THE QUALITY OF UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' WRITING UNDER FREE WRITING TECHNIQUE

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ABSTRAT: *This action research is designed to overcome students' writing problem and to bring about changes on the quality of students' writing through the implementation of freewriting technique. Specifically, the research aimed to address two research questions: (1) Is there any improvement on students' writing quality through the implementation of free writing technique? (2) How is students' perception toward the implementation of free writing technique? The research was carried out at English Education Study Program, Dayanu Ikhsanuddin University, Indonesia, during academic-year 2015/2016 with 25 participants. The research was carried out in two cycles, and each cycle consists of three steps: planning, action, and observation. Writing tests were applied to collect data on students' writing performance, and students' perceptions toward the application of freewriting technique were gathered through interview. The data were analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively. The results of the research shows that: (1) students' writing quality is successful to be be improved in two cycles of the implementation of freewriting technique, and (2) and in general, students regard that their writing quality improve since freewriting technique is motivated, and the techique is also effective to reduce their writing anxiety. This implies that freewriting technique is significantly effective to improve students' writing quality.*

KEYWORDS: free writing technique, teaching writing, writing quality

INTRODUCTION

It is generally accepted that writing is the most difficult skill to learn. Elbow (1998:13) remarks that most people experience an awkward and sometimes paralyzing translating process in writing. Whereas, Nunan (1989) believes that writing is an extremely complex cognitive activity since the writer is required to demonstrate control of a number of variables simultaneously; at the sentence level, these include control of content, format, sentence structure, vocabulary, punctuation and letter for action, and beyond the sentence, the writer must be able to structure and integrate information into cohesive and coherent paragraph and texts. This could be the reasons why in learning writing, students will have a number of problems. Raimes (1983: 13) agrees that when students complain about how difficult it is to write in a second/foreign language, they are talking not only about the difficulty of finding the right words and using the correct grammar but also about the difficulty of finding and expressing ideas in a new language. Byrne (1984) mentions three causal factors of the difficulties in learning writing; they are (1) linguistic problem (the problems due to the use of standard language and writing convention); (2) psychological problem (the problem related to the fact that writing is a solitary activity in which we have to write our own without the possibility of interaction or the benefit of feedback); and (3) cognitive problems (the problem due to the need to master the written form of the

language and certain structures which are less use in speech, or perhaps not used at all but they are important for effective communication in writing).

However, apart from the problem that writing is difficult, the skill can be learned. Gardner (2008:10) states that everyone has capacity to write, writing can be taught, and everyone has an opportunity to become a professional writer if he learns to write because ability to write belongs to all people. Schneider (2011) asserts that anyone who is motivated to learn writing and always practice writing seriously will be able to write well because the difficulties in writing are due to lack of exercise. Elbow (2000) comments that students' success in learning to write is directly related to the support and guidance given in the exercise and assignment because a person may not be able to produce satisfy writing without effort and struggle.

Regarding to students' problems in writing, students of English Education Study Program (EESP) of Dayanu Ikhsanuddin University, Indonesia also experience the same case. Even though the students have had some courses focused on writing (Basic Writing, Writing 1, Writing 2, and Writing 3), however, the facts show that the quality of their writing (*i.e*, writing project, research report) is still unsatisfied. The products they produce are difficult to understand since the works are full of illogical, ambiguity, and run-on sentences.

As stipulated in the curriculum of EESP of Dayanu Ikhsanuddin University, Writing 3 is the last subject on writing which is given to the third-year students. This subject is offered to those who have passed Basic Writing, Writing 1, and Writing 2. It is assumed that the students already have enough background knowledge in writing. However, the data shows that most of the students of this program have low writing performance. The actual students' writing achievement which is shown in the grade of Writing 3 subject, especially for the three last academic-years (2014, 2015, and 2016) is presented in Table 1.

