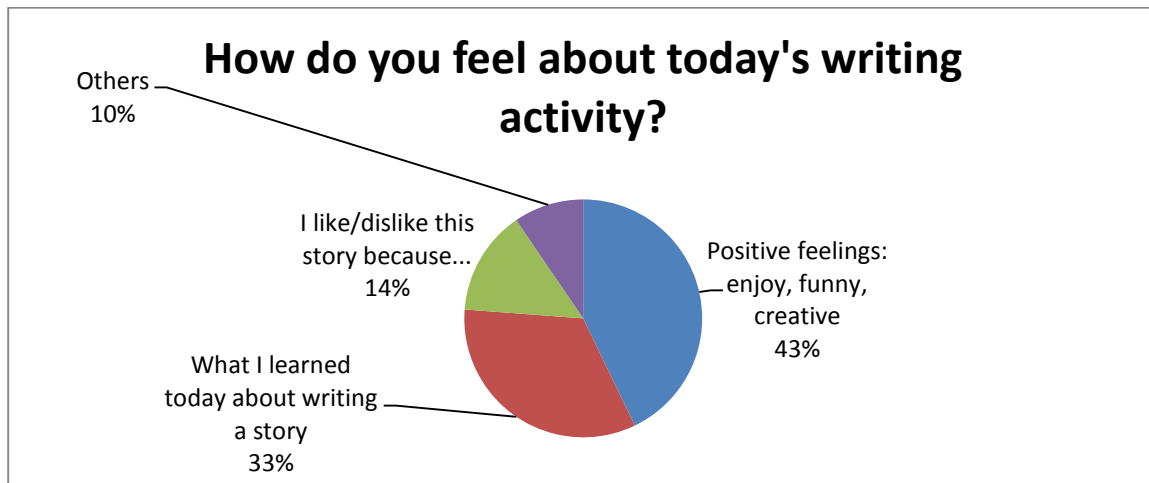


Figure 5: Students' reflections while interventions were going on

There were more positive words like 'enjoy', 'interesting', 'funny', and 'creative.' The students were also displaying better understanding about stories and the elements that make the stories pleasurable. For instance, a few students could explain that a story must have a beginning, a climax and an ending, and that in order for a story to be interesting it must have 'elements of surprise' 'suspense' and etc. The reflections also showed that some students were beginning to acquire the ability to analyse and evaluate a story. They could state why they like a particular story. For example, a student explained that a story is good when it 'affects her emotions' and that a story is bad when it has 'no moral value'. Here are some excerpts from the students' reflections:

What I learn today, I know a story must have intro, build up, climax, resolution and ending. When I listen to the sound teacher play, I make a story in my head with intro, build up, climax. But I don't write the resolution yet and the ending yet because I am still thinking.

My favourite story is from Natasha's group. I think they are very creative. The story has elements of surprise. The story is not yet finished, but I really like it. Maybe I can write my own ending for the story. I can make it like a fairy tale.

Figure 6 shows the students' responses towards these questions: How do you feel about your experience with 'The Story Makers' project? How do you feel about your writing ability now? These questions were asked towards the end of the research, when the students were about to complete their final project on the class blog.

