

## Understanding the Impact of Using Visual Arts as Writing Prompts in Narrative Writing

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**ABSTRACT:** *Our contemporary educational task is to build a solid foundation for lifelong learning inclusive of visual arts known for its potentials and benefits to empower the hearts and minds of young children. This case study focused on how integrating visual art in the writing process enhances the quality of fifteen fifth-grade children's narrative writing. This research also highlights the significance of visual arts in active learning or visual learning. The qualitative inquiry used three writing conditions that include a short film, photographs, and 3D artwork model as writing prompts to stimulate children to write productively. The data collection process also included children's Individual Learning Plan and classroom observations. The results revealed that most of the children responded positively to the writing prompts and there was a significant improvement in the grades achieved in at least one of the writing conditions with prompts.*

**Keywords:** *visual arts, writing prompts & narrative writing*

### Introduction

Visual art is an artistic language with an amalgamative culmination of insight, skill and thoughts which are very similar to the developing process in effective writing (Maurin et al., 2003). Many educators have agreed that visual art has its own symbolic way as a universal language to spark creativity and construct meaning in the journey of discovery (Jensen, 2001). Some evidence suggests that the benefits are greater when the visual arts are started earlier, suggesting a developmental role in the process (Bezruczko and Schroeder, 1996 as cited in Jensen, 2001:53).

Olshansky (2006) had made an effort in establishing a writing curriculum focused on art making called Picturing-Writing and Image-Making. This process broadly involves elementary level students to draw and/or paint what is on their mind and then write a story about what is going on in and through the picture. Another effort was also done by Randle (2010) where he successfully applied visual thinking strategies as outlined by researchers Housen and Yenawine (2001) in her qualitative research inquiry in three different writing conditions among twenty-seven fourth grade students.

Nevertheless, this meaning-making strategy of introducing and integrating visual arts in core subjects has not been consistently acclimatized in many schools as an effort to further promote creative and critical thinking among students especially in the context of literacy. Thus, the lack of inclusion of visual arts across the academic curriculum has propelled the researchers to investigate its true impact on children's learning by applying visual arts as writing prompts.

Literature has shown that visual arts quicken the pace of learning and teaching in numerous aspects. As such the scope of this research is to investigate the effects of using visual arts as writing prompts in narrative writing among young children to discover how creativity aids and inspires them in their writing. This study will address two major research questions. Firstly, to investigate whether prompts help students narrate better and secondly, to identify the type of visual arts which is deemed to be more engaging in providing a platform of inspiration for narrative writing.

### **Literature Review**

In the present day, visual art is principally needed by young children as a platform for safe expression, exploration, communication, imagination, and cultural and historical understanding (NACCCE report, 1999). The integration of visual art into the curriculum offers extensive opportunities for children to be fully engaged in their learning whereby they are completely involved as a whole person physically, emotionally, intellectually and spiritually. On top of that, Korn-Burstztn (2012:74) stated that one reason that the visual arts are critical for children at all stages of learning, but particularly in early childhood, is that they provide an entry point to engage different kinds of learners. Thus, visual art is definitely a powerful tool to bring forth active, differentiated and inquiry learning in schools. Not only that, the federal 'No Child Left Behind' (NCLB) Act of 2001 also emphasized heavily on the equal billing of arts with mathematics, reading, science and other disciplines as core academic subjects which has the potential to maximize children's learning outcomes.

It can be stated that young children acquire a greater sense of self-confidence and develop many essential skills through visual art. According to Ruppert, one promising line of inquiry focuses on how to measure the full range of benefits associated with arts learning and she asserts that this includes 'efforts to develop a reliable means to assess some of the subtler effects of arts learning that standardized tests fail to capture, such as the motivation to achieve or the ability to think critically (2006:8).

