IMPROVING THE SKILL IN WRITING DESCRIPTIVE PARAGRAPH OF ENGLISH EDUCATION DEPARTMENT STUDENTS

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Abstrak: Tujuan dari penelitian ini adalah menemukan apakah teknik clustering dapat meningkatkan kemampuan dalam menulis paragraf deskriptif. Desain penelitian adalah penelitian tindakan kelas kolaboratif. Ada empat langkah penelitian yaitu perencanaan, pelaksanaan, pengamatan dan refleksi. Subyek dari penelitian adalah mahasiswa semester dua program studi Bahasa Inggris STKIP PGRI Tulungagung tahun ajaran 2010/2011. Penelitian dilakukan dalam dua siklus. Hasil dari penelitian menunjukkan bahwa subyek menjadi lebih aktif dan termotivasi dalam pembelajaran menulis. Hal ini dapat dilihat dari meningkatnya hasil akhir menulis mahasiswa yang dikategorikan dalam level "baik" dari lima kriteria (format, penggunaan tanda baca, isi dari paragraph, cara mengorganisasikan kalimat, dan penggunaan grammar serta struktur kalimat) yang menjadi dasar dari keberhasilan menulis suatu paragraph deskriptif. Dari hasil penelitian, dapat disimpulkan bahwa teknik clustering meningkatkan kemampuan menulis mahasiswa.

Kata kunci: clustering, paragraph deskriptif, kemampuan menulis

Abstract: The objective of the study is to find out how clustering can improve the students' skill in writing descriptive paragraph. The research design was collaborative classroom action research. The procedure of the research consisted of four major steps namely: planning, implementing, observing and reflecting. The subjects of this study were the second semester students of English Education Department of STKIP PGRI Tulungagung in the 2010/2011 academic year . This study was conducted in two cycles. It means that clustering was effective to improve the students' skill in writing. It can be seen from the increase of their final works. The result was categorized in "good" level at five criteria (format, punctuation and mechanics, content, organization, and grammar and sentence structure) prescribed for succesful writing a descriptive paragraph. Based on the findings, it can be concluded that clustering improves the students' writing skill.

Key words: clustering, descriptive paragraph, writing skill

INTRODUCTION

English has become one of the most important languages in the world. It has trickled even into lesser known countries as something that is needed to communicate with others. English is used in politics, business dealings, and everyday life. Many people are finding it hard to get by without knowing English. Realizing the importance of English, many people have taken it on as a second language.

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Littlejohn (1991:77-78) states there are a number of good reasons for bringing writing into more central position in classroom work. Firstly, in contrast to oral classroom work, writing can offer students the opportunity to work at their own pace and, above all, to think while they are producing language. Many students feel very anxious when they are called upon to speak in front of others and this anxiety effectively blocks their ability to think clearly. Handled correctly, writing can less stressful. Secondly, writing can give students a change to retrace their steps, to check and correct what they have written before they are required to show it to another person. This can allow more room for students to develop confidence in their language abilities, to develop their own understanding of how the language works and of what is 'linguistically possible'. Thirdly, unlike oral classroom work, writing can offer a permanent record; students can look back on what they have done, improve, check things, and refresh their memory of what they learn in class. For these reasons, writing can offer students considerable opportunities to increase their vocabulary, to refine their knowledge of the grammar, and to develop their understanding of how things are best expressed and how well their message is understood. In short, writing can offer more opportunities to learn.

The basic competence of Writing 1 at STKIP Tulungagung states that students are able to write good English paragraphs including descriptive. It means that the students are expected to have ability in creating unity and coherence in their paragraph.

Based on the preliminary study conducted in Writing I class of STKIP PGRI Tulungagung, the researcher found that the students' skill in writing was poor. The class mean score of the students' writing was 46.49 on a 0-100 scale. The class is categorized success if the mean score is 70. It means that the class did not reach the criteria of success.

The problem is the students' inability to create a descriptive paragraph. Firstly, when they were given a blank sheet of paper and assigned to write a paragraph, they did not know how to start. Secondly, they did not have enough ideas to express in their paragraph. And thirdly, even when they had ideas, they could not develop them. They did not know how to connect the ideas well. It means that they cannot generate the idea existing. They have poor ability in organizing the paragraph as well as constructing sentences. The problems deal with Nurussaniyah (2010) in her research. She states that descriptive text is difficult enough to learn by the students. The problem is students still feel strange and face some difficulties with English lesson especially in developing paragraph, such as to build and develop their ideas, choose the right dictions, and use the grammar. According to Brown (2007:394-395), there are several differences between L1 and L2 writing. L2 writers did less planning, and that they were less fluent (used fewer words), less accurate (made more errors), and less effective in stating goals and organizing material. Differences in using appropriate grammatical and rhetorical conventions and lexical variety were also found, among other features.

