



Analysing Narrative Elements in Short Fiction: A Study of Students' Writing Skills

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ABSTRACT

Narrative writing is a crucial element of English as a Second Language (ESL) instruction in tertiary education. It contributes to the development of students' language proficiency, creativity, and critical thinking skills. By adopting a mixed-method research design, the present study examines the extent to which ESL diploma students incorporated the five elements of Freytag's Pyramid including exposition, rising action, climax, and resolution into their 80-to-100-word narratives written by 66 ESL diploma students in Malaysia. The study also investigates the challenges students encountered when incorporating the five elements into narrative writings within the given word constraints. To elicit data, 66 narrative essays were collected and analysed. To further explore how the five elements were applied by students in their narrative writing and the challenges they encountered in writing short stories, the researchers interviewed five students. The results revealed that most students could write exposition and rising action effectively, but often omitted or weakly developed climaxes, falling actions, and resolutions. Several issues that they encountered when writing short stories including strict word limit, first language interference, limited vocabulary, and other factors. The implications of the study are outlined.

Keywords: English as a Second Language, Freytag's Pyramid, narrative elements, narrative writing, proficiency

INTRODUCTION

The word "narrative" means telling of an event or a series of events (Abbott, 2002), while "narration" is the process of conveying a story or part of a story through oral or written communication (Corvellec, 2006). In the second language context, narrative writing constitutes a class of communicative events that use certain grammatical structures and specific lexis to express meanings in a particular socio-cultural framework (Wong & Lim, 2014).

Narrative writing plays an essential role in supporting meaningful English language development. It is widely regarded as a powerful tool for enhancing language proficiency, fostering creativity, and cultivating critical thinking skills among students (Che Awang et al., 2021).

ESL learners must attend to both linguistic features, for example the effective use of descriptive language, and discourse-level organisation, particularly the coherent sequencing of events across the introduction, body, and conclusion when writing short, meaningful stories. They need considerable knowledge, experience, skills, and understanding of both language used and generic structure to effectively entertain readers (Vui-Fun & Jason, 2014). This is supported by Sok and Shin's (2023) findings that highlight handwriting, language proficiency, organisation, overall structure, and conceptual development as important aspects of narrative writing.

The Freytag's Pyramid, a classical narrative framework that comprises of five elements, including exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, and denouement is often used to teach short stories in classrooms (Harun et al., 2013). Typically, English educators at Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), Malaysia utilise this model when teaching short narratives to students.

Narrative writing is included in the English language syllabus for the first-semester ESL diploma students at UiTM. Students are required to compose short narrative texts of approximately 80 to 100 words as a component

of their assessment. However, one of the key challenges in this pedagogical context lies in the expectation for students to integrate all five narrative elements within a highly constrained word limit which demands a significant level of language accuracy, structural coherence, and narrative competence. These factors could make it very challenging for certain students to write intriguing and high-quality short stories.

While Freytag's Pyramid has been widely discussed in longer essays and literary analysis (Pham, 2021), to date there has been little research on examining ESL students' ability to incorporate all narrative elements under strict word constraints (80-100 words) and obstacles that impede their ability to compose coherent and engaging short narratives. Comprehending these issues is crucial for creating specific teaching materials and methods to help students write effective short narratives.

The present paper aims to investigate the extent to which ESL diploma students incorporated the five elements of Freytag's Pyramid including exposition, rising action, climax, and resolution into their 80-to-100word narratives. Additionally, the study explores the challenges that ESL diploma students encountered when incorporating the five elements of Freytag's Pyramid into their 80 to 100 word narratives. The research questions to be examined are as follows:

1. To what extent did ESL diploma students incorporate the five elements of Freytag's Pyramid in their 80-to100-word narratives?
2. What challenges did ESL diploma students encounter when incorporating the five elements of Freytag's Pyramid into their 80 to 100 word narratives?

To address these questions, the paper next reviews relevant literature on Freytag's narrative structure, the significance of narrative elements in writing, and challenges in writing short narratives.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This section offers a brief overview of relevant literature on the structure of Freytag's Pyramid. Then, the section presents the significance of narrative elements in writing short narratives. Finally, the section discusses existing research on the challenges students face in composing English short stories.

