

## The Effects of Authentic Learning Experiences on Student Confidence in Process Writing

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### Abstract

*This study explores how authentic learning experiences within the writing process affect secondary school students' confidence in writing. Specifically, it examines the impact of a learning journey within the writing process on students' self-efficacy towards writing in general, writing a context-related essay task and coming up with or using sensory details and emotive words in this task. Employing a quantitative-qualitative approach, the study was conducted on an entire Secondary 1 cohort in a Singaporean secondary school. The analysis of the data reveals significant implications for how educators may reshape curricula to utilise learning journeys to enhance teaching and learning as well as the need for differentiated pedagogical styles and scaffolds for students in different streams.*

### Introduction

*First, we must nurture the joy of learning in our children. This intrinsic motivation will drive them forward to explore and discover their interests and passions (Ng, 2017).*

In 2017, the joy of learning was espoused by then Education Minister, Mr Ng Chee Meng (Ng, 2017), as one of the key directions for Singapore's education. Ng highlighted that Singapore's education would flourish beyond academic excellence when students developed the joy of learning. Educators around the world are exploring ways to inculcate a greater love for learning within learners so that they may feel 'good about learning and themselves' instead of becoming 'discouraged, alienated, bored or intimidated' in school (Willis, 2017). Acquiring the joy of learning will have far-reaching benefits for students since this will motivate them to learn while empowering them to take education beyond the classroom. Singapore has performed well in international tests, being first in the Programme for International Assessment (Pisa) rankings in Science, Reading and Mathematics (Coughlan, 2016). However, this has been criticised as an achievement that incurs a huge cost in time, monetary costs in tuition, stress and health (Tan, 2015).

According to researchers at the Motivation in Educational Research Lab (MERL) at the National Institute of Education (NIE), one way to cultivate the joy of learning is to provide students with a rationale for school learning by injecting real-life importance and applications into tasks (Wang, 2017). Schools have tried to fulfil these needs by having students participate in Learning Journeys (LJs) or school field trips. These events, held either locally or internationally, are considered 'informal learning experiences' (Melber, 2008, pp. 1-3). Such experiences are not fabricated but provide living evidence of the application of the disciplines, and thus are 'Authentic Learning

Experiences'. In Singapore, these experiences take the form of LJs, which typically take place at the start or end of a curriculum semester, but they are usually unrelated to the formal curriculum, which prevents more authentic learning.

This study trialled and evaluated the impact of an authentic learning experience on students' learning. It aimed to delve into the process writing approach in English Language and ascertain if the use of such authentic learning experiences as process writing stimuli could improve student's confidence in personal recount writing. Flower and Hayes (1981), the pioneers of process writing, highlighted that writers who are more motivated and feel deeply about a writing task perform better at that particular writing task.

## **Review of Literature**

### *The Writing Process*

In the teaching and learning of English, there are several models to help teachers understand the process of writing. The Flower and Hayes (1981) writing model postulated three dimensions of the cognitive process of writing for educators to focus on in developing writers: the task environment, long-term memory and writing processes. In this writing model, 'the process of writing is best understood as a set of distinctive thinking processes which writers orchestrate or organise during the act of composing.' (Flower & Hayes, 1981, p. 366). Flower and Hayes (1981) believed that the writing process consisted of the three cognitive processes and that constant monitoring was essential to determine how learners transited between the writing phases of 'planning', 'translating' and 'reviewing'. Hayes later enhanced this model by adding on writers' motivation and affect as important factors in all stages of the writing process (Hayes, 1996).

In developing the learner's motivation, however, we believe that the pre-writing stage (planning from Flower & Hayes, 1981) is the most vital. This is similar to Rohman and Wlecke (1964), who postulated that the pre-writing stage is the most essential stage of discovery. Flower and Hayes (1994) later elucidated that this discovery stage is the act of 'meaning-making'; without a good discovery phase, poor writers would 'give up too soon' and fluent writers would be 'satisfied with too little' (p. 64). We see the potential in LJs, part of the Ministry of Education's school infrastructure, as a discovery phase to improve students' learning.

Correspondingly, Singapore's EL Syllabus 2010 (Curriculum Planning and Development Division, 2008) as well as Project En-ELT (Tan-Chia, 2011), a study initiated in 2011 by the English Language and Literature Branch, adopted the process writing cycle approach. Both allocated the majority of the brainstorming, the contextualisation of learning for learners and the introduction to the topic to the pre-writing stage.