The incorporation of visual art creates a strong connection to a wide continuum of academic and social benefits. In an integrated curriculum, education through visual arts opens the doors for children to learn how to analyze, evaluate, and articulate conclusions from what they see and hear. Korn-Burstztn (2012:55) also affirmed that 'it provides a means for children to reflect on their experience, as through a kaleidoscope.' Additionally, the Southeast Center for Education in

the Arts (SCEA) of University of Tennessee at Chattanooga (2008:2) stated that 'knowledge and experience in the arts provide children the capacity to expand their reasoning ability, to make connections, and to think creatively.' Hence, the use of visual art with core subjects establishes an extraordinary learning process for children in order to ensure a perpetuating momentum in developing both head and experiential knowledge and skills needed.

Olshansky (2003) developed an approach to writing that combines two dynamic elements of art and literature whereby her two main methods namely picturing-writing and image-making have demonstrated its effectiveness through colourful, tantalizing and unconventional pathway into writing. The implementation of visual art in core academic subjects especially in the context of literacy generates imaginative and expressive learning environments for children to engage and explore. Children and young people achieve learning gains through participating with others in "art-full" exploration, beginning with seeing (learning to look, to sustain visual focus), and doing (enacting, role-playing as in created or performing arts) accompanied by saying (inner speech, verbalizing, narrating), reading and writing (Grant, et al., 2008:59 as cited in Heath & Wollach, 2008:6).

To add on, 'art experiences enhance observation, listening, questioning, and describing skills, which are important for language development and writing' (Libby, 2000:3). Such experiences capture the hearts of young children to pay attention and participate in any arts-based instructions classroom. Introducing visual art as writing prompts or in the literacy context is something that is familiar to many educators but is not actively instigated in many schools (NCCA report, 2005). Children will always remember what is meaningful and enlivening for them – what touches a chord of their lives that links up to their preceding experiences. The more it is connected with their feelings and former encounters, the stronger the impact is (Gullat, 2008:17 as cited in Grieff, 2010:8) stated that 'the arts link thought and feeling, thus they foster more effective communication and significantly impact the development of language and literacy skills.' Additionally, Libby (2000:2) also described that 'a painting is a triple experience: visual, emotional and intellectual.' Subsequently, children will grow to identify and position themselves in this artistic process of learning which will eventually help to improve in their literacy skills and knowledge.

Randle (2010) has successfully conducted a research study in implementing the visual thinking strategies, an effort of introducing visual arts into literacy, through three different writing conditions among twenty-seven fourth grade students. The goal of her research study was to distinguish if the gap between creative speech and creative writing quality would be closed by offering students alternate methods as story starters, including both textual forms and visual art forms. However, her research point can be further explored on how visual art can be used as a tool to direct and instruct a differentiated classroom of learners with diverse learning needs and accelerate their academic and social attainment. On top of that, Obama (2009) also boldly mentioned that in addition to giving our children the science and math skills they need to

compete in the new global context, we should also encourage the ability to think creatively that comes from a meaningful arts education. Moreover, Eisner, et al. (1977) commented that educators want their children to have basic skills. But they (children) will also need sophisticated cognition, and they (children) can learn that through the visual arts. Generally, visual arts are handiwork that we can observe such as painting, drawing, sculpture, film, photography, crafts and printmaking.

According to Gelineau (2011:4), arts play a vital part in the problem-solving process in the classroom by strengthening the right or intuitive side of the brain to aid in finding alternative solutions and more creative thinking. Williams says that ‘children come with a two sided mind. We must encourage them to use it, to develop both types of thinking so that they have access to the fullest possible range of mental abilities.’ (2011:4). Apart from that, integrating visual arts in lessons of other subjects have the capability to serve dissimilar learning needs of young children. Thus, the significance of the visual arts’ ability to unite children in schools should not be understated.

### **Methodology**

As explained throughout the preceding review of literature, there is evidence in the implementation of visual arts as narrative writing prompts to lay forward various academic and social skills especially creative and critical thinking. The main objectives of this research are to explore the impact of visual arts in the context of literacy specifically in writing through the use of artistic writing prompts among young children and to investigate how creativity stirs up their imagination and galvanize them to make connections in their writings.

