

## Outdoor Learning: Evaluating Students' Performance through Descriptive Writing

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**Abstract:** *This study discovers the relevance of outdoor learning by assessing students' performance through descriptive writing. The purpose of this study is to investigate students' performance in descriptive writing and how is it relevant to the outdoor learning classroom. The method used in this study is a qualitative case study. This study is conducted in Universiti Tenaga Nasional (UNITEN) with the sample taken from the College of Engineering. The participants selected for this study is 6 with 3 male and 3 female students each with mixed level of proficiency ranging from low intermediate to high intermediate. The instruments used in this study are interview questions and students' writing performance results which are taken from their mid-term and final exams. The students' were asked to write a descriptive essay before and after they had been taught using the outdoor teaching method. The findings of this study indicated that all of the six students' improved in their descriptive writing after being exposed to the outdoor teaching method. Hence, it could be implied that outdoor learning is a great alternative teaching method as compared to the traditional method of teaching as it helps students to be proficient in their descriptive writing skills.*

**Key Words:** *outdoor learning, descriptive writing, writing performance*

### Introduction

Writing has become an equally recent development with its teaching only evolving as a scholarly development in the 1970's, Nystrand et.al (1993). However, writing is seldom seen as something to be taught solely and in the second language classroom it was most often used as a way of representing mastery of the structures studied in class or for dictation.

The term 'writing' denotes both to an act and the result of that act. This directly sets up two possible perspectives on acquiring writing: learning the process of creating and learning the form and organization of the product but writing also has a social dimension and purpose, which can lead to other viewpoints focusing on genre, voice, and audience, Swales (1990). One of the types of writing which focuses on those aspects is descriptive writing.

Descriptive writing requires the writers to be imaginative and run wild with images that they create in their minds; enabling them to be better writers. This means that, descriptive writing is a type of writing where the author uses details to paint the picture with words. Readers will be provided with details of people, places, objects, events and sensory details such as touch, smell, hear, taste and see to help the readers to get a clear picture of the story the author intended to tell.

However, many writers face problems in descriptive writing which results to writing anxiety because they are unable to be imaginative thus be creative in their writing, Erkan & Saban (2011). One of the reason is due to lack of space in the classroom; the writers are confined within the four walls of the classroom which prevents these writers to think creatively and write freely in the classroom, Marlia Puteh and Supyan Hussin (2003). This is because the large number of students in the indoor classroom prevents them from moving freely in the classroom.

Nonetheless, by exposing these writers to outdoor learning, it could help reduce writing anxiety and improve writers' use of sensory details which is essential in descriptive writing. It is through outdoor learning that these writers are able to experience for themselves the world, thus enhancing their visual imagination, Claiborne et.al (2003) and being better descriptive writer.

### **Review of Literature**

The central role of the outdoor learning is experiential learning which is experience which helps learners in the learning process. The term 'experiential' is used to distinguish the experiential learning theory both from cognitive learning theories which tend to highlight cognition over effect and behavioural learning theories that refute any role for personal experience in the learning process, Kolb and Kolb (1999).

Additionally, the experiential learning theory could be defined as "the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience". Kolb (1984) further states that "knowledge results from the combination of grasping and transforming experience" Kolb (1984). The concrete experience and abstract conceptualization is one of the form of grasping experience which is portrayed by two contrasting related modes of the experiential learning theory model Kolb and Kolb (1999). In addition, the renovating experience which are reflective observation and active experimentation is another two form of the contrasting related modes of the experiential learning theory model, Kolb and Kolb (1999). These contrasting related modes of the experiential learning theory could be seen in the current study that is being conducted which is the outdoor learning.

Descriptive writing on the other hand, is one type that requires the writers or in the case of this study, the learners to describe something such as object, person, place, experience, emotion, and situation and allows for a great deal of creative freedom towards the learners in expressing themselves, Purdue University (n.d). Additionally, a good descriptive writing entails the learners to brainstorm for ideas, Purdue University (n.d). This means that as a good descriptive writer, the learners should be ever ready to jot down ideas they observe before they start describing it. This would then help the learners to be more descriptive and precise when it comes to descriptive essay.

