

IMPROVING THE STUDENTS' WRITING PROFICIENCIES THROUGH JOURNAL WRITING

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ABSTRACT

Journal writing is a kind of diary where students can write many things. It is useful in that it helps improving students' writing skill in general, and a good way to practice writing. This study aims at revealing the impact of journal writing on the students' writing proficiencies. The research design used was quasi experiment of one group pretest-post-test design. The subject of the research was the students of English Education Department joining Writing 4 class in academic year 2008/2009. The result of the study showed that there was a significant difference of the students' writing proficiencies before the students get journal writing and after the students get journal writing.

ABSTRAKSI

Journal writing adalah sejenis buku harian di mana mahasiswa dapat memuliskan berbagai macam hal. Journal writing berguna untuk membantu memperbaiki kemampuan menulis mahasiswa secara umum dan wadah yang baik untuk praktek menulis. Penelitian ini ditujukan untuk mengetahui impak journal writing terhadap kemampuan menulis mahasiswa. Desain riset yang digunakan adalah quasi experiment of one group pretest-post-test design. Subjek penelitian merupakan mahasiswa Program Studi pendidikan Bahasa Inggris yang mengikuti mata kuliah Writing 4 pada tahun akademik 2008/2009. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa ada perbedaan yang signifikan dalam kemampuan menulis mahasiswa sebelum mereka melakukan aktivitas journal writing dan setelah mereka melakukan aktivitas journal writing.

Keyword : *Journal Writing, Writing Proficiency*

A. Background of the Study

The most common problem encountered in second language writing classes is the students' low writing proficiencies. This condition can actually be seen in the English Education Department of Muria Kudus University. As a private university, Muria Kudus

The Lecturer of English Education Department FKIP UMK accept students from various different backgrounds. Therefore, in the English Education Department, there are three level kinds of students that might be found. Some are the students

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with very good English mastery or in their advanced level; most are still in their intermediate level; and few belong to the below intermediate level.

The condition requires an English instructor, specifically a writing instructor in this case, to carefully choose the writing instruction applied in the classroom. The aim is that the writing instruction can embrace all three level kinds of students. The hope is that none of the students will feel left out. Instead, they all can follow the writing instruction and thus have their writing skill be better.

This idea seems to be far reached, if not impossible. A writing instruction or English instruction in general, is mostly pointed to a particular level which then does not fit the kind of writing class with various students' backgrounds. However, there is one of solutions that might cope with such a problem, that is journal writing.

Journal writing is a kind of diary in which students can write about various topics (Harmer, 2004:125). The topics range from the events they meet in everyday life until the recent political situation of their country. As Harmer (2004: 125) notes, the students can write about anything they want. And so, this enables students to write based on their own abilities. The journal writing then can be applicable to all levels of students' English mastery.

The activity that the students do with journal writing is a kind of writing-for-writing activities. It is an activity that the main goal is to develop the students' skills as writers (Harmer, 2007a: 112). This can be achieved because the focus is not merely the language itself, but the whole text too. Furthermore, Harmer (2007b: 400) states that "journal writing provides good writing practice and helps to improve the students' general writing skills".

This study aims at revealing the impact of journal writing on the students' writing proficiencies. Thus, there is one statement of problem, i. e., is there any significant difference of the students' writing proficiencies before the students get journal writing and after the students get journal writing.

B. Literature Review

The habit of writing journal began long time ago. However, Palmer et al. (1994: 225) remark that it is in the late 1980s and early 1990s that the journal is used widely in the classroom.

Harmer (2004:125) defines journal writing as a kind of diary in which students can write about various topics. The topics here are not limited. They can be the events happened to the writer or even the short story written by the writer.

Regardless the topics, according to Palmer et al. (1994: 225), journal writing is a kind of heuristic activity, "a hands-on, self-educating activity that improves the skillfulness of learners as they participate". Palmer et al. (1994: 225) assume that writing will improve as the students write more frequently.

This is in line with Hyland (2002: 78) who states that writing is fundamentally learned rather than taught. Therefore, the use of journal writing in writing classroom is a kind of writing practice for students that finally will make their writing skill better.

