

Improving the Students' EFL Writing Ability through "Put Yourself in the Picture" Strategy

By

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Abstract: *This Action research was intended to improve the students' EFL writing ability through "Put Yourself in the Picture" strategy. This research involved 33 first year management major of students A of Muhammadiyah University of Ponorogo in the academic year 2015/2016. This research was conducted in two cycles by following the procedures of the action research, namely, planning, implementing, observing, and reflecting. Each cycle of the research encompassed three meetings. The data of the research were gathered through observation checklists, field notes, questionnaire, and portfolio. The findings of research showed that "Put Yourself in the Picture" strategy has proven effectively to improve the student's writing ability. The improvement could be seen from the increase of the students' average writing score. Besides, "Put Yourself in the Picture" strategy can increase the students' participation during the process of writing.*

Key words: "Put Yourself in the Picture" strategy, writing ability

A. Introduction

Among the four language skills, writing belongs to a productive skill. Dixon and Denise (1983) cited in Eksan (2004) stated that as a productive skill, writing plays an important role in communicating ideas, thoughts, and messages to a reader for a purpose. Writing as one of the four language skills plays an important role in the context of English teaching as a foreign language in Indonesia. Hyland viewed that writing is a way of sharing personal meanings and it emphasizes the power of the personality to construct someone's view based on a certain topic.¹ Writing comprises communicating a particular message in the written form.² However, writing is regarded as the most difficult skill for foreign

¹ Hyland, K. *Second Language Writing*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003, 9.

² Spratt, P. A. & William, M. *The Teaching Knowledge Test Course*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005, 26.

language learners to master because it involves several components which need to be considered while the learners are writing, such as content, organization, vocabulary, language use and punctuation.³ In addition, writing is linked with several components of language such as choice of word, grammar, syntax, mechanism, and generating of ideas.⁴ Furthermore, writers should pay attention both on the goal of writing itself and the readers.

Compared to speaking, writing is even more difficult because the typical characteristics of written language are more complex than those of spoken language.⁵ The complexities lie on the use of standard language and the degree of formality. Moreover, in writing, we have to pay attention to higher level skills of planning and organizing as well as lower level skills of spelling, punctuation and word choice.⁶ In writing, the writer should also think about the essential elements such as the audience, the tone, and the goal of writing itself.⁷

As a means of communication, writing should be included as a primary part of the teaching and learning activities in the classroom. Incorporating writing as part of the learning process, however, is not just because it is a means of communication but more importantly it is also a learning activity which is beneficial for the learners.⁸ The most important reason for teaching writing is that it is a language skill, just as important as listening, speaking and reading. In the teaching of writing, the teachers are tempted to see writing as one of the first things to be reduced and treat a writing task as homework. Generally, the most common problem that confronts writing teachers does not lie so much on

³ Brown, H. D. *Language Assessment: Principles and Language Classroom Practices*. White Plains, NY: Pearson Education, 2004, 244–245.

⁴ Gebhard, J. *Teaching English as a Foreign or Second Language: A Teacher Self-development and Methodology Guide*. Michigan: The University of Michigan Press, 2000, 211.

⁵ Nunan, D. *Language Teaching Methodology: A Textbook for Teachers*. New York: Prentice Hall, 1991, 85.

⁶ Richards, J. C. & Renandya, W. A. (Eds.). *Methodology in Language Teaching: An Anthology of Current Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002, 303.

⁷ Oshima, A. & Hogue, A. *Writing Academic English*. Tokyo: Addison Wesley Publishing Company, 1981, 2.

⁸ Widiati, U. & Cahyono, B.Y. The Teaching of EFL Writing in the Indonesian Context: The State of The Art. *Jurnal Ilmu Pendidikan*. 13(3), 139-150, 2006, 140 – 142.

what to ask students to write about, but on how to motivate the students to write interesting and effective materials.

In fact, the college students' ability in writing at university is generally very poor. It is revealed by some research concerning the students' writing ability. *Sundari* conducted a study intended to improve the students' writing skill through pictures. Her preliminary study revealed that the students faced difficulty in writing English especially in expressing their idea.⁹ *Khoirunnisa* in her preliminary research stated that the students faced some difficulties in writing in terms of the content and the organization. It happened due to the fact that the teacher did not give any intervention during the process of writing. From the findings described above, it can be concluded that there are some problems found in the teaching of writing.