Freytag's Pyramid of Dramatic Structure

Gustav Freytag (1863), a 19th-century German playwright and novelist, introduced a model of dramatic structure known as Freytag's Pyramid (Tyler, 2022). Figure 1 shows the five key components of Freytag's Pyramid, such as exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, and denouement, which offer a foundational model for understanding the structure of narratives. These stages provide a basic framework to understand how stories develop, especially when it comes to conflict and resolution.

Studies show that exposition does more than just set the scene (location and time) and introduce characters, it also sets the mood and tone (Tyler, 2022). Rizuan and Mohd Asyiek (2024) explained that rising action is a stage that shows how characters feel and builds dramatic tension that makes stories more interesting.

The climax, also known as the crisis, represents the most dramatic part of the story. During this stage, protagonist and antagonist tenses collide, which triggers conflict as characters' actions intensify. Conflict is important to narrative and plot development. By producing an emotionally moving scenario, the conflict makes the story more engaging (Dominguez et al., 2015; Rahman et al., 2020).

The term 'dénouement', which is derived from French, signifies the conclusion of the narrative. Francis (2019) emphasised that the writer or characters typically unveil any remaining mysteries, questions, or puzzles in the resolution. Nevertheless, numerous research indicates that students frequently neglect or inadequately develop the five key elements, revealing a consistent disparity between theoretical frameworks of narrative and real learners implementation.

The Freytag's Pyramid Freytag's methodology had been utilised in Malaysian contexts to analyse local folklore, like Legenda Puteri Saadong (Hamadun & Shukri, 2024). The researchers applied Freytag's sevenstage pyramid,

including exposition, inciting incident, rising action, climax, falling action, resolution and denouement to facilitate the understanding of its narrative in the story. However, employing this model in practice, especially for ESL students can be challenging due to various factors. This raises the question of whether the Freytag's model can be effectively applied in ESL classrooms, particularly in contexts with strict word limits such as 80 to 100 words.

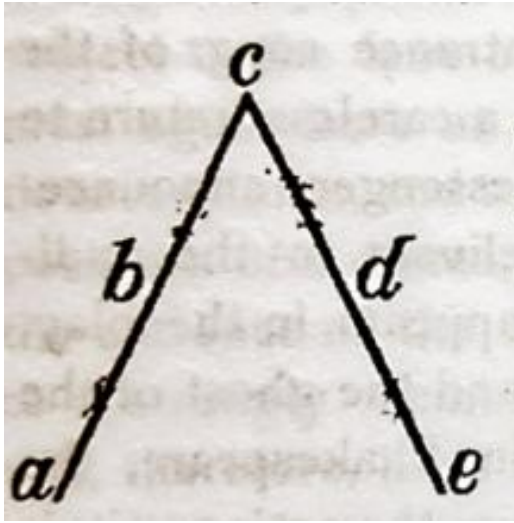


Figure 1 Freytag's Pyramid (Freytag, 1863). Freytag describes the letters on the pyramid as representing the following: a) introduction, b) rise, c) climax, d) return or fall, e) dénouement

The Importance of Narrative Elements in Writing

In the book, *Reading Like a Writer* (2006), Francine Prose states that becoming a skilled reader and writer requires a profound understanding of the elements of fiction, such as words, sentences, characters, dialogue, and details, suggesting that Freytag's Pyramid functions as a scaffold in crafting a short story. Researchers from several disciplines have also emphasised the significance of narrative structure, illustrating that a narrative employing Freytag's Pyramid can provoke profound and empathetic responses (Quesenberry & Coolson, 2014).

It is a fact that Freytag's Pyramid is an important tool for making interesting stories since it gives readers a clear framework that makes it easier for others to follow and understand the story (Harun, Razeef, Razak, & Nasir, 2013). In a study, Shi and Cheung (2024) observed that many participants acknowledged the importance of a climax when creating personal narratives with children, while the climax and a resolution have been found in all narratives.

