IMPROVING THE WRITING ABILITY OF THE THIRD SEMESTER ENGLISH DEPARTMENT STUDENTS AT STAIN TULUNGAGUNG THROUGH PEER ASSESSMENT

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Abstract: This study was designed to improve the students' writing skills using peer assessment. It was conducted since the students had difficulties in writing, especially in generating ideas for their writing. The final purpose, it leads to the improvement of the students' writing ability. The subjects of the study were the third semester English Department students taking Writing III. This study focused on writing problem/solution essay. The findings show that in applying peer assessment to improve the students' writing skill, the students required to do and to get involved actively in all steps of peer assessment. Firstly, the teacher convinced the students about the importance of doing problem solving task, especially in increasing their critical thinking. Then, the procedures of writing problem solution essays as well as the model of problem solution essays as the final products of problem solving essay were explained.

Keywords: Writing Ability, Peer- Assessment

Writing is a language skill that needs to be taught in the teaching of English as a second or foreign language. This is because writing, in addition to speaking, is an important means of communication. As Raimes (1983:3) stated, learning a second language means learning to communicate with other people in order to understand them, talk to them, read what they have written and write them. Writing is considered as the most difficult skill to master in English language learning. This case does not only happen to second language learners but also to its native speakers. This is in line with Nunan's (1999) statement that writing is something most native speakers never master. Further, he says that for second language learners, moreover, the challenges are more enormous, particularly for those who go on to university and study in a language that is not their own.

This difficulty is caused by the complexity of the writing nature itself. According to Richards and Renandya (2002:303), the skills involved in writing are highly complex, consisting of the higher level skills of planning and organizing as well as the lower level skill of spelling, punctuation, words choice and so on. They also mention that the difficulty in writing lies not only in

generating and organizing ideas, but also in translating these ideas into readable text.

Considering the above fact, no wonder then that in the real writing classroom, most L2 learners have low ability in writing and get many problems in writing. The problems become even more complicated if the learners' English language proficiency is weak. They find it difficult to express their ideas in written form. They made many errors in doing so and as consequence they fail to make the readers understand their ideas.

As a writing instructor and a reader, the writer feels very much distracted or even frustrated by those errors. Although sometimes their sentences are still understood by the instructor and some non-native speakers for the similarity of their background knowledge, those sentence will be awkward and surely it will be difficult for the native speakers to get the intended meaning. Besides, as the students of English department who will be English teachers someday, the students are required to reach a certain standard of accuracy in writing that the academic discourse community demands. If they fail to reduce those grammatical errors in their writing, they will not be considered having good command in English writing. It is in line with Ferris' (2002: 328) statement that the grammatical and lexical inaccuracies may lead to harsh evaluation on the students' overall writing abilities. More severely, he argues that the students will not succeed outside of the sheltered world of the EFL class unless they can learn to reduce their errors. Therefore, because the students will not be always accompanied by their teachers when they write, it is necessary for the ESL writing teachers to help students develop and improve their editing skills.

In response to this problem, the writer intends to apply an assessment. The term assessment has been widely known by the teacher. However, there are some confusion among the teacher about the differences between assessment and evaluation. Nunan (1999) describes a clear distinction between evaluation and assessment. He defines evaluation as the collection and interpretation of information about aspects of the curriculum (including learners, teachers, materials, learning arrangement, etc) for decision-making purpose. On the other hand, assessment is a subsequent of evaluation, which is referring to the tools, techniques, and procedures for collecting and interpreting information about what learners can and cannot do.

There are two types of assessment: formal and informal. Formal assessment includes nationwide tests, standardized achievement tests, or tests accompanying publish program. Formal assessment requires standardized procedures or procedures carried out under controlled condition, whereas informal assessment utilizes observations, and other non standardized procedures. Informal assessment is also named as authentic assessment.

Formal assessment follows the conventional assessment concept that assessment practice is basically characterized by standardized tests or teacher-made tests. These tests are normally viewed as formal test; usually in the form of multiple choices, selected and administered by the teachers or administrators several times in an academic year. The results are reported quantitatively or in numbers representing scores of students. This aimed at obtaining information

because of administering the tests that should be reported to school boards, administrators, and parents through a report book.