Further research built on this process writing model, with a systematic analysis and breakdown of approaches, procedures and processes for writing. Baroudy (2008) explained that the writing process, as defined by Flower and Hayes (1981), can be further understood as the 'brainstorming', 'group writing' and various 'free-writing' stages. There are several studies, such as Bayat (2014) and Faraj (2015), which highlight how adopting the process writing approach has improved writing success in a positive and statistically significant way.

A scan of current research work indicates that there might be little to no literature which explicitly highlights the effects of LJs on the writing process. Nonetheless, writing using authentic real-world contexts has been proven to engage students to write better (Boyd, Williams-Black, & Love, 2009; Brunow, 2016).

## *Self-Efficacy and Writing Apprehension*

The literature informs us that one key way to determine if students are writing well is to measure their self-efficacy. Self-efficacy refers to the 'judgements of how well one can execute courses of action required to deal with prospective situations' (Bandura, 1982, p. 122). In education, efficacy beliefs 'affect students' motivation to learn, affective response to these efforts, and ultimate academic attainment' (Zimmerman, 1995, p. 203).

Self-efficacy is considered a primary factor in student motivation for academic success (Graham & Weiner, 1996). Some studies found strong correlations between self-efficacy and students' writing performances (Pajares, 2003), and this is pronounced in the case of content writing (Prat-Sala & Redford, 2012). To measure self-efficacy, a few empirical methods have been used, one of them being to measure the individual's self-rating of their efficacy beliefs (Bandura, 2006).

In addition, the landmark research by Daly (1978) found that higher writing apprehension was linked to lower writing competencies and apprehension affected students' motivation to write. The Daly-Miller's Writing Apprehension Test (WAT) is a way of measuring writing apprehension (Daly & Miller, 2013).

In response to the literature on self-efficacy, this study seeks to take a first step in the context of secondary education in Singapore by exploring how an authentic LJ in the pre-writing stage of the writing process might impact the self-efficacy and writing apprehension of secondary school students.

## *Learning Journeys in Singaporean Education*

Although similar to educational field trips in other countries, LJs in Singapore took a slightly different perspective in that they were intended by the then acting Minister for Education, Mr Teo Chee Hean (1997-2003), to be 'experiential' and 'multi-disciplinary' so that they could be either a part of National Education or complementary to the school curriculum (National Library Board, 2014).

In many primary and secondary schools in Singapore, for logistical efficiency, students usually travel in large groups (up to entire levels) on LJs at the start or end of the curricular semester, to minimise any disruption to curriculum learning. While for humanities, LJs have at times been part of curriculum fieldwork (Chang & Ooi, 2008), most LJs in Singapore take place outside the formal curriculum time, rather than within or as a part of the curriculum. English Language (EL) educators could leverage on this platform.

## **Research Questions**

With the literature reviewed, we established the following research questions:

1. Will the Second Process Writing Cycle improve the students in the Authentic Learning Experience groups in all aspects of their confidence (planning, brainstorming, application) in the domain of writing?
2. Will the Authentic Learning Experience group obtain higher scores in all aspects of confidence than the other students at the end of the Second Process Writing Cycle?
3. Will Authentic Learning Experience groups in both Normal Academic (NA) and Express streams show improvement in their writing confidence?

When planning our Secondary 1 curriculum, we wanted to design one that was able to address our research questions and to pique our students' interests. With a school population with varying proficiencies in EL, we found a need to cater to our students' differing learning profiles and needs.

## Methodology

A total of 229 students from the Express and NA classes were involved in the research project throughout the year. Involved in the study were four classes of Express students and two blended NA classes that included students who were Normal Technical (NT) students taking English Language at NA Level as part of MOE's subject-based banding initiative. Among these participants, we chose one Express class (37 students) and one NA class (36 students) to participate in the authentic learning experience, so that we might weigh the possibly different effects of our research on Express and NA students. The remaining 156 students did not take part in the learning experience.

