

ESL Activity: Using Paragraph Writing Technique to Develop Ideas for Individual Presentation in Speaking Assessments

Sophie Binti Tarmizi

(English Unit, Negeri Sembilan Matriculation College, Malaysia)

Abstract: Malaysian students need to sit for Malaysian University English Test (MUET) before entering local universities. The aim of this research was to investigate the effectiveness of paragraph writing technique in preparing students for MUET Speaking assessment; Individual Presentation. Although the focus is speaking, I used “paragraph writing” technique introduced by Huggard (2003) as my intervention tool. This method helped students in their development of ideas for Speaking task in “Task Fulfilment” as described in the marking scheme. Whitehead and McNiff’s Model (2006) was chosen because of its 5 disciplined and systematic steps known as “action reflection”; a complete cycle with a plan to modify the action and move in new and improved direction. The data collected was quantitative and obtained through assessment of the student’s presentations through various mediums. 13 respondents were chosen for this study. After the first cycle, 8 students managed to increase their marks from “Limited User” to “Modest User”. Meanwhile, the other 5 had to go through the second cycle. After that, they managed to obtain good marks and became a “Satisfactory User”. Overall, by using the “paragraph writing” technique, the students managed to organize their ideas effectively before delivering their ideas in the speaking assessment.

Key words: ESL, MUET, speaking assessment, speaking skills

1. Introduction

1.1 Study Background

English language is a second language in Malaysia and there are local English teachers to teach children as early as 5 years old to upper form students (18–19 years old students). Government schools provide English language syllabus based on different age groups and teachers have to follow the syllabus given in teaching or guiding students to have a better acquisition of the language itself. Teachers have to focus on four skills namely reading, speaking, writing and listening. On the other hand, for upper form students, we have matriculation colleges and Form Six colleges. The students have to go through continuous assessments conducted by the institution itself and Malaysian University English Test (MUET) for local university admissions. There are Band 1 to Band 5+ in this MUET examination and some courses require at least Band 2 for entrance but Band 3 for graduation. Meanwhile, if the students want to pursue education in medical or law field, they are required to get Band 5. This MUET examination is also a compulsory examination for foreign students if they want to study in our local universities. That is how important MUET is in our education system.

Sophie Binti Tarmizi, English Unit, Negeri Sembilan Matriculation College. E-mail: sophietarmizi@gmail.com.

1.2 Reflection of the Problem

In my case, I am one of the English lecturers in a matriculation college and students will register for their One-year matriculation programme at least by the end of June or early July every year. The problem that we have is the time constraint as speaking for MUET examination will be held in the middle of October, while reading, writing and listening examinations will be held in November. Therefore, we have limited time to train or guide our students to be effective speakers during that examination. Not to mention the mixed abilities of students that we receive every year makes the problem a bit challenging for most of us here.

In my perspective, reading and speaking skills tend to overlap when teachers are trying to guide students to improve their speaking skills. Normally, students will be encouraged to read a lot of books if they want to develop ideas for their class presentation and oral tests. Based on a study conducted by Çağrı Tuğrul Mart (2012), he clearly stated that reading is one of the key factors in language learning especially for foreign languages and it is very important for students to use the language for learning and communication purposes. He also added that reading plays a pivotal role in successful language learning because it can also develop speaking skills. However, speaking skills should not be taken lightly since it holds a very significant place in language learning, because through speech, our messages will be conveyed easily.

Although the idea of combining the two skills is quite fascinating, I think my students should be taught differently for each skill. Reading might be one of the key factors to succeed in academics, but if the students do not really know how to develop and organize their own ideas based on their readings, this may hamper their performance in speaking assessments both for matriculation level and MUET examination. Students have to sit for MUET as the entrance examination for local university admissions. They have to be tested in reading, writing, speaking and listening and they will be given 'bands' for that examination. The least band they should target is Band 2, while Band 5+ would be the highest. If they only achieved Band 1, they have to retake the examination before entering university.

Like any other teachers or lecturers, I normally teach my students to prepare some notes before they sit for any speaking assessments. Note taking, brainstorming and some other activities are explained in class before they sit for any speaking assessments in order to help them to write a better content. Huggard (2003) stressed on the importance of using notes while doing oral presentation and in my case, it would be for the speaking assessments. Huggard also stated that notes can help students to stay on track and focus on the content they are trying to deliver.

However, after conducting a few lessons with the students, it was observed that some of the students did not use suitable methods to write down their points or opinions. Most of the time they just randomly wrote whatever came across their mind without properly organizing the ideas that they had beforehand.

