

Research Article

Written Retelling Strategy in Improving Reading Skill among ESL Students in Malaysia

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Skills of reading and comprehending in English are crucial for academic success in schools. Pupils with low reading ability skill may result in obtaining low grades and poor test scores. Traditionally pupils are taught to lift specific information as a reading strategy to answer comprehension questions, comparatively, this study uses retelling strategy to evaluate pupils' understanding. Past research indicated that retelling strategy enhances accuracy and greater comprehension. Thus, far study that investigates effectiveness of this strategy remains scarce in Malaysian English as Second Language (ESL) primary schools. As reading skill starts to develop in early stage of schooling, it is deemed necessary to conduct this study among primary level pupils. The present study specifically analyzes the effects of written retelling strategy on pupils' understanding of story structure among year three primary school pupils in Malaysian ESL classroom. A quasiexperimental research design with pretest and posttest was adopted to carry out the study. Pretest and posttest questions consisting of structural comprehension questions and written retelling were used to measure the effects of written retelling strategy on the pupils' achievement in reading comprehension and their understanding of the story structure. A pretest was conducted before teaching and learning took place. This was followed by a posttest. An independent *t*-test was used to obtain the mean values and standard deviations. The results obtained in this study conclude the written retelling strategy had notably improved the pupils' reading skill as they are able to retain information from the story and make better predictions. Subsequently, it increased their abilities in answering the comprehension questions. The results also indicate that written retelling could be a prospective reading strategy along with other strategies for primary ESL learners in Malaysia and similar context.

1. Introduction

Reading skill is deemed essential for every individual as it carries the role of increasing our knowledge. In addition, it also builds maturity level and character of an individual, sharpens our thinking, and widens our awareness of social, economic, political, and environmental issues [1]. According to Travers [2], reading is a fundamental skill for learners, not just for learning but for life with reading being defined as "... the ability to draw meaning from the printed page and interpret this information appropriately" (Grabe and Stoller [3], p. 9). Following Clark and Rumbold [4], they reported research shows that reading gives a major impact on learners' educational performance. Learners who do pleasure reading on a daily basis proven to achieve better scores in reading tests, in addition to develop a wider vocabulary, increased

general knowledge and a better understanding of other cultures [5]. Reading skill is a crucial for learners in primary level as it serves as a building block in developing understanding. It is important to provide intervention at the earliest for learners with low reading skills as great interventions will impact their reading proficiency in future [6].

Possessing the ability to read and comprehend in English is deemed an important skill as it is crucial for academic success, business transactions, and other purposes [7]. Poor reading comprehension among the pupils may affect their abilities to succeed in school. All subjects require reading comprehension skills [8–11]. Hence, pupils with low reading skills may result in obtaining low grades and poor test scores.

The ultimate goal of reading is comprehension. "Reading comprehension is the ability to process text, understand its meaning, and to integrate it with what the reader already

knows" (Grabe [12]: p17). According to Davis [13], there are six important skills required to comprehend effectively. First, learners need to know the meaning of words, therefore they should be able to perform the ability to comprehend the meaning of a word from its discourse context. Second, in order to build an understanding learners should be able to trail the development of a passage in terms of organization. Third, the ability to make inferences from a text about its contents and further recognize main ideas of the text. Fourth, learners should be able to answer questions related to the passage and recognize the literary devices or propositional structures used. Next, they should be able to understand the situational mood and determine its tone, and finally, they should also have the skill to recognize the discourse semantics of text, mainly in identifying writer's purpose and point of view.

In the case of Malaysia, many students are facing problems to master reading comprehension materials and lack the essential skills to comprehend. This is supported by past studies conducted by Ahmad Mazli [14], Sarudin et al. [15], and Jamaliah and Faridah Noor [16] that verified Malaysian students indeed face challenges in comprehending academic reading texts. It further reported students face difficulties to deal with texts because they could not form an understanding on the context and consequently, they do not pose ability to connect main ideas from text to tasks assigned related to the given text [17]. Similarly in the report of Overview of the Economic Assessment of Malaysia [18], Malaysian primary school students obtained below average scores, they were ranked among the lowest of the 65 participating countries in mathematics, science, and reading scores. As a result, it affects Malaysia's competitive advantages within the region. The global average score in 2021 was 489 for reading, indicating Malaysian scores are still far below the international standard. Thus, it is essential to intervene and aid the students starting from lower primary level as this is the period, they are exposed to new reading materials and learn the essential skills to comprehend texts [19].

