

The Aesthetics of Storybird to Replace the Traditional Pen and Paper for Writing English Essays

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Abstract: The initiatives of the Malaysian Ministry of Education in elevating the quality of education in Malaysia had been outlined in the National Education Blueprint (2013 – 2025) and the Blueprint for Higher Institution (2015-2025). One of them is to equip students with the 21st century skills to incorporate more of Information and Communications Technology (ICT) in the teaching and learning process in order to improve the quality of students' learning experience in the classroom which is in line with the millenials' attraction towards visual appeal. This study aims to identify the students' perception on the usage of an ICT tool called Storybird and their thoughts on the visuals and to identify the preference of students between the digital approach and the conventional approach in writing an English essay in the ESL writing classroom. Two essay tests were carried out and a questionnaire was used as the instrument in this study. A total of 18 respondents in a private university college in Malaysia participated in this study.

Keywords: Storybird, visuals, ESL writing, conventional

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INTRODUCTION

Integration of technology in teaching English subjects in Malaysia is nothing new in the education sector. It was implemented in 2003 with the integration of Information and Communications Technology (ICT) in all educational fields as outlined by the Ministry of Education (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2003). Although ICT has a positive influence in education, the usage of ICT in teaching writing skills in the English as a Second Language (ESL) classroom is still not encouraging (Yunus et al., 2013). According to the Ministry of Education's second plan in the integration of ICT, it emphasises the usage of ICT to obtain information and communication by making ICT as an educational tool. Thus, this study attempts to shed some light on the effects of the integration of ICT on writing English essays by students. The launch of the National Education Blueprint (2013-2025) and the Blueprint for Higher Institution (2015-2025) is expected to address the necessary skills needed by students for the 21st Century in line with the government's initiatives incorporate more technology in education. Advancements in technology has led to many innovations in the different ways of teaching students. Students with ICT literacy is also higher than in previous years with them being labelled as "Digital Natives" (Prensky, 2001).

One way to cater to the new generation called millennials is to incorporate digital instructional tools in writing an essay. Zakaria et al. (2016) have stated that the writing component in English can be a daunting task that can lead to boredom when the process of teaching is still using the conventional approach. A previous research titled "Students' Experience of Using Storybird in Writing ESL Narrative Text" by Zakaria et al., (2016) had explored the integration of using Storybird in teaching writing to students. This instructional tool is in sync with our current educational blueprint in incorporating ICT in educating students. One of the tools that is currently being used by writers is Storybird. Storybird is not effective enough to improve the students' essay as it needs to be visually appealing as well, to be able to gain students' interest in writing. Thus, this study aims to take a look beyond the students' experience in using Storybird. It attempts to highlight the aesthetics of the pictures which are used in Storybird and at the same time explore the students' preferred choice between the conventional approach

or the new ICT based approach in writing an essay. Literature pertaining to Storybird is still limited (Herrera, 2013; Menezes, 2012; Wertz, 2014) and there are not many studies being done on the aesthetics as well as the comparison between the digital approach and conventional pen and paper approach.

The research questions that act as the basis of this study are: (i) Are there any significant differences in using the conventional approach and the digital approach in writing an English essay? (ii) What is the perception of the students on the visuals and usage of Storybird in the learning process?

LITERATURE REVIEW

1. ESSAY WRITING

Preparing for the 21st Century, students must have the necessary skills to be able to embrace the 21st century. English language teaching (ELT) and learning is still being updated with new tools and pedagogies (Velloo & Shuib, 2019). According to the Ministry of Education (2012), some of the skills needed are the ability to communicate well and having English language proficiency. One of the strategies to enhance the language proficiency in English is through writing. In producing an essay in English, most teachers will revert to the conventional method of writing an essay using pen and paper with students brainstorming for ideas and making mind maps. Writing is a very complex process regardless of whether it is by the conventional or digital approach. According to Biggs et al., (1999), writers need to simultaneously do multiple things when it comes to writing. To add to this complexity is the notion of English as a Second Language (L2). L2 learners go through much more in producing a piece of writing compared to writing in their mother tongue (L1) (Biggs et al., 1999).

