

THE USAGE OF 'GAP PENCIL' TECHNIQUE IN TEACHING EARLY WRITING SKILLS AMONG THE PRE-SCHOOLERS

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Abstract: *This study has been conducted among the pre-schoolers who are experiencing problems at the initial stage of writing skill with the aid of 'Gap Pencil' technique. The usage of 'Gap Pencil' technique is considered as an innovative method in assisting the learners who could not write well, as for instance, inapt spacing in writing simpler sentences, writing outside the provided lines and various sizes of letter blocks in writing. This qualitative research is carried out with several methodologies via tests, observations, documents analysis and interviews on the four samplings at Tuaran district pre-school, Sabah. The collected data is thereafter analysed with descriptive analysis as to tabulate the outcome of the results which are based on the percentage, achievement tests and summary aspects. The findings reveal that the four samplings have shown improvement on their writing skill based on the conducted achievement tests. They are able to write neatly: balanced spacing in writing simpler words in easier sentences, writing the letter blocks in equivalent size, and writing within the provided lines. Thus, the usage of 'Gap Pencil' technique has been viewed as an effective early writing skill among the pre-schoolers and could also be applicable for other related problems in writing.*

Key Words: *Pre-schoolers, 'Gap Pencil' Innovation, Early Writing Skill, Writing Spacing*

INTRODUCTION

The Document of Curriculum and Assessment Standard (DSKP) in the National Preschool Curriculum Standard (2016) states that writing skill is one of the most important skills that a pre-schoolers must master. Writing skill is an ability to write words, sentences and present ideas through the many types of writing on the knowledge or personal experiences with proper grammar, appropriate use of punctuations, correct spelling, neat and clear writing (Hasnah and Habibah, 2010). Children learn the process of writing skill in stages depending on their readiness and ability. Readiness here means the ability of manipulating their (children) fine motor skill where they can control their fingers freely while holding the writing apparatus and writing. Allowing children to be independent when doing everyday activities like eating,

putting their own clothes, and playing will indivertibly makes them learn much faster in manipulating the use of their hand and fingers for other purposes (Sharifah and Siti Hazlifah, 2012). A child's writing ability grew as they become better in reading, whilst a child ability in reading grew when they were able to write. Mastering reading and writing skills should go hand in hand (Falconer, L., 2010). Thus, mastering writing skill should be given priority at early stage in children so that it would be easier for them to learn other literacy skills.

Children ability in writing nowadays is in worrying state because even after one year in pre-school, they still cannot write neatly. Most teachers did not give much of emphasis in teaching writing in class, specifically on how to hold the writing apparatus correctly,

determining the proper size of letters, and in determining the right space between the letters and words (Norain Md. Nor, 2005). The ability to write in a student will be influenced much on the student's overall confidence in which it would greatly affect their academic performance (Beatty & Pratt, 2003). Children that have a problem in writing usually associated with 'dysgraphia' learning disorder.

Dysgraphia refers to a learning disorder that is closely linked to the writing skill. Generally, those with 'dysgraphia' will have a problem in spelling, difficulties in writing correctly, and the inability to present ideas in written form. Thus, children with 'dysgraphia' tend to be better in communication but weak in writing skill. An individual with writing difficulties is not necessarily have 'dysgraphia' (Crouch A.L. & Jakubecy J.J, 2007). 'Dysgraphia' is a neurological disorder that is usually detected in children while they are in the beginning stage of learning the writing skill. Experts could not explain how 'dysgraphia' happens but early detection and intervention is the best way to prevent it from becoming more serious (Crouch A.L. & Jakubecy J.J, 2007).

Definition of the Problem and Research Objective

Having a good grasp in the basics of writing among children is crucial because they need to be able to write well especially to those who just begin their formal education. Writing skill is important in assessing the children's ability to understand what they read and write while slowly nurturing the confidence in them during lessons (Wood, M, 2004).

Nevertheless, every child is different when it comes to their ability. In other words, the ability for each child with the same age in a class to acquire knowledge on writing, reading, counting and deductive varies (Noriati A. Rashid, Boon Pong Yin & Sharifah Fakhriah Syed Ahmed, 2017). Children who face difficulties in the early stages of writing usually linked to the fine motor skill and the hand-eye coordination problems where the growth in these aspects were slow and the lack of intervention in honing writing skill at home or in the class (Kaiser, M.L, 2009). A child's ability in writing is one of the ways in assessing their academic performance.

