

Using Digital Comics in Teaching ESL Writing

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Abstract: The use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in teaching and learning language is one of the popular approaches employed in education and is said to be a beneficial tool in language teaching and learning. The digital comics can be implemented in teaching and learning process with the purpose to motivate low proficiency students in writing skill. This study aimed to examine the teacher trainees' perceptions of using digital comics in teaching ESL writing to low achiever learners. To achieve the aim of the study, a survey questionnaire was administered to 30 TESL teacher trainees in Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM). The findings of the study clearly indicated that most of the surveyed teacher trainees have a positive perception of using ICT and digital comics in teaching ESL writing to low achiever learners. The majority of the respondents stated that digital comics have a lot of advantages that encourage students to write in English.

Keywords: ICT, Digital Comics, English as a Second Language (ESL), Teachers Trainee, Perception

1 Introduction

The use of comics for educational purposes especially in printed form began in the USA in the middle of the 20th century, and this trend expanded worldwide in the forthcoming years [1]. According to Oxford Dictionary, comics are defined as an art form that features a series of static images in fixed sequence, usually to tell a story [2]. Typically, comics are printed on paper, and text is often incorporated into the images. The most common formats are newspaper strips, magazine-format comic books, and larger bound volumes called graphic novels. Meanwhile, Hayman, Greg and Pratt defined comic as a sequence of discrete, juxtaposed pictures that comprise a narrative, either in their own right or when combined with text [3]. For the purpose of this study, digital comics can be defined as comics that are published on a website. Other terms such as web comics, online comics, or Internet comics also refer to digital comics. This study was conducted to explore the teacher trainees' perceptions of using ICT in general and digital comics in particular in teaching ESL writing to

low achiever learners. The following three specific research questions were posed in order to achieve the purpose of the study:

- 1) What are the teacher trainees' perceptions of using ICT in teaching writing?
- 2) What are the teacher trainees' perceptions of the advantages and limitations of using digital comics in ESL classrooms?
- 3) What are the teacher trainees' perceptions of applying digital comics in teaching ESL writing to low achiever learners?

2 Literature Review

2.1 The Use of ICT in Teaching Writing

Digital comic is one of the pedagogical tools that involve the application of ICT. Nowadays, many instructors prefer to utilize ICT in teaching and learning as it offers a lot of advantages especially in creating an interesting learning environment [4] [5]. Currently, ICT is a common phenomenon among the

society. The Net Generation is becoming more aware of the importance of ICT in today's life. This is due to the fact that ICT not only provides us with current information, but also aids us in learning. Computer is an interactive audio and visual technology which helps the users in enhancing the teaching and learning process to be more fun, interactive, cooperative, as well as effective in passing on the linguistic values [6].

The reformation in the western countries especially in the United States of America (USA) has made the ICT as one of the important tools in teaching and learning processes. Neo claimed that ICT has given a great impact and has influenced teachers to the progression of new perception and innovative teaching techniques [7]. Nowadays, teachers integrate technology in order to help them with their work as well as making it as a part of the teaching and learning process [4] [5]. Moreover, by using the technologies, students will have the opportunity to learn to use the language as well as the technology [8]. According to Wang (2002), a teacher's broader perception of education is perhaps a more valuable indication of his or her ability or even desire to implement the use of technology into the classroom [9]. In light of the fact that teaching with computers requires a shift from traditional teaching practices, teachers who hold teacher-centered beliefs of teaching and learning will be less likely to view technology as a fundamental learning tool.

Throughout the researches done in some specific areas, there is cumulative evidence of the positive impact of ICT on teaching and learning. Goldberg, Russell and Cook concluded that students who use computers when learning to write are not only more engaged and motivated in their writing, but they produce written work that is of greater length and higher quality [10]. Rafiza and Adelina conducted a study on the advantages of the exploitation of dialogue journal through email technology in developing students' writing skills and in what ways it can be used to improve the teaching and learning of the English Language in the Malaysian secondary schools [11]. In this study, the researchers stated that the use of dialogue journal through e-mail can help in enhancing the students' interest, the level of student-teacher interface and standard of writing in Malaysia. Moreover, Norlida and Supyan conducted a study on how e-learning aids the learners in a writing course

[12]. This study examines the learners' perceptions of the degree of helpfulness of the web-based language learning activities. They concluded that e-learning is considered as a useful tool to enhance learners' writing skills.