The participants were surveyed throughout two Process Writing Cycles (PWCs) which were based on the genre of personal recounts. In the First PWC (held in March 2017), all students underwent the same lesson packages and writing tasks on Solo Travel before being surveyed. In the Second PWC (completed in July 2017), the Authentic Learning Experience group went on an LJ to *Dialogue in the Dark* while the rest remained in the classroom. Both groups in the Second PWC wrote an imaginative recount of their temporary loss of sight. The Second PWC, unlike the first which was based on a more comfortable topic, was specifically designed to be something that many students had yet to experience, so that we could ascertain the impact of the LJ on their writing experience.

Prior to the First PWC, students were exposed to the structure and rigours of Process Writing through class writing, group writing and individual writing of incident reports. In all PWCs, the students underwent a class writing stage, where the teacher provided content knowledge, did explicit teaching and brainstormed with the class. This was followed by a group writing stage, in which students co-constructed responses, and an individual writing stage, when students wrote on their own.

### *Differences in Second PWC between Authentic Learning Experience and Other Students*

During the Second PWC, both classes went through similar group writing and individual writing stages. During the class writing stage, however, there were different experiences.

The Authentic Learning Experience group participated in an LJ to *Dialogue in the Dark* at Ngee Ann Polytechnic. The experience lasted approximately an hour, with the students being led by a visually impaired guide through different daily activities in the dark to simulate the life experiences of the visually impaired. Afterwards, the students visited a cafe in the dark, where they paid for their food or drinks and enjoyed them in the dark, while having a conversation with their visually impaired guides. Prior to the experience, the students engaged in activities such as learning the Braille alphabet and playing *Pictionary* blindfolded. Before and after the experience, the students also reflected on their experiences and wrote down some of their thoughts on the events, guided by questions given by the teachers.

In contrast, the remaining students (three Express classes, one NA class) were not offered the LJ option. They went through a similar learning experience without the LJ, although an extra lesson was spent on brainstorming in the class writing stage through the use of videos. These students watched videos as visual stimuli for the topic on visual impairment and videos based on Hellen Keller's personal experiences through an ICT Tool, Edpuzzle. We designed questions in Edpuzzle to encourage students to provide details for certain parts of the video, regarding the sensory experiences and emotions that Hellen Keller experienced. The video on how Hellen Keller spoke was chosen, because it was thought it would fascinate the students to see that she needed to press on another person's throat, lip and nose to ascertain the words being spoken. This was intended to spark the students' curiosity towards the topic of 'Visual Impairment' and invite them to challenge their beliefs that a physical disability would negatively affect a person's future. At the

end of the lesson, the teacher invited the students to share their learning experiences and thoughts about Visual Impairment.

The differences in treatment for the two groups of students at the class writing stage were designed to facilitate evaluation of the effect of the LJ experience on the students, as compared to that of a typical classroom experience using ICT.

### *Research Methodology*

We adopted a Mixed Methods approach using a quantitative-qualitative analysis. 'Mixed Methods' refers to 'an emergent methodology of research that advances the systematic integration, or "mixing," of quantitative and qualitative data within a single investigation or sustained program of inquiry.' (Wisdom & Creswell, 2013, p. 1).

The quantitative aspect was realised through a survey for both the Authentic Learning Experience and the remaining students at the end of the two PWCs. We then conducted qualitative interviews of respondents from both the groups who reflected interesting answers or significant increases or drops in confidence. The qualitative phase aimed to understand the students' individual experiences and attempted to explain the quantitative data better. We wanted to give a voice to our students and ensure that the data reflected the nuances of our students' authentic learning experiences.

For our survey, we adopted a Likert Scale with values between 1 and 5. A lower value within the Likert Scale reflected a lower confidence level towards the given statement. For questions that gauged students' overall confidence, we used a 10-point Likert Scale that could offer a greater variance in responses, which we felt would allow greater precision in the findings. The survey contained a set of statements for students to respond to. If a respondent gave a higher value within the Likert Scale, it informed us that he or she was more confident towards the given statements.

#### **Quantitative Phase**

We measured confidence vis-à-vis a number of variables.

- (1) Planning the essay.
- (2) Coming up with emotive words and sensory details.
- (3) Applying emotive words and sensory details to their writing.
- (4) Having confidence towards writing.
- (5) Having confidence towards emotive words and sensory details.
- (6) Having confidence towards meeting the word count.
- (7) Having confidence as a writer.
- (8) Scoring well on the writing apprehension test.