The ability to write in a child is much influenced by the guidance from the teacher as well as from the exposure that child has while learning writing at the early stage. Sassoon (1993) and Noraini Bini Ombi (2010) discovered that teachers gave less emphasis on the learning of writing while in class, notably on the proper way of holding the writing apparatus, writing letters the correct way, the size of the letters, and the proper space between letters in words and sentences. Pupils should be exposed with the right writing technique at an early stage because this will help to nurture their interest in producing beautiful and artistic writing ideas (Wood, M, 2004). Children being able to write neat and beautiful is a great advantage to others including the teachers themselves. Having neat and beautiful writing makes messages easy to read and understand (Chia Mei Yin, 2013). It is not an easy task in helping children that have a problem in the early writing stage. Multiple methods and materials are being utilized to ensure a language lesson would run smoothly since language learning involves writing, listening, reading and speaking skills (Roskos, K.A, 2003). Therefore, teachers must possess a specific tool to help them to teach pupils in learning writing faster and effectively.

In Malaysia, studies related to the application of teaching aids in helping pupils to learn proper writing techniques is scarce. There are various types of problems that are related to the learning of writing and this case study focuses on the ability in making the proper space between words in simple sentences. There are many types of writing aids that assist learning of writing at the early stage sold in the market but most of them focus on enhancing the skill in proper handling of the pencil. The 'Gap Pencil' innovation is designed specifically to assist children facing the issue in making the proper space between words in simple sentences. This innovation will also help in making their writing much more aligned and neat.

This study is being conducted to evaluate the effectiveness of 'Gap Pencil' in helping children with writing difficulties where they face troubles in making proper space between words in simple sentences and also writing in a much more aligned and neat manner.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study uses qualitative approach. This study centred upon analysing a phenomenon or abnormal changes in a period of time using various data collection methods (Othman Lebar, 2009). This case study is being conducted to evaluate the effectiveness of an innovative writing aid called ‘Gap Pencil’ on children in learning writing. There methods of data collection are being utilised. Firstly is through interviews where the researchers will gathers basic information on the chosen subject, basic background information of the participants, the performance and the ability of pupils in the selected class. McMillan (2008) stated that the method of interview is used when the researcher could not observe aspect like a ones characteristic, emotions, on how a person decipher the world around them, and to gather information on things that is impossible to be replicated back. Second is the documents analysis method. This method involves the analysis of the participants’ personal files, individual achievement record and the works that they have produced (worksheets). The method of analysing documents is a method where relevant information are gathered from various written sources where the findings can help to enhance and explain the data and other information acquired through observations and interviews (Othman Lebar, 2009). Third, test achievement method. This method is use to observe the achievement of the participants before and after the use of ‘Gap Pencil’ in


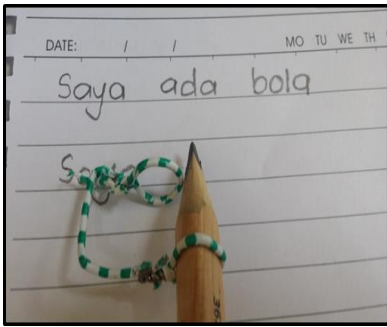
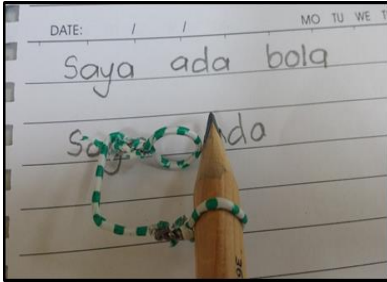
making proper space between words in a simple sentences, writing letters with equal sizes and writing words on the designated line in the pages of their exercise book.

Four preschoolers were chosen from a local preschool in the district of Tuaran Sabah as research participants as they met the basic criteria set where they all have problem in writing. The gender composition of the research participants are two 6-years old boys and girls each. All four research participants have similar writing problems and has almost the same socioeconomic background.

The duration of the research is one month. At the beginning of the research, the researcher interviewed the teacher teaching in the selected class and trying to identify potential research participants among her pupils. The next phase of the research was where the researchers look through the documents that belongs to the four selected participant. The last stage of the research were where the researchers run test on before the introduction of ‘Gap Pencil’ to the pupil and another test after the research participants were introduced to the ‘Gap Pencil’.

‘Gap Pencil’ is a normal pencil with triangular shaped body that is fitted with a colored piece of wire at the near the lead in which it is shaped in a specific shape so that it can be used to measures gap between letters, determining the size of letters, and write in a straight line all the time. Following are the steps in using ‘Gap Pencil’.

Table 1 - Steps in using 'Gap Pencil'

Steps	Picture
<p>Step 1:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Identifying materials. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Triangular bodied pencil ○ Coloured wire ○ Round shaped end for the gap size between letters 	
<p>Step 2:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Words has to be written on the line in the page. ➤ Writing the first word, the last letter in that word will be the starting point and marked as the gap. ➤ No letter can be in the circle to ensure an even gap between words. ➤ After writing the second word, the gap for the next word have to be marked before writing continue. 	
<p>Step 3:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Repeat steps 1 and 2 for every following words until the learner can form a perfect word with a proper gap. 	

