

**Promoting Reflective Journal  
as an Approach to Enhancing EFL Students' Writing Skills**

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**Abstract**

This study aims at improving the students' writing skills through promoting reflective journal writing. This is a classroom action research. The data were gained through observation, questionnaire, interview, written testimonies, and writing tests. The research findings reveal that reflective journal writing promotes the students to get progress in their writing skills achieved through some indicators shown in each meeting. They cover the improvement of: a) the mean score of each writing component affecting the increase of the mean score of the students' writing tests, b) the scoring category from "average" to "good", c) the number of the students getting writing skills improvement, and d) the students' learning gain. In addition, the class of English (Beginner) which is especially focused in the writing skills has been able to raise the students' motivation. It can be seen through their active participation, excitement, and positive response during the instructional process, and their interest in writing.

**Keywords: reflective journal writing, students' writing skills, classroom action research.**

## **A. Introduction**

Writing is an essential part for college or university students since they are very familiar with written works such as research paper, report, essay, etc. Good writing skill is required to be owned by them since one of the requirements for finishing each degree of university study including bachelor, master, and doctoral is that they have to write a research paper, thesis, or dissertation. In fact, it is not simple thing for them, moreover if it is done in English as foreign language. English writing skills are highly complex making writing the most difficult skill for EFL learners to master. They deal with planning, generating, and organizing ideas; translating them into readable text; and paying attention to spelling, punctuation, word choice, complex structure, grammatical and lexical accuracy.

The matters stated above were similar to what was experienced by the students of the first semester at Nahdatul Ulama Islamic College (STAINU Temanggung). It is supported by their study program which is exactly not English Department. They took English as General Subject namely English Beginner at the first semester. These conditions make the students get very limited opportunity to study more specifically each skill of English at college. In one semester, they had to work on the four skills which are listening, reading, speaking, and writing. Consequently, they just had very restricted time to be more qualified on and master each of them.

Based on the observation results, one of the skills being the most complicated for them is when they had to do writing assignment. They took much time to just think of generating the ideas. Even though they were succeeded to make one, they used to get stuck to continue it to be a passage. In other words, it was more complicated when they had to extend the ideas into a good longer passage. It was found that when the students were asked to write, they did not know what to write and felt confuse how to extend their writing. Besides, other writing components consisting of grammars, vocabulary mastery, and punctuation need much attention as well.

Further, results of interview with students indicated that most problems of writing they got were generating ideas and how to organize the ideas to be meaningful writing. Organization was one of the dominant problems making the

students unable to produce a cohesive and coherent passage. In this case, the students got difficulties in organizing the ideas. They could not make a topic sentence with a good controlling idea. They were also confused in producing relevant supporting sentences or finding the ideas that relate to the topic sentence. As they had ones, on the other hand, they could not organize them into a good passage. It means, they did not properly develop the main idea stated in the topic sentence into relevant supporting sentences and concluding sentence. They could not connect the ideas or sentences in the paragraph. Consequently, their paragraph consisted of a collection of disjointed sentences.

In line with what has been explained above, the results of pre-cycle questionnaire showed some information dealing with the students' writing difficulties and perception about their writing skills. Most of the students (78%) mentioned that writing in English was difficult. Most problems were related to the organization, the grammar, and the vocabulary which was experienced by 89%, 92%, and 68% of the students, respectively. Meanwhile, the ones connected to the content were stated by 94% of the students who mentioned that they did not know what should be mentioned in their writing. From the questionnaire, it also could be identified that most of the students (86%) had little interest in writing added by other 6% who totally did not like writing. They had low motivation in writing because they (66%) thought that their writing skills were poor and needed much improvement. Besides, the other 31% of the students stated that theirs were not too good or belonged to average category.

Similar to the results of the interview and the questionnaire, the students' writing performance in pre-test in which they were asked to write a 150-200 word passage, showed that they found difficulties in developing their writing. It can be seen from the mean score of the students' pre-test (63.23) which was based on the four categories of scoring modified from Boardman and Frydenberg (2008, p.183) namely "very good", "good", "average", and "needs work", was included in the "average" category. This means, it needed much improvement for the students of university level. In this case, 72 % of the students got "average", 25 % reached "good", and the rest 3 % obtained "needs work" category. It was also found 29 as the lowest score. It showed that the students could not develop the topic sentence

into relevant supporting sentences. Consequently, the paragraph was made up of very few short sentences. It can be said that it was not well-developed. As an example, there was a paragraph containing four short sentences written in approximately 50 minutes (half session of English Beginner class) which, in addition, cannot be categorized into correct sentences. The paragraph also consisted of irrelevant sentences and did not meet the requirements of the writing test directions.