Although applying Freytag's Pyramid in narrative writing can help develop effective short stories, Pham (2021) revealed that six out of 28 narrative essays written by second-year students at a university within the National University system in Ho Chi Minh City struggled to write an effective climax, falling action, and resolution. At times, students also encountered difficulties in applying the rising action effectively in their stories. The result corresponds with findings from Malaysian and Chinese ESL learners (Lee, 2021; Tsai, 2002), indicating that difficulties in employing Freytag's model may arise from linguistic and cognitive obstacles of L2 writing.

Previous studies indicate that a well-structured narrative, as outlined by Freytag's Pyramid, is not merely a literary construct but also a pedagogical goal, since it can deeply engage readers in educational settings. However, educators must also consider numerous factors that hinder ESL students from composing effective short stories, particularly when constrained by strict word limits.

Challenges in Writing English Short Stories

Despite the clear framework that Freytag's Pyramid provides, ESL students usually struggle to implement the five elements. Empirical evidence identified several factors that hinder students' ability to produce wellstructured and coherent narratives such as limited linguistic proficiency, first language (L1) interference, lack of sustained



writing practice, lack of genre awareness, and inadequate guidance from educators (Han & Shin, 2017; Wang et al., 2023).

Marzaizah et al. (2021) found that while most participants were able to complete the narrative writing task, their responses generally lacked creativity and demonstrated limited mastery of English. L1 interference was a dominant factor contributing to diminished language quality. Similarly, Wang and Weng (2002) also observed greater reliance on L1 in narrative writing than in argumentation tasks, indicating that creative writing stimulates more profound cultural-linguistic transfer.

Besides, Tsai (2002) reported that limited vocabulary is one of the challenges faced by L2 writers. Lee (2021) also reported that L2 writers found difficulty to choose the right vocabulary and grammatical structures to meet the communicative requirements of narrative writing.

While substantial literature has documented the challenges hindering students from producing quality narrative writing, other researchers have suggested educators focus on sentence length. Notably, some researchers argued that shorter responses reduce coherence (Kroll, 1990 & Lee et al., 2021). Similarly, Yang (2014) suggested educators to encourage students comprehend and construct lengthy sentences in the target language to enhance their proficiency. Educators are advised to use their strategies to help students increase the length of their sentence (Xu, Sawaki, Zhu, 2024).

The following section outlines the mixed-methods design that was employed in this study.

METHODOLOGY

The results are presented by research questions. RQ1 summarises frequencies of Freytag's elements across 66 narratives while RQ2 reports themes derived from five semi-structured interviews.

This study involved a total of 66 participants from the first year of Diploma in Communication and Media and Diploma in Tourism Management at public university in Malaysia. The participants (45 females and 21 males) were between 18 and 20 years old. All participants speak Malay as their primary language. Two primary instruments were employed: narrative tasks and semi-structured interviews.

The primary instrument for collecting data in this study was the narrative task. The researcher employed random sampling in this study to ensure equal selection opportunities for all first-semester diploma students in the target population. The study encompassed 66 narrative writing pieces. All these short stories were products of the writing section of the English language final test. The rationale for selecting the task is that it provides an opportunity to assess the students' ability in incorporating Freytag's Pyramid, including exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, and resolution into their short stories.

For this task, the participants were instructed to write a narrative text of 80 to 100 words in response to a given prompt. The stories must begin with the prompts stated in the writing section. The prompt for the narrative task, *I wish I had listened to my mother and did not act so carelessly*.

An analytic rubric aligned with Freytag's Pyramid (Exposition, Rising Action, Climax, Falling Action, Resolution) was developed to analyse the narrative writings, assessing the presence and effectiveness of the five Freytag's elements. An element counted as 'Yes' (present) if it was clearly identifiable (e.g., a distinct climax moment); 'Weak' if an element was attempted but underdeveloped (e.g., a very minimal or unclear climax), and 'No' if the element did not appear at all. The analysis of narrative structures was summarised.

Then, the collected data were analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), version 26. To address Research Question 1, which explores the extent to which ESL diploma students incorporated the five elements of Freytag's Pyramid including exposition, rising action, climax, and resolution into their 80-to-100-word narratives, a frequency analysis was conducted.