This case study was purposefully done among fifteen targeted PYP 5 students in an international school consisting of eight male students and seven female students. All of them have completed a personal Individual Learning Plan (ILP) that facilitated in the identification of their dissimilar learning intelligences. All fifteen students who participated had good attendance record and this enabled the researcher to maintain the consistency and reliability of the research outcomes. However, one male student was absent for the third writing condition but the research sample was kept in a group of fifteen participants to ensure the consistency of the data collection. An equal amount of time of 45 minutes (after a short introduction of the writing prompts) was allocated to every writing condition for all fifteen participants to ensure the validity of the writing conditions. All writing conditions were conducted by their own classroom teacher. The differences in their performance with and without visual arts as their writing prompts were observed. Teacher A first conducted one narrative writing lesson without any visual arts prompts as per her teaching style but with a writing template. The purpose the template was given to students was to aid them in organising their ideas. This first narrative writing condition was the control of the case study. The question that Teacher A selected for the participants was “If I Could Only See One Colour.” Students were asked to write a narration based on this.

Three different types of visual arts namely short films, photographs, and students' artwork were used in three different narrative writing situations. The chosen writing situations were as follows:

1. Most of us have a favourite book. Imagine that one day the book pulled you into the story.
2. Imagine that you woke up the next morning after your 10<sup>th</sup> birthday as a grown-up adult.
3. Assume that you were given only one chance to go to the place you would love to live in.

Thus, there was a total of four narrative essay questions altogether. For every lesson, a brief extra ten minutes was utilized for the introduction of the visual arts writing prompts. In the second narrative writing condition, a short film from the movie of 'The Chronicles of Narnia: The Voyage of the Dawn Trader' was shown. The video clip took up roughly about eight minutes of the starter activity. Few photographs were screened on the whiteboard as writing prompts for the third writing condition. These photographs depicted young adorable children and grown-up adults. For the fourth writing condition, all participants were brought out for a short gallery walk outside their classroom to see their own 3D model artworks that they had done previously about a place where they wished to live in.

Data was collectively obtained and analysed. All their writings were evaluated by three different teachers with the use of the same grading rubrics to ensure reliability and validity. Other important controls throughout the research were a fixed minimum number of words of 50 for every writing condition and unchanged grading rubrics for all lessons.

## Findings

The purpose of the current case study was to elucidate the impact of employing visual arts as an effective tool to promote creative and critical thinking to improve children's writing skills within the context of one fifth-grade classroom. Previous research explored throughout the review of literature suggests a positive link between visual arts and children's creative thinking and critical thinking skills. 'The rationale proposed by some is that experience in the arts develops initiative and creativity, stimulates the imagination, fosters pride in craft, develops planning skills, and in some arts fields helps the young learn how to work together.

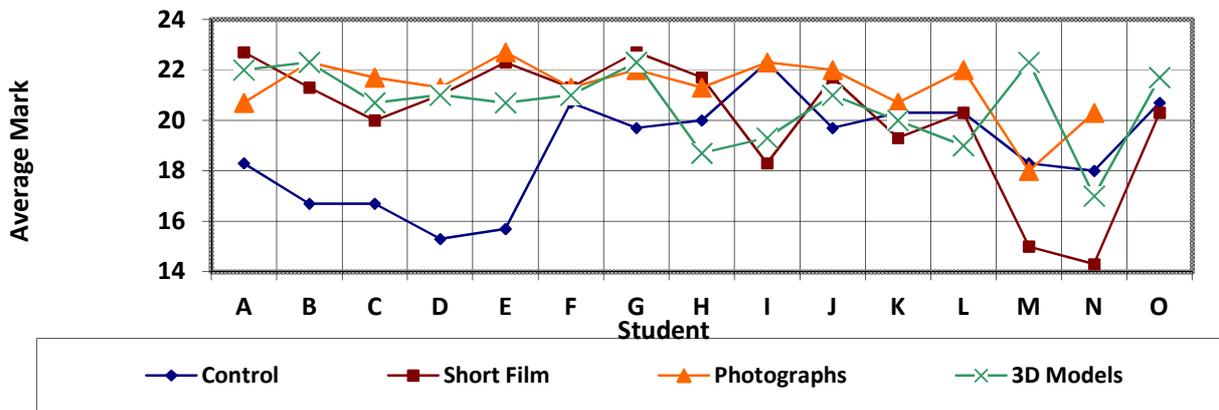
In order to discern what forms a meaningful and thus valuable creative experience, children participated in a series of four writing activities for this research. Each activity presented required more creative input from them to be reflected in their final writings. The final writing in each of the four target activities was a narrative story. Three different writing prompts as explained above were used as to indicate three different types of visual arts. This was done to identify which type of visual art was deemed to be more engaging for students in providing a platform of inspiration for narrative writing.

