**INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF
EDUCATION, PSYCHOLOGY
AND COUNSELLING
(IJEPC)**www.ijepec.com**FRAMING *THE OTHER WORLD*: NARRATING SCARS OF
COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN MALAYSIAN EDUCATIONAL
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Article Info:**Article history:**

Received date: 15.09.2022

Revised date: 10.10.2022

Accepted date: 30.11.2022

Published date: 15.12.2022

To cite this document:

Nik Mohamed, N. Z., Ab Aziz, A. A., Kamlun, K., & Othman, I. W. (2022). Framing *The Other World*: Narrating Scars Of Covid-19 Pandemic In Malaysian Educational Context. *International Journal of Education, Psychology and Counseling*, 7 (48), 150-164.

DOI: 10.35631/IJEPC.748011

This work is licensed under [CC BY 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)**Abstract:**

The COVID-19 outbreak, which started in March 2020, has affected education in various ways. The closure of schools and universities worldwide has forced both teachers and learners to abandon physical teaching and learning. Instead, they have to adapt themselves to remote online classes. Literature education is no exception. The need to create lively, fun and interactive literature lessons suddenly became impossible. Instead, students were thrown into the world of isolation, fear and helplessness. For the first time in history, literature lessons worldwide have undergone an abrupt change under a new norm. This qualitative study attempts to explore students' perceptions of COVID-19 pandemic. Data was gathered from written narratives of the midterm assignment of 30 undergraduate TESL students in the Faculty of Psychology and Education, Universiti Malaysia Sabah during Semester 2 session 2021/22. Employing the premise mooted by Ahlberg (2021) who considers the pandemic as a crisis and the process of teaching and learning should take into consideration the factors of context, experience and emotion on learners' sides, the eBook entitled *The Other World* was used as a frame narrative for reading activity. Next, students were required to choose two short stories from the volumes and produce their own narrations in dealing with the pandemic. A qualitative inductive content analysis of students' narratives resulted in 5 codes indicating students' perception of COVID-19 pandemic. Students have mixed reactions in narrating their personal experiences during the pandemic. Most expressed states of despair and depression, and their readiness to adapt themselves to the new social norms. Others have expressed their concerns for

security and safety, while a small number related their experience to the new educational norm. The rest of them related their experiences in retrospect of close family ties and gratitude. The results of this study suggest the use of frame narrative technique among hesitant or problematic ESL students in dealing with a crisis.

Keywords:

COVID-19 Pandemic, Literature Education, Tertiary Education, TESL

Introduction

The COVID-19 outbreak, which took place in March 2020, has affected education in various ways (Suffian et al., 2020). The World health Organization declared it as a pandemic on 11th March 2020. To combat the outbreak, the Malaysian government implemented the first nationwide movement control Order (MCO) from 18th March- 12th may 2020. Restrictions such as the prohibition of mass gathering, school closures and prohibition of outside movement were implemented during the MCO. Since then, the world has turned into a new nightmare.

The learning paradigm of “Maslow before Bloom” emerged during the pandemic in order to allow online learning to embark upon students’ centredness (Abd. Karim Alias, 2021). The pandemic is considered a crisis, thus dialogical or performative learning should replace the conventional literature lesson (Ahlberg, 2021). In this teaching framework, she suggested emotion to be considered as well. Her teaching framework concurs with Showalter (2003), who also suggested this form of learning in literature during a crisis or darker time. Indeed, dialogical learning is also considered a higher order thinking skill (HOTS) activity (Faizah A. Majid, 2013; Abd. Karim Alias, 2021). In fact, the latter provides HOTS teaching ideas to be used by teachers across the curriculum. However, studies or ideas on techniques in teaching literature during the pandemic are lacking. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to fill in the gap by proposing a technique of teaching literature to ESL students.