2.2 Digital Comic as a Tool in Teaching Writing

In his study entitled "Comic Life in Education", Glen Bledsoe reports that many students read fluently but they find it difficult to write [13]. They complain that they do not know what to write. They have ideas, but they lack the written language skills to create a beginning, follow a sequence of ideas and then draw their writing to a logical conclusion. Students frequently ask if they may draw a picture when they are writing. They are reaching for images to support their language ideas. Like reading, comics provide a scaffolding so that students experience success in their writing. According to Bledsoe, by using comic life, students have a new publishing medium. Comic life documents can be printed, emailed to parents or posted as a website very easily. Recent studies show that teachers believe that it is easier to teach writing, grammar and punctuation as well as scientific concepts with materials that students are fully invested in such as printed but mostly web comic books. The kinds of "writing" decisions students make in this media go far beyond the text. Furthermore, Bledsoe points out that if they have the skills, students can create movies, podcasts, digital stories which are 'written' but are recorded in other media than text. The skills, according to Bledsoe, have to be learned and are essential in helping learners to spell correctly or organize thoughts into paragraphs [13].

Besides that, as we all know, writing is a difficult part of language learning for most of the ESL learners especially for low achiever language learners. This is even worst when the students have no motivation and lack of interest to write in English. However, according to Faulkner, by using digital comic, it can spur students' interest to write [14]. Furthermore, Zimmerman points out that while learning a new language can be a daunting and frustrating experience, he sees a frown or a tear shed when creating and working with comics [15]. By using digital comics, students can work collaboratively as digital comics can be a great collaboration online tool. This subsequently can

improve students' language skills. Educators who are teaching new vocabulary or grammatical structures might have students who create a comic strip in which the characters use the new words or constructions that have been learned in class. It is a much more engaging way to practice a language and creative writing than simply writing them out as words alone on a blank page [15].

3 Methodology

This study aimed to explore the teacher trainees' perceptions of using digital comics in teaching ESL writing to low achiever learners. Therefore, to collect the data, a survey questionnaire was administered to 30 TESL teacher trainees in Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM). The questionnaire was designed based on the objectives and research questions of the study. The questionnaire consists of three sections and 17 items altogether. Moreover, four demographic items were included in the beginning of the questionnaire. The respondents were required to give the background information on age, gender, course and year of study.

The first section of the questionnaire consisted of five items designed on the basis of five-point Likert scale of agreement to get information about the respondents' perceptions on using ICT in

teaching writing. The second section consisted of six items to collect information about the respondents' perceptions on the advantages and limitations of using digital comic in ESL classes. The third section included six items to get the respondents' perceptions of applying digital comic in teaching ESL writing to low achiever learners. All the questionnaire items were designed on the basis of 5-point Likert Scale of agreement, where five = strongly agree, four = agree, three = uncertain, two = disagree and one = strongly disagree.

4 Findings and Discussion

4.1 Teacher trainees' perceptions on using ICT in teaching ESL writing

The items in the first section required the respondents to indicate their perceptions on using ICT in teaching ESL writing. As Table 1 shows, the majority of the respondents (83.3 %) showed a positive attitude towards using ICT in teaching ESL writing. Most of the respondents agreed that the use of ICT can help and motivate low achiever ESL learners to develop their writing skills. The findings indicated that low achiever ESL learners need motivation to write in English and the application of ICT can be a motivational factor spurring students' motivation to write in English.

Table 1: Teacher trainees' perceptions of using ICT in teaching ESL writing

Statements	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Uncertain	Agree	Strongly agree
I prefer to use ICT in teaching writing.	0.0	0.0	16.7	60.0	23.3
I will use ICT in teaching writing.	3.3	0.0	16.7	60.0	20.0
Using ICT in language teaching is useful.	3.3	0.0	6.7	56.7	33.3
Using ICT in language teaching can help low achiever ESL learners to improve their writing skills.	3.3	0.0	6.7	66.7	23.3
Using ICT in language teaching can motivate low achiever ESL learners to write in English.	3.3	0.0	0.0	80.0	16.7

4.2 Teacher trainees' perceptions of the advantages and limitations of using digital comics in ESL classrooms

The items in the second section required the respondents to indicate their perceptions on the advantages and limitations of using digital comics in ESL classrooms (see Table 2). The findings showed that more than two-thirds of the respondents believed

that the use of digital comics in ESL classrooms can create a meaningful learning environment. Similarly, majority of the respondents (93.3 %) agreed that the application of digital comics appeals and encourages students to write in English. Moreover, more than 80 % of the teacher trainees agreed that the use of digital comics enables students to utilize multiple skills.

