EXPLORING THE WRITING APPROACHES
IN THE *FACEBOOK* ENVIRONMENT

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Abstract

The following is a qualitative case study investigating the writing approaches that are evident when a group of ESL students were to complete their narrative writing task in the *Facebook* environment. Six students and a teacher interacted in the *Facebook* environment to revise and improve the quality of their essays. Data in this study were derived from the online interaction archives and scores of the narrative essays. Drawing on qualitative data of the online interactions, product and genre approaches were evident. Process approach did not appear in the findings although time and space were available for students and the teacher to communicate with their peers and teacher. The implication of this study is that the teacher should also be given a checklist when they are engaged in online writing activities. Also it is important for teachers to consider the different level of thinking skills based on Bloom's Taxonomy while guiding students to write their essays. There were also emerging themes that were related to students' confidence and duration of task.

Keywords: *Facebook*, online writing, product approach, process approach, genre approach

1. Introduction

The 21st century learning was developed to prepare students for increasingly complex life and working environment due to advances in globalization and internationalization. There is a requirement for learners and workers to move beyond regurgitating facts and figures, towards acquiring positive transferable of learning disposition instead of 'knowers' of shallow knowledge who passively receive information (Turnipseed, 2015). Accordingly, today's learners need to focus on creativity, critical thinking and collaboration to face the challenges of 21st century. To achieve this, the 21st century learning has recommended several key competencies in the context of life long learning, which include communication, effective use of technology and learning to learn (Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2011).

In line with the international trends, Malaysia is also experiencing dramatic changes in global economy and industrialization. The Ministry of Education in Malaysia realizes the need for the system to keep evolving to stay abreast with global trends. In line with the

country's aim to become developed, prosperous and competitive nation several attributes were highlighted in the Malaysian Educational Blueprint (2013-2025).

The attributes comprised the projection of English by focusing on four skills (reading, listening, speaking and writing). Writing remains an important skill and being able to write well is definitely an added advantage for students. Also what is emphasized is the use of ICT in the classroom to change the pedagogical practices and to ensure 21st-century readiness for every learner. As such, there is a considerable alignment between the use of ICT and language learning, particularly in the area of writing, which provides the focus of this study.

Writing as predominantly a cognitive activity tends to be lonely, brain bound and an internal affair (Nishino & Atkinson, 2015). It is said to be a difficult skill for ESL students to master as it is a complex, laborious, boring and uninteresting task (Warschauer, 2010). This implies that writing instructions should help ESL learners to organise their ideas, revise and review techniques that get them to start writing and should not only focus on accuracy, sentence structure and grammatical aspects that are pre-planned. As language teachers, students should be given an opportunity to voice ideas, knowledge and provide them opportunities to become confident writers. Thus, the general agreement that writing is a challenging task has led researchers and practitioners to seek ways for effective teaching.

According to Simsek (2009), there are two important elements that dominate the research related to writing effectively. One is investigating the writing approaches while the other condition is the application of ICT tools in language learning. In Malaysia, the official syllabus has outlined process approach to be taught in ESL classrooms. From the perspective of process approach, writing involves brainstorming, organising ideas, prewriting, drafting, revising, editing and evaluating. It is an approach that focuses on process involved in producing a written product instead of the final product (Nunan, 1991). In the recent times it has come under criticism from local researchers that process approach had been neglected in the Malaysian ESL classrooms due to temporal, spatial and resources constraints (Mukundan 2011; Darus & Ching, 2009).These constraints do not allow teachers to discuss at length certain ideas and meanings and to attend to different needs and interests of learners (Darus & Ching, 2009). As a result, the writing approach is overlooked and simplified and does not provide effective scaffolding during the process of producing a piece of writing.

With the pervasiveness and the popularity of social networking sites, researchers and practitioners alike have become increasingly interested in the interplay of social networking sites and language learning where the use of the space for writing become the focus (Mahadi & Ubaidullah, 2010). Social networking sites such as *Facebook* can help teachers to create a

conducive environment for students to practice their writing skills and overcome the difficulties in writing (Carlos et al., 2015). Writing will be less burdensome with the online platforms as teachers and students are able to interact, collaborate and work at their own pace outside the classroom hours (McCarty, 2013). In fact, researchers have highlighted that *Facebook* has the potential to motivate and encourage students to learn English well (Omar, Embi & Yunus, 2012).