Following the highlighted issues in Malaysian English as Second Language (ESL) classrooms, an effective reading strategy is required to help improve pupils' reading comprehension starting from lower primary level. Thus, this study aims to explore written retelling strategy that is commonly used to aid reading comprehension of lower proficiency level pupils. Specifically, it intends to examine the effects of written retelling strategy on reading comprehension of primary three pupils in a school located in the state of Perak, Malaysia. Written retelling is examined as a comprehension strategy that could help the primary three pupils to improve in their learning and develop their comprehension [20]. Numerous past studies on written retellings that were conducted [21–24] reported the effectiveness of a written retelling strategy in aiding learners' comprehension; those studies, however, only focused on adult learners and native speakers of English. In the case of countries such as Malaysia, thus far there is only one study reported on the use of retelling strategy for comprehending and interpreting short stories for

secondary students by Louis and Gurdial Singh [24] and none on written retelling as a strategy for improving the reading comprehension of lower primary level students. This study, therefore, intends to fill the existing gap in the area of retelling strategies and its impact on reading comprehension. It primarily focuses on lower primary level school students of a school in Malaysia.

1.1. Retelling Strategy. According to Kalmbach [25], retelling is a postreading or postlistening activities in which readers or listeners recall and tell what they remember either orally or in writing or illustrations. Retelling is perhaps one of the simplest and most powerful ways to enhance children's comprehension and their desire to read [26]. It is a technique used to identify how a pupil is able to form a good comprehension on a specific story. Retelling is a strategy to guide learners on focusing what they have read, in addition, to test their understanding by communicating to others on what they have learned [27]. When learners are engaged in retelling, they have to activate their knowledge to understand organization of stories and later apply it to a new reading [28]. During retelling, students are required to summarizing, organizing information, and form inferences. According to Han [29], retelling has two forms; written and oral presentation, both forms pay attention to all necessary details in a story such as main narrative components, character, setting, theme, mood, and tone. In similar, vein Rog [30] argued that "retelling encourages pupils to attend to the meaning of the text; reinforces the elements of story structure, such as character, setting, plot; requires readers to distinguish between key ideas and supporting details; encourages communication and oral language development" (Rog [30]; p. 24).

Researchers have found that retelling is an instructional strategy that helps students better process information and, therefore, leads to enriching comprehension [31]. Past studies further confirmed that retelling strategy has proven to be beneficial in both improving and assessing comprehension [32]. Following the suit, Fitzgerald and Shanahan [33] mentioned that combination of teaching reading along with writing will be useful in guiding students' learning process, mainly because both reading and writing skills have common traits of development components. According to Brown and Cambourne [34], retelling enables active cognitive process that requires learners to reinvent the read materials in a written form. To complete the former, readers have to make connection between ideas, read in between lines make inferences and explore the text structure. In the process of written retelling, learners are required to connect their previous knowledge and form schemata related to passage, then they have to rearrange the ideas in a new form that may reflect and relate to their own personality. There is a possibility that the newly formed knowledge may be different for every reader as it is personal, yet it carries same meaning of the original text. Wijaya and Dachofany [21] stated that to determine students' reading comprehension is not easy; hence using a written retelling strategy will help teachers to check their students' understanding after reading a text. They also cited Anderson [1] to support their view in which she

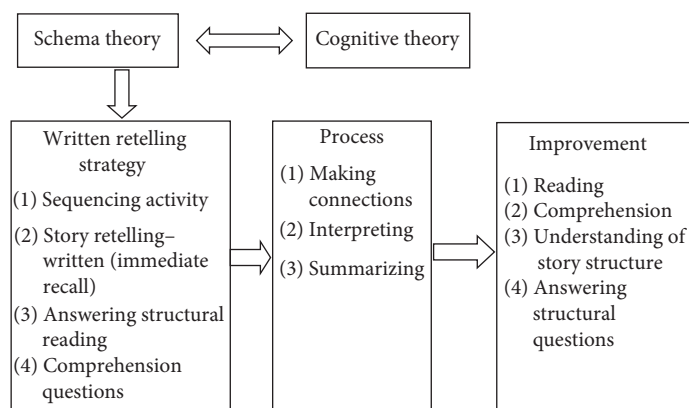


FIGURE 1: Conceptual framework.

