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Enhancing English Writing Engagement Among Struggling Writers Through Themed Vocabulary: An Action Research Study in a Malaysian Vocational College

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Abstract: Vocational students in Malaysia frequently disengage from English writing tasks, and limited lexical resource is among the barriers most often reported. This action research examined whether supplying a themed vocabulary list as a writing scaffold was associated with changes in the writing engagement of nine low-proficiency Semester 3 Welding Technology students at a vocational college in Selangor. Following Lewin's action research spiral, a four-week cycle of planning, action, observation and reflection was carried out. Verbs and adjectives drawn from the Science and Technology theme of the syllabus were introduced, discussed in context, practised in controlled exercises and then applied in sentence construction and guided writing. Engagement was examined across the cognitive, behavioural and emotional dimensions using classroom observation, a twelve-item questionnaire completed by all nine participants, interviews with two participants and a guided writing task, analysed descriptively. All nine participants produced grammatically acceptable simple sentences, while six produced at least one correct compound sentence, a difference consistent with the additional processing demand of coordinating two clauses. Questionnaire responses were uniformly favourable, with no participant selecting Disagree or Strongly Disagree on any item. Interview accounts point to reduced hesitation at the point of starting a task, alongside continuing difficulty in sustaining motivation across longer pieces. The study suggests that themed vocabulary may lower the entry cost of a writing task for struggling vocational writers without addressing persistence. With a single intact group, no comparison condition and partial reliance on self-report to a teacher-researcher, the findings are indicative rather than causal.

Keywords: Themed Vocabulary, Writing Engagement, Vocational Education, Action Research, English As A Second Language

1. Introduction

Writing is the productive skill in which second language learners most often fall behind, and it is the skill in which falling behind is hardest to conceal. A learner with weak listening or reading can participate in a lesson without producing visible evidence of difficulty. A learner asked to write a paragraph cannot. The blank page makes the gap public, and for learners who already carry a history of poor performance in the subject, that visibility is itself a reason to avoid the task. Understanding what makes struggling writers begin, and keep going, is therefore a practical problem for classroom teachers rather than only a theoretical one.

In technical and vocational education and training the problem takes a particular shape. Vocational students have chosen a pathway defined by practical competence, and they generally invest their effort where they can see it converting into a skill they will use. General subjects, and language subjects in particular, are frequently read as belonging to the academic track they left behind. Skarpaas (2024) found exactly this pattern among upper secondary vocational students, reporting that perceived relevance was the factor that most strongly shaped their engagement with English lessons, and that students disengaged where they could not connect the language content to their trade. The difficulty is not straightforwardly one of ability or of attitude. It is one of fit between what the language classroom offers and what the vocational learner recognises as useful.

Malaysian policy has treated English proficiency as a national priority for more than a decade. The Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013 to 2025 made bilingual proficiency one of its eleven shifts, committed the system to raising the proportion of students achieving a credit in English at the Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia examination, and identified the

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vocational pathway as an early focus for quality improvement (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2013). The intent is clear at the level of policy. Translating it into practice within a workshop-oriented college, where English occupies a small share of contact time and competes with trade modules for student attention, is a different matter.

Evidence from the Malaysian sector indicates that the barrier is at least partly lexical. Kho and Ting (2024) examined the English proficiency of diploma students at a Malaysian polytechnic and identified limited vocabulary, weak grammatical control and low confidence as the difficulties students named most often. Jamaludin et al. (2020), working specifically in Malaysian vocational colleges, concluded that technical communication instruction in that setting was poorly matched to the learner profile it was meant to serve and proposed a redesigned pedagogical model in response. Peer-reviewed empirical work on English writing within Malaysian vocational colleges, as distinct from polytechnics and universities, remains thin, which is itself part of the problem this study addresses.

Affective factors compound the lexical ones. Horwitz et al. (1986) identified anxiety specific to the foreign language classroom as a barrier to participation, describing learners who withdraw from performance rather than risk visible failure in front of peers. Guo et al. (2025), reviewing the more recent literature on writing anxiety and second language writing performance, found a consistent negative association between anxiety and performance across studies, while also noting that the instruments used to measure writing anxiety frequently fail to report reliability and validity evidence. In the Malaysian context, Che Nor and Md Yunus (2022) reported that no student in their sample recorded low writing anxiety, and that insufficient writing knowledge and skills was among the causes students identified. Anxiety and lexical shortage are difficult to separate in practice. A learner who cannot retrieve the words needed for a task has a reasonable basis for apprehension about attempting it.

There is also a social dimension specific to the Malaysian setting. Kapong (2022) documented the way Malaysian speakers can face mockery from their own peer group for using English, a form of othering that attaches a social cost to visible effort in the language. In a close-knit workshop cohort where students spend most of the week together, that cost is not trivial. It offers one explanation for reluctance that has nothing to do with ability and that no amount of grammatical remediation will address.

Against this background, vocabulary is a plausible point of intervention. Lexical knowledge is measurably associated with the quality of second language writing. Yang et al. (2023) found that measures of lexical richness predicted the quality of expository writing produced by learners of English as a foreign language. Allagui and Al Naqbi (2024) reported that vocabulary size accounted for a substantial share of the variance in summary writing quality, and that size was a stronger predictor than indices of lexical variety. The practical implication is that supplying words, rather than teaching strategies for generating them, may be the more direct route for learners whose store is small.