Research Questions

This paper attempts to deal with this research question:

1. How does the framing narrative of *The Otherworld* evoke student’s narratives about COVID-19 pandemic?

Significance of The Research

This paper is significant as it provides another teaching technique in teaching literature to hesitant or problematic ESL students. The pandemic could be seen as a wake-up call to all literature educators that they have to transform their ways of teaching. The remote online teaching has made it impossible for them to engage students in various physical activities done previously. Instead, learning should be meaningful and student-centred in line with the coinage of Maslow before Bloom concept (Abd. Karim Alias, 2021). The dialogical or performative teaching in literature should be practised in Malaysian classrooms.

Limitation of The Study

This paper is not extensive in terms of data collection as it only confines to document analysis via written narratives. It could be seen as a fragment from a “work in progress” project. Future

study should include other forms of data collection such as questionnaire, interview and focus group discussion, as suggested by Creswell (2009).

Literature Review

Studies have shown that the pandemic has caused mental disturbances among students. Sundarasan et al.(2020) for instance, has conducted a cross-sectional online survey among university students in Malaysia, in order to examine the impact of Covid-19 pandemic upon their anxiety levels. They have identified a few stressors leading to students' anxiety levels, such as financial constraints, remote online teaching and learning, and uncertainty of their academic performance. Wong et al. (2021) has also conducted a study through an anonymous online survey among the Malaysian population aged 18 and above. They tried to measure the level of mental health issues among the respondents at the early stage of the pandemic, from May until September 2020. Among the types of mental health issues detected are depression, anxiety and stress. They found out that students with financial problems were vulnerable to mental health symptoms. These studies have shown that mental health issues were prevalent among the population due to Covid-19 pandemic, which has taken place for more than 18 months. The abrupt changes of learning, working, lifestyles and habits under the term "new normal" that all of us have gone through, have caused various mental health issues. Among the health issues brought forth in the mentioned studies are depression, stress, and anxiety.

In the aspect of education, the closure of schools and universities worldwide has forced both teachers and learners to abandon physical teaching and learning. Instead, they have to adapt themselves to remote online classes. Literature education is no exception. The need to create lively, fun and interactive lessons (Duff & Maley, 2011; Collie & Slater, 1999; Cook, 2000) was suddenly thrown into the dungeon of isolation, fear and helplessness (Leow et al., 2020; Suffian et al, 2020). For the first time in history, literature lessons in Malaysia have undergone an abrupt transformation under a new norm of remote online learning. Educators have to revamped their lesson plans in order to suit online learning. Students with internet access problems could not follow their online classes and complete the given tasks as scheduled. This new educational norm has caused various mental disturbances among teachers and students.

Having said that, the learning of literature in Malaysia has to be steered to a new direction. As shown in the conceptual framework below:

