

Hand-Shape Coding to Improve Subject-Verb Agreement in Writing for Year Four Pupils

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ABSTRACT

This study was carried out to examine the use of Hand-Shape Coding (HSC) as a teaching and learning strategy to improve subject-verb agreement (SVA) in writing sentences. Thirty-nine Year 4 pupils from a primary school in Johor, Malaysia were the participants of the study. This study utilised action research as the research method. In this research, pre-writing and post-writing tests, pupils' worksheets and the teacher's reflective journals were used as research instruments. There was improvement based on the data obtained where pupils were able to improve their scores in the post-writing test. The pupils' work also showed they made fewer errors in the worksheets which indicate that they had improved their use of SVA using the HSC technique. Moreover, the teacher's reflective journal showed that the HSC technique had increased the pupils' attention and participation as well as promoted co-operative learning in the classroom. The results indicated that HSC gave positive impact to writing sentences with correct SVA. It is recommended to teach other grammar items in the implementation of the HSC technique to further this research.

KEYWORDS: hand-shape coding technique, subject-verb agreement, writing

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Introduction

According to Nik, Hamzah and Hasbollah (2010), writing is one of the most difficult skills to be mastered among other language skills. Effective writing not only involves effective expression of ideas, but also being free of grammatical errors such as the use of punctuations in each sentence in the essay (Darus & Subramaniam, 2009). However, subject-verb agreement (SVA) is one of the grammatical components that most pupils make mistakes with (Nayan & Jusoff, 2009) and this affects their writing. Therefore, this action research was carried out to improve the pupils' SVA in writing sentences so that meaningful sentences can be written without grammatical errors.

Problems of using Subject-Verb Agreement in the classroom

Throughout the three months of practicum in a Chinese primary school, I (second author) discovered that my pupils were unable to write sentences with the correct SVA. For example, "Ben make a scrapbook" or "John and Mary goes to school every day" are two sentences with incorrect SVA. One of the main reasons why pupils easily made mistakes in SVA was because their first language, Mandarin, does not have the rule of SVA compared to English which has SVA rule (Stapa & Izahar, 2010). The same goes for the Malay language as Bahiyah and Wijayasuria (as cited in Nayan & Jusoff, 2009) agreed that Bahasa Malaysia does not differentiate personal pronouns such as *he, she, it, we, you, they* and *I*. Therefore, the Malay pupils also made a lot of mistakes in SVA just like the Chinese pupils. Since it is not necessary for verbs to agree with the subjects in their mother tongues, most Malaysian pupils are confused and easily make mistakes relating to SVA in writing sentences.

SVA can be defined as a type of grammatical rule in which the subject must agree with the verb. Singular subjects are followed by singular verbs whereas plural subjects take plural verbs (Stapa & Izahar, 2010). This grammatical rule only applies in simple present tense. However, the main verbs "was" and "were" are needed for another consideration when these are used in the simple past tense (Nayan & Jusoff, 2009). Hence, pupils' writing without correct SVA is unable to transmit their messages effectively to the recipients. The recipients (teachers) may be confused and misinterpret the meaning of the messages being received by the sender (pupils). For example, "John and Ali goes to school every morning." From this sentence, the recipient may be confused with the meaning of the messages on whether the sender wants to tell him that *John and Ali go to school together* or *John goes to school* or *Ali goes to school* which means *Both John and Ali go to school in the morning but they go separately*. Hence, SVA plays an important role in expressing ideas especially in writing without any verbal communication.

The present study examined whether the use of the Hand-Shape Coding (HSC) technique could help to improve students' SVA in writing. The following research questions were formulated:

- 1 Does the use of the HSC technique improve Year Four pupils in writing sentences with correct SVA?
- 2 Does the use of the HSC technique increase the pupils' attention and participation in learning?

Literature Review

Vygotsky's ZPD and co-operative learning

Theoretical support for co-operative learning can be found in Vygotsky's (1978) notion of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) which he defines as 'the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem-solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem-solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers' (p.86). He further stresses the fundamental role of social interaction in the development of cognition as he believed strongly that community plays a central role in the process of 'making meaning'.