2. STORYBIRD IN WRITING AN ESSAY

One of the application sites that helps to improve writing is Storybird. It allows users to access a wide arrange of illustrations to help in promoting writing. It is a combination of art and storytelling that can benefit both students and teachers when it comes to producing a better

piece of writing. The most interesting part in using Storybird is the images that can be used for free to aid one's writing. Art is used to create picture books with meaningful art that can be arranged by the writers to suit their story. Pop (2012) and Zakaria et al., (2016) suggested that Art is very simple to use and has very high quality visual arts. Their research aimed to study the perception of the students in producing essays using the Storybird application which can be used in the teaching of writing in the ESL classroom.

3. USER INTERFACE DESIGN (UI)

In order to increase the usage of an application or tool, it is very important that the application contains a good interface. According to a famous book written by Shneiderman titled "Designing the User Interface: Strategies for Effective Human-Computer Interaction (2017)", the eight fundamentals for designing a good interface are highlighted as follows:

1. Strive for consistency
Consistent sequences of actions should be maintained in similar situations. Identical terminology should be used in prompts, menus, and help screens, and consistent commands should be employed throughout.
2. Enable frequent users to use shortcuts
As the frequency of use increases, so do the user's desires to reduce the number of interactions and to increase the pace of interaction. Abbreviations, function keys, hidden commands, and macro facilities are very helpful to an expert user.
3. Offer informative feedback
For every operator action, there should be some system feedback. For frequent and minor actions, the response can be modest, while for infrequent and major actions, the response should be more substantial.
4. Design dialog to yield closure
Sequences of actions should be organised into groups with a beginning, middle and end. The informative feedback at the completion of a group of actions gives the operators the satisfaction of accomplishment, a sense of relief, the signal to

drop contingency plans and options from their minds, and an indication that the way is clear to prepare for the next group of actions.

5. Offer simple error handling

As much as possible, the system is designed in such a way that the user cannot make a serious error. If an error is made, the system should be able to detect the error and offer simple, comprehensible mechanisms for handling the error.

6. Permit easy reversal of actions

This feature relieves anxiety, since the user knows that errors can be undone; it thus encourages exploration of unfamiliar options. The units of reversibility may be a single action, a data entry, or a complete group of actions.

7. Support internal locus of control

Experienced operators strongly desire the sense that they are in charge of the system and that the system responds to their actions. The system is designed to make users the initiators of actions rather than the responders.

8. Reduce short-term memory load

The limitation of human information processing in short-term memory requires that displays be kept simple, multiple page displays be consolidated, window-motion frequency be reduced, and sufficient training time be allotted for codes, mnemonics, and sequences of actions.

Storybird is an application that has a good user interface with an artful aesthetic. The graphic layout is arranged neatly and easy for students to use and still keep their attention and focus on the application itself. The location of access is designed in a way that does not burden the users for ease of movement when they need to.

Storybird uses a graphic design that is easy to use and at the same time supported by visual art that is very much appealing to respondents of various ages. This is important as according to the eight fundamentals of UI by Schneiderman et al. (2017), it can cut the time between uploading your own visual art into a platform.

VISUAL AESTHETICS

1. COLOURS

The visuals being used were objects of illustration that use basic colours and contrast. In a study conducted by Boyatzis and Varghese (1994), colour is one of the elements that is very important in affecting the emotions and reactions of an individual. For example, the blue colour tone used in Storybird as the main colour in designing the website can invoke a sense of creativity and an element of calmness for the user. This is very much relevant to the Storybird platform which aims to make respondents become creative in writing and also the art illustrator produce a creative piece. Besides that, illustration in the Storybird platform uses bright colours that trigger positive feedback from users (Boyatzis, 1993), because children are often attracted towards bright colours. This can be seen quite clearly in the creation of popular cartoon characters like Spongebob and Naruto. The use of colours should be emphasised accordingly with the objectives of the application to attract the attention of the targeted end users that was designed for.

2. SPACE

In the world of design, space is closely linked with the shape and line that makes up a structure of the design. What is meant by space and the relationship with the graphic design of a website or online application? Space in the world of design can be categorised into white space or negative space. The space mentioned here in the empty spaces is present around a design of an image or website. This can include the spaces between the graphic and the picture, margin and spacing, and spaces between the columns, which can also be considered as spaces.