This implication is reinforced by evidence on how low-proficiency learners behave. Nik Anuar and Abdul Aziz (2024) found that low-proficiency Malaysian learners deployed markedly fewer metacognitive vocabulary strategies than their higher-proficiency peers. A learner who does not spontaneously plan, monitor or search for vocabulary is unlikely to benefit from being told to do so. Providing the lexical resource directly removes a step that these learners are least equipped to take on their own.

How that resource should be organised is less settled than classroom practice usually assumes, and the distinction matters for the present study. Tinkham (1997) drew a line between semantic clustering, in which words share a superordinate category and compete with one another, and thematic clustering, in which words are associated through a shared scenario. Semantic clustering impeded learning in his experiments; thematic clustering facilitated it. Erten and Tekin (2008) replicated the interference effect for semantic sets, and Pérez-Serrano et al. (2022) found that the disadvantage of semantically clustered presentation persisted and grew with repetition. McDonald and Reynolds (2023) offer the counterweight: when word sets were embedded in meaningful instructional context rather than presented as decontextualised lists, learners acquired and retained both semantically and thematically clustered words. Taken together, the evidence cautions against handing learners a list of near-synonyms to memorise, while supporting sets organised around a topic and used inside a task.

Scaffolding provides the pedagogical frame. Wood et al. (1976) described the process by which an expert enables a novice to complete a task that would otherwise exceed their reach, and Vygotsky (1978) located learning in the distance between what a learner can do alone and what they can do with support. Recent intervention research supports the frame in the second language writing classroom specifically. Hassen et al. (2024) found that explicit instruction in scaffolding strategies raised the writing achievement of learners of English as a foreign language. Aznan and Saad (2023), working with Malaysian secondary school learners, reported improvements in content, language and organisation following the use of a graphic organiser as a pre-writing scaffold. A vocabulary list supplied before a writing task belongs to the same family of interventions, and Graham and Perin (2007) had earlier identified explicit support of this kind among the strategies with the strongest evidence base for adolescent writers.

Cognitive load theory supplies a mechanism. Sweller (1988) argued that working memory is limited and that instructional designs which impose unnecessary load degrade learning. A learner attempting to compose in a second language is simultaneously retrieving vocabulary, selecting grammatical structures, monitoring accuracy and holding a communicative goal in mind. Removing the retrieval component by supplying the words should, in principle, free capacity for the remaining demands. Stahl and Fairbanks (1986) had earlier established through meta-analysis that vocabulary instruction affects comprehension, and Nation (2013) documents the repeated encounters a word requires before it becomes available for use. The step from vocabulary support to writing performance is nonetheless an inference rather than a demonstrated chain.

The evidence on vocabulary instruction is in fact more equivocal than classroom practice tends to allow. Cervetti et al. (2023), in a meta-analysis of thirty-nine studies, found that word-meaning interventions did not produce reliable overall effects on breadth of vocabulary knowledge, although their review concerned first language learners in the primary years and does not transfer directly to the present setting. Similarly, Schmitt (2008) emphasised that instructed vocabulary learning depends heavily on the quantity and quality of engagement with the words rather than on exposure alone. Any claim that supplying a list produces learning must therefore be stated carefully. What can more defensibly be examined is whether learners engage differently with a writing task when the lexical burden is reduced.

Engagement is the appropriate outcome for this question, and it is not a single thing. Fredricks et al. (2004) established the now standard treatment of school engagement as comprising behavioural, emotional and cognitive dimensions, each with its own indicators and its own relation to achievement. Zhong and Zhan (2024) applied the tri-dimensional model to the writing classroom for learners of English as a foreign language and found that task design was among the strongest environmental influences on it. Treating engagement as three-dimensional makes it possible to report that a scaffold moved one dimension and not another, which is a more informative and more honest result than a single global judgement.

The gap this study addresses is therefore specific. The relationship between vocabulary knowledge and writing quality is established, and the value of pre-writing scaffolds is supported in Malaysian secondary settings. What is missing is a classroom-level account, from within a Malaysian vocational college, of what happens to the separate dimensions of writing engagement when struggling writers are handed a themed vocabulary set drawn from their own syllabus. The published work on this setting is sparse, and the small number of struggling writers in any one workshop cohort means the question is unlikely to be answered by large-scale study. Practitioner action research is the method the circumstances allow.

This study accordingly asks two questions. First, how is the use of themed vocabulary associated with the cognitive, behavioural and emotional engagement of struggling writers in English writing tasks? Second, how do these students describe the contribution of themed vocabulary lists to the difficulties they experience with English writing? The study does not claim to establish that themed vocabulary causes improved engagement. With a single intact group of nine students, no comparison group and a four-week window, causal attribution is beyond what the design supports. What it offers is a documented account of one intervention in one classroom, reported in enough detail to be judged, adapted or contested by other practitioners working in similar settings.