On the basis of the unsatisfactory condition above, the researcher intended to find a solution to solve the problems because the teacher has important role in guiding the students. She proposed technique on writing to help students' problem. The technique was clustering. It is applied as prewriting. Blanchard and Root (2004:13) define that clustering is a visual way of generating ideas. It is a technique to show the connections among ideas using circles and lines. Clustering is expected to be one way to increase the students' writing. Clustering causes writers to pay attention to any thoughts that pop into their heads about the original word. Thoughts come out as images and as ideas. The ideas often end up in an outline of what will be written. Clustering allows writers to focus. It causes writers to come full circle with a concept, as they are readily able to write down everything associated with the word, including opposite viewpoints. It helps writers break down con-

cepts which make those concepts easier to organize. Once information is organized it becomes easier to understand.

In accordance with the ideas above, the researcher assumed that clustering was a good technique to improve the students' writing based on the problems existing. She considered that it was suitable to be implemented for the writing class of the English Education Department of STKIP PGRI Tulungagung.

In line with the background of the study, the researcher formulates the research problem: "How can the skill in writing descriptive paragraph of the second semester students of English Education Department of STKIP PGRI Tulungagung be improved using clustering technique?" This study aims at improving the skill in writing descriptive paragraph of the second semester students of English Education Department of STKIP PGRI Tulungagung using clustering. The study is expected to assist the students to find a meaningful technique to solve their problems in writing descriptive paragraph, as information for the teachers to develop the technique in increasing the students' writing skill and facilitate the future researchers to be used as a reference in conducting further studies about clustering.

In order to be able to write a good composition, students need to know some basic characteristics of written language. Brown (2007:397-398) states that there are seven characteristics of written language from the perspective of a reader: permanence, production time, distance, ortography, complexity, vocabulary, and formality. Kral (1995:123) also clasifies some components what writers have to deal with as they produce a piece of writing. They are content (relevance, clarity, originality, logic), syntax (sentence structure, sentence boundaries, stylist choices), grammar (rules for verbs, agreement, articles, pronouns), mechanics (handwriting, spelling, punctuation), organization (paragraphs, topic and support, cohesion and unity), word choice (vocabulary, idiom, tone), the writer's process (getting ideas, getting started, writing draft, revising), purpose (the reason for writing) and audiences (the readers).

Harmer (2007:325-330) states there are number of different approaches to the practice of writing skill both in and outside of the classroom. They are process and product, genre, creative writing, writing as a cooperative activity and building the writing habit. In the teaching of writing we can either focus on the product of that writing or on the writing process itself. When concentrating on the product, we are only interested in the end product. Many educators, however, advocate a process approach to writing. This pays attention to the various stages that any piece of writing goes through. By spending time with learners on pre-writing phase, editing, re-drafting and finally producing a finished version of their work, a process approach aims to get to the heart of the various skills that most writers employ – and which are, therefore, worth replicating when writing in a foreign language. Indeed, it might be possible to argue that editing and re-drafting are even more important when we are writing in a foreign language than we are writing in our first language. Genre represents the norms of different kinds of writing. When teachers concentrate on genre, students study texts in the genre in which they are going to be writing before they embark on their own work. Thus, if we want them to write business letters of various kinds, we let them look at typical models of such letters before starting to compose their own. If we want them to write newspaper articles, we have them study real examples to discover facts about construction and spesific language use which are common to that genre. The term creative writing suggests imaginative tasks, such as writing poetry, stories and plays. Creative writing is 'a journey of self-discovery, and self discovery promotes effective learning'. When teachers set up imaginative writing tasks so that their students are thoroughly engaged, those students frequently strive harder than usual to produce a greater variety of correct and appropriate language than they might for more routine assignments. Cooperative writ-

ing well whether the focus is on the writing process or, alternatively, on genre study. In the first case, reviewing and valuation are greatly enhanced by having more than one person working on a text, and the generation of ideas is frequently more lively with two or more people involved than it is when writers work on their own. In genre-based writing, it is probably the case that two head analysis genre-specific texts as well as, if not better, than one head would do, and often create genre-specific texts more succesfully as a result, we need to help such students build the writing habit so that they recognize writing is being a normal part of classroom practice and they come to writing tasks with as much enthusiasm as they do other activities. One way of doing this, of course, is to give them interesting and enjoyable tasks to do. We must make sure, however, that we give them enough information to do what we have asked. Building the writing habit can be done with some activities, such as dictating half a sentence which the students have to complete, responding to music or film, describing pictures and using games.