1.3 Research Objectives

(1) General Objective

To investigate the effectiveness of paragraph writing technique in preparing students for MUET Speaking assessment; Individual Presentation.

(2) Specific Objectives

- 1) To enable students to develop and organize their ideas in a paragraph.
- 2) To enable students to present ideas in an organized way by using the paragraph format.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1 The Focus of the Study

The focus of the study revolved around my Accounting class whereby most of the Accounting students have problems in developing and organizing ideas based on the situation given to them. The aim is to help them to be able to perform in “Individual Presentation” for MUET. This could also help them in the “Continuous Assessment” for the matriculation level because the marking schemes are quite similar. In order for me to evaluate the individual presentation, I adapted the marking scheme provided by Majlis Peperiksaan Malaysia (MPM) or Malaysian Examination Council by looking at the “Task Fulfilment” part whereby the content was evaluated. Because of MPM’s marking scheme is highly confidential, I rephrased some of the items to be included in this study. Each level had different descriptors that explained how the marks were to be given to each candidate (Table 1).

Table 1 The Adapted Marking Scheme Used in Individual Presentation

Type of users (Task Fulfilment /content)	Band Score/Marks
Limited User - shows limited understanding of the topic given - hardly develops ideas -limited response to task given with major gaps and/or repetition	Band 2 7–9 marks
Modest User - shows moderate understanding of the topic given - develops and organizes ideas but with some effort - response generally relevant to the task given - moderate response to the task given/may not elaborate on points raised	Band 3 10–12 marks
Satisfactory User - shows satisfactory understanding of the topic given - develops and organizes ideas satisfactorily - response for the most part relevant to the task given - adequate response to the task given but there are some gaps or redundancy	Band 4 13–15 marks
Proficient User - shows good understanding of the topic given - develops and organizes ideas reasonably well - relevant response to the task given with few slips - adequate response to the task given	Band 5 16–18 marks

Teaching students to develop and organize ideas was not easy but after reading Huggard’s book (2003), it gave me ideas on how to help the students develop and organize their ideas for individual presentation. Huggard also explained how written preparation can help students to deliver their ideas effectively as they can stay focused because they have organized ideas according to a simple format of a paragraph writing. As mentioned by him, “A paragraph is a group of sentences organized around the one main idea. It is the building block of any type of essay.” (Huggard, 2003, p. 176). By looking at that perspective, I adapted paragraph writing technique whereby it consists of three parts namely “Topic Sentence”, “Developing Sentences” and “Concluding Sentence”. The reason of using the paragraph writing technique was to help students to organize their ideas in a suitable order to enable them to present their ideas smoothly. After all, developing and organizing ideas are some of the important features in the marking scheme descriptors.

2.2 Target Group

13 Accounting students. 3 male and 10 female students.

2.3 Planning and Action of Intervention

For this action research, I referred to the Whitehead and McNiff's Model (2006) because it suited the purpose of my class activities. This model consists of 5 disciplined and systematic steps in a research known as "action reflection". It is also a complete cycle with a plan to modify the action and move into a new and improved direction.

On another note, according to Nunan (1991),

"Task and exercises for developing speaking skills should be referenced against the purposes for which learners ultimately require the language, and to this end it is useful to carry out an analysis of the materials and classroom tasks which form the basis of learners' speaking programs, and compare these with the target tasks. (p. 62)

Nunan (1991) also mentioned that by going through an action research and application of tasks in classroom can actually help teachers to experiment different methods and strategies to help students to develop their abilities in different skills. Teachers can evaluate the methods used in a classroom to see the effectiveness of methods used towards students' performance. Additionally, by experimenting new ways, teachers can find suitable strategies that suit the students' capabilities in order for them to excel in different skills. With that notion, I was motivated to try out the paragraph writing technique in helping my students to score better marks in their speaking assessments for matriculation level and also MUET purposes.

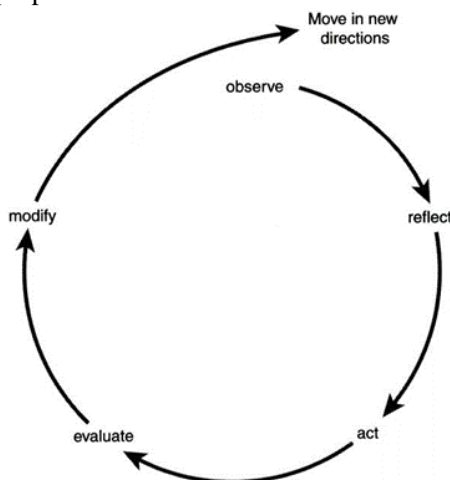


Figure 1 An Action-Reflection Cycle; Whitehead and McNiff's Model (2006)

3.