The findings revealed that 53.33% of the participants were significantly motivated with the use of visual arts as their writing prompts. They showed a big improvement in their writing skill as they were guided with creativity and imaginative ideas as compared to when they were not given any visual arts as their writing prompts. This was supported by the observation of the classes where the students showed more interests when the visual arts prompts were used. Thus visual arts were seen to be catalysts to unlock and inspire creative output amidst the students. The findings are shown in Table 1.

**Table 1: Students' Writing Grades**

Student Grade Profile				
Student/ Writing Condition	Average Mark			
	1	2	3	4
A	18.3	22.7	20.7	22.0
B	16.7	21.3	22.3	22.3
C	16.7	20.0	21.7	20.7
D	15.3	21.0	21.3	21.0
E	15.7	22.3	22.7	20.7
F	20.7	21.3	21.3	21.0
G	19.7	22.7	22.0	22.3
H	20.0	21.7	21.3	18.7
I	22.3	<b>18.3</b>	22.3	<b>19.3</b>
J	19.7	21.7	22.0	21.0
K	20.3	<b>19.3</b>	20.7	<b>20.0</b>
L	20.3	20.3	22.0	<b>19.0</b>
M	18.3	<b>15.0</b>	18.0	22.3
N	18.0	14.3	20.3	<b>17.0</b>
O	20.7	20.3	<i>Abst</i>	21.7

In Table 1, I represents the results of the students where no visual prompt was used while 2,3 and 4 are the results when prompts were used (2 is where a short film was used as prompt, 3 is where photographs were used as prompts and finally 4 is when the 3D model was used). The results in Table 1 shows there is a significant increase of approximately about 4.6 – 7.0 marks in average for almost all the students in the 2<sup>nd</sup> , 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> writing condition as compared to the initial marks they obtained in the first writing. This is consistent with Grieff’s (2010:6 as cited in Grant, et al., 2008:70) claim that ‘playful activity (through visual arts) sets in motion learner strategies for attending and connecting, predicting and confirming, integrating and completing, that together make possible full engagement in reading and writing’. The major increase in the participants’ performance in narrative writing is very much affected by the strong nature of visual arts as a dispenser of creativity. A line graph was also used to illustrate the final outcomes of their narrative writings clearly (see Figure 1).



**Figure 1: Students’ Average Mark Difference for All Writing Conditions**

Despite the significant increase in students’ results when visual prompts were used, it must be noted that there was some inconsistency in the findings as shown by the results of Students I, K, L, M and N. The reasons for these discrepancies were explained to a certain extent through the analysis of the Individual Learning Plan (ILP) that they had completed in the course of the research study. Student I wrote that he was more comfortable with the habitual, guided writing approach taught by his teacher. He also mentioned that he would require some time to adapt to new changes but he personally thinks the implementation of visual arts as writing prompts to be very interesting. This explains the reason why he scored the same average mark in the first writing condition and the second writing condition where photographs were used as writing prompts. Students K, M and N wrote that they only made some progress and there is room for improvement in their literacy skills. It can be concluded that these students may need a longer time to adapt to this new approach of inclusion of visual arts in writing lessons as they may have

