Integrating Think-Aloud Protocol into *MAYmAP* Technique in Improving Post-Secondary Students' Essay Writing Skill

Sujatha A/P Veeriah and Doreen Primus

Abstract-This action research is conducted to expose students to write essays academically by integrating the Think Aloud Protocol (TAP) into the MAYMaP technique. Facing the transition from extended writing in Form 5 to writing academically inclined essays among every Post-Secondary English Language (PSEL) learner is a challenge. This calls for understanding the reason behind their inability to write academic essays. It is to be noted that the MUET paper in Form 6 focuses on all 4 skills: Listening, Speaking, Reading, and Writing. The most problematic skills are Speaking and Writing as they go hand in hand. Both papers require students to respond well to the tasks and present a clear stand/opinion. They are required to develop ideas with reasons that show maturity. A noting point is, that students can master speaking skills after a series of drills. However, this is not the case in writing. By implementing the quasi-experimental approach, seventeen (17) learners are involved in this study. The findings seek to clarify insights; therefore, educators must investigate ways to overcome the problem.

Keywords: MUET -Malaysian University English Test, writing skills, academic essays, Think Aloud Protocol, MAYMaP Technique- Mine and Yours Make Perfect Technique

I.   INTRODUCTION

Writing skills in English in Malaysia are taught by CEFR also known as the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages whereby it is an international standard to describe language ability across reading, writing, listening, and speaking (Chin, Thien, & Chew, 2019). Thus, it is implemented in lower and upper secondary. The Malaysian University Test (MUET) conducted under the Malaysian Examination Council (MEC) is also CEFR-aligned. It is a compulsory proficiency test for all Form Six, Matriculation's students. Foundation and foreign students who wish to pursue their tertiary studies in Malaysia.

MUET tests validate a candidate's proficiency in the English Language using CEFR's Global scale which categorizes language proficiency in 6 levels, ranging from the lowest band A1-A2 equivalent to 1.0-2.5 in MUET, B1-B2 (3.0-4.5) and the highest is C1-C2 (5.0-5+) (MOE, 2015). Therefore, to obtain a place in any of the universities in Malaysia, students need to be either in B1 to B2 or C1 to C2. MUET tests students' ability to master listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills. According to Zheng,

Zhang and Yan (2016), a point to note is that students are not only required to master their listening,

Sujatha a/p Veeriah, Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan Kuala Kubu Bharu (harkamish@yahoo.com.my)
Doreen Primus, Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan Kuala Kubu Bharu (doreenprimus@gmail.com)

speaking, or reading skills alone, but they also need to acquire proficiency in their writing skills, which proves challenging to many. As is known, writing is defined as an "intricate" and complex task whereby it is the "most difficult of the language abilities to acquire" (Harsch & Martin, 2012). It is undeniably one of the most complicated skills among the four language skills, as it involves a lot of cognitive processes (Figueras, (2012).

MUET's writing paper (800/4) which carries equal weightage with other papers comprises 2 tasks whereby Task 1 is replying to an email and Task 2 is an extended essay writing that requires an academic style of writing. Candidates need to compose an academically inclined essay, either an argumentative essay, opinion-based or problem-solving essay at least 250 words.

Statement of Problem

During an observation, Post-Secondary English Language (PSEL) for the past 1 year, out of 17, about 14 of 6A7 students are unable to grasp the techniques of writing essays despite attempting the question during their Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM). After a background check, it was found out that out of 17 students, only 5 obtained at least an A- in their SPM in 2022. Another point to note is, they are less exposed to academic materials such as journal articles. In a different observation, it is noticed that these students as second language learners (ESL writers) tend to use their mother tongue during the composing process. Therefore, it is more difficult for the students to compose their thoughts in the English language as they generally think in their mother tongue. As it became an obstacle in the teaching and learning process, this study attempts to tackle this problem.

It is started with data collection by taking their Test 1 results as a benchmark. 14 out of 17 students scored low with Band 2(6-13) and 2.5. (14-20). The reasons that have been identified are as below:

a.   inability to expand their main idea.
b.   the fear of verbalizing their ideas in the English Language

Hence, as their PSEL T teacher, I searched for a technique that could assist them in obtaining a higher band in their writing paper. With that in mind, I adapted the Think Aloud Protocol (TAP) which was founded by Clayton Lewis and then developed by K. Ericsson and H. Simon (Erikson K.A & Simon H, A.,1984) integrated it with a technique created by the researcher named Mine and Yours Make Perfect (MAYMaP Technique).

