

### **Title**

Enhancing English Grammar and Writing Competence through a Big Book Project

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### **Abstract**

English grammar is not easy to learn especially for non-native speakers. When English grammar is not sufficiently mastered, many non-native speakers become too shy to

speak the language. This is particularly true for most of the thirty childcare providers who recently completed three levels of a Communication English course. This short course is part of a two year Knowledge Transfer Programme (KTP) research project from the Centre for Modern Languages and Human Sciences (CMHLS) of Universiti Malaysia Pahang. These educators are members of Association of Pahang State Childcare Providers (PPNP) and their ages range from 21 to 53. Despite English being a second language in Malaysia, for many of these participants, English is more of a foreign language. This paper aims to describe a more unconventional approach of teaching English grammar and Writing skills through a big book project. This approach introduced English grammar in stages through poetry writing and focused on Haikus. At the end, participants produced a big book as a group in class and another big book individually as an assignment. To ensure that their illustrations were cohesive, they were given an art technique to choose from. Feedback received shows that the educators enjoyed learning grammar and writing this way and are inspired to write big books for their respective daycares.

**Keywords:** *teaching English Grammar, Big Book Project, Haiku*

## **Introduction**

For years, English has been blamed as one of the primary reasons why many Malaysian graduates are unemployable (Syed Jaymal Zahiid, 2015; Teoh, 2011; Kassim & Ali, 2010). The number of unemployed graduates is reported to have multiplied since 2013 from 52,282 to 161,000 unemployed graduates as of 28 September 2016, according to OfficeParrot (2016), an online resource and platform to research on prospective employers beyond company websites.

The standard of English language proficiency is believed to have been declining since the 1970s when the medium of instruction was switched from English to Malay (Teoh, 2011). This is because since the 70s, Malaysian children have been getting less and less exposure to English. Only when they started working would they realise how important English is, particularly if they worked in the private sectors.

It is obvious that the solution to this matter is not at tertiary level. It would be too late, as by the time high school leavers enter tertiary level, they should already be proficient in English as many of their references are in English. Therefore, it is crucial to find ways to improve English language mastery at a much earlier stage, preferably at the formation years

stage of children (i.e., before the age of 4). The Permata Negara website speaks of Neuroscience studies which show that the formation years of children are essential to the success of their future due to the exposures they receive at this stage that lead to synapses or interconnection of brain cells or neurons to form when they are stimulated. The more these neurons are used, the more permanently connected they will be (<http://www.programpermata.my/en/negara/about>).

Furthermore, in the English Language Education Reform in Malaysia: The Roadmap 2015 – 2025 published by the English Language Standards and Quality Council, the Ministry of Education (English Language Standards and Quality Council, 2015), it was reported that “special attention has to be paid to early learning because this is when the foundations are laid for lifelong learning” (p.23). While this is true, many kindergartens or daycares are not equipped to teach toddlers English primarily because the caregivers themselves are lacking the confidence to use English, particularly in the case of many of the participants in this paper. The reality is that although English is supposedly a second language in Malaysia, for many Malaysians, English remains more of a foreign language. That is why there must be efforts made to improve the quality of English language among daycare educators. While parents work, their children spend an average of eight hours in daycares.

This is where KTP Kindy, a knowledge transfer programme research grant project steps in. It is a two year project that is funded by Ministry of Higher Education, aiming to enhance the English language proficiency of 30 daycare educators under Persatuan Pengasuh Negeri Pahang (PPNP) or the Association of Pahang State Childcare Providers by developing their self-confidence in using the target language with the children at their daycares.

KTP Kindy offers two modules: English Communication Skills (Module 1) and Effective Storytelling Techniques in English (Module 2). Both modules consist of 3 levels. However, the focus of this paper will only be on the Big Book Project, one of the project-based activities in Module 1 Level 2 (Poetry writing activities) and Level 3 (Big Book Exhibition).

## **Literature Review**

When non-native speakers feel that they lack English mastery, it affects their self-confidence to speak it. This is reflected in statements like “I think I could have confidence while I’m speaking if I know about grammar well” (Lockley and Farrell, 2011, 176). Lockley and Farrell (2011) also cited many prior studies that showed that learners’ anxiety are linked

to face preservation (Tomizawa, 1990) and high performance expectations (Liu & Littlewood, 1997) and how they wished to be corrected (Katayama, 2007).

Literature also shows that learning difficulties among Asian learners are often grounded in weaknesses in students' prior learning experiences – focused on grammar and reading skills in teacher-centred classrooms, not conversational skills – and in beliefs about language learning instilled during schooling (Erlenawati Sawir, 2005). Nishimuro and Borg's (2013) study revealed that when teaching grammar, the lessons were teacher-centred and lacked communicative activities. Despite believing in the utility of such activities, the teachers felt such activities were time-consuming (Nishimuro & Borg, 2013).