In PWC1, the students from both groups were given the same set of survey questions which, for the purposes of easy reference, we have refined and renumbered to remove administrative questions that asked students to input details such as their names, classes, and index numbers. The questions with their corresponding response ranges on the Likert Scale are listed in Table 1.

Table 1

Likert scale questions given to all students in PWC1

Questions		Likert Scale
1	After the process writing cycle, how well were you able to plan your essay?	1-5 1: I could not come up with a writing plan for the essay. 5: I was able to come up with a good writing plan for the essay.
2	After the process writing cycle, to what extent were you able to come up with sensory details? (Sensory details are words that require the use of your five senses.)	1-5 1: I could not come up with any sensory details. 5: I was able to come up with many sensory details.
3	After the process writing cycle, to what extent were you able to come up with emotive words? (Emotive words require you to write about your emotions, e.g. Happy, sad, anxious, frustrated.)	1-5 1: I could not come up with any emotive words. 5: I was able to come up with many emotive words.
4	After the process writing cycle, to what extent were you able to use sensory details? (Sensory details require the use of your five senses.)	1-5 1: I could not use any sensory details in my writing. 5: I was able to use many sensory details in my writing.
5	After the process writing cycle, to what extent were you able to use emotive words? (Emotive words require you to write about your emotions, e.g. Happy, sad, anxious, frustrated.)	1-5 1: I did not use any emotive words in my writing. 5: I was able to use many emotive words in my writing.
6	How confident were you as a writer before this lesson?	1-10 1: I was not confident at all as a writer before this lesson. 10: I was very confident as a writer before this lesson.

Questions		Likert Scale
7	How confident were you in writing with sensory details for the individual writing task?	1-10  1: I was not confident at all about writing with sensory details.  10: I was very confident about writing with sensory details.
8	How confident were you in writing with emotive words for the individual writing task?	1-10  1: I was not confident at all about writing with emotive words.  10: I was very confident about writing with emotive words.
9	How confident were you in meeting the word count for the individual writing task? (Word Count - Express: 250-400 words; NA: 250-350 words)	1-10  1: I was not confident at all in meeting the word count.  10: I was very confident in meeting the word count.
10	How confident were you as a writer after this lesson?	1-10  1: I was not confident at all as a writer after this lesson  10: I was very confident as a writer after this lesson

In addition to the questions requiring a response on a Likert Scale, for question 11 the students were asked what their Writing Apprehension Test (WAT) score was. Scores can range from 26 to 130. According to the Daly-Miller Writing Apprehension Test, scores 26-59 indicate a high level of writing apprehension, 60-96 indicate a usual level of writing apprehension while scores 97-130 indicate a low level of writing apprehension.

Within PWC2, there were some variations. The students were given the same set of survey questions, except that the Authentic Learning Experience group was asked two additional questions. They appear in Table 2 below.



Table 2

Additional questions given to the Authentic Learning Experience group students in PWC2

Questions		
12	Some of your schoolmates did not go for the Dialogue in the Dark LJ as part of class writing. If given a choice, would you like them to go for the LJ as well?	Yes-No option
13	Out of a scale of 1-10, with 1 being very negative, and 10 being very positive, rate whether you think that going for the LJ had a negative or positive impact on your writing. (Rate 5 if you think that it has no impact)	Likert Scale 1-10 1: Very negative impact on writing 10: Very positive impact on writing

### Qualitative Phase

After acquiring the data, we proceeded to the analysis and identification of trends. We investigated further by conducting a qualitative interview of 10 students. These students were approached based on interesting patterns in survey responses, such as the following:

- a big increase in confidence (at least an increase in value by 2 or more); and
- a drop in confidence.

Five of these students were from the Express stream, of which three were from the Authentic Learning Experience group. The other five students were from the NA stream, of which three were from the Authentic Learning Experience group. They shared their opinions on why they gave such ratings during the interviews. For their confidentiality, no real names are used in the reporting of the interviews. All names are fictitious.

