STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF INSTAGRAM REELS FOR NARRATIVE WRITING: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

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Abstract

The current study analyzes the attitudes of ESL learners towards the use of Instagram Reels from @bbclearningenglish for the development of narrative writing skills. To achieve the research objectives, a qualitative case study design was used with 30 lower secondary school learners from a suburban public school in Sabah, Malaysia. The collection and analysis of the data were conducted through open-ended questionnaires and individual interviews using thematic analysis technique. Four main themes emerged from the data categorized under overall perceptions (anxiety reduction, language learning) and operational factors (multimodal features, distractions). They are perceived improvements in the emotional aspects and in narrative writing skills. Learners pointed out that videos help them get rid of writer's block, enhance self-efficacy, and increase vocabulary due to the presence of visual and audio components. At the same time, there are some drawbacks that include the short video duration, fast pace, and distraction from the application. Nevertheless, the results suggest that students perceived Instagram Reels as a useful supplementary tool for enhancing narrative writing among secondary ESL learners. It provides many ideas for microlearning resources in English language teaching and learning.

Keywords: *ESL Learners, Instagram Reels, narrative writing, self-efficacy*

INTRODUCTION

Acquiring narrative writing proficiency remains a complex challenge among Malaysian secondary school ESL students, who frequently encounter hurdles such as limited vocabularies, grammatical gaps, and cross-linguistic interference (Ghabool et al., 2012). This complexity is amplified by Malaysia's multilingual landscape and a persistent urban-rural divide that often contrasts with overall national proficiency metrics, leaving many students struggling with creative and productive writing tasks. Conversely, the Malaysian Ministry of Education has introduced frameworks including the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), aiming to raise awareness of communicative competence, but classroom pedagogy continues to rely on traditional methods that fail to sustain learner engagement and offer opportunities for interactive language practice beyond the limited confines of textbook exercises (Aziz et al., 2019; Sarangapani & Hashim, 2022).

To bridge this gap, innovative and multimodal tools such as Instagram Reels by @bbclearningenglish offer a compelling solution by delivering bite-sized, culturally responsive,

and interactive microlearning content. While the social media tool is extremely popular among young people today, its deliberate educational worth towards formal writing instruction has been overlooked (Sarangapani & Hashim, 2022).

Therefore, this study aims to investigate Malaysian secondary school ESL students' perceptions of using Instagram Reels by @bbclearningenglish as a digital tool for narrative writing improvement, alongside the factors that facilitate or hinder its pedagogical use. To fulfill these aims, the following research questions were addressed: (1) What are Malaysian secondary school students' perceptions towards the use of Instagram Reels by @bbclearningenglish for improving their English language narrative writing skills? and (2) What factors do these students perceive as contributing to or hindering the effectiveness of this tool?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Foundations of Digital Multimodal ESL Writing

Second language (L2) writing development of ESL learners in contexts such as Malaysia needs to incorporate teaching methods that address aspects of language skills development as well as emotional aspects of the learner. Conventional L2 writing settings create high levels of performance anxiety among students and prevent them from learning. This study uses Albert Bandura's (1977) Social Learning Theory and Stephen Krashen's (1982) Affective Filter Hypothesis to discuss this issue.

According to Bandura (1977), humans learn through observation, including behaviors, language, and skills. On Instagram Reels, language teachers become models in an indirect way for students. Through observation of such model's dissection of the process of writing into smaller parts, students gain self-efficacy as well as self-belief in their capability to perform writing tasks. The modeling is facilitated through the affective filter hypothesis by Krashen. According to this hypothesis, language acquisition is facilitated when a learner's 'affective filter' is low, meaning anxiety and stress are reduced, while confidence and motivation are elevated. If the affective filter is high, a learner faces writer's block and cannot produce language. Use of multimodal means, like Instagram Reels, with visual, auditory, and caption elements helps to reduce the affective filter since learners perceive lessons as fun and relaxed.