Further, descriptive writing needs the writer to use clear and concise language, Purdue University (n.d). This means that learners should be meticulous in choosing the right words to

enable them to describe effectively. Descriptive writing demands learners to use their senses when it comes to descriptive writing, Purdue University (n.d) which are to sight, touch, taste, hear and smell thus enabling them to better write a good descriptive essay. Another feature of the descriptive writing is that learners should be able to comprehend adjectives, Purdue University (n.d) that could help them paint a vivid image in the mind of the readers. The last feature of descriptive essay is organization, Purdue University (n.d). This means that the writers need to strive to have a flow of ideas and not just plain ramblings of ideas.

In addition, Scoolwork (n.d) states that there are three types of descriptive essay structures which are spatial, chronological and climatic. The spatial structure is known as the order of place where the writing is depicted as a movie camera which involves a recall of events and details. This type of writing is important when the topic involves on place. The structure includes introduction, three locations of the place and a conclusion.

The second structure is chronological which is also known as the order of time where the writing is seen as moving scene by scene. This writing is important when the topic is an event and it includes the introduction, the three scene and a conclusion and lastly, the climatic structure which is also known as the order of importance. This type of writing is used in any descriptive approach of the essay and it includes the introduction, the three points that the writer wished to convey and a conclusion.

In addition, one of the problems that is faced by students when it comes to descriptive writing is lack of vocabulary. Vocabulary is one of the important aspect when it comes to writing a descriptive essay. This is because it is one of the basic component of a successful writing skill. This is agreed by Kurtus (2012) who stresses on the importance of having a good vocabulary in terms of writing. Hence, lack of vocabulary is a crucial problem that affects students' fluency in writing due to lack in reading, Zarea (n.d).

According to Ahmad et.al (2010) on his research on adult ESL learner's vocabulary knowledge, state in his findings that Malaysian adult students have a poor active and passive vocabulary knowledge. Hence, this is a barrier towards learning the second language particularly in the writing classroom as some students failed to take charge of their own learning.

Besides, the duration of fourteen week for the class to commence makes it impossible for teachers especially in private colleges to give extra lessons on vocabulary as they need to meet the course outlines requirements of the subject in order to conduct the class. Hence, this brings to the decision that the learners have to take charge of their own learning which in reality many students failed to do so due to lack in attitude towards the learning process.

Furthermore, these students face problems in their descriptive writing skill because of the lack of conducive environment. This is further proven by The University of Michigan (n.d) which states that "a warm, safe, and caring environment allows students to influence the nature of the

activities they undertake, engage seriously in their study, regulate their behaviour, and know of the explicit criteria and high expectations of what they are to achieve". This is due to most teachers opt to teach the writing skill through the traditional method in the confinement of the four walls that is the indoor classroom. This makes these students to feel uneasy as it restricts them to think clearly and thus be imaginative in their writing. To add the students' problem is the need for the teacher to cater to classes with at least sixty to eighty students in a classroom. This is further agreed by Kornfeld (n.d) who states teaching a large classroom can be daunting for teachers which results in these students to not be able to move around and be comfortable enough in their own seats to write the descriptive essay.

In short, the method of teaching through outdoor learning is one way of helping students to express themselves through the use of senses and adjectives in enhancing their writing skill performance particularly their descriptive writing performance.

Malaysia, has also established the outdoor education or to be more specific, outdoor learning in the Malaysian education scene. However, most outdoor learning that is being conducted is in the field of science, mathematics and physical education and hardly on the field of languages. Previous studies conducted by Tuan Mastura Tuan Soh, Tamby Subahan Mohd Meerah (2013) indicates that outdoor learning conducted in Malaysia in the field of science, mathematics and physical education and scarcely on the field of languages especially in the tertiary education.

This is because most language teachers take lightly on language subjects such as English since there's no experiment involved in teaching this subject. This is because of the mindset of the teachers who focuses on grammar rules which should be conducted indoor. This is further agreed by Boumova (2008) who states that the language classroom is strongly associated with traditional methodologies which is used in a certain field in relation to students' life or work.

