

Low-Stake Writing For The Short-Paragraph Writing Skill Of Semester Five Students Of Amik Tunas Bangsa Pematangsiantar

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Abstract: Writing skill being the most difficult problem faced by students in North Sumatera, Indonesia especially by those in Pematangsiantar, has forced the teachers to think of searching for strategies functioning as a bridge that will lead them to their objective of gaining the writing skill. The writer sees that Low-stake writing technique provides a path for beginners to reach the achievement. With a lot of work and guidance in writing, starting from very short paragraph of about 50 words, they will gradually be guided to writing a short paragraph of a least 100 words, and later to high-stake writing.

Keywords: low-stake writing, strategies, writing skill

I. Introduction

1.1 Background

Writing is one of the four skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing) in English language learning that a learner has to master. With *writing skill* one can put whatever he has in his mind into written words and keep them for himself or deliver them to other people. In other words one can tell other people what ever thing he has in his mind. With writing skill, one can be with other people in whatever situation he wants to be. He can go into business world, political world, educational world, biological world and many others. In short, he will have the potential of dealing with English for Specific Purposes. He can have a communication with other people through writing. The more grammatically correct his writing is, the more accurate the information containing in the writing and the more obvious it will be to the readers.

But writing needs skill. The more important one is, the more perfect his writing must be. Education assumes that a man needs to express himself in a way that is understood by others. This needs direct attention to how the expressions should be constructed that will later create a communication which is an art of giving things across to others, putting ideas and feelings in the forms that are familiar to others. (Richard M. Weaver;1961) If one is just a street vendor or a retailer, a little writing skill is just sufficient for him because, in his everyday life, he writes very little. And what he writes is just mostly simple thing like the items that he needs to buy or list of buyers who are in debt to him. What he writes is just for himself. If one is just a low-paid worker, he does not need perfect writing skill because he will never write formal English. The english he needs is just enough to understand instructions of his superiors. If he has to write, it is just to remind himself when he does not want to forget something or when he wants to say something in words to the members of his family or to his friends.

But if one is an important person in his organization, it is either in an office or a company, he requires perfect writing skill. The higher his position is the more perfect his writing must be. His writing is the feature of the company's financial status.

Writing is a central skill for higher education (Mc Keachie's,1993). Academic or high-education students, after their graduation, will fill job-requirement. And the jobs for these students are certainly more important than those of High-School graduates. They, therefore, require better writing skill than those of high-school students. But most of the students at Amik Tunas Bangsa, in which the writer teaches and carried out this research find it the most difficult skill of the four, (listening, speaking, reading and writing) And this fact is reasonable because when one writes, one has to pay close attention to grammatical regulations, which they consider the most difficult, punctuations and spelling..

1.2 Language of Instruction

Amik Tunas Bangsa is located in Pematangsiantar, the second biggest city in North Sumatera, Indonesia. Despite the size, the city has only two private universities and six academies. Like the rest, fifty percent of the learners are the city inhabitants and the others are from the area around the city.

Most of the high school students, after graduation, are taking part in a competition for an opportunity to study at State Owned Universities located in the Capital cities, and those who fail tend to stay in Pematangsiantar and attend the higher education institutes in this city. For this reason, the intellectual

capability of the students being employed at Amnik Tunas Bangsa is generally lower than those winning their chance to have a seat at the state owned universities.

In Indonesia, English is officially stated by the government as a foreign language, and the second languages are regional languages that are spreading so many in Indonesia. It has been officially regulated that the language of instruction in the schools is Bahasa Indonesia (Indonesian Language). The teachers, while teaching a foreign language, commonly use Bahasa Indonesia as the language of instruction. And AmikTunas Bangsa is not an exception. The students' very low mastery of English does not allow them to comprehend not only spoken English but also written sentences. This is why the whole teachers have to use Bahasa Indonesia as a language of instruction, although they teach a foreign language. Due to the fact, the teaching of writing in English Language at the schools is not a simple thing. Teaching needs resourcefulness, conscious planning, logical procedures and organized approaches which must be possessed by the teachers (Bumpass 1963:22). The teachers have to be aware of the four factors and work hard to find out if they are appropriate to the teaching atmosphere for the purpose of gaining the teaching objective. In order to gain an achievement in which the students have the capability of writing, at an early stage, short paragraphs, the teachers have to be extra careful in selecting the most appropriate strategy.

