

IMPROVING SENTENCE CONSTRUCTION SKILLS AMONG EFL GRADE 5 STUDENTS THROUGH PICTURE-BASED WRITING TASKS

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Abstract: *This study investigates the impact of picture-based writing tasks on improving Grade 5 students' sentence construction skills in a Vietnamese primary school context. A quasi-experimental design was employed, including pre- and post-writing tests and analysis of students' written products. Preliminary findings indicate that many students struggle to produce correct and meaningful sentences. To address these challenges, the study proposes the systematic use of picture-based writing tasks to support idea generation and sentence organization. The further findings are expected to provide practical implications for primary English teachers seeking effective strategies to support young learners' sentence construction skills.*

Keywords: *Picture-based writing tasks, sentence construction, primary EFL learners, visual support, writing instruction.*

1. Introduction

1.1. Rationale

In the context of English language teaching in Vietnam, developing writing skills has become an important objective at the primary school level. Among these skills, sentence construction plays a fundamental role in helping students express ideas clearly and accurately. For fifth-grade students, who are at the final stage of primary education, the ability to write correct and meaningful sentences is particularly important as they prepare for the transition to the next level of education. However, many students still experience difficulties in organizing words into grammatically correct sentences and expressing ideas in written form. Prior research highlighted that these challenges are often related to limited language resources, insufficient writing practice, and teaching approaches that emphasize mechanical exercises rather than meaningful language use [1], [2], [5]. Therefore, this study examines the effectiveness of picture-based writing tasks in enhancing fifth graders' sentence construction skills, thereby providing pedagogical insights into effective strategies for teaching writing at the primary level.

1.2. Theoretical background

Sentence construction is a fundamental component of writing proficiency for young EFL learners, as it involves organizing words into grammatically correct and meaningful structures. At the primary level, learners are expected to produce simple sentences. These

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sentences should follow appropriate word order and include basic grammatical elements such as subjects, verbs, articles, and prepositions. However, many learners struggle to effectively use vocabulary and grammar in constructing coherent sentences. Research indicates that young learners often lack metalinguistic awareness of how grammatical choices influence meaning, which may lead to incomplete sentences, incorrect word order, or repetitive structures [9]. These challenges are commonly associated with limited vocabulary, developing cognitive control of language, and low confidence in independent writing [1], [11]. Hence, effective instructional support is necessary to help learners gradually develop sentence construction skills in meaningful contexts.

In this regard, visual materials, especially pictures, are widely recognized as effective instructional tools for supporting writing development among young learners. From a theoretical perspective, Cognitive Load Theory [13] suggests that learning becomes more efficient when unnecessary cognitive demands are reduced, allowing learners to concentrate on essential aspects of the task, such as sentence structure and grammatical accuracy. Similarly, Dual Coding Theory [11] proposes that combining visual and verbal information enhances language processing and facilitates language production. In language classrooms, pictures provide clear and concrete contexts that support idea generation and help learners connect language forms with meaning [1]. Such visual input is particularly beneficial for primary learners who may struggle to generate ideas for writing tasks.

Based on these theoretical perspectives, picture-based writing tasks have been shown to offer effective scaffolding for developing sentence construction skills. Visual prompts enable learners to focus on forming sentences rather than generating abstract ideas, while guiding questions or sentence models help them apply appropriate word order and basic grammatical structures. Wright [14] argues that pictures provide concrete references that assist learners in identifying essential sentence components, thereby improving sentence accuracy and completeness. In addition, supportive writing tasks can increase learners' motivation, engagement, and confidence in the writing process [7]. Despite these advantages, previous studies have largely focused on writing outcomes, while learners' perceptions of picture-based writing tasks remain relatively underexplored. Therefore, the present study investigates students' perceptions of picture-based writing tasks and examines their potential contribution to improving sentence construction skills among Grade 5 EFL learners in a primary school context.

2. Methodology

2.1. Design of the study

A quasi-experimental research design was adopted in this study to investigate the impact of picture-based writing tasks on Grade 5 students' sentence construction skills. This design was considered appropriate as it enables the use of intact classes within a natural classroom setting, where random assignment of participants was not feasible.

2.2. Participants

The participants in this study were 78 students from Quynh Thach Primary school - a primary school in Nghe An province, Vietnam. All students are learning English as a foreign language with a similar primary-level proficiency background. The students were

divided into two intact groups, including 39 students in the treatment group, who were taught using picture-based writing tasks, and 39 students in the control group, who received conventional textbook-based writing instruction.

2.3. Data collection instruments

The study employed both quantitative and qualitative instruments. Pre- and post-tests, designed following the procedures suggested by Heaton [6], were used to measure students' sentence construction skills before and after the intervention. In addition, a Likert-scale questionnaire, adapted from Gashaye and Muchie [3], was administered to explore learners' perceptions of sentence-writing difficulties and their attitudes toward picture-based writing tasks. Classroom observation notes were also collected during the intervention to record students' engagement and participation, providing supporting insights for the findings.

