

Improvising essay writing skill for form 2 students by using Schema Theory

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Abstract This study examines the use of schema theory to enhance the conceptual essay writing skills of Form 2 students in Malaysian Tamil-medium schools. Essay writing is an essential skill, yet many students face significant challenges such as organizing ideas, selecting appropriate vocabulary, and ensuring coherence and logical flow. Traditional teaching methods that prioritize grammar and syntax often neglect cognitive structuring, which is vital for improving writing proficiency. The purpose of this study is to identify the challenges students face in writing conceptual essays and to evaluate the effectiveness of schema theory in overcoming these obstacles. A pre-test and post-test research design was implemented, involving 30 Form 2 students. Post-test scores were notably higher, and a comparison of pre-test and post-test results confirmed these positive changes. They then participated in schema-based instructional activities that included brainstorming, semantic mapping, and structured storytelling to activate prior knowledge and improve organization. Following this intervention, a post-test was administered to evaluate progress. The results showed significant improvements in students' writing skills, particularly in the areas of idea organization, coherence, and clarity. Post-test scores were notably higher, and a comparison of pre-test and post-test results confirmed these positive changes. The findings suggest that schema theory provides a structured cognitive framework that supports students in effectively developing and presenting their ideas in essays. In conclusion, schema theory proves to be a practical and effective instructional approach for enhancing conceptual essay writing skills among Form 2 students in Malaysian Tamil-medium schools.

Keywords: Schema Theory, Conceptual Essay Writing, Form 2 Students, Tamil-medium Schools, Pre-test and Post-test

INTRODUCTION

This study investigates how schema theory can enhance Form 2 students' ability to write conceptual essays in Tamil. Over time, teaching methods have evolved significantly, driven by technological advancements and insights into student learning (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Today's strategies focus on 21st-century skills like creativity, critical thinking, and collaboration, which are crucial for global education (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001). In Malaysia, the Curriculum and Assessment Standard Document (DSKP) ensures nationwide

teaching consistency, providing objectives, content, and assessment guidelines. The Tamil curriculum emphasizes key language skills, with writing regarded as essential for expressing ideas effectively. This study addresses challenges Form 2 students face in organizing ideas and achieving coherence in essays, with the goal of improving their writing skills.

1. Background of the Study

The Tamil language was introduced to Malaysia during the British colonial period, when Indian laborers from Tamil Nadu were brought to work on plantations (Ramanathan, 1994). Today, Tamil is spoken by over 1.5 million people in Malaysia, making it one of the most widely used Indian languages in the country (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2020). The language and culture are preserved and promoted through Tamil-medium schools, media, and cultural organizations, which play essential roles in fostering a strong sense of identity and continuity within the Tamil-speaking community (Manickam, 2012). The Malaysian government acknowledges Tamil as a language of instruction in schools and permits its use in media and official communications, reflecting the nation's multicultural structure (Ravindran, 2005). Additionally, Tamil literature and arts are celebrated in various festivals and cultural events, further emphasizing the importance of the Tamil language in Malaysian society (Nadesan, 2011).

Tamil schools in Malaysia play a pivotal role in preserving the linguistic and cultural heritage of the Indian Tamil community, as evidenced by programs such as the Tamil Language Carnival organized annually by the Ministry of Education and the introduction of Tamil cultural heritage modules in the school curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2023). Originally established to educate children of plantation workers, there are now approximately 528 Tamil primary schools, highlighting the ongoing demand for Tamil-medium education (Ministry of Education, 2023). Despite challenges such as limited funding and infrastructure, Tamil schools have advanced through government initiatives that include increased financial aid and teacher training, along with support from the community and non-governmental organizations (Department of Statistics, 2022; Raman & Vaithilingam, 2021). The Malaysian education system also promotes multilingualism, with Tamil offered as an elective subject in secondary schools from Form 1 to Form 5. These classes enable Tamil-speaking students to excel in their mother tongue and support Malaysia's commitment to linguistic diversity (Ministry of Education, 2023). In upper secondary education, Tamil proficiency is assessed through the PT3 and SPM exams, which include sections on essay writing to develop students' expressive and analytical skills (Examinations Syndicate Malaysia, 2023).

