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# A REVIEW ON PRIMARY SCHOOL STUDENTS' NARRATIVE ESSAY WRITING SKILLS: A FOCUS ON AN INTERVENTION BASED ON THINKING MAPS

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#### **ABSTRACT**

In this study, the researchers reviewed the current literature of Malay essay writing that highlighted most students were lacking the essential skills to write good narrative essays, with most of their works lacking depth, elaborations, strong contents, coherence, and grammatical integrity. Against this backdrop, the researchers proposed a teaching and learning intervention with the use of thinking maps as a learning tool for the teaching and learning process of Malay narrative essay writing based on the year-five Malay Language curriculum by focusing on three principles of the writing of children's stories, namely curiosity, challenge, and suspense. With such a thinking tool, teachers can help their students to search for and organize ideas for their essays in a structured, systematic fashion, the infusion of which can help them create interesting, moving stories. From a grammatical standpoint, students' essays will consist of cohesive sentences and coherent paragraphs, which makes reading a smooth, enjoyable experience to the reader.

### INTRODUCTION

In Malaysia's educational context, the Malay language curriculum for primary school has undergone several changes from the old primary school curriculum (KLSR) through integrated primary school curriculum (KBSR) to primary school standard curriculum (KSSR). Such changes mainly focus on the contents of the primary school Malay language curriculum including writing skills, which took place during the implementation of KBSR. For this type of curriculum, writing skill was embedded in any of the curriculum contents, such as interpersonal skills, information, and aesthetics. As such, teachers had to identify the linguistic skills, such as listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills and grammar, that students should learn and acquire based on the curriculum. Premised in the context of narrative essay writing, this study was carried out to examine the writing skills embedded in the new curriculum as summarized in Table 1.

**Table 1** Curriculum Standard and Assessment Document of Year-Five Malay Language

CON	TENT STANDARDS	LEAR	LEARNING STANDARDS		
3.3	Correctly constructing and using proper words, phrases, and sentences.	3.3.4	Constructing a framework for narrative and imaginative essay writing.		
3.6	Writing to convey information about a particular subject using a proper language.	3.6.2	Writing coherently and cohesively to convey accurate information by using the main idea with a proper language.		
3.7	Producing creative writings in various genres.	3.7.1	Developing an initial draft of sentences, contents, and conclusion in creative writing.		
3.8	Correctly editing and fine- tuning writings.	3.7.2	Creating creative and imaginative writings using the correct grammar.		
		3.8.2	Editing and fine-tuning writing in terms of spellings, punctuations, vocabularies, and sentence structures.		

(Source: Dokumen Standard Kurikulum dan Pentaksiran Bahasa Melayu Tahun 5)

As highlighted in Table 1, there are five important learning standards (refer to items 3.3.4, 3.6.2, 3.7.1, 3.7.2, and 3.8.2) for narrative essay writing, which was the main focus of this study. Story-telling writing skills should be emphasized to be aligned with the teaching and learning of Malay language at

the primary school level, given that such skills will be assessed in the Primary Schools Achievement Test (UPSR) as shown in Figure 1.

Table 2 shows the frequency of UPSR 2005-2019 Malay Language essay questions. As highlighted, narrative essays were assessed 14 times throughout the 15 years of study from 2005 to 2019, signifying that skills in writing narrative essays are deemed highly important. Given this unique finding, the researchers will discuss in detail the skills in composing stories and the accompanying approach used in the teaching and learning process of the subject matter.