In this research, I incorporated co-operative learning where lower proficiency pupils develop their writing skills with the help from their more skilful peers and the teacher within ZPD. I formed groups of mixed-abilities in which pupils who were more knowledgeable provided assistance to the other group members in writing sentences. The low proficiency pupil seeks to understand the actions or instructions provided by the tutor (the parent, teacher or peer) then internalises the information, using it to guide or regulate their own performance (McLeod, 2007). When the pupil works in groups, he is able to absorb the information shared and learnt during interaction, and then he can do it by himself independently.

Hand-shape coding (HSC)

In order to overcome the problem of using SVA correctly in writing sentences, I decided to use the Hand-Shape Coding (HSC) technique. HSC consists of hand technique and shape coding technique. Both of these techniques complement each other to form the HSC technique. Shape coding is a type of technique using different types of shapes such as circle, rectangle, oval, triangle and others or arrows to code the structures of a sentence such as identifying subjects, verbs and the predicates. Shapes are also used to code the phrases and objects such as "line up" in the sentences (Ebbels, 2007). According to Ebbels (2007), shape coding was originally created to help the children with language impairments to overcome their problem of language. The use of this technique shows remarkable results in that most of the children with language impairments are able to master language learning easily (Ebbels, 2013).

The visual feature of the shapes easily attracts the attention of pupils who have stronger visual ability and this indirectly causes them to identify the subjects, verbs and predicates in the sentences easily (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). There are two advantages of using shape coding: the shapes can be moved around easily which help the pupils to identify the subjects, verbs and predicate as well as how to form sentences and questions; the shapes are placed along the words which easily show the hierarchical structure of the sentences. Some examples of shape coding technique in teaching the SVA in sentences are shown below:

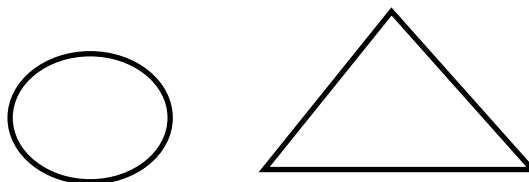


Figure 1. Shape coding (singular subject with singular verb)

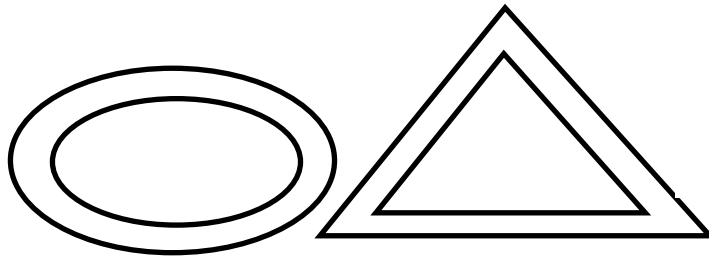


Figure 2. Shape coding (plural subjects with plural verbs)

Based on the examples above, I fixed the shape circle for subject and triangle for verb in order to teach the pupils how to identify the subjects and verbs as well as to teach them how to put correct singular or plural verbs which agree with the singular or plural subjects in the sentences. One circle surrounding the subject represents singular subject and it should be followed by one triangle representing verb ending without 's', 'es' or 'ves'. The condition is similar for two circles surrounding a plural subject and two triangles surrounding the verb that comes after plural subject. As a result, the pupils would understand easily how to put suitable singular or plural verbs which agree with the subjects. Moreover, shape coding can be applied to the subjects made up of personal pronouns such as *we*, *she*, *they* and others.

However, the personal pronouns *I* and *you* are excluded because these two pronouns are 'special pronouns' which mean they are singular subjects followed by verbs with no 's', 'es' and 'ves'. The pupils may be confused with the sentences that start with the subjects *I* and *you* as they do not know whether to put the verbs that end with 's', 'es' or 'ves' or not.