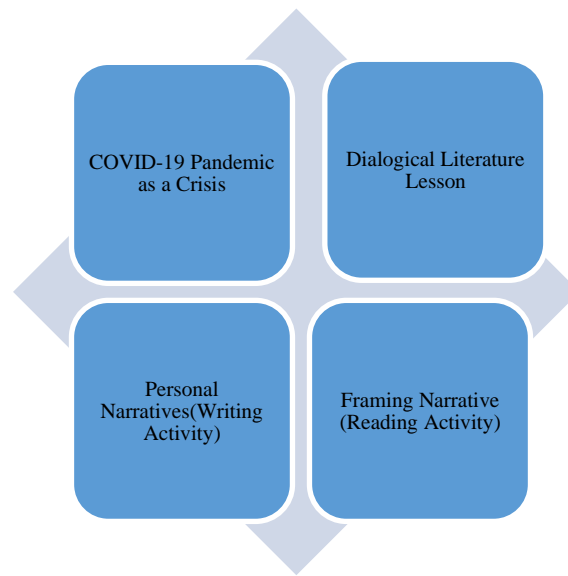


Figure 1: A Conceptual Framework of Literature Lesson for Post COVID-19 Pandemic

The conceptual framework for this paper involves four factors. Based on the figure above, in clockwise movement, the context was during COVID-19 pandemic period, starting from March 2020 until December 2021. The approach used is dialogical or performative teaching, requiring interaction between a teacher and students, emotion and context (Ahlberg, 2021). The technique of frame narrative was chosen as scaffolding in reading strategy in order to provide a relevant connection for students to relate and express their experiences during the pandemic. A frame narrative is a story within a story. This technique of narrative has been around since the ancient centuries (Ahlberg, 2021). It allows a reader to understand the main idea that lies behind a collection of stories in a volume. One example is a collection of tales in “The Thousand and One Nights”, whereby the frame narrative concerns Shahrazad. She has to narrate her tales continuously in order to save her life from the ruler, Shahrayar. Henceforth, for this study, the ebook entitled *The Other World* was used as a frame narrative for COVID-19 pandemic. Once completed their close reading of the assigned ebook, students were asked to produce their personal narrations about COVID-19 experiences. These narrations were used as data of the study.

Methodology

Research Design

The design selected for this study was qualitative, whereby narrative research that studies the life and experiences of individuals over a certain period of time (Creswell, 2007) has been selected. As an interpretive mode of research is required, a case study strategy has been employed (Yin, 2003). This research strategy has its strength in observing activities, processes or events in real context and in-depth situations, thus able to unfold interaction between texts, human and context.

Data Collection

Documentation

Documents refer to any kind of information that exists in some type of written or printed form and are available for analysis (Creswell, 2007). Thus, class assignments could be used as data sources.

Participants

The participants in this study were thirty first year TESL students from the Faculty of Psychology and Education, Universiti Malaysia Sabah. The inclusion criteria for participants in the study was all of them studied a literature course entitled Literature and Language Learning online in semester 2 session 2021/2022 (March-June 2022). Thus, a purposive sampling has been adopted to enable the researcher to yield the best understanding of the inquiry.

Procedures

Data was gathered from midterm assignments produced by thirty first year TESL students from the Faculty of Psychology and Education, Universiti Malaysia Sabah. They were required to complete the following task:

Review two volumes of ebook entitled *The Other World: Stories of Covid-19 Pandemic for Children*

- Identify the language level and sentence patterns found in both volumes;
- Explore the main theme/themes of both volumes. Relate it/them to social reality;
- Compare and contrast the plots of your selected stories;
- Discuss 3-5 literary elements used by the writers.
- Provide your comments.
- To get the ebooks, go to <http://www.aififah.biz>



Figure 2: Ebook Covers

As stated by the head of the project:

“This is our first CSR project to provide free reading materials for primary school students, particularly in Sabah. Both volumes are suitable for CEFR level A1-A2.

... The title of these two volumes encompasses the writers' reflection and understanding upon their students' predicament and experiences in dealing with the pandemic.”

The Other World, Vol. 1, pp. 13-14,
<https://www.aififah.biz/>

The first volume contains five short stories, while the second volume contains eight stories which are related to the writers' personal experiences, insights and observations during COVID-19 pandemic. These are the titles of short stories in both volumes:

Volume 1:

“Ivan's Ball” by Gilinah Gitom, “Tommy My Cat” by Nik Zaitun Nik Mohamed, “My Feelings” by Noraini Said, “Fantastic Four” by Lorina Peter, and “My Schools” by Candice Kang Kiah Tian.

Volume 2:

“The Little Samurai”, “My Books and Toys” and “Toby and Blackie” by Harry Gopog, “My Enjoyable Hobby” by Cassey Thesseira Sahari, “Waiting for Ummie by Nik Zaitun Nik Mohamed, “Pandemic and Hope” and “My Lockdown Routine” by Kolnah Selim, and “The Rainbow” by Hamisah M. Yusop.

The use of the ebook as a frame narrative in dealing with COVID-19 pandemic, would enable the participants to relate themselves to the pandemic from their own space and understanding. This dialogical learning allowed them to be performative as they were able to produce the assignment from their own space. The mixture of content and emotion seems crucial in learning during a crisis (Ahlberg, 2021). The written narratives were used as data.