Not only does journal writing develop fluency, Kern (2000: 193) writes that it also encourages writing habit. Moreover, journal writing can improve the motivation and attitude of the students toward writing.

Another benefit of journal writing, as noted by Harmer (2007: 400) is that it enables students to write more freely. And if the students know that not everyone will read their journal, they will write more openly. Daly and Hailey (Palmer et al., 1994: 227) found that "when students feel their writing is being evaluated, as in a pass/fail composition, as opposed to writing in a journal that no one will read, they become increasingly anxious". As a result, Daly and Miller (Palmer et al., 1994: 227) reported that when the students' anxiety increases, their performance will decrease. Thus, it can be inferred that journal writing might increase the students' writing performance.

In addition, Harmer (2007: 400) notes that journal can be a good tool to encourage teacher-student dialogue. Similarly, Olshtain (2001: 213) states that journals "enable students and teachers to interact on a one-to-one basis at any level and in any learning context". This, in turn, allows the teacher to respond in writing to the students' questions and concerns, to give suggestion and advice, and to empathize with them (Harmer, 2004: 128).

Kern (2000: 193) divides journal writing into two types. They are personal journal and intellectual journal. Personal journal is a kind of journal where the writer writes "diary-like accounts of day to day experiences and thoughts" (Kern, 2000: 193). The main goal of personal journal is language production. On the other hand, the main goal of intellectual journal is "as a tool for reflection and therefore incorporates critical framing" (Kern, 2000: 193). Therefore, in intellectual journal, the writer will reflect on readings, lectures, ideas, etc.

Palmer et al. (1994) add other kinds of journals: literature study journal, poetry journal, academic journal, and process journal. Literature study journal or usually called logs is the journal in which the writer writes after s/he reads about something that s/he would like to share. Therefore, this kind of journal is a representative of the interaction between the reader and the text.

Poetry journal, as the name shows, is a journal where the writer writes poems. Meanwhile, academic journal is similar to literature study journal in that the writer writes after s/he reads. The difference is that in literature study journal, the sources that the writer reads are not limited, whereas in academic journal, the sources are from the classroom material. That's why Fulwiler (in Palmer et al., 2000: 239) mentions that academic journal "stimulates classroom discussion, starts small group activity, clarifies hazy issues, reinforces learning, and stimulates imaginations".

The last kind of journal is process journal. Here, the writer writes her/his progress on particular pieces of writing. Wroblewski (in Palmer et al., 2000: 239) explains that by the process journal, the writers will "gain insight into their own process of writing" since they describe what has happened and what their plans in their process journal.

C. Research Method

This study belongs to the quantitative study. The research design used is quasi experiment of one group pretest-post-test design. The following is the design taken from Cohen et al. (2007: 282):

Experimental O_1 X O_2

Using this design, O_1 is the students' writing proficiencies (pretest) before the students are given the task of writing journal (X). After an eight-week journal writing project, the students' writing proficiencies again (O_2) are measured (post-test). Therefore, the independent variable in this study is the task of writing journal, whereas the dependent variable is the students' writing proficiencies.

The subjects of this study are the students of the English Education Department of Muria Kudus University attending Writing 4 in the academic year 2008/2009. The number of the population is 260. The sample, taken through cluster sampling, is class C consisting of 50 students.

Meanwhile, the instrument in this study is essay test. The essay is measured using analytic scoring adopted partly from the Jacobs ESL Composition Profile (Jacobs et al., 1981). Some changes on the Jacobs Profile are made to meet the curriculum of writing 4 in the English Education Department of Muria Kudus University. And so, the following is the rubric for writing used to measure the students' essays:

Table 1. The Analytic Scoring Rubric for Writing

Writing aspect	Percentage
Essay Organization	30%
Paragraph Organization	30%
Sentence Structure	20%
Grammar and Mechanics	20%

The procedures for conducting the experiment of this study follow several steps:

1. Administering the pretest where the subjects write essays on certain topic.
2. Exposing the subjects to the experimental treatment, that is the task of writing journal. Here, the subjects get three articles every week. After reading these articles, they must write a comment or opinion about those articles in at least one-half page for every article. This journal writing project is done for eight week.
3. Administering the post-test, i. e. the subjects write essays on certain topic.
4. Comparing the pretest and post-test by using test of statistical significant.

