Applying Cultural Project Based Learning to Develop Students' Academic Writing

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Abstract

Writing is considered to be the most demanding and difficult skill for many college students, since there are some steps to be followed such as prewriting, drafting, editing, revising and publishing. The interesting topic like culture including lifestyle, costume, and custom is necessary to be offered in Academic Writing class. Accordingly, this article aims to elaborate the application of a cultural project based learning to develop students' ability in academic writing. This descriptive qualitative research was conducted in Academic Writing class consisting of 20 students of the fourth semester. The students were divided into some groups, each consisting of 4-5 people assigned to make a cultural project within 6 weeks, in the form of essay. Each member of the groups has to create his/ her own essay and then compile the essays to be a mini-journal. Therefore, each group has one mini-journal consisting of 4-5 essays. To check the content of mini-journal, the lecturer also asked the groups to present in front of the class to get some suggestions, feedback, or comments.

Keywords: culture, project based learning, writing, essay writing
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A. Introduction

As one of the most popular foreign languages in Indonesia, English has successfully made people interested in learning it deeper from elementary school level to university level. Some university students try hard to practice using it inside or outside the classroom. Formally, their teacher teaches four English skills, such listening, speaking, reading and writing at school or course based on the national curriculum, whereas informally, the students focus only on one skill or two skills, such as listening and speaking. Accordingly, listening and speaking

are easy to be learned, since the students can watch and listen to any TV programs in English to improve either their listening or speaking abilities. The next skill, reading can be automatically improved if they are consistent to read any passages in English. Thus, the students seem to set aside the rest of the skill; writing, because they need to equip themselves with some understanding on how to construct words into sentences, paragraphs and essays.

For many university students, writing is considered to be the most demanding and difficult skill, since there are some steps to be followed such as prewriting, drafting, editing, revising and publishing (if it is possible). It shows that writing is a process skill requiring the students to carefully follow the stages above in order to create good paragraphs or essays. The teacher commonly trains them to construct from a paragraph to an essay, for both paragraph and essay have similar organization. In College of Teacher Training and Education "PGRI" at Madiun, East Java (IKIP PGRI Madiun), writing courses are best served in series, from the first semester (Sentence Building) to the fourth semester (Scientific/ Academic Writing) aiming to comprehensively raise their writing ability.

In this respect, a preliminary study was conducted to know what problems the students in writing essays face. By analyzing the students' collection of essays done in the third semester, the researcher found that the students were still difficult in organizing ideas. The contents of writing were unfortunately shallow and less interesting. Further, their teacher also informed that they lacked motivation and seemed difficult to cultivate ideas based on the writing topics putting into an essay. Eventually, they were following the writing courses in series since they were in the first semester. They might only focus and concern on mechanics such as, punctuation, commas, and grammar.

In line with the problems, an interesting and popular topic that needs to be proposed in the academic writing is culture. According to Brown (1994) culture is a way of life. It means that every part of human's life done and used regularly is culture. It is also the context underlying what people think, feel and relate with others. Unintentionally, culture has been taught and used inside the classroom although it is mostly used verbally or in a spoken form. For instance, when the students address, greet others, and use some particular expressions, they greatly represent either local or target culture. Some topics possibly derived from the culture are lifestyle, costume, arts, family life, and many more. In fact, the teacher hardly realizes that they have taught part of culture. Therefore, culture can evidently be introduced in the academic writing as topics that hopefully can stimulate students' critical thinking.

By inserting culture in academic writing, the students eventually can explore their ideas based on their interest of culture topics or themes. They talk about the reality-based topics, not the artificial ones that are commonly taken from writing textbooks. Certainly, it is not simple; they need to read much information related before they write essays. If only they are consistent and

focus on searching for information, they can generate and organize their ideas into good essays. Moreover, teacher needs to greatly provide appropriate techniques, method, or approaches in order to help the students achieve their intention to explore or generate the ideas.

One of the best learner-centered approaches used here is project-based learning. This approach can be fruitful for the students, since they importantly get authority to plan, manage and accomplish their project based on the content area of knowledge that is culture topics. Particularly, project-based learning activities can be characterized (Fried-Booth, 1997; Simpson, 2011; Srikrai, 2008; Stoller, 1997) in Poonpon (2011) in the following:

• focuses on content learning rather than on specific language patterns,
• is student-centered so the teacher becomes a facilitator or coach,
• encourage collaboration among students,
• leads to the authentic integration of language skills and processing information from multiple sources,
• allows learners to demonstrate their understanding of content knowledge through an end product (e.g., an oral presentation, a poster session, a bulletin board display, or a stage performance), and
• bridges to use English in class and in real life contexts.