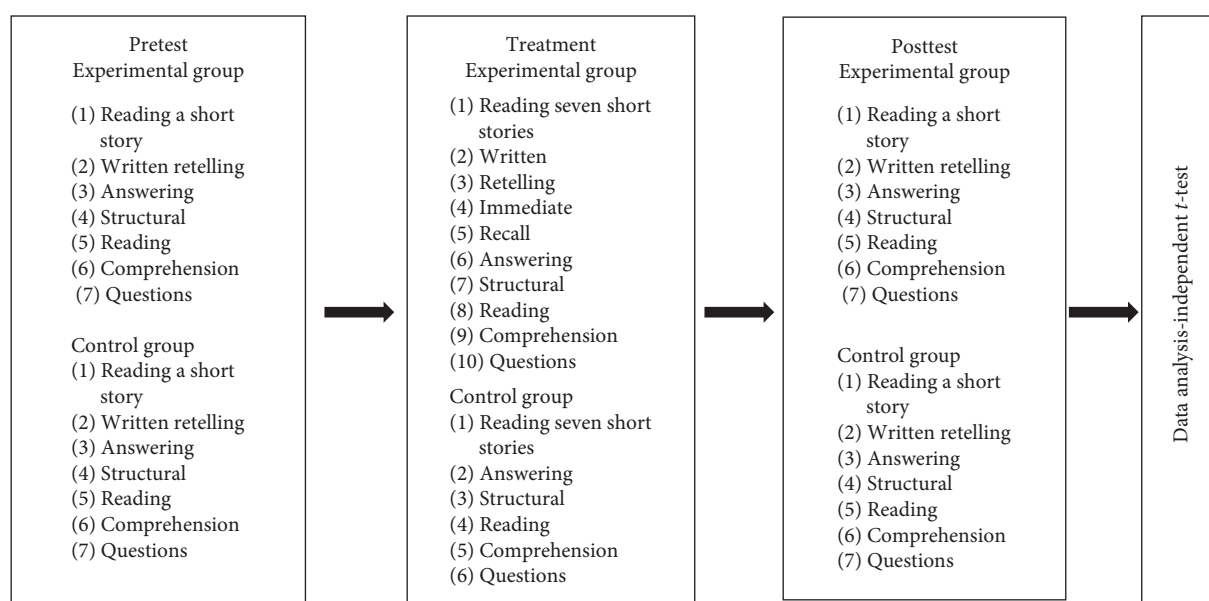


FIGURE 2: Research design.

mentioned that a written retelling is a strategy used to help the teachers assess students' reading comprehension level.

Many past studies have been conducted to study the effects of oral and written retelling strategies in improving learners' reading comprehension skills and develop their awareness of story structure especially for L1 and EFL learners. However, most studies conducted investigated both of the strategies simultaneously and a very few research have focused solely on one of the strategies. Literature review shows that studies that focused on written retellings strategy are much fewer than those on oral retellings. Although studies have been conducted on the effect of written retelling strategy, these have only focused on secondary and tertiary level EFL students. In countries such as Malaysia, studies investigating the effects of written retelling strategy remain scarce, particularly involving primary level ESL learners. Thus far, there is no empirical evidence reported on the effect of retelling strategy in improving primary level ESL students'

reading comprehension in the Malaysian ESL classroom context. Thus, this study intends to explore the effectiveness of written retelling strategy among primary three students in Malaysian ESL classrooms. This study primarily focuses on the primary three students as they are at the end of the year before moving to next academic stage of upper primary. This school-based assessment tests on language components that the students have studied for the past 3 years. Therefore, conducting an intervention at this stage is deemed necessary to yield better results both for this study and students' performance in year-end examination.

1.2. Conceptual Framework and Research Questions. Figure 1 illustrates the conceptual framework for this study. It can be seen that cognitive theory and schema theory will influence written retelling strategy among students. By drawing connections between the text and their existing knowledge, interpreting and summarizing the students improve their

reading comprehension and ability to answer structural questions related to the text.

