STRENGTHENING STUDENTS' LITERACY THROUGH REFLECTIVE ESSAY WRITING: AN IMPLEMENTATION OF WRITING TO READ PROGRAM IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract:
Literacy is a condition where a person has capability to read for knowledge, write to share knowledge, and think critically. Students' literacy is a never-end issue in the field of English Language Teaching. Studies have been carried out to investigate literacy practices in various level of education including higher education. Among the problems of students' literacy in higher education are the amount of their reading and writing practices and their motivation to read and write. The current paper is intended to share an experience in strengthening students' literacy at the English Department of State Islamic Institute (Institut Agama Islam Negeri/IAIN) Tulungagung, East Java. The preliminary investigation of the present study revealed that many students have low motivation to read. In addition, their comprehension was relatively low as represented in their paper works. Under a Classroom Action Research Design, the present study was conducted to propose writing to read program to strengthen the students' literacy. In such program, the students were required to write a reflective essay based on the selected topics that they had to read prior to classes. The findings showed that writing reflective essay helped students strengthen their literacy as well as improve their motivation to read and to write because the reading and writing activities were done in a more relax and supportive environment that

was at home.
Keywords*: literacy, writing to read program, higher education*

Literacy which is commonly defined the state of being able to read and write is a long lasting issue in the field of second language teaching. In a specific term, being literate means that someone is able to comprehend various texts of various purposes, to share knowledge in a written form, and to think critically. Fifty years ago, high school graduates could find good job easily. In such era, good jobs did not require high level of reading ability because most of them relied on the physical strength and fitness. However, with the development of information and digital technology, at present, many jobs require the ability to operate the products of technology like computer or internet. Hence, being literate or even multi literate is a must to make an individual able to keep in pace with global development (Mazzoni & Gambrell, 2003, p.17). To respond to such need, numerous literacy programs have been carried out and come up with various recommendations. The recommendation is, for instance, early literacy should be organized systematically and concentrate of some elements including phonemic awareness, phonics, comprehension, vocabulary, and fluency (NRP, 2000). In relation to adolescent literacy, Lewis and Fabos (2000) suggest that the teachers make use of multiple types of literacy, instant message services and internet uses, into classroom instruction because they are unavoidable realities in the modern era.

Literacy does not only embrace the ability to comprehend texts. Being able to communicate in a written form, however, is another part of literacy. The rate of literacy in Indonesia can be said as high, 87,9% in 2002, even though it is lower than the neighboring countries such as Thailand, Malaysia, Philippine, and Vietnam (Jalal & Sardjunani, 2006, p.1) However, the rate of reading interest of Indonesian is very low. The survey from UNESCO reveals that the level of reading interest of Indonesian people is 0,001. This means that only 1 person among 1000 people has reading interest (gobekasi.

co.id, May 19, 2017). This surprising fact requires the people working in the realm of education to focus on literacy teaching.

Literacy education is not only essential for children but also for adult. The Indonesian government, through the constitution, has guaranteed literacy education as human investment that will succeed in developing quality nation in the future. To realize it, despite the changes of curriculum, literacy has always been put as the priority. In the document of revised 2013 curriculum, the level of literacy is functional and informational for junior high school and senior high school, respectively. In addition, for students in university, they must show their being multi literate (The regulation the Ministry of Research and Higher Education No 44/2015). Numerous studies report the importance of prioritizing literacy in instruction. Literacy program ranges from out of school English literacy activities (Darmawati et al, 2016; Iftanti, 2009; Setiasih, 2014), the use of various teaching techniques (Giyoto, 2009; Ratih, 2014; Yulianto, 2016;) and technology utilization (Hanip & Saadah, 2014; Heriyawati et al., 2016; Rizkiyah, 2016; Suparmi, 2014). All the preceding studies point out the success in teaching literacy to the students of various levels of literacy. However, not many studies are conducted in relation strengthening students' literacy as well as fostering students' learning autonomy.

In the context of higher education, improving students' literacy is a never-end issue. With the development of technology, especially social media, there is shift of the trend in the strategy of seeking information. Students prefer to searching information through the help of browser rather than reading book. However, the fact that not much information in the internet is written by credible writers requires the students to have habit in reading various books. It is not enough to rely on the information presented in the internet. Meanwhile, teaching literacy in higher education is not without problems. Low motivation, low reading habit, and rare writing practice are among the problems appearing in reading and writing classes. Similar problems also occur in other classes. The present study was conducted in

a class where students were required to read and write in a large amount, Contemporary English Language Teaching. In such class the students were exposed to reading some relevant books and made group presentation. The preliminary observation of the present study revealed that the students had low motivation. In addition, most of the students did not read the materials prior to class. Some students stated that they only read the materials they had to present. Their writing ability was also relatively low as represented in their paper works. Thus it was considered to provide an intervention that helped students read and write better.