Empirical Perspectives on Instagram Reels in Language Acquisition

Recent empirical literature consistently highlights positive relationships between mobile-assisted language learning (MALL) and student affective factors particularly regarding motivation and anxiety reduction. The existing empirical studies have shown that there is a positive correlation between MALL and affective elements of student performance, especially motivation and reduced anxiety. Zhao and Yang (2023) observed that traditional English as a Second Language writing classes might result in students' experiencing significant levels of performance anxiety while the use of social media platforms provides a relaxed context for experimenting with language usage. Beyond affective benefits, empirical studies also highlight concrete improvements in mechanical and structural writing performance. Multimedia integration on social media helps secondary school students build story coherence, diversify their vocabulary, as well as increasing their overall writing fluency (Aziz et al., 2019). Furthermore, targeted interventions focusing on micro-video formats often referred to in the literature as "InstaGrammar" initiatives that demonstrate

measurable gains in grammatical accuracy and syntactic control among adolescent learners (Sarangapani & Hashim, 2022). The pedagogical strength of this type of short-form video lies in their ability to offer authentic, context-rich language models. This allows students to observe language in such realistic settings and receive immediate socio-validation through platform feedback loops like comments and shares features.

Research Gaps and Methodological Justification

Despite the positive convergence between social media and MALL, there remain several crucial shortcomings within existing literature. Initially, it should be noted that most of the existing research fail to cover some specific issues related to creative writing and focus mostly on more common writing issues, such as vocabulary lists or grammar (Sarangapani & Hashim, 2022). Creative writing is a complicated process that needs imagination, ability to work with tenses and transitions (Aziz et al., 2019). Furthermore, although previous works have investigated the use of social media and short-form videos in language acquisition, the use of institutionally created content such as @bbclearningenglish' reels is not thoroughly studied when compared to social media used for writing (Dewi et al., 2022; Sarangapani & Hashim, 2022). In terms of methodology, the area has a problem of excessive use of quantitatively based pre-test and post-tests or survey studies (Dewi et al., 2022). Although these methodologies validate changes in numbers, they always overlook the subjective reality of students' experience, limitations of technology, and motivations behind it (Nowell et al., 2017). Thirdly, there remains a paucity of research on the qualitative experiences of the use of social media-supported writing applications by students within lower resourced or suburban schools (Dewi et al., 2022; Nowell et al., 2017). This current qualitative research provides a solution to the above gaps identified through empirical and methodological analysis. Through qualitative inquiry into the experiences of the perception of the use of Instagram Reels by @bbclearningenglish among Malaysian secondary school students, the study shifts from the quantified scores to unearth the real experiences, motivation, and challenges of ESL digital natives in acquiring narrative writing skills.

METHODOLOGY

To understand the experiences of the participants qualitatively, the researcher used a qualitative case study research design. The use of the research design was apt because it stresses description and not numbers and hence enabled the researcher to examine how the digital instrument works in practice. The two primary instruments used for collecting data included an open-ended questionnaire and a semi-structured interview guide.

The five-items open-ended questionnaire was adapted from Davis (1989) on perceived usefulness and ease of use, and from recent studies by Dewi et al. (2022), and Sarangapani and Hashim (2022). The questionnaire items were directed at eliciting the immediate emotions of the respondents, their perception regarding writing improvement, structural issues faced, coping strategies used, and differences between e-learning and regular classes. In addition, the 6-question semi-structured interview guide was devised to further explore and delve into the results obtained through the open-ended questionnaire. The development of the interview questions was based on existing qualitative ESL research involving short-form videos and social media use (Dewi et al., 2022). This format allowed the researcher to conduct an incremental investigation of the experiences and learning methods of individual students.

The target population in this study was lower secondary school English as a Second Language (ESL) students in Malaysia public schools. Purposive sampling was used whereby the selection of participants was based on criteria that are specific to the objectives of the research (Saunders et al., 2023). This took place in a suburban school located in Sabah during the researcher's teaching practicum. The selected sample consisted of 30 students from Form 2, all aged 14 years. The ESL proficiency of the participants was rated low to intermediate. They had been using instructional Instagram Reels from the @bbclearningenglish account in their story writing assignments. Out of the 30 students, 6 students were selected for individual interviews due to their divergent written responses.