The proper use of spaces can create a good relationship between the elements of the website with the graphic design of the overall application. Website that is designed using proper spaces will give a better user interface that is comfortable and more user-friendly. This can negate boredom when the teaching process incorporates ICT. Golombisky & Hagen (2013)'s book titled "White Space is Not Your Enemy" explained the importance of using spaces effectively and the direct relationship between the terms "form follows function". Shapes, lines and spaces that

interact with one another and a combination of proper thought-out design are used in designing the graphic user interface. Storybird makes sure it applies these concepts to fulfil the objectives in trying to attract users to use its services. Storybird has managed to manipulate the spaces to attract writers, visual artists and teachers to contribute and use their web services. It is well documented that many articles have stated the effectiveness of promoting digital story telling or essay writing by using Storybird.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

1. RESEARCH DESIGN

This study used a mixed-method which seeks the perception of the respondents in comparing writing using the conventional way and the digital approach. A test using the conventional approach in writing and using Storybird was also conducted. The test results were then compared to find if there are any significant results.

2. RESPONDENTS

A total of 18 respondents took part in this study. They were of mixed-proficiency levels of English. The proficiency level of the respondents was determined from their English subject 1119/1 Paper 1 and 1119/2 Paper 2 results in the Malaysian Certificate of Education or “Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia” (SPM). The respondents’ proficiency level was mixed to make sure that the findings are representative at other ESL classrooms in Malaysia. All the respondents in this study are currently enrolled in a Communicative English course in a private higher education institution in Malaysia. The number of respondents is small due to the design of the research which aims to look at the results of the test and attempts to gain more details of information by asking the respondents their opinions when comparing both the use of the conventional way of writing an essay and using Storybird.

3. PROCEDURES

Purposive sampling was used in this study. The respondents were given one hour to write an essay in class and one week to produce an essay using Storybird. Many of the respondents were not aware of the presence of Storybird. Thus, a simple explanation on how to use Storybird was given. Due to time constraints, the respondents were given notes on how to use Storybird. The respondents were asked to sign up for an account in Storybird and submit in a week's time with no specific theme provided to explore the creativity of the respondents. The respondents were asked to submit their work online and complete a set of questionnaire to share their perception on the use of Storybird.

4. DATA ANALYSIS

The English essays in the test using the conventional approach of pen and paper were analysed using a rubric that was adopted from Unitar International University.¹ Marks were assigned accordingly based on the rubric and analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) Version 24. Questionnaires were also analysed using SPSS. The responses were decoded together with the results from the questionnaires to find any significant outcomes in the respondents' results.

5. DISCUSSION AND FINDINGS

The respondents managed to submit the Storybird essay within the duration that was set. The respondents essays were marked and then compared between using the conventional approach and Storybird. The data were then analysed using SPSS Version 24. The respondents' SPM English subject results from 1119/1 Paper 1 and 1119/2 Paper 2 were taken into account to ensure that the respondents were of mixed-level proficiency.

¹Essay Rubric, Unitar International University, Short Writing Course Assessment, English 3, UGQF0133.

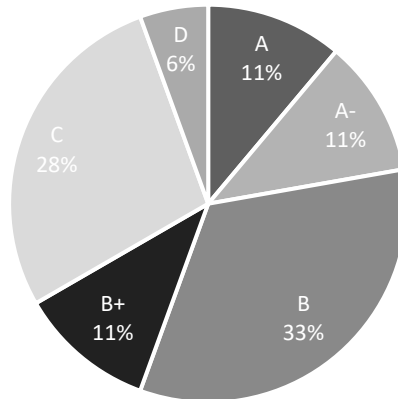


Figure 1: Respondents' overall SPM result for English 1119/1 Papers 1 and 2

Figure 1 clearly shows a mixed-level English proficiency that resembles the common classroom in Malaysia. The percentage of respondents getting grades A, A- and B+ is 11% respectively. Respondents who obtained grades B and C make up 33% and 28% respectively and only 6% of the respondents had obtained grade D.

The test was administered in the classroom. Figure 2 shows the results of the essays after they were marked. Only one respondent managed to score the highest mark that is 16 out of a total of 20 marks. This was followed by four respondents with 14 marks, two respondents scoring 13 marks, and another two respondents scoring 12 marks respectively. Only five respondents obtained the highest score of 11 marks and four respondents obtained the lowest mark of 10.

It was a different scenario with the essay writing task that used Storybird. There was an increase in respondents scoring 16 marks from one to two respondents. Respondents scoring 14 marks remained the same and only one respondent scored 15 marks. There was also an improvement in the number of respondents scoring 12 marks from two respondents to six respondents. Lastly, there was a significant drop in the number of respondents scoring 11 marks and 10 marks to two respondents each.