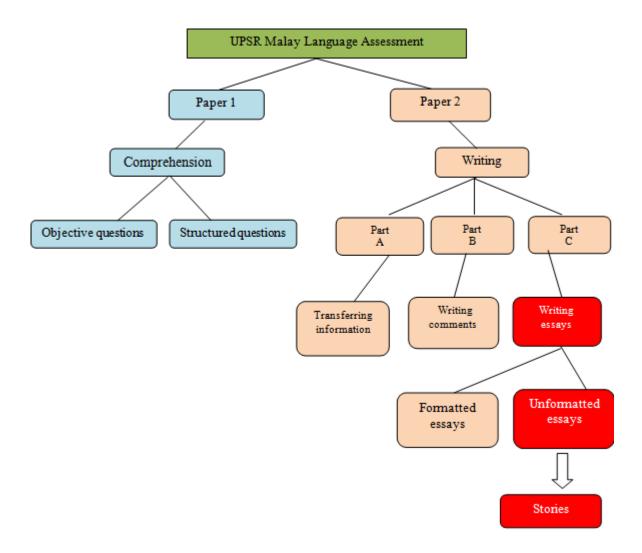


Figure 1 The assessment process of Malay Language at the UPSR level

**Table 2** The frequency of UPSR 2005-2019 Malay Language essay questions

Year	Unformatted essay	Formatted essay	
New Format			

2005	Descriptions	<ul> <li>Notations</li> </ul>
	-	<ul> <li>Interviews</li> </ul>
2006	• Facts	• Speeches
		<ul> <li>Dialogues</li> </ul>
2007	Continuing a story	• News
	<ul> <li>Descriptions</li> </ul>	
2008	Descriptions	
	Biographies	-
	<ul><li>Facts</li></ul>	
2009	Ending a story	• Informal letters
	<ul> <li>Descriptions</li> </ul>	
2010	Story reviews	• Reports
	• Facts	•
2011	Descriptions	<ul> <li>Dialogues</li> </ul>
	• Facts	C
2012	Ending a story	<ul> <li>Notations</li> </ul>
	<ul> <li>Biographies</li> </ul>	
2013	Descriptions	• Speeches
	• Facts	•
2014	Continuing a story	• Informal letters
	• Facts	
2015	Ending a story	• Reports
	• Facts	•
New Format		
2016	• Facts	• Speeches
2017	Descriptions	• Informal letters
2018	Continuing a story	• Dialogues
2019	• Stories	• Reports
		*

#### LITERATURE REVIEW

### Writing

Surely, writing is one of the language skills that students have to master. In this regard, Purba (2018) asserts that writing a deliberate act carried out based on one's mind. He also argues that writing activities can help encourage students to express their knowledge to the reader. Put simply, writing is a communication process to convey one's ideas or opinions in a written form done by the student (Purba, 2018). Likewise, Nunan (2003: 88) states that writing is the physical act of committing words or ideas to a range of media, such as hieroglyphics written on parchments or an email message typed onto a computer. On the other hand, writing is the mental work of inventing ideas and thinking about how to express and organize them into statements and paragraphs that are legible to the reader. As such, students have to be

effectively trained to acquire such a skill; however, such an endeavor has been a major challenge for many teachers as they have to be creative in choosing effective teaching approaches (Hammer, 2004, p.11). Admittedly, many traditional teaching approaches used to teach writing have not been effective, which may need a shift of focus from product to process of writing. In other words, students' attention has to be directed to 'what' rather than 'how' in terms of text construction. In particular, teachers can should encourage and guide their students to explore and develop their creativity in writing. Also, teachers should provide some freedom to students to express their ideas and complete their writing tasks successfully by giving them relevant information, real-life examples, and clear instructions (Purba, 2018). Against this backdrop, this study was conducted to review the current literature of narrative essay writing and to propose an approach to help teachers and students to effectively write such a literary composition.

### The implementation of narrative essays in the teaching and learning of Primary School Malay Language

According to Tuan Yusof and Nazir (2011), authoring or writing is an important skill that every student should to learn and acquire, given that virtually all formal educational activities need the learner to convey his or her ideas, views, or opinions. As such, teachers have to use effective teaching approaches through which they can teach their students the appropriate writing techniques to composure good essays. Over recent years, many studies have been carried out to examine factors that influence Malay language essay writing among secondary school students. For example, a study conducted by Abdullah, Mahamod, and Nor Shahid, (2016) showed that most students had to struggle to write the contents of an introductory paragraph. They also concluded that teaching and learning approaches have a huge impact on students' writings, which suggests that teachers have to apply interesting approaches to improve students' writing skills. Other studies have shown that students lack motivation and interest to learn to write Malay essays. To make matters worse, learning environments are not conducive for learning due to overcrowding, making the class too noisy and chaotic.