To investigate the effects of written retelling strategy in improving primary three pupils' reading comprehension ability, this study seeks to provide and answer for the following research questions:

- (1) What is the effect of a written retelling strategy on the pupils' ability in answering the structural comprehension questions?
- (2) Does written retelling strategy improve pupils' story structure scores?

2. Literature Review

The review of previous studies affirmed that the written retelling strategy has strong effects in refining learners' reading understanding, with the inclusion of understanding the story structure. A study conducted by Gudwin (2020) on elementary level students proved that written retelling strategy greatly improves learners' comprehension, writing ability, vocabulary knowledge, and oral proficiency, it is deemed as a productive strategy. Similarly, Stoicovy [35] mentioned that both forms of written and oral retelling strategies are beneficial in developing comprehension and language skills in general. The findings revealed by researchers on ESL and EFL learners such as Sylvia and Widiati [22], Louis and Gurdial Singh [24], and Wijaya and Dacholfany [21] consistently showed a positive effect of written retelling on pupils' reading comprehension.

A similar study on primary level students was conducted by Geist and Boydston [36], a number of 118 s-grade students were randomly assigned to treatment and control groups in both traditional and writing process classrooms. The measure was pre- and post-scores on a test of writing ability. In the writing process classrooms, the written-retelling-treatment group performed significantly better than the control on subtests of vocabulary, syntax, spelling, and style. In the traditional classrooms, there were no significant differences between the treatment and control groups' performance. The findings from the study suggest that teachers could not use this strategy as a ready-made classroom activity or as a piecemeal. It further imposed that teachers should use retelling as part of an overall paradigm shift toward a more writing-centered classroom. The study concluded that the written retelling strategy tends to work best in a whole language-based classroom or for literature-learning purposes.

A vast number of past studies' results were consistent with the findings revealed by Louis and Gurdial Singh [24] in their study on written retelling strategy for comprehending and interpreting short stories. In a similar vein, Solusia [37] reported that retelling strategy use increases the students' awareness in understanding the literary text, improves their language proficiencies, and stimulates their interest in achieving successful comprehension and interpretation of a literary text. In addition, according to Terlemezyan [38], the strategy also gives alternatives to teachers in teaching literature in new ways and adapting it to suit different student

abilities. Although many studies have been conducted on written retelling strategy and the resulted in positive outcomes but very minimum studies have been conducted in Malaysia ESL classroom focusing on primary students. Thus, conducting similar study on these students deem essential.

3. Materials and Methods

This study employed quasiexperimental design, below is the research design implemented (Figure 2).

3.1. Sample. The sample of the study consisted of 48 pupils distributed equally into the experimental group and control group. The two groups were chosen from the year 3 pupils of a primary girls' school in Ipoh, Malaysia. Prior to the study, written consent was asked from parents for inclusion of their children in this study. The pupils were selected from the same proficiency level of English based on their year-end reading assessment and LINUS results. According to their English teacher, the majority of the pupils need guidance in doing their reading comprehension activities. Their English teacher taught them in dual languages (Malay and English) to make them understand the subject. All the pupils were from average-income families. The school was chosen as the researcher was able to gain convenient access to the samples.

3.2. Instrument(s). The instruments in this study consisted of seven short stories and each story consisted of a minimum of 6–10 comprehension questions and one sequencing and matching activity. The reading materials are obtained from Standard 3 textbook that is used throughout Malaysian primary schools. The study was conducted for 8 weeks and the researcher met the students 3 hr per week to conduct the lesson. Each week, the pupils were introduced to one story. The written retelling treatment was carried out based on the given story. Pretest was conducted on the first week and posttest was given on the last week. The experimental group, however, was given a written retelling intervention before proceeding with the reading comprehension questions.

In written retelling activities, pupils were required to rewrite a summary of the story read, sequence the sentences and pictures, and answer a set of comprehension questions. In rewriting, pupils had to write a summary based on their understanding of the story read. A story map with guided questions was given to guide them to rewrite the story. Next is the sequencing phase. In this phase, the pupils sequence the sentences based on the story read and match the pictures given in the worksheets. Finally, the pupils had to answer a set of comprehension questions. These comprehension questions consist of structural literal and inferential questions. The control group, on the other hand, read the story and did the comprehension questions, followed by the sequence and matching activities.