Table1. Students' Basic Writing Performance for the Last Three Year

Academic-Year	Grades								
	Success						Fail		
	A	A-	B+	B	B-	C+	C	D	E
	≥ 86	81-85	76-80	71-75	66-70	61-65	51-60	46-50	≤ 45
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
2014	2	1	8	6	18	24	25	12	4
2015	3	5	3	11	18	20	26	9	5
2016	2	6	7	10	13	26	19	14	3
Average	3.50	6	9	13.50	18.5	33	35	12.50	6
Total	46.50						53.50		

Source: Academic Bureau of English Education Study Program of Dayanu Ikhsanuddin University (April 2017)

Table 1 shows that during the last three years only 46.505 % of the students was successful in writing course. It is hypothesized that the students' difficulties in writing are close related to the lack of opportunities for them to explore and develop their own ideas in writing practice, as written by White (1991) that in teaching writing the quality of students' written work can be

affected by the amount of time they have. Time duration for classroom teaching and learning writing is 90 minutes each week for group of students consisting of 25 to 30 students. Probably, the students' problem in writing instead of the limited time duration it is also due to the teaching learning method implemented by the lecturer. Ideally, in teaching writing, it is necessary to consider students' background, the nature of the writing, and students' academic atmosphere. The teaching and learning method implemented in the classroom should create students to think critically and to involve actively in the teaching and learning process; the classroom atmosphere is not boring, monotonous, and dominated by the lecturer's role (Lee and Krashen, 2002).

One of the alternatives to improve students' writing quality is through the application of free writing technique. Some writers discuss the advantages of freewriting technique, and researcher on this technique found that it has several benefits, for example, promoting writing fluency (Stover, 1998), minimizing writing anxiety (Belanoff, *at.al*, 1991), and improve students' English proficiency (Penn and Lim, 2016).

As have been proved by some researchers that free writing is effective to promote writing fluency, the present study applies this technique to improve students' writing performance. This research aimed to address two research questions: (1) Is there any improvement on students' writing quality through the implementation of free writing technique? (2) How is students' perception toward the implementation of free writing technique?

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Teaching Writing
Writing, as stated by Rivers and Temperley (2007: 164), is associated with the use of grammar (e.g, subject-verb agreement, tense, and the use of the article, syntax (word order), and mechanics (spelling, punctuation, and handwriting), and the organization of ideas coherently. So that, based on this definition, teaching writing should be focused on activities that allow the students to practice using the appropriate words, correct grammar and mechanics, and clear organization of idea.

Scott, and Ytreberg (2002: 74) states that writing in a foreign language is useful, essential, integral, and enjoyable part of the foreign language lesson. One of the reasons to include writing in a second or foreign language syllabus, according to Reimes (1993) is that writing helps learners learn; it helps them have a chance to adventure with the language, to go beyond what they have learned. Hedge (1998:5) also states that a good deal of writing in the English language classroom is undertaken as an aid to learning; for example, to consolidate the learning of new structure or vocabulary or to help students remember new items of language. In this context, writing allows students to see their progress and get feedback from the teacher, and also allow teachers to monitor students and diagnose problems encountered. This shows that writing plays a predominant role in language learning. However, compare to speech, effective writing requires a number of things: a high degree of organization in the development of idea and information; a high degree of accuracy in grammar and vocabulary use so there is no ambiguity of meaning; the use of complex grammatical devices to focus and emphasis; and a careful choice of vocabulary, grammatical patterns, and sentence structure to create a style which is appropriate to subject matter an eventual readers (Hedge, 1998).

Heffernan and Lincoln (2010:3) remark that writing skill is a communication tool that must be consciously learned. Writing and speaking, as described by Lado (1986: 143-144), are both

productive skills; however, the nature of the two types of learning these skills is relatively different. We learned to speak naturally and automatically to imitate the sound we hear from the people around us; however, we cannot learn to write automatically. Even we cannot write a word without any conscious effort of the mind and hand; we have to be taught how to form letters. We must be taught how to spell a word and how to arrange the words into a sentence as well as the placement of punctuation.

Furthermore, Harmer (2007:112) notes that the logical reason of teaching writing is to give students opportunity to sharpen their though in language processing spontaneously. It brings benefits for students, for example: (1) as a good way to help develop students' ability of using vocabulary and grammar, increasing the ability of using language; (2) as an essential tool to support other skills because if a student has good writing ability, they can speak and read text more effectively; (3) as a away to approach modern information technology as well as the human knowledge. Rao (2007) states that EFL writing is useful in two respects: First, it motivates students' thinking, organizing ideas, developing their ability to summarize, analyze and criticize. Second, it strengthens students' learning thinking and reflecting on English language.