According to Abdullah et al. (2016), students' weakness in writing stems from the lack of contents, elaborations, and coherence and poor grammar, limited vocabularies, and punctuations. Moreover, according to Tuan Yusof dan Nazir (2011), writing skill involves other related skills, including seeking, structuring, and presenting contents that are clear, legible, neat, and interesting to read. Thus, teachers need to consider several factors in teaching essay writing skill, such as skills in finding relevant information and stimulating materials and in checking written essays. As revealed above, the researchers opted to use thinking flow maps as stimulating materials to help students to seek ideas for writing essays. Effectively, such materials can help students to systematically organize their ideas to establish continuity from one paragraph to other paragraphs.

According to Jamian and Abu Zarin (2008), the difficulties to master the writing skills have made students losing interest and motivation in learning the Malay language. As such, teachers need to teach their students to create the outline of an essay by using the thinking-map technique that can ease the process of narrative essay writing. In this respect, Osman, Sarudin, Janan, and Omar (2016; 2019) assert that an authentic approach that employs authentic materials, activities, and assessments can help improve student learning. Such an assertion has its merit in that the authentic approach engenders student-centric, active, and contextual, and higher-order learning. Thus, teachers need to use a wide range of strategies and approaches to improve students' motivation and interest to learn to write essays.

### The principles and requirements of children's stories

Essentially, children's stories encompass both oral and written forms that help tell the story of a particular event or incident to children. Typically, children's stories use simple, clear sentences to help students understand the intended meanings of the stories. Most children's stories are based on fictions involving mystics, legends, and folklores, all of which tend to have simple storylines and exemplary endings. Admittedly, the changes and advancements taking place in the world have transformed many people's lives, including those of young children. Over recent years, children's literature is regarded as an important part of educational systems that needs to be nurtured (Nijhar, 1984), signifying the close relationship between children and stories that is important in children's lives. As highlighted previously, most children's stories consist of fictional characters conjured through the author's imagination. Such a story uses a simple language that is appropriate with children's ages and contains elements of suspense, which are collectively organized into an effective storyline to interest and motivate children to read it.

In a study by Jusoh and Jamian (2014) titled *Kesan Bercerita Terhadap Pencapaian Penulisan Karangan Naratif Bahasa Melayu*, students gained a significant improvement in narrative essay writing after they had been taught a story-writing technique, suggesting that teachers can employ such a technique as an alternative teaching method to help motivate school students to learn to write good narrative essays.

A study carried out by Sujud, Abdull Sedik, Nik Muhamad Affendi dan Gaisun (2014) found that reading materials consisting of stories had a huge impact on stimulating students' interest and motivation in learning. Such a finding clearly indicates that reading stories is an integral part of children's lives. In addition, stories can change and influence students' behaviors as they can be easily swayed to imitate the characters of stories. For example, in a study carried out by Nik Muhamad Affendi dan Awang Pawi (2017) titled *Nilai Sosiobudaya dalam Cerita Kanak-Kanak Pilihan*, students were found to be able to understand and assimilate socio-cultural values contained in several classical stories. This interesting finding signifies that stories can change

students' personalities as they can be easily influenced by the stories told to or read by them.

## The effects of the use of flow maps in the teaching and learning process of narrative essay writing

As revealed, the use of flow maps can help improve the teaching and learning process of narrative essay writing for primary school students. Hence, this study employed such a use as many studies have shown flow maps can have three major impacts on student learning, namely improving the quality of students' essays, enhancing students' motivation, and strengthening students' skills in expanding their ideas for their essays. For the first impact, a study by Jusoh and Jamian in 2014 (cited in Rosly, Abd. Rahim and Halim, 2015) showed that a story-telling technique could significantly improve children's narrative essay writing, the finding which underscores the importance of using effective teaching techniques to teach children to write essays easy with ease. As acknowledged, students have a wide spectrum of cognitive abilities, with some having the ability to write narrative essays based on their ideas while others have to be guided to do so. Given this diversity, teachers must use creative, interesting teaching techniques to help students, especially the latter, to help them acquire strong essay-writing skills (Che Hassan & Abd. Rahman, 2011). To this end, several studies have been carried out to examine the impacts of such techniques on students' writing skills. For example, in a study by Jusof and Jamian (2014) which involved 66 year-one secondary school students in Selangor, they found the use of a story-telling technique for narrative essay writing had a strong positive impact on students' writings. Likewise, similar findings were replicated in studies carried out by Mohd Rahim and Othman (2016) and Abdul Rahman (2019), in which the use of thinking maps were able to improve students' performances in narrative essay writing.