Data Analysis

Written narratives were analysed through interpretive approach. In this approach, the narratives were studied, reconstructed and interpreted based on content and themes (Hsieh & Shanon, 2005). The performance or dialogical narrative analysis (Riessman, 2008) which focuses on the context and views of narratives as being multivoiced was taken into consideration as well. In doing so, the researcher would have a better understanding of how the narrators reconstructed their views about the pandemic. In addition, the coding of themes was done in two generations to ensure a deeper understanding. Finally, discussion shall follow according to the research questions posed earlier.

Results and Discussion

This section begins with the participants' written task based on their close reading of the ebook entitled *The Other World*. The selection of short stories made by the participants and the general themes produced by them, are shown below:

Table 1: Selection of Short Stories with COVID-19 Framing Narrative

Participant	Title	Synopsis	First- Generation Theme
2,3,4,6,7,10,11,12,16,19,21,24,26,27,28,30	"Ivan's Ball"	This story depicts a boy who expresses his resentment and frustration because his parents do not allow him to play outside.	Frustration, Loneliness, Unhappy life
1,2,11,13,17,29	"Waiting for Ummie"	This story depicts a boy who is waiting for his mother to come home, after she was taken to a hospital due to COVID-19.	Feeling hopeless and lonely, disappointment, motherly love, and impact of Covid-19
2,6,8,19,22,24,27	"My Books and Toys"	This story depicts a boy who spends his time reading books and playing with his toys since he is not allowed to play outside.	New life during the pandemic, life has to go on
8,9,12,13,15,20,24	"My Schools"	This story depicts an unhappy girl who has to go through her online and home schooling due to the pandemic.	New way of schooling, problematic online schooling, home schooling is not fun at all.
4,18,21,23,26,28	"The Little Samurai"	This story depicts a boy who wants to be a hero to kill the monstrous virus that causes the pandemic.	Covid-19 virus is a deadly enemy, Covid-19 is very dangerous to human beings

21,25,16, 18	"My Feelings"	This story depicts a girl who expresses her frustration during the lockdown period.	Children are not happy during the lockdown period; children feel lonely and sad if they cannot play with their friends.
5,14,22	"Tommy My Cat"	This story depicts a boy who spends his day playing with his cat during the lockdown period.	Life during the pandemic, a pet is a good friend during the lockdown period.
7,15,20	"My Enjoyable Hobby"	This story depicts a boy who enjoys gardening as his new hobby during the pandemic.	New life during the pandemic, gardening is a fruitful activity during the pandemic
5,14	"Toby and Blackie"	This story depicts a boy who loves to play with his two pets during the lockdown period.	Life during the pandemic, a pet is a good friend during the lockdown period.
4,29	"My Fantastic Four"	This story depicts a girl who misses her four fantastic friends and their time together.	Frustration, Loneliness, Unhappy life

This table has shown that the most popular short stories selected by the participants as a frame narrative for COVID-19 pandemic are "Ivan's Ball", "My Books and Toys", "Waiting for Ummie", and "My School". In "Ivan's Ball", the pandemic is reflected through the feeling of frustration and boredom expressed by a young child when he is not allowed to play outside the house due to safety measures. A total number of 16 participants have selected this play to relate to frustration, loneliness and unhappy life during the pandemic. Beckstein et al. (2020) and Wong et al. (2021) have highlighted these mental disturbances in their studies among students. In "My Books and Toys," seven participants have connected the story to the themes of life continuation and adapting to the new norm regardless of the disruption of normal life during the pandemic. Indeed, everybody has to go through the process of adapting to the new norms during the pandemic (Wong et al., 2021; Suffian, S. A. et al. (2020). Next, in "Waiting for

Ummie,” six participants have related this story to the themes of hopelessness, disappointment, motherly love and impact of the pandemic to family structure. Again, themes of mental disturbances echo the studies done by Beckstein et al. (2020). In “My Schools,” the themes of unhappiness and problems in online or home schooling are mentioned by seven participants. Indeed, this new norm of learning is evident in studies done by Suffian, S. A. et al. (2020) and Sundarasan et. al. (2020). Both of these studies have shown the implementation of online learning during the pandemic and its impact on learners. Suffice to mention these three examples have illustrated the connection between the frame narrative of *The Other World* and the participants’ narratives of the pandemic.

