

The 'Branches Map' method and ESL students' Motivation in essay writing*

El método del "Mapa de ramas" y la motivación de los estudiantes de ESL en la redacción de ensayos

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to study secondary school students' perceptions towards the use of 'branches map' method and its influences to motivate them in their essay writing. Semi-structured interview was conducted to collect the data. Twelve students of age sixteen with different level of English proficiency were selected to participate in this study. The analysis of the data indicated that majority of the students had positive perception towards the use of Branches Map method to motivate them in writing. The students responded that the use of 'Branches Map' method helps them in planning their writing, generating ideas, and enhancing creativity in writing. These results manifested that the tree structure of the 'Branches Map' method used in the pre-writing process were able to enhance students' motivation in essay writing.

Keywords: Motivation, ESL Writing, generating ideas, English proficiency.

RESUMEN

Este estudio tiene como objetivo estudiar las percepciones de los estudiantes de secundaria sobre el uso del método de 'mapa de ramas' y sus influencias para motivarlos en su redacción de ensayos. Se realizó una entrevista semiestructurada para recopilar los datos. Doce estudiantes de dieciséis años con diferentes niveles de dominio del inglés fueron seleccionados para participar en este estudio. El análisis de la fecha indicó que la mayoría de los estudiantes tenían una percepción positiva sobre el uso del método Mapa de ramas para motivarlos en la escritura. Los estudiantes respondieron que el uso del método 'Mapa de ramas' les ayuda a planificar su escritura, generar ideas y mejorar la creatividad en la escritura. Estos resultados manifestaron que la estructura de árbol del método 'Mapa de ramas' utilizado en el proceso previo a la escritura fue capaz de mejorar la motivación de los estudiantes en la redacción de ensayos.

Palabras clave: Motivación, ESL Writing, generación de ideas, dominio del inglés.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Writing is a mean of communication which made possible through graphics symbols, arranged according to certain conventions to form words which in turn are arranged to form sentences. Writing is a complex yet a creative process that is an essential skill for effective communication, which comprises refining ideas and expression, coupled with presentation and editing. However, to glean the interest in writing among students is not an easy task for teachers. Writing is also considered as one of the most difficult skills which students have to deal with combining ideas, choosing the right vocabulary so that it would not overlap and so on. Problem of writing becomes very much compounded when students are made to express themselves in a second language. The reason is based on the fact that most students lack the skills to communicate effectively in English (Benjamin Amoakohene, 2017). Therefore, various methods need to be used in order to facilitate and enhance students' writing skills. One of the most used method is by using concept map. Concept map is a pedagogical tool that allows learners to construct a visual representation of their understanding of connections between concepts. Teachers usually will find the very best method or teaching tool in order to attract their students into the learning process and concept-mapping is one of the traditional methods that have been used for years by the educator all over the world for writing. The mind mapping strategy can be used to explore a wide range of topics in writing and also used in every kind of writing such as narrative, descriptive, recount, persuasive and argumentative (Riswanto & Prandika, 2012). While enhancing their imagination to be expressed on a piece of paper, concept mapping has also been studied as a productive intervention to improve critical thinking when reading and learning a second language (Khodaday & Ghanizadeh, 2011).

Writing is always considered as the least favourite component of English language subject as students found it to be 'complicated' and 'time wasted'. Students find composing in English difficult because the writing process demands them to employ many cognitive and linguistic strategies of which they are uncertain (Maghsoudi & Haririan, 2013). Lack of motivation to write which is conceptualised in terms of attitudes and beliefs as the result of repeated writing experiences is also a factor (Faisal et al., 2017). There are several factors that can explain students' loss of motivation to write in English. Firstly, writing is often taught in a rigid way, with the teacher emphasising conformity to text types and writing conventions, rather than students themselves searching for meaning in writing. Second, students are often given writing tasks as exercises detached from other classroom activities, and with little or no opportunities to interact with classmates when writing. Lack of motivation, however, may not only be due to unattractive writing tasks. Language barrier often cited as one of the major factors of students' lack of motivation to write in English (Zulkifley et al., 2017). This may be due to the official command language used in school and the lack frequency of English language used around peers. Hence, students often encountered difficulty in choosing the word due to lack of vocabulary.

