

Article



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Utilizing Critical and Creativity Thinking to Enhance ESL Grammar and Vocabulary in Narrative Essay Writing among Malaysian Form-Four Learners

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ABSTRACT

English as a Second Language (ESL) learners need to master all the four language skills which are listening, speaking, reading, and writing unconditionally. Nevertheless, most Malaysian ESL learners face a major problem in writing skill when compared with the other three skills. The 21st century learning skills are divided into the main four skills which are communication, collaboration, critical thinking, and creativity thinking. Henceforth, this study attempts to assess the usefulness of utilizing critical and creativity thinking-based activities among Malaysian upper secondary ESL learners in developing their grammar and vocabulary features to enable them to construct an appropriate and good piece of narrative essay. The participants of this research encompassed 17 Form-Four ESL learners from a secondary school in Penang, Malaysia. It was a mixed-method study, in which data were collected quantitatively by conducting pre-test and post-test, while the data were gathered qualitatively by using participant observation and document analysis. The findings indicated that relevant grammar and vocabulary activities by incorporating critical and creativity thinking of the 21st century main skills showed positive responses among the participants. It is hoped that the critical and creativity thinking-based activities would assist in

learning and teaching narrative writing skills.

KEYWORDS: critical thinking, creativity thinking, grammar, English as a Second Language (ESL) learners, vocabulary, narrative writing skills

Introduction

In Malaysia, policymakers and stakeholders make necessary changes in language curriculum system from occasionally to enable ESL learners in Malaysia to improve their language proficiency effectively as many ESL learners in Malaysia find the English language difficult to be mastered (Nawawi, Zuhami, Sabu, Mahamud, & Nasir, 2021). The importance of the English language has been emphasised in the second and seventh shifts of Malaysia Education Blueprint (2012-2025) to incorporate or integrate digital literacy into the classroom teaching and learning environment in this twenty-first century period (Nawawi, Zuhami, Sabu, Mahamud, & Nasir, 2021). Apart from that, English becomes more vital for Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) candidates when the government decided to make English subject as a compulsory subject to pass in SPM (Shazali & Hashim, 2018). In order to achieve the aim, the Ministry of Education has developed a 10-year roadmap from 2015 to 2025 that includes a variety of programmes and actions. The main purpose of English Language Education Reform is to develop student proficiency level in English language (Ministry of Education, 2015). Hence, in 2017, a new Secondary School Standard Curriculum (KSSM) associated with Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) for English language was introduced in Malaysian secondary schools. The new KSSM linked curriculum has steadily changed learning and teaching approaches in comprehending English context to make learning more practical and enjoyable. In addition, the Malaysia Education Board (2020) introduced a new format for the English papers in the SPM 2021 examination in early 2020.

Nonetheless, when compared with the other three skills of ESL reading, speaking, and listening, Malaysian learners continue to struggle with writing (Siddek & Ismail, 2021). Thus, ESL learners would need to polish their writing skills to be able to get a good grade in the English SPM Writing Paper. On the other hand, Azlan, Zakaria and Yunus (2019) stated that the roadmap of language teaching and learning undergoes major changes in this present era of utilizing new technologies. Using a variety of teaching approaches is essential since it has a large potential for piquing ESL learners' interest and concentration (Joannes, 2022).

This study focuses on narrative essay even though there are many types of writing skills that are available among upper secondary level ESL learners. Narrative essay is explored in the present study because ESL learners are still unable to write a proper narrative essay by using proper grammar and vocabulary elements (Muliani, Norahmi, & Asi, 2019). Consequently, critical and creativity thinking-based activities are constructed to improve the ESL learners' grammar and vocabulary components as these two features are pertinent for them to write a good narrative essay in the future. As a result, two research questions are addressed in this study as follows:

- 1) Is there any significant effect of using critical and creativity thinking-based activities to improve ESL grammar and vocabulary elements to write a narrative essay among Form-Four learners at a public school in Penang, Malaysia?

- 2) How does the 4C's (communication, collaboration, critical thinking, and creativity thinking) to WRITE Module enable Form-Four learners at a public school in Penang, Malaysia to improve their ESL narrative writing skills by using an online platform?