2. Methodology

2.1 Research Design

This study adopted an action research design following the spiral of planning, acting, observing and reflecting that originates with Lewin (1946) and was subsequently operationalised for educational practitioners by Kemmis et al. (2014). Action research was selected because the problem was identified by the teacher within her own classroom, because the intervention had to be delivered inside the existing timetable, and because the intention was to improve practice in that classroom rather than to test a hypothesis under controlled conditions. The cycle ran over four weeks. Each week's observation informed the following week's planning, so that the sequence of activities was adjusted in response to what students were found to be able to do.

The design carries known limitations, which are stated here rather than deferred. De Oliveira (2023) sets out the principal criticisms of practitioner action research, among them the researcher's position inside the setting being studied and the constrained generalisability of findings drawn from a single site. Both apply directly to this study and are returned to in Section 4.9.

2.2 Participants and Setting

The study was conducted at Kolej Vokasional Sungai Buloh, a vocational college in Selangor, Malaysia, within the Semester 3 English Language subject of the Sijil Vokasional Malaysia programme. Nine students from the Semester 3 Welding Technology programme took part. They were identified from their performance in the preceding trial examination as the students in the class obtaining the lowest band scores on the writing component, and are referred to throughout as struggling writers. All nine were taught by the researcher as part of her normal teaching load.

These students shared a recognisable profile. Their productive vocabulary was small, their written output was short and heavily reliant on a narrow range of structures, and they showed hesitation and delay when a writing task was set. The nine sat within a larger intact class, and the classroom activities described in Section 2.3 were delivered to the whole class. Only the nine identified students were observed, surveyed and interviewed for the purposes of this study.

2.3 The Intervention

The intervention consisted of four sessions of sixty minutes each, delivered within scheduled English lessons over four weeks. Its organising principle was that vocabulary should be supplied before it is required, drawn from the theme the syllabus already prescribes, and then used inside progressively more demanding writing tasks rather than memorised in isolation. The words themselves were verbs and adjectives associated with the Science and Technology theme of the Semester 3 syllabus. This is thematic rather than semantic clustering in Tinkham's (1997) sense: the words are linked by a shared scenario, not by membership of a single semantic category.

Session 1: Themed vocabulary

The teacher introduced ten verbs and a parallel set of adjectives relating to technology, presenting five of each in relation to the main ideas of the topic. The set was deliberately small. Aitchison (2003) describes the mental lexicon as a network of connected entries, and a manageable number of thematically linked items was judged more likely to be retained than a longer list. Students then explored the meanings of the selected items through a contextual guessing activity in which the teacher supplied situational examples. The session closed with a gap-filling exercise in which students selected the appropriate verb or adjective for each sentence, providing retrieval practice under low-stakes conditions.

Session 2: Simple sentence construction

Three target structures were introduced: Subject-Verb, Subject-Verb-Noun and Subject-Verb-Adjective. The teacher modelled each with examples built from the technology vocabulary, then constructed further sentences on the board while students followed the relationship between structure and lexis. The reliance on teacher modelling before independent attempt follows the account of observational learning given by Bandura (1977). Students subsequently wrote their own simple sentences individually while the teacher circulated, providing feedback and clarification. Several students, including members of the target group, were invited to write a sentence on the smartboard. Feedback on error was framed as information rather than as evaluation.

Session 3: Compound sentences and guided writing

Students were shown how two simple sentences may be joined with a coordinating conjunction to form a compound sentence, with the structure displayed on the smartboard and explained. A short writing task followed. The second half of the session was a guided writing exercise in which students produced a paragraph of approximately eighty words on the topic 'The Benefits of Using Smartphones'. The session opened with a brainstorming discussion, after which the teacher revisited the relevant vocabulary and reminded students of connectors such as firstly, moreover, then, next and finally.

Session 4: Diagnostic writing task

The final session was a written task of thirty minutes in which students wrote a paragraph of eighty to one hundred words entitled 'The Benefits of Using Laptops'. Students were given main ideas to work from and were required to use the vocabulary introduced during the intervention, constructing a mixture of simple and compound sentences. The task mirrors the Guided Writing component of the Semester 3 English Language final assessment, so that the exercise served an instructional purpose alongside the research one.

2.4 Data Collection

Four sources were used, selected to address the three dimensions of engagement described by Fredricks et al. (2004). Pearson (2024) notes that mixed approaches predominate in research on engagement in second language writing, and the combination used here follows that pattern.

Classroom observation was conducted by the teacher-researcher throughout each of the four sessions. Observation focused on participation in discussion, willingness to volunteer written work, time taken to begin a task, and the structures students were able to produce. Records were made in the form of written notes during and immediately after each session. The observation was not conducted against a pre-specified coding scheme, which limits its systematicity.

A questionnaire of twelve items was administered to all nine participants after the intervention. Items were grouped under three headings, namely task completion, active participation and general reflections, and each was answered on a five-point scale from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree. The questionnaire was prepared by the teacher-researcher for this study. It was not piloted, and no reliability coefficient was computed for it. This is a limitation of the instrument and is acknowledged as such; Guo et al. (2025) identify precisely this omission as a recurrent weakness in the writing anxiety and engagement literature.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with two of the nine participants after the intervention. The interview schedule covered confidence in writing, motivation to write, and general reflection on any change in attitude towards writing tasks. The two students were selected by the teacher on the basis of willingness to speak at length; they are referred to as Respondent 1 and Respondent 2. Two interviews from a group of nine cannot represent the group, and the interview material is used here to illustrate rather than to establish.