In terms of the limitations of using digital comics in ESL classrooms, all the respondents believed that the use of digital comics in ESL classroom is time consuming. Perhaps, this is due to the technical aspect that teachers have to deal with when using a technological tool in their classrooms. Furthermore, most of the respondents (70 %) believed that the use of digital comics is only suitable for the

low achiever language learners. This indicates that the use of digital comics is just limited to low achiever language learners and it seems to be inappropriate to be used for intermediate and advanced learners. All the respondents also agreed that the use of digital comics in ESL classroom is impractical. Since digital comics are time-consuming, they cannot be implemented in ESL classrooms.

Table 2: Student teachers perceptions about the advantages and limitations of using digital comic in ESL classroom

Statements	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Uncertain	Agree	Strongly agree
The use of digital comics in ESL classroom can create a meaningful learning environment.	0.0	6.7	16.7	43.3	33.3
The use of digital comics appeals and encourages students to write in English.	3.3	0.0	3.3	80.0	13.3
The use of digital comics enables students to utilize and develop multiple skills.	0.0	0.0	16.7	46.7	36.7
The use of digital comics in ESL classroom is time consuming.	0.0	0.0	0.0	20.0	80.0
The use of digital comics is only suitable to the low achiever ESL learners.	0.0	0.0	30.0	66.7	3.3
The use of digital comics in ESL classroom is impractical.	0.0	0.0	0.0	80.0	20.0

4.3 Teacher trainees' perceptions of applying digital comics in teaching ESL writing to low achiever learners

As Table 3 shows, the respondents have a positive attitude towards applying digital comics in teaching ESL writing. About two-thirds of the respondents feel that digital comics are easy to use. Meanwhile, most of the teacher trainees agreed that they will use digital comics in teaching ESL writing to low achiever learners. Moreover, the majority of the respondents (96.6 %) agreed that the use of digital comics is a positive way to attract low achiever learners to write creatively. More than 85 % of the respondents also agreed that telling stories by building digital comic

strips is a way to motivate low achiever ESL learners to write in English. When the teacher trainees were asked about other applications of digital comics, majority of them believed that telling stories using digital comics will make the difficult job of writing in English a much more enjoyable experience to low achiever ESL learners. Eighty percent of them also stated that writing with the use of digital comics will motivate low achiever ESL learners to write short sentences in English. Generally, the respondents perceived that digital comics are easy to use, can encourage students to write creatively as well as enable the low achiever ESL learners to write in English.

Table 3: Teacher trainees' perceptions of applying digital comics in teaching ESL writing to low achiever learners

Statements	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Uncertain	Agree	Strongly agree
I feel digital comics are easy to use.	3.3	10.0	26.7	43.3	16.7
I will use digital comics in teaching writing to low achiever ESL learners.	0.0	0.0	16.7	66.6	16.7
The use of digital comics is a positive way to	0.0	0.0	3.3	53.3	43.3

attract low achiever ESL learners to write creatively.					
Telling stories by building digital comic strips is a way to motivate low achiever ESL learners to write in English.	0.0	0.0	13.3	60.0	26.7
Digital comics will make the difficult job of writing in English a much more enjoyable experience to low achiever ESL learners.	0.0	6.7	10.0	46.7	36.7
Writing with digital comics will motivate low achiever ESL learners to write short sentences in English.	0.0	0.0	20.0	26.7	53.3

5 Conclusion

The findings clearly indicated that teacher trainees have positive attitudes towards using ICT in teaching writing and most of them agreed that the application of ICT enables them to help low achiever language learners to write in English. Such an attitude may be due to the importance of ICT in today's education. Furthermore, the positive perception on using ICT in language teaching or specifically in teaching writing is driven by the factor of exposure to ICT that subsequently leads teacher trainees to become aware of the importance of ICT for ESL learners. For the advantages of digital comics, majority of the respondents agreed that digital comics can attract and encourage low achiever language learners to write in English. Thus, it obviously shows that the appealing features of digital comics are undeniable. As for the limitations, the respondents perceived the use of digital comics in classroom as time consuming and impractical. This may be due to several factors especially the technical factors such as lack of access and lack of training. Melor reports that one of the unsatisfactory uses of ICT in teaching ESL is lack of access to the computer lab [8]. Since the use of digital comics requires internet connection, it seems impractical to be implemented in a classroom. If teachers intend to use it, they have to bring the students to the computer lab. However, the problem appears as the internet connection may not be guaranteed in the computer lab. Although majority of the respondents realized about the advantages and limitations of using digital comics in ESL classroom, they agreed that the digital comics are easy to use and their applications may help low achiever ESL learners in their writing as it can motivate these learners to write in English.

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