Literature Review

In this modernization era, it is crucial to use 21st century learning skills in teaching and studying language skills in Malaysian national schools. There are four main skills (4C's) of 21st century learning which are communication, collaboration, critical thinking, and creativity thinking (Aminuddin Baki Institution, 2017). Nevertheless, the current study adopts critical

and creativity thinking skills to improve ESL learners' narrative writing skills by employing a module that includes grammar and vocabulary exercises. The name of the module which was created for this present study is called as 4C's to WRITE Module.

Selvaraj, Azlina Abdul Aziz, Mariam, and Pahat (2020) explained that narrative writing is a story writing process. The ESL learners in this study applied the process approach to construct their narrative essays. Hence, this approach aids from the five-step writing process for narrative essay writing (Abdel-Hack & Helwa, 2014; Teo, 2006). The five steps to write an essay are pre-writing, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing. As the new curriculum policy emphasises on critical and creativity thinking, ESL learners should be able to use these two skills when they want to write – an ESL narrative essay. Students, who are taking an important public examination which is the SPM examinations, should be able to write their storyline critically and creatively. Consequently, ideas and organization do not exhibit the role to narrate a story, but ESL learners would need to apply proper ESL grammar and vocabulary components to ensure that the storyline flows stimulatingly and captures the readers' attention. The choice of the vocabulary used reflects one's ability. When ESL learners are able to use high and appropriate vocabulary, they are able to produce or write a proper essay which enables the ideas to flow smoothly (Wiliana & Djajanegara, 2019). Therefore, ESL learners would need to use proper vocabulary words and would not repeat the same vocabulary words frequently.

Writing is one of the language skills that a learner must enjoy producing a good writing. Choosing the accurate ESL grammar and vocabulary elements according to the storyline is imperative. Thus, ESL learners would need to implement their critical and creativity thinking as writing involves a mental process. Gocen (2019) explained that creativity thinking skill is essential for ESL learners to create imagination to develop their storyline in the narrative writing process. He also mentioned that creativity writing activities help ESL learners to develop in their grammar and vocabulary elements. Additionally, ESL learners would need to use proper grammar and vocabulary to explain their storyline. Therefore, critical thinking assists ESL learners to choose proper grammar and vocabulary to retell their story (Abdel-Hack & Helwa, 2004). Morrell (2008) explained that through the process of engaging ESL learners in activities that promoted critical thinking, it brought about ideas which enabled them to analyse, critically evaluate and assess their abilities. They would need to plan, as well as evaluate the grammar features and vocabulary words critically to give life to their storylines. Reay (2018) argued that there is a strong connection between critical thinking and writing skill because critical thinking helps ESL learners to clearly process their thoughts or ideas in order to construct proper structured essays. This specifies that ESL learners

would need to accomplish with proper guidelines to improve their grammar and vocabulary skills (Joannes, 2023)