Next, let us look at some of the participants’ narratives in relating the frame narrative of the ebook to their personal experiences during the pandemic. For the purpose of clarity, the general coding from the first generation has been turned into the second generation. As shown below:

Table 2: Narratives on COVID-19 Pandemic

Item	Narrative	f	%
1	Depression	9	30
2	Safety and security	6	20
3	Adaptation (new social norm)	8	27
4	Adaptation (new educational norm)	3	10
5	Retrospect of life	4	13
TOTAL		30	100

The first-generation coding of themes has been simplified to five main themes: depression, safety and security, adaptation to new social norms, adaptation to new educational norms and retrospect of life. The comparison of themes based on the written narratives given by thirty participants are illustrated in the pie chart and bar chart below:

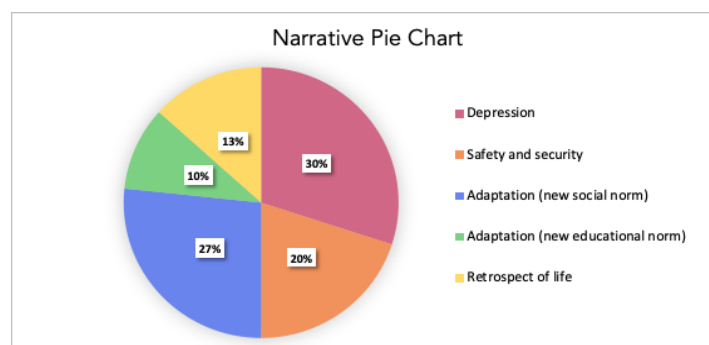


Figure 3: Narration Weightage

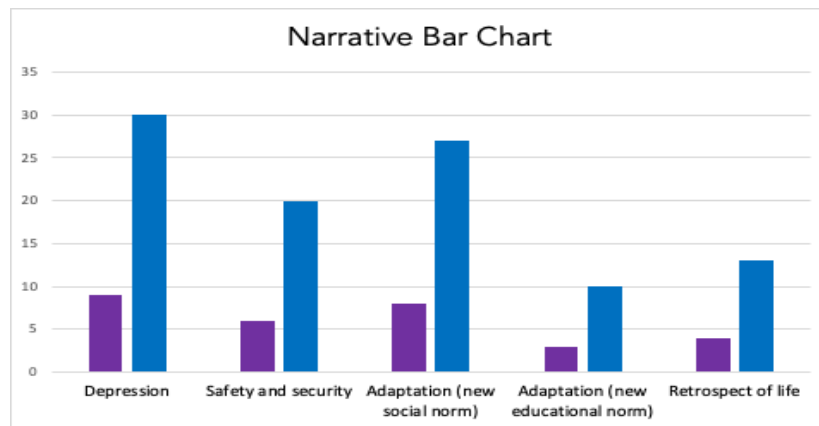


Figure 4: Narratives in Percentage

Based on three graphical information above, the highest percentage is the theme of depression which constitutes 30% of the total narrations. Next is the theme of adaptation to new social norms with the percentage of 27%, followed by safety and security with a percentage of 20%. The themes of adaptation to new educational norms and retrospect of life received less attention from the whole participants. Only 13% for the former theme and 10% for the latter. The difference of percentage has enabled the researcher to get a deeper understanding of the participants' views of COVID-19 pandemic, in terms of what matters most to them.

The next section discusses the narrative themes mentioned graphically above.

Narratives of Depression during the Pandemic

The phase of lockdown during COVID-19 pandemic has brought numerous mental disturbances to people worldwide. Everybody lived in fear knowing the fact that the virus could attack anyone. The spreading of COVID-19 virus to different parts of the world has brought fear, emotional instability and depression. Cases of morbidity and mortality have caused a sense of loss and endless pain to family members of the victims. Indeed, depression seems evident in various studies during the pandemic (Beckstein et al., 2020; Wong et al, 2021). Note the following narratives of depression from Participant 1:

"The story that attracts me most is 'Waiting for Ummie". I understand the depression moment faced by Irfan. It really brings tears to my eyes. The situation is relatable to me because my family members were also Covid-19 survivors. Thus, I could feel the writer's emotion and the situation at that time. As a Covid-19 survivor myself, it was the worst sickness that I have experienced, and I never want anyone to go through it."

