

# Scaffolding Students' Creative Writing Skills through Visual Arts

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## ABSTRACT

The study aimed at investigating the effectiveness of utilizing visual arts to scaffold students' creative writing skills. The study employed the Action Research Cycle process and the participants were Grade 11 Humanities and Social Sciences (HUMSS) students in the Creative Writing class of the researcher herself. Total Population Sampling (TPS) was used; hence the entire class participated in the study. An intervention utilizing the visual arts to scaffold students' creative writing abilities was used, which consisted of a series of writing tasks that were introduced for three weeks, one writing task per week. Reflective journaling was used in the analysis, supplemented by a one-on-one, retrospective, semi-structured interview immediately after the third and final writing task. In the thematic analysis conducted, the following themes emerged: "*writing is made easy with pictures,*" "*painting to write makes the latter easier,*" "*writing is exciting, enjoyable, and fun,*" "*liberating and self-fulfilling,*" and "*boosts self-confidence.*" On the whole, visual arts are powerful teaching and learning scaffolds that can help students overcome their apprehensions in writing. Thus, as instructional materials, they transform writing into a more familiar and less challenging learning experience for students by providing meaningful connections to their real-life experiences and authentic references to create mental pictures and generate ideas.

**Keywords** — Education, Creative Writing, visual arts, action research, Philippines

## INTRODUCTION

The acquisition of 21st-century skills defines the learning goal of the K to 12 curriculum of the Department of Education (DepEd). Specifically, these skills include (1) learning and innovation skills, (2) IT and media skills, (3) effective communication skills, and (4) life and career skills (SEAMEO INNOTECH, 2012). The third skill is rather encompassing; as in real-life context, communication does not only equate to being able to communicate verbally since not all communication activities can be in the form of spoken language but may come in written forms as well (Langan, 2011; Beckley, 2014; Yulianti, 2014). According to Lok (2014), writing is essential in the 21st century, so that educators should prepare young students to acquire the necessary skills needed to succeed in this form of communication.

Researchers affirm that listening, speaking, reading, writing, and viewing among the five macro skills, writing is often perceived by many as the most difficult task (Gustilo, 2010; McCutchen, 2011; Johnson, Mercado, & Acevedo, 2012). It is also regarded as the most difficult aspect of literacy in English as Second Language (ESL) classrooms; hence teachers struggle to engage students in writing activities (Lok, 2014; Cole & Feng, 2015). According to Pesik (2010), Harris (2011), and Galvez (2016) students would usually refuse to write because they do not know what to write and that having an empty page to write is too great a challenge. On the contrary, Rumney, Buttress, and Kuksa (2016) aver that all children have stories to tell. However, they are hampered in their ability to put them down into writing for several reasons, they may lack confidence or the practical skills needed (Randle, 2010; Rumney et al., 2016).

Interestingly, several studies have confirmed the strong correlation between reading comprehension ability and quality of writing composition (Berninger et al., 2002; Chuenchaichon, 2011; Cho, 2015; Motlaq & Egresh, 2016; Choi et al., 2018). Unfortunately, despite the crucial role of reading and writing in today's society, it seems that poor literacy remains a perennial problem in the country's education. In the 2018 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), results showed that the Philippines scored the lowest in reading comprehension among 79 participating countries worldwide; the country had an average reading score of 340, more than 200 points below China (555) and more than

100 points less than the average Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) average of 487 (San Buenaventura, 2019). Moreover, in a study conducted by Pablo and Lasaten (2018), findings revealed that Senior High School students have difficulties writing academic essays concerning the variety of ideas in the content. Likewise, in an evaluation of Grade 7 students' composition writing, results showed that the write-ups still need substantiation, a well-defined introduction, and a conclusion (Gepila Jr., 2018).

Most worryingly, in 2016, the National Statistics Authority reported a less than 40% passing rate in licensure examinations in various fields (San Buenaventura, 2019). According to Kirsch et al. (2002), students with low literacy performance have poorer chances in the labor market as such skill is needed to function well and progress in adult life.

More specifically, a secondary school in the region has reported a total of 71 students in the frustration level in their reading performance for the school year 2019-2020. For the past five years, the school has recorded a very low performance in the school's press conferences. In 2016, the school had only two student-qualifiers to the Regional Schools Press Conference, while only one student-qualifier in 2018. Unfortunately, in 2015, 2017, and 2019, the school did not advance to the regional competition.