In order to make writing more interesting among students, the researchers proposed a method for the students to understand and make their essay more organised. Since it is hard for students to write, they barely have anything in mind to jot down. Hence, the mind mapping strategy can be used to generate ideas in writing; and also used in every kind of writing such as: narrative, descriptive, recount, persuasive and argumentative (Riswanto & Prandika, 2012). A little bit innovation has been made to the mind map and is named as "Branches Map" method. The tree itself is a unique form of the mind map as it includes its 'roots' that could actually be made as the topic title. The tree shaped of the map (Figure 1) is more presentable, simple and organised. Furthermore, the number of the branches will be form based on the main points of the essay. As for example, an argumentative essay requires 5 main points; thus, students need to draw 5 branches for each point. This would ease students' in generating ideas as the main points is clearly highlighted on the branches. Hence, it is not impossible for students to develop ideas in elaborating their points in every paragraph.

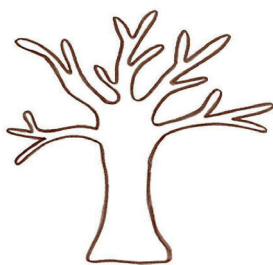


Figure 1: Branches Mind Map

According to Abd Karim and Rafidah (2016), mind maps feature tree-like branches of information that display key concepts as well as relationships. The most associated individual in Mind Maps is Tony Buzan, whose publications can be traced back in 1960s (Buzan, 1993). The concept of Mind Maps, which rely upon the Radiant Thinking Information-processing System (Buzan, 1993), are generally used to generate, visualise, structure and classify ideas around a central keyword. As such, mind maps are found to support techniques of brainstorming, visual thinking, organisation, problem solving, decision making, and writing (Harris and Caviglioli 2003; Buzan 2005). According to Naqbi (2011), mind mapping strategy is important to help students in organising and developing their ideas

and thoughts. Moreover, mind mapping technique is also an effective tool to help students generating ideas and evaluating them. They were able to recall and retrieve their prior knowledge about different topics which is beneficial for designing mind maps. Therefore, it could be said that mind mapping can have a positive impact on students' cognition skills and information retrieval skills. It is also concluded that the mind mapping technique is an appropriate tool to help students in planning their writing as the approach encourages students to gain an in-depth understanding of the writing topics (Naqbi, 2011). Thus, the aims of this study are to investigate students' perceptions towards the use of Branches Map Method and to examine its influences on students' motivation on essay writing.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative research design where focus group interviews were conducted. Twelve secondary schools students from various schools in a state in Malaysia were involved as participants. The questions for the focus group interview were designed to elicit the students' views toward the use of Branches Map Method strategy in motivating them in learning and doing essay writing. Moreover, the questions were designed to allow students the freedom to give their views on the Branches Map method strategy in writing and their future consideration. Furthermore, the responses to the items were categorised, coded and analysed based on the group's proficiency level.

4. Findings and Discussions

The results are presented in this section. The followings are the tables of summary of the interview conducted which are categorised into three groups which are excellent, average and weak.

4.1. Excellent Group

Table 1 presents the answers given by the participants from the excellent group.

Question	R1	R2	R3	R4
1) Was the Branches Map Method fun?	- Don't really understand the method. - Weird, not used to it.	- Don't understand the method. - Somehow fun.	- Yes, it was fun. - Can get more ideas.	Yes, it was good for me.
2) What do you think of the method? (creative, helpful, brilliant?)	- Kind of weird. - Against her writing.	Against his writing but think it was creative.	Can elaborate points.	Gets more way to elaborate points.
3) Was it easier to construct your essay using this method?	Helps to generate ideas.	It helped; it was easier.	It was helpful.	It was very helpful.
4) Do you think you can write better essay using this method?	No, it opposes her way of writing.	He doubts that.	Yes.	Yes, very much agree.
5) If yes, would you use this method in the future? If no, why?	No, it opposes her way of writing.	Can try to adapt.	Of course, she will try.	Yes, she will.
6) Do you think this method helps you to think creatively?	Only thing that was creative is the topic we taught.	Yes, it did.	Yes, she thinks so.	Yes.
7) Do you prefer using the branches map method individually or in group?	- Individual. - She isn't good working in a group.	- Group - He would be lost working alone.	- In a group. - Can share ideas with others.	- Group. - Can share ideas together.
8) Would you do more essay writings after this?	Yes of course but not using this method.	Yes, he will.	Yes, she can apply the method in essay writing.	Yes, she can apply the method in essay writing.