Considering how many learners had been learning grammar and how their grammar anxiety could affect their confidence to communicate, KTP Kindy decided to take a project-based approach towards grammar and writing that is communicative, hands-on and relevant to their job responsibilities. This paper focuses on describing the big book project and how it enhances participants' writing and grammar competence through poetry writing, particularly haikus. It will also provide some feedback from the participants on the effectiveness of the approach.

### *Big Book Project Approach*

During Module 1 Level 1, the participants realised that they were not learning English the way they learned in school, *i.e.*, the conventional way through 'chalk and talk' and grammar exercises. They were initially taken aback but soon admitted that they liked learning English using this more communicative approach, including the refresher course on grammar to introduce different parts of speech and how to write simple sentences through the Big Book Project approach.

The first activity was to write Category Poems, followed by 2-word Poems, Everyday Poems and lastly Haikus. All of these poetry writing activities with exception of Haiku, were inspired by Prof Alan Maley of British Council at the 2007 Malaysia International Conference for English Language Teaching (MICELT) during his workshop. All the activities were done in groups. The class was divided into six groups of five participants. However, within the group, they were also allowed to work in pairs or individually.

In Category Poems, participants were asked to think of a category and list as many words in that category. If necessary, they could repeat the words to give it rhythm. Then they had to recite their poems with feeling. For example, the category is shapes. So the poem could be as shown below:

## **Shapes**

Circle

Diamond

Square

Triangle

Octagon

The 2-word Poem consists of two activities. Each group had to select 3 words from their Category Poem and pair it with another word making it a 2-word poem. The other word can be placed either before or after the existing word. Each group has to write three 2-word poems for each word they have selected. An example of the outcome would be as follows (the original words are in **bold**):

**Diamond** ring

Bright **diamond**

Expensive **diamond**

After each group had presented, then there would be a discussion on noun phrases. Participants were asked to think how placement can affect meaning. They would learn that nouns can also function as adjectives. They also learned about collocations, how some words can go together.

The proceeding activity was to combine two 2-word poems to make five sentences out of them. If that proved to be difficult, they were allowed to make sentences out of one 2-word poem instead. The ensuing discussion was on the importance of verbs and how sentences without verbs are not considered as English sentences. They were also introduced to subject verb agreement.

The next activity was to write Everyday Poem in stages – a verse of five lines at a time. There are four verses all together. The first verse must begin with Every day, I... The second verse must begin with But now, I..., followed by Yesterday, I... and lastly, Tomorrow, I... Through this poem, learners learned about tenses, and the difference between one tense from another.

The last group activity was to write a Haiku. A haiku is a Japanese inspired poem of three lines and fixed syllables of 5, 7, 5 each line. Participants learned to count the syllables and be selective of their word choices. At the end of the lesson, they produced a group haiku. The given theme was Safety as it was the national theme for early childhood education for 2016.

On the final day of Module 1 Level 2, they worked as a group to produce a Safety-themed big book of between ten and fourteen pages, that must be big and colourful. They were given two hours and selected art techniques to choose from so that their illustrations would be consistent from one page to another.

The next level for Module 1 was a month away. During that period, their take-home assignment was to individually write their own big book. The first meeting of Level 3 was the Big Book Exhibition where they showcased their big books and explained the idea behind the book. The advantages of the big books are many. Apart from the main aim of the activity, which was to build the participants' confidence level and give them a sense of achievement, the big books could be used in their respective classes and in follow-up activities in Module 2. Moreover, the books were created and written by them, they are a source of pride. In fact, the daycares educators recently showcased their big books on 16 October 2016 during Safety Carnival in conjunction with Children's and Daycare Day 2016.

## **Methodology**

### *Instrument*

A set of questionnaire was developed by the researchers with 16 Likert-scale items for Part A and 4 closed-ended questions for Part B. Part A comprises 4 effectiveness items, 4 confidence items, 4 enjoyment items and 4 understanding level items. The questionnaire was distributed to 26 participants who attended Module 2 Level 1.

### *Participants*

The actual participants of KTP Kindy who attended Module 1 Level 2 and Level 3 were 30 and their age ranged from 21 to 53 years old. As mentioned, when the questionnaire was distributed, only 26 participants were available as respondents. Of the 26, the majority are Malaysian Certificate of Education or Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) Form 5 school-leavers (50 %). Only 11.5 % or 3 participants are degree holders and 26.9 % (7 participants) are Diploma holders. The other participants are with Malaysia Lower Certificate of Education or Sijil Rendah Pelajaran (SRP), taken in Form 3 (1 participant) and other qualifications (1 participant).

