

ENHANCING THE STUDENTS' FLUENCY IN WRITING THROUGH THE USE OF JOURNAL WRITING

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ABSTRACT

Writing in English claimed as the hardest skill to be achieved by the students, especially the students at *STAI Darul Ulum Kandangan* because of some reasons. The reasons are because the students have no ideas to write, they have very limited vocabulary, and they are not sure with their grammar. However, those kinds of reasons can be solved by using journal writing focusing only on the fluency of writing performed by the students.

Key Words: Enhancing, Students' fluency in writing, Journal writing

There are some different opinions about the English language skills. As we know that English language skills consist of four skills that are listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Some people might say that listening in English is difficult because listening in English cannot be repeated, while some others might say that speaking is difficult because they need a strong confidence to say something. In terms of reading, in contrast, they might say that reading is easy because they can re-read the texts for many times and they can get the answers from the reading passages as long as they can read the texts thoroughly. While in terms of writing, the majority of people, including the students at *STAI Darul Ulum Kandangan* say that writing is the 'hardest skill' (Nunan, 1999) to be mastered especially because it is not easy 'to motivate English learners to practice [writing] regularly' (Hedge, 1991:6) when the students have claimed that writing is the most difficult one.

There were some reasons for the writer to choose *STAI Darul Ulum Kandangan* as the place of the study. First, the college was located in a small place precisely at Hulu Sungai Selatan regency, which has the uniqueness in teaching English among Islamic subjects. Secondly, the writer was interested in measuring the students' fluency in writing in English. In the writer's mind, before the students entered *STAI Darul Ulum Kandangan*, the students had studied English at least for six years when they were at junior high schools and at senior high schools. After getting some exposures in English for at least six years, the writer wanted to know about the progress of the students' fluency in writing in English. There were 50 students in the classroom with the variety ages, between 18 years old and 30 years old. About 90 percent of the students were the fresh graduates from the senior high schools, while the rest of students were the Islamic teachers at *Madrasah Ibtidaiyah* or *Madrasah Tsanawiyah* or *Madrasah Aliyah* spread out in Hulu Sungai Selatan regency who wanted to get more knowledge and the title from the college to support their career more.

The writer had the interesting experience while entering the class for the first time. When the writer entered the English class for the first time, there was no student who used English in the class. The writer used English starting from entering the class till the end of the class because it was the English class, according to the schedule. Then, the writer thought there was something wrong with the English skills that they have been achieved. After that, the writer had a question and answer session in order to get to know about the previous English subject that they had had on the first semester. While doing the question and answer session, the writer kept using English while the students used the mixture languages, that were Banjarese, Bahasa Indonesia and a little English. At the same time, the writer got to know the students individually, including their level of English. Then, at the last ten minutes before ending the class, the writer asked the students to take out a piece of paper, one for each, and ask them to write about everything they wanted to write on their paper in ten minutes. Then, the writer walked around the class for checking the students' writing. The writer paid attention to every single activity that the students did. The reactions of the students were varied, such as holding their heads getting blank what to write, looking at their friends and laughing, keeping busy in looking the dictionary up finding the English words that they wanted to write, and so forth. When the time was over, the writer asked the students to submit all paper to her. The writer checked quickly the amount of words that the students wrote on their paper. It was very surprising that nine tenths students only wrote ten to twenty words only in ten minutes, whereas the rest wrote more than twenty words. The other finding was more than 95 percent of the students wrote about the introduction of themselves.

The students at *STAI Darul Ulum Kandangan* state that writing became the most difficult skill to do. When they were asked the reason why writing was the most difficult one to do, they mentioned some reasons, that were: (1) they did not have any ideas to write, (2) they do not have a wide range of vocabulary, and (3) they were not sure with their grammar.