It can be seen that project-based learning truly concerns on making students generate ideas based on the real life contexts by assigning them to work with other people. In project-based learning, the students have to work independently with other students, member of the classroom and then end their project with a product, namely culture-based essays. In sum, project-based learning is necessarily appropriate for content learning, not language formulae or patterns.

In accordance with project-based learning approach applied in this research, the end-product is mini journal consisting of students' culture-based essays. This journal is the result of self-writing in which the students have to do outside the classroom. Brown (2001) particularly states that a significant proportion of classroom writing may be devoted to self-writing or writing with only the self in mind as an audience and diary or journal writing which also falls into this category to support it. By using journal, the teacher may trace student's ability in writing essays. The students' writing progress time after time can truly be checked in terms of content, organization and accuracy. Thus, in search of solution the teacher may immediately identify any obstacles found in their writing.

Based on the explanations above, this research incorporates culture as the topic of academic writing and connects reading and writing. Accordingly, this research aims to elaborate the implementation of cultural project-based learning to develop students' academic writing and explain advantages and disadvantages of the implementation of cultural project-based learning to develop students' academic writing.

B. Research Methodology

In accordance with the aim of the research to elaborate applying cultural project based on learning to develop students' academic writing in the English Department, College of Teacher Training and Education "PGRI" at Madiun, East Java (IKIP PGRI Madiun), a descriptive qualitative research design was utilized. The design was greatly appropriate for, it described the phenomena naturally. Therefore, some problems faced by the students might be raised in this research further.

This research involved 20 students of the fourth semester taking academic writing class offered in the English Department, College of Teacher Training and Education "PGRI" at Madiun, East Java (IKIP PGRI Madiun). The researcher collaborated with the lecturer to design a research on applying cultural project based learning to develop students' academic writing, since the researcher did not teach this writing course. The lesson plans were made for six meetings (a half semester). From the first to second meeting, the lecturer alone explained anything related on how to write a 1000 word -culture based essay that inserted culture topics such as, lifestyle, customs, movies, etc. and then assigned the students to work in-group comprising of 4-5 people to plan a project of mini-journal, while the researcher observed. Then, the students needed to work outside the classroom generating ideas. Next, in the third meeting, they proposed an essay title and outline. In this meeting, the researcher not only observed but also actively helped the lecturer check the students' essays' titles and outlines. For instance, they proposed essays entitled '*Introducing American Culture through The Tournament of Roses for Junior High School*' and '*The differences between American and Indonesian Lifestyle*'. The fourth meeting is the time when the students presented their draft of essays in front of the class in order to get some comments and suggestions either from their lecturer or from their friends. Later, in the fifth meeting, the lecturer asked the students to do peer editing by exchanging their essays with other groups. Finally, the students presented the revised essays and collected them into a mini-journal.

To obtain truly credible data, the researcher collected the data through recording the teaching and learning process and completing the observation sheet, assessing the students' essays based on ESL Composition Profile by Hartfiel, et. al. (1989), and interviewing the students and the lecturer. Teaching and learning process were carefully transcribed and checked to answer the first aim that is to elaborate the implementation of cultural project-based learning to develop students' academic writing. Accordingly, the lecturer and the researcher read, rated and commented the students' essays. Based on the teaching-learning process and the students' scores, the researcher interviewed the lecturer and some students in search of advantages and disadvantages on the implementation of cultural project-based learning. The researcher only chose those students who were nicely willing to be interviewed using snowball technique in order to reach a point data saturation; no longer hearing or finding new information.

The data were analyzed throughout the research. Therefore, the researcher obviously worked with data by organizing it, breaking it into manageable units, synthesizing it, searching for patterns, discovering what is important and what is to be learned, and deciding which parts will be told to others (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982). It means that the researcher selected and chose only data which importantly supported the purpose of the research.

C. Findings

The data collected from observation, students' essay scores, and interview were analyzed in relation to the purposes of the study: (1) to elaborate the implementation of cultural project-based learning to develop students' academic writing and (2) to explain advantages and disadvantages of the implementation of cultural project-based learning to develop students' academic writing.