Writing done in college is called academic writing (Hogue, 2008:2). The purpose of academic writing is to explain something or to give information about something. Its audience is the teacher and the classmates.

Hogue and Oshima (2007:3) state that academic writing is different from creative writing, which is the kind of writing we do when we write stories. It is also different from personal writing, which is the kind of writing we do when we write letters or e-mails to our friends and family. Creative writing and personal writing are informal, so we may use slang, abbreviation, and incomplete sentences. However, academic writing is formal, so we should not use slang or contractions. Also, we should take care to write complex sentences and to organize them in a certain way.

According to Blanchard and Root (2004:11), there are three steps of the writing process: prewriting, writing, and revising and editing. Prewriting is an activity to generate ideas, plan and organize them. Some tech-

niques that the writers do to generate ideas are brainstorming, clustering, free writing and keeping a journal. In writing step, the writer uses the ideas to write a first draft. Fitzpatrick (2005:11) states that a draft is not a perfect polished paper. It is the writer's first attempt to say what he/she can say or want to say. The goal in writing a first draft is to get as many of ideas as possible on paper. In revising and editing step, the writer improves what he/she has written. When the writer revises, he/she can add new ideas or more spesific support, eliminate irrelevant sentences, rearrange ideas to improve the organization, edit to correct the grammar, punctuation, and spelling. Editing is the final part of the revision step.

A paragraph is a group of sentences about a single topic (Hogue, 2008:4). A paragraph can be as long or as short as necessary to develop the topic. According to Wishon and Burks (1980:369), the purpose of paragraphing is to show a change of thought or change of topic. For that reason, each paragraph must be limited to a single topic. A paragraph has three main parts. They are topic sentence, supporting sentences and concluding sentence. The most important sentence in a paragraph is the topic sentence. It is called the topic sentence because it tells the reader what the topic of the paragraph is. In other words, it tells the reader what he or she is going to read about. The topic sentence is usually the first sentence in a paragraph. Bram (1995:13) states that the the topic sentence guides us to select information – to include relevant information, but to exclude what is irrelevant. A topic sentence has two parts: a topic and a controlling idea. The topic part names the topic. The controlling idea part tells what the paragraph will say about the topic. The middle sentences in a paragraph are called the supporting sentences. Supporting sentences explain or prove the idea in the topic sentence. Paragraphs that stand alone (that is, paragraphs that are not part of a longer composition) often have a concluding sentence at the end. A concluding sentence closes the paragraph so that the reader is not left expecting more. There are two important

things about concluding sentence: reminding the reader of the main point by restating the topic sentence in different words and summarizing the main points.

Descriptive writing appeals to the sense, so it tells how something looks, feels, smells, tastes, and/or sounds (Hogue and Oshima, 2007: 61). A good description is a word picture, the reader can imagine the object, place, or person in his or her mind.

Hogue and Oshima (2007:74) state that clustering is one of prewriting techniques we can use to get ideas in creating a descriptive paragraph. When we cluster, we start by writing our topic in a circle in the middle of our paper. As we think of related ideas, we write these ideas in smaller circles around the first circle. The related idea in each small circle may produce even more ideas and therefore more circles around it. Clustering exercises are good not only for generating new ideas but also for exploring ideas that are not fully developed.

RESEARCH METHOD

The research design is Classroom Action Research. Creswell (2008:597) defines that action research designs are systematic procedures done by the teachers (or other individuals in an educational setting) to gather information about, and subsequently improve, the ways particular educational setting operates, their teaching, and their student learning. Educators aim to improve the practice of education by studying issues or problem they face.

Applying the principle of an action research design, this study involves the spirals of planning, action, observing, and reflecting. The researcher takes the model of an action research proposed by Stephen Kemmis in which each cycle consists of four steps. They are planning of action, implementing of action, observing and reflection. Those four main steps are preceded by reconnaissance (preliminary study).

