
USING 'PROBLEMS' TO PROMOTE STUDENTS' WRITING SKILLS IN EFL

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Abstrak

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengetahui dampak pembelajaran berbasis masalah (PBL) terhadap keterampilan menulis siswa dan pengaruhnya terhadap proses pembelajaran bahasa Inggris. Penelitian ini menggunakan desain penelitian kombinasi (embedded mixed-method) yang melibatkan 41 siswa kelas VII SMP Negeri 4 Denpasar. Dalam penelitian ini, data kuantitatif dari keterampilan menulis siswa diperoleh melalui tes tulis yang kemudian dianalisa dengan metode statistik deskriptif dan uji t sampel berpasangan. Sedangkan, data kualitatif diperoleh dari hasil kuisioner dan catatan lapangan yang memfasilitasi pengamatan kegiatan belajar mengajar. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan terdapat perbedaan yang signifikan dalam kemampuan menulis siswa antara sebelum dan sesudah mengikuti kegiatan pembelajaran berbasis masalah (PBL). Masalah yang digunakan dalam kegiatan pembelajaran berbasis masalah tersebut terbukti mampu menstimulus siswa untuk menghasilkan tulisan dengan konten yang terorganisir dengan lebih baik. Selama mengikuti kegiatan pembelajaran berbasis masalah, siswa tampak aktif bertukar pendapat/gagasan dan menuangkannya dalam bentuk tulisan secara kolaboratif. Secara tidak langsung hal tersebut mengkonfirmasi bahwa pembelajaran berbasis masalah mampu meningkatkan keterampilan siswa dalam bekerja sama.

Kata Kunci: pembelajaran berbasis masalah, menulis, keterampilan bekerja sama

Abstract

This study aimed at investigating the impact of problem-based learning (PBL) on students' writing skills and the process of teaching and learning. An embedded mixed-method design was applied involving 41 seventh grade students of SMP Negeri 4 Denpasar. In this study, the quantitative data were students' writing skills which were collected through writing test. The students' writing were scored by using analytical scoring rubric. Then, the acquired data were analyzed statistically by using descriptive statistics and paired sample t-test. Meanwhile, the qualitative data were obtained from classroom observation which was facilitated by field notes; and questionnaire administration which was facilitated by open-ended questionnaire. The results revealed significant difference in students' writing skills before and after the study. Problems were found to stimulate them to produce better content and organization of writing. During PBL activities, students were observed to actively share ideas and work collaboratively in composing their writing. Such a classroom situation has brought an implication that PBL obviously managed to improve students' collaborative learning skills.

Keywords: problem-based learning, writing, collaborative skills

1. INTRODUCTION

In educational field, the use of traditional approach has been considered old-fashioned since it brings insignificant impact on students' development. The current trend in education is more to student-centered which requires the students to be more active during teaching learning process (Khalid and Azeem, 2012). Indonesian Ministry of Education and Culture has been trying to adopt the concept of student-centered learning through the implementation of Curriculum 2013 which applies scientific approach as its foundation. The use of scientific approach is expected to provide student-centered learning process which helps the students become active learners (Wijayanthi, 2016). The implementation of scientific approach in the classroom can be facilitated by three learning methods. One of them is acknowledged as Problem-Based Learning (PBL), which has been claimed to allow students to develop their critical thinking and problem-solving skills (Surif, Ibrahim, and Mokhtar, 2013; Coffin, 2013; Sungur and Tekkaya, 2006; Tan, 2003; Hmelo-Silver, 2004)

Problem-Based learning was originally introduced by Howard Barrows (1986) to facilitate students' learning in medical school. It was designed for graduate medical school program. The idea derived from the issue that students graduated with abundance of information without possessing necessary problem solving skills to use effectively. Its successful implementation led its expansion across other disciplines not only in medical field, but also other fields including education. In later development, PBL is defined as a teaching method which involves real-world problems that trigger learning and optimize the power of problems to incorporate key learning processes (Tan, 2003). In PBL, the problems are used to provide students with opportunities to build their knowledge by themselves. They then develop and reconstruct their own knowledge from prior and new knowledge and experiences through self-directed learning, collaborative learning, and presentation activities. The problems should be relevant and should have function as a learning motivator and it guides the students to discover the desire information and learn the important concepts and principles, so that the course goals and objectives could be achieved (Tan, 2003; Jurkovic, 2005). In addition, problems presented in PBL learning model should be able to foster flexible-thinking and support intrinsic motivation (Hmelo-Silver, 2004). To foster flexible thinking, problems need to be complex, ill-structured, and open-ended. Then, to support intrinsic motivation, problems should be realistic and related to students' experiences. A good problem provides feedback that enables students to evaluate the effectiveness of their knowledge, reasoning, and learning strategies. In addition, the problem solutions should be complex enough which requires students to associate many interrelated pieces and should motivate the students' need to know and learn.