This participant narrates her personal experience based on the frame narrative of "Waiting for Ummie". This story depicts a boy who is waiting for his mother to come home, after she was taken to a hospital due to COVID-19. Being innocent about the separation, he keeps on waiting for his mother to come home and bake muffin for him.

Note the breakdown of her narration into plot development in illuminating the connection between the selected story and her own experience:

Exposition : *I understand the depression moment faced by Irfan.*

Complication: *It brings tears to my eyes.*

Climax: *The situation is relatable to me because my family members were also Covid-19 survivors.*

Resolution: *I never want anyone to go through it.*

This narration has a mixture of content and emotion. The content deals with the selected short story as she poured out her experience as a Covid-19 survivor and reminds other readers not to go through her painful experience. This goes in line with Ahlberg's (2021) suggestion that literature teachers should include emotion in dialogical or performative teaching during the pandemic. Earlier, Showalter (2003) mentioned that in teaching literature in a moment of crisis or darker time, an educator should not detach the classroom from reality. By communicating their unpleasant experiences, students could leave the past and venture into a better future.

Narratives of Security and Safety during the Pandemic

The narrative of security and safety is also evident in the data. As shown below: *"Even though the stories are fictional, we can still relate them to our lives during the pandemic that began in 2020 and continues until now. Because this sickness is contagious, we must keep our family members protected."* (Participant 29)

The narration is then put into a plot development:

Exposition: *..we can still relate them to our lives.*

Complication: *..began in 2020 and continues until now.*

Climax: *..this sickness is contagious.*

Resolution: *..we must keep our family members protected.*

This participant also used "Waiting for Ummie" as her frame narrative for COVID-19 pandemic. Unlike the earlier example, the participant does not focus on the boy's misery in waiting for his mother to come home after being taken to the hospital for treatment. Instead, he focused on the issues of health, security and safety. Indeed, the story depicts that Irfan's mother caught the virus from her friend after she visited a wet market. Due to her negligence in hygiene, she has transferred the virus to Irfan's mother. Indeed, the issue of health haphazard seems clear in this story.

To conclude, the narration of security and safety is present. This issue was considered vital during the whole period of the pandemic (Suffian et al, 2020). The connection made by the participant seems self-explanatory.

Narratives of Adapting to New Social Norms during the Pandemic

The spreading of COVID-19 virus to different parts of the world has brought about fear, emotional instability and depression. Cases of morbidity and mortality have brought a sense of loss and endless pain to family members of the victims (Beckstein et al, 2020; Wong et al, 2021). Safety measures were taken seriously. Note the narration below by Participant 8:

"An impossibility has become a reality as a result of the pandemic that has struck. The evidence is when we were unable to do simple tasks such as shaking hands, conversing at a distance less than one meter, or breathing fresh air without the use of a face mask."

The narration is then put into a plot development:

Exposition : ..the pandemic struck..
Complication: ..unable to do simple tasks....
Climax: An impossibility has become a reality ..
Resolution: ...the use of a face mask..

In this example, the participant has chosen “ My Books and Toys” as her frame narrative for COVID-19 pandemic. This story depicts a boy who reads his books and plays with his toys daily during the pandemic since he is not allowed to play outside. When his father told him about the deadly Coronavirus, the boy accepted the new norm and stayed home.

The issue of adapting to the new social norms during the pandemic was given greater attention worldwide. Schools and educational institutions were closed. Shopping places, offices and entertainment activities suddenly came to a halt. Everybody stayed at home. A new norm of life has taken place. This reality could be seen in the chosen short story.