As an integral part of providing vital pedagogic information with regards to the qualitative findings, a planned intervention in the classroom through six different lessons was conducted in two secondary classrooms. The six lessons were used to teach descriptive vocabularies and narrative structures using selected instructional Instagram Reels from @bbclearningenglish. The timeline of implementation, process of conducting, and targeted learning outcomes are illustrated in Figure 1 below.

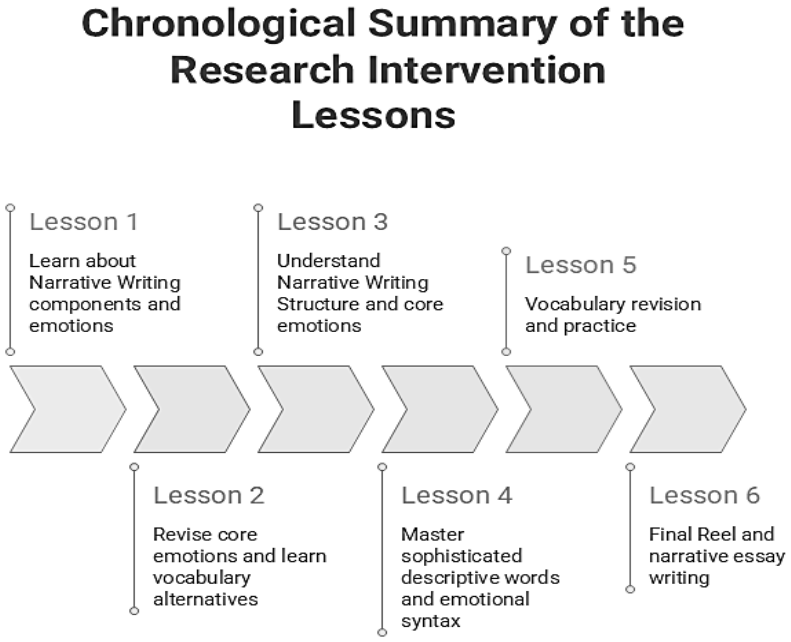

Figure 1 *Chronological Summary of the Research Intervention*

Whereas this is not a numeric-based study, credibility, transferability, and dependability have been used as measures of trustworthiness for the current qualitative study (Nowell et al., 2017). In order to ensure the content validity of the current study, the research questions, questionnaires, and interview guide were prechecked and validated prior to conducting data collection with the help of two experienced ESL teachers at secondary school level who have experience of teaching for more than 10 years as well as the research supervisor from university level. The aim of doing this was to make sure that the language used was appropriate for the age group of 14-year-old students as well as the consistency of the questionnaire with the purpose of the study.

Data was collected through two straightforward processes. In the first step, the open-ended survey was uploaded into Google Forms. Participants were given one week to complete it. It takes around 20-30 minutes to answer questions regarding their emotions, writing skills improvement, difficulties, solutions and classroom comparison. In the second process, the researcher conducted personal interviews with the 6 selected participants. Each interview lasted approximately 4 to 5 minutes, while brief, this duration reflects the concise nature of responses from low-proficiency learners who relied heavily on targeted and direct prompts. The interview was held at a quiet location within the school premises to ensure privacy. The interviews were audio-recorded after securing consent from both participants and their parents and then transcribed.