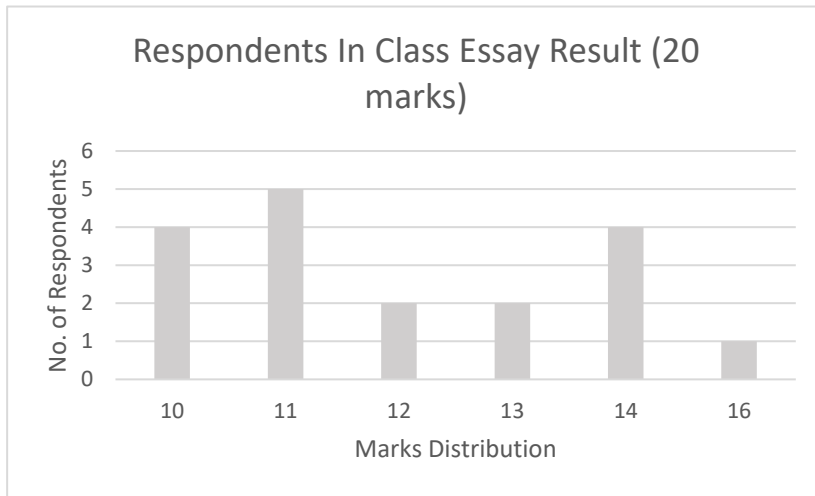


Figure 2: Respondents' results for the essay writing task in class

Figure 1 and 2 show that the results are different when using the conventional approach in writing compared to using the one aided by a digital visual. However, the increase in marks in the findings between the two is still low compared to the benchmark of the test that is 20 marks. The shift can be clearly observed in the band of the lowest marks available where the total of 10 and 11 marks have shifted to the median point of the overall test scores when Storybird was introduced.

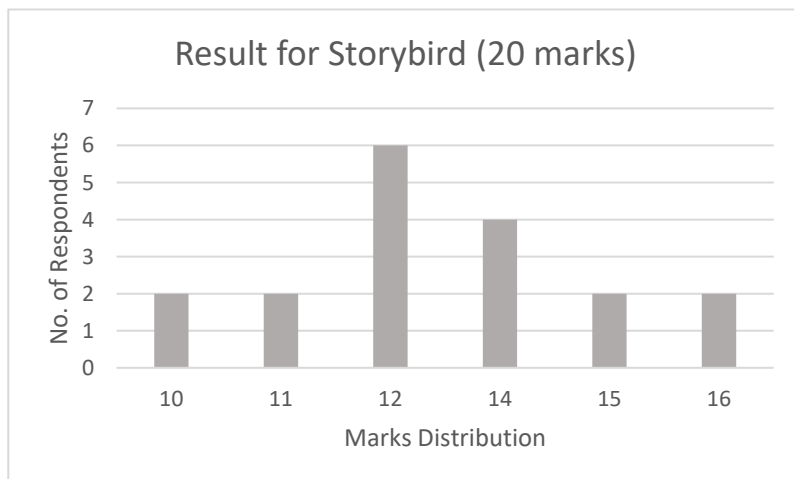


Figure 3: Respondents' results for the essay writing task using Storybird

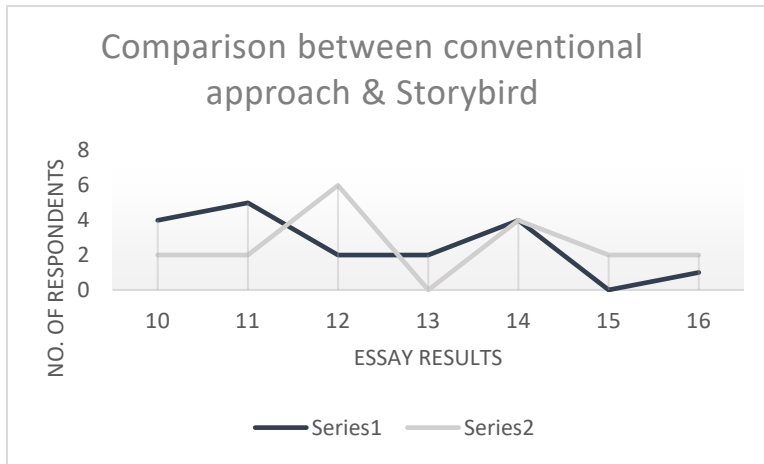


Figure 4: Comparison of results between the essay writing task using the conventional approach & Storybird

Series 1 shows the respondents' results obtained when using the conventional approach in writing the essay and Series 2 shows the respondents' results obtained when using Storybird. In Figure 4, it is apparent that there is an improvement when using the Storybird approach and the number of respondents getting higher marks has also increased.