In more particular application i.e. EFL writing class, the use of problems greatly influences the development of students' writing skills. It plays prominent role to activate students' prior knowledge toward the topic they should write. In addition, it enables them to develop and grow their imaginations (Dharma, 2014). By having imaginations, they could explore and then convey their ideas into a good writing composition creatively. From this elaboration, it could be inferred that problems provided in PBL could facilitate the students to generate a high quality writing product.

However, based on the preliminary classroom observation conducted in SMP 4 Denpasar, it was revealed that the teacher seemed to put less concern on using problems to help students develop their writing skills. It was seen from the learning activities in which students were required to complete the tasks/worksheets as provided on their textbook. The tasks were as simple as creating some sentences by using "there is/are + noun" without having any challenging part which stimulate them to think critically and put their creative ideas into writing. As the result, the students were apparently unable to produce a wide-ranged writing composition.

In addition, the teaching and learning process was revealed not to apply the principles of PBL which emphasize student-centered classroom. The teaching and learning process was more likely to be teacher-centered in nature. The teacher was noticeable to be dominant along the teaching and learning process. This domination made the students passive and excessively depended on the teacher as the main source of knowledge. They quietly sat and waited for their teacher explanations or instructions without showing active participation. Besides, the provided learning activities did not

seem to encourage students to actively develop their own knowledge through self-directed learning or group discussion.

Considering the significances of PBL which had been previously mentioned, this article aimed at investigating the impact of Problem-Based Learning on students' writing skill and the teaching and learning process.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study applied an embedded mixed-method design. The population of this study consisted of 443 seventh grade students from SMP Negeri 4 Denpasar which divided into 11 classes. Among 11 classes, Class VII4 which consisted of 41 students was selected as the sample of this study by employing cluster random sampling.

In relation to the design of this research, the data collection was carried out before, during and after the treatment. Data were obtained by using three types of instruments including writing test, field notes and questionnaire. Writing test was given twice: (1) before conducting the treatment in order to figure out students' initial writing skills (pretest); (2) after the treatment in order to investigate the impact of PBL on students' writing skills (posttest). The writing test was in the form instruction in which the students were required to write a short paragraph related to certain topic in a piece of paper. To record how the implementation of PBL influenced the teaching and learning process, field notes were employed during conducting the treatment. Another instrument, the questionnaire with open-ended types was distributed at the end of the meeting during conducting the treatment. It consisted of three questions to which the respondent answered by elaborating their feeling, impressions and opinions after having PBL activities.

Different methods of data analysis were employed since this study involved the collection of both qualitative and quantitative data. The qualitative data of this research were analyzed through three concurrent flows of activities including data reduction, data display and conclusion drawing/verification proposed by Miles and Huberman (1994). Meanwhile, the quantitative data were analyzed descriptively through SPSS ver. 23 for windows. More specifically, paired-sample t-test was conducted to perform further statistical analysis in investigating the impact of PBL on students' writing skills.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The impact of PBL on students' writing skills

This section presents and discusses the results of the students' writing in the pretest and posttest. Table 1 pointed out that the mean score of students' writing in the pre-test was 58.05 (SD = 11.032). The lowest score achieved by the student was 36; meanwhile the highest was 80. In the post-test, the mean score of students' writing showed improvement (M = 78.34, SD = 8.147). The highest score was 96; meanwhile the lowest was 60.

Table 1. Pre- and post-test scores for writing test

Performance	Mean	Std. Deviation	Maximum	Minimum
Writing (pre-test)	58.05	11.032	80	36
Writing (post-test)	78.34	8.147	96	60

Those improvements indicated that the implementation of PBL brought an impact on students' writing skill. Most of the students had successfully developed better writing skill compared to the earlier stage before conducting the treatment. Furthermore, this finding was statistically confirmed by the result of paired sample t-test as displayed in Table 2.

Table 2. Paired sample t-test for students' writing scores before and after the treatment

	Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
				Lower	Upper			
Writing Pre-test Post-test	-20.293	9.226	1.441	-23.205	-17.381	-14.084	40	.000

From the table's legend, the t-value of -14.084 and p-value of $0.000 < 0.05$, indicated that there was a significant difference in students' writing skills after the treatment. It statistically revealed that the implementation of PBL enabled students to possess better writing skills.

In addition, the result of another analysis revealed that PBL affected the development on students' writing mainly in term of content and organization. First, in term of content, 31 out 41 students (75.6 %) managed to produce a well-composed writing within clear main idea and accurate elaboration of supporting details. Then, the rest 10 students (24.4 %) were noticed to construct their writing in a good composition by providing clear main idea and its supporting details sufficiently. This indicated that the majority of students exhibited a satisfying development in stating their ideas and providing better supporting details for their writing. Second, in term of organization, there were 8 students (19.5 %) whose writing composition was completely well-organized and perfectly coherent. Then, 27 students (65.9 %) were noticed to organize their ideas and compose it into writing coherently. This indicated that most of students were considered to be capable of arranging their ideas into an effective and coherent composition of writing.