Being aware of the problems, it was conducted a classroom action research aimed at improving the students' writing, especially on the most difficult aspects faced by them which are generating ideas and organizing them into a good writing through the implementation of reflective journal.

## **B. Literature Review**

In the field of education, writing skill can be accomplished through composing a report, resume, paper, and those relating to the media of delivering idea, fact, and opinion in the written form (Anggia Suci Pratiwi and Tadkiroatun Musfiroh: 2014, p.125). It also plays an important role in personal and professional lives in which the ability to convey meaning proficiently in written texts is a critical skill for academic and professional success (Dasterdji and Samian: 2011, p.66). Boardman and Frydenberg (2008, p.3) suggest that students who want to study in college or university need to learn how to write a paragraph because all types of academic writing, such as essays, reports, and research papers, are based on good paragraph writing. Further, they say, to be able to write well, the students have to demonstrate good competencies in all writing components including content, organization, grammar/structure, word choice/word form, and mechanics (Boardman and Frydenberg, 2008, p.183).

EFL/ESL writing has always been considered an important skill in teaching and learning (Ahmed, 2010, p.212). Its importance is directly proportional to the difficulties experienced by the EFL learners. Richard and Renandya (2002, p.303) argue that skills involved in writing are highly complex making it the most difficult skill for L2 learners to master. Further, they mention that it deals with generating and organizing ideas, translating them into readable text, and paying

attention to higher level skills of planning and organizing as well as lower level skills of spelling, punctuation, and word choice. The difficulty becomes even more pronounced if the (English) language proficiency is weak. It is in line with Ong (2011, p.42) who states that of the four skills in language learning, writing poses the most challenging task for English as a foreign language learner. It is because writing provides opportunities for more careful organization, more complex structure, and needs grammatical and lexical accuracy. These conditions made the students get many problems in writing.

One of the ways can be used to enhance the EFL learners' writing skills is by promoting the reflective journal writing. Journaling is the activity where students can always write wherever they go. Writing in a journal will help students to develop the habit of thinking on paper and show them how ideas can be discovered in the process of writing (Mettaningrum, G., Dantes, and Suarnajaya, 2013, p.2). Reflective journal writing is defined broadly as meaningfully interacting with the teaching and learning processes by applying information to personal experiences (Farisiyah, U., 2017, p.262). According to a study prepared by The Learning Centre, The University of New South Wales in 2008, reflective writing contains personal response to experience, opinions, events or new information; response to thoughts and feelings; a way of thinking to explore your learning; an opportunity to gain self-knowledge; a way to achieve clarity and better understanding of what you are learning; a chance to develop and reinforce writing skills; and a way of making meaning out of what you study. Journal writing technique potentially affects students' writing skill which influences the development of the students' writing achievement. Reflective journal writing (RJW) is currently emerging as a common approach to enhancing the students' learning experience in professional courses, increasing learner's motivation and promoting higher order thinking skills (Estrada, F. F. and Rahman, M. A., 2014, p.22).

Literature has emphasized the importance of reflection in helping students learn from their experience. There are positive effects of the use of reflective journal writing in enhancing motivation and self-confidence and improving learning in general and the writing skills in particular (Farrah, M. 2012, p.997).

Various studies have underscored the importance of the role of reflective writing in higher education. Some of the researchers who are concerned with the implementation of journal writing technique in teaching writing skill are Kim (2018) in Sunchon National University, Tuan (2010) in National University of Ho Chi Minh City, Farrah (2011) in Hebron University of Palestine, Mack (2012) in Reitsumekan Asia Pasific University, and many more.

### **C. Research Method**

This research was action research aimed at overcoming the students' writing problems identified in the preliminary study. It was conducted at Nahdatul Ulama Islamic College (STAINU Temanggung) which is located at Jl. Suwandi\_Suwardi, Km. 01, Temanggung, Central Java. Sixty students taking English Beginner class in the first semester of the academic year 2018/2019 became the subjects whose passage were the objects of the research. The research was carried out from December 2018 to February 2019 in which the treatments were implemented in approximately three meetings in January 2019.