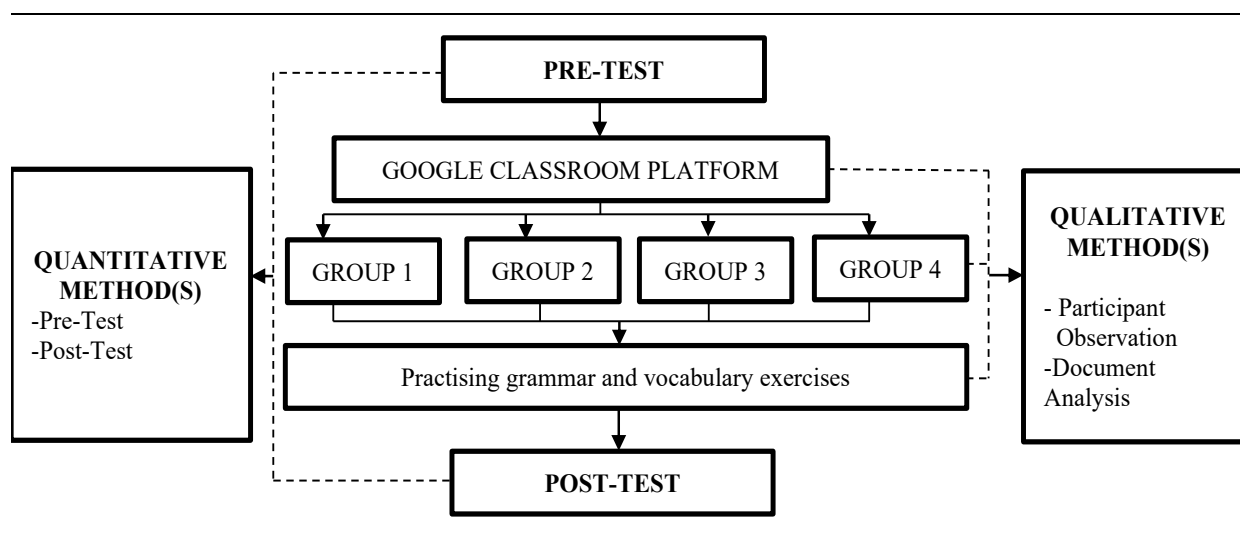
On the other hand, ESL learners' creativity and innovation are evaluated as one of the main priorities of all societies (Baucus et al., 2008). Liang and Fung (2021) remarked that many researchers acknowledged the significance of creativity skill in language writing. ESL learners in Malaysian upper secondary level would need to practise to write and produce their stories creatively. Thus, grammar and vocabulary skills are related aspects to aid to write good stories. For writing narrative essays, ESL learners should not replicate the same grammar components and vocabulary words. When ESL learners can use their creativity thinking, it supports them to use various types of sentence structure expressively and avoid writing unpretentious stories. Furthermore, Malaysian upper secondary ESL learners should be able to apply ESL grammar characteristics properly based on their level. For example, in their story writing, they should employ creativity thinking to include punctuated dialogue lines. Additionally, they must be inventive in their use of tenses. They cannot use the same past tense in their narrative essays in order to make the story interesting. If they apply the same type of grammar sentences, they are unable to score high mark for their language element. Aside from that, ESL learners should be able to creatively use ESL vocabulary in narrative writing. They must also be innovative in their explanations of their ideas, utilize accurate syntax and language to guarantee that they exhibit identification with a character, communicate different feelings that characters have, or manage a difficult circumstance that a character is experiencing (Rong & Noor, 2019).

Reviewing relevant literature as to utilizing critical and creativity to improve ESL narrative writing shows that very limited research has been carried out in Malaysia in national secondary schools. As a result, this research aims to analyse the usefulness of critical and creativity thinking-based activities in improving the ESL grammar and vocabulary features among Form-Four ESL learners at a public school in Penang, Malaysia to enable them to write a good piece of narrative essay.

Methodology

Participants

The participants in this study, selected through a purposive sampling technique, were 17 Form-Four ESL learners from a secondary school located at Butterworth district in Penang, Malaysia. A small number of ESL learners was employed as this was a pilot study. In addition, a mixed-method data collection was employed for this study. The participants took part in the study for five weeks. The participants would complete their exercises based on the 4C's to WRITE Module which was uploaded to the Google Classroom platform. They would have to use their mobile devices to complete the exercises from Monday to Friday after 5.00 in the evening.

Data Collection Methods*Figure 1: Data Collection Methods*

From Figure 1, the quantitative data for this study were collected by conducting the pre-test and post-test, while the qualitative data were gathered through participant observation by using a fieldnote and document analysis by employing a checklist. The observation and checklist ticking were done by the language teacher.

This study was conducted for five weeks. In Week 1, a pre-test was done with the participants in classroom. Then, the treatment was carried out from Week 2 to Week 4. The 4C's to WRITE Module which was created specifically for this study to develop the Form 4 ESL learners' ability for writing their narrative essays, as well as the Google Classroom platform as treatment. Finally, a post-test was conducted with the participants in Week 5.

The 17 ESL learners were divided into four groups at the Google Classroom platform. Before conducting the ESL grammar and vocabulary activities, they were directed to do some activities which were related to identifying and organising their main ideas according to the elements of the plot for narrative essays. After completing the related tasks, they were assigned with the grammar and vocabulary-related exercises. The grammar exercises were related to types of past tense, while the vocabulary tasks were associated with synonyms, antonyms and expressive words.

Research Procedures*Quantitative Data Collection Methods*

To answer the first research question, pre- and post-tests were conducted. The same theme with different titles was utilized for conducting the pre- and post-tests. A language teacher graded the pre-test and post-test narrative essays and reported the results to the researcher.

Qualitative Data Collection Methods

Participant observation was used to answer the second research question. The participants took part in the treatment for three weeks. During the treatment stage, the participants used the social networking platform, which is the Google Classroom. During this stage, the researcher requested the language teacher to observe the participants' activities through a fieldnote.