II.   PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

This study proposal focuses on helping the students to become better writers in their Task 2 by implementing the Think Aloud Protocol in MAYMaP Technique which requires the students to verbalize their ideas in the targeted language and share with others. With that, it is hoping the problem of having mother tongue interference would be minimized and therefore the students' ability to expand their ideas and write accurately will be enhanced.

III.   OBJECTIVES

General Objective

a.   To determine the effectiveness of the using Think Aloud Protocol in MAYMaP Technique in improving 6A7 students' essay writing skills.

Specific Objectives

a.   3.2.1. students can verbalize their ideas in the English Language without fear of making mistakes by adapting to TAP.
b.   3.2.2. able to expand their ideas confidently with the help of MAY MaP Technique
c.   3.2.3 students can obtain marks from the range of band 3.5 to 5.0.

IV.   TARGET GROUP

The target group of this study comprises 17 students from an Upper 6 class. Most of the students in this class only managed to score 6-13 upon 60 (Band 2) and 14-20 (2.5 Band) for their extended writing.

V.   RESEARCH IMPLEMENTATION

a.   Observation
b.   Pre-Test -Initial Review of the problem
c.   Questionnaire
d.   Post-test

Description Of Instrumentation and Procedures

Observation
Students' progressive written task in class is taken into consideration as proof of the need for intervention.

Pre-Test
A pre-test is administered before the implementation of the treatment to confirm the problem identified. The pre-test has been carried out in the classroom. The scores are recorded and will be compared with the post-test scores.

Questionnaire
A set of questionnaires on their self-reflection before and after the treatment given. The questionnaires

are then used to determine the success of TAP in MAYMaP Technique in improving students writing skills.

Post Test

MUET Trial paper in September acts as the post-test as teachers can obtain accurate marks to prove the success of the research conducted.

VI.   DATA ANALYSIS

Observation

Based on the problem identified and responses received, it was found that 17 students from A7 were often shunning themselves from Question 2- Extended Writing. They find it challenging to develop the ideas in mature writing as they do not have sufficient academic reading materials. This hindered them from expanding their ideas and linking their paragraphs convincingly. Above all, their inability to fully think about the ideas in the English language was another drawback. They were not only struggling to write the whole essay; in fact, the introduction and thesis statement were challenging as they needed a precise choice of words. They were also brainstorming among themselves in the national language, Bahasa Melayu.

Pre-Test

As mentioned earlier, writing Task 2 is the most challenging component in MUET. Most students fear when they are asked to write extended writing as they have problems generating and developing ideas and completing their essays without thinking of the sentence structures in their mother tongue. MUET writing requires creativity and language command from the students. Most 6A7 students lack confidence in writing in the English Language which explains the alarmingly low band in Part 2 of the writing paper.

Based on the practice that the students have attempted in the class, the scores obtained by the students are stated in the chart below:

TABLE 1: STUDENTS' (PRE-TEST) SCORES IN PART 2 WRITING PAPER

BAND (MARKS)	NO. OF STUDENTS
2.0 (6-13)	3
2.5 (20-14)	10
3.0 (26-21)	4
TOTAL	17

TABLE 2: QUESTIONNAIRE (BEFORE TAP IN MAYMAP)

NO	ITEM	YES	NO
1	I can understand the essay question in Task 2 on my own.	15	2
2	I can brainstorm on my own for content points.	7	10
3	I can list out my content points accurately without thinking aloud.	3	14
4	I am confident that came out with a thesis statement correctly on my own.	1	16
5	I am confident I can write a good first draft on my own.	0	17
6	I can write an academic essay without sharing my thoughts with others.	1	16

The analysis of the above questionnaire shows that the majority of A7 students are not confident in attempting Task 2 on their own. As the thesis statement is a new item in their writing skill, 16 of them find it difficult as it requires them to synthesis their content points beforehand and line them in a sequence in a statement at the end of introduction.

Intervention
TAP into MAYMaP Technique in improving essay writing skill

Essay writing lessons are conducted during MUET lessons every alternate week after their speaking skill. Students use the topic of speaking discussion for essay writing. The teacher guides the students on how to use TAP and MAYMaP. The students are given 50 minutes to write out their essays individually before submitting them to the teacher. The time constraint is imposed here to familiarize the students with the exam format. Once students obtain their marked essay, they are placed in a group of 3. In their respective group, each of them reads out aloud their paragraphs assigned. Based on their mistakes, they think together about how to perfect their paragraphs. Then, each team will meet the teacher to get their corrected paragraph checked. Once the paragraphs become perfect, they type them out and share the paragraphs in Telegram to be copied by all.