Byrne (2010: 6-7) describes the pedagogical benefits of learning to write, namely: **first**, writing exercise gives students a variety of needs and different ways of learning. Some learners, especially those who are not easily learned by what she heard orally, feel better if he read and write in the language being studied. For this type of students, writing can help memory, if only because they feel more comfortable and relaxed; **second**, the writing students produced is a realization about their progress in learning the target language; **third**, exposure to foreign languages through more than one medium is more effective than just depend on one medium. Writing also gives diversity in the classroom activity, an interlude of oral activity, and increase the frequency of language contact through work that can be done outside of the classroom; **fourth**, writing often needed to formal and informal tests.

Furthermore, according to hedge (1988: 5) that the reason to include writing in a second/foreign language syllabus is that writing helps learners learn; it is undertaken as an aid to learning; for example, to consolidate the learning of new structure or vocabulary, and to help students remember new items of language.

With reference to the theories that have been reviewed, it can be concluded that teaching writing to students is a processes and activities designed to help students acquire the ability to convey ideas and concepts in the form of written language.

Free Writing Technique

In the simplest terms, free writing refers to the act of writing quickly for a set of time from ten to fifteen minutes, just putting down whatever is in mind, without pausing and worrying about what words to use, and without going back to modify what has been written because the goal of frewriting is the process, not the product. This technique has been viewed and used as a powerful technique for developing students' writing (Elbow, 1984: 13).

For the first time the idea of free writing was suggested by Brande (1934). Later, Elbow (1971) in, his book *Writing without Teacher*, developed it as a technique in writing exercise, and it has been popularized by Cameron through her book *The Artist's way* (1992). According to the proponents of this technique, freewriting is a prewriting technique in which a person writes

continuously for a set period of time without regard to spelling, grammar, or topic. Free writing is based on a presumption that while everybody has something to say and the ability to say it, however, the mental wellspring may be blocked by apathy, self-criticism, resentment, anxiety about deadlines, fear of failure or censure, or other forms of resistance. Cole (2001) states that the accepted rules of freewriting enables a writer to build up enough momentum to blast past blocks into uninhibited flow. In doing freewriting a person produces raw, often unusable material, but helps him overcome blocks of apathy and self-criticism.

The essential rules of freewriting that are often formulated for the beginners or students, as proposed by Goldberg (1998) are summarized in four points: (1) give a time limit, for example, write for one or ten or twenty minutes, and then stop; (2) keep hand moving until the time is up; do not pause to stare into space or to read what you've written; write quickly but not in a hurry; (3) pay no attention to grammar, spelling, punctuation, neatness, or style: nobody else needs to read what someone produce here; the correctness and quality of what we write do not matter; the act of writing does; (4) if someone gets off the topic or runs out of ideas, keep writing anyway; if necessary, write nonsense or whatever comes into our head, or simply scribble: anything to keep the hand moving; (5) if we feel bored or uncomfortable as we're writing, ask yourself what's bothering you and write about that; (6) when the time is up, look over what you've written, and mark passages that contain ideas or phrases that might be worth keeping or elaborating on in a subsequent free-writing session.

Futhermore, Elbow (1998: 14-15) elaborates several benefits of freewriting, especially for language class; *i.e*, (1) freewriting makes writing easier by helping learner with the root psychological or existential difficulty in writing: finding words in his/her head and putting them down on a blank piece of paper; (2) freewriting is the best way to learn to separate the producing process from revising process; (3) free writing is a good way to warm up to make time effective and help student find words easily; (4) freewriting is a useful outlet of feelings; and (5) freewriting is one of the alternatives to improve learners' writing performance.

There are two types of free writing technique; they are: (1) unfocused free writing: the writer chooses the topic and is free to shift from subject to subject Often this is used to generate ideas for a piece of writing on any topic of the writer's choice; (2) focused free writing: the writer focuses attention on a specific subject, often in response to an assigned task. Focused free writing is often used in classrooms. Free writing activities enable students to try out their language in a freer way. However, since the more language the children have, the easier it is to work on free writing activities (Scott, and Ytreberg (2002: 74).