Hence, the hand technique can be used to complement the shape coding technique to help the pupils to overcome the problem of remembering the subjects as personal pronouns especially *I* and *you* in the sentences. Gan (2012) suggested the use of hands as an unconventional technique to teach the students regarding the use of SVA in writing sentences and she found remarkable results in using this technique. Her students had improved their scores in the post-test when compared to the pre-test in using SVA after they were exposed to this technique.

Figure 3 below shows Gan's (2012) proposed technique of using hands to teach SVA. The two hands with seven fingertips are used for the seven different personal pronouns. The right hand signifies the plural subjects whereas the left hand signifies the singular subject. This means the verbs after the singular form of personal pronouns (*he*, *she* and *it*) should end with 's', 'ves' or 'es'. The verbs after the plural form of personal pronouns (*I*, *you*, *they* and *we*) should end with original verbs.

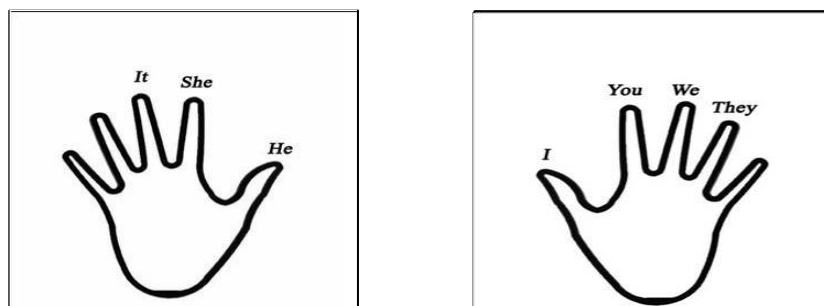


Figure 3. Hand Technique (Gan, 2012)

I use this technique in order to help the pupils to remember which personal pronouns are singular subjects or plural subjects by looking at their hands if they forget which personal pronouns are of singular subjects or plural subjects. Moreover, the application of this technique can also help the pupils to remember easily as the hands are a part of our body and they can always refer to their hands immediately.

Methodology

Research design

In this research, I selected the action research model proposed by Kemmis and McTaggart (1988). The figure below shows the action research model. This model was easily carried out in the classroom as it consisted of four distinct stages, namely, planning, action, observing and reflecting. The procedure of this model was cyclical in nature and only one cycle was carried out for this study due to time constraints.

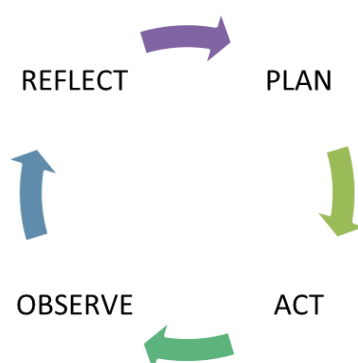


Figure 4. Kemmis and McTaggart's Action Research Model (1988)

According to this model, there are four basic steps in an action research cycle which are plan, act, observe and reflect. Table 1 below illustrates the steps taken.

Table 1
The Four Steps in Action Research Cycle

Stage	Procedure
Plan	During this stage, I made a plan by first identifying the main problem faced by the pupils and looking for a variety of sources to find out the most suitable technique to deal with the problem faced by the pupils. Then I prepared the lesson plan, the teaching aids such as shapes and hands, and PowerPoint slides to be used during the implementation of the HSC technique in the lesson.
Act	During this stage, I started to implement the HSC technique during the lesson for three months. A pre-writing test was carried out before the implementation of the HSC technique and a post-writing test was carried out after going through the implementation of the HSC technique in the lesson.
Observe	During this stage, I observed the pupils' writing through pupils' works. I also wrote reflective journals at the end of the lesson about the pupils' behaviour and reactions during the implementation of the HSC technique in the lesson.
Reflect	During this stage, I analysed and interpreted the pre-writing test and post-writing test to identify whether there was any improvement in the pupils' writing after going through the implementation of the HSC technique in the lesson. I reflected on the effectiveness of the HSC technique.