The diagnostic writing task described in Section 2.3 provided the written evidence. Scripts were marked against the existing twenty-mark Guided Writing band descriptors used in the Semester 3 assessment, which address task relevance, accuracy, variety of sentence structure, organisation and vocabulary. The rubric is reproduced in the Appendix. Scripts were also examined qualitatively for the presence of the target vocabulary and for the sentence types students were able to produce.

2.5 Data Analysis

Data were analysed descriptively and narratively. Questionnaire responses are reported as counts of respondents selecting each option, since with nine participants each respondent represents approximately eleven per cent and percentages would convey a precision the sample does not support. No inferential statistics were computed, and no significance testing was carried out. Interview material was read for recurring content and organised under the two themes the schedule addressed.

Observation notes and diagnostic scripts were read alongside the other sources to identify points of agreement and disagreement between what students reported and what they produced.

2.6 Ethical Considerations

Written notification of the study was sent to the parents or guardians of the participating students before the intervention began, describing the purpose of the study, the data to be collected and the voluntary nature of participation, and requesting consent. The questionnaire carried a preamble stating that responses would remain anonymous and confidential, that participation was voluntary, that students could withdraw at any time without penalty, and that there were no right or wrong answers. Participants are identified in this report only by generic labels. No photographs, names, class identifiers or other material capable of identifying an individual student are reproduced. The intervention itself consisted of ordinary curriculum content delivered within scheduled lessons, so no student was deprived of instruction by taking part.

3. Results

Findings are reported under the three dimensions of engagement set out by Fredricks et al. (2004). Each dimension draws on more than one source, and points at which the sources diverge are noted.

3.1 Cognitive Engagement

Cognitive engagement was examined through the diagnostic writing task, with attention to whether students applied the themed vocabulary and what sentence structures they were able to construct.

3.1.1 Application of the themed vocabulary

Most of the nine participants applied vocabulary from the intervention to the diagnostic topic, 'The Benefits of Using Laptops', despite this topic differing from the one used in the guided writing session. Scripts showed verbs and adjectives from the technology set combined into sentences that conveyed the intended meaning, indicating that students were selecting items according to context rather than reproducing the list. Transfer to a related but unrehearsed topic is a modest form of evidence that the words had become available for use rather than merely recognisable, which is consistent with the account of repeated encounter given by Nation (2013).

3.1.2 Sentence structure

All nine participants produced grammatically acceptable simple sentences in their diagnostic scripts. Given that the group was selected on the basis of the weakest writing performance in the class, and that short and structurally repetitive output was among the characteristics that identified them, this is the clearest single result in the study. Observation during Session 2 indicated that students found sentence construction more manageable when the lexical content was already familiar, which is what cognitive load theory would predict if retrieval demand had been reduced (Sweller, 1988).

Compound sentences were a different matter. Six of the nine participants produced at least one correct compound sentence. The remaining three did not. The gap between the two structures is informative rather than disappointing. A compound sentence requires the writer to hold two complete propositions, select an appropriate coordinator and apply the associated punctuation, all while managing the lexical and communicative demands already present. Errors observed in the scripts included comma splices and run-on constructions, which is the pattern expected when learners generalise a rule learned for simple sentences.

Duration is the most plausible constraint. A single thirty-minute session on compound structures within a four-week cycle offers few opportunities for practice, and Schmitt (2008) argues that the quantity and quality of engagement with material determines what is learned from it. The result should be read as indicating what the intervention did not reach within its window rather than as evidence that compound structures are beyond these students.

The teacher-researcher's marking records indicate that all nine participants scored higher on the diagnostic task than on comparable earlier writing tasks. These earlier tasks were not administered under matched conditions and the scores are therefore not reported as a pre-test and post-test comparison. Students also met the required word count on the diagnostic task, which is a behavioural indicator of task completion as much as a cognitive one.

3.2 Behavioural Engagement

Behavioural engagement was examined through the twelve-item questionnaire completed by all nine participants and through classroom observation. Questionnaire responses are set out in Table 1.

Table 1: Questionnaire Responses by Item (n = 9)

Area	No.	Item	SA	A	N	D	SD
Task completion	1	Themed vocabulary helps me finish my writing assignments more regularly.	5	3	1	0	0
	2	When I use themed vocabulary, I feel more confident and able to complete my writing tasks.	5	4	0	0	0
	3	The use of themed vocabulary reduces my frustration when completing writing assignments.	5	3	1	0	0
	4	Since using themed vocabulary, I feel more motivated to complete my assignments on time.	6	3	0	0	0
Active participation	5	I am more likely to participate in class activities related to writing when I have themed vocabulary to use.	5	4	0	0	0
	6	Themed vocabulary makes me feel more comfortable contributing ideas during writing discussions in class.	5	4	0	0	0
	7	I ask more questions or seek clarification about writing tasks when I am given a list of themed vocabulary.	4	5	0	0	0
	8	Having themed vocabulary helps me overcome the initial hesitation or avoidance of writing tasks.	5	3	1	0	0
General reflections	9	I am more likely to actively participate in writing activities because I have specific vocabulary to guide my writing.	5	3	1	0	0
	10	The use of themed vocabulary has made writing assignments feel more accessible to me.	6	3	0	0	0
	11	Themed vocabulary has helped me engage more with the writing process compared to before it was introduced.	5	3	1	0	0
	12	Since using themed vocabulary, I feel more confident in my ability to complete writing assignments independently.	5	4	0	0	0

Note. SA = Strongly Agree; A = Agree; N = Neutral; D = Disagree; SD = Strongly Disagree. Values are numbers of respondents. No respondent selected Disagree or Strongly Disagree on any item.