Before doing the action, the researcher carried out preliminary research by observing the English Beginner class process, distributing questionnaire to the students, interviewing the students, and conducting pre-test of English including writing test. The actions were done in three months by applying the stages proposed by Kemmis and Taggart (1988) as cited in Burns (2010, p.8). They are: (1) planning: preparing the instruments needed to support the actions, and determining the media and the method used in the instructional process, (2) action: conducting the English Class by focusing on the writing skill through the writing stages suggested by Bergman and Senn to accommodate the use reflective journal writing in the students' writing, (3) observation: observing the instructional process by using observation sheet as the guidance, and (4) reflection: analysing the data resulted from the actions and evaluating whether each meeting needed more improvement or not.

Instruments of the research consisted of observation sheet, questionnaire responded by the students, interview proposed to the students, testimonies written by the students, and writing tests conducted to know the students' writing skills

given at the beginning of the research and at the end of each meeting. The results of observation, interviews, and students' written testimonies were analyzed through qualitative data analysis suggested by Miles & Huberman (1994, pp.10-11): data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. Furthermore, the research presents descriptive statistics by giving frequency, mean, standard deviation, and percentage to analyse the quantitative data resulted from the questionnaire and the writing tests. Besides, T-test of Paired Sample was applied to know the significance level of the improvement. Regarding to the students' progress on the writing skills from pre-test and post-test score in each meeting, it is applied the formula stated by Meltzer (2002, p.1260).

$$g = \frac{\text{posttestscore} - \text{pretestscore}}{\text{max inumpossiblescore} - \text{pretestscore}}$$

To gain the valid data of the research, four of the five validity criteria proposed by Burns (1999, p.161-162) including democratic, outcome, process, and dialogic validities were implemented. On the other hand, reliability of the data was established through triangulation (Cohen, L., Manion, L., & Morrison, K., 2007, p.142). It was, in this case, achieved by time, investigator, and methodological triangulation. Besides, it was accomplished by providing the original data (Madya, 2011, pp.45-46), such as the students' writing test scores, the field notes, the questionnaire results, interview transcripts, and the students' written testimonies.

The indicator of achievement in this action research was categorized into two types, namely process achievement indicator and product achievement indicator. The process achievement indicator was shown by the students' high motivation proved by the results of the observation describing their active participation, excitement, positive response, and writing interest during the instructional process. On the other hand, the product achievement indicators were seen through the significant improvement in terms of: 1) the mean score of the tests, 2) the scoring category (e.g., from average to good, even to very good), 3) the number of the students getting improvement on their writing skills, and 4) the

learning gain. Additionally, it was also measured by the significant decrease of the number of the students getting lower than 'good' category of scoring in both the writing test score and the score of each writing component.

This research was attempted to answer three questions. They are: (1) how can the students' writing skills be improved through reflective journal writing? (2) to what extent can the students' writing skills improvement be achieved through reflective journal writing?



#### D. Findings

This action research was conducted in three meetings. The results are discussed and summarized by referring back to the research questions that were raised earlier. They were answered by the following discussion.

The results of the actions in each meeting showed progress in some areas. They can be seen from the increase of both the mean score of each writing component and the mean score of the writing tests from 63.23 on the pre-test to 65.75 (post-test meeting 1), 72.38 (post-test meeting 2), and 83.21 (post-test meeting 3). They are summarized through the following data.

**Table 1. Mean Score Improvement from Pre-cycle to Post-test (Meeting 3).**

Components	Mean Score			
	Pre-test	Post-test (Meeting 1)	Post-test (Meeting 2)	Post-test (Meeting 3)
Content	9.08	9.50	11.54	12.88
Organization	16.07	17.22	18.66	20.98
Grammar	15.00	15.19	16.44	20.30
Vocabulary	15.48	15.92	17.40	20.44
Mechanics	7.61	7.96	8.29	8.61
Test Score	63.23	65.75	72.38	83.21

Besides, at the end of this research, the scoring categories of most of the writing components and the mean score of the writing tests from pre-test to post-test meeting 3 changed from “average” to “good”. They are portrayed in the table below.