In academic context, the ability in writing is very important to be acquired to support the study of the students. As we know that having the skills in writing in English will be very helpful when students are asked to write the abstract of their '*Sarjana Skripsi*,' some paper in English, theses, and dissertations. The skills in writing will also be very useful in supporting the students when they want to take part in the International Seminars, International Conferences, and International Symposium. Whether they like it or not, they must use English as the most convenient medium to communicate their ideas with the society in those international events. It happens because English has become not only the international language, but it also has become the universal language for communication worldwide. Therefore, having the good English skills especially in writing will give some benefits to the students, because it can support their career as mentioned by Glazier (1994:3) as 'assets for learning and life-long career' now and in the future.

PROBLEMS IN WRITING

In the background above, it has been known that the students at *STAI Darul Ulum Kandangan* got problems. Those problems are: (1) they did not have any ideas to write, (2) they do not have a wide range of vocabulary, and (3) they were not sure with their grammar when they

were asked to write about everything they want to write in ten minutes. As a result, the majority of students wrote only ten to twenty words written on their paper.

If we have a look at the reasons why the students could not be able to write more than twenty words, as the majority number, they are correct. The core of the causes why the students were not able to write more than twenty words will be because: (1) they do not get use to write in English which is along with Byrne (1991:5) who states that ‘being at a loss of ideas is a familiar experience to most of us when we are obliged to write’ or ‘even worse [like] non-native writers.....have nothing to say’ Tho (2000:36), (2) they do not get use to use the variety of words because they do not have enough exposure to learn new words and practice using the variety of words, for instance they only know the word ‘big’ while there are some other words which have the same meaning with the word ‘big’ such as ‘huge and gigantic’, and (3) they are very worried with the grammar mistakes that they might make because the previous teachers and lecturer were teaching English focusing much only on accuracy.

METHOD IN SOLVING PROBLEMS

The writer was only given four opportunities to enter the English class of *STAI Darul Ulum*, and she used the rest of meeting enhancing the students’ fluency in English, focusing much on their writing skills. The writer used the integrated skills while teaching English linked with religion materials, in this case Islamic materials like The Pillars of Islam, Shalaat, Allah almighty, Muhammad Rasullullah, and so forth.

The writer starts the lesson with games and puzzles related to the materials that will be discussed further. By having games and puzzle, the students could activate their prior knowledge through this activity. Then, they have a simple reading material, about Islamic material in English, and have the discussion in English. Some of them still mix the languages between *Banjarese*, *Bahasa Indonesia*, and English at once. Then, they have listening and speaking session by having a conversation session stated in their handbook and by making their own scripts related to reading material. After performing the conversation in groups which scripts made by the students, they asked the audience in the class to answer two questions they raised, related to the script performed. Having to teach listening and speaking at once could train the students to listen to the spoken English comprehensively and answer the questions based on their understanding. Finally, just ten minutes before the class over, the students were asked to write about everything they wanted to express, for instance their impressions towards the topic, the activities, and so on.

The lecturer implemented the journal writing in the classroom. She did it because she wanted to attract the students’ attention in writing. Additionally, Wilcox (1998) claims that ‘A journal is a place where our thinking can be visible’. In the writer’s opinion, journal writing is not only a place to ‘see the students’ [ways] of thinking’, but it is also as the place for her to see the fluency of the students in writing.

There are some benefits of journal writing. Genesse and Upshur (1999) state about the benefits of journal [writing], that are: '(1) they provide useful information for individual instruction (for instance: students' attitude and feelings about themselves or towards teachers), (2) they increase opportunities for functional communication between students and teachers, (3) they give students opportunities to use language for genuine communication and personalized reading, (4) they permit teachers to individualize language teaching by modeling writing in their responses to students' journal, (5) they promote the development of certain writing skills, and (6) they enhance students' involvement in, and ownership of learning.'

The writer told the students about the rules in writing the journal. At the second meeting above, the writer encouraged the students to write more about everything the students want to write, without being worried of 'the grammar mistakes' (Hamp-Lyons and Heasley, 2006:2) might occur in their writing. The writer avoided to interfere about the things that the students wanted to write, therefore she allowed students to write whatever they wanted to write. It was still difficult to do though at the same time it was very 'challenging' (Harmer, 1992:53 and Tuan, 2010) to be applied. Every student looked very busy with their task, holding a pen on the right hand, and an APhalink electronic dictionary or a dictionary on the other hand. Some of the students could directly write down the words in English, on the contrary, the others were struggling to translate words by words into English with the help of their electronic dictionaries or the manual dictionaries.