Table 1: Paired Sample Correlations

		N	Correlation	Sig.
Pair 1	In Class Essay Results (20 marks) & Results for Storybird (20 marks)	18	.637	.004

A paired sample T-test with a p value of < 0.05 shows that there is a significant difference between the results from the conventional method in the class test and that using Storybird. The correlation value $r = 0.637$ as shown in Table 1 shows that there is a positive correlation between both the tests that were carried out.

Table 2: Paired Sample Test

		Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
					Lower	Upper			
Pair 1	In Class Essay Results (20 marks) - Results for Storybird (20 marks)	- .833	1.581	.373	-1.620	-.047	-2.236	17	.039

Table 3 shows the results attained for the paired sample T-test was also significant with a p value <0.05. This shows that there are significant differences in the results between both of the tests that were conducted in class.

The perception of the respondents regarding the usage of Storybird was collected using a questionnaire. The questionnaire was labelled according to the questions when entered using SPSS. POS1 to POS6 was used to label the questions² except for POS5 as the question was not able to be grouped together to visualize the data on a chart form as shown in Figure 5. Questions POS1 to POS6 except POS5 require a Yes and No answer where respondents are asked to choose based on their experience after using Storybird. Findings for POS1 revealed that many of the respondents were not aware of the tool to help them in writing before participating in this study. POS2 showed 13 respondents thought that it was easy to use Storybird in writing an essay while three respondents answered “No” and another two respondents answered “Others”.

²Refer to the questionnaire breakdown in the Appendices Section.

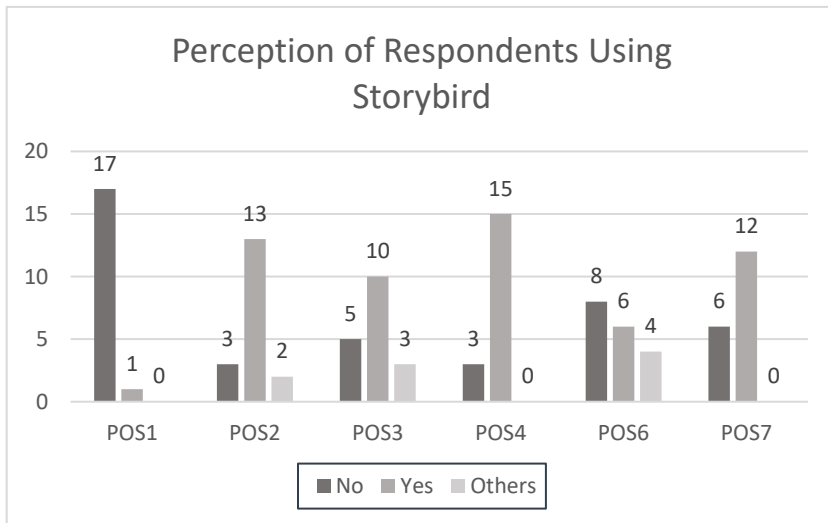


Figure 5: Perception of Respondents Using Storybird

POS3 shows that 10 respondents liked using Storybird when it comes to writing an essay, followed by five respondents opting for “No” and another three for “Others”. In the POS4 question where respondents were asked regarding the artwork that was being used in Storybird, a total of 15 respondents suggested “Yes” with the rest of the respondents opting for “No”. POS5 was assessed in a different visual data. POS6 examined in regard to whether respondents would use Storybird again to write their essay. Mixed-results were attained where only six respondents said they would likely use Storybird while a total of eight respondents said “No” and the rest chose “Others” as their responses. The last question tested whether respondents thought that using Storybird could help them to improve their writing. In POS7, the respondents were asked whether using Storybird had helped them to improve their essay, with 12 respondents replying “Yes” and six respondents ticking “No”.

POS5 examined the time used to complete the essay using Storybird. Although the deadline was set at one week, some respondents took a longer time to complete the essay. To have a better control of the time for respondents to complete the essay for richer information, it would probably be worth to take note that the essay should be written in the classroom setting during class hours.