At this point it is important to acknowledge *Facebook* has many features that can be utilised in language learning, such as *Like, Chatroom, Comments, Notifications, Messages, News Feed, Events, Groups, Apps, Friends* and etc. To use *Facebook* as a writing platform, one needs not necessarily use all features, it is enough to accomplish the task planned. In the case of using *Facebook* to investigate the writing approaches, it is sufficient to use features such as *Groups*, *Comments* and *Walls* alone. Only a few features are used to accomplish a simple writing task.

The present study investigates the approaches of using *Facebook* as a platform for narrative writing. There is scant research which has attempted to investigate how writing approaches can be used in an online writing environment. In fact no studies have been carried out to investigate on the writing approaches that are applied when teachers and students are given the inflexibility of time, space and resources.

The study is guided by two research questions:
1. What types of approaches are adopted when revising narrative writing essays?
2. How do the online writing approaches contribute to the quality of their narrative writing?

2. Literature review

2.1. *Facebook* and language learning

Facebook has attracted a considerable amount of attention from researchers and practitioners alike. Lampe et al. (2007) note that *Facebook* provides a base for learners to check on their action, ideas and interest of the group they belong to. Similarly, Shih (2011) and Roblyer et al. (2010) found that *Facebook* allows learners to interact and collaborate. Also, Haverback (2009) mentions learners' active engagement and participation. Drouin (2011) argues that *Facebook* improves second language reading while for Reid (2011) *Facebook* creates the power, allows diversity and new relationship to form interaction, language and texts.

Prior research related to writing skills and *Facebook* demonstrated a satisfying experience and acquisition of knowledge. Most prevalent was the mixed method study by

Shih (2011), where pre-test and post-test surveys, questionnaire and interviews were used to prove immediate value to the instructors by suggesting peer assessment using *Facebook* can be interesting and effective for college students. Yunus et al.(2011) conducted a mixed-method study investigating students' perceptions of the use of *Facebook* in teaching ESL writing. The researchers found that students improve their vocabulary from the online comments and spell check. Such advantages of *Facebook* should be utilized by using the environment for writing and interactions, because students tend to show their interest as the writing environment is a space that students are deeply integrated in their day to day practices.

Despite existing evidence of the potential of *Facebook* for enhancing writing skills, previous studies have not paid enough attention to the writing approaches that are available when the teacher and students are given the space and time to write narrative essays. The results obtained from the studies mentioned above are far from satisfactory in understanding the use of *Facebook* for writing.

Moreover, there were mixed results regarding the use of *Facebook* in educational contexts. A study by McCarty (2013) found that students were not active in *Facebook* due to its privacy. Another study related to *Facebook* is the one conducted by Selwyn (2009), who claimed that students only used *Facebook* to exchange information about the course assessment and for in-depth discussion or reading. Hamat, Embi &Hassan (2012) reported that SNS such as *Facebook* are used to communicate with the lecturers for informal learning and participants spend more time on social networking sites for socializing rather than using it for academic purpose. With these worrying findings in mind, much more research needs yet to be done before we can reach comprehensive understanding of how *Facebook* can be used for writing instruction.

2.2. Approaches to writing

Three approaches to writing will be discussed in this section particularly process, product and genre approaches. The product approach focuses on grammatical features and appropriate sentences that fit in a pre-planned format. This helps students to realize that English essays are based on rhetorical patterns such as narration, description and persuasion. In Malaysia, there is an overemphasis on the product approach in the ESL classrooms and this is partially because of the exam-oriented education system (Taha and Thang, 2014, Tan & Miller, 2007). Students' writing problems are neglected and they do not receive adequate guidance whie producing a piece of writing. The product approach trains students to please the examiner and to achieve good results in the examination. Students are not trained to become good writers.

As a result, the purpose and process of writing are neglected in classroom teaching. In such a situation, accuracy is prioritized over meaning making. Students fail to acquire essential writing skills related to jobs and academic papers.

Process writing is an approach that focuses on the very process involved in producing a written product instead of the final product (Nunan, 1991). In the Malaysian ESL classroom, at Year 10 level, the English lessons are conducted with a maximum of forty minutes per period and with two hundred and forty minutes per week. Most classes consist of 30-40 students. With such large classes and time constraints, teachers are not able to implement the process approach successfully and fall back on the product approach (Mukundan, 2011). Therefore, the abovementioned problems should be first addressed to implement the process writing approach effectively.