Then, the writer collected all the second tasks the students had written down. After that, the writer analyzed the students' work at home before returning those paper back to the students on the following meeting.

The writer did the same thing on the third and the fourth meeting with the students at *STAI Darul Ulum Kandangan*. The writer conducted the same procedures in sequence, starting from having games and puzzles related to the Islamic materials, followed by reading and reading discussion, speaking and demonstrating the students' scripts and enhancing the students' listening skills through question and answer session after the group of students performing their script, which ended up with writing about everything the students wanted to write in ten minutes at the end of the lessons. Although Chandrasegaran (2002:14) says 'writing outside the classroom can be useful tool to enhance writing skills', the writer did not do that. The writer preferred to ask students to write the journal writing in the classroom just 10 minutes before the class over to ease her to control the progress of the learners in writing the journal with the strict time allotment. The students could choose 'any topic freely' (Hudelson, 1989, Silva, 1997:361, and Hamp-Lyons and Heasley, 2006:5) to talk about in order to increase their success in writing.

Having to do those steps of teaching above in sequence, using English integratedly, had changed the perception of the students that English was very difficult. They had fun during studying English with no worried of making mistakes, especially in writing as they have been told that the lecturer only focus on 'fluency' (Peyton 1990, Peyton and Reed, 1990, and Peyton and Staton, 1993, 1996) of writing only. At the same time they had a kind of pride that they had the ability in reading, listening, speaking and especially in writing in English which is in line with acquiring the Islamic materials in English. They looked much more confidence,

starting from the second meeting until the fourth meeting. Hence, for the rest of the meeting of English class, they talked and enjoyed English more than before.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

On the first meeting, we had already known that the production of the students of *STAI Darul Ulum Kandangan* in writing were mostly not more than twenty words as stated above. The topic that they wrote basically only about the introduction about themselves, for instance: their names, the addresses they live, and their opinions about English which was very difficult. After the students got some courage for not being too much worried with their word choices and ‘grammar mistakes’ (Hamp-Lyons and Heasley, 2006:2) that they might have, the range of the words produced by them in ten minutes were increased.

	Meeting 1	Meeting 2	Meeting 3	Meeting 4
Total of words	10 to 20	20 to 50	50 to 70	70 to 100
Time allotment	10 minutes	10 minutes	10 minutes	10 minutes

In general, based on the results on the table above, it can be seen that at the second meeting they could write between twenty and fifty words in average, talking about their impression about topic of English and the kinds of difficulties that they still faced in studying English. Next, at the third meeting, the students’ length in writing were increased becoming fifty to seventy words, discussing about the varieties topics such as the impressions that the students felt after learning the third topic of English, the students’ progress in practicing the English skills, and their habits at home in enhancing the students’ English language skills. Finally, at the fourth meeting, the students made the significant progress by writing their journals with the length between seventy and a hundred word in average with the nice topics such as the pride of their success in writing more than fifty words in ten minutes, their impressions of studying English by using Islamic materials, and their new habits getting use to write diaries in English. Therefore, we can conclude from the result above that the students’ fluency in writing in English at *STAI Darul Ulum Kandangan* were increased significantly after having the courage for not being too much worried in the grammatical mistakes, though the writer used the same time allotment about 10 minutes for each meeting in order to measure the reliability of the students’ writing, although Weir (1990:61) says ‘time pressure.. [will] hinder learners in writing [journal] effectively’. However, keeping the students to keep writing their journals more regularly, especially with the same time allotment, in this case for ten minutes, can promote the progress of the students in writing, as stated by Lagan (2000:14) ‘the more you practice in writing, the better you will write’.