3.3. Data Collection and Analysis. All samples took the pretest (sense of story structure and reading comprehension) during their regular classroom periods. All participants were given uniform instructions on how to answer the test, which was taken on the first day by both groups. The experimental group had received the written retelling strategy

TABLE 1: Mean structural reading comprehension *t*-test scores.

Group	<i>N</i>	Experimental		Control		<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i> (sig)
Test		Mean	<i>SD</i>	Mean	<i>SD</i>			
Pretest	24	3.96	2.010	3.96	2.881	0.000	46	1.000
Posttest	24	7.96	2.789	5.88	3.505	2.278	46	0.027**

**Significant at the significance level, $p < 0.05$; H_0 is rejected if p value < 0.05 .

TABLE 2: Mean understanding of story structure of overall *t*-test scores.

Group	<i>N</i>	Experimental		Control		<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i> (sig)
Test		Mean	<i>SD</i>	Mean	<i>SD</i>			
Pretest	24	0.670	1.09	0.792	2.16	-0.0252	46	0.802
Posttest	24	4.292	2.16	1.750	2.77	3.547	46	0.001**

**Significant at the significance level, $p < 0.05$; H_0 is rejected if p value < 0.05 .

which lasted 8 weeks. For the control group, there was no written retelling strategy given. Their lessons were presented in the normal reading procedure (students read the story, discuss the story, and teacher-guided students do the reading comprehension exercises). This procedure was carried out by their English teacher. However, the materials and worksheets given to the treatment group were also given to them during the research period. Posttest was carried out for both the experimental group and control group on the 8 weeks.

t-test was used to measure any significant differences among the scores and variables [39, 40]. It determines whether there are any significant effects of a written retelling strategy on reading comprehension and understanding of the story structure of the experimental group compared to the control group. The specific hypotheses to be tested are shown below in the null form:

- (1) There is no significant difference in reading comprehension between pupils taught using written retelling strategy and those who are not taught using the written retelling.
- (2) There is no significant difference in the learners' understanding of the overall posttest of story structure between pupils taught using written retelling strategy and those who are not taught using the written retelling.

4. Results

Table 1 illustrates the mean structural reading comprehension *t*-test scores. The pretest results of both experimental group and control group show an equal mean of 3.96. It shows that the pupils' ability in answering the reading comprehension before given the treatment is equal. From the above *t*-test output, it shows that the pupil's mean score difference of both groups is 0.00. It was found that $t(46) = 1.00$, $p > 0.05$. The obtained sig value (p) is bigger than 0.05 ($p = 0.95$). Therefore, there is no significant difference in pupils' achievement scores between experimental group and control group. In conclusion, pupils' reading comprehension

ability in answering structural comprehension questions before giving written retelling intervention is equal.

Based on the results of posttest score between the experimental group and control group, it shows that the mean score of the experimental group is 7.96 which is higher compared to the control group (mean = 5.88). The pupils' mean score difference is 2.08. It indicates that pupils in the treatment group had shown better improvement compared to the control group in answering reading comprehension questions.

From the *t*-test output, it was found that $t(46) = 0.027$, $p < 0.05$. The obtained sig value (p) is smaller than 0.05 ($p < 0.001$). Therefore, there is a significant difference in student's achievement scores between the experimental group and control group. In conclusion, students' reading comprehension ability in answering structural comprehension questions after giving written retelling intervention is higher. The null hypothesis is rejected at the 95% confidence level.

Table 2 displays the pretest and posttest results of the overall scores for understanding of the story structure. The mean score of the pretest of experimental group is 0.67, while the mean score of the control group is 0.792. This indicates that the mean scores of both groups are slightly equal before the experimental group received the written retelling treatment.

From the above *t*-test output, it was found that pupil's mean score difference of both groups is -0.122. Given $t(46) = -0.0252$, $p(0.802) > 0.05$. The obtained sig value (p) is bigger than 0.05 ($p = 0.802$). Therefore, there is no significant difference in pupil's achievement scores between the experimental group and control group. In conclusion, pupils' overall understanding of story structure before being given written retelling intervention is equal. The null hypothesis was accepted at the 95% confidence level.