3.1 Cycle One

3.1.1 Observe and Plan

The class used for this purpose was A2P5 (an accounting class) and the number of students was 13. There were three activities conducted in this cycle. An impromptu speech activity was carried out as the first activity initially, in order to observe the speaking skills or abilities of the students. Most lecturers use impromptu speech activity in the first week of class in order to understand their students' background when the students introduce themselves in class.

The second activity was a prepared speech and each student was given a topic to present. They were allowed to prepare the speech in advance and they were allowed to use any websites to find relevant information to make

things interesting. After that, they have to present their speech in class under one minute.

In the third activity, I used the MUET Speaking question for individual presentation and the students were not allowed to search for any relevant information from any websites. The students were not even allowed to use their phones during this activity. In comparison to the first and second activity, this time they were to prepare their notes without being able to refer to any sources. They were given two minutes to prepare their idea and then present it in class after the time has ended. The duration of the presentation was two minutes per student.

A person's character is often influenced by other people around him/her. Who has the greatest influence on a person's character?
Discuss which of the following has the greatest influence on a person's character:

- Candidate A: Parents
- Candidate B: Teachers
- Candidate C: Friends
- Candidate D: Famous Personalities

Figure 2 Sample MUET Speaking Question; Individual Presentation

3.1.2 Reflect

The first activity was not difficult for most students since they managed to introduce themselves accordingly although there were some grammatical errors in their sentence structures. Most of them were quite confident and they gave relevant information about themselves. There were also similar responses during the second activity whereby they managed to present relevant information based on the topic given earlier to them and some of them even requested to present the information for more than one minute.

However, during the third activity, most of the students did not manage to give good presentation due to the fact that they had to prepare and present in class during a short period of time. When they were asked, some of them mentioned that they have lack of ideas and they did not know how many points should be given within two minutes. On the other hands, most students used different methods to develop and organize their ideas, they have so many points or ideas to be presented and the time was too short for them to put all of the information together.

3.1.3 Act

After going through three different activities with the students (as mentioned in *Observe and Plan* part above, I noticed that students needed enhancement and a different approach than brainstorming or mind mapping in preparing their ideas for speaking assessment. Therefore, I decided to use the 'paragraph writing' technique as an intervention tool to help the students to develop and organize their ideas for their individual presentation.

For the intervention tool, I used the guidelines given by Huggard (2003, p. 176):

- 1) A topic sentence which contains the main idea of the paragraph.
- 2) Developing sentences which contain the details of your explanation — facts, examples and others.
- 3) A concluding sentence which contains a finishing sentence.

Visual below would be the input given to the students in order to make them understand how to organize their ideas. This was a crucial step before assessing them later by using different sets of MUET questions.

Figure 3 shows the sample answer for MUET Speaking Question for "Individual Presentation" assessment which was used after students have carried out the third speaking activity previously. Students were taught on how to focus on one main idea (as stated in the question). They need to understand that main idea should be only one and others would be called supporting details as to support their main idea. The development of ideas was not easy for some students due to the fact they did not really know how to connect from one point to another. That

was the reason to choose paragraph writing technique (because I have implemented it in essay writing process). Once they understood that the process is the same as writing a content paragraph as in an essay, they easily understood that they are writing content paragraph but for speaking assessment purposes.