Document analysis was also employed as a qualitative data collection method. After completing their ESL grammar and vocabulary activities, the participants were asked to write a complete narrative essay each week for three weeks consecutively on Friday. Their language teacher uploaded different topics of narrative essay in each week during the module implementation. After the participants completed their narrative essay of about 250 words, they uploaded their essays to the Google Classroom platform and their group members could read their essays. Finally, the language teacher checked 51 summative essays that were compiled for three weeks by using the given checklist by the researcher.

Data Analysis

The marking criteria for the narrative essays in the study had been given and discussed by the researcher and the language teacher. The teacher used the marking rubric to mark the pre- and post-tests' essays of the participants. A marking rubric was established based on the writing rubrics of Brown (2007), Jacobs et al. (1981) and Wong (1989). The marking rubric consisted of four elements. The elements were on main ideas (content), organization or the elements of plot (organization), vocabulary, and grammar. Each aspect carried a total of five marks. Therefore, the total mark was 20. Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 25 was used to analyse the pre- and post-tests' data. A paired samples t-test was used to test the significance of difference between the ESL learners' pre-test and post-test narrative essay scores. The paired samples t-test was also used to classify the difference between two mean scores of the same group.

On the other hand, the qualitative data from the participant observation and document analysis data were categorized to common themes. During the intervention process, the language teacher used a fieldnote to observe the participants' progress of using the Google Classroom platform to do their grammar and vocabulary activities. For this phase, the participants were instructed to write a narrative essay individually for three weeks after the group tasks. Then, the teacher evaluated their essays using the checklist.

Results and Discussion

Quantitative Data from Pre-and Post-tests

To answer the first research question, the participants' scores of pre-test and post-test were compared (see Table 1). The results show that the participants' narrative writing skills were enhanced as there is a difference between the pre-test scores (9.706) and post-test scores (15.71) which is 6.00.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for Pre- and Post-Tests' Scores

| | | Mean (upon 100) | N | Std. Deviation | Std. Error Mean |
|--------|-----------------------------|--------------------|----|-------------------|-----------------------|
| Pair 1 | Overall Marks for Pre-Test | 9.7059 | 17 | 2.22948 | .54073 |
| | Overall Marks for Post-Test | 15.7059 | 17 | 1.72354 | .41802 |

From Table 1, the result of the within group comparison indicates that the participants' post-test ($M = 15.71$, $SD = 1.72$) is comparatively higher than their pre-test ($M = 9.71$, $SD = 2.23$). The significance of the mean difference between the participants' scores in the pre-test essay and post-test essay was notified (see Table 2).

Table 2. Paired samples t-test results

| | | Mean (upon 100) | T | df | Sig. (2-tailed) |
|--------|-----------------------------|--------------------|---------|----|--------------------|
| Pair 1 | Overall Marks for Pre-Test | -6.00000 | -12.993 | 16 | .000 |
| | Overall Marks for Post-Test | | | | |

* Correlation is significant at the .05 level (2-tailed)

Table 2 indicates that the mean difference of 6.00 between the pre- and post-tests' scores is statistically significant, $(16) = 13.0$, $p = .00$. Thus, the result proves that the critical and creativity thinking-based activities by using a module fostered the participants' ESL grammar and vocabulary elements for writing a narrative essay.

This result is similar to Cosgun and Atay's (2021) study which indicated that using proper activities would enable ESL learners to use their critical and creativity thinking, as well as it would help them to improve their writing skills. When ESL learners have an opportunity to use their critical thinking, they are able to use proper features of grammar and vocabulary to construct their storyline. Furthermore, creativity thinking aids ESL learners to create their storyline to be unique and different from others by using proper grammar and vocabulary features to create an appropriate storyline. Therefore, proper planning of grammar and vocabulary activities which include critical and creativity thinking is necessary to help the ESL learners to write proper narrative essays. Results obtained by the current study argue that not only proper activities should be done to boost narrative writing skill but other types of writing among ESL learners should also be carried out in upper secondary level in Malaysia.

Aside from that, the analysis of the four dimensions (main idea, organization or plot, grammar, and vocabulary) was conducted to investigate whether critical and creativity thinking-based ESL grammar and vocabulary activities have significant effects on the participants' narrative writing essays. Table 3 reveals that the participants' pre-test scores for each dimension are comparatively lower than their post-test scores.