The genre approach focuses on grammar, linguistic structures and social functions. According to Tribble (1996), the genre approach seems to share many similarities with product writing as it also emphasizes linguistic features and models that seem to guide the writers. However, one main thing that differentiates the product approach from the genre approach is that latter is produced according to the social context (Badger & White, 2000).

In the Malaysian ESL classroom, narrative writing is considered an examination genre. Malaysian ESL students and teachers take the public examination very seriously (Tan & Miller 2007). Students are also encouraged to attend seminars, as well as workshops, holiday camps to analyze past year questions to acquire the appropriate techniques to score high for their examination (Tan & Miller 2007).

The narrative writing task in this study assumes students write essays with appropriate use of language (grammar, sentence structures, vocabulary and cohesion) as well as fulfill the demand of the SPM requirements to excel in their SPM examinations. For these reasons, the genre approach in this study basically makes clear that narrative writing plays two important roles for the Malaysian ESL students. The genre approach is considered as "knowledge of language" and has "a social purpose" (Badger & White, 2000). Students are able to understand the rhetorical and linguistic structures that appear in narrative writing. This will assist them to produce a more accurate text and excel in their examination.

2.3. Comparison of approaches to writing

The three approaches discussed above exhibit similarities and differences in instructional practices that they advocate. Evidently, there is no approach that is considered perfect to be implemented in the classroom. There is a need to integrate other tools to support the three

writing approaches. The *Facebook* environment is a promising solution to a number of problems in writing. The use of *Facebook* encourages the process writing approach. With the use of *Facebook*, students are able to go recursively through planning, drafting, revising, editing and publishing as they can access the Internet multiple times. *Facebook* permits learners to continue their learning activities outside the classroom. Additionally, the drafts are on the Internet, therefore, there is no time limit to receive comments. The product approach can also be implemented since the teacher can provide model essays, guidance and extra materials in the online writing environment. Criticism on product and genre approaches can also be solved. The social interactions encourage students to share and exchange various ideas and opinions. This obviously encourages creativity in writing their narrative essays. Additionally, the writing tasks in this study also encourage students to write their narrative essays based on their SPM examination format. This will enable them to be familiar with the public examination format. All in all, the researcher hopes that *Facebook* has the potential to implement all the three approaches successfully.

3. The study

This research presents an interpretive case study that is analyzed through a qualitative method. This study is also considered a naturalistic study as the participants involved are observed in their natural setting. The scores represent the qualitative information of vocabulary, language, organization, content and mechanics, which are converted into marks. Pope (2000) has rightly pointed out that a qualitative approach does not intend to quantify data. Simple counts are used to provide a useful summary of some aspects of the analysis.

3.1. Participants

A purposive sampling aimed to seek certain criteria was adopted in this study. The six students had been learning English as their second language for 10 years. Three of them were at the advanced level and the remaining three were at the intermediate level. The students were willing to participate and a consent form was signed informing the aim, objective and the data to be collected. Participants were given pseudonyms to ensure anonymity. The pseudonyms were S1, S2, S3, S4, S5 and S6.

3.2. Procedure

Students and the teacher participated in the closed group. The teacher gave three tasks to the students, to produce essays based on Year 10 syllabus. The length of the essays was 350

words based on the public examination (SPM examination). The teacher's *Facebook* was termed as tutor platform while students' *Facebook* was the learner platform. The teacher guided the students with the narrative writing by using the Labov and Waletzky's narrative structure. Labov and Waletzky narrative structure consists of Abstract, Orientation, Completing Action, Resolution, Evaluation and Coda. Students' Students were instructed to write their individual essays before and after their interactions with peers and teacher. A total of 36 essays were collected from the students.

Table 1. Schedule of learner and tutor platform

	Tutor Platform	Learner Platform	Learner Platform	Learner Platform
Week1-2	Title Material 1	First draft (1)	Social interaction in the online writing environment	Final draft (1)
Week 3-4	Title Material 2	First Draft (2)	Social interaction in the online writing environment	Final draft (2)
		Continued		
Week 5-6	Title	First Draft (3)	Social interaction in the online writing environment	Final draft (3)

3.3. Data collection

Data sources included online interactions and scores of narrative writing. The interactions on *Facebook* were collected during the 2nd, 4th and 6th week by downloading them periodically from the archives. As qualitative study results are rich and have a large amount of data, data reduction becomes pertinent (Miles & Huberman, 1994). According to Miles and Huberman (1994), data reduction is a part of the analysis and the researcher is allowed to decide on which data should be included, discarded and organized in order to arrive at the conclusion.