**Table 2. Scoring Category Improvement from Pre-cycle to Post-test (Meeting 3).**

Components	Scoring Category			
	Pre-test	Post-test 1 (Meeting 1)	Post-test (Meeting 2)	Post-test (Meeting 3)

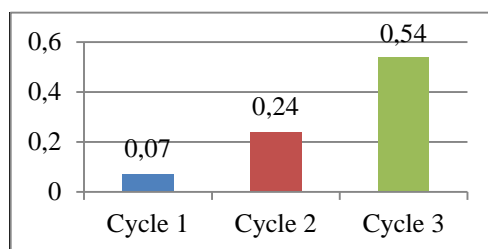
Content	Average	Good	Good	Very good
Organization	Average	Average	Good	Good
Grammar	Average	Average	Average	Good
Vocabulary	Average	Average	Average	Good
Mechanics	Good	Good	Good	Good
Test Score	Average	Average	Good	Good

In addition, the number of the students getting progress on their writing skills increased meeting by meeting which finally all students (100%) successfully improved theirs at the end of meeting three. The data are shown in the following table.

**Table 3. Number of the Students Getting Writing Skills Improvement**

Improvement	The Number of the Students		
	Meeting 1	Meeting 2	Meeting 3
Improved	42	53	60
Not Improved	18	7	0

Another notable result was seen from the students' learning gain showing positive results (0.07 in meeting one, 0.24 in meeting two, and 0.54 in meeting three) indicating that the students' writing skills improved in each meeting. Further, the score increased higher and higher from meeting one to meeting three which means the level of the improvement is better than the previous cycle or meeting(s). It is displayed in the following chart:



**Figure 1. The Students' Learning Gain**

Besides, by the actions, the students' motivation improved. It can be seen through the students' writing interest and active participation during the instructional process.. They were also excited about and positively respond to the activities during the English Beginner class focusing on the writing skills. These were in line with Granito and Chernobilsky (2012, pp.2-3) who state that students' motivation is reflected through their willingness to participate, interest and curiosity, excitement, and positive response to the learning process in the classroom activities.

#### **E. Discussion**

The research questions were positively answered by improvement on the students' writing skills in terms of: (a) the mean score of each writing component affecting the increase of the mean score of the students' writing tests from 63.23 (pre-test) to 65.75 (post-test meeting 1), 72.38 (post-test meeting 2), and 83.21 (post-test meeting 3), (b) the scoring category from "average" to "good", (c) the number of the students getting improvement in which all of them (100%) got progress on their writing skills, and (d) the students' learning gain from 0.07 (meeting one), 0.24 (meeting two), and 0.54 (meeting three). In addition, the English Beginner class focusing on the writing skills by implementing reflective journal writing has been able to raise the students' motivation. It can be seen from their active participation, excitement, positive response, and high interest in writing during the instructional process.

Besides being beneficial for the students relating to their writing skills, this classroom action research gives some advantages to the researcher connected to the knowledge, the attitude, and the skills in teaching English Beginner focusing on the writing skills. They can be described as follows.

1. The researcher's comprehension of the action research improved.
2. The researcher's knowledge of reflective journal writing increased.
3. Related to the instructional process, the researcher concluded that the positive teaching habits as in the opening and the closing session of each meeting were important to be applied so that the students were familiar with the

activities and the goal of the meeting, which at the end, were aimed at easily achieving the goal itself.

## **F. Conclusion**

The findings of this research reveal that the writing skills of the first semester students of Nahdatul Ulama Islamic College (STAINU Temanggung) of the academic year 2018/2019 can be improved through the implementation of reflective journal writing. It can be seen from the improvement on some areas consisting of the mean score on each writing component and the mean score of the writing tests, the scoring category, the number of the students getting progress on their writing skills, and the students' learning gain. In addition, the English Beginner class which is focused on the writing skills by the implementation of reflective journal writing has been able to raise the students' motivation. It can be seen from the students' active participation, excitement, positive responses during the instructional process and their writing interest. Therefore, the use of reflective journal writing has given significant contribution in improving the writing skills of the Nahdatul Ulama Islamic College (STAINU Temanggung) students.

The encouraging findings of this study show that the students' writing problems, particularly the ones related to content, organization, grammar, and vocabulary could be overcome if they were exposed to use reflective journal writing to generate ideas and extend their writing. The results positively confirm the research questions. These lead to important pedagogical implications. First, the English lecturers should provide and familiarize students with the reflective journal writing. Second, in the instructional process of English class which is focused on writing skills, the lecturers should integrate reading and writing activities aimed at assisting the students to identify the characteristics of good writing. And finally, there must be opportunity for the students to practice writing both inside and outside the classroom, for example, there are students' journal or students' writing activity unit to facilitate them in expressing their ideas in the written form.

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