Table 3. Descriptive statistics for pre- and post-tests' scores (n = 17)

| Dimensions | Pre-Test | | Post-Test | |
|--------------------------------|----------|--------|-----------|--------|
| | Mean | SD | Mean | SD |
| Pair 1 Main Idea | 2.7059 | .84887 | 4.2353 | .75245 |
| Pair 2 Organization or Plot | 2.4706 | .87447 | 4.2353 | .90342 |
| Pair 3 Grammar | 2.4118 | .50730 | 3.7059 | .58787 |
| Pair 4 Vocabulary | 2.1176 | .33211 | 3.5294 | .51450 |

The mean difference between the pre- and post-tests' scores for each dimension was verified for their statistical significance by using paired samples t-test. Table 4 indicates the SPSS output for these tests.

Table 4. Paired samples t-test results

| | | Mean | t | df | Sig. (2-tailed) |
|--------|---|----------|---------|----|-----------------|
| Pair 1 | Main Idea for Pre-test Main Idea for Post-test | -1.52941 | -7.211 | 16 | 0.00 |
| Pair 2 | Organization or Plot for Pre-Test Organization or Plot for Post-test | -1.76471 | -0.8054 | 16 | 0.00 |
| Pair 3 | Grammar for Pre-Test Grammar for Post-test | -1.29412 | -9.077 | 16 | 0.00 |
| Pair 4 | Vocabulary for Pre-Test Vocabulary for Post-Test | -1.41176 | -11.474 | 16 | 0.00 |

* Correlation is significant at the .05 level (2-tailed)

The results indicate that all the mean differences between the pre-test and post-test scores for each dimension are statistically significant. The differences between the pre-test and post-test scores for main idea [$t(16) = -7.21, p = .000$], organisation or plot [$t(16) = -0.81, p = .000$], grammar [$t(16) = -9.08, p = .000$], and vocabulary [$t(16) = -11.47, p = .000$] are statistically significant since the significant value, p is less than .05. This means that the integration of main idea, organization or plot, grammar, and vocabulary to write a narrative essay based on the module which was specifically created for this present study is positively affected by the treatment.

Table 5. Effect size (test of between-subjects effects)-dependent variable: overall marks for post-test

| Source | Type III of Squares | df | Mean Square | F | Sig. | Partial Eta Squared |
|-----------------|---------------------|----|-------------|----------|------|---------------------|
| Corrected Model | .000 ^a | 0 | | | | .000 |
| Intercept | 4193.471 | 1 | 4193.471 | 1411.663 | .000 | .989 |
| Error | 47.529 | 16 | 2.971 | | | |
| Total | 4241.000 | 17 | | | | |
| Corrected Total | 47.529 | 16 | | | | |

a. R Squared = .000 (Adjusted R Squared = .000)

From Table 5, effect size is determined from partial Eta squared. It is shown that the effect size is very large as the partial Eta is .989. This means that 98.9 per cent of the change in the overall marks for post-test is caused by the incorporation of the created module for this present study by including all the main four skills.

This result is similar to Yunus, Nuraishah, Junaidi, and Suliman's (2020) study which displayed that using a module to teach writing activities was essential because ESL learners were able to practise their writing skills (content, organization, grammar, and vocabulary) step by step with a proper guideline by using a planned module. Apart from that, it is believed that when teachers use a new pedagogy to teach any types of writing skills with ESL learners via technology platform, it is essential for them to use an appropriate guideline or module which contains a series of exercises. This would enable the ESL learners to follow the steps from the given module to practise their writing skills appropriately. This is supported by Sham (2020) that proper module creation for writing skills is fundamental to enable and arouse ESL learners' interest to write and learn each type of writing appropriately.

Qualitative Data from Participant Observation and Document Analysis

Qualitative data from participant observation and document analysis were collected to answer the second research question. Data for the participant observation were collected by using a fieldnote, while data for the document analysis were collected by using a checklist. Data were organized according to common themes.

Participant Observation

There were about 12 items under participant observation, in which the usefulness of critical and creativity-based activities via the Google Classroom platform in this study was analysed under six scales which were very frequently, frequently, occasionally, rarely, very rare, and never. Then, the findings from the fieldnote were divided to a few themes, such as critical thinking, creativity thinking and the usability of Google Classroom platform in this study.