Based on the observation, there were 20 students attending academic writing class. The researcher intentionally chose the class based on the lecturer's recommendation. Both the researcher and the lecturer collaborated to create lesson plans of 6 meetings on applying cultural project based learning to develop students' academic writing. By so doing, the students were assigned to make groups, each consisting of 4-5 people in order to plan, manage and accomplish essay-writing project in the form of mini-journal. At that time, the students looked very active and involved, since they needed to explore and generate ideas related to culture outside the classroom and then proposed title and outline before starting to write the essay. It was similar to the interview result with NR translated in English as follows:

> We are challenged to be actively searching culture topics from many sources like books, internet, journal and many more before proposing title and outline to the lecturer. Fortunately, we can work together and help one another with our classmates.

There were two major culture themes proposed by the students namely, contrasting local and target culture and inserting culture into the teaching of skills in junior or senior high school. Among four groups, only one group contrasted local and target culture to be the titles of their essays such as, *contrasting American and Indonesian lifestyle, comparing American and Indonesian education.* The rest of the groups inserted culture into the teaching of skills in junior or senior high school such as, *Introducing British Culture through 'Pride and Prejudice', Introducing American Culture through the Tournament of Roses,* and *Teaching Cross Cultural Understanding through 'Thanksgiving'.*

Soon after presenting the draft of their essays in front of the class, the students wrote their culture-based essays outside the classroom, as a project. Some strategies were done to support their ideas. They read some related sources and discussed them with their friends to get some suggestions. Accordingly, they found that it was not easy and simple. They were afraid of being trapped

plagiarizing, since the lecturer had banned it. It was also supported by MA in the following:

> To avoid plagiarism, I definitely read some related sources and watched some videos in order to inspire me in generating more ideas. Approximately 70 % of my essay was based on my own language and 30 % was quoted from many sources with clear references.

In the next meeting, while the students attended the classroom bringing along their culture-based essays, the lecturer asked them to exchange their essays of one group to other groups. They did peer editing under the lecturer and the researcher's supervision. Surprisingly, one of students' essays was suspected to be totally plagiarizing. Then, the lecturer alone approached him to confirm and ask clarification whether it was definitely proven or not. It was based on the interview with the lecturer, SL as follows:

> I, myself actually had been suspicious that there were some students being unfaithful in writing culture-based essay, since it was very challenging. Some students tended to find ways in order to save themselves facing people in the classroom. Intentionally, I walked around and read the suspicious essay. Next, I called him personally to discuss and he confessed not to do it anymore in the future.

Furthermore, the students finally presented the revised essays and collected into a mini-journal, although the students' culture-based essays were not very good in terms of scores. Overall, the scores were ranging from 'very poor' to 'good to average'. In terms of content, the students mostly succeeded to insert culture topics into their essays, since the scores ranged from 12 to 20 in the level of 'good to average'. The students seemed to get significantly low in the score of organization and language use that ranged from 5 to 10 in the level of 'fair to poor' and 'very poor'. Then, in terms of vocabulary and mechanics, the scores ranged in the level of 'fair to poor' and 'good to average'.

Based on the students' scores above and the interview results, some problems faced by the students were revealed in the following. The students firstly experienced to work with their classmates outside the classroom with culture topics that were relatively new. They got accustomed to working or writing under their lecturer supervision, not their friends help. They had not been ready yet to do individual assignment with the requirement of searching own references or sources. They never experienced to write serious composition consisting of 1000 words.

In line with the problems above, interviewing with the students could be fortunately categorized into the research advantages and disadvantages. Some students named MD, NR, MA, HM, and R recommended that inserting culture topics through applying project-based learning was helpful and made the academic writing course more interesting. The students were challenged to be

more independent and more critical, since they had to search and prepare their own sources or references either from the internet or from the other course textbook, TEFL, if they were keen on integrating culture into the teaching of skills. However, MA stated in the interview that:

> I think applying cultural project based learning actually was very interesting, but the situation of the classroom can be out of control while proposing and checking the essay's title and outline. The students were noisy and had a chat while waiting a turn to see the lecturer. In terms of peer editing, the problems happened to the low proficiency students. They did not know what to correct and edit, therefore they were very passive.