In details, there are some causes happened to change the previous condition becoming having fun in learning English. First, the students at *STAI Darul Ulum Kandangan* at the first meeting was still shocked with the English teaching method used. They predicted that the English that they would learn would be like the previous English class that they had had which focused much on grammar only. What they had in their mind were the kinds of Tenses like Simple Present Tense, Present Continuous Tense, Past Tense and the rest of Tenses, active and passive sentences, and so forth by using the general materials with not focus on the Islamic materials at

all linked with Islamic materials. Consequently, they said that learning English was very difficult. As long as the lecturer only relied much only on grammatical matters or in other words on 'accuracy' (Hamp-Lyons and Heasley, 2006:2) only, the students would keep saying that English was very difficult. This kind of thinking set on their minds could kill their creativity to use English. In general, they were very eager to be able to use English fluently orally and written, however because of they had to be accurate in using the words and patterns, then they chose to be silent. They did not want to feel ashamed in front of their classmates.

However, in terms of enhancing the fluency of the students in writing, the lecturer must not focus on the accuracy or grammatical mistakes that the students have. The focus will be given only on the number of words used and written on the students' work. In other words, whether the students wrote the sentences with no clear pattern, it would not be really matter as long as he or she wrote the words in English. The most important one is, starting at the beginning of the class, that the students need to be brave and have 'low anxiety' (Tin, 2004:6) in expressing what they have in their minds by using English by writing them on their paper, as the media to express. Commonly, it will be very hard to do at first because they need to change the mind-set they hold so far from being afraid of expressing their ideas becoming being brave in expressing their ideas on their paper. Slowly for sure, they will get use to do so. Additionally, the time limit like ten minutes before the class over is really good to be applied because the students will know that they must be 'creative' (Spaventa, 2000:168) and be automatic in thinking. Moreover, the students must have a good skill in synchronizing their ideas in their mind and their hands to write the ideas on their paper with the time constrain.

The lecturer must not make correction on the patterns of sentences on the students' work. What the lecturer must do are reading the students' work thoroughly trying to understand the flow of ideas they wrote on their paper. Additionally, the lecturer counts the number of words used by the students on each meeting and controls the progress of the number of words written on the paper from each meeting. Furthermore, the lecturer can give comments on the students' work so that the students will be felt appreciated by the lecturer. The 'comments' (Anderson, 1993) could be related to the content of the students' work or other comments which can encourage the students to write more and 'make students more interested in writing more' (White and Arndt, 1991:63). By giving the comments like that, it will also show to the students that the lecturer really reads and appreciates the students' work. Even though reading and giving comments on the students' work are very 'time consuming' (Jeffrey and Hadley, undated), they are worth to do. The comments on the students' work will be good feedback and can make 'good rapport between the lecturer and the students' (Dyment and O'Connell, in press-b). Something which is always needed to remember is that all of the students' work must be confidential. Therefore, each student will pay attention and responsible only for his or her own work only.

Furthermore, by returning the students' work back to them directly with the certain comments as soon as possible will make the students more aware of their ways of writing in English, especially in terms of the content of the writing. Hence, the students will be more confident in keeping writing in English without being asked to do so, as long as they do not have any worried for being afraid of the mistakes. Later, when they are fluent in expressing their ideas through writing, this ability will also affect their ability in speaking too because they have got

some experiences of thinking critically and automatically in using words in English in expressing their ideas. In terms of accuracy, the students can learn it along with strengthening their abilities in their progress in expressing ideas orally and written.

CONCLUSIONS

The majority of students at *STAI Darul Ulum Kandangan* were afraid of using English, including in writing in English to express their ideas from their minds. It happens because they were nurtured by the teachers and the previous lecturer that English was about accuracy only. Therefore, they learnt grammar which were confusing them very much and making them were baffled when they were asked to express their ideas on their papers through writing.

The lecturer should not force the students to focus on the accuracy in the beginning of the study of English, including in writing in English. It will be much better if the students are encouraged to be able to use English actively in writing. Telling the students for not being too much worried for their grammatical mistakes will reduce their anxiety which can block their creativity in expressing their ideas on a piece of paper. In addition, the lecturer should give some comments as the feedback to the students' work showing that the lecturer is appreciating the students' work.

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