For Week 1, the participants were able to use their critical and creativity thinking frequently to complete their grammar and vocabulary activities. Additionally, ESL learners used their mobile devices very frequently to use the Google Classroom platform in order for them to complete the given tasks appropriately. For Week 2 and Week 3, they were able to use their critical and creativity thinking very frequently to complete all the tasks. Similar to the ESL learners' critical and creativity thinking, they were able to use the Google Classroom platform consistently to complete all the given activities accordingly in Week 2 and Week 3.

This finding is similar to the findings obtained by Yu and Mohammad (2019), in which they used participant observation for the ESL learners in groups to write at least a keyword, construct at least a sentence, as well as sentences with correct punctuation, spelling, capitalization, and grammar. The focus of their study was on 4C which included communication, collaboration, as well as critical and creativity thinking. However, in the current study, participant observation was employed to evaluate the ESL learners' performance when doing their grammar and vocabulary activities by using their critical and creativity thinking. Furthermore, Nuridayanti, Aqila and Nurhajati (2022) claimed that using the main 4C's of 21st century learning skills in teaching and learning writing skills was important among ESL learners as all the four skills helped to develop their writing skills as it helped to train how to brainstorm their ideas, as well as to revise and edit their essays.

Document Analysis

A total of 51 summative essays of the participants were checked. The participants were required to do their reflection writing for narrative writing for three weeks. Their reflection writing for narrative essay was evaluated by using a checklist. This checklist consisted of 16 items and each item was divided to "done", "pending" and "not applicable". The items were divided to a few themes, such as for tenses (past tense, past continuous tense, and past perfect tense), while for vocabulary, the themes were synonyms, antonyms, and expressive words.

The findings displayed that for Week 1, the language teacher checked 17 reflection writings for narrative. It was observed that participants were able to use past tense accordingly even though they made some mistakes of using irregular verbs of past tense. With regards to vocabulary elements, they were able to apply some of the synonyms from the vocabulary exercises. It was noted that for Week 2, majority of ESL learners were able to use past tense and past continuous tense to construct their storyline accordingly even though there were some minor errors. For vocabulary elements, they were able to integrate more antonyms, in which they had learnt during the vocabulary exercise session, and they were able to apply from the sample essays accordingly in Week 2. Lastly, for Week 3, for grammar parts, the participants were able to show a good progress as they were able to use past tense, past continuous tenses, and past perfect tense to construct their stories. On the other hand, after viewing the sample essays which the language teacher provided the participants every week, they were able to narrate their storyline by using expressive words which made it interesting and meaningful to be read.

The results disclosed that the participants were able to use their critical and creativity thinking to use the elements of past tense, past continuous tense and past perfect tenses to construct their ideas accordingly. This was done by describing the characters, characteristics, events, elements of plot, and moral values which made their stories relevant to upper secondary level. Additionally, they

were able to use both critical and creativity thinking, as well as vocabulary words to let the storyline flow appropriately and to create more meaning to the storyline.

The findings of the study revealed that the writing elements were evaluated by using a document analysis. These findings were consistent with the findings of Siddek and Ismail's (2021) study, as well as Chepkemoi, Situma and Felicity's (2018) study which showed that document analysis was evidential to be analysed in-depth for the writing elements. Moreover, by including document analysis, it supported the language teacher and the researcher to identify the elements that the participants were progressing for three weeks via the checklist.

After conducting this study, it was found that this study is meaningful and important due to many aspects. For one, technology has significantly expanded access to education system. Besides that, the current generation ESL learners really feel contented of incorporating technology platforms in their learning and teaching process. Apart from that, the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic and other unavoidable circumstances have led to an inevitable surge in the use of technology platforms.

Conclusion

New and latest teaching and learning methods for upper secondary ESL learners in Malaysian National Secondary schools would be needed to foster their grammar and vocabulary components. The new teaching and learning approach has been highlighted in Malaysia by adding the 21st century learning abilities. Therefore, it is fundamental to include the main 21st century learning skills in teaching language skills to ESL learners in Malaysia. In this study, two main skills of the 21st century learning skills which were critical thinking and creativity thinking were included to develop ESL learners' grammar and vocabulary components to enable them to write their narrative essays appropriately.

Besides that, using proper materials by incorporating the main 21st century skills could be taken into account to plan proper materials for ESL learners by using online platforms. Policymakers and teachers would need to prepare proper materials or guidelines which will enable the ESL learners to practise in cultivating their grammar features and vocabulary elements. This would enable them to write a good piece of narrative essay in the near future in Malaysian National Secondary schools.

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