It showed that the things stated above are the disadvantageous parts of applying cultural project-based learning in the academic writing course. In addition, MD, NR, MA, HM, and R obviously declared that applying cultural project based learning consumed much time.

In this respect, it can be postulated that applying cultural project-based learning could not be totally developing students' academic writing yet viewed from the students score. Only few students got good scores, but actually based on the interview result, it contributed to challenge students being more independent and more critical.

D. Discussion

As reported in the findings part, the investigation of applying cultural project based learning to develop students' Academic writing revealed the unexpected result viewed from the students score. The applying cultural project based learning can only help in terms of content and vocabulary but not help yet in terms of organization and language use, since the length of the project here was only six meetings. In contrast, Poonpon (2011) reported that applying project based learning can balance of language use and content in the project. A reasonable explanation for this might be that the students needed more time to conduct a project. Thus, adjustment of the implementation plan and other activities needed for future implementation.

Regarding the changing perspective, the finding showed that the students and the lecturer were accustomed to doing all writing processes like prewriting, drafting, editing, revising and publishing inside the classroom. The lecturer had never assigned the students writing project systematically conducted outside the classroom. Only individual homework is mostly assigned outside the classroom. Therefore, applying project based learning was something relatively new for both of them. They may feel uncomfortable, since project based learning focuses on in –depth investigations while constructing personally -meaningful artifacts, the tone of a classroom may change (Grant, 2002). As a matter of fact, each student

can have different ideas to be offered in the project rather than wait for the ideas suggested by his/her lecturer.

The findings also indicated that inserting culture into Academic Writing course had been very challenging. The students tried hard to make themselves understand how to insert culture into culture-based essays. They were truly motivated at generating ideas by searching from many sources such as textbooks, internet sources, TV, film, and video (Baker, 2012). In addition, Chen Su (2011) also confirmed that the subject of study was asked to recognize and re-evaluate stereotypical images portrayed in movies, TV series, and soap operas. One of essays' titles was taken from the film *'Pride and Prejudice'*. Thus, it showed that they were actually able to compose or write culture-based essays.

All in all, the students mostly agreed that incorporating culture through project based learning into the teaching of English, in this case writing changed either the lecturer's or the students' attitudes on learning. As stated by Saniel (2012) & Cakir (2006) that in teaching culture for foreign language, teachers need to be sensitive to the students' attitudes by using techniques that promote cultural understanding. They admitted that they were more independent, more critical and certainly enhanced their cultural understanding. They needed to prepare all things independently outside the classroom. The lecturer only monitored, checked, and confirmed whether they did on the track or not. He or she did not feed them by providing titles or references as usual. By doing so, the students automatically became more critical. Later, these positive attitudes lead to the terms of advantageous parts of the research findings.

In fact, the findings also showed that the problems were greatly faced by low proficiency students in terms of generating ideas and editing. They tended to be unfaithful in composing culture-based essays while being absent-minded to state clearly the sources and they relied much on the lecturer's supervision while editing session inside the classroom. They did not know what and how to correct their partner's essay. Thus, this situation could gradually be changed whenever the lecturer had maintained to apply project based learning in the teaching and learning process.

E. Conclusion

This section has elaborated the application of cultural project based learning to develop academic writing of the students of the English Department, College of Teacher Training and Education "PGRI" at Madiun, East Java (IKIP PGRI Madiun). The application cultural project based learning have developed students' academic writing only in terms of content and vocabulary, but it has not developed yet in terms of organization and language use. It helped the students to search for their interests on culture topics through the internet or other sources and continuously to generate ideas of composing a culture-based essay. This happened since the students were not accustomed to working

individually outside the classroom. They tended to rely on the topics given on the textbooks under supervision of the lecturer.

This research, however, helps the lecturer and the students such as the occurrence of positive attitude on learning. Firstly, the students became more independent and critical, for they had to search their own references to generate writing ideas. Secondly, the lecturer became sensitive and aware of the students' writing development. The lecturer needed to check every quotation used in the essays to eliminate plagiarism. It could increase the students' cultural understanding on either local culture or target culture.

With this respect, further studies may investigate the application of cultural project based learning to develop students' academic writing much longer for approximately one semester by assigning them to write more culture-based essays in order to get comprehensive and significant improvement on students' writing. Then, this present research can be considered as preliminary study for further investigation, since there are some problems and weaknesses revealed in applying cultural project based learning.

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