Conventional assessment cannot be used to closely monitor the students' progress in the school curriculum throughout the year since they are only administered several times during a semester in the academic year. Therefore, conventional educators often fail to provide the kind of information that the typical classroom teachers are interested in. In addition, the testing situation itself often produces anxiety within the students so that they are unable to think clearly. The students may also be facing extenuating circumstances (e.g. personal problem or illness) at the time they are being tested, thus also hampering their performance on the test (Macias, 2002:338). The problem associated with traditional testing often masks what the students really know, or in the case of ESL, what the students can do with the language.

Authentic assessment is different from traditional assessment in that it actually asks students to show what they can do. Students are evaluated on what they integrate and produce rather than on what they are able to recall and reproduce. Implementing authentic assessment is more than what the teachers did in conventional teaching and learning. According to Valencia (1994) what are being assessed in performance and authentic assessment are the students' real performance during the teaching and learning process.

In the teaching of writing the teachers mostly score their students' writing product by their own subjective impression like the writing is clear and neatly written or all the writing tasks finished and submitted before the due time. Besides, they give objective test for testing the students' writing ability in formative or summative evaluation integrated with other skills. So far, the teacher has not involved the students' participation in the assessment process. Self assessment encourages the students to think about their purpose in writing and to reflect on what and how much they are learning. Peer assessment can be used by the students to evaluate each other's writing. Such involvement eases in the teacher's burden in evaluating every paper that each student produces.

Peer assessment is an assessment of students by other students, both formative reviews to provide feedback and summative grading. Peer assessment is one form of innovative assessment which aims to improve the quality of learning and empower learners (Mowl, 1996 in Bostock, 2006). It can include student involvement not only in the final judgments made of students own but also in the prior setting of criteria and the selection of evidence of achievement. Bostock (2006) states that "peer assessment is also called as peer tutoring". There are some potential advantages of peer tutoring including the development of the skills of evaluating and using discipline knowledge.

In peer assessment, it is possibly easier to read other's work than to assess student's own work, especially at the beginning of the implementation of assessment. By judging the work of others, students gain insight into their own performance. Brown, Rust, and Gibbt (1994) state that "Peer and self assessment help students develop the ability to make judgment, a necessary skill for study and professional life". Self and peer assessment promote lifelong learning by helping students to evaluate their own and their peers. Students should,

therefore, be encouraged to get in the habit of getting informal feedback from each other.

METHOD

The design of this study belongs to a Collaborative Classroom Action Research (CAR). In conducting this study, the researcher had collaboration with the teacher of English Department who was teaching at the setting of the study. Kasbollah (1998:91) states that a classroom action research will be better if it is conducted collaboratively because the researcher will get other's help in conducting and controlling the action.

This assessment was developed into the most appropriate procedure through a spiral of cycle adopted from Kemmis and Mc Taggart in Arends (2004) which covers four steps namely, planning the actions based on the problems to be solved, implementing the action, observation and reflection. After implementation of the first cycle and if it fails, it means that there should be a revision of the procedure and then it is implemented.

The research conducted at English Department at Sekolah Tinggi Agama Islam Negeri (STAIN) Tulungagung. This college is used as the setting of the study because the researcher is the lecturer there and wants to improve the quality of teaching and learning in her institution.

The subjects of the study are the third semester of English Department students taking writing III. The researcher choose the students taking writing III because in writing III, they deal with essay writing. There are actually 4 classes taking Writing III and class C was used as the subject of the study because it was the class that the researcher taught and many students of this class had difficulty in writing. Self and peer-assessment were implemented in this class following the process writing started from pre writing to post writing activity by using writing observation checklist, peer editing.

FINDINGS

The students' writing skill could be improved by Assessment in writing class. The result of preliminary study showed that the students mean score was only 54.5. There were only 2 out of 21 or 9.5% who got equal or higher than 70. After having Cycle I, the progress was great enough although the criteria of success in term of students' mean score, that was having mean score equal or higher than 70, could not be reached yet. The percentage of the students getting equal or higher than 70 could not achieve 70% either, it was still 66.7 %.