From the standpoint of motivation, the findings of a study by Yaakub (2009) titled *Teknik Bercerita dalam Perkembangan Emosi Kanak-Kanak Prasekolah* are insightful. In this study, he found children were extremely excited and happy when they were read several story books, which led to a significant improvement in their communication skills as they were able to freely express their ideas or opinions. This finding suggests that the need for stories is inseparable in children's lives. Similarly, other studies have also found that stories can significantly influences children's behaviors or demeanors. For example, studies by Subramaniam (2013) and Yaakub (2008) showed that appropriate instruments and teaching materials helped improve children's motivation, stimulate their creativity, and enhance their communication skills. In another study, which was carried out by Beth (2019), it was revealed that the emphasis on using appropriate teaching strategies had a huge impact on the development of students' essay-writing skills. Similarly,

Kristen and Matthew (2019) found students' writing performances improved significantly after an intervention.

All the above findings underline the imperative of using appropriate, interesting learning tools, such as the flow map, to help students learn to write good essays and expand their ideas. According to Che Hassan and Abd. Rahman (2011), teachers need to use appropriate techniques that can help students to gain a firm understanding and expand their ideas in writing essays; otherwise, they will be at risk of not meeting the minimum standard of essay writing (Sariyan, 2009), which is reflected by poor grammar, disorderly sentence structures, and incoherence paragraphs that obscure the intended meanings of an essay. To mitigate such a predicament, he asserts that an outline of essays can serve as a guideline for students to compose good essays, which without it can throw the writer into confusion or uncertainty.

The lack of studies on the use of flow maps in narrative essay writing in primary schools motivated the researchers to pursue this endeavor. In this study, the researchers focused on Piaget's Cognitive Development Theory (Piaget, 1957) that deals with a wide of range of children's abilities and ages. This study was carried out to examine the effects of the use of flow maps as a learning tool to help year-five primary school students to arrange and organize their ideas or information in writing narrative essays.

### The effects of the use of flow maps on students' motivation in narrative essay writing

The use of thinking maps, in particular the flow map, can have a profound impact on essay-writing performances among students at both primary and secondary levels. As found in Mohd. Rahim and Othman's (2016) study, the use of round maps and flow maps in the teaching and learning of the Malay language subject helped improve Chinese students' performances in narrative essay writing. This promising finding suggests that the use of such learning tools can help stimulate students' higher-order thinking and increase their motivation to learn the Malay language subject, especially in learning to write essays. Similar finding was replicated in Ab. Rahman and Mahamod's (2019) study in which the combination of a sketching technique and flow maps was able to improve the performance and motivation to learn the Malay language subject among Malay students of Lun Bawang ethnicity. Specifically, the findings showed students' essays were coherent, cohesive, and relatively long. Students' marks after an intervention that used flow maps were significantly higher than their prior marks, suggesting that the use of such a learning tool is highly efficacious for the learning of essay writing. Overall, the above promising findings indicate that the use of thinking maps, especially the flow chat, can help improve students' motivation to write essays. Such findings provided the researchers the motivation to develop and implement an intervention for the teaching and learning of narrative essay writing and to examine the extent to which it could improve students' motivation and performance in narrative essay writing.

## The role of thinking maps in the teaching and learning of Malay narrative essay writing

Thinking maps are one of the important thinking tools that can be used to improve the efficacy of teaching and learning of Malay language. Essentially, such a learning tool can be divided into eight types, the selection of which depends on the suitability of a learning topic and skill to be learned and acquired, respectively. The eight types of thinking maps are the round map, bubble map, double bubble map, tree map, brace map, flow map, multi-flow map, and bridge map, with each having its unique role as summarized in Table 3.