However, what most teachers failed to understand is that languages do in fact involve with hands on activity if the teachers knows how to conduct the lesson well especially when it comes to learning the second language particularly in the field of writing and to be more specific, the descriptive writing. This is agreed by Cox (n.d). who states that the field of language arts do indeed involves hands on activities which could be used in teaching older students especially in the field of writing. This is because learning the second language should be fun and not mundane which does not excite the students to learn and this could be achieved through outdoor learning.

The utilization of outdoor learning benefits students through the development of their physical and motor skills, social development and cognitive development, Malone and Tranter (2003). This is because through outdoor learning; they are exposed to using their physical and motor skills as it involves a lot of hands on activity which requires them to do a lot of movement. An example of a hands on activity in the outdoor learning which relates to the context of this study which is through the usage of senses and adjectives to describe the details of a flower in within the compound of the private college. This involves the use of their hands as the motor skill to

touch and feel the flower in order to give a detail description of the flower such as the softness of the flower petals and the piercing thorns of the flower stem in the compound of the college complex.

In addition, another benefits of outdoor learning is that it promotes social development among the students, Dillion et.al (2005). This is because through outdoor learning, these students would be able to interact with each other through the group activity which is conducted by the teachers.

Furthermore, another benefits of outdoor learning is that it helps to promote cognitive development among students, Dillion et.al (2005). This is because through outdoor learning, students would tend to be critical in thinking. This brings them to be creative in the writing skill particularly in the descriptive writing skill.

In addition, outdoor learning also helps them to be more appreciative of the nature. This is agreed by Bullock (1994) who states outdoor learning do indeed help learners to appreciate nature as this sparks curiosity in them knowing about nature and thus helps them to have a positive outlook towards nature. In addition, these students would also be able to respect mother-nature and tend to take care of the environment better. An example of this would be by not throwing litter around the compound of the college.

In short, outdoor learning is a great platform for teachers to teach the writing classroom particularly in descriptive writing as it enables creativity and imagination in students. Even though, outdoor learning is something that is still new in the Malaysian education system particularly in the field of language. Based on studies done by researchers in the field of outdoor learning, suggest that this method of teaching has achieved great success. Therefore, the researcher encourages this method of teaching to be employed in the field of language to help learners to perform well academically. Hence, this is a gap in the Malaysian education system particularly in the field of language and this study would be looking further into details of it in regards to outdoor learning in Malaysia particularly in the higher learning institutions.

### **Methodology**

This study is conducted in Universiti Tenaga Nasional with a population of foundation engineering students where a purposive sample of six students with mixed level of proficiency is selected to represent the college of engineering in Universiti Tenaga Nasional. The research design used is a qualitative case study. The research instruments used are interview questions and observations. This study aims to determine students' ability to write a correct pattern of organization of the descriptive essay and students' ability to use adjectives and senses in the descriptive essay.

### **Findings**

The current study aims to look at how outdoor learning could help promote students' performance in descriptive writing by focusing on:-

1. The students' ability to write a correct pattern of organization of the descriptive essay.
2. The students' ability to use adjectives and senses in the descriptive essay.