II. Review Of Related Literature

2.1 Low-Stakes Writing

Low-Stakes writing is an approach which asks for comfortable, casual, exploratory writing about a question or a topic and urge students not to struggle too much to gain the thought exactly right. Low-Stakes writing also increases fluency and confidence in writing and helps with creativity and risk taking. In common, writing is learned in schools where it is handed in to the teachers for grading or evaluating. In schools, especially in Indonesia, the country where the writer was born and grown up, writing is carried out much more seriously than speaking. When the students are assigned to write, they think of dealing with formal writing and of course think that it is a seriously difficult thing. What they have in mind when doing a writing assignment is just "high-stakes writing". High-Stakes writing is in deed the target of the writing lesson but it must be realized that the students have to start from "low-stakes writing". When the students are already accustomed to low-stakes, they will easily led to high-stakes writing. Low-Stakes writing tends to be informal and this reality will provide the students with very low-scale burden. The students are not so much to produce excellent pieces of writing as what they previously have in mind. They will be relaxed and will truly realize that they are really free to write down what ever comes to mind even if it does not make sense (McKeachie and Svinicki, 193).

2.1 Paragraph Writing

A paragraph is a distinct section of a piece of writing, usually consisting of several sentences dealing with a single theme (Hornby), A paragraph contains ideas that are structured in sentences. The paragraph develops a subject systematically to make it clear for reading. Therefore, a paragraph should have a topic sentence which is the main idea in the paragraph. The idea is specific and focuses only on one point. So the topic sentence is structured in a complete sentence that consists of the topic and the controlling idea. The topic refers to the subject and the controlling idea means specific information about the topic (Progressive English for Malaysian College Students, 2001: 32). The topic itself can be expressed in a sentence or in a phrase. If they know a lot, they will find it interesting and well motivated to write a paragraph. Nothing is uninteresting if one knows a lot about it (Easley S. Jones, 1941)

Example: The visitor is a computer specialist from Italy.

Topic: The visitor

Controlling idea: a computer specialist from Italy

While undergoing their life, students have quite a lot of things to inform other people. For example, when they see a volcano and they find it fascinating, they will be interested in writing something about the volcano to friends. Or they will tell others about a car crash that they witnessed on their way to destination

III. Research Methodology

To solve the problem, the students have to undergo a well-planned writing exercises that keep them busy and out of mischief. (Wilga M. Rivers,1971:240). If the students are made to keep writing, they are expected to find it a habit and finally reach the expected writing skill. Of course the exercises of giving the students some writing assignment is not only a single time. This must be repeated as many times as it is required to achieve the writing competence objective. Continuous practice will gradually lead the students away from

linguistic problems but at the same time it will force them to use language examples that contain problems (Lado;1979:105). But, can a student write something if he finds it uninteresting? Richard M. Weaver (1961:3) says that anything can be interesting if one knows enough about the thing. There is no reason why a

small thing should be a small interest and why a familiar one should be devoid of rich possibilities. It is the work of the teachers to make the students interested in the writing short paragraph. The teachers have to make sure that the students should be familiar with the topic they have to write.

Being beginners in writing, the students should start from writing short paragraph. In this way, they will be led to gradual writing power achievement. They will not be shocked by a big burden that stands in front of them and at the same time will make them step back and finally give up doing things. There must be a slow approach to make them interested in writing. Due to this reason, and for the achievement expected by the teachers, the writer sees that Low-Stakes Writing strategy as a solution.

To encourage the students, they have to be told that writing is not as difficult as what they have in their mind. They can be asked to write down whatever comes into mind, even if it does not make sense. In this step, students are not insisted on using perfect grammar. Since low stakes writing is informal and even tend to be ungraded, let them write in their way. Let them write as much as the amount they have in their mind, even if it is around fifty to one hundred words. They have to be allowed to have enough time to complete the writing. The students must feel free when doing the writing. But in classroom activity, to encourage students, it can be said that they will deserve an A or a B if they do it well but if they do not do it, they will deserve a zero. Once they have been accustomed to writing, they will have more to write and it will be easier to gradually lead them to better writing skill. Students will really know some scientific information they have studied if they have the capability of writing and talking about the concepts in their own language (Mc. Keachie's, 2006:193).

McKeachie and Svinicki (2006:194) says when students are directed into low-stakes writing, it will mean the same as they are made involved to make their mind work. They will

write things by using their own language, in this case English as the target language, without being intervened by the teachers. If students can write and talk in their own language, it is either for their school-mates or for themselves, they will have more chance to know more about a field. Of course, the use of this strategy for class-room activity must be well planned. There must be series of assignments to be given to the students in order to make them work regularly and finally make them like it, and will find it a habit. As a support to the implementation of this strategy, it is important that the teachers be under control when they see that the students find it too difficult to express their ideas in written form. The teachers can be psychologically patient to give the students some encouragement in order to make them keep working.

Make sure that the topic sentences are formal. The probable problem can be that the students may have nothing to write about the topic. In this case it will be the teachers who have to be careful in choosing a topic for the students to develop. The teachers have to make sure that the students know a lot about the topic. With constant training in paragraph writing by using Low Stakes writing strategy, they will be trained in developing a topic that gradually leads to perfect paragraph writing.