The spirals of the action starts after the problem is found and defined in preliminary study. The second step is to make a plan of the action based on the findings in the preliminary study. The next step is implementing the action based on the planning and preparation which has been made before. The observation is done during the action. To apply this step, the researcher needs collaborator to help her. The researcher acts as the practitioner who implements the planning and her collaborator observes her performance during the implementation of the technique.

Preliminary study was conducted to find and define the real problems in writing mastery. It was done before the researcher started the action research to see what problems really existing during writing teaching and learning. The researcher assigned the students to write a descriptive paragraph. The result showed that the students' writing were poor. Class K was chosen as the subject of the research because of the lowest score among the other classes. The class consisted of 35 students. The mean score of the student' writing was 46.49. It was categorized in "poor" level. The students did not have many things to say and lacked of ideas. They could not organize their sentences well. Besides, they did not have good ability in constructing sentences and they did not check their work before submitting it. From the result the researcher believed that the main problem faced by the writing class was inability to use the appropriate technique to create a paragraph.

The research stage consists of four steps: planning an action, implementing the plan, observing the action, analyzing and reflecting. At the planning step, the researcher proposes the strategy, designs lesson plan and sets the criteria of success. The criteria of success is established to know whether the students' improvement is reached. The study is categorized successful if the subjects' final writings are in a "good" level with score 70-85. It is established based on the result of the writing assignment. Based on the scoring rubrics, the improvement should cover the the five general parts of writing paragraph . They are format, punctuation and mechanics, content, or-

ganization, and grammar and sentence structure. Implementing the plan is designed in four meetings. In the first meeting, the researcher explains about the descriptive paragraph. She asks the students to do some exercise related with the paragraph. In the second meeting, the researcher continues the material with grammar, connecting words and sentence combining. In the third meeting, the students are assigned to make a descriptive paragraph which is preceded by prewriting. The researcher explains about clustering to generate the ideas and how to make it. Having finished with clustering, the students are asked to make rought draft based on their ideas. In the fourth meeting, the researcher assigns the students to revise and edit their draft into good writing as final work. At observing step, the collaborator observes and collects the data about the result of the action. The instruments used to collect the data in this study are obversation checklist, writing assignment and questionnaire. The observation checklist is used to record the researcher's performance in each activity The other instrument used in the study is writing assignment. The products of writing are evaluated by analytic scoring guide. Questionnaire is also used to evaluate toward the technique applied in writing class; the researcher distributes questionnaires to the students in the end of the activity. She takes Likert scale for the method of questionnaire. A Likert scale assesses attittudes toward a topic by presenting a set of statements about the topic and asking respondents to indicate for each whether they strongly agree, agree, are undecided, disagree, or strongly disagree (Ary et al, 2002:224). In analyzing and reflecting step, the researcher compares the result of the note during the teaching and learning process and checks the students' response toward the implementation of the action in each meeting. The data obtained through observation are collected and analyzed. In this step, the decision of the further steps whether this action research is to be continued or terminated is undertaken. The data classification is done based on the action, and then the data are classified into the data of observation. The classified data are presented into an organized description. Meanwhile, concluding the analysis of the data is done step by step from the data obtained in each meeting separately. The results are used to make final conclusion which is then used as the basis for making an interpretation of applying the technique in the writing class. The data are compared with the previous research finding, some theories about the technique and the criteria of success to identify whether or not the students are active and motivated in the writing class and whether or not their writing scores are in the "good" level. The result of these comparisons is used as the basis of deciding to continue or stop the cycle of the study.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the result of the students' work, it is found out that the their writing skill was gradually improving. In cycle 1, the mean score of the class was 60.54. Although it had not reached the criteria of success, the students' mean score is better than the result of preliminary study. The failure was possibly caused by a number of factors. First, the students could not choose the best topic to describe. Some of them described something generally, not a special thing. It breaks the rule of descriptive paragraph because descriptive paragraph just tells one thing in particularly. Second, several students described two places or persons in her paragraph. They did not focus on one place or person. Third, the students had problem with their grammar and structure construnction. They did not know how to revise and edit their paragraph. Fourth, they did not use transition signal to connect one sentence with another. It influences the organization of their paragraph. Fifth, the researcher could not perfectly monitor all students one by one.

Noticing all problems identified, the researcher decided that the implementation of the action in cycle 1 still needed to be improved and revised. Therefore, it had to be continued to cycle 2.