2. Research Problem

Essay writing is an essential academic skill, yet many Form 2 students encounter significant challenges in this area. Common difficulties include organizing ideas logically, expressing thoughts clearly, and adhering to academic standards for essay structure. Research suggests that these challenges often result from insufficiently developed cognitive frameworks, or schemata, which are crucial for structured and effective writing (Smith, 2023; Johns et al., 2022). Additionally, students frequently struggle with understanding different types of essays, using appropriate vocabulary, and improving the coherence of their ideas—elements that are vital to achieving writing proficiency. Studies highlight the importance of 'schema activation' in enhancing these areas, as it provides students with a structured foundation for arranging and connecting ideas logically (Brown & Lee, 2023; Taylor, 2021).

Traditional methods of teaching essay writing tend to focus primarily on grammar and syntax rather than fostering cognitive structures that aid in organizing and conveying ideas. These approaches may not fully address the underlying cognitive processes that support proficient writing. Current educational research advocates for integrating schema theory into writing instruction to strengthen students' abilities to generate, organize, and clearly express their thoughts (Chen & Wang, 2022; Lee & Smith, 2023). Addressing these challenges requires a deep understanding of the cognitive elements involved in writing and an effective use of schema-based instructional strategies, which can support students in developing the skills necessary for academic success in essay writing (Johnson et al., 2023; Clark, 2024).

3. Research Purposes

This study has two main objectives:

- I. To identify the challenges faced by Form 2 students in writing conceptual essays.
- II. To improve the writing skills of Form 2 students in writing conceptual essays through schema theory.

Literature Review

Firstly, the study conducted by Zennure Elgun Gunduz and Ismail Dogan Unal explains how activities based on multiple intelligences enhance engagement and proficiency in language learning, including writing skills. The research supports the effectiveness of multiple intelligences approaches in developing personalized and effective learning environments. The quasi-experimental designs found in Bas and Beyhan (2010) studies prove that the MI approach yields better educational gains compared to traditional methods. As Campbell (1999) notes, MI activities often demonstrate a positive impact on students' motivation and enthusiasm in learning. The difference between the MI study and this study is the approach, the article, the subjects studied, and the method of conducting the study.

Surat, Shahlan, Rahman, Saemah, Mahamod, Zamri, and Kummin, Saadiah (2014) conducted a study investigating the impact of metacognitive strategies (planning, monitoring, and evaluation) on the essay writing of 18 students from an urban low-income area. Students wrote essays and then reflected on their processes. The analysis revealed a lack of significant planning and knowledge (declarative and conditional) essential for effective writing. Moreover, none of the students demonstrated a complete practical knowledge of constructing strong essays. These findings suggest a need for interventions or instructional packages to enhance students' writing abilities. The researchers selected this topic due to its relevance in improving essay writing skills.

The study demonstrated the positive effects of schema theory. Students in the experimental group reported a more supportive learning environment and an increased vocabulary related to the writing topic. The research suggests that schema theory is effective in enhancing writing skills. Cailing's (2016) study shares a commonality with this research in that both focus on schema theory. However, they differ in terms of country, participants (university students), language, and the specific type of essay. Nevertheless, Cailing (2016) also supported the notion that schema theory can be used to enhance students' writing skills.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a mixed-methods research design to investigate the impact of schema theory on the development of Form 2 student's conceptual essay writing skills. A quantitative approach, involving pre-tests and post-tests, was used to measure the student's progress. Additionally, a qualitative approach, incorporating interview with teacher and document analysis of student's written work, was employed to gain deeper insights into the process and outcomes of the intervention.