Finally, in Cycle II, the targeted mean score could be attained. The mean score was 72.1. There was also an increase in the number the students who got equal or higher than 70. 16 out of 21 students or 76.2% of all students could get equal or higher than 70. The clearer description of the increase in students' average scores of their preliminary study essays, cycle I essays and cycle II essays can be seen in Figure 1
Further, Figure 2 shows the percentage of the quantity of students whose essays attained equal or higher than 70.
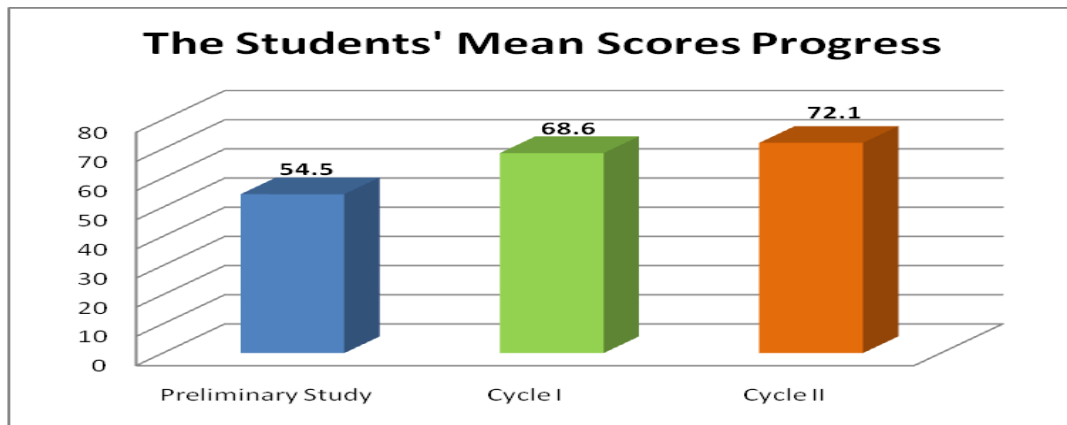
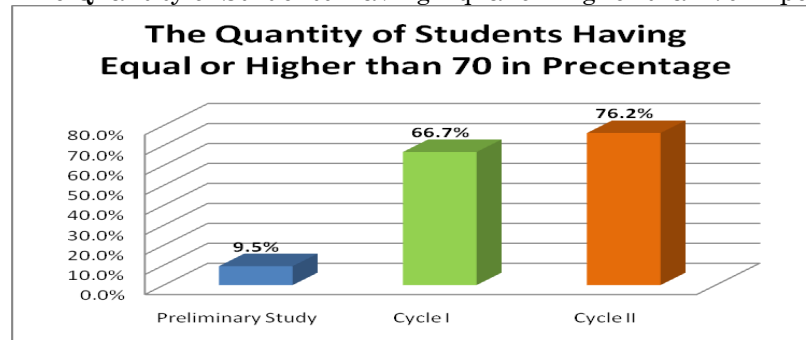Figure 1 The Students' Mean Scores Progress

The Students' Mean Scores Progress

Figure 2 The Quantity of Students Having Equal or Higher than 70 in percentage

The Quantity of Students Having Equal or Higher than 70 in Precentage

Concerning the students' involvement in doing task of essay, some improvements were also made. This improvement was the result of observation in Cycle I and Cycle II. There was no such observation in the preliminary study since Peer Assessment had not been done yet. In Cycle I, only 60 % of the students were actively involved in the whole activities done in the writing class, while in Cycle II, the students' participation increased reaching 78% of the total students in the writing class. The visual description of the students' involvement is shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3 The Students' Involvement in Doing the Essay Task in percentage.