2.4. Treatment procedures

The study was conducted over an eight-week period, from January 3 to March 5, 2026. During this time, each lesson was carried out following the instructional procedures consisting of four main steps: (1) lead-in and topic familiarization, where pictures were introduced to activate students' background knowledge; (2) guided questioning and clue provision, in which the teacher used guiding questions based on the pictures to support idea generation; (3) oral practice based on pictures, allowing students to rehearse vocabulary and sentence patterns; and (4) sentence and paragraph writing, where students used the pictures as prompts to produce written sentences or short paragraphs with teacher monitoring and support.

As an illustration, in the *English Discovery textbook - Unit 3: Hobbies, Lesson 8: Skills, page 41*, picture-based writing tasks were applied to support students in completing Activity 4, which requires learners to write a short advert (30-40 words) for a sport or activity at their school.

Step 1: Lead-in with teacher-provided pictures

At the beginning of the lesson, the teacher presented a self-selected picture illustrating various school leisure activities, such as students playing football, basketball, running races, and doing physical exercises in the school playground. The picture was sourced from online educational materials or designed using AI to ensure close alignment with the unit theme and key vocabulary.

Figure 1. Some teacher-selected pictures used to support picture-based sentence writing tasks



Step 2: Guided questioning and clue provision

Based on the picture, the teacher guided students through a series of focused questions, such as: “*What activities can you see?*”, “*Where are the students?*”, “*Which activity looks fun?*”, “*When does the activity happen?*”, and “*Why should students join?*”. These clues directed learners’ attention to essential content elements of an advert, including activity type, location, time, and benefits, while reinforcing relevant vocabulary and sentence patterns.

Step 3: Oral practice based on pictures

Before writing, students work in pairs to practice orally. They answer the guiding questions or form simple sentences describing the chosen activity using the picture as support. For example, students may say: “*We play basketball after school. It is fun and healthy*”. This oral practice reduces anxiety, allows learners to explore the ideas, and better prepares them for the writing task.

Step 4: Sentence and paragraph writing

Students worked in pairs to write a short advert for Activity 4, using the picture and ideas developed during prior oral practice. Typical sentences produced by students included: “*Our school football club is very exciting*”, “*Students can play football and run with friends*”, “*The club meets after school on Friday*”, and “*Come and join us for fun and exercise*”. These sentences were then combined into a short advert of 30-40 words, enabling learners to complete the task more effectively with reduced cognitive load and improved sentence construction accuracy.

Finally, the teacher observed students’ sentence writing, examined their written products, and provided feedback accordingly.

All four instructional steps were implemented in Lesson 8 of each unit (10 units in total), which functions as a skills or project-based lesson. Each lesson lasted 40 minutes, including approximately 5 minutes for lead-in, 10 minutes for guided questioning, 10 minutes for oral practice, and 15 minutes for sentence writing, allowing students to progress gradually from idea generation to written production with appropriate scaffolding.

3. Result analysis and discussion

3.1. Analysis of the Pre-test and Post-test results

A pre-test and a post-test were administered to both the experimental and control groups. The pre-test, conducted without picture support, assessed students’ initial ability to construct sentences, while the post-test, conducted with picture support, evaluated their performance after the intervention. In both tests, students wrote several sentences on a given topic within 20 minutes, focusing on grammatical accuracy, word order, subject-verb structure, and completeness of ideas.

The results obtained from these two tests were used to compare the performance of the experimental and control groups across three levels of achievement (Low, Medium, and High) based on the official Grade 5 English learning outcomes set by the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET, 2018), as presented in the following tables.

Table 1. Criteria for sentence writing levels

Level	Description
Low	Students are able to write isolated words or incomplete sentences. Frequent grammatical errors occur, sentence meaning is unclear, and vocabulary use is very limited.
Medium	Students can write simple, complete sentences related to the topic. Sentence structure is generally correct, though errors in grammar or word choice are still present. Meaning is mostly understandable.
High	Students can write clear and meaningful sentences using appropriate vocabulary and correct sentence structures. Ideas are relevant to the topic and sentences are mostly accurate.

The results of the pre-test and post-test are presented in Table 2 and Table 3 below.

Table 2. Pre-test results of sentence writing ability

Group	Low	Medium	High	Total
Experimental Group (n=39)	15 (38.5%)	17 (43.6%)	7 (17.9%)	39
Control Group (n = 39)	16 (41.0%)	16 (41.0%)	7 (17.9%)	39
Total (N = 78)	31 (39.7%)	33 (42.3%)	14 (18.0%)	78

As shown in Table 2, the pre-test results reveal a very similar distribution of sentence writing proficiency between the experimental and control groups. In both groups, most students were at the low and medium levels, while only a small proportion reached the high level. The percentage differences across the three levels were minimal, indicating negligible variation between the two groups. This suggests that students' sentence construction skills were generally limited before the intervention and confirms that the two groups were comparable at the baseline for evaluating the effects of the picture-based writing tasks in the post-test stage.