Language teachers in the said school lamented that students could hardly express their thoughts. Written outputs would usually contain shorter paragraphs with simpler discussions and lesser details, contrary to the demands of most writing activities. Worst cases are students would rather not try to write any or opt not to participate in class' writing-related activities. Similarly, teachers who handle Creative Writing, a specialized subject designed for Humanities and Social Sciences (HUMSS) students in the Senior High School, have experienced the same. The subject aims to develop the students' writing skills, particularly in writing imaginatively and creatively; thus, they are expected to produce their write-ups, such as short stories and the like.

Such performance is alarming considering that the Senior High School is in place to prepare students for the rigorous academic tasks ahead of them in college and combat the challenges in the real world thereafter. Foreign teacher-researchers, having experienced the same problem in their classrooms, have ventured into the use of visual arts as writing prompts and scaffolds and found out that students benefited greatly from it (Alter, 2010; Beckley, 2014; Harris, 2011; Leahy, Halloran, & Jaenichen, 2014; Lok, 2014; Pesik, 2010; Randle, 2010; Rumney et al., 2016). However, there has not been much research on this

area in the Philippine setting involving Filipino Senior High School students who are taking up Creative Writing.

## **OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY**

The study hoped to contribute to any existing pedagogical knowledge in teaching Creative Writing. Specifically, it aimed to determine (1) the effectiveness of utilizing visual arts to scaffold students' creative writing skills; and (2) to describe the students' responses to the given intervention.

## **FRAMEWORK**

“When children’s stories are driven by rich images, their writing is transformed in many powerful ways” (Olshansky, 1995). Past researches make connections between visual arts and academic gains (Housen & Yenawine, 2001; Chicola & Smith, 2005; Livingston, 2005). The studies of Alter, 2010; Pesik, 2010; Randle, 2010; Harris, 2011; Beckley, 2014; Leahy, Halloran, and Jaenichen, 2014; Lok, 2014; Rumney et al., 2016, affirm that combining literacy instruction with visual arts provide a better scaffold to struggling students in writing. When visual arts are present, the burden of cognitive load among students is lightened by having something to refer to (Olshansky & Cunningham, 1997; Bruning, Schraw, Norby, & Ronning, 2004).

An intervention utilizing the visual arts as means to scaffold students' creative writing abilities was devised. It consisted primarily of a series of writing tasks that were introduced for three weeks, one writing task per week.

Visual arts meet the eye and evoke emotion through an expression of skill and imagination. The areas most associated with visual arts include drawing, painting, printmaking, sculpture, and photography (Encyclopædia Britannica, 2020). However, the visual arts used in the intervention were just limited to the pictures used in the second writing task and the drawings and paintings created by the student-participants in the third writing task. The three writing tasks were:

### **One-Liner Initial Writing Task**

During the whole group discussion, student-participants were shown a fishbowl containing 40 small pieces of paper folded up carefully so that no one can read the print on each piece. Each small piece of paper contained open-ended one-liner story prompts; first, a one-story prompt was drawn as a means to model

the impending writing activity. The class was engaged in a group discussion about some possible storylines related to the recently drawn story prompt. Student-participants were encouraged to use their senses to extend their imagination and picture out what will happen in their stories. Afterward, each of them was asked to draw a story prompt from the bowl. Finally, they were instructed to begin writing their creative stories and were given 120 minutes to complete their work.

### **VTS- inspired Second Writing Task**

Arnheim (1969) coined the term “visual thinking” to refer to the interdependence between visual perceptions and cognitive thought. As a teaching strategy, the Visual Thinking Strategy (VTS) uses a process of asking three carefully worded questions relating to an image during group discussions to boost critical and creative thinking skills; the questions are: What is going on in the picture? What do you see that makes you say that?, What more can we find? (Housen & Yenawine, 2001).

The second task was administered in two phases. In the first phase, student-participants were gathered for a group discussion about several pictures displayed on the board. After a few minutes, students were directed to focus their attention on the picture displayed at the center; they were given enough time to examine it. The discussion progressed using the VTS strategy. After the discussion, a portion of a story that went along well with the chosen picture was read aloud in class. This served as a means to model the next phase of the task.

In the second phase, student-participants have chosen one picture from among the ones displayed on the board, except for the center. They were instructed to focus on descriptions of what things will “look like, sound like, feel like, and smell, or taste like” in it. Then, they were given 120 minutes to complete their creative stories.

### **Picturing-writing Task**

The final writing task was adopted from the Picturing-writing strategy developed by Olshansky (2006), wherein students need to draw or paint first what they are thinking before creating a story about it.

This task was given in two phases. In the first phase, student-participants were introduced to drawing and/or painting using crayons and watercolors; each of them was given their art supplies. They were given enough time to think of a story that they intended to write and then begin drawing/painting the scene. They were given 120 minutes to complete their artwork.