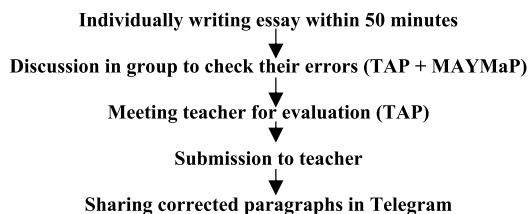The above process is shown in the flowchart below:

Individually writing essay within 50 minutes
↓
Discussion in group to check their errors (TAP + MAYMaP)
↓
Meeting teacher for evaluation (TAP)
↓
Submission to teacher
↓
Sharing corrected paragraphs in Telegram

Figure 1: Flowchart of Implementation of TAP into MAYMaP Technique

By integrating TAP into MAYMaP, students began to write more organized academic essays. This technique also helped students in their speaking test as they had to verbalize their content points and expand their ideas among their peers before putting them down in writing. Thus, using TAP in MAYMaP formed a habit of thinking in the English language.
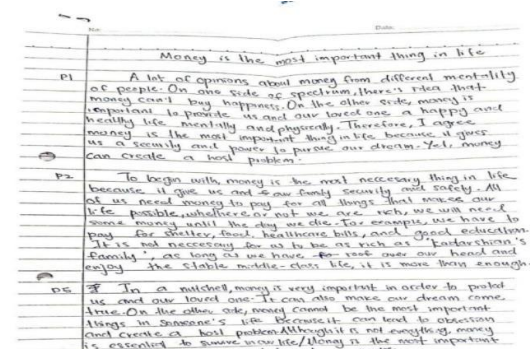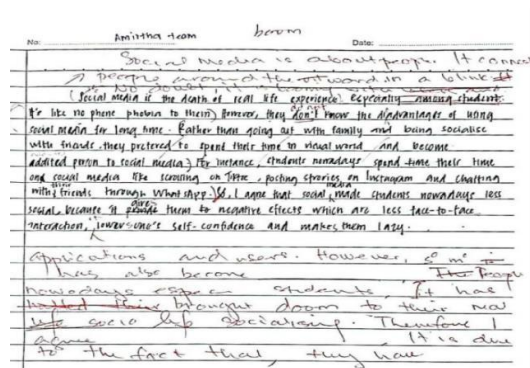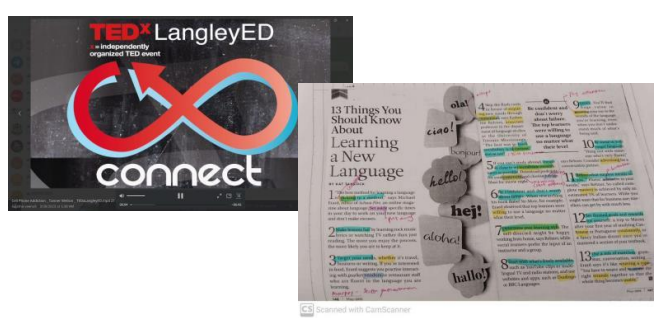
Student's work is as below:

Figure 2: Before integrating TAP into MAYMaP

Listening to TED Talks→ Academic articles. Brainstorming

Using Telegram as a platform to share work.

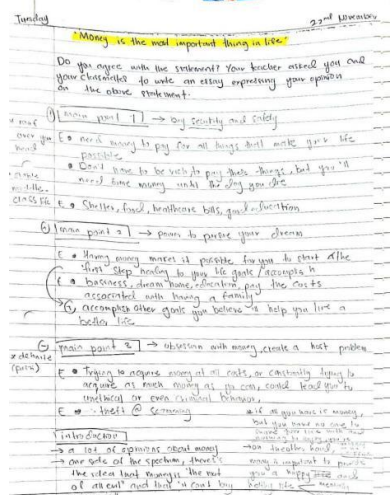*Figure 3: The process of integrating TAP into MAYMaP*

Figure 4: After a series of integrating TAP into MAYMaP

Research Findings

A post-test (trial semester 3) was carried out after 3 months of implementing TAP into MayMaP Technique. The results are as in table 3.

TABLE 3: POST-TEST RESULTS

BAND (MARKS)	NO. OF STUDENTS
2.0	0
2.5	0
3.0	0
3.5	4
4.0	10
4.5	3
TOTAL	17

Based on the data above, it can be concluded that 17 A7 students have shown a great improvement in writing extended essays in academic tone effectively with a good thesis statement after practicing TAP into MAYMaP. However, there is room for improvement for them to be proficient writers.