Qualitative data obtained from Google Forms and face-to-face interviews were manually analyzed by employing six phases of thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke (2006). First, familiarity with the data was obtained by transcribing the audio recordings and re-reading the Google Forms answers. Second, the researcher identified the initial codes manually in an Excel spreadsheet. This involved applying line-by-line simple codes like "video too fast", "words helpful", or "enjoyed music" to capture raw participant responses. Third, the initial codes were grouped based on the patterns observed in data. Fourth, the categories underwent review and revision to make sure that they could form themes. Fifth, the themes were then defined and named. To ensure coding consistency and objectivity, the coding framework as well as the transcript samples were validated by the university research supervisor, and any discrepancy in coding labels were sorted out until full agreement was reached. Sixth, the findings were reported in the research report. As Form 2 students sometimes, code switched to Bahasa Malaysia during the interview, the researcher provided translation of the phrases into English without altering the original meaning of the students.

FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

The findings and discussion section presents the results of qualitative thematic data analysis and provides an interpretation as well as explanation of the findings relation to the research questions and objectives. Unlike quantitative methodologies that isolate variables using statistical metrics such as correlation or regression coefficients, this qualitative research uses interpretive thematic analysis to extract depth and meaning from open-ended Google Form questionnaire answered by a total of 30 respondents (N = 30) and 6 semi-structured interview transcriptions (N = 6). Additionally, the findings are organized systematically around two primary-sub topics representing the research questions: (1) students' perceptions towards Instagram Reels for narrative writing improvement, and (2) the contributing and hindering factors affecting platform effectiveness. To safeguard respondents' confidentiality in line with the ethical requirements, open-ended questionnaire respondents are coded as R1 to R30, while semi-structured interview participants are coded as ST1 to ST6.

To ensure that methodology was transparent in this process, and to highlight the robustness of the themes generated, a thematic frequency mapping exercise was undertaken for each of the two main methods used for gathering data. The data gathered using open-ended questionnaires (n = 30) and semi-structured one-on-one interviews (n = 6) were analyzed and coded based on the specific participant responses.

Table 1 *Summary of Research Questions, Themes, and Codes*

Research Question (RQ)	Themes	Codes Generated
RQ1: What are students' perceptions towards the use of Instagram Reels for narrative writing improvement?	Theme 1: Increased Confidence and Less Writing Anxiety	- Lower writing fear (R2, R3, R7, ST1) - Higher motivation (R5, R17) - Easy-to-use platform (R19, ST4) - Flexible review pace (R5, R17, ST1)
	Theme 2: Learning Vocabulary and Sentence Structure	- Learning new adjectives (R1, R9, ST1, ST3) - Enhancing story depth (R9, ST1)
RQ2: What are the perceived contributing and hindering factors affecting platform effectiveness?	Theme 3: Visual and Audio Features Aiding Learning	- Dual reading and listening (R11, ST1) - Visualizing story scenes (ST1, ST2) - Audio and visual media engagement (R5, R17, ST1) - Clear pronunciation and speech modeling (R2, R11)
	Theme 4: Short Video Duration and Digital Distractions	- Videos too short (R7, R13, R16, R22) - No complete essay structure (R16, R22) - Social media distractions (R16) - No instant teacher feedback (R3, R16)

Note: *R = Questionnaire Respondent, ST = Interview Student.*

Research Question 1: Students' Perceptions towards Instagram Reels for Narrative Writing

The primary theme emerging from the data shows that students experienced a positive emotional shift, moving from feeling anxious about writing to feeling more confident in their abilities. In the open-ended questionnaire, R5 shared how the platform's visual presentation enhanced motivation: "*Overall, I find Instagram reels by @bbclearningenglish very helpful, interesting and easy to follow. The short colorful and lively videos make learning narrative writing feel less boring and much more enjoyable. I feel excited and motivated to learn because the lessons are short, straight to the point, and I can watch them anytime and anywhere it turns learning into something fun instead of just reading long notes.*" Similarly, R17 explained that the combination of visuals, audio, and creative examples made learning fun, which motivated them to study narrative writing by saying "*I have a positive view of using Instagram reels by @bbclearningenglish for learning Narrative Writing. The content is engaging, concise, and easy to understand, which helps learners grasp narrative writing techniques more effectively. I also feel more motivated and interested in learning because the combination of visuals, audio, and creative examples makes the learning process enjoyable. In addition, the short reels format allows learners to review the lessons anytime and anywhere, making learning more flexible and convenient.*"

In addition, this change in confidence is also evident from the face-to-face interviews. For instance, ST1 noted, *"I liked learning using Instagram Reels since the video was simple, engaging,*

and comprehensible. They helped me retain new vocabulary and came up with more ideas on how to write my narrative essay".