Analysis of Data

The analysis of data is based on the achievement that has been run on the four research participants. Below are the four stages taken while doing the intervention in using the 'Gap Pencil':

Table 2 - Four stages in testing of writing

Action	Activity by the research participants
Stage 1	Copying two simple words
Stage 2	Copying three simple words.
Stage 3	Copying four simple words.
Stage 4	Copying five simple words.

Table 3 - Examples of worksheets before and after 'Gap Pencil' intervention

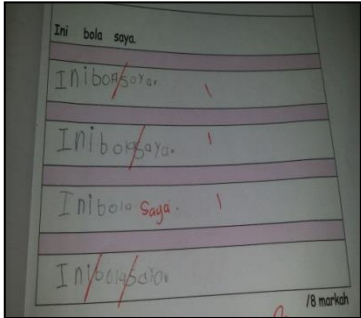
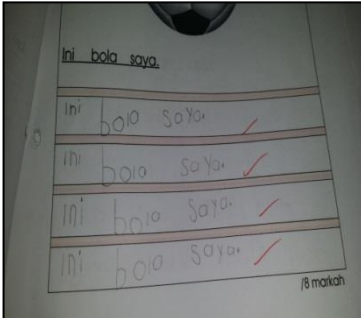
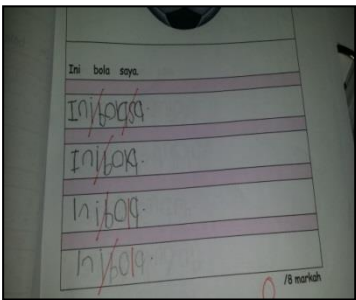
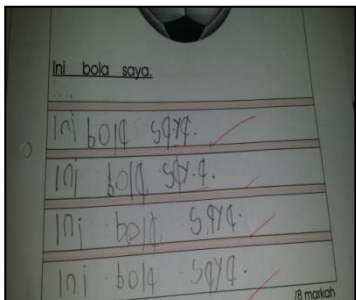
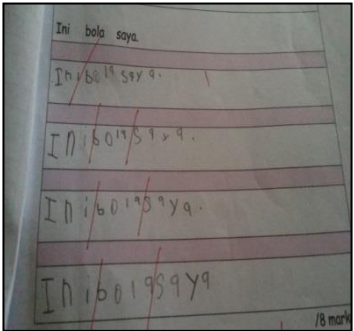
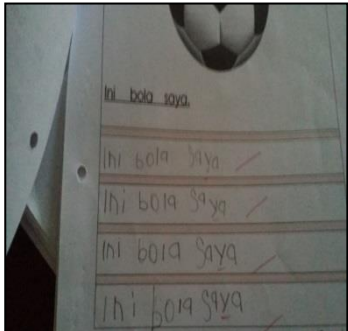
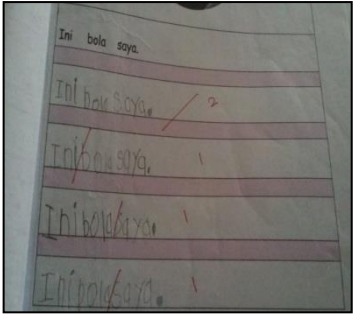
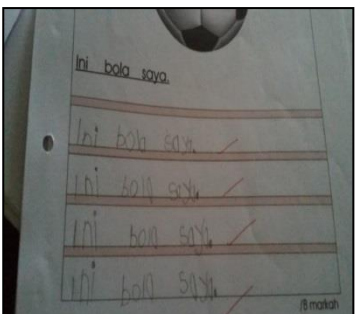
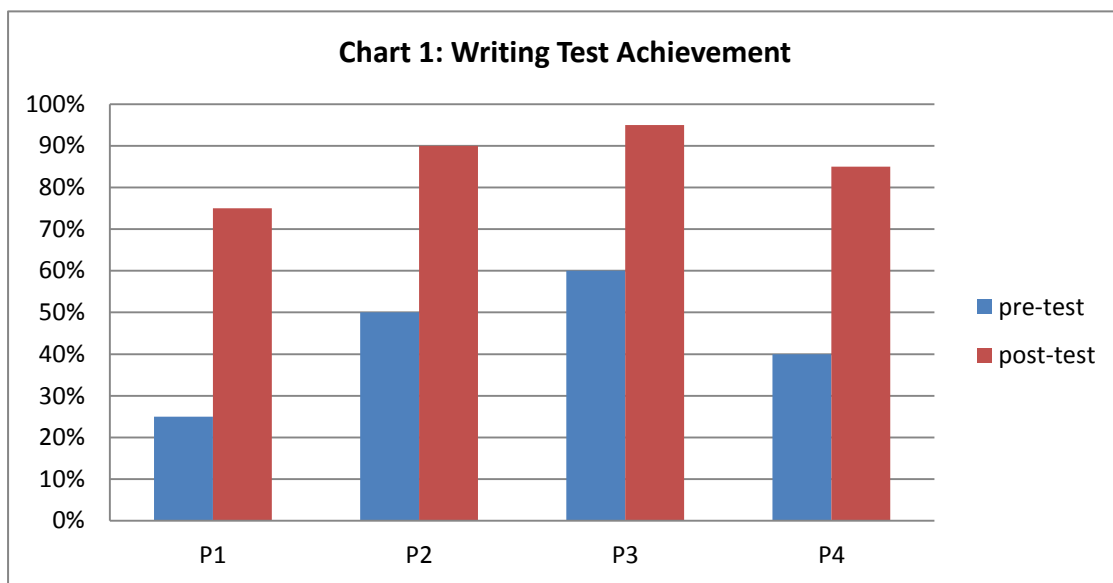
Research Participant	Before Intervention	After Intervention
P1		
P2		
P3		
P4		