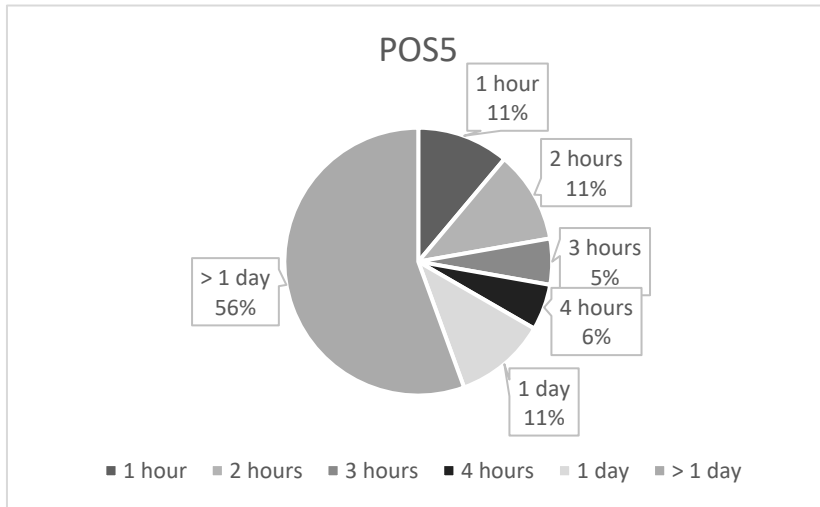


Figure 6: Student time taken to complete the essay using Storybird for PSO5

As stated before, POS5 showed a large disparity with regard to the time taken to complete the essay compared to the timeline given which was one week to be completed at home. 56% of the respondents took more than one day to complete while the rest managed to complete the task in less than a day.

Table 3: POPP1

		Frequency	Percent
Valid	Strongly Disagree	5	27.8
	Disagree	6	33.3
	Agree	5	27.8
	Strongly Agree	2	11.1
	Total	18	100.0

The respondents were then asked a series of questions regarding the comparison between using the conventional approach that is pen and paper and using Storybird. POPP1 is to compare the ease in is writing an

essay with only 11.1% of the respondents “Strongly Agree”, followed by 27.8% who responded “Agree”. More than half of the respondents or 61.1% replied “Strongly Disagree and “Disagree”. This finding shows a contrast with what was discussed in the introduction part where millennials are more inclined towards technology use.

Table 4: POPP2

		Frequency	Percent
Valid	Strongly Disagree	3	16.7
	Disagree	3	16.7
	Agree	6	33.3
	Strongly Agree	6	33.3
	Total	18	100.0

Table 4 reveals the finding from the questionnaire which was to assess whether respondents think it is better to use Storybird compared to using the conventional approach. 66.6% of the respondents said “Strongly Agree” and “Agree” which can be implied that the respondents found it much better to incorporate ICT when completing a writing task in English.

Table 5: POPP3

		Frequency	Percent
Valid	Strongly Disagree	1	5.6
	Disagree	4	22.2
	Agree	6	33.3
	Strongly Agree	7	38.9
	Total	18	100.0

Table 5 shows the assessment of whether the tool is fun to use or not. It indicates that respondents were having fun using Storybird to write

an essay. 72.2% of the respondents replied “Strongly Agree” and “Agree” that it was more fun to use. However, this still does not suggest that Storybird is a better tool to help in improving the respondents’ essay based on the findings that there was not much significant increase from the result in the first essay to the second essay.

Table 6: POPP 4

		Frequency	Percent
Valid	Strongly Disagree	1	5.6
	Disagree	4	22.2
	Agree	11	61.1
	Strongly Agree	2	11.1
	Total	18	100.0

POPP 4 is a reverse question to ask the respondents whether using the conventional approach was much better compared to using Storybird. 72.2% of the respondents “Strongly Agree” and “Agree” that it was much better. A higher result was obtained compared to using Storybird in POPP2 at 66.6%. This again helps to support the findings that the millennials were not that inclined to use technology in writing English essays.

CONCLUSION

The overall results from the study suggest that there were positive results in the effort to incorporate ICT in teaching English by using Storybird. However, there are still mixed outcomes in terms of using Storybird even though the respondents are from the millennial era. This study suggests that a larger target audience should be investigated for better generalisability. Another area that this study hopes to explore is the teachers’ perspective in trying to incorporate Storybird into the daily ESL classroom teaching.