The patterns of interactions were coded as soon as the researcher observed and studied the patterns of interactions from the tutor and learner platforms. The raters were trained to categorize the patterns based on the product, process and genre approaches. The codes were based on the definitions and evidences of these approaches so that the coders were able to

apply the definitions consistently (Miles & Huberman, 1994). All the messages posted by the teacher and the students to the tutor and learner platforms were analysed.

The three coders were also the raters for the written assignments. The essays posted to the learner platforms were thirty-six in total and were also photocopied for the three raters. They were selected on a voluntary basis, taking into consideration experience in marking public examination English scripts for more than five years. The preliminary rating try-out in grading narrative essays indicated that the scores showed little differences. The raters and coders were required to read and sign the consent forms to ensure their interest and commitment in participating in this study. The students' narrative essays were marked based on Tribble's Assessment Scale (1996). The essays were analysed by considering vocabulary, language, mechanics, organisation and content.

3.4. Findings

3.4.1. What types of approaches are adopted when revising the narrative writing essays?

The findings of this study were reported based on the online interactions between the teacher and students. The interactions were related to teacher and students' explanation, instruction arguments, justifications and other aspects that add quality to the essays. Only a few examples of the interactions related to the approaches were discussed in this study.

The teacher has commented that *"You have to use the semicolon correctly" "errors in singular and plural noun"* and *"errors on punctuation"*. The participants emphasised the grammatical errors found in the peers' essays. For example, *"I pick up", "they were keep talking"* and *"but I fail"*. Errors related to subject-verb agreement also became a problem as in *"My family and I was,"* and *"Terry and the discipline teacher was"*. Besides, past perfect tense was also spotted, as in *"was been arranged"*. Apart from this, some other grammatical inaccuracies were also highlighted. For example, *"we should spell meters or metres", "without long thinking"* or *"without much thinking" and "stayed at school= stayed back in school..."*. The use of prepositions resulted in such errors as *"on the watch"* and *"four buses on the trip"*. As a result, the students predominantly edited their final essays for grammar and sentence structures. The participants corrected the errors that were pointed out by their friends. The product approach was evident in the interactions.

There were no major changes in the organization and the content as the students did not revamp the essays. Their focus was only on grammatical errors. Participants were not keen to re-organize the content. Therefore, the quality of their organization and the content aspects