*R=Respondent

Table 1: Interview summary of the students who are good in English.

Among the higher proficiency of these students, half of them reacted somewhat negative by stating that the Branches Map Method was "weird" or "oppose to my writing style". One of them even kept emphasising that the method is against her way of writing and preferably using her own approach to do essays, whereas other two reacted positively towards the Branches Map Method by stating that the method "was fun and it helps me to elaborate more ideas and points in my essay writing". As Branches Map Method was created by us based on the mind-mapping concept, most of the students in this group agreed that it helps them to think more creatively. According to Abd Karim and Rafidah (2016), mind mapping is basically a process of writing down a central idea and coming out with new and related ideas from the centre. The mind mapping strategy can also be used to explore a wide range of topics in writing such as narrative, descriptive, persuasive and argumentative (Riswanto & Prandika, 2012). As for the motivation whether the method helped them to feel like writing more essays in the

future, all of them said they definitely would apply it in essay writings, especially when they work in a group. The findings showed that students like to interact more with others in this 21st century learning and teaching style. This interaction helps them to develop language and social skills (Morris, 2016).

4.2. Average Group

Table 2 presents the answers given by the participants from the average group.

Questions	R5	R6	R7
1) Was the Branches Map Method fun?	Yes, it was fun.	- Yes, it was fun. - She can write the essay easier.	- Yes, it was fun. - Can improve her writing skills and the map is easy to draw.
2) What do you think of the method? (creative, helpful, brilliant?)	- It helps to write better. - More organized to write elaborations and examples.	- It helps to write better.	It makes her easier to do essay.
3) Was it easier to construct your essay using this method?	Yes, it is easier.	Yes, it is easier.	- Yes, easier. - She just have to fill in the points, elaborations and examples and make it in a sentence to write an essay.
4) Do you think you can write better essay using this method?	Yes.	Yes.	Yes.
5) If yes, would you use this method in the future? If no, why?	She can use the Branch Map method to elaborate the points better than before.	She thinks it was very helpful.	She likes to make essay in point forms before writing them down correctly.
6) Do you think this method helps you to think creatively?	- Yes. - She can list all the sentences much better.	Yes, it helps her to write essay.	It makes her think about the ideas to support the points.
7) Do you prefer using the branches map method individually or in group?	In a group.	- Group. - She can share her ideas together with others.	- Individual. - She cannot use other people's idea to do her own essay.
8) Would you do more essay writings after this?	- Sure. - She doesn't like to write essays at first but maybe Branches Map method can make her do more essays.	- Sure will.	- Yes. - She found an easier method to do essay.

*R=Respondent

Table 2: Interview summary of the students who are average in English.

For the average group students, all of them think that the Branches Map Method was fun and easy to apply in pre-writing of essays. They claimed that the method is helpful and “more organised to write elaborations and examples”, according to Respondent 5. Bharambe (2012) also claimed that mind-mapping provides a useful focus for students to organise their thoughts and ideas to present information clearly and attractively. Most of them also agreed that it helps to construct their essay better because they can list out and write down all their points and elaborations, just like what Respondent 7 stated, “I like to make essay from point form...it makes me to think about the other idea to support the points.”. By this, we can also assumed that the Branches Map Method also helped in brainstorming ideas on essay writings. MacDowell (1999) defined brainstorming as “the act of defining a problem or ideas and coming up with anything related to the topic”. Therefore, this method will certainly help students to think more creatively and can get more ideas after listing down whatever it is related to the essay topic. This can be supported by the results of the survey by Abd Karim, Rafidah (2016), where her studies showed that the mind-mapping tool encouraged creative thinking and users of mind-maps became faster at generating and organising ideas for writing.

These students from the average category also stated that this Branches Map Method has make them to want to write more essay writings in the future, one of them stated that “I don't like to write essays at first but maybe this can make me do more essays.”. Another also said that she found this method very easy and would like to use it in the future for pre-writings.