**4.1 The Students' Ability To Write A Correct Pattern Of Organization Of The Descriptive Essay**

**Descriptive Essay Introduction:-**

**Table 1**

<b>STUDENT NUMBER</b>	<b>FIRST ATTEMPT</b>	<b>SECOND ATTEMPT</b>
<b>1</b>	<i>Saturday, May 22, 2014 was a beautiful day. First day of college is as exciting and memorable as any other days in everybody's life,...</i>	<i>Saturday, May 22, 2014 was a beautiful day. The skies were blue, the sun was shining bright, and the birds were singing.....</i>
<b>2</b>	<i>To be honest, I did not feel excited nor was I happy. It was a Sunday afternoon. I got ready a bit late as University Tenaga Nasional was my second choice.</i>	<i>Have you ever felt so excited that your heart beats so fast like a drum? That was not how I felt on that day. To be honest, I did not feel excited nor was I happy....</i>
<b>3</b>	<i>I was woken up by my alarm clock. Usually I will feel annoyed but I feel energized to wake up. It was my first registration day.</i>	<i>The 2nd of June 2014 was one of the unforgettable day of my life. On that day, I was woken up by my alarm clock....</i>
<b>4</b>	<i>On the second June of 2014, I arrived at UNITEN safely from my lovely house with my parents and older brother....</i>	<i>I am always looking forward to my university life since my high school time...</i>
<b>5</b>	<i>On 24th May 2014, there is a big changes in my life....</i>	<i>On 24th May 2014, there is a big changes in my life....</i>
<b>6</b>	<i>I am proud to say that UNITEN is my university and this is what it would feel when you step into your university life which will create a concrete foundation for your life.</i>	<i>The building with a big red coloured UNITEN board and with a gigantic cone like mirror on top of it gave me a new beginning for my life....</i>

**Descriptive Essay Body:-**

**Table 2**

NUMBER OF STUDENTS	FIRST ATTEMPT	SECOND ATTEMPT
1	<i>When I began college and walked through the doors for the first time, I took a deep breath and I could feel my future approaching....</i>	<i>When I began college and walked through the doors for the first time, I took a deep breath and I could feel my future approaching....</i>
2	<i>The orientation started at 5 in the evening. Before that, I went to my hostel at Kelompok Murni....</i>	<i>Just as we arrived, we went straight to the Administration Office....</i>
3	<i>After I woke up, I straight go and take my breakfast that was specially prepared for me from my beloved mother...</i>	<i>After I had woke up, I straight went to have my breakfast that was specially prepared for me from my beloved mother....</i>
4	<i>On the second June of 2014, I arrived at UNITEN safely from my lovely house with my parents and older brother...</i>	<i>On the second June of 2014, I arrived at UNITEN safely from my lovely house with my parents and older brother....</i>
5	<i>For my registration at UNITEN, my parent's book a hotel nearby UNITEN to avoid traffic jam and on the 24th morning,...</i>	<i>For my registration at UNITEN, my parents book a hotel nearby UNITEN to avoid traffic jam or any inefficiency of the registration process...</i>
6	<i>My first day at UNITEN started with registration in a building which called as administration building...</i>	<i>My first day in UNITEN started with the registration in a mansion look alike building...</i>

**Descriptive Essay Conclusion:-**

**Table 3**

NUMBER OF STUDENTS	FIRST ATTEMPT	SECOND ATTEMPT
1	<i>Upon the arrival of first day of orientation week, I was very happy...</i>	<i>After the orientation week, it made me and my friends to be very tired...</i>
2	<i>The facilitators gathered us in groups. We did a few activities that involves...</i>	<i>The facilitators gathered us in groups. We did a few activities that involves....</i>

3	<i>After that I get back to my room and took a bath and prepared to sleep...</i>	<i>After bidding farewell to my parents, I get back to my room and took a bath and get prepared to sleep...</i>
4	<i>All my worries before I enter UNITEN fades away from me and become an enjoyable time...</i>	<i>I felt very happy studying here with my kind and funny friends and it has been two months since I entered the university...</i>
5	<i>I went to my apartment and take a bath since it's a hot day...</i>	<i>I went to my apartment and take a bath since it's a hot day...</i>
6	<i>In conclusion, the real challenges of my life are about to come after this...</i>	<i>In conclusion, I had a wonderful orientation week in Uniten. The real challenges of my life are about to come after this....</i>

**The Students Ability To Use Adjective And Senses**

Based on the second research question which is being mentioned in the title above, a clear description on the students' ability to use the adjectives and senses will be further discussed below.