Narratives of Adapting to New Educational Norms during the Pandemic

The theme of adapting to new educational norms is also evident in the data. Note an example below given by Participant 24:

“The stories are related to me and most of us. I also experienced online classes for the first time and it was painful at first to accept it. Yet we slowly adapted to it considering that is the only way for us to follow our classes.”

The narration is then put into a plot development:

Exposition : The stories are related to me and most of us.
Complication: ..it was painful at first to accept it.
Climax: Yet we slowly adapted to it..
Resolution: ...the only way for us to follow our classes

In this example, the participant has chosen “My Schools” as her frame narrative for COVID-19 pandemic. This story depicts a lonely girl who has to go through her online schooling due to the pandemic. She is unhappy because her parents are too busy working from home and they do not have time to help her with her homework. She is looking forward to normal schooling. Even though this story depicts a child’s experience, older students have experienced a similar educational norm as well. Students were forced to go through an online learning to replace the physical one. This new norm has caused problems to students in various aspects, ranging from feeling helpless, depressed, inadequate and hopeless due to internet problems (Leow et al., 2020; Sufian et al., 2020; Wong et al., 2020). Thus, the narration made by the participant seems realistic.

Narratives of Viewing the Pandemic in Retrospect

The theme of viewing the pandemic in retrospect is also evident in the data. Note an example below given by Participant 10:

“The stories provide me comfort and hope. The more I understand the messages from these stories, the more they warm my heart because everyone was in the same shoes when the pandemic hit. The pandemic stole years of everyone’s lives, but in hindsight, this pandemic has also taught us to be sympathetic and empathetic to one another.”

The narration is then put into a plot development:

Exposition : *The stories provide me comfort and hope.*

Complication: *The pandemic stole years of everyone's lives..*

Climax: *..they warm my heart..*

Resolution: *..this pandemic has also taught us to be sympathetic and empathetic to one another.*

In this example, the participant has chosen "Ivan's Ball" as her frame narrative of COVID-19 pandemic. This story depicts a boy who expresses his resentment and frustration because his parents do not allow him to play outside. However, he does not understand that his parents are trying to ensure his safety from the deadly virus. The feelings of resentment and frustration during the pandemic have inflicted upon adults as well (Wong et al., 2020; Sundarasan et. al., 2020). However, should they reflect on their resentment closely, they would be grateful for the safety measures taken during the pandemic.

According to Ahlberg (2021) and Showalter (2003), there is a need to discuss real issues in the classroom. This approach will speed up the process of recovery (Showalter, 2003, p. 136). In the context of looking back to the pandemic experience, Ahlberg's (2021, p. 68) uses the term *scar*. Such a dialogical or performative teaching would enable students to be engaged in learning. The connection between narratives, context and emotion resonates with the "Maslow before Bloom" concept that seems to underline the process of teaching and learning during the pandemic (Abdul Karim Alias, 2021). This dialogical aspect of learning is considered as higher order thinking skill (HOTS) activity (Faizah A. Majid, 2013; Abd. Karim Alias, 2021). Thus, if executed properly, this teaching technique can be therapeutic to students in dealing with their scars and move on into a better future.

Conclusion

This case study has revealed the participants' narrations of COVID-19 pandemic from their own perspectives. Indeed, the pandemic has left scars to their thoughts and emotion. The findings echoed previous studies done by Wong et al. (2020), Sundarasan et. al. (2020) and Sufian et al. (2020). These studies revealed the impact of the pandemic upon students such as depression, frustration, sense of loss and inadequacy. The connection between narratives, context and emotion seems clear in this study. Using Ahlberg's (2021) premise of looking at the pandemic as a crisis, thus requiring a dialogical or performative approach to literature teaching, this study has embarked on using the technique of frame narrative as a reading approach prior to a writing activity. By using the ebook entitled *The Other World* as a frame narrative for COVID-19 pandemic, the participants were able to connect with the crisis and communicated about it from their own perspectives. This technique can be used as a reading activity in an ESL literature classroom, particularly in dealing with hesitant or problematic students who have experienced scars during a crisis.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to acknowledge Global Academic Excellence (M) Sdn Bhd, who granted the Publication Grant Scheme for this project.

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