Based on the good point obtained from the cycle 1 , the researcher still implemented the same technique in cycle 2 with different steps. First, the researcher focused on one topic to describe. She explained more about how to deescribe a place by using spatial order signals to organize the paragraph. Second, the researcher emphasized on students' grammatical errors in editing their paragraph by assigning the students' to look closer on grammatical errors when they were revising their draft. She delivered editing worksheet to the students to guide them in revising and editing their paragraph. Third, the reseacher intensively guided the students in every activity by monitoring and walking around more frequently during the class discussion in order to give helps to the students. As the result, the students' work of cycle 2 was better than the result of cycle 1. The mean score of the students' work was 71.68. It was categorized in "good" level. It means that the students' score had reached the criteria of success. The improvement was possibly caused by a number of factors. First, the students were more familiar with the activities. In cycle 1, it was the first time for them to implement the technique. They did not fully understand about the activities they were doing. But, in cycle 2 they knew more what they had to do in constructing a paragraph by using the technique. Second, the focusing of one topic was very helpful. They did not have to think what topic they should develop in their paragraph. By describing a place, they could organize their paragraph better by using spatial order expressions. They checked the topic sentence, the suppoting sentences, and the concluding sentence before submitting their work. They were able to revise and edit their writing based on the editing worksheet provided by the researcher. Third, their grammar and sentence structure got better. Fourth, the researcher monitored and walked around more frequently although she could not perfectly do it with 35 students in the class, but she always offered help for all students if they were still confused about the activities.

Through the questionnaire result, it is also found that the students were more motivated to learn writing using clustering as prewriting. They agreed if clustering could help them generate ideas easily and explore new ideas in their writing.

The findings of the study are in line with some previous studies. Agus (2007) carried out action research at SMK Negeri 1 Bojonegoro entitled "Increasing Ability to Write Draft of Composition through Clustering Technique of Eleventh Grade Students at SMK Negeri 1 Bojonegoro in Academic Year 2006/2007". The result showed that the students' writing ability of SMK Negeri 1 Bojonegoro could be increased through clustering. It is similar with the findings of the study.

Muzaki (2009) conducted a research at SMP "Islamic Boarding School" Ar-Rohmah Malang entitled "The Effect of Clustering Technique on Writing Achievement of the Second Year Students of SMP "Islamic Boarding School" Ar-Rohmah Malang". The finding showed that students who were taught using clustering technique had better writing skill than those who were taught with conventional technique (technique where in the process of teaching and learning the students were not trained to make cluster in their prewriting activities). It deals with the findings of the study.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

Clustering could improve the students' writing skill and also increase the students' involvement during the teaching and learning process. In preliminary, the mean score of the students' work was 46.49. In cycle 1, the mean score was 60.54 while in cycle 2 the mean score was 71.68. The improvement of the subjects' writing skill on descriptive paragraph was achieved through several activities. It was preceded by clustering as pre writing stage. This activity was intended to generate and explore the students' idea before writing. They could generate ideas as many as possible without worrying about making mistakes. This activity allowed the students to focus and

caused them to come full circle with a concept, as they were readily able to write down everything associated with the word. It not only helped the brain warm up, but it also served to help the students organize ideas in writing. The contolling topic was also very helpful because they did not have to seek the topic and could focus on the topic suggestions.

In drafting stage, the students wrote a rough draft based on the ideas generated from clustering. To make a good draft, the students did several things: (1) stating a topic sentence, supporting sentences, and a concluding sentence; (2) developing a single topic; (3) organizing sentences logically and adding transition. With ideas explored and developed through clustering, the students could write a draft. They had many things to write in their paragraph. They could arrange the sentences well and used spatial order signals to help reader understand how the ideas in their paragraph were connected.

In the revising and editing stage, the researcher delivered the editing sheet to the students as guidance to revise and edit their paragraph. To revise, they had to check a topic sentence, supporting sentences, and a concluding sentence. They could add new ideas or more specific support, eliminate irrelevant sentences, or rearrange ideas to improve the organization. They also checked the use of spatial order expression in describing a place. In the editing stage, the students checked the format, the content and organization, punctuation, capitalization, spelling, grammar and sentence structure.

By applying the clustering technique, which helped students write a rough draft well as the guide of the next steps, the students could improve their skill in writing a descriptive paragraph.

In accordance with the findings, it is suggested that the students are recommended to solve problems using clustering to explore the ideas in writing class. The teachers can also apply the same technique to develop their students' writing skill to achieve target score. It is recomended that the future researchers fol-

low up the study by conducting action research on improving the students' writing skill in other types of paragraph, such as narrative, argumentative, and expository through the same technique since there are still many problems in teaching writing.

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