**Table 1**

FIRST ATTEMPT			
NUMBER OF STUDENTS	SENTENCE 1	SENTENCE 2	SENTENCE 3
1	<i>Saturday, May 22, 2014 was a beautiful</i>	<i>I took a deep breath and I could feel my future approaching.</i>	<i>Once I get to the front door of the administration building, it feels like a horror story.</i>
2	<i>I feel horrified as the house was in a mess</i>	<i>The facilitators gave me a warm welcome which gave me a good first impression.</i>	Null
3	<i>The place was crowded with many excited students and their parents.</i>	<i>The old security guard at the front gate welcome us with a warm smile</i>	<i>I was shocked with the amount of student that register at that day.</i>
4	<i>On the second June of 2014, I arrived at UNITEN safely from my lovely house with my parents and older brother.</i>	<i>When I arrived at the room, all my depression gone away when my roommates gave a warm welcome to me</i>	<i>Sometimes, I felt really bored and sleepy with those activities.</i>
5	<i>I saw my father black</i>	Null	Null

	<i>Mercedes were drove away from the gate</i>		
<b>6</b>	<i>The helpful guides given by the people in charge and systematic arrangements made my registration work easy and superfast.</i>	<i>It was well maintained, clean and fully furnished.</i>	<i>: I met new awesome friends who going to be with me for rest of my life.</i>
<b>SECOND ATTEMPT</b>			
<b>NUMBER OF STUDENTS</b>	<b>SENTENCE 1</b>	<b>SENTENCE 2</b>	<b>SENTENCE 3</b>
<b>1</b>	<i>First day of college is as exciting and memorable as any other days in everybody's life, and that is the same with me, as I will never be able to forget the first day of my college at University Tenaga Nasional.</i>	<i>I felt that UNITEN is going to be a great place as I will learn and get a lot of knowledge from this wonderful place.</i>	<i>From my observation, I could see some students were in tears as they had to leave their families behind in order to pursue their studies.</i>
<b>2</b>	<i>I was quite satisfied with their hospitality.</i>	<i>I have to be independent now.</i>	<i>I could see that it was full house.</i>
<b>3</b>	<i>After I had my big satisfying breakfast, I went to have my bath and wear my formal attire and get ready to start my journey to my new school with my parents.</i>	<i>I fell asleep in the car because of the long journey</i>	<i>I admired their bravery to come and register on their own without their parents company.</i>
<b>4</b>	<i>I felt really nervous and curious on what is going to happen next</i>	<i>Luckily a kind-hearted senior showed us the right way to go to the admin building.</i>	<i>I felt very happy.</i>
<b>5</b>	<i>I can smell the tasty 'Nasi Lemak' that will satisfy my hunger.</i>	<i>During the journey towards UNITEN, there were many questions popping up in my mind and it makes me to feel nervous.</i>	<i>As soon as I entered the administration building, I can feel the breezy air-condition.</i>
<b>6</b>	<i>My father and I were busy searching for a parking in the hot day.</i>	<i>We were warmly welcomed by a young and pretty senior.</i>	<i>In addition, I also met with my seniors who are very helpful, friendly and they never ragged us.</i>

## **Discussion**

To sum up, it could be seen that after utilizing the outdoor method, the students were able to perform well in their descriptive writing task. They were able to use the correct organization pattern in the descriptive essay after being exposed to the outdoor learning which is spatial. Besides, they were also able to describe using adjective and sense in their essay. This could be seen in their second attempt of the essay. It is clear through this research that before outdoor learning is used as a teaching method, the students were unable to utilize both their sense and adjective in describing their first day in UNITEN. However, after the outdoor teaching method is utilized, the students were able to produce a better descriptive writing.

Therefore, this research finding is in line with Woods (n.d) who stresses the point on using adjectives as it makes a writing look descriptive. Besides the finding of this study come in agreement with Priest (1990) who defined outdoor learning as an experiential learning where students get to experience the learning by being out of the classroom, experiencing the real world by fully utilizing their senses and adjective.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, outdoor learning is essential in generating students' creative thinking skills as it helps them to be more imaginative in their writing. This is indeed proven through the findings of this study as being mentioned previously.

## **Suggestions and Recommendations**

Hence, it is the researcher's hope that curriculum designers, educators, policy makers and future researchers would find the current study useful in regards to the outdoor learning as this particular approach is highly suggested by many researchers, including the present one as it aids students in understanding the lessons better. Finally, this study is also hoped to aid future researchers in conducting their studies in regards to the current study since this study is still new in Malaysia.

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