Participants

The participants were from a Chinese primary school where I underwent a 3-month practicum. There were 39 pupils (19 boys and 20 girls) aged 10 years in the class. Mandarin was the medium of communication among the pupils in the classroom. The proficiency levels of the pupils were intermediate and low. There were 10 pupils who were the low achievers and they had to attend the LINUS programme. The LINUS programme is the Literacy and Numeracy Screening programme which aims at ensuring that all Malaysian children acquire basic literacy and numeracy skills after three years of mainstream primary education. The 10 pupils had gone through the programme for the past three years and I could see they could not write using the correct SVA.

I also checked the pupils' previous work such as their exercise books and activity books to find out their problems in using the correct SVA in sentence writing. From the analysis of these documents, there were some pupils who were still unable to write simple sentences with the correct SVA. For example, one of the pupils wrote "*Mimi wait for school bus at a quarter past seven.*" Therefore, this prompted me to find out if the HSC technique could help these participants to improve their writing with correct SVA.

Procedure of data collection

The process of carrying action research in this study is based on the four stages by Kemmis and McTaggart Model (1988). During the planning stage, I made a plan by first identifying the main problem faced by the pupils and looking for a variety of sources to find out the suitable technique to deal with the problem faced by pupils. Then I prepared the lesson plan, the teaching aids such as laptop and PowerPoint slides to be used during the implementation of the HSC technique in the lesson later. During the action stage, I carried out the HSC technique in the lessons.

In the beginning, I introduced the shape coding technique to my pupils. I told them the single circle is for singular subject and single triangle is for singular verb while double circles are for plural subject and double triangles are for plural verb. The shapes would enable the pupils to identify the subjects and verbs as well as to teach them how to put correct singular or plural verbs which agree with the singular or plural subjects in the sentences. Then, I taught my pupils the hand technique to remember the personal pronouns. I reminded my pupils to fix their left hand for singular subjects and right hand for plural subjects. When I asked them to show the finger for 'he', they would show their left thumb and say out loudly 'he goes'. As for 'I', they would show their right thumb and say out loudly 'I go'. I drilled them on this practice of SVA rule. They first practiced in groups, then in pairs and later individually until they could remember the rule correctly. Later, I replaced the hands with colourful and attractive hand puppets so that the pupils could be attracted to the colours.

The writing lesson was carried out for an hour every week. A pre-writing test was carried out before the implementation of the HSC technique and a post-writing test was carried out at the end of the lesson after the pupils went through the HSC technique.

During the observation stage, I observed the behaviours and reactions of the pupils in the classroom to identify whether the pupils were interested in participating in the activities and at the same time I observed the pupils' work to see if there was any improvement in their writing. I recorded my observation in writing reflective journals. The reflection was written at the end of each lesson to reflect about the pupils' behaviours and writing performance on

whether there was any improvement in writing the sentences with the correct SVA after the lesson.

Instruments

According to Goh (2012), data triangulation can be defined as a type of practice that involves various types of data resources which help to prove the validity and credibility of the research findings. I used pre-writing test and post-writing test, pupils' work as well as reflective journal in data triangulation.

The pre-writing test and post-writing test were the same and they consisted of ten items in which pictures and guiding words were given to the pupils to write correct sentences. The items were checked by the supervisor lecturer for content validity before the test was administered to the pupils. Four worksheets were designed and the items were written ranging from easy to difficult from Worksheet 1 to Worksheet 4. These worksheets were also checked by the supervisor lecturer. During the observation stage, my practicum partner and I observed the pupils together. After I wrote my reflective journals, I asked the practicum partner to check the content to see if we had made the same observation. My supervisor lecturer also checked my reflective journals for content validity. The validity and credibility of each data were verified with each other for triangulation purposes.

Data analysis and interpretation

The data collected using pre-writing and post-writing tests and pupils' work were analysed quantitatively while the teacher's reflective journal entries were analysed qualitatively. Their results are discussed below.

Pre-writing and post-writing tests

The comparison of mean scores revealed that the post-writing test (96%) was higher than the first test (56%). The bar graph below shows the results of the mean scores for the two tests.