**Table 3** The types and roles of thinking maps

Type of Thinking maps	Role		
Round map	Definition (based on a specific context).		
Bubble map	Explanation.		
Double bubble map	Comparison.		
Tree map	Classification.		
Brace map	Overall relationship.		
Flow map	Sequence.		
Multi-flow map	Causes and Effects.		

### Flow maps as a learning tool for narrative essay writing

The two types of thinking maps are the flow map and the multi-flow map, with the former being used to show a particular process and the latter to show and analyze causes and effects. As such, the flow map is deemed as an appropriate learning tool for the teaching and learning of narrative essay writing as it can show the flow or the sequence of a story involving the beginning, story build-up, climax, story resolution, and ending of a story, the ideas of which can be outlined in a flow map to help develop cohesive sentences and coherent paragraphs as highlighted in Figure 2. The researchers strongly believe that the use of such a learning tool can help improve students' skills in organizing their ideas for their essays. For example, teachers can instruct their students to use a flow map to outline their ideas, which later can be easily described in words that when combined with others can lead to a complete, meaningful essay.

As depicted in Figure 2, students can write important points in the flow map to highlight their main ideas for a story. From a theoretical learning perspective, the use of flow maps can help students to plan their stories more systematically and efficiently. Based on Piaget's Cognitive Development Theory, the assimilation process that occurs when students complete the flow map with their ideas can help them organize their thinking to write good

essays. Subsequently, the process of changing the schemas will take place by taking in new information that ultimately leads to the accommodation process, through which students can the flow map to arrange or organize their ideas as shown in Figure 3.

### Question:

Write an essay that begins with the sentence as follows: "I just came home from the extra class. When I opened the door ..."

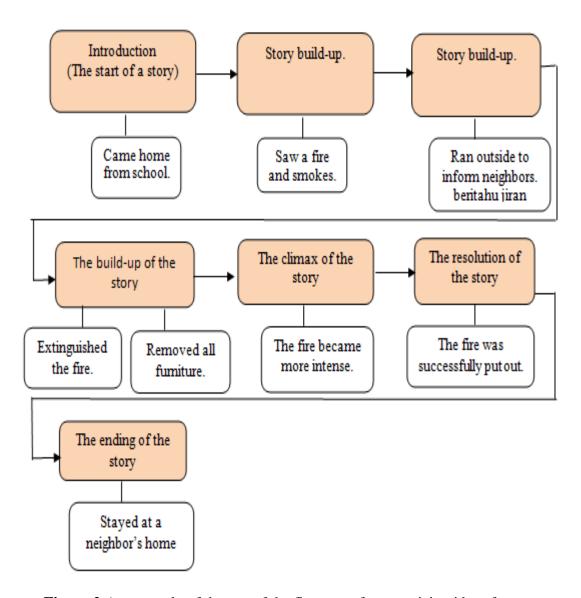
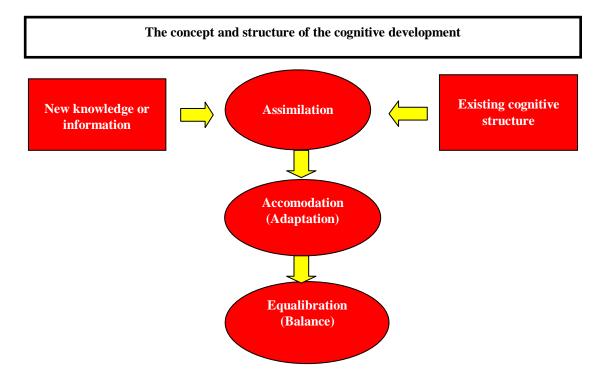


Figure 2 An example of the use of the flow map for organizing ideas for a story



**Figure 3** The concept and structure of Piaget's Cognitive Development Theory (Piaget, 1957)

# A PROPOSED UTILIZATION OF FLOW MAPS FOR THE TEACHING AND LEARNING PROCESS OF NARRATIVE ESSAY WRITING

### Teaching and learning intervention

In this article, the researchers propose a teaching and learning intervention for the teaching and learning process of Malay narrative essay writing based on the year-five Malay Language curriculum prescribed by Malaysia's Ministry of Education by focusing on three principles of writing of stories for children, namely curiosity, challenge, and suspense. As acknowledged, stories can have huge impact on children's lives, notably on those with learning disabilities. For example, a study by Rosly, Abdul Rahim, and Abdul Halim (2015) and Al Muhsin et al. (2020) found that digital stories were able to help children with Asperger Syndrome to get accustomed to their environments. Clearly, such a promising finding highlights that reading stories to children can have positive impacts on their emotions, attitudes and interest.