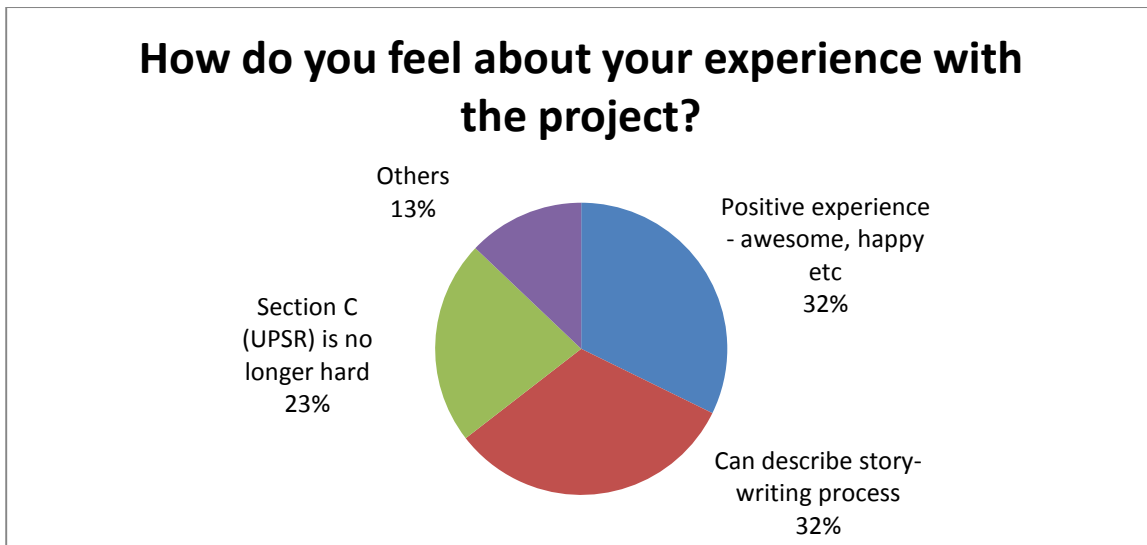


Figure 7: Students' reflections after interventions were carried out

The students could describe, in their own words, the process of writing a story. They understood the steps that they had to take. They could also explain why they chose to include certain things in their story. The reflections also indicated that the students no longer perceived Section C as being 'difficult' and 'hard.' There are also indications that the students were starting to enjoy writing and creating stories. Here are some excerpts from the students' reflections:

Today we do practise UPSR and teacher give Section C to us. I'm so surprise because it was so easy for me, not hard like before this. I write introduction for my story and one paragraph for one picture. My story has three pictures so I write three paragraph. And of course the closure. I end my story with describing the character emotions.

The part about the stranger want to kidnap Anna was not in the question paper, but I still write it in my answer because it will make the story more interesting.

I'm surprise when teacher say we can write in section C, we can use our imagination like when we do our story prompts. When I use my imagination my story become longer. It make me so happy.

5.2. Pre-test and post test

The marking for the tests (Section C writing exercises) was based on the official UPSR marking scheme provided by the Malaysia Examination Board (see Appendix 2). In order to enhance the validity of the scores, I sought the assistance of two other teachers who are also experienced UPSR examiners for the English language paper. The markings were done in three stages. I did the first round of marking while the other two examiners did the second and third rounds. The final scores were the average of the scores from the three rounds. 1 shows the final average scores in pre-test and post-test for the 31 students involved in this research.

The pre-test was conducted before any of the intervention strategies were conducted. The post-test was conducted at the end of the research, after all the intervention strategies had been carried out.

Table 1: Students' Scores in Pre-test, progress test and post-test

Student	Pre-test (max. 15)	Post-test (max. 15)
1	2	8
2	2	7
3	3	6
4	3	7
5	3	6
6	2	7
7	1	5
8	2	6
9	3	5
10	2	7
11	5	10
12	4	5
13	3	6
14	4	6
15	3	6
16	4	6
17	2	5
18	1	4
19	3	5
20	5	5
21	3	6
22	2	6
23	1	7
24	3	7
25	4	8
26	3	8
27	3	8
28	3	8
29	3	7
30	6	11
31	2	8
Average	2.90	6.65

5.3 January test scores and UPSR result

In September, the students sat for the national examination. As soon as the official result was released, I made a comparison between the students' grades at the beginning of the year (a practice UPSR exam) and the grades in the national examination. Out of 31 students involved in the research, 28 passed the examination. There were no A's at the beginning of the year, but in the national examination 4 of my students managed to get an A. The number of B's increased from 3 in January to 10 in the examination. The percentage of passes increased from 83.9% in January to 93.3% in September. The percentage of passes for the English paper improved by 14.94% compared to last year (the best in 3 years). Table 2 shows a comparison between the students' scores in the January test and the UPSR result.

Table 2: January test scores and UPSR result

	January test	UPSR result
Number of A's	0	4
Number of B's	3	10
Number of C's	23	14
Number of D's	5	3
Number of E's	0	0
Percentage of passes	83.9%	93.3%
Percentage of failures	16.1%	9.7%

I am not able to compare Section C only because the breakdown of results is not released by the Malaysian Examination Board. Therefore, I could only compare the overall UPSR English scores and cannot claim that students' improvements were solely the result of improved performance on Section C.

6. Conclusions and recommendations

At the beginning of the research, my students had very little interest in writing. Due to past failures in previous practice tests, most had become reluctant writers. They associated writing activity with difficult and impersonal examination tasks with little sense of communication. The students' reflections before the interventions were carried out indicated that they had low motivation to write in English. The students seemed to be lacking the confidence to answer the writing task in the UPSR English paper. Story-writing was seen as something difficult and hard.