Data collection methods included administering questionnaires to students to assess their prior knowledge and challenges, conducting pre-tests and post-tests to measure their writing skills before and after the intervention, interviewing the teacher to gain their perspectives on the student's writing abilities and the effectiveness of the schema-based intervention, and analyzing students' written work to identify patterns and trends in their writing development.

The quantitative data collected from the pre-tests and post-tests were analyzed using descriptive statistics to calculate mean scores and standard deviations. Inferential statistics, such as t-tests, were employed to determine the statistical significance of the differences between the pre-test and post-test scores. The qualitative data from the interviews and document analysis were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify emerging themes and patterns. The findings from both quantitative and qualitative analyses were triangulated to provide a comprehensive understanding of the impact of schema theory on student's writing skills.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This study had two objectives based on this research. The first objective was to identify the problems faced by Form 2 students in writing conceptual essays. The second objective was to investigate is to improve the conceptual essay writing skills of Form 2 students through the schema theory. Pre-test and post-test result shows that the schema theory can significantly improve students' scores on essays, including conceptual essays.

Table 1: Pre-test results

Students	Marks(40)	Grade
STUDENT 1	26	B
STUDENT 2	32	B
STUDENT 3	25	C
STUDENT 4	22	C
STUDENT 5	22	C
STUDENT 6	20	C
STUDENT 7	21	C
STUDENT 8	33	A
STUDENT 9	20	C
STUDENT 10	20	C
STUDENT 11	22	C
STUDENT 12	21	C
STUDENT 13	17	C
STUDENT 14	3	E
STUDENT 15	9	E

The pre-test results revealed significant challenges among Form 2 students in organizing ideas and meeting academic writing standards in conceptual essays. Out of 15 students, only one achieved an A, while the majority scored within the C grade range or below, with several in the lower ranges. These results indicated that many students struggled to express and structure their thoughts effectively. The lack of higher grades further highlighted the gap in their ability to produce coherent, well-organized essays that met academic expectations. These challenges underscored the need for instructional interventions to address their weaknesses in essay writing.

One key factor contributing to these low scores was the student's limited application of schema theory in their writing. Building on findings, schema theory focuses on activating prior knowledge and systematically organizing ideas to enhance essay coherence. The student's difficulties in activating relevant prior knowledge, structuring their thoughts logically, and understanding the conventions of conceptual essays reflect a lack of well-developed mental frameworks or schemata. Without these schemata, many students failed to link their existing knowledge to the essay topic, resulting in vague or disjointed ideas. They also struggled with genre-specific requirements, such as maintaining a formal tone, supporting arguments with evidence, and following a structured format. These deficiencies demonstrate the critical need for schema-based instructional strategies to help students activate prior knowledge, organize their ideas effectively, and internalize the conventions of conceptual essay writing, ultimately improving their performance.