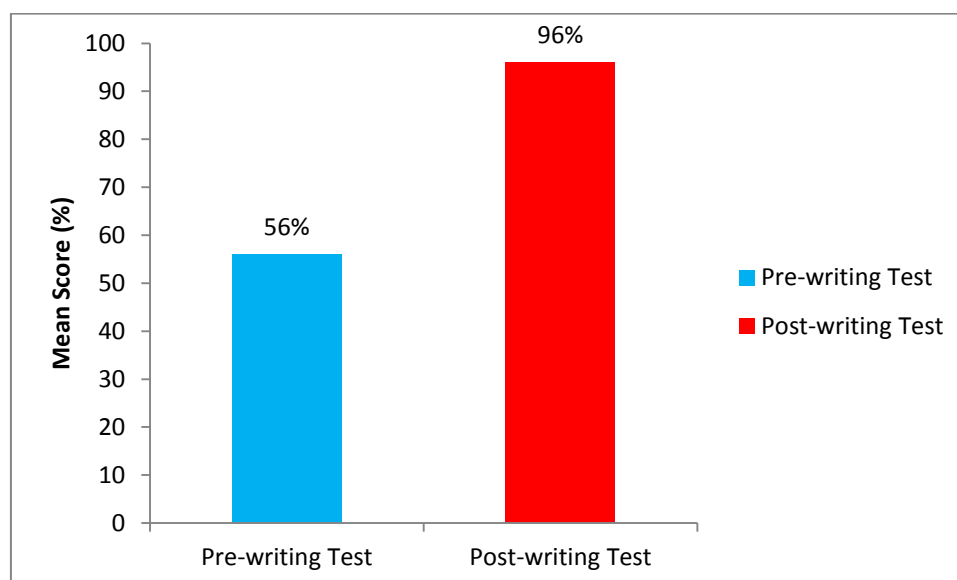


Figure 5. Mean scores of pre-writing test and post-writing test

Figure 5 indicates an increase of 40% between the two tests. Based on the analysis, it can be concluded that all the participants had improved in writing sentences with correct SVA. The

statistical results strongly indicated that the participants had experienced a positive improvement before and after the implementation of the HSC technique.

Pupils' work

Rating of pupils' work can be defined as the rating or evaluations being made on the pupils' work such as worksheets during the teaching and learning process in the classroom to show strong evidences for the improvement regarding the targeted feature (Goh, 2012). Four worksheets were provided for the pupils to do after implementation of the HSC technique at the end of the lesson. The levels of the questions in the worksheets ranged from easy to difficult. For example, for the easy level, the pupils were required to identify subjects and verbs in the sentences in Worksheet 1. For Worksheet 2, the pupils were required to fill in the sentences with correct SVA. Then, the pupils were required to write a few simple sentences with correct SVA based on the pictures given in Worksheet 3. For Worksheet 4, the pupils were required to write sentences with correct SVA based on the words given.

The data collected from the pupils' work were first analysed quantitatively. Marks were given to the pupils' work as the ratings or evaluations were a quantitative way of analysis (Creswell, 2012). For example, 100% was given to the participants' performance for the worksheets without mistakes. I analysed the mistakes made by the participants who scored low marks regarding the use of SVA in writing the sentences. The marks depended on the number of question and type of question. For example, for the questions that required the participants to write simple sentences with the correct SVA, I marked the sentences based on the correct SVA used in the sentence even though there were other grammatical mistakes such as prepositions. This meant that the marks were given to the correct use of SVA only. Figure 6 showed the mean scores of the pupils' work.