In our interviews, we prompted our students based on a set of questions that required them to clarify, elaborate or explain further. The following were the probing questions for the Authentic Learning Experience group:

- 1) How did you feel about the LJ to *Dialogue in the Dark*? Did it help you in your writing? In what way did it help or hinder you in your writing?
- 2) How did the LJ help/ hinder you in your essay planning?
- 3) In what way did the LJ help / hinder you in your use of sensory details of the five senses?
- 4) How did the LJ help / hinder you in the writing of emotive words?
- 5) How was the LJ able to improve / affect your general confidence as an author?
- 6) How did the LJ help you meet your word count? / How did the LJ hinder you in meeting the word count?
- 7) We noticed that, in your survey, you indicated a drop / an increase in (an aspect of writing). Is there a specific reason why?
- 8) What is your view of the LJ? Is it useful? Would you recommend it to your friends, and why?

The students who did not participate in the authentic learning experience were asked only question 7 and whether they felt that going on the LJ would have helped their writing and writing



confidence. The following section will state our findings.

## Findings

### Overview of Findings

Our analysis is derived from a comparison of survey results from the two PWCs for the Authentic Learning Experience group and rest of the students in the Express and Academic Streams. We initially analysed the second PWC results to determine if there were any significant differences arising from the LJ. Next, we compared this to the first PWC results to see if there were any pre-existing differences in terms of self-efficacy and competency to use sensory details or emotive words.

After reading the literature on Likert-scale analyses, we followed the recommendations of (Wolfe, n.d.) in presenting and analysing the data using percentages to make meaningful comparisons. Due to the large amount of data analysed in this report, we will only be discussing and presenting data from the survey responses that reflected significant differences.

The data suggests that there were differences between Express and NA participants. The Authentic Learning Experience Express students reported lower scores in their confidence in writing about sensory details but slightly higher scores in some aspects of self-efficacy compared to the remaining students. On the other hand, the NA students from the Authentic Learning Experience group had slightly lower scores in certain aspects of self-confidence than the rest of the NA students. We summarise below the findings according to the themes in each section.

### Findings for Express Students

Based on our quantitative analysis of the survey data, we made the following observations for students in the Express Authentic Learning Experience group:

1. The LJ seemed to have played an instrumental role in developing writer's confidence in their ability to use sensory details.
2. The LJ seemed to be helpful in enabling students to reflect on and brainstorm more emotive words.
3. There was a dip in writers' confidence in the aspects of writing sensory details and emotive words.
4. The LJ seemed to have helped our students in the Authentic Learning Experience group in terms of word count and confidence as writers.

The qualitative interviews with the selected Express students added support to these observations as illustrated by the quotes from the interviews given below.

#### ***Observation 1: The LJ played an instrumental role in developing writer's confidence in their ability to use sensory details.***

Arjun mentioned that 'The LJ was fun, as it was a new experience... it was easier to describe the emotive and sensory words. In fact, it [the experience at *Dialogue in the Dark*] made it easier for me to write emotive words and sensory details.'

How Kuang shared the same sentiments, as he mentioned, 'Since I have experienced [*Dialogue in the Dark*], it was easier to write ... better than the travel one whereby I had to imagine it... Because of the experience I had [with the LJ], I will know what sensory details and words to use...'. How Kuang revealed that it was easier for him to write on something that he had experienced before.

He knew what kind of words or sensory details he could use. However, when given a topic on travelling solo, the theme in the first PWC, he found it difficult to generate the words and sensory details. He supported this further by saying, ‘Overall, it really help in my learning. Generally gaining confidence in terms of details or more complex details ... descriptive words and vivid descriptions...’ This showed that the LJ was likely to have given How Kuang the words he needed to discuss a similar topic on blindness or impairment.

***Observation 2: The LJ was able to help students to generate more emotive words.***

How Kuang noted that, ‘... Since I experienced it [the LJ], it was easier [for me to] plan. Whenever you read the question, you will think and brainstorm about whether I have experienced it before, and so it was easier... I will know what sensory details and words to use’. This meant that How Kuang found that the LJ helped him to come up with sensory details.

Eleanor mentioned, ‘I find myself more confident in the planning of this essay assignment.’ This reveals that Eleanor found herself more confident in the generation of emotive words, as the generation of emotive words was done during the planning stage of the essay writing.

***Observation 3: The LJ caused a dip in writers’ confidence in the aspects of writing sensory details and emotive words.***

The participants also shared their reasons for the dip in confidence in writing sensory details and emotive words.