In the second phase, the student-participants will have to write a story about the scene or image they have drawn/painted on in the first phase. They were instructed to imagine how their story will “look like sound like, smell, or taste like.” They were given 120 minutes to write their creative stories.

## METHODOLOGY

### Research Design

The study employed the Action Research Cycle process. According to Kemmis and McTaggart (1998), the process is iterative or cyclical; the processes revolved around the major steps of planning, action, observation, and reflection.

### Research Site

The study was conducted in one of the public secondary schools in Dagami, a municipality in Leyte, Philippines. The school caters to almost 2,000 students coming from the different barangays of the municipality.

### Participants

The participants were Grade 11 Humanities and Social Sciences (HUMSS) students in the Creative Writing class of the researcher herself. Total Population Sampling (TPS) was used; hence the entire class participated in the study. The sample consisted of 15 males and 27 females, a total of 42 student-participants. According to Etikan, Musa, and Alkassim (2015), TPS is a technique where the entire population meets the criteria is included in the study. Such sampling technique is more commonly used when the number of cases being studied is relatively small (Etikan et al., 2015).

### Data Collection

One method that was used in collecting the qualitative data needed for the study was reflective journaling. According to Lutz and Paretti (2019), reflective journaling is an in-depth process of writing while describing a recent activity and the salient aspects, such as people, resources, and activities, that affected learning in an ongoing manner for a period of time. Likewise, it is also a powerful heuristic tool and research technique that provides an interactive means of communication between the researcher and participants in the study (Janesick, 1998).

Reflective journaling was done by the student-participants once a week for three weeks, one for each writing task. Lutz and Paretti (2019) affirm that

journals best capture the participants' micro-level (i.e., day-to-day) experiences. In the study, reflective journaling was done on a separate session after each writing task, and student-participants were provided with reflection prompts, a series of open-ended questions to guide them in writing. The reflection prompts were as follows:

*Good morning! You are about to share your experiences about the writing activity we had in class for this week. Please remember, there are no right or wrong answers here. It will be highly appreciated if you will share as much as you can. (1) How did you find the writing task?, (2) How did you accomplish the given writing task?, (3) How did you overcome the challenges that you encounter while doing the writing task?, and (4) Which among the three writing tasks was the easiest to accomplish and has helped you the most in your story? Why?*

The same reflection prompts were provided for all three writing tasks, except for question number 4, which was given only in the third and final writing task. Student-participants were provided journal writing sheets for each writing task, and these were collected at the end of each week.

While reflective journaling documents a concrete record of learning outcomes exhibited over time (Lutz and Paretti, 2019), it was deemed necessary to conclude the study with an interview with the student-participants. As the main instrument in the study, the researcher conducted a one-on-one, retrospective, semi-structured interview immediately after the third and final writing task. Following an interview protocol, the interview provided an opportunity to probe specific points that the student-participants mentioned in their reflective journals. Apart from this, it maintained a space for them to elaborate on their specific learning experiences regarding the three writing tasks introduced to them; hence, such avenue offered triangulation of reflective journal findings and a form of member checking as well wherein the student-participants had the opportunity to engage with, add to, and elaborate more on their narrations in the reflective journals.

Specifically, the interviewed student-participants consisted of a sub-sample of the sample described in the study. During the implementation process, some student-participants missed either one or two of the writing tasks. Nonetheless, they were allowed to remain and continue with the study. With this, it was understood that there would be gaps in the data drawn from the reflective journals of the student-participants; thus, only 32 of them who were able to undergo completely with the study were interviewed.

## **Data Analysis**

The reflective journals and interview transcriptions were analyzed using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is a method used in qualitative research to identify patterns of meaning across a dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Particularly, the analysis conducted was informed by Braun's and Clarke's (2019) reflexive thematic analysis, wherein themes are viewed as analytic outputs, created from codes, and through the researcher's active engagement with the dataset. It involves a six-phase process; however, the analysis is recursive, with movement back and forth between different phases.

The analysis commenced with the data familiarization, wherein the researcher had a thorough reading and rereading of the data to become immersed and familiar with the depth and breadth of its content. This was followed by an initial production of succinct labels or codes that contained specific data features that which were relevant to answering the research questions. The next phase began after all data have been assigned codes and collated to generate initial themes. These themes were further reviewed to ensure that they formed a coherent pattern with the data relevant to the research questions at hand. In the process, some themes were deleted for they did not have enough data to support them, while some were broken down into separate themes and some were collapsed into each other. The next phase was defining and naming themes wherein a detailed analysis of each theme was developed, and 'punchy' theme names were created to immediately give the reader a sense of what each theme was about; the words of the student-participants were used in the names. Finally, the process was concluded with the production of a concise, coherent, and logical report of the analyses made; it contained the analytic narrative supported by direct quotes and supplemented with existing literature.