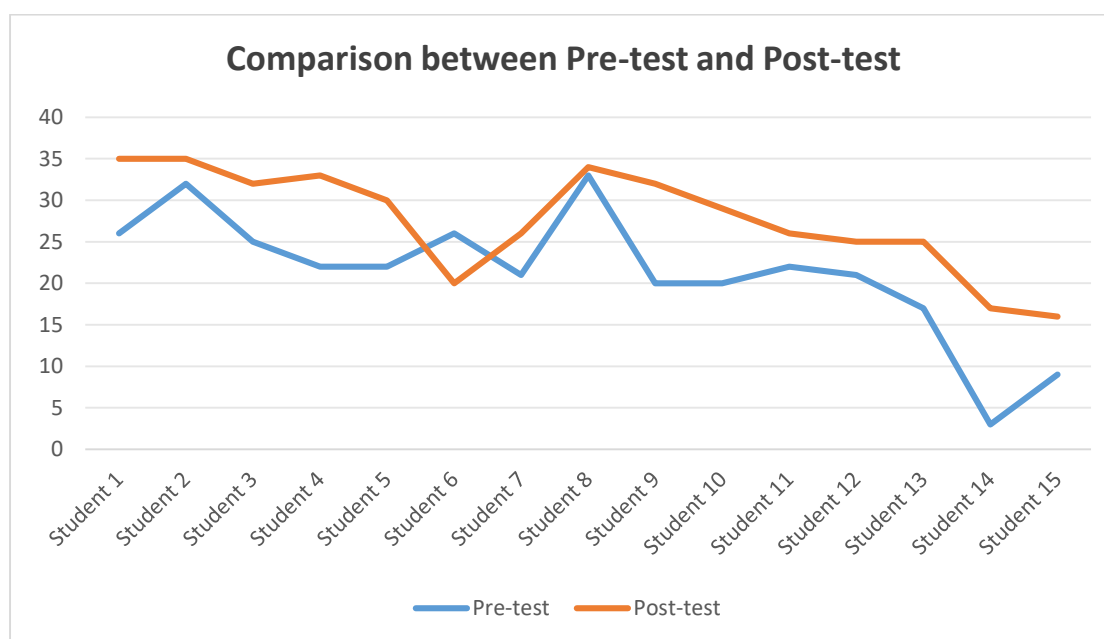
Table 2: Post-test results

Students	MARKS (40)	GRADE
STUDENT 1	35	A
STUDENT 2	35	A
STUDENT 3	32	B
STUDENT 4	33	A
STUDENT 5	30	B
STUDENT 6	26	B
STUDENT 7	26	B
STUDENT 8	34	A
STUDENT 9	32	B
STUDENT 10	29	B
STUDENT 11	26	B
STUDENT 12	25	C
STUDENT 13	25	C
STUDENT 14	17	C
STUDENT 15	16	D

The post-test results, as shown in Table 2, demonstrate the effectiveness of schema-based instruction in improving student's essay-writing skills. Out of 15 students, four achieved an A, while seven secured a B, indicating a significant increase in high-performing students compared to the pre-test results, where only one student scored an A and most fell within the C range or lower. Students who initially scored lower grades also showed marked improvements, with better organization and presentation of ideas in their essays. This shift highlights how schema theory aids in cognitive processes essential for writing conceptual essays, such as organizing prior knowledge, structuring ideas coherently, and understanding genre conventions.

Schema theory played a critical role in these improvements by equipping students with mental frameworks to approach their essays systematically. Key principles of schema theory, such as activating prior knowledge, helped students recall and connect relevant information to the essay topics. This connection enabled them to create more meaningful content. Additionally, schema-based strategies for structuring essays taught students how to organize their ideas logically, which enhanced the coherence and flow of their writing. Understanding the conventions of conceptual essays, including tone, evidence-based arguments, and format, further supported their ability to meet academic standards. These factors collectively contributed to the student's better performance in the post-test, demonstrating that schema-based instruction effectively addressed the weaknesses identified in the pre-test.

Chart 1: Comparison between pre-test and post-test results



The comparison chart visually illustrates the difference in student performance between the pre-test and post-test. It shows a clear upward trend in scores following schema-based instruction, with most students moving up by one or more grade levels. The chart underscores the positive impact of schema theory on students' writing abilities, supporting the conclusion that schema-based teaching strategies can significantly enhance conceptual essay writing skills among Form 2 students.

CONCLUSION

This study was designed by the researcher with two objectives in mind. First, the difficulties encountered by Form 2 students when writing conceptual essays were discovered. This study investigated the effectiveness of the schema theory in improving Form 2 students conceptual essay writing skills. The results showed that the schema theory successfully solved the stated problems and had an advantageous effect on students' conceptual essay writing skills. By implementing schema-based instructional methods in teaching, it is possible to improve students' accomplishment and comprehension of conceptual essays. When 21st-century teaching and learning approaches are implemented in the classroom, students become actively involved. If teachers always use the same strategy, students will be unable to fully participate

in the learning process. As a result, teachers should employ such methods in their classroom instruction.

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