Writing to read program was proposed to overcome students' problem of low motivation and low amount of reading and writing practices. This program integrated the activity of reading the teaching materials and writing a report of the texts the students had read. Research report from Carr (2002) cited in Graham& Hebert (2010) proved that in a writing to read program named as *Reading Next,* writing instruction improved reading comprehension and that the teaching of writing skills such as grammar and spelling reinforces reading skills. It is also believed that writing about a text improves comprehension, as it helps students make connections between what they read, know, understand, and think. Studies by Chang & Sung (2002), Graham & Hebert (2010), Langer, J. A. & Applebee, A. N. (1987), and Rinehart, S. D., Stahl, S. A., & Erickson, L. G. (1986) suggest that writing to read program is applicable in reading and writing instruction because in such program, writing practices can be a tool for strengthening students reading comprehension. In relation to the problems investigated in the present study, a writing to read program is expected to provide an alternative to overcome the abovementioned problems.

METHOD

The present study was carried out by employing a classroom action research (CAR) design. The type of CAR employed was *individual teacher research* since there was a single focus in the study that was classroom

instruction. This study was conducted in two cycles, comprising of some steps, namely, planning, implementing, observing, and reflecting. The study was conducted in the English Department of IAIN (State Islamic Institute) of Tulungagung, East Java in the odd semester of the academic year 2016/2017. The research was carried out in a content class named Contemporary English Language Teaching, a class in which the students learn information about English language and its teaching. This means that material covers large area of information.

FINDINGS

Prior to going to the planning step, the researcher went to a diagnostic stage to analyze the students' problem of literacy by distributing questionnaires to dig out the real problem they have in CELT class. The preliminary observation was carried out by distributing questionnaires to the 35 students of CELT class. The results were presented in the following table.

Table 1. The student's problems dealing with reading and assignment.

No	Questions	Checklist		
		Yes	No	Doubt
1	I have good achievements in reading and writing courses	18	17	-
2	I read all the textbooks suggested by the lecturers	5	28	2
3	I always the material prior to the class/a night before)	5	28	2
4	I do not read because the materials are too difficult	25	-	10
5	I do not read because the materials are too much and all the lecturers assign me to read	26	4	5
6	I do not read textbooks because I prefer to search information through internet	29	1	5
7	Reading is not fun for me	30	5	-
8	I always take note on the lecturers' explanation	18	17	
9	I always contribute in the group discussion by writing some ideas	20	10	5
10	I think my writing is good	7	25	3

Based on the table above it can be inferred that most of the students had a problem with reading and writing. There were three serious problems to overcome. They were low motivation, low reading comprehension, and low writing ability. The students have low motivation to read because they did not have good habit reading. The low motivation affected their reading comprehension as represented by their low score in the formative tests. Their low reading comprehension affected the quality of their writing as represented in their paper works. Not many students had good achievement.

The planning stage of this program was started by socializing the program to the students. In such stage, the students got information about the task they had to accomplish. The students received a list of topics they had to read. The order of topics to be read and written was based on the order of the topics to be discussed in the CELT class. The students also got the explanation and the model of reflective essay. In this stage also, the criteria of success were determined; they were (1) 75% of the students engaged in the classroom discussion, (2) 75% of the students achieved the score >75. In the implementing stage, the students were to read a topic in the textbook and write a reflective essay every week. The students were also given a guideline about how to write the reflective essay. In the present study the reflective essay had to contain a summary and the students' comment/opinion/conclusion about the topic they have read. The total number of the texts to be read and written was 10. After the first 5 weeks doing reading and writing activity, the students had a mid-term test. The result of the test then was analyzed to determine the students' achievement and their quality of writing as well.

The observing stage was done by checking the students' answers and analyzing their written answers. In addition to it, students' increase of motivation was also carefully observed. In this case, students' motivation was represented by their participation in the classroom discussion. As it was mentioned previously that this study employed an *individual teacher research*, the researcher did the observation herself during the process of classroom discussion. It was easy to conduct the observation due to the

characteristic of the class which was full of group presentation. Students who were highly motivated in the classroom could be seen from their participation in asking or answering the questions. The students' answers were checked and their writings were analyzed based on some aspects, namely, idea, grammar, and choice of word.

The reflection stage was done by analyzing the result of observing students' learning motivation as reflected by their classroom participation and the quality of the students' answers. The result of the reflection stage determined the next stage whether the research was stopped or continued.