As a lecturer, the researcher has observed the teaching and learning process in his classroom at *Muhammadiyah University of Ponorogo* since the students were in the first semester of the management grade and found some problems faced by the students. The most crucial problem is that the students could not write well when they were assigned to write a composition. They did not have any ideas about what to write first. As a result, the students were unmotivated to complete the task. They did not have sufficient vocabulary in developing their writing and they found difficulties to determine the content in their text. Then, their writing achievement was still under the Minimum Passing Standard. They just got 46.22 on the average, whereas, the Minimum Passing Standard is 65. It proved that the students' ability was not quite good and needed to be improved. The inadequate result could happen due to several factors, for example, the strategies that the teacher used to teach writing were not interesting. The teacher only assigned them to write paragraphs without giving any models of good paragraph writing. The lecturer also monotonously let them write the paragraph alone without giving any feasible example of paragraph writing strategies. Hence, the strategies applied by the English teacher

⁹ Sundari, S. Improving Second Year Students' Writing Skill Through Pictures at SLTPN 3 Jember. *Lingua Franca*, 3(6), 23-32, 2002, 24

seemed to be less effective since the teacher did not give much contribution in developing the students' skill in paragraph writing. Moreover, a writing task should actively engage students in the process of learning to write.¹⁰ There should be an effort to make writing class more interesting in order that the students can produce attractive texts. The other causes that make the students produce unattractive texts are the fact that the media for presenting material is not various. As a result, the students' ability in constructing and composing their paragraphs is still low.

A further analysis on the preliminary study that was held on the 15th September 2015 by the researcher found that most students did not have any ideas on what to write first when the researcher assigned them to write a descriptive paragraph. They had limited linguistic knowledge especially on the choice of words, the accurate grammar and the content. It seemed that they did not have sufficient vocabulary in developing their writing. Also, they found difficulties to determine the content in their text.

Taking the problems into account, the researcher tries to find out the appropriate strategy to help the students improve their writing ability and motivate them to participate actively in the writing class. Brown suggested that the lecturer has a role as a facilitator who offers guidance to the students in creating an interesting and motivating lesson. Thus, the lecturer must be creative in selecting and preparing instructional media. Instructional media can enhance learning and support the lecturer's instruction in the teaching and learning process in the classroom. However, the lecturer should follow some considerations in applying instructional media in order not to face many difficulties in the lecturer's activities during teaching and learning process in the classroom. In addition, the instructional media should be easy to prepare and easy to organize. They should be interesting and give enlargement to an adequate amount of language.

¹⁰ Tribble, C. *Writing*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996, 68.

The English lecturer can employ pictures as their instructional aids in the teaching of writing. Pictures can translate an abstract idea into a more realistic form and they are inexpensive.¹¹ The pictures are appropriate for young learners because they are easy to prepare, easy to organize and interesting to the students. In the teaching and learning process, the use of pictures is aimed to make the process of teaching and learning more effective. Wright explained that pictures could play a role in motivating the students. Pictures can also provide a stimulating focus for students' attention, a variety of tasks, and a shared experience.¹² From those statements, it is obvious that pictures could be used as media to teach writing especially in helping the students to express the ideas in the written form.

Therefore, short essays or composition writing is one of writing activities that can be used by the teachers to teach writing. In writing short essays activity, the teachers teach students how to write short stories related to their past events and description of people, places or object. Likewise, the teaching of writing in Junior High School must be viewed as an ongoing process. It means that teaching writing involves pre-writing, drafting, revising, editing.¹³

The descriptive text is selected in this study because descriptive text is considered difficult. The students had studied about descriptive text at high school, but the result on the preliminary study that was held on the 15th September 2015 showed that the ability of the students to write descriptive texts needs to be improved.

Furthermore, "Put Yourself in the Picture" strategy which is adapted from Lindstromberg is developed as a prewriting activity. Prewriting, which is typically characterized as a *planning* activity is very fundamental in determining the students' success in drafting the entire text.¹⁴ This stage consists of three stages

¹¹ Suyanto, K.K.E & Sukarnyana, I W. *Penelitian Tindakan Kelas (Classroom Action Research)*. Malang: Universitas Negeri Malang, 1999, 21.

¹² Raimes, A. *Techniques in Teaching Writing*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983, 27.