were nearly the same. This is indicated in the scores for the organization and content aspects. Figure 1indicates selected online interactions related to product approach.
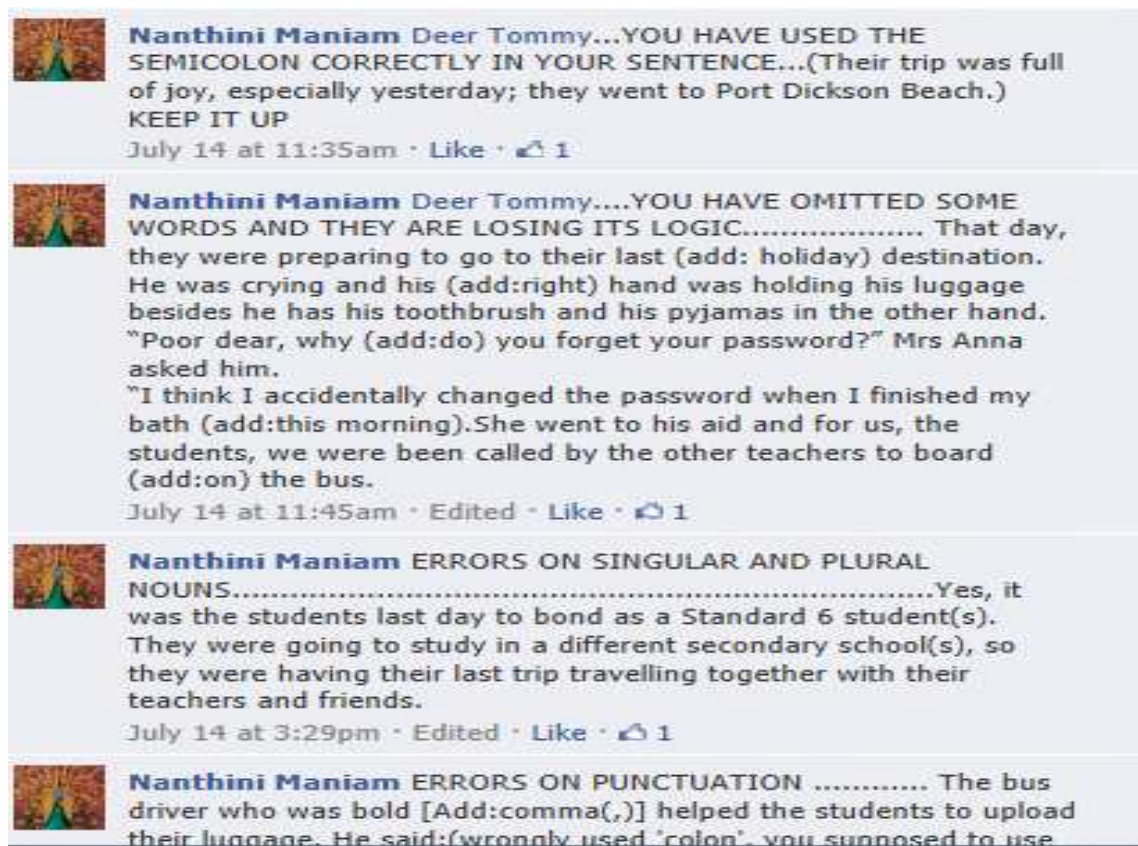

Figure 1. Interactions related to product approach

Students were also reminded to consider certain aspects of writing expected in the public examination (the SPM examination). Students were constantly reminded to maximize their scores by looking closely at the SPM requirements. The teacher was predominantly concerned about the lexical and grammatical errors instead of helping the students to explore and discover other areas of narrative writing.
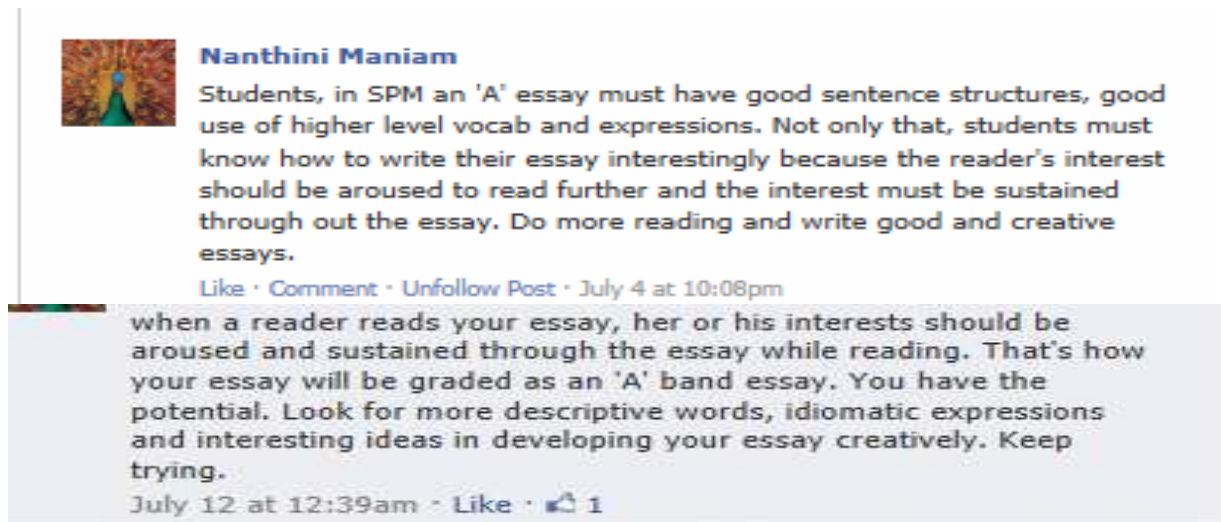
Figure 2. Interactions related to genre approach

3.4.2. How do the online writing approaches contribute to the quality of their narrative writing?

The organization and the content is nearly the same. Tables 2-4 illustrate the scores for the different aspects of the writing for Task 1, 2 and 3. The narrative writing is marked for organization (O), content (C), language (L), vocabulary (V), mechanics (M) and total (T).