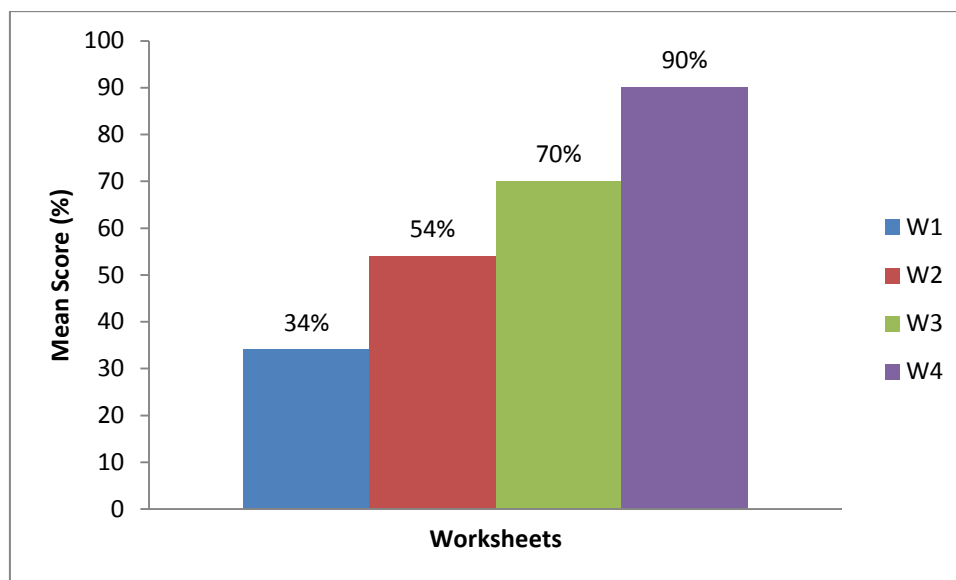


Figure 6. Mean scores of the pupils' work

Based on Figure 6, the mean scores had increased from 34% in Worksheet 1 to 90% in Worksheet 4. This showed that there was improvement among the pupils in the use of correct SVA in writing the sentences.

The level of difficulty of questions was increased gradually from Worksheet 1 to Worksheet 4 (samples shown in Appendix A). Worksheet 1 required the participants to draw the shapes

around subjects and verbs and the samples showed that they were able to identify the subjects and verbs in 2 out of 5 sentences. This showed that they were still able to identify the subjects and verbs in the sentences through the technique of shape coding in which circle was subject and triangle was verb. Then, in Worksheet 2, the participants had to write the verbs after the subjects and they managed to answer 3 out of 5 correctly. The task in Worksheet 3 was rather difficult as the participants had to write sentences based on the picture given and they managed to answer 4 out of 5 correctly. In Worksheet 4 where no picture was given, they were able to write all the sentences correctly. The samples of pupils' work showed the participants made fewer errors after they were taught the technique of HSC.

Both the results from the tests and pupils' work showed the HSC technique was able to improve the pupils' writing sentences with the correct SVA. It was found that the visual feature of the shapes easily attracted the attention of pupils. Moreover, the use of hands also helped them to remember easily how to put the correct forms of the verb after the singular form or plural form of personal pronouns by remembering that the left hand (*he, she* and *it*) was singular subjects whereas the right hand (*I, we, you* and *they*) was plural subjects. As a result, they were able to do well in writing sentences. This showed that they were able to know how to put singular form or plural form of verb after the singular subjects or plural subjects through the use of HSC technique. They were also able to differentiate the subject and the verb in the sentences now after going through four weeks of implementation. In a nutshell, the HSC technique worked effectively in helping the participants to use the correct SVA in writing sentences.

Teacher's reflective journals

The reflective journal was written to record the teaching and learning process at the end of each lesson. The journal was analysed qualitatively. In the reflection, I recorded what had happened during the implementation. I analysed the effectiveness of the HSC technique and made the necessary adjustments to the technique to overcome the weaknesses. Moreover, I also analysed whether there was any improvement in the participants, who had the problems, through observations of their behaviour as well as their work. The aim was to examine whether the technique used was able to increase their participation in the lesson.

The data from the reflective journals were extracted by using coding and analysed in terms of themes by examining the words, phrases and sentences used. The emerging themes from the reflective journals were increased attention, participation and promotion of co-operative learning.