<p>SAMPLE QUESTION/SITUATION: Malaysia is a popular holiday destination among foreign tourists. Suggest some ways to improve tourism services.</p> <p>CANDIDATE B: You have to give a presentation to your class. Talk about the importance of clean public toilets.</p> <p>NOTE: 1. Context: Malaysia, foreign tourists (outsiders), public toilets. 2. Possible POV: i) where can we find public toilets? ii) reasons why must have clean public toilets? iii) how can we make sure the toilets are clean?</p>	
GREETINGS	Good morning to the examiners and fellow candidates.
Introduction / Topic Sentence	Malaysia is known for its diversities of cultures and beautiful places. Therefore, many foreign tourists come to Malaysia to experience different things here in Malaysia. In my opinion, the cleanliness of public toilets should be one of our priorities to attract tourists to visit Malaysia.
<p>Content / Developing Sentences</p> <p>Explain</p> <p>Stressing</p> <p>Questioning & answering</p> <p>Additional POV</p> <p>Elaborating</p> <p>Reasons / justifications</p> <p>Examples</p> <p>Reasons/justifications</p>	<p>Public toilets can be found mostly in every corner of tourist attraction; be it in a mall or even by a beach. We can find them easily.</p> <p>However, it is our duty to make sure our public toilets are clean and hygienic. Why do I say so? It's simple – we use toilets every single day.</p> <p>To add on the above statement, tourists do find our country interesting to be visited for many times. It could be because of we have many interesting places and tasty food from different states.</p> <p>So, when they go from one place to another place, public toilets will be a place that will be used frequently. And that will be the utmost reason why our public toilets should be maintained well and in a sparkling clean condition.</p> <p>As an illustration, we all know that Malaysia is a popular holiday destination especially our beautiful beaches like Pulau Redang and Pulau Pangkor. There, we have divers' heaven where tourists can spend time with family or friends. So, toilets will be provided for them to relieve themselves.</p> <p>Without proper and clean toilets, tourists will not come back to these places to support our economy in the future. Tourists bring income to local people and products. And that's the reason why we need to provide them good and clean public toilets.</p> <p>*** you can add another example if you like.</p>
<p>Concluding sentence</p> <p>Repeat Topic Sentence</p>	<p>All in all, public toilet is meant for public use. We need clean toilet in order to relieve ourselves. With that stated, cleanliness of public toilets should be one of our priorities to attract tourists to visit Malaysia.</p> <p>Thank you.</p>

Figure 3 Sample Answer for MUET Speaking Question

After a few lessons, the students were tested again in class but using different sets of questions. They used the tool given to them within the preparation time limit (two minutes) and they had to present in class within two minutes also. The results will be shown in Table 2.

3.1.4 Evaluate

For the evaluation process, I have to refer to the marking scheme provided by MPM (Malaysian Examination Council). I adapted the marking scheme and simplified it for this action research purposes because the document cannot be published without MPM's consent (Tables 1–2).

Based on Table 2, the comparison can be seen before and after using the intervention tool. There were 13 students involved and after using the paragraph writing technique in constructing their ideas during individual presentation, they were able to upgrade their marks. The least was 7 marks being upgraded to 9 marks and the highest was 11 marks being upgraded to 15 marks. Therefore, a modification needed to be done to help five students whose marks were 9 and 10 (Limited and Modest User accordingly).

Table 2 The Comparison Before and After Using the “Paragraph Writing” Technique

No	Students	Before using ‘Paragraph Writing’	After using ‘Paragraph Writing’
1	S1	9	13
2	S2	7	9
3	S3	7	9
4	S4	9	13
5	S5	11	15
6	S6	8	10
7	S7	8	10
8	S8	8	13
9	S9	7	9
10	S10	8	12
11	S11	8	12
12	S12	8	12
13	S13	8	12

3.1.5 Modify

Based on Table 2, three students scored the lowest marks (9: Limited User) and two students scored 10 (Modest User) which was not expected after using the intervention tool (paragraph writing technique). Therefore, it was decided that a different approach needed to be implemented towards these five students and other few things needed to be focused on such as time constraints and the students' abilities in delivering their ideas. However, the paragraph writing technique will still be used as the intervention tool for the second cycle.

A second cycle was carried out in order to help the five students to be at least at the low of “Satisfactory User” level before they sit for the MUET Speaking examination. It is very important for both the lecturer and the students to have a change in their final marks.

3.2 Cycle Two

3.2.1 Act

I still used the “paragraph writing” technique but with a slight change whereby voice recording (Activity 1) and video recording (Activity 2) were used. The students still used the technique but with a twist as they recorded their voice for two minutes and sent it through the WhatsApp application within the time frame given. The five students were asked to do two rounds of voice and video recordings and I have to listen and comment on every aspect of their presentation.

Before they submitted the recordings, they had to write their notes within two minutes (as if they are having the real examination) and the duration for the presentation is 2 minutes. The reasons why they had to submit their presentation through a voice recording was to help them to feel at ease while presenting ideas and to practice time management (which was one of the factors during individual presentation part done previously).

Some of them submitted more than four recordings and they were committed in achieving good marks in their presentations. The students also had personal consultation with me when they submitted the recordings and the consultation seemed to help most of them to be more confident in delivering their ideas. On the other hand, it was very essential for me to listen and to give feedback on each student's performance before doing the "Mock MUET Speaking" test in order to test the students' readiness towards the examination itself. Thus, by listening to their voice recordings and watching their videos, I could give feedback accordingly and also guide the students to perform better in actual examination.