The pattern across the twelve items is uniform. No participant selected Disagree or Strongly Disagree on any item, and agreement, combining Strongly Agree and Agree, ran at eight or nine of nine for every item. The items attracting the highest count of Strongly Agree responses concerned motivation to complete assignments on time and the perceived accessibility of writing assignments, at six of nine each. The item attracting the fewest concerned asking questions or seeking clarification, at four of nine, although combined agreement on that item remained at nine of nine.

A distribution this uniform limits what can be read from it. With nine respondents, an instrument administered by the class teacher and items worded so that agreement is the favourable response, the absence of any negative response is as consistent with acquiescence as with a strong effect. The questionnaire result is reported here as an indication of how students characterised their experience, and is interpreted in Section 4.5 alongside the observational record rather than in place of it.

Classroom observation offers a partially independent view. During Session 2, three of the nine participants volunteered to write their sentences on the smartboard, which none had been observed to do in earlier lessons. During Session 3, two participants produced correct compound sentences during the activity itself. Across the four sessions the target students were noted as attentive and as asking questions during teacher-guided construction. These are small observations from a single observer who was also the teacher, and they are recorded as such.

3.3 Emotional Engagement

Emotional engagement was examined through semi-structured interviews with two participants, addressing confidence in writing and motivation to write. The material is summarised in Table 2.

Table 2: Interview Themes and Illustrative Accounts (n = 2)

Theme		Summary of accounts	Illustrative detail
Confidence in writing	in	Both respondents described a reduction in the difficulty of beginning a task once a vocabulary set was available, and attributed this to having fewer decisions to make at the outset. Both reported that access to more specific words allowed them to express intended meanings more precisely.	Respondent 1 described feeling less overwhelmed and better able to organise ideas. Respondent 2 described feeling prepared to begin without hesitation. Respondent 1 recalled using words such as flexible, accessible and convenient in an examination and feeling satisfied with the result. Respondent 2 reported greater clarity.
Motivation to write	to	Both qualified their accounts, noting that teacher guidance remained necessary for correct application in more demanding tasks. Both described the vocabulary list as making tasks feel more structured and less open-ended, which they connected to reduced delay in starting. Both reported greater willingness to contribute to class discussion. Both reported that motivation was not sustained across longer or more complex tasks.	Neither respondent claimed to be able to use the vocabulary independently in unfamiliar task types. Respondent 1 reported being more focused and less inclined to postpone work. Respondent 2 reported more active participation in class writing activities. Respondent 1, who had previously found it difficult to contribute ideas, reported feeling able to share thoughts with the relevant words to hand. Respondent 1 described continuing difficulty with motivation on longer tasks. Respondent 2 reported that motivation decreased for longer or more complex assignments.

Note. Accounts are drawn from semi-structured interviews with two of the nine participants and are illustrative rather than representative of the group.

3.3.1 Confidence in writing

Both respondents described a change located at the start of a task rather than across it. Respondent 1 reported that before the vocabulary set was introduced, the difficulty was not knowing how to begin, which led to delay. With a relevant set available, organising thoughts became more manageable. Respondent 2 described a similar effect, reporting that a clear list allowed the task to be started without hesitation.

Both also described being able to express intended meanings more precisely. Respondent 1 recalled using words such as flexible, accessible and convenient during an examination and connected this to a sense of accomplishment. Both respondents qualified their accounts in the same way, noting that teacher guidance remained necessary for correct application in more demanding tasks. Neither claimed to be able to use the vocabulary independently in unfamiliar task types.

3.3.2 Motivation to write

Both respondents reported that the vocabulary list made writing tasks feel more structured and less open-ended, and connected this to a reduced tendency to postpone starting. Respondent 1 reported being more focused and less inclined to procrastinate. Respondent 2 reported more active participation in class writing activities. Both also reported greater willingness to contribute to class discussion, with Respondent 1 noting that having the relevant words available made it possible to share ideas that had previously gone unsaid.

The qualification both respondents offered is the more useful finding. Motivation was not sustained across longer or more complex writing tasks. Respondent 1 described continuing difficulty with motivation on extended work, and Respondent 2 reported that motivation decreased as assignments became longer or more complex. The reported benefit was concentrated at the point of initiation and did not extend through the writing process.