Therefore, the development of an intervention for educational purposes must carefully consider all these aspects. For the proposed intervention, flow maps would be used as the main tool to help make the plots of narrative essays interesting and complete by embedding elements of suspense, challenge, and curiosity. The intervention to be carried out would include activities required in developing an essay framework to guide the essay writing process that culminates in complete essays consisting of stories with all the essential constituents – the beginning, buildup, conflicts, climaxes, and ending. As such, the types of activities to be carried out in the proposed intervention will serve as the independent variable of the study. Also, the flow maps would be used as a guideline in developing teaching and learning activities that are in line with the research objectives and questions, which are illustrated in Figure 4.

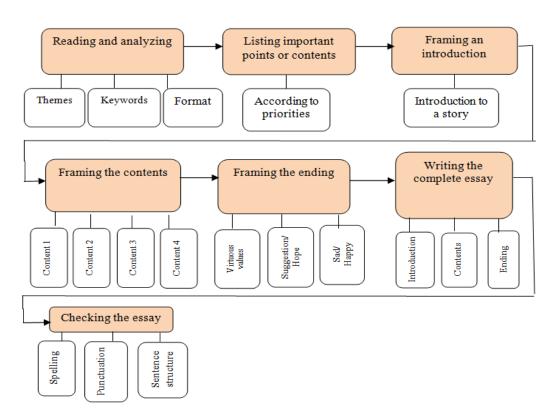


Figure 4 The flow maps of interventional activities in narrative essay writing

For the proposed intervention, the writing activities can be carried five or six times repeatedly with successive pre- and post-tests. In the intervention, exercise hand-outs comprising flow maps will be given to students to guide them in the correct way of composing essays based on stories. On such maps, they will be required to write the three major elements, namely suspense, curiosity, and challenge, which are appropriate with the principles of effective writing of stories. The marks given to their essays will be treated as the dependent variable of this study.

### The infusion of writing principles in narrative essay writing

In writing essays involving stories, authors need to infuse three elements into such literary works, namely suspense, curiosity, and challenge, which must be carefully structured based on their storylines or plots. Also, the levels of complexity of a chosen language for children's stories have to be appropriate for their ages (Nijhar, 1984). When infused judiciously, these elements can interest and attract children to read a piece of the story. Effectively, writing an essay based on a story entails the author to introduce, complete, and seamlessly conclude the story, the process of which must be aligned with the principles of effective essay writing, as depicted in Figure 4.

#### **DISCUSSION**

In this study, the researchers reviewed several articles published in highly reputed journals, such as Jurnal Pendidikan Bahasa Melayu, Jurnal Pendeta, Jurnal Melayu, Journal of Political Science Education, Journal of Research in Childhood Education, International Journal of Innovative and Exploring Engineering (IJTEE), and International Journal of Language Education and Applied Linguistics. The review revealed that most students had some difficulties in writing essays based on stories or narratives. Such findings have raised a major concern among practitioners given that school students need to have strong writing skills that can help them learn the Malay language subject effectively. Studies have shown that sound writing skills involve a process of finding, framing, and structuring relevant contents of a story and delivering and presenting them with the use of coherent, intelligible sentences.

Also, studies have shown that a lack of guidelines, stimulating materials, and assistance further exacerbate problems faced by students. As such, teachers should intensify their efforts and commitments to produce students capable of thinking at various cognitive levels (Tuan Yusof and Nazir, 2011). To help realize this aim, teachers need to select and use effective teaching techniques to ease the process of learning. In particular, teachers must help students to hone their writing skills by teaching them the skills required in developing strong content, finding stimulating materials, and checking essays. In this regard, teachers can guide their students to use various thinking maps, including flow maps, to systematically organize or structure their ideas for essays, which can eventually lead to coherent paragraphs to facilitate smooth reading.