Arjun shared, ‘I can write on those details, but I am not sure of what to write... the content is much clearer nonetheless...’ What we see is that, while Arjun had gained experience in the LJ, he still found it slightly difficult to decide what to write on. This might explain the dip in confidence, although this was likely to have arisen from the fact that the students were writing about a less familiar topic in this PWC, which in turn means that moving forward, more scaffolding may be needed in relation to the LJ topic.

***Observation 4: The LJ helped our students in the Authentic Learning Experience group in terms of word count and confidence as a writer.***

Eleanor explained, ‘The LJ made learning interesting and we learnt how to write essays well in the class. Although the LJ was scary, it was able to help. I applied my understanding of the *Dialogue in the Dark* for my assignment...’ This informs us that Eleanor’s experience in *Dialogue in the Dark* was transferred to her writing on blindness. She gained confidence as a writer, as she was able to relate to the given topic.

Similarly, How Kuang mentioned, ‘Overall, it [the LJ] really, really helped in my learning. I generally gained confidence in terms of words, sensory details, more complex ideas ... word count ... descriptive words and vivid description, though slightly more prone to mistakes in grammar.’

While How Kuang noticed a slight propensity to make more grammatical errors, he admitted that the LJ had given him the confidence to express his ideas through various aspects of the writing. This helped him gain more confidence as a writer.

***Findings for NA Students***

With regard to the NA Authentic Learning Experience group, we made the following observations based on our analysis of the survey quantitative data:

1. The LJ appeared to be instrumental in helping the NA Authentic Learning Experience group meet the word count requirements of the individual writing task.
2. The LJ seemed to help the NA Authentic Learning Experience group plan their essay,

brainstorm and use sensory details more than the other students.

3. The NA Authentic Learning Experience group, despite the results of the LJ, indicated lower scores in confidence as writers in general.
4. The NA Authentic Learning Experience group, following the LJ, showed lower confidence in coming up with sensory details and using them, and were less confident in using emotive words in the writing task.

As with the Express group, we interviewed students from both the Authentic Learning Experience and non-authentic learning experience groups from the NA. However, in contrast to those for the Express group, the interviews with the select NA students produced data that did not fit squarely with our analysis of the survey quantitative data. Using the students' comments, we illustrate four observations below that differ to some extent from the observations that we made based on the survey quantitative data. As can be seen, there is no exact one-to-one match between the quantitative and qualitative results for the NA group.

There was, for example, an interesting observation that went against our expectations. Seemingly, the NA Authentic Learning Experience group could not translate their learning from the LJ into brainstorming and coming up with sensory details and emotive words, even though they felt it had helped them meet the content and word count requirements of the individual writing task.

***Observation 1: The LJ was fun and helped the Authentic Learning Experience group acquire more content and ideas about what to write***

The students reported that the LJ was beneficial in terms of idea generation and other aspects of content such as their planning, or the writing of the storyline.

Andrea found the LJ 'fun and that the darkness was intriguing with some students screaming at the start.' Andrea also stated that the LJ 'made writing easier'. Overall, she felt that the LJ made it 'easier to plan and gave me lots of ideas.'

Lynde, on the other hand, stated that the LJ was 'the first-time experience in the dark', and that the students 'could apply our experience of dialogue in the dark' with 'feeling and emotions in our writing.' Lynde also felt that the LJ helped 'in terms of idea generation' and that the LJ 'made the topic better.'

The above anecdotes inform us that the Authentic Learning Experience group found the LJ helpful in writing their plans and ideas, supporting our quantitative findings that the NA Authentic Learning Experience group reported higher confidence in the Second PWC in terms of word count and planning.

***Observation 2: The LJ, while a helpful and positive experience, did not help the Authentic Learning Experience group in writing sensory details and emotive words***

The interviews showed that the LJ in conjunction with the lessons did not particularly help the Authentic Learning Experience group write well in terms of writing with sensory details and emotive words.

Andrea informed us that while 'the LJ was able to help me connect to the topic', it 'did not help in my writing'. Lynde also felt the same way, commenting that the LJ helped her 'come up with feelings and emotions' but made 'no difference in the writing of sensory details and emotive words.' Shermaine concurred, stating that while she thoroughly enjoyed the LJ, she 'did not know how to use it in writing or apply my learning properly.'

This might suggest that while the NA Authentic Learning Experience group enjoyed the LJ and

brainstormed better for more sensory details and emotive words, they needed more scaffolding and help to transfer their learning into the actual writing of sensory details and emotive words.