From the answers above, it is evident that students initially had some hesitation when writing narratives. However, because the Instagram Reels were small enough, students managed to overcome this barrier and felt confident about writing. Thus, they did not face an overwhelming challenge of dealing with large amounts of information from textbooks. The results are consistent with Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis. Since students found Instagram Reels less intimidating than other educational resources because of their visual nature, they felt that their anxiety and stress decreased.

Then, after anxiety disappeared, they were as their anxiety decreased, they felt able to absorb the information and learn. In addition, this process is consistent with the Social Learning Theory developed by Albert Bandura (1977). Native speakers in the @bbclearningenglish videos played roles of friendlier and more competent symbolic models. Seeing such models speaking fluently, students believed that it would be easy to imitate them. This may have helped to increase students' self-efficacy in terms of writing. This result is consistent with the findings of Dewi et al. (2022), who claim that social media tools like Instagram Reels allow to build learners' self-confidence.

The second theme is based on the positive changes in language mechanics, such as the development of descriptive vocabulary and better sentence construction. Open-ended questionnaire responses showed that short videos allowed students to substitute overused words with more developed language. For example, R9 explained, *"I got knowledge on how to use more complicated words than very happy or very sad, making my sentences look more mature".* In addition, during the semi-structured interviews, participants described how they managed to learn particular emotion words from instructional videos. For example, ST2 recalled: *"I still remember the words 'terrified' and 'frightened'. For example, when you are super scared of something, you can use the word 'terrified'."* On the other hand, ST3 explained that short videos helped them learn new vocabulary that they then applied to make their narrative essays more interesting by saying, *"My experience in learning using Instagram Reels from @bbclearningenglish was good. I was able to learn new vocabulary from the short and interesting videos. I could also apply the new vocabulary in my narrative writing making my essay more interesting."*

The above results clearly reveal that the short video formats have distinct language patterns that are easily understandable and applicable to students. The structural development of the language is directly linked to the symbolic modeling of Bandura (1977). In symbolic modeling, the creators of content give the tools of the language through realistic examples rather than using the traditional method of learning from memory. Through exposure to these digital models, the students got syntactic control and writing self-efficacy. This result correlates with the findings of Sarangapani and Hashim (2022).

Research Question 2: Perceived Contributing and Hindering Factors

For the third theme of visual and audio features aiding learning**,** it is noteworthy that the importance of multimodal characteristics such as visual graphics, on-screen subtitles, and audio narration was another important aspect that played a vital role in enhancing students' interest and understanding. As seen in the survey, R11 mentioned the advantage of listening and reading by saying, *"Having the ability to listen to the right pronunciation and read the subtitles made it easier for me to memorize the words".* Moreover, in the interview, ST5 also added the way in which the multimodal aspects helped them to imagine the scene for narrative writing: *"Videos,*

music, and on-screen text in Instagram Reels make narrative writing more fun. This enabled me to imagine the characters, settings, and emotions of the scenes".

The positive responses of students about multimodal components indicate how dual modality input is useful for language processing. The interplay of audio, subtitling, and visuals aids learners to interact with language input as well as to write fluently without anxiety (Aziz et al., 2019; Krashen, 1982). According to Krashen's (1982) Affective Filter Hypothesis, the above-mentioned interactive approach helps make writing lessons interesting and less stressful, which may lead to lower affective filters. This is consistent with the results of the study conducted by Aziz et al. (2019).