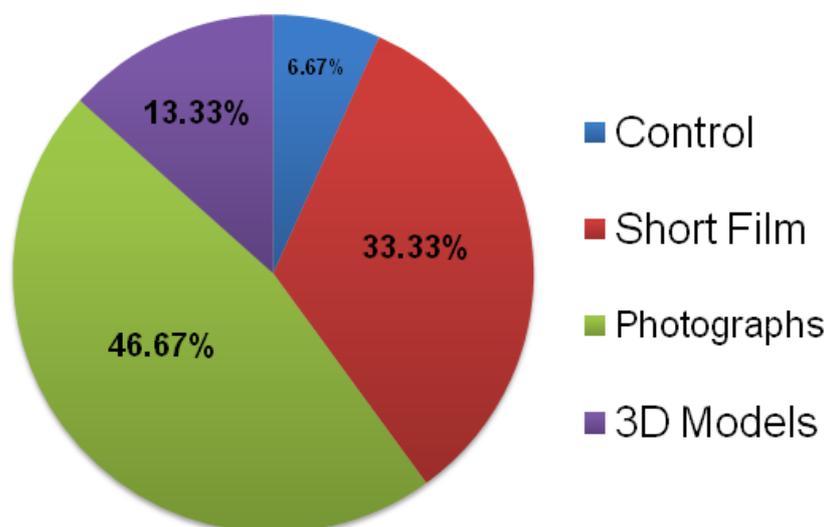
different strong learning intelligences. ‘Creativity in learning is about fostering “flexibility, openness for the new, the ability to adapt or to see new ways of doing things and the courage to face the unexpected’ (European Commission, 2009:7). Their ability to adapt to these new changes and have courage to try something new is developing as they did perform better in writing condition 2 where photographs were used.

According to the students’ ILP, there was consensus that they benefited to a great extent with the help of visual arts as their writing prompts. This is in line with Kouster’s (2011:6) claim that ‘ it is through the creative exploration...that child artists begin to develop visual, auditory, kinaesthetic, and graphic symbols with which to represent their thoughts. Their language abilities are enhanced through listening, communicating, vocabulary, and symbolically.’ Having mentioned that visual arts are creative catalysts, it truly gives a deep impact to promote learning development in the context of literacy and other academic gains. Furthermore, they also stated that they would love to have visual arts as narrative writing prompts to promote their literacy skills. This is shown in the excerpts shown in Table 2 which is taken from the students’ answer in response to the question “Would you like to have visual arts as writing prompts in your English lessons? Please give your reason(s)’.

**Table 2: Answer to Q 3 in ILP**

Student B	Yes, it would make it easier to compose and create a story.
Student D	Yes. It’s fun and we can get new ideas with lots of fun.
Student F	Yes, because it helps me with my writing and creativity.

Figure 2 distinguishes which type of visual arts is deemed to be the best platform of inspiration for students to write. As can be seen in the pie chart, 93.33% of the participants showed positive response to the three writing conditions where visual arts were used as their writing prompts. It is proven that photographs is the type of visual arts, which has the greater ability to spark imaginative ideas among these fifteen students as compared to the other types. All fifteen participants responded well to the writing prompts and reflected creativity and improved writing skills in at least one writing condition with the use of visual arts. Thus, art can be applied as an approach to accentuate learning in a particular subject or topic area. Offering an unconventional experience for young children through the introduction or creation of an artwork can provide supplementary contextual knowledge and standpoint into a subject.



**Figure 2: Percentage of Effectiveness of Different Types of Visual Arts as Writing Prompts in Narrative Writing**

It must be noted that a few of the students (Students C, D and E) in the study are learning English as an Additional Language (EAL). Every school's curriculum across all subject areas should provide relevant, inclusive and challenging opportunities to all children with different learning needs. Through visual arts, students with special learning needs are able to construct a sense of self-confidence to engage in a creative cycle of experimentation, action and reflection in their literacy skills.