## **Ethical Considerations**

The researcher adhered to the ethical standards and policies in conducting research. The School Principal was notified about the letter of approval from the Division Office relative to the implementation of the said action research. With the School Principal's permission, a parent-teacher conference was held to discuss the rationale and possible implications of the study. During the meeting, informed consent forms were filled out and signed by the student-participants and their parents.

Moreover, the student-participants were assured about the anonymity of their identities and confidentiality of the information gathered throughout the



study, which was solely kept for research purposes. Likewise, their consent was asked before audiotaping the interview.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The following were the themes that emerged in the analysis of both the student-participants' reflective journal and interview transcriptions: "*writing is made easy with pictures,*" "*painting to write makes the latter easier,*" "*writing is exciting, enjoyable, and fun,*" "*liberating and self-fulfilling,*" and "*boosts self-confidence.*"

### Utilizing Visual Arts in Scaffolding Students' Creative Writing Skills

#### Theme No. 1: "*Writing is made easy with pictures*"

Student-participants affirmed that visual arts, like pictures, made writing a more familiar and less challenging experience. Three sub-themes emerged from this theme.

**Sub-theme No. 1.1: *Spark ideas.*** Student-participants recognized the huge contribution of pictures in generating ideas while writing.

According to one student-participant: "*I felt excited and happy when I already see the different pictures posted on the board because there's a lot of ideas that came into my mind.*"

Gutiérrez, Puello, and Galvis (2015) explained that pictures make it easy for people to catch ideas or information conveyed in them clearly, more than if merely expressed verbally; likewise, when pictures are available, students can speak more and build new ideas.

Another student-participant wrote in the journal: "*It is much easier to write when you are given a picture than a story prompt because in the picture you can get ideas about the story that you are going to write. And it helps you to be more creative because of what you see in the picture.*"

**Sub-theme No. 1.2: *Relate past experiences.*** Student-participants acknowledged that pictures served as a scaffold in writing by providing connections to their past experiences. According to Jordan and Diccio (2012), incorporating visual images in classroom instruction provides students a medium of understanding with which they are most familiar.

As penned by one student-participant in the journal: “*When I saw the pictures, all of my childhood friends and memories came back so that it was easy for me to write.*” As they depict real objects, pictures promote students’ enthusiasm in examining them because of their vividness, color, authenticity, and attractiveness (Sa’diyah, 2017).

One student-participant recalled: “*Masayon na pagsurat kay tungod nga akon man adto na-experience nga ak guin drawing ngan akon liwat guin surat.*” (*Writing was easy since it was my experience that I have drawn and wrote a story about.*)

Barbot, et al. (2012) emphasized the strong connection between visual and verbal activities, like looking and reading, drawing and writing.

**Sub-theme No. 1.3: *Stimulate and broaden imagination.*** When asked about their experience while doing the tasks, one student-participant shared: “*Masayon kay mayda mo dayon mai-imagine bisan syahan ko pala pagkita han ak napili nga picture...*” (*It was easy since I was able to imagine a lot, even at one glance, about the picture...*)

Mental imagery allows writers to create a mental picture of a setting, character, or event, facilitating writing descriptions and creating scenes (Zimmerman & Resimberg, 1997).

One student-participant wrote: “*I can picture out my main character by just looking at the picture that I chose and through the picture I can imagine the atmosphere of the setting.*”

## **Theme No. 2: “*Painting to write makes the latter easier*”**

According to Kellogg and Whiteford (2012), the earliest developmental stage in writing is “knowledge telling”; this refers to creating or retrieving what one wants to say, which can be in the form of a visual image, generating a text to say it.

For most student-participants, writing became less challenging because they have their paintings and drawings to mine ideas and mental images from for their stories.

One student-participant shared: “*... masayon kay akon mismo drawing ngan guin himo an akon guin babasihan han pagsurat hin istorya ngan masayon nala pagdescribe.*” (*It was easy because it was my drawing which I had to base my story from and describing it was easy, too.*)

Another student-participant recalled the experience as: “*It was easy because I already make up my idea ngada han nagdro-drawing pala ako so, I already knew*

*how to tell and show my story.” (It was easy because I already make up my idea while I was working on my drawing so that I already knew how to tell and show my story.)*

Vision, as the most dominant sensory system in humans, has more visual processing areas in the brain compared to any other sense, and they develop sooner than other regions required for reading and higher-level thinking; hence, such visual development may support other developing skills, like writing (Gogtay et al., 2004).