***Observation 3: The NA students in generally found the First PWC easier compared to the Second PWC due to the task and topic***

The interview also revealed the difficulty that the students had with the task and topic in the second cycle compared to the First PWC, which may have led the students to indicate lower self-confidence in various aspects in the first place.

According to Andrea, she felt a closer relationship to the First PWC regarding travel, because she ‘travels a lot, and [has] taken a lot of flights’. Andrea also felt that this was the reason why she found ‘the topic on travel easier to manage and idea generation was easier’. Shermaine also reflected the same beliefs, stating that it was ‘easier to write about travel than darkness’ because she ‘travels more often than experiencing the dark’. This was why she stated that she found ‘idea generation easier to travel’ and that ‘planning for the travel topic was easier than the *Dialogue in the Dark* topic.’

The students who did not take part in the authentic learning journey, Peter and John, also agreed. Peter stated that he ‘couldn’t write that well’ because he ‘wasn’t able to imagine how the character would feel’ and whether ‘the emotions were spot on’ in his writing. John, on the other hand, found ‘the essay on travel easier as idea generation is faster’. John continued, stating, ‘the topic on blindness was hard to generate ideas’, and that ‘the part where I was supposed to display understanding of the blind was difficult’. John also struggled in the follow-up assignment (the blindfold challenge) and stated that he ‘had no idea what I could do’.

These findings indicate that, for the NA students, it was likely that the obscure topic of blindness was something they could not connect easily to even after the LJ. This meant that the LJ, however effective, was unlikely to generate high confidence in the students’ self-reporting since the topic remained somewhat unfamiliar to some of them despite the LJ. Perhaps, this suggests that a broader topic, such as one regarding an impactful experience, could have been better for the NA students. This supports our quantitative findings as to why the NA Authentic Learning Experience group’s confidence decreased in the Second PWC.

***Observation 4: The LJ and topic had impact beyond their application in writing***

The students reflected that the LJ had an impact on them that extended beyond their current writing experiences, as well as deepening their learning beyond writing. According to Andrea, she felt that she ‘got to understand how blind people feel’, and that she understood ‘how blindness feels like’. Andrea also felt ‘that I can empathize with the blind better’. Lynde said that she knows ‘what to do’ if she ‘meets a situation on blindness or with blind people’, while Shermaine stated that ‘the LJ gave a chance for me to bond’ with her friends and that the bonding ‘did help improve my interest towards English Language’. Shermaine also stated that while the students can now ‘see how it is like to be blind’, they ‘won’t know how the blind people feel but we want to find out more.’

This tells us that the LJ’s impact may not be direct nor simple to gauge through the PWC, and that the students found deep meaning through the learning as well as in the gaining of social awareness from the experience. However, this learning might aid them in their writing and other areas of language learning only in the future and not immediately. The students who did not take part in the authentic learning journey also reflected this, with John stating that ‘the topic is helpful to make us feel the troubles that the blind people face’, and Peter got to ‘appreciate the importance of protecting my eyesight.’ Peter also reflected that the LJ was important and said that he thought if they focused on ‘another group of under-privileged people, it will be meaningful for learning’

since it ‘creates social awareness’ which ‘helps after learning the topic.’ This highlights that there are numerous ways in which the LJ and the use of related topics could help students develop in multiple ways to increase their writing confidence and language learning.

## Discussions and Implications

The findings of this research paper suggest far-reaching implications. From what we can gather above, the authentic LJ introduced during the Second PWC was beneficial for the students in the Authentic Learning Experience groups although they did not improve in every aspect of their confidence in writing as hypothesised. While the Authentic Learning Experience group did not obtain higher scores in all aspects of confidence than the other students at the end of the Second Process Writing Cycle, our findings reveal that the LJ provided a rich and authentic learning experience as a basis for pre-writing and a better transition from the planning to the writing stage of process writing.

However, we must note that the benefits were less immediate or pronounced with the NA stream, since the NA students in the authentic learning experience groups did not show improvement in their writing confidence. This calls for greater scaffolding in support of the students’ learning and application, such as the tailoring of pedagogies to tap on the affordances of the LJ. One possible suggestion is to bridge the learning gaps through more teacher modelling or other pedagogies such as differentiated instruction. There can also be more pre- and post-activities to introduce sensory details, emotive words and other aspects of language learning so that the LJ may be used even further to enhance teaching and learning.