While there were several advantages, the data showed that there were critical obstacles that prevented students from learning. In the first place, the greatest obstacle that was pointed out by the participants was the time constraint for the Reels, which was limited to 60–90 seconds. For example, R7 pointed out that because the videos were so short, it was sometimes difficult to understand the points clearly, requiring them to watch the videos repeatedly by saying that *"Sometimes the videos were too short, so it was difficult to understand some points clearly. However, I could watch them again to understand better."* R13 share a similar experience, noting *"Some videos were too short, and I sometimes needed to watch them several times to understand the content clearly."* Additionally, students struggled with the classroom environment and the social media platform itself. R16 commented *"The videos are too short, so sometimes the explanation is not enough. I also get distracted easily by other things on Instagram. If I do not understand, I cannot ask right away."* And finally, R22 highlighted how these short videos interacted with poor infrastructure and learning habits, stating that limited details, internet issues, and the difficulty of taking notes while watching made learning harder noting *"The videos are too short, so details are limited. I also sometimes face internet issues, and it can be hard to take notes while watching."* Overall, these threads of data show that although multimedia content is excellent in engaging students and providing concise linguistic input, it presents unique cognitive barriers, brevity in instruction, and environmental distractions, which render learning of multi-paragraph writing difficult to achieve independently.

In the evaluation of these results, students' experiences appeared to differ. Some students (R7, R13) found the short, fast-paced videos hard to follow at first and needed to watch them repeatedly. Because individual proficiency levels were not recorded, differences between higher- and lower-proficiency students cannot be confirmed. Thus, even an engaging microformat may not suit every learner. Moreover, a notable difference among the students' experience was digital distraction. While some learners devoted their full attention to the educational process, some, like R16, were distracted easily by additional entertaining functions of Instagram.

Regarding structure, while Reels are perfect for the learning of vocabulary chunks, they are unable to cover the complex organization of the structure of an essay. Therefore, it is the key shortcoming of microlearning, which proves Bandura's (1977) opinion about the necessity of prolonged teaching of complex behaviors instead of observation only. This is in agreement with previous research which shows that short form social media applications are capable of providing targeted linguistic elements such as grammar and vocabulary but are more effective when used along with classroom instruction and not to replace guided essay writing (Bandura, 1977; Sarangapani & Hashim, 2022).

CONCLUSION

This qualitative study explored how lower secondary Malaysian ESL learners perceive the use of short-form Instagram Reels from @bbclearningenglish to improve their narrative writing skills. Based on the thematic analysis of the questionnaires and interviews, several key conclusions can be drawn.

First, regarding student perceptions, students reported that regular viewing of these micro-videos helped them overcome their initial writing anxiety and build their confidence. This emotional shift is consistent with Stephen Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis and Albert Bandura's Social Learning Theory. The video presenters served as friendly symbolic models, helping to lower the students' situational stress (the "affective filter") and build their "self-efficacy" or belief in their own writing abilities. By making language input feel low-stakes and accessible, the platform encouraged students to attempt descriptive writing tasks without fear.

Second, from an operational perspective, the dual presentation of spoken narration, visuals, and subtitles was perceived as an engaging way for students to learn and recall descriptive vocabulary. However, the brief 60-to-90-second format of Instagram Reels acts as a major structural limitation. While students perceived the micro-format as helpful for fast vocabulary learning, it does not provide the depth or macro-level structure required to teach students how to organize and transition full, multi-paragraph narrative essays independently.

Therefore, as a pedagogical implication, Instagram Reels should be used strictly as a supplemental classroom tool to spark student interest, introduce targeted vocabulary, and lower writing anxiety, rather than a substitute for formal, teacher-guided writing instruction. Future research should utilize mixed method designs with larger, more diverse student samples to measure the direct impact of these digital tools on actual essay performance over a longer duration. The findings are also limited by the short interviews (4 to 5 minutes), one slightly leading interview question, and the reliance on self-reported perceptions from one school.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares that they have no competing interests.

Author Contribution

The author conducted fieldwork, prepared the literature review, methodology, data entry, performed statistical analysis, and interpreted results.

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Ethics Statement

The research followed all applicable ethical standards. Participation was voluntary, and confidentiality was ensured.

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