The Students' Involvement in Doing the Essay Task in Percentage
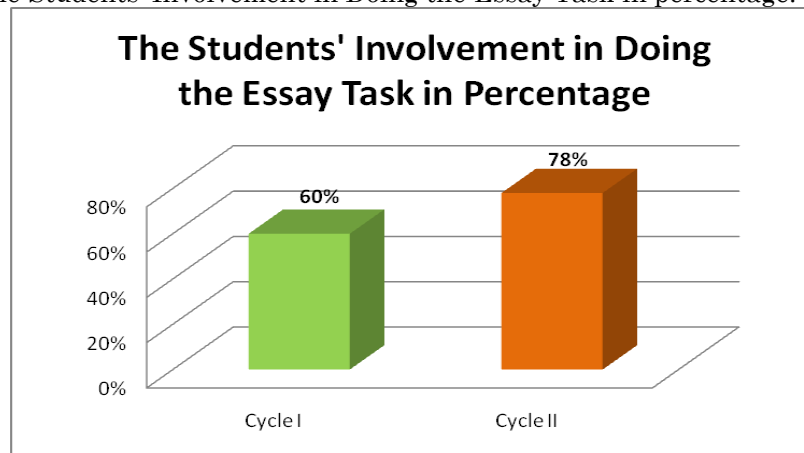
DISCUSSION

Assessment as one the curriculum aspects include both teaching and learning that requires teacher and student to be actively involved during the process. In line with this statement, Tierney et al (1991) state that assessment should provide the information that is needed to pursue ongoing curriculum development that is responsive to students' need, and, therefore, provides direction from instructional decision making, assessment should involve the students. It mainly aimed at gathering evidence, such as how students are approaching, processing and completing their task. In other words, both teacher and students need to know what they have done and in what case they succeed or fail.

Peer Assessment is one of the alternatives to assess the students' ability in learning English especially on writing skill. Based on the result of the study, students could assess their friends fairly which can be seen from varied scores. They also could learn much from their own friends' mistakes. Students could raise self confidence which can be seen from their expression. This is assessment done among students and feedback is provided. It allows students to take responsibility for their own learning and to gain insight into their own performance. Topping (1998) accurately defined "peers" as students with similar educational background. One way to make sure students understand this type of evaluation is to give students a practice session with it. The teacher provides a sample writing task. As a group, students determine what should be assessed and how criteria for successful completion of the communication task should be defined. Students assess this using the criteria they have developed, and determine how to convey feedback clearly to the fictitious student. For peer evaluation to work effectively, the learning environment in the classroom must be supportive. Students must feel comfortable and trust one another in order to provide honest and constructive feedback.

Also, peer assessment is an assessment which allows students to assess each other's performance or work, it can be valuable in helping students to learn from their friends' performance, analyzing and giving problem solving. It encourages the students to be involved in the assessment process, as Earl (1986) states that an assessment procedure which reflects the collaborative environment in which students will be required work professionally.

In the process of peer assessment, students are able to observe their peer and come to an understanding of how their peer learnt. In peer assessment, it is possibly easier to read other's work than to assess student's own work, especially at the beginning of the implementation of assessment, because it gives students the opportunity to encounter diversity in different ways, critique and judge, they have to learn how to be responsible for their own learning. By judging the work of others, students gain insight into their own performance, as in line with Brown, Rust and Gibbt (1994) state that peer and self assessment help students develop the ability to make judgment, a necessary skill for study and professional life.

The Strength and the Weakness of Peer Assessment

In this section, some aspects of the finding which believed to promote the students' writing skills are discussed based on the related theories. Problem Solving Essay was chosen to be applied in this study. Problem Solving fits the characteristics of Essay in order to find out the expected solution. Besides, they gathered some necessary information by reading magazines or newspapers, browsing internet, or interviewing some people. After that, the students were expected to write a problem/solution essay in English as their final product. All those activities involved the students in comprehending, manipulating, producing and interacting in target language.

Besides having many advantages in promoting language acquisition, having problem solving essay also gives a lot of benefits in writing process. Usually, a writing teacher requires the students to do a single form of pre-writing activities, for example, having brainstorming, free writing, or outlining alone. Indeed, this is not enough. Moreover, with the students' limited knowledge on a certain topic, one kind of pre-writing activity will not work at all. It is impossible for them to be able to do free writing or brainstorm with such condition. References from other sources are absolutely needed. Therefore, problem solving essay which covers discussion, outlining, reading some references, and interviewing was chosen for this study.