IV. Data Analysis, Findings And Discussion

4.1 Data Analysis

For the need of data analysing, and for the smooth run of the low-stakes writing activity, the writer divided the class of 29 students into six groups. This is to allow each student to take part in a discussion involved for the writing purposes, and each student has the opportunity to share the knowledge of another. It has been proved that cooperative learning and teaching is very much effective for a variety of goals, content and students of different levels and personalities (Johnson et al, 1981). If the students have gained the capability of working cooperatively, there will be positive results emerging from the process.

For the purpose of seeing the steps of improvement, the writer divided the class into three sessions. Session 1 is for the first meeting (the English class is scheduled a single meeting per week), session 2 is for the second meeting, and session 3 is for the third meeting. After having carried out three meetings of low-stakes writing activities, it is seen that there has been some improvement in the students' quality of writing. This was supported by the writer's being active in guiding the students and giving them some encouragement by saying that they can. For the difficulties of vocabulary, they are allowed to use dictionaries and for confirmation of the uses of some new words, they asked questions to the writer, as the only one who is responsible for the writing achievement in the class-room. To make sure that every group is active and free from any form of difficulty, because once the writer neglects this, they will lose spirit to go on working, and finally leads to failure, that is never wanted, the writer kept moving from one group to another to see if a group needs some advice.

4.2 Findings

The assessment is based only on how far the students can produce grammatically correct sentences. For the starting moment, organizations of content is neglected. If they can build grammatically correct sentences, they can be led to paying attention to the organization, this is because of the reasons previously stated in the introduction.

Finding 1 (In Session 1)

The following which is taken to represent the rest of the students' is the original copy of the students' paragraph (belonging to the same group), with mistakes in bolds, for the readers to facilitate seeing the syntactic errors already made by the students.

Pematangsiantar

This city has an area of 79,97 km² and total population of 787 inhabitants (2000). Pematangsiantar just a 128 km from medan and 52 km from parapat often become city crossing for tourism in the region surroundings. The city has 8 hotels Star hotels, 10 hotels and 268 restaurant Jasine. In this city there are still many bikes BSA motorcycle old model as tricycles engine which generate sound hard. (69 words)

The paragraph above was handed in to the writer for a correction. At this time, the members of the group were called together to make sure that each could listen to the advice. These students, being only five persons, listened attentively. They asked questions if they did not understand what the writer explained, hoping not to make the same mistakes another day.

It was explained to them some necessary things concerning the errors the student s made in the writing, such as proper nouns like Medan and Parapat should be preceded with "capital letters", the word "total" should be with "the" to make "the total", "city crossing" into "crossing city" and "regio surroundings" into "surrounding region", etc.

Although they have made a lot of mistakes but the writer still comments that the quality of their sentences is improving. This is to give them some encouragement.

Finding 2 (In Session 2)

Our College Our lecturer check our attendance before and after study. They talk softly, they give us many homework. The course teaches very good, they remember every homework.

When the study process, we ask to them with raising our hand. We restudy the courses at home. We face the test calmly. Our result of test is announce at the Portal AMIK Tunas Bangsa. The bell ring at 08.50 pm. We come home by motor cycle, bus or picked up with our parents. (80 words)

The content of the paragraph is not relevant with the title, but the writer gave them only a slight comment to remind them in order to be aware of this kind of mistake. Telling them that the content should be about the title, but the quality of the sentences has improved.

Finding 3 (In Session3)

My family is something that is very precious because nothing can be replace the role of the family in this world. That's a place where I could find a peaceful and ever-lasting affection. I am really love my family. My family consist of four people. They are my mother, my father and my sister. Although we are just a small family, our affection to each other are very large. I am very proud to them. That's my little family. A family that I love the most. We always support and love each other. I wish we could live together in joy and sorrow. (103 words)

The sentences in this paragraph look better than the previous two. The more they write, the more they will improve and the less mistakes they will make.

V. Conclusion

- 1) After having analyzed the data already gleaned and studied, the writer comes to a conclusion that
- 2) The use of low-stakes writing strategy in the class-room writing activities has drawn the students' great interest in taking part in the paragraph writing activities.
- 3) Low-stakes writing helps the students find opportunities to use their own language with which they start developing their own ideas and they begin to gain their habit of writing.
- 4) although at the beginning they made a lot of mistakes but with the patient attitude of the teacher, the students see it as the start of improvement.
- 5) When the writer has come to conclusions of what he has conducted in this research, he would like to express the following suggestions :
- 6) Frequent low-stakes writing improves high-stakes writing because students will already be warmed up and fluent before they write something we have to respond to.
- 7) Be diligent to train the students by using this strategy, be patient to give them personal guidance for the students' sure improvement
- 8) Limit the number of words in the paragraph at the start and make sure that the students know a lot about what they will write.

- 9) If the activities of this kind is well planned to go on as to be included in the teachers' teaching steps, it can be expected that the students will be accustomed to writing longer paragraphs and later "high-stakes writing".

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