Table 3. Post-test results of sentence writing ability

Group	Low	Medium	High	Total
Experimental Group (n=39)	6 (15.4%)	18 (46.2%)	15 (38.5%)	39
Control Group (n = 39)	12 (30.8%)	17 (43.6%)	10 (25.6%)	39
Total (N = 78)	18 (23.1%)	35 (44.9%)	25 (32.1%)	78

In Table 3, clear changes in sentence writing proficiency can be observed after the intervention. In the experimental group, the proportion of low-level students decreased markedly, while the percentage of high-level students increased substantially, indicating

significant improvement in sentence construction skills. In contrast, the control group showed only slight changes, with most students still concentrated at the low and medium levels. The greater differences between the two groups in the post-test suggest that the experimental group benefited more from the instructional treatment. The results indicate that picture-based writing tasks had a positive impact on improving students' sentence construction skills.

3.2. Analysis of Questionnaire data

The analysis of the questionnaire data (adapted from Gashaye and Muchie [3]) intended to assess the reflection of the experimental group about the effect of picture-based writing tasks on their writing performance is presented as follows.

Table 4. *Students' Perceptions of Picture-based Writing Tasks*

No.	Items	Number of participants responded				
		1	2	3	4	5
1	The teacher's support helped me to brainstorm ideas to develop a paragraph.	2	1	0	29	7
2	The support I received from my teacher helped me to shape the topic sentence of the paragraph.	0	0	1	5	33
3	The sentence writing process became easier due to my teacher's close support.	4	6	0	9	20
4	The support of the teacher helped me to organize ideas in writing sentences.	0	0	0	8	31
5	The teacher's support reduced difficulties of organizing ideas to build a sentence then develop a paragraph.	2	4	0	24	9
6	The guidance the teacher gave me helped me keep the structure of my sentences.	0	5	2	11	21
7	The support of the teacher helped me to keep the unity of the paragraph.	0	2	3	4	30
8	The support informed me to use cohesive devices properly such as, first, next, because, for example, as a result, but, etc.	0	3	2	23	11
9	The teacher's support has reduced my frustration of making errors in writing a sentence.	3	2	0	26	9
10	The teacher's support helped me use appropriate language to the intended audience in each sentence and the whole paragraph writing.	1	2	1	14	21

11	In the writing process, the teacher's support helped me to revise each sentence and the whole paragraph.	3	1	0	10	25
12	My writing skill has been improved through the support of the teacher.	0	2	0	9	28
Total: 469		15	28	9	172	245
Percentage		3.19	5.97	1.91	36.67	52.23

Key: 1 = Strongly disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3= Undecided, 4= Agree, 5= Strongly agree

Table 4 shows highly positive student perceptions of picture-based writing tasks with teacher support. Approximately 89% of responses fall into the Agree and Strongly Agree categories, indicating that pictures effectively supported idea generation, sentence organization, and reduced writing difficulties. Overall, the results suggest that picture-based tasks, combined with teacher scaffolding, help improve students' sentence construction skills and writing confidence.

3.3. Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that picture-based writing tasks have a substantial positive effect on Grade 5 students' writing development. The improvement observed in students' ability to generate ideas, organize sentences, and construct coherent paragraphs suggests that visual stimuli play a crucial scaffolding role at the primary level. Pictures reduce the cognitive load associated with abstract idea generation, enabling learners to focus more effectively on language form, sentence structure, and cohesion. This is particularly significant for Grade 5 students, who are in the transitional stage from sentence-level writing to paragraph-level composition.

Furthermore, the results imply that picture-based tasks enhance learners' confidence and engagement in writing. Students' reduced frustration and increased willingness to revise and improve their writing indicate that visual support, combined with teacher guidance, creates a low-anxiety learning environment conducive to language experimentation. This supportive context allows learners to take risks in using vocabulary, cohesive devices, and audience-appropriate language without fear of making errors.

Another important implication is that picture-based writing tasks promote meaningful teacher - student interaction during the writing process. Rather than functioning solely as a final product, writing becomes a guided process in which brainstorming, drafting, revising, and organizing ideas are explicitly supported. This aligns with process-oriented writing pedagogy and highlights the effectiveness of visual tasks in facilitating instructional scaffolding for young learners.

Overall, the discussion of results demonstrates that picture-based writing tasks are not merely motivational tools but pedagogically effective strategies that foster cognitive, linguistic, and affective development in Grade 5 students. These findings reinforce the view that incorporating visual-based writing activities into primary English instruction can significantly support learners' progression toward more coherent, confident, and independent writing.

4. Conclusion

This study examined the effect of picture-based writing tasks on Grade 5 students' sentence construction skills in a Vietnamese primary school context. The findings show that visual support helped students generate ideas, use appropriate vocabulary, and produce more accurate sentence structures. Analysis of students' written work, questionnaire responses, and classroom observations indicated noticeable improvements in both writing performance and learners' confidence. The results also suggest that picture-based writing tasks enhance students' engagement and attitudes toward writing. Therefore, integrating visual-based activities into primary English writing instruction can be an effective and context-appropriate strategy, particularly in rural learning environments.

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