¹³ Hill, C, Ruptic, C & Norwick, L. *Classroom Based Assessment*. Norwood: Christopher-Gordon Publisher, 1998, 68.

¹⁴ Linstromberg, S. (Ed.). *Language Activities for Teenagers*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004, 132.

called generating ideas, focusing, and structuring (White & Arndt, 1991 cited by Widiati & Cahyono, 2006:141) which enable the students to identify any materials related to the topic they are going to write.

“Put Yourself in the Picture” is one of an appropriate strategy to solve the students' problem in writing descriptive texts. This strategy can guide the students to generate ideas into a meaningful composition. By placing themselves in the pictures, the students will get involved indirectly. They will express their imagination freely as if they were in the pictures. Then, the students will easily recognize the vocabulary items around their positions. Therefore, this condition will stimulate the students to construct various sentences related to the pictures and the topic discussed.

Considering the benefits of “Put Yourself in the Picture” strategy, the researcher is interested in applying this strategy to improve the students' writing ability at *Muhammadiyah* University of *Ponorogo* by conducting Action Research.

The design of this research was Action Research since this research is carried out in order to understand, to evaluate and then to modify, in order to improve educational program.¹⁵ This research was focused on the teaching and learning activities in the classroom. This action was designed to improve the students' writing ability through “Put Yourself in the Picture” strategy. The successful action research involves collaboration. It means that we need to collaborate with other teachers in conducting action research. Therefore, in this research the researcher was the practitioner and the other teacher acted as an observer.

The action research follows the cyclical process proposed by Kemmis and McTaggart cited in Koshy which comprises four steps: (1) planning the action, (2) implementing the action, (3) observing the action, and (4) reflecting.

In the planning stage, the researcher and her observer made a careful action preparation prior to the implementation of the action based on the result of the preliminary study. The preparation consisted of teaching strategy, the

¹⁵ Koshy, V. *Action Research for Improving Practice: A Practical Guide*. London: Paul Chapman Publishing, 2005, 8.

lesson plan and (c) the criteria of success. The success criteria encompassed First, the students are able to write a final draft. It is indicated from the data found in the students' sheet. The improvement intended is that the students' average score on writing skill will increase at least the same or more than the minimum passing standard. The minimum passing standard of the first year college students of *Muhammadiyah University of Ponorogo* is 65. The scoring is based on the analytical scoring rubric proposed by Cohen. According to Cohen, the analytical score can provide feedback to students on specific aspects of their writing and it gives teachers diagnostic information for planning instruction.¹⁶ Second, the students are able to make good improvement in the teaching and learning process. The improvement can be seen when the students participate actively and enjoy the process of writing. It means that the students enjoy doing the writing tasks given by the teacher and feel that the "Put Yourself in the Picture" strategy can help them construct better compositions. To know the students' participation in the writing activities, they are observed during the implementation of the strategy. It is indicated by the data found in process of writing. If more than 70% students participate actively in the stage of prewriting, drafting, revising and editing, it is considered successful. The observer utilized the observation checklists and recorded the activities in field notes format. Then, to know whether the students are getting fun during the process of writing, the questionnaires were used.

In the implementation stage, the researcher took the role as a practitioner who taught writing descriptive texts based on the lesson plans by implementing the strategy, while the lecturer acted as an observer. The implementation of the action was done in two cycles. Each cycle encompassed three meetings.

Observing was done during the implementation of the action. Observing is the process of recording and gathering data about any aspects or events which is occurring during implementation. The data obtained from the results of the writing final product, which were in the form of scores, were classified as

¹⁶ Cohen, A. D. *Assessing Language Ability in the classroom*. 2nd ed. Boston: Heinle & Heinle Publishers, 1994, 328-329.

quantitative data. Furthermore, the data gained from the students' involvement in writing activities were classified as qualitative data. The data were taken from some sources such as (1) the result of observation checklists and field notes about the students' participation during the implementation of the strategy, (2) the result of questionnaire to find the students' response toward the implementation of the strategy, and (3) the students' final compositions.

In reflecting stage, all relevant data from implementation were analyzed and reviewed to examine whether the action was successful or not by matching the result of the observing stage with the criteria of success.