The opinions of the respondents from PP05 was skewed towards the conventional approach due to the many technical aspects in trying to

complete the essay using Storybird. Preference in using pen and paper was due to the fact that it was deemed easier and faster to complete the task. However, the results of the respondents were different compared to their essays using the conventional approach.

The aesthetics of the Storybird has shown a positive result in which millennials are more inclined towards artistic values when it comes to learning. By incorporating art and writing, respondents' creativity can be cultivated and enhanced further. This study hopes to add to the existing literature in regard to incorporating ICT into the process of teaching and learning to write an English essay.

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Appendices

Appendix 1

Survey Questionnaire³

Demographic:

- Hometown
- High school
- Age
- Gender

Story-bird

- Have you ever heard of Storybird before this assignment? [POS1]
- Is Storybird easy to use? [POS2]
- Do you like using Storybird? [POS3]
- Do you like the artwork in Storybird? [POS4]
- How long do you take to use Storybird? [POS5]
- Will you use Storybird again in writing your English essay? [POS6]
- Using Storybird improves your essay writing in English. [POS7]

Traditional Pen & Paper vs Storybird

- Using Pen & Paper to write an essay is easier compared to using Storybird. [POPP1]
- Using Storybird in writing an English essay is better compared to traditional pen & paper. [POPP2]
- Storybird for writing essay is more fun than traditional pen & paper. [POPP3]
- Writing English Essay using traditional pen & paper is better for improvement in writing. [POPP4]
- What is your personal thought on writing using the Traditional Pen & Paper vs Storybird? [POPP5]

³This survey was constructed and distributed through Google Form to the participants once they had completed both essays in class and Storybird.

Appendix 2

Essay Rubric for Writing Task

Criteria/Level	1	2	3	4
Main/Topic Idea Sentence	Main/Topic idea sentence is unclear and incorrectly placed, and is not restated in the closing sentence.	Main/Topic idea sentence is unclear and incorrectly placed, and is restated in the closing sentence.	Main/Topic idea sentence is either unclear or incorrectly placed, and is restated in the closing sentence.	Main/Topic idea sentence is clear, correctly placed, and is restated in the closing sentence.
Supporting Detail Sentence(s)	Paragraph(s) have no supporting detail sentences that relate back to the main idea.	Paragraph(s) have one supporting detail sentence that relate back to the main idea.	Paragraph(s) have two supporting detail sentences that relate back to the main idea.	Paragraph(s) have three or more supporting detail sentences that relate back to the main idea.
Elaborating Detail Sentence(s)	Each supporting detail sentence has no elaborating detail sentence.	Each supporting detail sentence has one elaborating detail sentence.	Each supporting detail sentence has at least two elaborating detail sentences.	Each supporting detail sentence has three or more elaborating detail sentences.
Legibility	Writing is not legible.	Writing is not legible in places.	Marginally legible handwriting, typing, or printing.	Legible handwriting, typing, or printing.
Mechanics and Grammar	Paragraph has six or more punctuation, capitalization, and spelling errors.	Paragraph has three to five punctuation, capitalization, and spelling errors.	Paragraph has one or two punctuation, capitalization, and spelling errors.	Paragraph has no errors in punctuation, capitalization, and spelling.

Rubric is adopted from Unitar International University, Short Writing Course Assessment, English 3, UGQF0133.⁴

⁴All credits are given to the owner for the rubric.

Appendix 3

I

NO. [REDACTED] Date: _____

Car Accidents

It was my first time face on that situation. At that moment, I was scared and get shock. The accident just came so suddenly. Now I gonna start to talk about the story. That day was a beautiful nice day, we can see the bright sunshine and the wind blow across our face. I was the driver and I fetch four of my friends. We (was) planning going for dinner. When we are heading to the place at a traffic T-junction, we make a right turn and suddenly we (crash) on a go straight line car. Wow, seriously, I was not prepare for that crash, its just (come) so quickly and out of my mind. My friend was scared but I also must quickly claim down because I was the driver. There are still so many car on the T-junction if I was stuck at there and soon there were be another car came to us, so I must claim down and move the car to the roadside. After we get out the car, we looked around the car to make sure that was nobody injured and the situation of car. Luckily, there was nobody get hurt in that accident include us and the opponent. All of us discuss and we decided to make report to the (polis) police.

paying

It was my fault, I was not (getting) attention on the road and let my friend get into (dangerous) situation and also the opponent. I learned a lot of lesson in that accident and I will be careful on the next time. Thank God for blessing us without getting any (injure) from the accident.