During the peer assessment stage, the students do the required task. In this study, they were required to do problem solving essay. First, the teacher introduced a problem to the students. Some possible causes and effects were exposed by the teacher in order to give clearer framework of what they were going to solve. Accordingly, the students were listening and getting what the teacher was saying, and if possible, they could give some responses. Again, this activity is considered crucial in processing language for meaning as mentioned by Willis & Willis (2007:21).

In doing peer assessment, the teacher provided a sample of problem/solution essay writing. As a group, the students determined what should be assessed and how criteria for successful completion task should be defined. Then the teacher gave a sample completed assignment. The students assessed their friends' works using the criteria and determined how to convey feedback clearly to their friends based on the detected mistakes that they found.

Next, group discussion was done. Such group discussion is considered very advantageous in language learning since it involves more negotiation of meaning than teacher-centered activities (Kumaravadivelu, as quoted by Beglar & Hunt, 2002:101). In group discussion, the students were required to discuss any possible solutions in English. They could freely express their opinions, agree or disagree with their friends' opinion.

The same advantage with that of group discussion also belongs to class discussion. The only difference is that the latter is led by the teacher with all students as the audience. Hence, not all students can participate actively in class discussion. Having some temporary solutions as the result of group and class discussion, the students, then, were required to seek the more information related their task performance. Besides increasing their grammatical awareness, those activities help the students very much in completing and making their final products better.

Considering the important role, some activities were done after the students wrote their solutions in the form of essay. The students were not given an opportunity to repeat their performance of the task. Instead, they were required to do peer correction for editing and revising their essays. This activity was also meant to encourage them to be more aware of the forms. After they finished doing peer correction, the teacher led a focus on specific forms. In this case, the teacher use impromptu way of focusing on the language that the students had used previously and found it problematic.

During peer assessment, the students were also utilized with peer editing worksheet containing some questions on language use and procedures of writing a good essay. This was aimed at giving them guidance in editing their friends' essay. Besides that, information-search forms were given to the students in order to push them to truly do something to gather the needed information for their essay writing. All those efforts were done with the purpose of getting the students involved actively in every stage of peer assessment and having them produce the expected outcome.

For peer assessment to work effectively, the learning environment in the classroom must be supportive. The students must feel comfortable and trust one another in order to provide honest and constructive feedback. During the research, in doing peer-assessment strategy, it was found the strengths and the weakness of peer assessment. There are some strengths that can be found in the process of peer assessment in the classroom, those are:

Help The Students Become More Autonomous and Responsible

The students can learn how to evaluate the other's work and give the solution of what they corrected. It can make them more autonomous because they have to be responsible when they have to give assessment of their friends' work. This is assessment done among students and feedback is provided and it allows students to take responsibility for their own learning and to gain insight into their own performance (Heywood,2000). There is a limit to how a teacher can help to improve the students, because teacher is not involved much during the process of peer assessment. The students must feel comfortable and trust one another to provide honest and constructive feedback. It is called that peer assessment can make the student become more autonomous learning and leads to be better peer feedback.

Encourages Students to Critically Reflect Each Others' Work

By peer assessment, it encourages students to critically analyze work done by others, rather than simply seeing a mark. Peer assessment makes students become more self- aware and more objective to analyze the works of their friends. The students also become more self-confidence to assess each others' work critically based on their knowledge. From this process, the students will become more reflective of their own work by becoming more aware of the strengths and weaknesses of their classmate's work.

Train the students to evaluate fairly

Without being discriminated, against and being misunderstood, the students have to be fair in giving evaluation on others' works. They have to give

the evaluation or assessment really based on the others' mistakes without any tendency to award the same mark and try hard to give the right solution in order to make the works better than before and make their own learning progress and performance. As Keaten et al (1993) reported that peer assessment is a practice that can foster high levels of responsibility among students; the students must be fair and accurate with the judgment they make regarding their peer. It means that by giving fairness assessment will make the student become honest and they are always motivated to involve each other in giving evaluation fairly. They have to maintain the fairness of assessment because everyone has the chance to assess each other. Based on the result of the study, the students could assess their friends fairly which can be seen from the varied assessment scores.