As the research progressed, some shifts in the students' attitudes towards writing could be seen. The evidence for this can be clearly observed in the students' reflections. The students were beginning to understand the process of creating stories, and they were starting to be more open about learning how to do it well. Towards the end of the research, the students' reflections displayed deeper engagement in story-writing activities. The way the students wrote their reflections clearly suggests that they were starting to enjoy it more. There is enough evidence in the students' reflective journals to conclude that the use of digital resources and the Internet to engage students in story-creating activities had positively impacted the students' attitudes towards writing. After participating in all the intervention activities, the students had become less reluctant and were more willing to take on the task of writing stories.

Analysis of the students' test scores shows that the students' performance had improved throughout the project. The maximum score for UPSR Paper 2 Section C is 15. In the pre-test, the average score was only 2.90. In the post-test, the students were able to achieve an average score of 6.65. The students' scores in the UPSR test also showed significant improvements compared to the scores in the January test. It was the school's best result in the UPSR English paper in three years.

Based on the findings and discussion, it can be concluded that the use of stories in writing pedagogy can help reluctant writers to be more enthusiastic writers. The love of stories among children is innate, and this research succeeded in utilising this to a certain extent. Stories give a lot of opportunities for the students to be imaginative, creative and innovative. This research had used stories as tools for motivating reluctant writers to write by creating a happy and enjoyable learning environment.

Through the use of technology tools like WhatsApp and Kidblog, this research had helped the students develop fluency and competence in technology. According to Yancey (2004), this should be a key part of teaching writing in this century. The findings from this research suggest that the competence in technology had positive impacts on the students' writing skills. The students had become more motivated writers. Their performance in writing tests had also improved. When the students were given the opportunities to write on blogs and use WhatsApp to interact with each other both synchronously and asynchronously, their confidence in writing improved.

I believe that participating in teacher research had expanded and enriched my teaching skills and had put me in collaborative contact with peers that have a like interest in classroom research. Through the research, I learned that the most meaningful and effective learning can happen when students' engagement is at its optimum level. Anything that I want to achieve in my classroom can be achieved if my students are engaged. I can bring all the latest pedagogical approaches, teaching strategies and sophisticated tools into the classroom, but if I fail to find out what engages my students and use it effectively to help them learn, we will not achieve anything. I think the most satisfying moment was when my students told me that I had succeeded in helping them learn writing by making them believe that they really want to learn it.

In the future, I would like to explore the many different ways mobile technology like smart phone apps can be utilised to help boost students' potentials in creative writing and other genres of writing.

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Appendix 1

SECTION C

[15 marks]

[Time suggested: 35 minutes]

Write a story based on the pictures below. You may use the words given to help you. Write your answer in the space provided.

Tulis sebuah cerita berdasarkan gambar-gambar di bawah. Kamu boleh menggunakan perkataan-perkataan yang diberikan untuk membantu kamu. Tulis jawapan kamu di ruang yang disediakan.



boy scouts – hiking – in the jungle



beehive – tree branch – pebble – threw



bees – stinging – ran – river
– jumped – water



flew away – faces – swollen
– cried – learned lesson

Appendix 2

Marking Scheme for Section C

BAND	DESCRIPTORS	MARKS
EXCELLENT	Excellent and confident use of the language. Ideas conveyed clearly through a variety of sentence structures Ideas are well-planned, organised and are linked so as to sustain the interest of the reader Overall accurate use of spelling and punctuation	13 – 15
CREDIT	Proficient use of the language throughout Attempts made to construct a variety of sentence structures but occasional errors occur Most ideas are well organised, relevant and conveyed clearly New words used correctly Punctuation and spelling errors may occur occasionally but the overall meaning is still clear	9 - 12
ACHIEVEMENT	Correct use of the language Simple sentences with minor errors but meaning is still clear Satisfactory presentation of ideas Vocabulary is adequate to convey meaning A few punctuation and spelling errors may be found in the script	5 – 8
LOW ACHIEVEMENT	Poor use of the language Multiple errors found sentences Ideas are incomprehensible even after a few readings Limited and incorrect use of vocabulary Many spelling and punctuation errors Direct lifting	1 - 4

Appendix 3

Reflection Sheet 1

Name: _____ Class: _____

Date: _____ Day: _____

Answer the following questions. You can write your answers in English or Malay.

Jawab soalan-soalan berikut. Anda boleh menjawab dalam Bahasa Inggeris atau Bahasa Malaysia.

1. How do you feel about today's writing activity?

Apakah perasaan anda tentang aktiviti hari ini?

2. Did you enjoy it? Why?

Adakah anda berasa seronok dengan aktiviti tersebut? Mengapa?