## **Students’ Response Regarding the Intervention**

### **Theme No. 1: “Exciting, enjoyable, and fun”**

Student-participants were actively engaged in the different writing tasks, more so that writing was no longer viewed as an enormous and very challenging learning experience, but one that was exciting, enjoyable, and fun to do.

One student-participant recalled: “... *mas naging active pa ako kay akon ngatanan idea an painting na hinimo ngan pati na gihapon an story na inayad.*” (... *I was more active since the ideas and the painting were all mine, including the story as well.*)

In a study conducted by Uematsu (2012), results showed that using pictures enhanced students’ motivation and engaged them in their learning; hence, they are considered appealing learning resources.

A student-participant penned in the journal: “*I found it so enjoyable by imagining all the characters, the setting, and the plot of my story.*” Another student-participant wrote: “... *I enjoyed what we did and the activity was exciting and so fun for me.*”

Kellner (2008) emphasized that pictures help students overcome their reluctance to write because they are powerful teaching aids that can inspire them to create both expository and creative compositions.

A student-participant shared: “... *komportable na ak magsurat and those images in my brain, nasusurat ko hiya.*” (*I felt comfortable while writing and I was able to express those images in my brain.*)

### **Theme No. 2: “Liberating and self-fulfilling”**

Student-participants felt that they were in control of the learning experience, wherein they were free to imagine, to make connections of their past experiences, and to express their ideas in writing.

A student-participant wrote: *“Since it was I who made it, putting it to a story was easy since I know everything about my drawing, its characters, the setting, the plot, everything that I could do to make my story worth reading.”*

One student-participant shared the experience as: *“... kay nag-ayad kami own art ngan hihimuan hin story. Tungod hadto nagstart ako pagpicture out an akon story habang nagpi-paint and mas masayon na ha akon.” (... we had to make our own art and eventually write a story about it. I started to picture out my story while painting and it was easier for me.)*

According to Meyer, Haywood, Sachdev, and Faraday (2008), self-regulated learning environments facilitate motivation and enjoyment among students and actively engage them in the learning experience compared to those restrictive learning environments. Moreover, a classroom instruction that employs self-regulated learning enhances motivation towards deep learning and mastery and fosters engagement, creativity, and successful learning among students (Field, Duffy, & Huggins, 2015).

Likewise, arts-integrated instruction fosters aesthetic and creative experiences among students, cultivating their sense of self and sense of community, and a feeling of self-actualization (Melabiotis, 2018).

A journal entry from a student-participant read: *“... so, I give appreciation to myself on such overwhelming task I did.”*

### **Theme No. 3: “Boost self-confidence”**

Student-participants recognized that they were capable of carrying out the tasks introduced to them. One student-participant wrote: *“I was proud of myself because I can do what others can.”*

Meskauskiene (2017) emphasized the importance of cultivating a humanistic atmosphere in the classroom that is based on respect for the students and their abilities because this would enhance the students’ confidence in their abilities.

One student-participant penned: *“... it strengthens our capability and our self-esteem to write...”*

Another wrote: *“I felt proud of myself for me to finish that activity with my full efforts and dedication to write.”*

According to Schleicher (2019), students’ confidence in their abilities and their fear of failure affect their performance and well-being.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

Visual arts are powerful teaching and learning scaffolds that can help students overcome their apprehensions in writing. Thus, as instructional materials, they transform writing into a more familiar and less challenging learning experience for students by providing meaning and connections to their real-life experiences and authentic references to create mental pictures and generate ideas.

Furthermore, respect and independence facilitate students' success in writing. Self-confidence and motivation are fostered when their abilities are recognized. Most importantly, students learn to take responsibility for their own learning when they feel that their choices in the classroom matter and are actively involved in making decisions relative to their progress; hence, restrictive writing conditions limit, if not apprehended, the students' enthusiasm to write.

Therefore, as frontline curriculum designers, teachers may review and reflect on their current teaching practices to ensure that these are responsive to the students' learning needs. Likewise, they may introduce art integration in writing programs in school to avail students of creative and liberating modes of learning in the classroom setting. Also, school management may conduct retooling and capability training programs to keep teachers abreast of the recent developments in teaching, emphasizing art integration in the curriculum implementation.

## **TRANSLATIONAL RESEARCH**

The intervention used in this action research can be adapted by other schools to address writing difficulties among their students. Also, for curriculum designers, the findings of the study may be used in the redevelopment and enhancement of the curriculum in Senior High School, with particular emphasis on art integration in language and literature classes.

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