Promote The Students' Interaction in The Class

In doing peer assessment here, they have to be in pair work. So, it is hoped that all students in group are involved and they have to have great motivation to be active in peer assessment process. Because of the need for students to assess all their classmates, this mean that the positions of the seats change, they will meet different partner every meeting. For well motivated students, this is of little consequence, but for less eager students, it is very useful tool for breaking up small groups that do not participate in class. A second advantage of changing seating positions is that students get different evaluations from different partners. A final advantage is that changing seating position gives students the opportunity to develop relationships with classmate that they do not know so well without any discrimination.

The Students' Involvement in Peer Assessment Process

The students' active involvement is a key factor in the success of the process of peer assessment. They have to want to engage in every stage of peer assessment to improve the writing ability. Here, the teacher's role is very important in motivating the students. Willis & Willis (2007:7) suggest the teacher to introduce very clear real-life goals, give precise instructions, give some necessary chart or tables to fill in, and push for more detailed output. Dealing with the practical methods in class, the teacher is suggested to move around, help the students, and keep them involved by always encouraging participation. After the activity, the students should let to realize how well they have performed in doing the writing task, even when there are problem to be overcome. This can raise their motivation and make them some sense of achievement.

During peer assessment, the students are involved actively. They have to give assessing to others' works fairly and they have to give the solution of detected mistakes made by their friends. All those were done with the purpose of getting the students involved actively in every stage of peer assessment procedure and having them produce the expected outcome and also lead to better peer feedback.

CONCLUSION

Based on the results of research findings and discussion, it is concluded that the students' writing ability and their involvement in writing class could be improved by using peer assessment. This improvement can be apparently seen from the constant increase in mean scores of the students' essays writing from 54.5 in preliminary study, 68.6 in Cycle I and 72.1 in Cycle II. The percentage of the students getting equal or higher than seventy also improved from 9.5% in preliminary study, 66.7% in Cycle I and 76.2% in Cycle II. In addition, the students' involvement in writing class experienced an increase from 60% of all students that were actively involved in Cycle I to 78% in Cycle II.

In applying peer assessment to improve the students' writing skill, the students required to do and to get involved actively in all steps of peer assessment. Firstly, the teacher convinced the students about the importance of doing problem solving task, especially in increasing their critical thinking. Then, the procedures of writing problem solution essays as well as the model of problem solution essays as the final products of problem solving essay were explained.

During the peer assessment stage, the students were exposed to a problem. A brief explanation about the problem was given to make the students get more understanding on the subject before they were asked form groups of three or four. Within the groups, they discussed the solutions to the problem. After the students got some solution, class discussion led by the teacher was begun. Having some temporary solution after the group and class discussion, the students began to write their essay writing draft individually.

The peer assessment strategy has strength in providing the students with direct involvement in the experience of assessment to identify and correct any errors in writing essay. Referring to the research problem, that is, how a peer assessment strategy can improve the students' ability in writing skill, it can be answered on the basis of the result of analysis of research findings that show that following peer assessment strategy procedure properly, the strategy proves effective in improving the students' writing ability. In addition, to the writing achievement, the strategy was able to improve the quality of learning process of writing. The students were motivated to write enthusiastically and were much aided to be a writer. They did not think that writing is something boring and a burden, they have good response and attitude to the strategy.

SUGGESTION

Based on the research finding and discussion, the following suggestions addressed to the writing teachers, the students, and the future researchers are presented.

Considering that the peer assessment with the use problem solving task could improve the students' writing skills and increase their participation in writing class, it is recommended for the writing teacher to implement such technique in writing class by applying peer assessment.

The idea of Peer Assessment in this study is enabling the students to generate more ideas for their writing through doing writing essay. Therefore, the students in writing class are suggested to actively and independently seek the related

information to enrich the content of their essays. Besides, independent peer correction is also worthy doing in their process of English writing.

This study dealt only with the use of problem solving essay in improving the students' writing skills. In fact, there are many other kinds of essay that can be appropriately done in writing class such as listing and classifying, story-telling, decision making, etc. All of the essays can be applied using peer assessment. For that reason, it is recommended that future researchers do similar research with other kind of essay in writing class by using peer assessment.

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