Table 1: *Participants' Educational Qualification*

	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage (100%)</b>
<b>Degree</b>	3	11.5
<b>Diploma</b>	7	26.9
<b>SPM</b>	13	50.0
<b>SRP</b>	1	3.8
<b>Others</b>	1	3.8
<b>Total</b>	26	100.0

*Data collection and data analysis procedures*

Participants were asked to rate their agreement on the items using a 5-point Likert-scale (1=Strongly Agree to 5=Strongly Disagree). Data were entered in *IBM SPSS Statistics version 22* for descriptive analysis. In addition to that, reliability of the questionnaire was also checked. The Cronbach Alpha value of 0.89 obtained in this study shows that the scale is reliable.

**Results and discussion**

*The effectiveness of the big book approach*

Table 2 discusses the effectiveness of using the big book approach based on the four types of poetry writing participants were required to do. It is evident that all participants agree that the most effective poem for them to learn was writing the category poem. This is no surprise as it is the easiest of all the poetry types. As they progressed from one level to the next, the grammar component they were introduced to became more complex, especially in the Everyday Poem activity. They were introduced to *at least* four different types of tenses: Simple Present, Present Continuous, Past and Future. For each tense, they had to produce five sentences, whereas for Haiku, the whole poem could be only one sentence written in three lines.

Despite the complexity, majority of the participants still gave positive feedback towards the effectiveness of the other types of poems with varying percentage of agreement and uncertainty: 2-word Poem, 91.3 % agreement and 7.7 % uncertainty, Every day Poem, 84.6 % agreement and 15.4 % uncertainty, and lastly Haiku, 88.5 % agreement and 11.5 % uncertainty.

Table 2: *The effectiveness of the Big Book Approach*

		Category			
		Poem is an effective way to learn different groups of nouns	2-word Poem is an effective way to learn nouns and adjectives	Everyday Poem is an effective way to learn different types of tenses	Haiku is an effective way to enrich my English vocabulary
Percentage (%)	Strongly Agree	34.6	15.4	15.4	23.1
	Agree	65.4	76.9	69.2	65.4
	Not Sure	0	7.7	15.4	11.5
	Disagree	0	0	0	0
	Strongly Disagree	0	0	0	0
	Total	100	100	100	100

*The confidence level of using correct language*

Table 3 illustrates the confidence level of the participants using correct language. 61.5 % agree that category poem gave them the confidence in identifying nouns. 73.1 % of the participants also believed they were confident in writing correct phrases using nouns and adjectives in the 2-word poems. Learning the parts of speech and being able to apply them in writing 2-word poems helped the participants a lot as they could see how the placement of words could affect the meaning. However, when asked whether they gained confidence in writing correct tenses, it is not a surprise that 84.6% responded with ‘Not sure’. Tenses, as revealed, was the most difficult part of grammar elements for them. Similarly, 53.8% of the participants also admitted to lack of confidence in writing Haikus. The difficulty of writing Haikus would be the counting of syllables and careful word selection to meet the Haiku syllable requirement.

Table 3: *Confidence level*

		I am confident writing correct	I am confident writing	I am confident to
	Category Poem gave			



	me confidence to identify nouns	phrases using nouns and adjectives in 2- word Poem	sentences using correct tenses	write Haikus	
	Strongly Agree	19.2	7.7	0	7.7
	Agree	61.5	73.1	15.4	38.5
Percentage	Not Sure	19.2	19.2	84.6	53.8
(%)	Disagree	0	0	0	0
	Strongly Disagree	0	0	0	0
	Total	100	100	100	100

#### *The enjoyment level in writing poems*

Table 4 illustrates the findings on the participants' agreement on their enjoyment engaging in the activities. All participants (100%) claimed to enjoy writing Category poem. Although 7.7 % participants were not sure whether they enjoyed writing 2-word poem, the majority of the participants (92.3 %) liked writing 2-word poem. Similar findings were reported for writing Everyday poem and Haikus where 88.2 % of participants enjoyed the activities, however 11.5 % were uncertain of their level of enjoyment in the activities.

These results support the idea of Susikaran (2013) who posits that teaching of grammar elements through poems can promote "enjoyment, involvement and interest" (p. 17) among ESL learners. It has been suggested by Jeffery and Wilcox (2014) that writing poetry activity which allow expressions of voice and opinions can encourage positive attitudes towards writing. The results of this study also appear to support the statement. The findings show that the participants of this project enjoyed writing short poems (Category and 2-word poems) slightly more compared to writing longer poems (Everyday Poem and Haikus).