METHOD

Participants
This research was designed using action research with a cyclic approach. Each cycle, which is adapted from Kemmis and McTaggart (1998) involving: planning, action, and reflection. The research was carried out at English Education Study Program, Dayanu Ikhsanuddin University, Indonesia, during academic-year 2015/2016. Participants were 25 students of group who participate in Writing 3 class. They had two 90-minute sessions per week over a 12-week semester for this class.

Procedure

Free writing activity was incorporated in writing class for 12 weeks. Before the technique was applied, a pre-test was given to students to measure their prior writing achievement. The quality of students' writing was measured using scoring rubric adopted from Ferris and Hedgcock (2011: 313), with the score range 13 to 100.

This research was carried out into two cycles, and each cycle covers 5 sessions which was implemented in 5 weeks. At the end of cycle 1 the test was held to measure whether the students have had significant improvement compared with the results of pre-test or not. The result of the computation indicated that the research needs to be continued to the cycle since it still does not meet the criteria of successfulness yet. To note that the criteria of the success is minimum 76 basis point or B category. The students were required to write their idea in 300 to 400 words by choosing one of the topics prepared. The students have to hand on their work after 15 minutes.

Instruments

There were two kinds of instruments used to collect data; they were writing test and interview guide. Writing test, which was consisted of (1) pre-test; (2) post-test of cycle 1; and (3) post-test of cycle were given to measure students' prior writing achievement, and their writing achievement after the application of cycle 1, and cycle 2.   Through out the tests, the students were required to write their opinion (in 300 to 400 words) by choosing one of the topics provided. They have 90 minutes to produce their product in which 15 minutes   for freewriting on the topic, 40 minutes for writing their product, and 35 minutes re-writing their final product. Meanwhile, the interview was conducted to dig up students' perception regarding to the application of free writing technique. The interview was held at the end of the application of the technique, and it was focused on digging up students' perception on the practicality and the advantages of the technique.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

a.   The results of pre-test

As aforementioned, pre-test was carried out to measure students' prior writing achievements. It also functions as a blueprint to stipulate the criteria of the successfulness of the implementation of free writing technique. Table 2 presents the result of pre-test.

Table 2. Data Distribution of Students' Writing Achievement in Pre-test

Range	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
≥ 81	Very Good	0	0
71-80	Good	1	4
61-70	Fair	4	16
46-60	Poor	17	48
≤ 45	Very Poor	3	12
Total		25	100
Average		47.66	

Table 2 reveals that the mean score achieved was 47.66. Most of the students (48 %) have poor writing achievement, 18 % have very poor category, and only 16 % of them (4 of 25 students)

have fair category. There was only 4 % (1 student) has good category, and none of them falls in very good category.

Cycle 1 was ended with the application of post-test where the students were required to write their response on one of the problems presented. The distribution of students' writing achievement in post-test of the cycle 1 in shown in Table 3.

Table 3. **Data Distribution of Students' Writing Achievement in Post-test of Cycle 1**

Range	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
≥ 81	Very Good	0	0
71-80	Good	2	8
61-70	Fair	15	60
46-60	Poor	7	28
≤ 45	Very Poor	1	4
Total		25	100
Average		65.98	

Based on the table, it was found that 8 % of the students have good category, 60 % of the students get fair category, 28 % of them in poor category, and 4 % of them still have very poor category. Compared to Table 1 in terms of poor category, there is any reduction in number. In pre-test, as shown in Table 2, there were 48 % (17 students) get poor category; however, after the implementation of cycle 1, the amount decreased to be 28 % (7 students). In terms of very poor category, it was any decrease in number as well (from 12% to be 4%). Meanwhile, the average score rose up from 47.66 to be 65.98. The results of post-test on cycle 1 exposed that there were relatively any improvement on students' writing performance compared to pre-test, however, it still does not meet the indicator of the successfulness stipulated (75.00) basis point. Therefore, the implementation of the technique still needs to be continued to cycle 2.

The implementation of the cycle 2 was preceded by evaluation and reflection on cycle 1. It was conducted to find out any shortcomings regarding to the application of the technique that need to be revised. The revisions were focused on (1) time allocation for free writing was prolonged from 15 to be 20 minutes; (2) the length of writing was reduced from range of words 300 to 400 words to be 250 to 350 words; (3) feedback on students' writing add corrections and suggestions.Moreover, the results of post-test conducted at the end of cycle 2 indicated that the mean scored achieved was 77.21. Most of the students (60 %) have had fair category, and only a few of them (8 %) was still in poor category but none of them has very poor category.