Table 4 - Data analysis before and after 'Gap Pencil' intervention

Research Participants	Pre Test (Marks) %	Post Test (Marks) %
P1	5/20 (25%)	15/20 (75%)
P2	10/20 (50%)	18/20 (90%)
P3	12/20 (60%)	19/20 (95%)
P4	8/20 (40%)	17/20 (85%)



The data on the pre-test and post-test achievement in table 4 shows that the use of 'Gap Pencil' can improve writing skill of the research participants. Through the intervention that had been done, the research participants were able to produce a neat writing with an even gap between letters in a simple word and they were also manages to write on the line in their task sheet. The pre-test marks for research participant 1 (P1) was 25%, P2 was 50%, P3 was 60% and P4 was 40%. The marks for each research participants increased significantly after the post-test with P1 at 75%, P2 with 90%, P3 with 95% and P4 with 85%. Based on the data that had been collected, all the research participants has shown significant improvement in their writing abilities. All the research participants were able to produce an even gap between letters in simple words, equal size in letters and write properly on the given line.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The innovation that has been introduced in this research incorporate crucial aspect in the early

child growth like the development of fine motor skill and the ability in using all the senses during the process of leaning These aspect were given priority because according to Jean Piaget (1959) children between the age of 2 to 7 years old are in the 'Pre-Operational' stage where children will utilise their ability in controlling their fine motor skill in discovering new things. An approach where the teacher utilising the fine motor and senses in children during lesson is the most effective.

Psychological theory stated that it is much more effective in teaching children using a physical teaching aid in a lesson where their sensory motors and skills is being put into use through a hands-on activity (Schaffer, H.R., 2004).

The development of children will be assess every day through observation and from their achievement during writing test. Previously, there is no tools or aid that can be used to assist children in improving their writing technique so that they can write in a neat and beautiful manner. Thus these group of children were left

to mend for themselves when it comes to improving their writing ability without any proper solution since (Beaty, 2012).

Referring closely to the DSKP 2016, lessons were designed carefully to so that a lesson with hands-on approach and a good physical teaching aid where it complement the development of children can be executed. A student-centered approach is selected in the implementation of this innovation where the teacher plays the role of a facilitator.

During the implementation stage of the innovation on the four research participants, the teacher involved assisted the children a lot on how to use the 'Gap Pencil' correctly. The right techniques in writing using the 'Gap Pencil' involved having the correct seating posture, proper handling of the pencil, right hand-eye coordination, and the placement of paper while writing. All these factors influenced the shape and neatness of the writing (Hope K.G. & Tricia D.F. 2014).

With the aid of 'Gap Pencil', children were much more focus and their writing technique improved. Children were also more enthusiastic in writing though in the beginning they were having problem in familiarising themselves in using the 'Gap Pencil'.

Based on the data collected through interviews and the achievement tests, the selected children in the research were able to improve their writing ability and successfully achieved the research objectives that has been set by the researchers which are to improve writing ability (proper spacing of letters), improving the writing techniques (body posture, position of hand and paper), training the fine sensory motor that involves during writing in children, improves the hand-eye coordination skill, increase the level of neatness in writing, improving children's interest in writing and enhancing the children's observational and sensory skills. Thus, the use of 'Gap Pencil' in enhancing children ability in writing is without a doubt is a success. The use of this innovation can be expanded into aiding and improving problems that are related to writing in nature.

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