4. Discussion

4.1 The Headline Result and Its Limits

The clearest finding is that all nine participants produced grammatically acceptable simple sentences in the diagnostic task, and that this group had been identified by weak writing performance including short and structurally repetitive output. The finding is worth stating carefully. It is not evidence that themed vocabulary caused the change. Nine students taught by their own teacher over four weeks, with no comparison group and no matched baseline, can show improvement for reasons that include additional instructional time, the attention that accompanies being observed, familiarity with a

repeated task format, and ordinary maturation across a semester. What the study can defensibly report is that the intervention was followed by a level of output the group had not previously produced, and that the pattern of that output is consistent with the mechanism proposed.

4.2 Initiation Is Not the Same as Persistence

The most useful distinction to emerge concerns where in the writing process the reported change occurred. Across the interview material, the questionnaire items on hesitation and accessibility, and the observational record of students beginning tasks more readily, the reported benefit clusters at the point of initiation. Both interview respondents then volunteered, without prompting, that motivation was not sustained across longer or more complex tasks.

These are different problems with different remedies. Difficulty starting is plausibly a resource problem: the writer cannot see a route into the task. Difficulty persisting is a problem of sustained self-regulation across a task whose end is not in sight, and a word list does nothing for it. Treating both as a single construct called engagement would have obscured this, which is the practical argument for the tri-dimensional treatment adopted from Fredricks et al. (2004). A teacher who reads this study as licence to expect longer and better sustained writing from a vocabulary list will be disappointed.

Self-determination theory offers one way of reading the asymmetry. Deci and Ryan (1985) hold that motivation is sustained where the needs for competence, autonomy and relatedness are met. A supplied word list plausibly supports competence at the moment of starting, since the learner can see that the task is within reach. It does little for autonomy, because the words are the teacher's choice rather than the learner's, and it does nothing to sustain a sense of competence once the writer moves beyond the supported stretch. Bandura (1997) makes the complementary point that self-efficacy is built primarily through mastery experience. A single successful paragraph is a small mastery experience, and the confidence it generates should not be expected to carry a learner through a task several times longer.

4.3 Reduced Retrieval Demand as the Proposed Mechanism

The mechanism most consistent with the pattern of findings is a reduction in retrieval demand. Sweller (1988) holds that working memory is limited and that load imposed by the instructional design competes with load intrinsic to the task. A struggling second language writer composing a paragraph is retrieving vocabulary, selecting structures, monitoring accuracy and holding a communicative goal simultaneously. Supplying the vocabulary removes one of these demands at the moment it would otherwise be heaviest.

The distribution of results across the two sentence types offers indirect support. Simple sentences, where the freed capacity is sufficient for the remaining demand, were produced by all nine. Compound sentences, which add the coordination of two propositions and the associated punctuation, were produced by six. If the vocabulary scaffold had raised general writing ability, the two structures would be expected to move together. That they did not is more consistent with a specific reduction in one component of the load than with a general improvement. This remains an inference from a pattern, not a measurement of cognitive load.

4.4 Why Thematic Organisation Matters

The vocabulary sets used here were organised thematically, drawn from the Science and Technology theme of the syllabus, rather than semantically. The distinction is not cosmetic. Tinkham (1997) found that words sharing a superordinate category, and therefore competing with one another, impeded learning, while words linked through a shared scenario facilitated it. Erten and Tekin (2008) replicated the interference effect for semantic sets, and Pérez-Serrano et al. (2022) found the disadvantage persisted and grew with repetition.

Had this intervention presented students with sets of near-synonyms to learn, the literature would predict interference rather than benefit. That it presented verbs and adjectives linked by a topic, and embedded them in a writing task rather than in a memorisation exercise, aligns it with the conditions under which McDonald and Reynolds (2023) found clustered vocabulary to be acquired and retained. Practitioners adapting this approach should take the organising principle seriously; a themed list and a synonym list are not interchangeable.

4.5 What the Questionnaire Does and Does Not Show

Questionnaire responses were uniformly favourable, with no negative response on any of the twelve items. This is the result that most requires caution. The instrument was administered by the class teacher to her own students, the items were worded so that agreement was the favourable response, and the respondents were nine adolescents who knew the teacher had designed the lessons being evaluated. Acquiescence and social desirability are the obvious competing explanations, and nothing in the design rules them out.

Fuller et al. (2018) provide a sharper caution. Triangulating self-report, trained observers and physiological measures, they found that students frequently appeared engaged to observers during periods when they were not, and concluded that neither self-report nor observation alone is a sufficient measure of engagement. In the present study the observer was also the teacher and the person being evaluated, which weakens the observational strand further. The questionnaire is best read as evidence that students were willing to characterise the intervention favourably, which is worth knowing but is not the same as evidence that their engagement changed.

The written scripts carry more weight for this reason. They are a record of what students produced rather than of what they said about it, and the divergence between the uniformly positive questionnaire and the uneven sentence-structure results is itself a useful signal. Where the two sources disagree, the scripts are the more conservative guide.

4.6 Reading These Findings Against the Vocabulary Literature

The relationship between lexical resource and writing quality is well supported. Yang et al. (2023) found lexical richness predicted expository writing quality, and Allagui and Al Naqbi (2024) found vocabulary size a stronger predictor of summary writing quality than variety indices. Both findings are correlational, and neither establishes that supplying words to a learner produces the writing gains associated with possessing them.