4.3 Weak Group

Table 3 presents the answers given by the participants from the average group.

Questions	R8	R9	R10	R11	R12
1) Was the Branches Map Method fun?	Yes, it was very fun.	- Yes, it was too fun. - Helps him to make his essay better.	Yes.	The best.	Yes, it was fun.

2) What do you think of the method? (creative, helpful, brilliant?)	- Yes, it was creative. - The map has examples and elaborations.	It was creative.	It was fun.	- Easier to write an essay. - Easier to find ideas.	Sometimes he understands, sometimes he did not.
3) Was it easier to construct your essay using this method?	Easier.	Yes, easier.	- No. - She didn't understand what we taught.	- Yes, she can understand the elaborations and examples easier.	- Maybe. - He has to keep it up (with the pace).
4) Do you think you can write better essay using this method?	He thinks he can.	Can.	No.	She thinks she can.	Yes, he had a lot of fun using it although he sometimes he doesn't have the vocabulary to describe.
5) If yes, would you use this method in the future? If no, why?	He thinks would use because it is easy.	Yes, it is easier.	No.	Yes, it is easier to elaborate and separate the points.	Yes, he will.
6) Do you think this method helps you to think creatively?	- Yes. - It makes him more interested to do essay.	Yes.	Yes.	Yes, she thinks so.	Yes, he thinks it helps.
7) Do you prefer using the branches map method individually or in group?	- In group. - They can exchange ideas.	- In group. - For individual he prefers another group's method.	In group.	- Group. - She doesn't mind using it individually too.	Both.
8) Would you do more essay writings after this?	- Maybe. - After he learned this method he would like to write an essay.	Maybe.	No.	Yes, although she doesn't like writing.	Depends, if he have time he will.

*R=Respondent

Table 3: Interview summary of the students who are weak in English.

Interview session with this group resulted in a positive attitude towards the Branches Map Method as well. All of them addressed that the method was really fun and creative. This can be proved by Tony Buzan in "The Mind Map Book" (1993) where he stated that "mind map is usually more fun and interesting to create than the standard chart or set of notes". However, there was one student where she has a very negative attitude towards English writings, due to her very low proficiency towards the language. She agrees that the method itself was fun and creative, but refused to do more writings in the future and thinks that the method would not make her write better essays. It could be concluded that the negative attitude of this student will make her have lower cognitive achievement, and lower motivation (Victori and Lockhart, 1995). Therefore her English language proficiency is not as good as the others and she needs one of our interviewees to translate English to Malay to her. Overall, students in the weaker group have lower motivation to do more essay writings in the future, providing just a few of them have a change of mind in essay writing and will consider to do it.

6. CONCLUSION

The results of this research discovered that the students' attitude towards the newly introduced Branches Map method has indeed influenced their motivation in essay writing, for a few of the interviewed students agreed to do more essays in the future using the method. However, it was also learned that the students have varied reactions towards the method. Some of the respondents, mostly from the average and weak groups, stated that the method was fun, creative, and easier to be carried on as pre-writing routine, especially in generating ideas and elaboration or organising ideas. Studies shown by M. Yunus, C. H. Chien (2016), that majority students in their studies agreed mind-mapping helped them organise their thoughts better. However, these groups did not express any further interest to do more essay writing in the future. Just as previous researchers who found out that "even though students were highly motivated to learn English, but they tend to labor minimal efforts in their learning process (Melor and Nur Rashidah, 2011; Noraini, 1999). We believed that it was their basic proficiency level and language barrier that are the causes of their attitude towards essay writing.

Nevertheless, half of the excellent students interviewed referred the method as complicated and uninteresting. This group insisted they would be using their own way of writing an essay, favourably disposed to their pre-existent methods. In any case, the excellent students cited no objection to learn and use the method in essay writing in the future. Researcher such as Thanget (et al. 2011) also proposed that students with positive attitudes and higher level of motivation will be more successful compared to those with negative attitudes and low motivation. Therefore, the attitude of students towards essay writings will affect their motivation in writing and thus decides

their proficiency level. Finally, we found out that using the Branches Map method in the process of teaching writing could also enhance students' interest and contribution in the learning process, considering its function to eliminate the tension in the classroom together with giving more independence to the students to be more creative and expressive in essay writing.

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