3.2.2 Evaluate

After a few sessions through the WhatsApp application, I conducted a Mock MUET Speaking test (in class) for the students right before the actual examination itself. The whole class was tested but my main focus was towards the five students as shown in Tables 3–5 below.

In Table 3, there was a consistency in their marks. They started as a "Limited" and "Modest User" but they showed a good change before sitting for the MUET speaking examination. My target was for them to exceed their lowest marks and they managed to do so.

Table 3 Marks for Voice and Video Recordings

Students	Voice 1	Voice 2	Video 1	Video 2
S2	11	11	12	13
S3	12	12	12	13
S6	12	12	12	12
S7	12	13	12	14
S9	12	12	12	13

Table 4 shows the comparison of marks for Cycle 1 and Cycle 2. Improvement of students can be seen clearly as they used the "paragraph writing" technique they learned in class in order to help them arranging their ideas and opinions while doing individual presentation for speaking assessments.

Table 4 Comparison Between the Marks for Cycle 1 and Cycle 2

Students	Cycle 1	Cycle 2 (Mock MUET)
S2	9	13
S3	9	13
S6	10	12
S7	10	14
S9	9	13

In Table 5, we can see improvement for S2, S3, S6 and S9. Meanwhile, for S7, the student scored the same marks, maintaining Band 4 (Satisfactory User). Although the difference of marks was only one or two, but S2 managed to change from Modest User (Band 3) to Satisfactory User (Band 4). The rest was in Band 4 before sitting for MUET and managed to maintain their band afterwards. This can be seen as a success to all five of them.

Table 5 Comparison between the marks for Cycle 2 and Individual Presentation marks (MUET Examination)

Students	Cycle 2	MUET
S2	13	15
S3	13	14
S6	12	13
S7	14	14
S9	13	15

4. Results and Discussion: The Effects of The Intervention

The intervention tool used was “paragraph writing” technique and it helped the students to have a focus on their presentation. Before using the technique, the students could present accordingly but with some difficulties. After the first cycle, the results were satisfactory but the other 5 students needed more practices because they were still not at the targeted level.

Due to the fact that there were 13 students involved in the first cycle and only 8 of them managed to score the targeted marks; so, the plan was therefore modified. Since the students were already familiar with many applications in their smart phones, it was decided that voice and video recordings were used through WhatsApp application in the second cycle. The remaining 5 students recorded their own voice (two recordings) and recorded themselves presenting in video form (two videos) by using different MUET questions.

The biggest impact was the personal consultation with the students while doing the listening, reviewing and commenting the voice and video recordings. It felt satisfying as I could communicate with the students easily and assist them in a way that the students want it to be. The 5 students seemed to have similar problems in presenting their ideas — lack of ideas, organization was not easy for them and they had issues with confidence level — so in a way, the personal consultation did help them to build up their confidence bit by bit and at the end of the process, they managed to score better marks.

By the end of Cycle 2, they have improved a lot in organizing their ideas and thoughts to be presented during individual presentation. Apart from that, their delivery could be considered as satisfactory also as they know what and when to say things based on their organized notes. For that particular reason, I have to wait for their MUET examination to be over and get their overall marks. It was satisfying to know that my 13 students managed to be in Band 3 and Band 4 group (Modest and Satisfactory User accordingly).

5. Conclusion

Based on the whole process of using the “paragraph writing” technique, I learned that some techniques could actually work out if both the lecturer and students did their parts accordingly as they were aiming for the same goal — to score good marks or good grades. The only drawback was the time constraints before MUET examination and due to the limited time available, there were not many activities that could be done to enhance the students’ abilities in each of the examination components (Speaking, Reading, Listening and Writing).

However, it is a challenge as teaching speaking skills is not an easy thing to do and having students with different fluency background was also one of the difficulties that most of the lecturers here have to face every year. Therefore, by incorporating the “paragraph writing” technique with MUET speaking question, I managed to help 13 students to develop and organize their ideas accordingly. Although some of them faced difficulties to present

their ideas due to their own circumstances, but at the end of the process, they have learned new ways to incorporate few things to get the utmost results that they wanted.

To conclude, by using different approaches and techniques, lecturers can help their students to achieve something good out of themselves. The students also have to play their part accordingly in order for them to become better at something. As what McNiff, J. & Whitehead, J. (2011) stated,

“It is a practical way of looking at your practice in order to check whether it is as you feel it should be. If you feel your practice is satisfactory, you will be able to explain how and why you believe this is the case; you will be able to produce evidence to support your claims. If you feel that your practice needs attention in some way, you will be able to take actions to improve it, and then produce evidence in what way the practice has improved.” (p. 16).

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