Cervetti et al. (2023) supply the necessary counterweight. In a meta-analysis of thirty-nine studies they found that word-meaning interventions did not produce reliable overall effects on breadth of vocabulary knowledge. Their review concerns first language learners in the primary years and does not transfer directly, but it establishes that vocabulary instruction is not automatically effective and that the burden of evidence sits with the intervention. The present study does not discharge that burden. It reports engagement with a writing task, not vocabulary acquisition, and no measure of retention was taken.

4.7 Scaffolding and the Malaysian Vocational Context

The intervention belongs to a family of pre-writing scaffolds whose value has been demonstrated locally. Aznan and Saad (2023) reported improvements in content, language and organisation among Malaysian secondary learners given a graphic organiser before writing, and Hassen et al. (2024) found explicit scaffolding strategy instruction raised writing achievement. The present study is consistent with both, and extends the setting to a vocational college, where the published evidence is sparser. Yusoff et al. (2023), reporting a pre-test and post-test writing intervention with learners on a vocational tourism programme, offer the closest published precedent and a design the present study would have benefited from adopting.

The vocational context supplies part of the explanation for why a themed list might work here specifically. Skarpaas (2024) found perceived relevance to be the dominant influence on vocational students' engagement with English. Vocabulary drawn from a science and technology theme is closer to the world these students have chosen than a general list would be. Ismail and Dol (2024), working with Malaysian community college students, similarly reported high comprehension and interest when English terms were deliberately deployed within vocational instruction. Nik Anuar and Abdul Aziz (2024) add the complementary point that low-proficiency Malaysian learners use markedly fewer metacognitive vocabulary strategies than their peers, which is a reason to supply lexis rather than strategies for finding it.

The affective barriers documented locally also bear on the result. Che Nor and Md Yunus (2022) found no Malaysian student in their sample recording low writing anxiety, with insufficient writing knowledge among the causes identified, and Kapong (2022) documented the social cost attached to visible use of English among Malaysian peers. A scaffold that reduces the risk of visible failure at the moment of starting addresses something more than a lexical gap.

4.8 Practical Implications

Three implications follow for practitioners in comparable settings. First, the vocabulary set should be small, thematic and drawn from content the syllabus already prescribes, so that the scaffold costs no additional curriculum time and carries the relevance vocational students respond to. Second, the set should be used inside a writing task rather than learned in advance of one; the conditions under which clustered vocabulary appears to help are conditions of meaningful use (McDonald & Reynolds, 2023). Third, and most importantly, a vocabulary scaffold should be expected to affect the start of a task and not its completion. Sustaining students through longer pieces is a separate instructional problem requiring separate provision.

What lies outside the teacher's control should also be stated. The contact time available for English within a vocational programme, the prior attainment of students entering the programme, and the peer culture surrounding English use are institutional and social conditions rather than classroom variables. A classroom intervention of four weeks operates within these constraints and cannot be expected to overcome them.

4.9 Limitations

The limitations of this study are substantial and shape what may be concluded from it. The design used a single intact group of nine students with no comparison group, so any change observed cannot be attributed to the intervention rather than to instructional time, task familiarity, observation effects or maturation. The sample was nine students in one programme at one college, selected for low prior attainment, and is not representative of vocational students generally.

The analysis was descriptive throughout. No inferential statistics were computed and no effect size is reported, so no claim in this paper carries statistical support. Earlier writing scores exist in the teacher's records but were obtained under conditions that were not matched to the diagnostic task, so no pre-test and post-test comparison is reported.

The questionnaire was constructed for this study, was not piloted, and no reliability coefficient was computed for it. Its twelve items were positively worded and it was administered by the teacher whose lessons it evaluated. Guo et al. (2025) identify the under-reporting of reliability and validity evidence as a recurrent weakness in this literature, and this study does not escape it.

The interview material comes from two of the nine participants, selected by the teacher for willingness to speak. Two accounts cannot represent a group of nine, and the selection method makes them unlikely to be the least favourable accounts available. Observation was conducted by a single observer without a pre-specified coding scheme, and that observer was the teacher who designed and delivered the intervention. De Oliveira (2023) identifies researcher positionality and constrained generalisability as the central criticisms of practitioner action research; both apply here without qualification.

Finally, the intervention ran for four weeks. No delayed measure was taken, so nothing can be said about whether any of the changes reported persisted beyond the immediate period of instruction.

4.10 Directions for Further Work

Each limitation suggests a corresponding next step. A second cycle using a comparison class within the same college would address the absence of a control condition at modest cost. Administering a matched writing task before and after the intervention, marked against the same band descriptors by a second marker blind to condition, would allow gains to be reported as scores rather than as impressions. Extending the cycle beyond four weeks, with repeated practice in compound and complex structures, would test whether the ceiling observed for compound sentences reflects the intervention's duration or the students' current stage.

Piloting the questionnaire, computing a reliability coefficient and including negatively worded items would reduce the acquiescence problem, and having it administered by a colleague rather than by the class teacher would reduce the social desirability problem. Interviewing all nine participants, or a sample not selected for willingness to speak, would give the qualitative strand a firmer basis. A delayed post-test some weeks after the intervention would establish whether anything was retained. None of these steps require resources beyond those available to a practitioner working within a normal teaching load.