The student's performance in the pre-test and post-test are compared and is shown in Table 4.

TABLE 4: POST-TEST RESULTS

BAND (MARKS)	PRE-TEST STUDENTS	POST-TEST STUDENTS
2.0	3	0
2.5	10	0
3.0	4	0
3.5	0	4
4.0	0	10
4.5	0	3
TOTAL	17	17

It can be concluded that almost all students have displayed great improvement in writing academic essays by integrating TAP into MAYMaP Technique. These findings are supported by Nurul Farehah and Mohd Sallehhudin, (2018) and Van Huy & Hamid, (2015). To upgrade the 4 students with band 3.5 and to ensure consistency in their writing till their MUET exam in November, the process of teaching and learning using the technique will go on. This is also because, students have taken a new interest in reading more articles either newspapers or online journals. Thus, in the process, the students are able to voice out their opinion on current issues in English language confidently. Therefore, the technique of integrating TAP into MAYMaP does achieve the research objectives which are:

a. Students are able to verbalize their ideas in English Language without fear of making mistake by adapting to TAP
b. Able to expand their ideas confidently with the help of MAY map Technique
c. Students can obtain marks from the range of band 3.5 to 5.0.

VII. REFLECTION

Based on the evidence above, it can be concluded that this technique has successfully improved the ability to write academically inclined essays in Task 2 confidently. This technique has had an impact on both teachers and students. These findings are aligned with Alismai and McGuire, (2015) as well as Deswila, Kustati, Yusuf, Raja Nor Safinas, Besral, and Rehani, (2020).

Implication on students

Students understood the need to be more open in choosing reading materials to upgrade their knowledge which helped them to verbalize their ideas confidently in the English language. None of them were passive during the discussion. students were deeply engrossed in the learning process as it is a two-way process.

Implication on teacher

The findings in this study show that this technique is useful in teaching both speaking and writing skills. As students had autonomy in their discussion, I had more time to guide the timid students to progress. It is a great technique to be used among students with low proficiency

in the targeted language whereby in this research, the English language.

To conclude, integrating TAP into MAYMaP has indeed been an effective technique in activating students' need to be prepared beforehand and to think critically. It also serves as a form of motivation for students.

VIII.   RECOMMENDATION FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Based on the findings, this technique not only to be effective in preparing 17 A7 students to obtain higher bands in MUET exam, but it also too created a more active classroom environment.

It is hoped that this research will be used as a base for other teachers to implement this technique to give me an insight to improvise the technique. As it is an ongoing process, I am implementing the same teaching and learning process in my lower six (6B3) for improvement.

REFERENCES

Alismail, A.A., & McGuire, P. (2015). 21st century standards and curriculum: Current research and practices. *Journal of Education and Practice, 6*(6), 150-154.

Chin, H., Thien, L. M., & Chew, C. M. (2019). The reforms of national assessments in Malaysian education system. *Journal of Nusantara Studies, 4*(1), 93-111.

Deswila, N., Kustati, M., Yusuf, Y. Q., Raja Nor Safinas, R. H., Besral, & Rehani. (2020). Cultural contents in the ELT textbook prepared by the Indonesian ministry of education for secondary schools. *Journal of Nusantara Studies, 6*(1), 222-241.

Figueras, N. (2012). The impact of the CEFR. *ELT Journal, 66*(4), 477–485.

Harsch, C., & Martin, G. (2012). Adapting CEF-Descriptors for rating purposes: Validation by a combined rater training and scale revision approach. *Assessing Writing, 17*(1), 228-250.

Ministry of Education Malaysia. (2015). *English language education reform in Malaysia: The roadmap 2015-2025*. English Language Standards and Quality Council, Ministry of Education Malaysia.

Nurul Farehah, M. U., & Mohd Sallehhudin, A. A. (2018). Implementation of CEFR in Malaysia: Teachers' awareness and the challenges. 3L: *The Southeast Asian Journal of English Language Studies, 24*(3), 168-183.

Van Huy, N., & Hamid, O. M. (2015). Educational policy borrowing in a globalized world: A case study of common European framework of reference for languages in a Vietnamese University. *English Teaching: Practice & Critique, 14*(1), 60–74.

Zheng, Y., Zhang, Y., & Yan, Y. (2016). *Investigating the practice of the common European framework of reference for languages (CEFR) outside Europe: A case study on the assessment of writing in English in China*. British Council.