From the elaboration above, it could be inferred that problems enable students to produce better content and organization of writing. It helps them explore their imaginations and creative ideas for developing broader elaboration in their writing. This means that there is a close connection between problems and writing development in which problems enable the students to develop and grow their imaginations so that they are able to write creatively (Dharma, 2014). Furthermore, problems are exploited as a stimulus for the students to help them develop their writing (Perry, 2005; Dastgeer and Afzal, 2015). It could stimulate them to present and elaborate their ideas more critically so that they are able to generate an extensive writing composition (Othman and Shah, 2013).

The impact of PBL on the teaching and learning process

To figure out how PBL influences the teaching and learning process, the data collected from field notes and open-ended questionnaire were taken into consideration. In elaborating the data from the open-ended questionnaire, the respondents were coded for the sake of privacy. For instance, *SI-M* indicated that the respondent was a *male* student and the roll-number was *1*. Based on the findings, the implementation of PBL influences the teaching and learning process in several aspects which could be described as follows.

A. Enjoyable and challenging learning experiences

The implementation of PBL was revealed to provide positive learning experiences for the majority of students. Students are into PBL activities since they find it more enjoyable rather than conventional learning activities (Weimer, 2009). Even though the process of learning was triggered by problems, the majority of them stated that they did not feel bored or stressful. In fact, problem-solving activities made them excited and challenged to solve the assigned problems. Most of them stated that they enjoyed participating PBL activities in the English teaching and learning process since it gave them more challenges rather than the learning activities provided by their English teacher at school as cited from one of the representative feedbacks.

Excerpt 1: (S12-M)

“Lebih seru dari waktu diajarkan sama guru yang sebelumnya”
[It is more exciting than the one provided by the previous teacher]

As one of the most important features of PBL, collaborative working was also revealed to bring another enjoyable learning experience for the students. They claimed that working collaboratively with their team-mates enabled them to learn with joy. To their perception, they were into the learning activities since they could engage into group discussion as cited from one of the representative feedbacks.

Excerpt 2: (S3-M)

“Saya sangat senang karena belajar berkelompok bersama teman-teman dan Mr. D (peneliti)”
[I was really into learning with group and Mr. D (the researcher)]

B. Active and interactive classroom

The implementation of PBL effectively created a student-centered learning situation which allowed the students to involve in active and interactive classroom learning activities. The active classroom learning activities was observable while students collaboratively engaged in an active group discussion to complete the assigned tasks/problems. While having group discussion, interaction was found in the process of sharing information, ideas, and opinions to identify the appropriate solution for the problem. When, they had completed the problems, they were given opportunities to share the result of their problem-solving to the other students in form of presentation. During the presentation session, the majority of them were observed to confidently present and elaborate their solution regarding to the assigned problems. Then, the other students were encouraged to give their feedbacks or opinions toward the presentation. This session really created an interactive classroom learning situation since the presenters could argue the feedbacks from other students. This finding proved that PBL activities provides

opportunities for students to be actively involved and engaged in interactive inquiry and group learning (Tan, 2003).

This active learning, which was found during collaborative working, also helped students build better understanding and develop their knowledge effectively. The majority of them believed that having their learning within the group promoted their understanding toward the learning material as they could exchange and share the ideas or knowledge each other without excessively relying on the teacher.

Excerpt 3: (S3-M)

“Menyenangkan karna belajar kelompok, jadi bisa saling bantu memahami materi pelajaran jika kurang mengerti”

[The teaching and learning process was exciting since I could have collaborative learning. Thus, we could help each other understand the learning material in case of lacking in understanding]

This finding indicated that effective collaboration can lead to knowledge construction as students construct joint explanations (Surif, Ibrahim, and Mokhtar, 2013; Hmelo-Silver, 2004). They are able to develop knowledge from various contributions of each member within the group.

4. CONCLUSION

The result of this research reveals that Problem-Based Learning (PBL) brings significant impact on students' writing skills and the teaching and learning process. The use of problems was found to stimulate students' creative ideas so that they could provide broader elaboration / description in their writing composition. In term of teaching and learning process, the implementation of PBL brought the students into a new distinctive experience of learning. It provide an enjoyable classroom learning environment in which the English teaching and learning process was no longer boring, but highly challenging. In addition, PBL provided the students with an active and interactive learning atmosphere. They were encouraged to actively explore and find any available resources, and then work collaboratively with the others in order to solve the assigned problems or tasks. The process of working collaboratively was noticed to help them build better understanding toward the learning materials and develop their knowledge effectively.

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