Studies have also revealed that most students did not have adequate skills in writing strong essay contents and interesting introductory paragraphs, thereby entailing teachers to teach students to use effective, simple writing techniques to help them acquire such skills. To help students overcome such a predicament, it is crucial to analyze issues in the Malay language teaching by generalizing the problems faced by students (Sarudin et al., 2019; Osman et al., 2016, 2019; Mohamed Redzwan et al., 2020). Furthermore, Abdullah et al.

(2016) assert that several external factors can have profound impacts on the quality of essays written by Malay language students. The external factors include low motivation, boredom during class lessons, noisy learning environments, and overcrowding, which collective impedes effective learning.

In general, students' essays lacking in terms of depth, elaborations, strong contents, coherence (due to unstructured sentences), and grammatical integrity (attributed to poor vocabularies and bad punctuations) (Abdullah et al., 2016). To help mitigate these problems, teachers need to eclectically communicate with students using a more stylish, elegant form of a particular language (Mohamed Redzwan et al., 2020). Also, teachers need to teach their students to develop the outlines of their essays by using the thinking map technique, which effectively makes the essay writing process more efficient and manageable. From the learning perspective, Osman, Sarudin, Janan, and Omar (2016, 2019) assert that teachers should explore the use of learning approaches that can help create student-centric, active, contextual, and high order learning. Some scholars, including Mohd Rahim and Othman (2016), strongly emphasize the use of stimulating materials to help improve students' narrative essay writing skills. On the other hand, other scholars, such as Jusoh and Jamian (2014), make a strong case for the use of the story-telling technique to help students improve their narrative essay writing skills.

#### **CONCLUSION**

Overall, this study, which was based on a critical review of the current literature, helped highlight the issues and problems in writing Malay narrative essays and the interventions used to help mitigate such a predicament. In particular, the findings of the review served as guidelines for the researchers to propose an intervention that uses thinking maps as a learning tool. With such a thinking tool, teachers can help their students to search for and organize ideas for their essays in a structured fashion. By infusing all the ideas creatively into the storylines, students will be able to create interesting, moving stories that can attract readers to read their literary compositions. Given this potential benefit, the researchers will use the proposed intervention in a follow-up study to determine the effectiveness of flow maps in helping students to improve their essay writing skills.

**Table 4** The principles for essay writing based on stories

Prin	Story-writing process			Teaching and learning activities
ciple	Introducing a	Endin	Building	(the plot of the story)
	story	g a	-up a	
		story	story	

	That			Challenge
Curi	afternoon,			
	Ana was			• Reading a book alone.
osity				Curiosity
	alone at			Heard a voice
	home. Her			<ul> <li>A thief entered the house</li> </ul>
	parents went			Suspense
	to the next			<ul> <li>Almost caught by the thief.</li> </ul>
	village to			The neighbor came to help.
	attend a			Resolution
	wedding. As			<ul> <li>The thief was handed over to the police.</li> </ul>
	she was busy			The thirt was manded over to the points.
	reading a			
	book,			
	suddenly she			
	heard a			
	disturbing			
	noise coming			
	from the			
	kitchen. She			
	then			
			Hari	Challenge
Chal			Raya is	• Fasting for a month.
leng			around	Curiosity
e			the	
			corner.	• Cleaning the house.
			State the	Suspense
				Helping my mother to bake cakes and biscuits.
			preparat ions to	Hari Raya is coming soon, new clothes have not
				been bought and biscuits have not been baked
			celebrat	yet.
			e the	Resolution
			event	<ul> <li>A festive Hari Raya.</li> </ul>
			that you	
			and your	
			family	
			have	
			made.	
				Challenge
Susp		finally,		<ul> <li>Year-five students.</li> </ul>
ense		Adi		Curiosity
		admitt		<ul> <li>Stubborn, lazy, and mischievous.</li> </ul>
		ed his		Suspense
		mistak		Playing with a fire in the house.
		es.		• The house was on fire.
		Startin		Resolution
		g that		Admitted his mischiefs.
		_		Tidifficted into importation.

day,
he
promis
ed
himsel
f not to
be
mischi
evous
anymo
re.

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