M	-2
S	-4
E	-2
L	-2
G	-1
	11

Appendix 4

No.: [REDACTED] Date:

FAVORITE SINGER.

Nowadays, everyone has their own favorite singers. Well, I have too. My favorite singer is 'Joker Xue', a singer who works very hard on his passion for 10 years. He ~~sings~~ writes and sings his songs all alone until now. ~~no one~~ The first song he wrote was 'Snow in earnest', but sadly, no one knows about him and his songs 10 years ago. ~~After 10 years~~ During that 10 years, he worked so hard to release an album, Xue owned a hotpot shop ~~called~~ and also an online store called 'Dangerous people'. Xue took all his hard earned money to release his first album ~~it~~ ^{which} is called 'snow in earnest'.

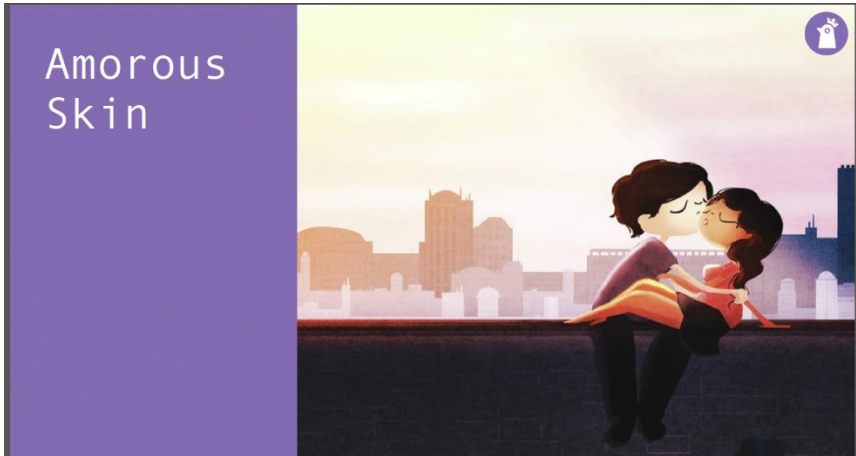
Joker Xue has ^{seen} his ~~fair~~ fair share ^{of} ups and downs in his life. He was born and grew up in Shanghai, China. His mother passed away since he is at the age ~~of~~ four. Xue grew up with his father and grandmother. ~~his father~~ always stop him from learning musical instruments. His father thinks that ~~it~~ it is just a waste and music won't help him to have a brighter future. But nothing could stop him from doing and learning what he likes, Xue insists on music ~~it~~ ^{persu}. His hard work paid off, the album 'Actor' was very well-known and it was a success for him.

Now, he is the most-streamed mandopop artist on most of the TV shows in China. ~~fastly~~, I admire him ~~it~~ because ~~of~~ he doesn't lose faith on himself and ~~insist~~ ~~insist~~ ~~insist~~ insists on his passion.

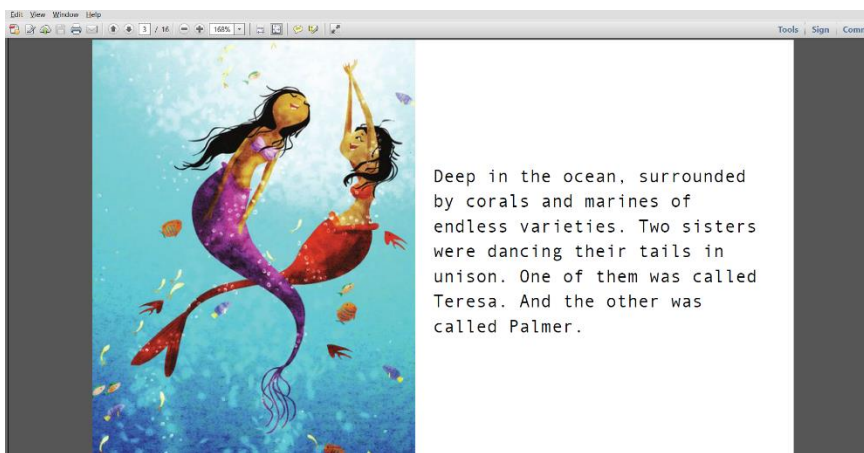
M - 4
 S - 4
 E - 3
 L - 3
 G - 2

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Appendix 5



Storybird essay that was submitted by a student.



An essay is submitted in PDF format.