Firstly, the pupils' attention could be encouraged by implementing the HSC technique in the lesson. The use of shapes in the sentences was able to grab their attention in the lesson. For example, the participants paid more attention by listening actively to my instructions to remember the personal pronouns as the subjects in the sentences when using the shapes and hands. This indirectly attracted their attention as they were able to identify the subjects and verbs in the sentences easily. The use of hands aroused the interest of participants to participate more actively in the lesson. Moreover, the use of shape coding technique by using two different shapes (circle and triangle) to surround the subjects and verbs in the sentences also aroused the interest of participants in writing the sentences with the correct SVA. As a result, they were able to stay focused in the lesson much longer as their attention span had been increased to prevent them from committing minor discipline problems such as making noise during the lesson.

The second emerging theme was increased participation. The participants put up their hands eagerly in order to be called by their teacher to come in front to write the correct SVA in a sentence. It showed that the participants like to engage in the classroom activities and such activities were able to motivate them to participate in writing sentences with the correct SVA; thus creating a passionate involvement among the participants.

The third emerging theme was co-operative learning. The use of HSC technique affected their social skills because it promoted social interaction among the participants as they were asked to work in groups. Thus, co-operative learning was instilled among the participants as each participant in the group interacted with each other during the group activity. Some of the participants were still eager to participate in the activity although they were not happy as they had lost in the competition at the end of the group activity.

Findings and discussion

The following findings are discussed based on the two research questions.

Research question 1: Does the use of the HSC technique improve year four pupils in writing sentences with correct SVA?

Based on the analysis, the strategy of using the HSC technique was able to help the participants to write the sentences with the correct SVA. From the analysis of the pre-writing test and post-writing test, we could see tremendous improvement in the mean scores between the pre-writing test and post-writing test in which the mean score of pre-writing test of 56% increased to 96% in the post-writing test. The data from pupils' worksheets and teacher's reflective journal also showed the participants' improvement in writing sentences with the correct SVA. This clearly proved that the HSC technique worked effectively in helping the participants to overcome their problem. According to Ebbels (2007), shapes could be placed easily along the words to show the hierarchical structures of the sentences. Hence, after differentiating the subjects and verbs in the sentences, the participants were able to know when to put the correct form of verbs after the singular form or plural form of subjects in writing the sentences.

Gan (2012) proposed the use of the hand technique as an alternative method to teach SVA rule and her findings had shown that her students preferred to use the hand technique rather than the drilling method. This study also showed similar results as most of the participants were able to put the correct form of verbs after the personal pronouns through the use of the hand technique. As the hands are part of our body, it was easy for the participants to remember the singular form and plural form of personal pronouns. Thus, the participants were not confused about the special personal pronouns, namely 'I' and 'you' when they wanted to use these personal pronouns as the subjects to write their sentences. As a result, the participants were able to put the correct form of verbs after the personal pronouns as they recognised the singular form or plural form of personal pronouns easily through this technique.

Research question 2: Does the use of the HSC technique increase the pupils' attention and participation in learning?

Based on the analysis from teacher's reflective journals, the implementation of the HSC technique had increased the pupils' attention and participation as well as promoted co-operative learning among them. In terms of getting pupils' attention and participation, the hands were replaced with colourful and attractive hand puppets during the implementation.

According to Remer and Tzuriel (2015), colourful and tangible features possessed by hand puppets were able to attract the attention of pupils easily as they were able to feel and touch the puppets. As a result, the pupils who had short attention span and strong visual ability were able to pay more attention during the lesson and thus they participated actively in the activities and listened attentively to my instructions. This further showed that the HSC technique was able to improve pupils' participation in the lesson (Ebbels, 2007).

According to A. Shahmi (2013), the rules of SVA should be practiced by the learners intensively by means of using different activities such as group work, pair work, role-play, self-study and practice. The HSC technique was able to engage the pupils in group activity during the lesson which required each group of participants to co-operate with each other to write five simple sentences with the correct SVA. As a result, co-operative value was instilled among the participants in the lesson (Constantine, Musingafi & Rugonye, 2014).

Conclusion

This study examined the use of the HSC technique in overcoming the problem of writing sentences with the correct SVA among Year Four pupils. The findings showed that it was effective in improving the pupils' writing, increasing their attention and participation as well as promoting co-operative learning. Therefore, future researchers should carry out studies on using the HSC technique to teach other grammar components such as past tense, nouns, adjectives and conjunctions. This will add to the body of research on techniques that can sustain and enhance the pupils' learning.