The research finding showed the strategy can be used effectively to improve the ability of writing descriptive texts. It includes several steps as follows (1) leading students to the topic by giving some questions and showing a picture(s) related to the topic discussed, (2) introducing the strategy and distributing the pictures and the worksheet, (3) assigning the students to work in group, (4) informing students about the things they should do in their groups, (5) asking the students to place themselves in the picture and answering in a list the questions: "What can you see in the pictures?" and "What do the people do in the pictures?" (6) asking the students to make sentences based on their lists, (7) giving a model of descriptive texts and explaining generic structure and generic features (Simple Present Tense, Preposition) of descriptive texts, (8) assigning the students to write the first draft, (9) exchanging the works in group to get feedback by peer-revising (10) giving time to the students to do conference with the teacher, and (11) editing the first draft to make the final drafts.

"Put Yourself in the Picture" strategy has proven effective to improve the students' ability in writing descriptive texts at *Muhammadiyah* University of *Ponorogo*. At the first cycle, the average score was 54.53. Then, at the second cycle, the average score for final draft was 68. The increase of the students' average score from the first cycle to the second cycle was 13.47 and the students' average score is greater than 65 in their final draft. Furthermore, It showed that out of 33 students, 80% (30 students) were involved actively in

prewriting stage. Then, 29 students (73%) were active in the drafting phase. In the revising stage, 31 students (86%) were aggressively taken part. And, most of the students (93%) were successfully involved in the editing period. Afterward, the students showed positive responses toward the implementation of “Put Yourself in the Picture” strategy. They enjoyed the writing process and recommended “Put Yourself in the Picture” strategy for the future writing activities.

B. DISCUSSION

Based on the finding of this research, it is proved that “Put Yourself in the Picture” strategy is one of appropriate to teach descriptive texts and gives beneficial contribution in improving students' ability in writing. This strategy was implemented on the view of writing as process that consists of four stages, namely prewriting, drafting, revising and editing. Therefore, the lecturer has to follow a particular procedure in implementing this strategy.

In the prewriting stage the teacher has to introduce to the students' apperception about the concepts by conducting brainstorming to lead the students to focus on the activities which will be done. The teacher should create the appropriate activities to guide the students to generate ideas, exploring their own or other ideas, from pictures. It is in line with Seow's opinion prewriting activities can lead students in generating indefinite ideas and collecting information for writing. In this case, the students are involved by placing themselves in the picture and they are lead to make a list by answering leading questions “What can you see in the picture?” and “What do the people do in the picture?”. From their lists, the students are guided to make sentences based on their position in the picture. Subsequently, in giving instruction and explanation, the teacher uses English and Indonesian. It is done in order to avoid misinterpretation and to facilitate the students in accomplishing the task more easily. Gebhard stated that the students had the tendency to start working a task sooner when it was clear to them.

In the drafting stage, the students write the first drafts based on their sentences that they were made in the previous stage. It is supported by Gebhard who stated that drafting is a process of jotting down the ideas that they have got in the pre writing. In this stage, the lecturer has to facilitate the students to exploring their ideas freely without thinking greatly on grammar. This finding is in accordance with the idea stated by Smalley that in the drafting stage, the writer may not exceedingly concern with the grammatical form but the writer should focus more on finding the ideas to be put in the paper.¹⁷ Brown stated that by reading and studying a variety of relevant models of texts, students can gain important insights about how they should write about the subject matter that they may become the topic of their writing. Before having students write their first drafts, the lecturer gives a model paragraph then followed by the explanation. In this case, the lecturer gives model on descriptive text followed by the enlightenment about generic structure and generic features (simple present tense, preposition, to be) of descriptive texts

In the revising stage, the students are brought to the real activity sitting in groups to do peer revising activity by exchanging their first drafts each other. In revising stage, the students were expected to help each other and to be responsible to their team and their own. The students are assigned to check their friends' drafts in terms of the spelling, choice of word and grammar. In terms of research finding, at first, the students got difficulties in correcting their friends' work because there were no revising guidelines. Later on, in the second cycle, they could progressively revised their drafts or their friends' drafts in terms of the spelling, choice of words and grammar based on the teacher's guidance and revising guidelines. The finding of this research showed that having mini-conference could give positive impact on the students' drafts. At first, the students were reluctant to come to the teacher's desk, but later on they enjoyed the activities very much. As the result, in the second cycle, most of the students

¹⁷ Smalley, R.L., Ruetten, M.K. & Kozyrev, J.R. 2001. *Refining Composition Skills: Rhetoric and Grammar*. (5th Ed). Boston: Heinle & Heinle, 2001, 8.

could work cooperatively by giving comments or suggestions although they were still in simple ones.