5. Conclusion

This action research examined the writing engagement of a small group of struggling writers in a Malaysian vocational college following the introduction of a themed vocabulary scaffold drawn from the Science and Technology theme of their own syllabus. Engagement was examined across the cognitive, behavioural and emotional dimensions using classroom observation, a questionnaire, interviews and a guided writing diagnostic task.

The findings are indicative rather than conclusive. Every participant produced grammatically acceptable simple sentences in the diagnostic task, while the majority but not all produced a correct compound sentence, a difference consistent with the additional processing demand that coordinating two clauses imposes. Questionnaire responses were uniformly favourable, and are reported here with the caution that self-report to a teacher-researcher invites agreement. Interview accounts locate the reported benefit at the point of beginning a task rather than across it, and both respondents volunteered that motivation was not sustained through longer or more complex pieces.

That last point is the most useful thing this study has to offer a practitioner. Difficulty starting a piece of writing and difficulty finishing it are different problems, and a vocabulary scaffold appears to address the first while leaving the second untouched. Teachers adopting this approach should expect students to begin more readily and should plan separately for what sustains them once they have begun.

The study cannot establish that themed vocabulary caused the changes described. A single intact group, no comparison condition, a short cycle and a teacher who was also the researcher and the observer place that conclusion out of reach. What the study offers instead is a documented account of one intervention in one classroom, with its instruments, its procedure and its weaknesses set out in enough detail for other practitioners to judge, adapt or contest. In a sector where the published classroom evidence remains thin, an honest account of a small study is worth more than a confident account of a large claim.

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Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest with respect to the research, authorship or publication of this article.

Appendix

Appendix A: Target sentence structures and worked examples

The following worked examples were presented on the smartboard during Session 2 and Session 3.

Simple sentence (Subject-Verb): It connects.

Simple sentence (Subject-Verb-Noun): The computer operates smoothly.

Simple sentence (Subject-Verb-Adjective): The system is reliable.

Worked example 1. Simple sentences: The internet provides instant access to information. It helps with education and research. Compound sentence: The internet provides instant access to information, and it helps with education and research.

Worked example 2. Simple sentences: Smartphones make everyday tasks more efficient. They enable us to manage our time better. Compound sentence: Smartphones make everyday tasks more efficient, and they enable us to manage our time better.

Worked example 3. Simple sentences: Technology can save time. It makes life easier. Compound sentence: Technology can save time, and it makes life easier.

Worked example 4. Simple sentences: We can learn new things from the internet. We can use apps to study and improve our skills. Compound sentence: We can learn new things online, or we can use apps to study and improve our skills.

Appendix B: Guided writing marking rubric

The diagnostic task was marked against the twenty-mark Guided Writing band descriptors used in the Semester 3 English Language assessment, reproduced in Table A1.

Table A1: Guided Writing Band Descriptors (20 Marks)

Band	Marks	Descriptors
A	17-20	Task relevant; language accurate with minor errors; a variety of sentence structures; well organised with connectors; vocabulary adequate.
B	13-16	Task mostly relevant; language largely accurate with few errors; some variety of sentence structures; connectors used; vocabulary adequate.
C	9-12	Task partly relevant; language sufficiently accurate with some errors; sentence structures lack variety; organisation uneven; vocabulary still conveys meaning.
D	5-8	Task of poor relevance; language barely accurate with many errors; mostly simple sentences; vocabulary limited; poor organisation.
E	1-4	Task irrelevant; language inaccurate and meaning does not come through; poor organisation; vocabulary limited.

Appendix C: Questionnaire items

The twelve questionnaire items are reproduced in full in Table 1. Each was answered on a five-point scale from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree. The questionnaire carried a preamble stating that responses were anonymous and confidential, that participation was voluntary and could be withdrawn at any time without penalty, and that there were no right or wrong answers.

Appendix D: Interview schedule

Confidence in writing. 1. How do you feel about your ability to write in English before and after using themed vocabulary in class? 2. Do you feel more comfortable starting your writing tasks now that you have a list of themed vocabulary to use, and why? 3. Before we started using themed vocabulary, were there times when you felt frustrated or unsure about how to begin your writing, and how does that compare to how you feel now? 4. Can you describe a specific moment when you felt proud of your writing because you used the themed vocabulary? 5. When you are working on a writing task, does using the vocabulary list make the task easier or harder, and how does it affect your confidence?

Motivation to write. 6. Do you feel more motivated to start writing when you have themed vocabulary to guide you, and why? 7. Has using themed vocabulary made you more interested in participating in writing activities in class, and how? 8. Before using themed vocabulary, did you often delay or hesitate to start writing assignments, and how has your approach to starting tasks changed? 9. When you see the themed vocabulary before a writing task, do you feel more ready or less ready to write, and why? 10. Has using themed vocabulary helped you feel more engaged with the writing lessons and assignments, and can you give an example?

General reflection. 11. Do you think the use of themed vocabulary has changed your attitude towards writing tasks in general, and in what ways? 12. If you were to choose a writing task to do at home or in class, how likely are you to choose it now compared to before you used the themed vocabulary, and why?

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