The findings proved that the EAL students obtained better marks in the writing conditions where visual arts prompts were used as compared to when no visual arts was used. For instance, student E, a Korean female student, showed an increase in her marks of 5.0 to 7.0 in average in the three writing conditions with visual arts as prompts. Therefore, it is undoubtedly true that 'arts-based teaching capitalizes on these parallel processes by providing visual, kinaesthetic and/or auditory opportunities for connecting with and processing new information in addition to reinforcing prior learning' to cater students with special learning needs (Grieff, 2010:6 as cited in Cornett, 2006).

### **Conclusion**

This case study conclusively demonstrates the competence to construct and transform learning environments that foster student originality and creativity in the context of literacy specifically narrative writing via visual arts as writing prompts. Exhaustive research studies have proven the tremendous strength of visual arts in hosting creative and critical inquiry learning which

eventually leads to the initiation of many educational approaches and concepts as discussed in the literature review section.

According to Alter (2010), the multilayered and multi-disciplinary visual arts curriculum would be able to address key educational principles quite effectively because the value of art lies in its multi-connectedness. As such extending visual education beyond the parameters and boundaries of visual arts education would allow integrated teaching of subject content. Some degree of inter-disciplinary is needed because the realm of the visual arts overlaps with many school subjects and this invariably will challenge old curriculum constructs' (Freedman, 2003 as cited in Alter, 2010:8).

Unquestionably, the research results from this case study have confirmed that the overlapping and integration of visual arts into various subject or topic areas are beneficial and engaging. This has been proven among fifteen participants through the use of video/short film, photographs and 3D artwork models in various treatment groups of this research. This realm of creativity provides the best entry point to active inquiry learning and awakens positive attitudes towards learning. All participants that were involved in the case study reflected their enthusiasm in their narrative writings when they were given a mixture of writing prompts to direct their imaginative thoughts and feelings thoroughly. 'The imaginative, exploratory, active learning inherent in the arts enhances cognition, engages attention, motivates learners, and connects them to content emotionally, physically, and personally. Learning in and through the arts produces of creating excitement, joy and surprise' (Manitoba Education, Citizenship and Youth, 2003:6 as cited in Robinson, 2008:9).

The emergence of visual arts to be implemented in diverse areas of learning is still growing in schools all over the world. Many educationalists have moved from the perspectives of having visual arts as one separate subject in schools. Instead, many experience remarkable changes in their students' learning as a whole by blending visual arts into the desired academic areas. Young children construct meaning through such creative learning as it feeds inventiveness into their mind, body and soul compatible to their distinctive multiple intelligences.

What is more breath-taking is that differentiated arts-based instructions also impel learning that takes place in the classrooms in such a way that it is able to reach out to unreached multiple learning intelligences effectively. It creates manifold pathways so that children of diverse abilities undergo equally suitable ways to grasp, exploit, enlarge and present learning concepts through these instructions. Integrated lessons that blend the concepts of more than one subject, reflect how people naturally think, engage student interest, and tap higher-order thinking (Sikes, 2007:15). It is also vital in reaching students who otherwise do not subscribe to traditional educational methods. A number of participants of this case study self-reviewed after going through four different writing conditions and found that they have achieved something new in their learning beyond their intended learning outcomes. Thus, the insertion of arts into the

curriculum is succeeding, sustainable and capable of meeting the requirements of a growing population of children.

Undoubtedly, this creative zone of learning offers a place for young children to think critically rather than just getting the answers right and to better learn in other areas too leading them to progressively multiply their personal, social and academic development. As they are continuously exposed to the quality in this creative learning, they will be able to possess a better self-expression, an appreciation of arts, a wide range of necessary skills and an enriched personal confidence and satisfaction with their achievements.

Visual arts provide experiences that cannot be duplicated by other means for young children as they grow independently successful. Moreover, 'collaborative research that provides connections between the arts, sciences, and education would provide a powerful platform for instituting radical reforms that may change the culture of schools so that they establish the conditions for creative growth' (Robinson, 2008:11). Johnson (2012) also quoted that children don't dream of being insignificant. So, it is time for us to prepare the fields for them to come and enjoy learning creatively and passionately.

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