Our research also suggests the importance of authentic learning in process writing. Such approaches, including LJs, are highly aligned with the Ministry of Education’s support for the Joy of Learning in that we ought to connect students’ learning with the real-world, which would empower students to think and reflect deeply about their learning. LJs like the *Dialogue in the Dark* would be valuable in developing student language to effectively express empathy and sensory meanings. Students will also have a greater joy of learning when they feel more confident about their learning or, as in this case, more confident as writers.

This also adds credence to the idea of incorporating LJs into the school curriculum, instead of the usual practice of having LJs at the start or end of the curriculum. The learning includes moral and reflective values that extend beyond academics and are essential in the students’ holistic development. Furthermore, if educators were to plan, manage and utilise LJs carefully, it could mean both cost and time savings as a single LJ could lead to several benefits for different subjects and disciplines.

The research further brings to mind that the choice of topics used in the curriculum for writing has impact on students’ learning, since they may reflect on the experiences that they are familiar with, or experience as part of the school curriculum. This may indicate that teachers could set writing tasks based on select key events in the students’ school life, such as school orientations, festivals, camps or otherwise. With the introduction of less weighted assessments in Singapore’s education, this could be a more meaningful direction that teachers should explore in the years to come.

## Limitations

This paper acknowledges its limitations. Firstly, the participants in the Authentic Learning Experience group had different teachers compared to the other classes. Teachers play a major role in the students’ learning as they impart the styles or techniques of writing. Different teachers may approach the same content with different pedagogical approaches due to preferences or strengths in certain aspects of writing. They may choose to focus more time on explaining topics



such as planning, writing sensory details, or vocabulary. Some of them may adopt a differentiated instruction approach, while others may prefer to focus more on thinking routines at various writing stages. In recognition of this limitation, we have tried to keep the lesson objectives consistent across the entire cohort through our scheme of work, which uses the curriculum cycle model. This means that eventually, the entire Secondary 1 cohort learns the same set of skills, strategies, attitudes and behaviours and consistently receives the same set of instructional methods.

Additionally, in this study, we assumed the students had a homogenous readiness level, that is, that they were equally ready in all aspects of writing. The students seemed to share the same readiness level in the aspects of planning, selecting vocabulary and writing emotive and sensory details. However, we could have considered these aspects more carefully. Unfortunately, we struggled with keeping account of readiness levels and felt that it was not feasible to manage such data and give a reasonable analysis in this study.

Further, the study deliberately used a familiar topic (travel) in the First PWC and used an unfamiliar topic (visual impairment) in the Second PWC to gauge if the LJ had a more positive impact on the students from the Authentic Learning Experience group. We also chose the topic on visual impairment in our endeavour to pique their curiosity, as it was a new context for all the students. This use of a familiar topic followed by an unfamiliar one, however, could have had a huge impact on students' confidence levels especially for students who were unable to adapt, and this may have affected the responses significantly.

In addition, every class has different interests or readiness levels towards the learning of the school subject, English Language. Each class has a different classroom dynamic. This requires teachers to tailor their teaching to cater to their students' needs. Similarly, the *Dialogue in the Dark* LJ experience for each student may vary since they engage in the experience with different visually impaired guides who may or may not be experienced, and they are grouped into different groups with classmates with differing learning styles or levels of intimacy.

Moreover, during the survey, our students were required to report their names as a form of administrative check to ensure everyone took part in the survey. As a result, some students might have been pressured to give a more favourable score to the teacher who administered the survey. Compelled to give a score, they might have worried whether the teacher would fault them if they gave less than an ideal score. We tried to mitigate this problem by assuring them that their names would not be mentioned in the paper and got their parents to sign a letter of consent on this.

Lastly, with regard to the interview, we accept that the interviewers might have unconsciously influenced respondents' answers. One of us was typing the responses while the other was asking for the students' responses. These students might have felt obliged to give a positive response to please the teachers. Another complication was that the students sat in the room where the interviews took place. They might have felt compelled to share similar perspectives to preserve their friendships or relationships, or their reputations. To mitigate this, we first relied on the survey results to identify the students who showed a positive or negative change in confidence. The interview served only to account for these changes.

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