As this research is a quantitative one, a statistical analysis is used in analyzing the data. The statistics meant include mean, deviation standard, and t test.

The hypothesis of the research is that there is no significant difference of the students' writing proficiencies before the students get journal writing and after the students get journal writing.

D. Results of the Study

It was found out that before the students did journal writing activity, their writing proficiencies runs from 50 to 91, the average score (Mean) is 63.06 and the Standard of Deviation (SD) is 12.66. Meanwhile, after the journal writing activity, the students' writing proficiencies runs from 30 to 92, whereas the average score (Mean) is 65.32 and the Standard of Deviation (SD) is 12.42.

Table 2. The Statistic Result of the Study

No	Statistics	Before Journal Writing Activity	After Journal Writing Activity
1	Highest score	91	92
2	Lowest score	50	30

3	Mean	63.06	65.32
4	Standard of Deviation	12.66	12.42

To find out if there is a significant difference of the students' writing proficiencies before and after the treatment (journal writing given), the data were analyzed by using t-test. The calculation results in t-observation (t_o) 3.18 and in the level significance .05 and degree of freedom (d.f.) 50, the t-table (t_t) is 2.021. Because the t-observation is higher than the t-table ($t_o = 3.18 > t_t = 2.021$), the hypothesis that states that that there is no significant difference of the students' writing proficiencies before the students get journal writing and after the students get journal writing is rejected. This means that that there is significant difference of the students' writing proficiencies before the students get journal writing and after the students get journal writing

The result of the research indicates that there is relationship between the journal writing activities and the writing proficiencies of the students of the English Education Department of Muria Kudus University. It means that the students' writing proficiencies were improved after conducting the journal writing activities. In other words, the journal writing influences the proficiencies of writing.

This result is not surprising as Palmer et al. (1994: 225), assume that writing will improve as the students write more frequently. This is due to the journal writing as a kind of heuristic activity, that is "a hands-on, self-educating activity that improves the skillfulness of learners as they participate" (Palmer et al, 1994: 225). Hyland (2002: 78) also states that the use of journal writing in writing classroom is a kind of writing practice for students that finally will make their writing skill better.

The result of the research that proves and thus supports the theories can be traced back to the process of doing the journal writing activities by the students of English Education Department of Muria Kudus University. Those students received three articles every week in which they must read and wrote comments on the articles at least one page for every article. This activity was done for eight weeks, which means that the students wrote comments on twenty four articles. Those were considered a lot of writing for the students. Hence, by having the journal writing, the students wrote more frequently and regularly.

The journal writing also creates a good habit for the students. As they are accustomed to write regularly, they make themselves have a writing habit. This is surely a good habit and can result in many advantages, for example the improvement of the students' writing as the

research has indicated. This is in line with Kern (2000: 193) who mentions that journal writing encourages writing habit.

In addition, Kern (2000: 193) notes that journal writing develops fluency too. Meanwhile, Harmer (2007b: 400) explains that "journal writing ... helps to improve the students' general writing skills". Even though this research does not focus on particular aspect of writing, such as fluency, the assessment of the students' writing in this research have already covered the fluency. In other words, Kern's and Harmer's statement can be said to be true.

D. Conclusion and Suggestion

It can be concluded that the activities of journal writing done by the students of English Education Department of Muria Kudus University influenced significantly on the students' writing proficiencies. By having the journal writing, the writing proficiencies of the students were improved. This means that the journal writing activities make the students' writing proficiencies better.

As the result of the research seems to support the theories that the journal writing activities can improve the writing proficiencies, the research on journal writing is still worth doing. The future researchers might do similar research with different research design, for example true experimental design with consists of two groups (experimental group and control group). The attitudes of the students doing the journal writing are also other issues that is interesting to be researched.

For writing instructors, this research suggests that the writing instructors can help to improve the students' writing proficiencies through journal writing. That's why, the writing instructors can give their students the journal writing activities during the writing course in a semester. Besides, journal writing can foster the writing habit for the students. This, finally, will result in many advantages for the students, such as the better of their writing proficiencies as the result of this research has shown.

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