Table 2. Students' average scores for narrative writing task 1.

STUDENT	AVERAGE SCORES											
	BEFORE COLLABORATION						AFTER COLLABORATION					
	O	C	L	V	M	T	O	C	L	V	M	T
S1	15	16	18	11	6	**66**	15	16	19	12	6	**68**
S2	14	15	17	13	6	**65**	14	15	18	15	6	**68**
S3	15	15	22	15	6	**74**	15	16	23	16	6	**76**
S4	14	14	18	13	6	**65**	14	14	20	15	6	**69**
S5	14	14	16	14	6	**64**	14	13	17	16	6	**65**
S6	17	18	23	16	6	**80**	17	18	24	17	6	**82**

Table3. Students' average scores for narrative writing task 2.

| STU | AVERAGE SCORES | |
| | BEFORE COLLABORATION | AFTER COLLABORATION |

	O	C	L	V	M	T	O	C	L	V	M	T
S1	15	16	15	15	6	**67**	15	16	17	16	6	**70**
S2	14	15	15	14	6	**64**	14	15	16	14	6	**65**
S3	15	15	17	14	6	**67**	15	15	18	15	6	**69**
S4	15	16	18	14	6	**69**	15	16	19	15	6	**71**
S5	15	16	19	15	6	**71**	15	15	20	16	7	**73**
S6	17	18	24	18	6	**83**	17	18	25	18	6	**84**

Table 4. Students' average scores for narrative writing task 3.

	AVERAGE SCORES											
	BEFORE COLLABORATION						AFTER COLLABORATION					
STUDENT	O	C	L	V	M	T	O	C	L	V	M	T
S1	15	15	20	16	7	**73**	15	15	20	16	7	**73**
S2	15	15	17	15	7	**69**	15	15	18	16	7	**71**
S3	15	14	17	15	7	**68**	15	15	18	16	7	**71**
S4	15	15	16	16	7	**69**	15	15	16	16	7	**69**
S5	14	15	15	14	7	**65**	14	15	15	14	7	**65**
S6	16	18	21	19	7	**81**	16	18	21	19	7	**81**

The scores indicate that most of the students improved their vocabulary and language. However, there was no significant difference in the quality of essays for organization and content. In Task 3 students did not correct the changes indicated in the interactions. In fact the interaction in Task 3 was limited.

3.4.3. Emerging themes

According to Le (1999), research can be considered as an excursion and the entire meaning of the study can only be achieved when the excursion ends. There are no promises or assurances that the research will follow what was planned at the initial stage. Only when the research ends, the complete scenario of the whole journey is realised. Following this line of thought, the research did provide additional issues that emerged as supplementary findings in addition to the main research questions. These emerging themes further enriched this study as discussed below.

Students behaving like teachers

The digital natives often empower themselves in an online environment. When they were involved in the learning activities, with their tech-savvy nature, they tend to play a teacher-like role in addressing questions raised by their peers. This is a good online behaviour as students are beginning to have confidence when getting engaged in the teaching-learning activities. An example of such an interaction is given below.

Figure 3. Students behaving like teachers

Duration of task

The researcher observed an 'online fatigue syndrome' as students' interactions were gradually getting less and less developed as they proceeded from Task 1 to Task 3. A need, therefore, arises for teachers not to implement a teaching activity for a prolonged time. There seems to be a threshold for time on task when students are engaged in the online activities. Efforts should be made to vary the teaching activities from time to time when students are engaged in online writing.

4. Discussion and implications for the future

It is evident that the interactions were very much related to correcting of the misspelt words, grammar and sentence structures. Students' interaction with their peers and teacher assisted students in improving the microstructures of the essays in terms of vocabulary, language, sentence structures and mechanics. There were no differences in organization and content. Evidently, there is an overemphasis on the product approach in the Malaysian ESL classrooms although all the necessary prerequisites including time and space were available. The process approach that needs planning, multiple drafting and delayed editing is not evident in this study although all the necessary prerequisites including space and time were available.