The last stage is editing. In this stage, the students has to work individually to re-write the first drafts in order to construct the final drafts based on the feedback from their friends and the teacher.

The finding of this study showed that the students' ability in writing had improved significantly. It could be examined on the students' final drafts which were evaluated by using Analytical Scoring Rubric adapted from Cohen. At preliminary study, the students' average score was 46.22. At the first cycle, the result of students' final writing achievement was 54.53 at average of 65 minimum mastery standard determined as criteria of success. Then, at the second cycle, the students' average score was greater 65 in their final draft. The result of students' average score was 68.

Dealing with the students' participation in the process of writing. the results of the researcher's and observer's observation obtained during the implementation of "Put Yourself in the Picture" strategy in two cycles showed that the students' participation on teaching and learning process improved from the first cycle to the following cycle.

At first cycle, most of students did not participate actively in the teaching and learning process. Some students looked reluctant to come together with the others to share and discuss ideas. They did not give good responses. They were not actively involved in a group work and could not give meaningful contribution in the revising and the editing their first drafts to be a better drafts based on feedback from the friends and the teacher. In addition, their perception toward this strategy is in good level even though still there is negative viewpoint.

Finally, in the second cycle, most of the students had been enthusiastic, motivated, and actively involved in joining all the activities incorporated in the teaching and learning process using "Put Yourself in the Picture" strategy. Besides, they showed positive responses toward the implementation of "Put

Yourself in the Picture” and recommended “Put Yourself in the Picture” strategy for the upcoming writing activities.

C. CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

Referring to the findings obtained during the implementation of “Put Yourself in the Picture” strategy in the two cycles, it can be inferred that the strategy that can be used effectively to improve ability to write descriptive texts, includes several steps as follows (1) leading students to the topic by giving some questions and showing a picture(s) related to the topic discussed, (2) introducing the strategy and distributing the pictures and the worksheet, (3) assigning the students to work in group, (4) informing students about the things they should do in their groups, (5) asking the students to place themselves in the picture and answering in a list the questions: “What can you see in the pictures?” and “What do the people do in the pictures?” (6) asking the students to make sentences based on their lists, (7) giving a model of descriptive texts and explaining generic structure and generic features (Simple Present Tense, Preposition) of descriptive texts, (8) assigning the students to write the first draft, (9) exchanging the works in group to get feedback by peer-revising (10) giving time to the students to do conference with the lecturer, and (11) editing the first draft to make the final drafts.

Most of the students were active in joining the process of writing. Besides, they showed positive responses toward the implementation of “Put Yourself in the Picture” and recommended the use of “Put Yourself in the Picture” strategy for the future writing activities.

“Put Yourself in the Picture” strategy has some strengths in teaching and learning descriptive texts. First, the students’ drawings are easy to get and this gives a clear description about what the students’ knew about a certain topic. Second, it gives the students an easy way to generate the idea by placing themselves in the picture. Third, it encourages the students to write without being afraid of making mistakes. Forth, it requires students to work cooperatively

in order to solve their problems by giving feedbacks, suggestions, and comments. Finally, it encourages positive teacher feedback rather than judgmental comments.

With the research findings and discussion, the researcher offers some suggestions. The suggestions are addressed to the lecturers and future researchers. the lecturers who have the same problems with the lecturer in *Muhammadiyah University of Ponorogo*, it is suggested that they employ “Put Yourself in the Picture” strategy to make the students feel enthusiastic and active in the process of writing. Yet, the lecturers should focus on the followings aspects: (1) the lesson plans should be arranged in such away, (2) the pictures should be selected based on the students' level and need, (3) the instruction in the worksheet should be presented clearly, and (4) The students should be grouped heterogeneously. Furthermore, the lecturer should consider writing as a process to reach the expected outcome.

Future researchers, particularly those who are interested in applying “Put Yourself in the Picture” strategy in their research are suggested that they conduct action research in the teaching of writing of descriptive texts in the different level of education, for example, Elementary School. Moreover, it is also suggested that future researchers conduct action research in the teaching of writing using different genres for instances, narrative and recount texts.

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