DISCUSSION

Description of Cycle 1

Cycle 1 consisted of 5 meetings. The students started writing the reflective essay on the third week. This was done because the first three meeting were used to lecture them and explained the program. The students submitted a reflective essay per week. The feedback containing the comments of content and language use in the reflective essay was given every week. The result of the observation of the students' motivation revealed that the students were more active from meeting to meeting. This was because they had read the material so that they gained more confidence to ask and answer question during the group discussion. In addition, the reading activity in the writing to read program could be classified as guided reading and the result was good. The reading activity was done at home and prior to reading the students have got explanation about what to read and how to take notes as well as how to develop the notes into a reflective essay. More than 60% of the students have good scores (more than 75) in their mid-term test. This findings confirm Brown's (2007) research with suggest that guided reading can increase students' achievement in reading. In addition, the findings of the cycle 1 confirm the recommendation of Graham& Hebert (2010) about the writing practices which can improve reading includes having the students write about the texts. It was proven in the present study that students'

knowledge and skill improved when they were engaged in writing a response of a text, making a summary, and writing notes about the text.

Despite the improvement of the students' ability, the criteria of the success had not yet achieved as proven by the percentage of the students' motivation and scores. The result on the observation session showed that only the students who had high score in the mid-term test were engaged actively in the classroom discussion. In addition, in terms of the quality, some students did not yet write the idea completely and write their comments about the text they read. Therefore, the strategy to write the reflective essay needed to be revised. With regard to Ausubel's (1968) theory of advance organizers, the revision came up in the form developing a concept map prior to writing the reflective essay. So, the students were guided to write a concept-map, or mind-map prior to writing their reflective essay. Using concept-map or mind map was considered better than taking notes of the text because it was more systematic and therefore it was more helpful for the students to develop their idea.

Description of Cycle 2

Based on the result of the reflection in Cycle 1, it was found out that the criteria of success were not yet achieved and the revision was on the strategy in writing the reflective paragraph by using concept map. In Cycle 2, thus, the students were guided to develop a concept map and a mind-map. They might choose one of the mapping processes based on their preference. The cycle consisted of 5 meetings. Similar to practices in cycle 1 the students were obliged to submit one reflective essay every meeting. However, the students should attach the concept map of the reflective essay. To check their progress, a test (final examination) was administered. The test was designed to measure their comprehension of the materials covered in CELT class and in the form subjective test in which the students had to explain their answer.

The result of the observation stage revealed that in terms of their motivation, there was an increase of students' motivation. More than 75% of the students participate actively during the classroom discussion. It seemed

that they were readier to join the class and have sufficient background knowledge about the topic. The students' scores also increase significantly. More than 75% of the students get scores >75. It can be concluded that the modification of the strategy, by having the student make a concept map, made the students' reflective essay better.

The findings in cycle 1 and cycle 2 revealed that writing to read program brought some benefits for the students especially in strengthening their literacy. Having students to write the text they read could improve their comprehension since they made harder efforts in understanding ideas in the text. In addition, writing the reflective essay made them learn how to produce a cohesive and coherent text. In other words, they got practice that will strengthen literacy. This finding confirmed Graham & Hebert's (2010:9) research which proved writing to read program does increase reading ability. Their study revealed that there was consistent and positive effect for writing about what is read. Further, Graham & Hebert note that such program brings significant effect for low achieving students. The present study proved such state. The low achieving students who previously had low motivation and did not participate actively in the classroom discussion became active participants. It seemed that their well preparation prior to class brought effect on their behavior in the classroom.

The implementation of writing to read program was not without weakness. It was that in cycle 1 that the students found difficulty in organizing ideas into good composition. It implied that the program should be modified in such a way that students found it easier in writing reflective essay so that writing activity became fun. The use of concept map/mind-mapping was an alternative to solve such kind of problem. Such kind of advance organizer was helpful in the process of comprehending texts and developing ideas. Mind mapping is a form of a graphic organizer which has been recommended as a way to scaffold meaningful learning for students (Buzan, 1993). Such mapping technique would seem to be particularly suited to helping students in

planning their writing as the approach encourages students to reach for and adapt a deeper level of understanding of the writing topics. The findings of Cycle 2 confirm this theory. Students understood the text better and wrote in a more organized way.

CONCLUSION

Implementing writing to program is in fact helpful to strengthen students' literacy. This program combined reading activity and writing activity in the form of writing reflective essay after the students reading particular topic. The students were encouraged to read the learning materials as well as write their conclusion or opinion about the topic. Such experience increased their learning autonomy because they had to manage their own learning. The writing to read program gained its effective use by modifying it making a concept/mind-map before writing the reflective essay. Mapping technique was helpful in organizing ideas and developing them into a good essay. In addition, students' motivation in learning increased significantly since they were more prepared with the materials. The students also showed higher self confidence in the classroom discussion.

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