Such findings are consistent with those of Taha & Thang (2014) and Tan & Miller (2006), who pointed at the domination of the product approach in Malaysian ESL classrooms. The genre approach that emphasizes the need to excel in examination was evident. The particular findings of this study highlight the fact that the Malaysian students are trained to pass their public exams (Taha & Thang, 2014; Sharizan, 2003) in order to be admitted to tertiary education institutions.

As anticipated, the current study also confirmed the assumption that the use of *Facebook* as a writing platform brings significant benefits for the students. This aligned with findings of Carlos et al. (2015), Çelik, Çevik, & Haşlaman (2014); Reid (2011) and Drouin (2011), namely that *Facebook* can be used successfully in educational contexts. There are also implications for pedagogical aspect. A particular emphasis will be on interactions. Teachers should prompt students to further probe into the issue discussed instead of giving definite answers and pointing out a list of errors made by their peers. Put another way, students should be encouraged to give solutions, explanations and carry out constructive discussions of the solutions.

By emphasizing that the first draft of their essays should not be their final draft students will learn to organise the content, write and rewrite their essays to improve their narrative writing and reflecting the recursive nature of writing. For this, a checklist which integrates the three approaches, namely product, process, and genre approaches should be given to teachers.

Table 5. Checklist for teaching narrative writing

Product Approach	Grammatical, Vocabulary and Sentence Structures
Process Approach	Pre-Writing
	Drafting
	Revising
	Editing
Genre Approach	Examination Requirements

The use of the online writing environment can also be layered successfully with the teacher intervention at the appropriate time. The study demonstrated that the teacher played a dominant role and this behaviour is an extension of a teacher-centered attitude from the traditional classroom environment to the online learning environment. In the online

environment, students should be encouraged to ask questions that motivate them to seek new insights. Action words such as 'analyze', 'compare', 'contrast', 'point out', 'criticize', 'support', 'integrate', 'rearrange', 'rewrite', and 'summarize' should be used often to encourage critical thinking. Effective and active interactions will appear if the teacher is equipped with the different level of thinking skills based on Bloom's Taxonomy. If teachers are aware of the above thinking skills, students could possibly achieve a higher level of critical thinking and better writing outcomes. The different thinking skills based on Bloom's taxonomy as suggested by the Anderson and Krathwohl's (2001) adapted version of Bloom's taxonomy are as follows:

a. Remember - recalling terminology, specific facts, or different procedures related to information and or course topics. At this level, a student can remember something, but may not really understand it.

b. Understand - the ability to grasp the meaning of information in different situations or in problem solving.

c. Apply - being able to use previously learned information in different situations or in problem solving.

d. Analyze - the ability to break information down into component parts. Analysis also refers to the process of examining information in order to make conclusions regarding cause and effect, interpreting motives, making inferences, or finding evidence to support statements and arguments.

e. Evaluate - being able to judge the value of information or sources of information based on personal values or opinions.

f. Create - the ability to creatively or uniquely apply prior knowledge or skills to produce new and original thoughts, ideas, processes and etc. At this level, students are involved in creating their own thoughts and ideas. In these phases, the students were able to remember, understand and apply the ideas gained from the interactions.

5. Conclusion

Two important conclusions can be made from the study. The first conclusion is that the interactions gave priority to product and genre approaches although time and space was available in the online writing environment. Teachers need to recognize that there is a need to change their pedagogical practices when students are put online. As such, identifying and realizing the problems can serve to bring out changes in teaching writing to Malaysian ESL learners.

The second conclusion is that students welcomed the idea of the *Facebook* environment for writing instruction. Such positive aspects should be utilized by the teachers for effective writing activities. The study also adds to the body of research related to *Facebook*, thereby complementing the previous literature related to *Facebook*. The emerging themes indicated that *Facebook* can be viewed as an extended space for language learning activities as students appeared more confident, yet, duration of the task may inhibit the advantage of the online writing environment.

Although *Facebook* makes noteworthy contributions to this line of research, there are several limitations that need to be addressed in future research. The first limitation was a small group of students and therefore the findings cannot be generalized. Robust studies must be conducted for a better understanding of *Facebook* as a writing platform. The second limitation is the type of essays. Future research is still needed to explore other types of essays (factual and argumentative), report writing and summary. Despite these limitations the findings of this study gave valuable insights into Malaysian ESL students' online writing behaviour.

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