The second primary instrument for data collection was the semi-structured interview. Purposive sampling was adopted in this study to ensure the participants possessed specific criteria and provided meaningful perspectives



on the research objectives (Ritchie et al., 2023). A total of 5 students were individually interviewed, lasting between 45 min and one hour.

The interview questions focused on understanding the application of Freytag's narrative elements in the students' narrative writing and the obstacles they encountered in crafting effective short stories in about 80 to 100 words. All interviews were conducted in English, and the data was audio-recorded, transcribed, and analysed for thematic analysis. Thematic analysis was adopted to address research question 2. With the thematic analysis, codes were generated, and common themes were stated.

Upon completion of both phases, the results were compared to produce a comprehensive interpretation of the findings.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the results of the narrative task and interviews. The analysis addresses the research questions on the extent of students' use of Freytag's Pyramid in their short narratives and the challenges they encountered in composing the short stories.

Narrative Task Results

RQ1 To what extent did ESL diploma students incorporate the five elements of Freytag's Pyramid in their 80-to-100-word narratives?

The analysis of the narrative task in Table 1 revealed that participants demonstrated a high degree of effectiveness in incorporating exposition (95.5%) and rising action (93.9%) elements of Freytag's Pyramid in their narrative writing. These results indicate that most of the participants were able to establish context by introducing characters and settings, and initiating narrative tension, aligning with Tyler's (2022) view that exposition provides essential background and sets the tone for the story.

However, a small number of them encountered difficulty with the climax (86.4%) and falling action (78.8%). This means that they struggled to sustain tension through the narrative peak and to construct coherent falling actions, although they were able to write the characters and settings effectively in the short stories. In addition, only 92.4% of the narratives included resolutions while others ended without closure. The result is consistent with Pham's (2021) study, which Vietnamese undergraduates frequently omitted climax, falling action, and resolution in their narrative essays.

One contributing factor to the results is likely the restrictive 80-to-100-word limit, which, while encouraging conciseness, constrained students' ability to fully develop the story. One of the participants commented that:

"I have struggled with writing a short story using the five key elements. For example, the other day when I was writing a short story, I could only include the beginning, rising action, and climax. Then I paused to count my words, and it had already exceeded 70. I thought that if I continued writing the falling action and the resolution, the story would go beyond the 100-word limit."

This finding resonates with Kroll's (1990) and Lee et al.'s (2021) arguments that shorter responses may lack sufficient content to achieve discourse coherence. Yang (2014) and Xu, Sawaki, and Zhu (2024) recommend encouraging longer sentences and more detailed elaboration to enhance narrative fluency. The tension between conciseness and completeness in narrative writing is therefore a structural challenge that needs to be carefully addressed in an assessment design.

In addition, lack of comprehensive understanding of Freytag's Pyramid may be one of the factors of the issue which means that some participants were aware of its elements in theory but had difficulty applying them in practice. This gap between structural awareness and practical application suggests the need for greater scaffolding in teaching narrative stages, with specific emphasis on climax, falling action, and resolution.

Table 1 Frequency of Narrative Elements in Students’ Short Stories

Narrative Element	Yes (%)	Weak (%)	No (%)
Exposition	63 (95.5%)	-	3 (4.5%)
Rising Action	62 (93.9%)	-	4 (6.1%)
Climax	57 (86.4%)	4 (6.0)	5 (7.6%)
Falling Action	52 (78.8%)	-	14 (21.2%)
Resolution	61 (92.4)	-	5 (7.6%)

RQ 2: What challenges did ESL diploma students encounter when incorporating the five elements of Freytag’s Pyramid into their 80 to 100 word narratives?

For Research Question 2, three themes were generated: world limit constraints, language barriers, and writing habits. Table 2 presents the themes and their codes. The themes are essential for defining the participants’ perceptions.

Word Limit Constraint

This theme highlights the requirement for ESL diploma students to compose short narratives of 80 to 100 words during assessment. In this research, most of the participants found it challenging to incorporate all five elements of Freytag’s Pyramid, particularly the rising action, climax, falling action, and resolution in their narrative writing. The result is consistent with Pham (2021), who found that students did not write climax, falling action, and resolution in their narrative writing.