The posttest results show that the mean score of experimental groups has shown a great improvement from 0.67 to 4.29 compared to only 0.79–1.75 of the control group. The total means scores difference of the experimental group has increased by 3.62. This indicated that the written retelling strategy has helped the experimental group of pupils to improve in their overall understanding of the story structure.

The *t*-test output shows pupil's mean score difference of both groups is 2.54. It was found that $t(46) = 3.547$, $p(0.001)$

< 0.05 . The obtained sig value (p) is smaller than 0.05 ($p = 0.01$). Therefore, there is a significant difference in student achievement scores between the experimental group and control group. In conclusion, pupils' overall understanding of story structure taught using written retelling strategy and those that were not taught using the written retelling strategy is higher and improved. The null hypothesis is rejected at the 95% confidence level.

5. Discussion

The findings of the current study were obtained through pretest and posttest and comparison of results between the treatment and the control group. The results of the present study showed that the use of written retelling strategy benefited ESL learners in enabling them to understand the story structure and answer the structural reading comprehension questions effectively.

Posttest results of the control group also showed an improvement as compared to their pretest result. This indicated that different reading strategies and consistent reading exercises do give positive impact on pupils' reading comprehension. The positive result was also due to the same worksheets given to the control group and experimental group during the 8 weeks intervention period. There were also instances where three of the control group achieved better scores compared to the experimental group pupils. Nevertheless, the outliers in control group were considered minimal and did not give significant effects to the mean scores and t -test scores of the posttest. The control group pupils did not show any improvement in their understanding of the story structure as their pretest and posttest mean scores showed an increase of less than 1 mark. The overall results of the posttests scores proved that the written retelling strategy give more significant effects to the experimental group as compared to the control group.

The pupils from the experimental group were also able to comprehend the story read better by recognizing the elements in the story structure, such as setting, beginning, middle, resolution, and sequence. After the treatment, almost all pupils in the experimental group were able to rewrite the story read and scored at least 1 mark. Prior given the treatment, almost all the pupils unable to rewrite the story and make connections to the story read. As discussed earlier, the experimental group showed a significant improvement in the posttest of understanding the story structure as compared to their pretest and the control group scores. Thus, it is safe to say that the written retelling strategy had helped pupils to improve their reading comprehension skills.

The findings further confirmed that written retelling strategy does give significant gains in improving the primary level ESL learners' comprehension skill. This strategy is also feasible in teaching language and reading comprehension skills to ESL learners in Malaysia. The outcomes also suggest that the written retelling experiences enhance pupils understanding of the story structure leading to improved comprehension skills.

This study also fills the gap found in those studies which were more focused on secondary and preuniversity ESL students. The outcomes of this study showed that the written retelling strategy benefited the primary level ESL learners in improving their reading comprehension skills. The activities carried out during the written retelling procedure had make a positive impact to learners' ability in making relation of the stories to their existing knowledge and past experiences. It also enabled pupils to retain the information from the story and make better predictions.

6. Conclusions

The results of this study suggest that written retelling strategy does give significant gains to pupils in improving their reading comprehension skills by answering the reading comprehension questions and understanding the elements of the story structure.

The results of this study revealed that both experimental group and control group pupils had shown positive improvement after 8 weeks of practice. However, the overall scores of the experimental group pupils had achieved more significant improvement and showed better understanding in the stories read. The pupils were able to understand the inferential questions better and make connections with their previous experiences.

Written retelling strategy had also helped the experimental group pupils to better understand the elements of the story structure. The pupils were able to sequence the story starting from the setting, beginning, and middle until the end of the story that may lead to deeper understanding and connection to the stories read.

Despite the limitations of this study, pupils in the experimental groups had shown greater confidence in reading fluency. They learned about proper organization when they did the story map and improved their ability in retaining information. The written retelling strategy also encourages pupils to read for a purpose and motivate them to transform the stories read into writing. Teachers on the other hand can use this strategy to evaluate the pupil's reading comprehension and writing skills. They can encourage pupils to relate the stories read with their background knowledge to ensure the reading is more meaningful.

Data Availability

Results are discussed under 4.0 and 5.0.

Disclosure

Part of this article has been presented as a dissertation.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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