For both Everyday and Haiku poems, findings recorded showed 11.5 % uncertainty towards the level of enjoyment. A possible explanation for this might be that the participants' low levels of English language proficiency hindered them from expressing their views at length through poetry writing. It could also be a possibility that when writing longer sentences, the chances of making mistakes are higher. So this decreases the enjoyment of writing longer sentences. Furthermore, the lack of grammar confidence may affect their writing enjoyment.

Table 4: *Enjoyment in writing poems*

		I enjoyed writing Category Poem	I enjoyed writing 2-word Poem	I enjoyed writing Everyday Poem	I enjoyed writing Haikus
Percentage (%)	Strongly Agree	23.1	11.5	19.2	19.2
	Agree	76.9	80.8	69.2	69.2
	Not Sure	0	7.7	11.5	11.5
	Disagree	0	0	0	0
	Strongly Disagree	0	0	0	0
	Total	100	100	100	100

*Levels of understanding grammar concepts*

Table 5 indicates that 80.7 % of participants understood that nouns are names of things, places, people, animals and abstract ideas. However, there are 19.2 % of the participants who still did not understand the concept of nouns. When asked whether they understood that phrases could consist of nouns and adjectives, 69.2 % claimed that they did understand the concept, but 30.8 % of them were unsure of the concept. Half of the participants reported that they understood the differences between tenses. The other half were still unsure (46.2 %) or did not understand (3.8 %).

In response to being aware that words are made up of syllables, 76.9 % of the participants agreed that they were aware, but 23.1 % were still not sure that words consisted of syllables. Findings from this study which show that participants were able to grasp the concept of nouns and syllables from poetry writing support Susikaran’s (2013) beliefs that poems can be an effective tool in teaching certain grammar components. Nevertheless, the participants of this study still could not quite understand the notions of phrases as well as tenses. This result may be explained by the fact that the construction of phrases and tenses is more complicated and that they involve many elements.

Table 5: *Understanding of grammar components*

	I understand	I understand	I understand	Haiku
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		nouns are names of things, places, people, animals and abstracts ideas	that phrases can be made from nouns and adjectives	the differences between present, past and future tenses	makes me aware that words are made up of syllables
	Strongly Agree	19.2	15.4	3.8	19.2
	Agree	61.5	53.8	46.2	57.7
Percentage	Not Sure	19.2	30.8	46.2	23.1
(%)	Disagree	0	0	3.8	0
	Strongly Disagree	0	0	0	0
	Total	100	100	100	100

*Questions regarding the Big Book Approach*

4 closed-ended questions were also asked to the participants as shown in Table 6. Of the four questions posted, two questions received complete agreement from the participants in terms of their preference of learning grammar in groups and that writing big books enhanced their creativity. In terms of learning different art techniques to help them in enhancing their creativity, 80.8 % agreed that it did. As for the rest, perhaps these art techniques are already familiar to them. In terms of having written their own big books, only about 38.5 % of the participants have attempted it. This is very encouraging for the KTP team as most of the participants were so shy about their abilities to speak and write at the beginning of Module 1, and that they have managed to write their own books outside class time is a moment of pride.

Table 6: *Regarding the Big Book Approach*

Closed-ended questions	Options	Percent
Do you prefer learning grammar in group?	Yes	100.0
	No	-
Did learning different art techniques enhance your creativity?	Yes	80.8
	No	19.2
Did writing Big Book project enable you to apply your creativity?	Yes	100.0
	No	-
Have you written your own Big Book?	Yes	38.5
	No	61.5

### **Conclusion**

Indeed the unconventional approach of teaching English grammar and writing skills through a big book project has increased KTP Kindy participants' competence to the extent that 38.5 % has gained the confidence to write their own big books. The majority understood grammar concepts better, having followed this approach. Tenses and other grammar concepts will be addressed in future levels through other relevant activities to further enhance the participants' grammar knowledge and awareness of the language they are using. Even though the number of participants who have dared to do what they would never have dreamed of doing is about one third of the participants, for the KTP Kindy team, that is already a big accomplishment. This illustrates that the approach of teaching English grammar through poetry writing and Haikus was successful because they learned in stages and the product is very relevant to their needs. Furthermore, getting the participants to learn grammar through working in groups boosts their confidence because they can collaborate on exercises that are meaningful. This approach has successfully attracted the participants in learning grammar and writing and it is hoped that KTP Kindy participants' grammar and writing competence will further increase and improve at the completion of the programme in September 2017.

### **Acknowledgment**

This research was funded by Universiti Malaysia Pahang (Research Grant Vote No. RDU160376).

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Appendix A



Figure 1: Big Book (Individual)



Figure 2: Big Book Exhibition