During the interview, many participants explained that they were used to writing longer short narratives, which allowed greater flexibility in developing conflict, sustaining tension, and writing resolution. A participant in the study said:

“In my opinion, it is a bit challenging because I do not like to limit my words. For example, if possible, I prefer my story to be as long as necessary so that readers could easily understand what the story is about.”

The finding suggests that curriculum developers and educators must meticulously evaluate the suitability of severe word limitations in narrative writing tests. While brevity might enhance pupils’ linguistic clarity, severe limitations may impede their capacity to exhibit mastery of narrative components.

Language Barriers

This theme is defined as the linguistic difficulties encountered by ESL diploma students while composing short narratives in English. All participants in the study articulated challenges in selecting appropriate words for their short stories and formulating grammatically cohesive sentences, attributed to poor grammar and limited vocabulary. This finding is consistent with prior research indicating that L2 writers encountered difficulties with word choice and narrative coherence (Tsai, 2002; Lee, 2021).

In this study, the participants also said that L1 interference, specifically the habit of translating directly from Malay to English, made their writing sound strange, lost meaning, and broke up the flow of the story. One of the participants said:

“But if I had to mention one difficulty, it would be translating Malay words into English, as there are certain words without direct equivalents in English, and I am not sure if I am allowed to write them in Malay.” The results demonstrated that language barriers constrained students’ ability to craft effective short stories. Pham (2021) suggested students be taught with descriptive vocabulary, word denotation, connotation and collocation to help students build stronger vocabulary and have more sensible word choices in crafting their narrative writing.



Writing Habits

The definition of this theme is students' lack of structured planning, sequencing, and draughting strategies, which resulted in disorganised or incomplete short narratives. Most of the participants in this study believed that they lacked systematic planning before writing, which led to disorganised sequencing and uneven emphasis on narrative elements. This absence of pre-writing strategies often resulted in rushed or incomplete resolutions and a tendency to focus disproportionately on exposition. Without structured planning, students struggled to maintain narrative coherence while also adhering to the strict word limit.

Table 2 Theme and Codes of the Perceived Challenges in Composing Short Stories

Theme 1: Word Limit Constraint	Theme 2: Language Barriers	Theme 3: Writing Habits
It is difficult to include all five narrative elements within 80 to 100 words. The word limits restrict a full development of a short story. Usually write short stories longer than 100 words.	Weak vocabulary and grammar issues L1 interference: Translation challenges from Malay to English	Lack of planning

CONCLUSION

The study aimed to examine the extent to which ESL diploma students incorporated the five elements of Freytag's Pyramid including exposition, rising action, climax, and resolution into their 80-to-100-word narratives. The study also looked at the perceived difficulties they encountered in the process of writing a short narrative with a word limit of 100.

The results show that students were mostly good at building exposition and rising action, however they had trouble with maintaining momentum through the climax, developing coherent falling actions, and generating complete resolutions. Besides, they faced challenges when writing short stories, including restrictive word limits, limited vocabulary and grammar proficiency, first language interference, and weak writing habits such as insufficient planning and sequencing. Although Freytag's framework serves as a useful educational tool, its efficacy is limited by the linguistic and structural challenges present in second language acquisition environments.

The present study presents several important pedagogical implications for educators and curriculum developers. It is recommended that educators design narrative writing tasks that promote the application of Freytag's Pyramid and advanced vocabulary. For example, educators could assign students to revise simple sentences by incorporating more complex grammar and a sophisticated word choice. Additionally, educators can employ digital tools such as educational websites, mobile applications, and social media platforms to make the learning process more interactive and engaging. Curriculum developers should critically review assessment requirements, particularly word limits, to ensure that students are provided with sufficient space to demonstrate their narrative competence.

This study has several limitations that should be considered. First, the study employed only 66 narrative writing which limits the generalisability of the findings. Since varsity ESL diploma students are a highly diverse group students who come from different educational backgrounds and linguistic needs, it is better to use larger, more representative samples to better capture this diversity and provide results that are more applicable to the broader ESL population. Furthermore, the interview sample of five students might not have captured the full range of students' experiences.

Future research could address the limitations by broadening samples or varying task condition based on length and prompts.



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