Table 4. **Data Distribution of Students' Writing Achievement in Post-test of Cycle 2**

Range	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
≥ 81	Very Good	2	8
71-80	Good	6	24
61-70	Fair	15	60
46-60	Poor	2	8
≤ 45	Very Poor	0	0
Total		25	100
Average		76.21	

Compared to Table 3 in terms of good category writing achievement, there is any significant increase in number from 8% to be 24%. It also proved that 8 % of the students have reached very good category which cannot be reached in cycle 1. Meanwhile, the average score raised up from 65.98 to be 76.21. The results of post-test on cycle 2 exposes that there were relatively any significant improvement compared to post-test 1, and it already meet the indicator of the successfulness (75.00) basis point. Therefore, the implementation of free writing technique in improving students' writing performance is successful in two cycles.

Furthermore, students' perception concerning to the application of free writing, basically, can be summarized in main points; they are (1) the technique is helpful because it can reduce their writing anxiety; (2) the technique is effective since it makes them focus their attention without any pressure; (3) they are free to explore their idea without afraid of making mistakes and making bad grade; (4) it is fun because they can flow their idea freely; (5) it is motivated because all of the class member have to come up with their own writing; and (6) it is more practical because it can train their writing skill regularly.

DISCUSSION

As stated previously, the objective of this research is to improve students' writing quality through the implementation of free writing technique. The results of the research showed that students' writing quality can be improved significantly in two cycles of the implementation of the technique. This is relevant to the results of the study conducted by Penn & Lim (2016) stated that as the students did freewrote, they were able to write longer and use more varied words over time. Li (2014) also concluded that freewriting can be a powerful tool engage students in continual writing practice through with the students enhanced their understanding of the nature and process of academic writing; they become more aware of personal strengths and difficulties in writing, and thus developed more confidence in academic writing. In accordance with this conclusion, Rosenberg (1989: 74) believes that freewriting is a useful strategy that can help students generate material to write about.

Furthermore, students' improvement in writing is due to the benefit of freewriting which can be a helpful technique for students to get words in paper easily since lack of sufficient English language proficiency can shake students' self-confidence, leading to writing anxiety, and it will make writing less blocked because words will come more easily so freewriting can be an effective way to reduce students' writing anxiety Elbow (1998). Some researchers reported that writing anxiety had a negative impact on grades of writing test (Daly, 1985; Lee & Krashen, 1997).

The improvement of students' writing after two cycles of the implementation of freewriting technique is also related to the opportunity for students to do some exercises during the application of free writing technique. It means that freewriting exercise give the students more opportunity to do writing practice. As a warm-up activity, freewriting is designed to give students language, ideas, and encouragement before they settle down to the writing itself (Scott and Ytreberg, 2002: 75). Vivanco (2009) asserts that the best way to learn a language is by using it, so practice is better than theory.

Freewriting exercises can build students' writing habit. Many students either think or say that they cannot or do not want to write. This may be because of they lack confidence, think it is boring or believe they have 'nothing to say'. Freewriting activities involve them in writing

process with enthusiasm. Gardner (2008:10) asserts that the success of students in writing is directly releted to execises, direction, and motivation given by their teachers. It is impossible for someone to produce a good piece of writing without exercises, motivation, and sruggle. Finally, as part of the writing process, free writing can help improve the teaching composition by calling attention to planning and discovery prewriting is the stage before words emerge on paper; writing is the stage in which a product is being produced; and re-writing is a final reworking of that product (Flower and Hayes, 1981).

CONCLUSION

The main intention of this research is to overcome students' writing problems and to bring about changes on the quality of students' writing through the implementation of freewriting technique. After two cycles of implementation of the technique, students' writing performance improve significantly. In other words, students' writing quality is successful to be be improved in two cycles of te implementation of freewriting technique.

Frrewriting technique is effective to improve students' writing quality due to the folowing reasons: (1) the tehnique is effective to reduce students' writing anxiety; (2) it facilitas learnerss to focus in exploring their idea; (3) the technique is motivated; and (4) it is a practice technique to train learners' writing skill regularly.

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