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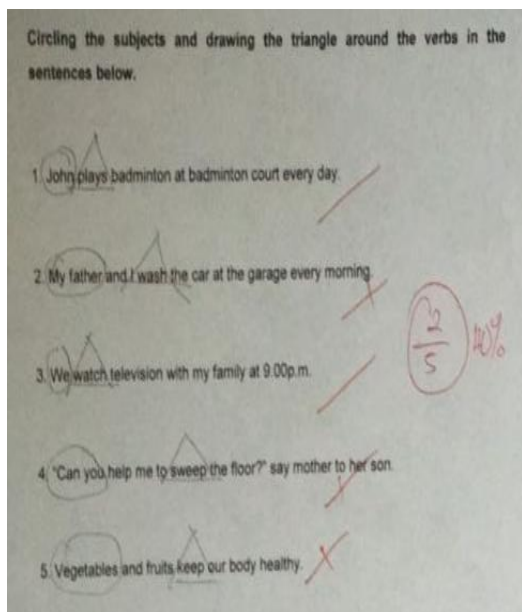
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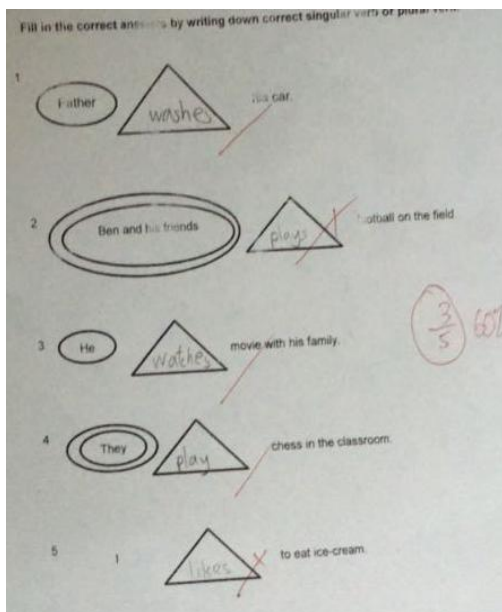
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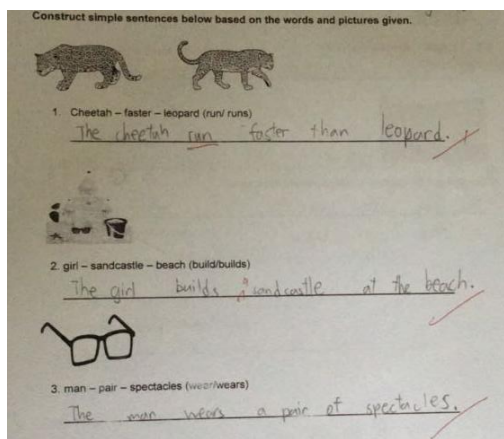
Appendix A Pupils' work



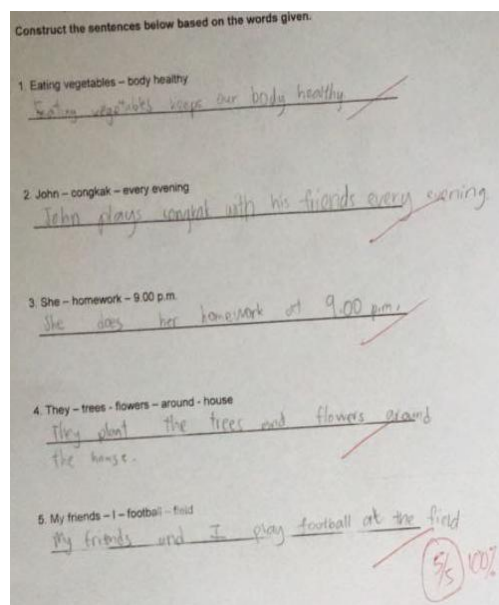
Worksheet 1



Worksheet 2



Worksheet 3



Worksheet 4