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Developing EFL Students' Descriptive Writing through Alternative Joint Construction

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Abstract

This study attempts to explore how Alternative Joint Construction (AJC) can improve the fifth-semester-English-Education-Department students' academic descriptive writing in large Indonesian English as a Foreign Language (EFL) Classrooms with Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) and a Genre-Based Approach (GBA). AJC combines Derewianka's (1999) whole-class-model and Emilia's (2010) small-group-model of Joint Construction to be a Group-Class-Group-Class (GCGC) model that merges the advantages of those models. The implementations of traditional Joint Construction caused serious problems: teachers' difficulties in guiding, supervising, and providing feedback to the students' Joint Construction due to the big number of students. Therefore, previously identified issues with the students' descriptive writing—such as (1) the students' incohesive and incoherent flow of information exchange, (2) the red herring of a personal perspective, and (3) lexicogrammatical issues—were not optimally improved. The result of this case study shows that AJC eliminates various problems in the implementation of traditional Joint Construction. The students' writing also improved in some respects: (1) more cohesive and coherent text, (2) a less personal perspective, and (3) lexicogrammatical improvement in some parts of their writing. In sum, Joint Construction with the GCGC model is recommended for teaching academic descriptive writing in large EFL classrooms with similar characteristics to this Indonesian context.

1 Introduction

Genre-Based Approaches have been increasingly influential in English Language Teaching (Derewianka, 2003) particularly in teaching writing, as reflected by studies focusing on the effectiveness of the approach in teaching writing activities (e.g. Badger & White, 2000; Derewianka, 2003; Hyland, 2007; Khodabandeh, 2014). This study also highlights the use of SFL GBA to develop EFL students' writing of descriptive texts in an Indonesian context where the writing classes consist of a large number of students.

In implementing SFL GBA in teaching writing, there are four aspects to consider. The first is the text types: descriptive, recount, narrative, report, spoof, procedural, and so on (Feez & Joyce, 1998; Gerot & Wignel, 1995; Hyland, 2004). In this study, descriptive texts are selected to be the focus of research because of the urgency of learning descriptive texts for the first task in the IELTS writing test and in the 5th semester EFL writing syllabus. The second is that Systemic Functional Linguistics sees language as a social semiotic (Halliday, Hasan & Christie, 1989; see also Emilia, 2010), and is a 'theory of language in context' (Teich, as cited in Emilia, 2010): The way to learn how language works is by considering the way it is used in actual contexts, cultural and situational (Halliday et al., 1989; see also Emilia, 2010). The third is the basic principles of GBA: language learning is a social activity or process (Halliday et al., 1989), teachers provide explicit teaching and apprenticeship guidance (e.g. Emilia, 2010). GBA suggests that the teacher teaches language explicitly,

including text organization; and linguistic forms that characterize different genres (Feez & Joyce, 1998). This is to realize how social context can be brought into the language learning process. In addition, regarding teacher's role in GBA, the teacher-student relationship is one of apprenticeship where the teacher takes an authoritative role of expert on language (Emilia, 2010). The last is the SFL GBA model to be implemented. One such model is Rothery's (as cited in Hasan & Williams, 1996) that includes four stages: Building Knowledge of the Field (BKOF), Modelling, Joint Construction (JC), and Independent Construction (IC) (Emilia, 2016).

This study focuses on the activities in the joint construction stage, although the other stages are also conducted. This stage is chosen because of its importance in preparing the students to write independently (Emilia, 2016). While previous studies highlight the employment of traditional joint construction consisting of students-students or students-teacher writing activities (Emilia, 2016), this study proposes alternative joint construction in which students-students and students-teacher writing activities are combined as one procedure. This combination is believed to be able to improve EFL students' ability in writing descriptive texts in an Indonesian context with large classes. Large classes create 'issues and challenges in writing class' (Emilia, 2016), especially regarding providing effective feedback to the students, which is a popular 'method of interaction and communication between teacher and students' (Leng, 2014). Thus, the procedure in the joint construction stage is a focus of this study.

This study is a case study in terms of purpose and scope. The participants involved were 45 EFL students in the fifth semester of a State Islamic University in Indonesia. There were four stages employed to collect the data: Diagnostic test, Meeting I, Meeting II, and Meeting III. The diagnostic test was employed to identify the students' problems in writing Descriptive Texts (DT); Meeting I involved implementing traditional joint construction; Meeting II involved in-group joint construction; and Meeting III involved Group-Class-Group-Class (GCGC) Joint Construction. The data collection approaches used in these stages were observation and writing tests.

2 Results and Discussions

2.1 Data from Observation

This section elaborates the process of the SFL GBA stages employed in this study from Meeting I to Meeting III. In Meeting I, Derewianka's Whole Class Model (2003) was implemented in which the four stages of SFL GBA—divided into 11 detailed steps—were also employed. Steps 1-2 are Building Knowledge of the Field (BKOF) and Building Knowledge of the Text (BKOT) respectively (Emilia, 2016, p. 46). In BKOF, the students were asked to examine several charts regarding different issues, and to answer questions about (a) whether or not they had already read the charts and (b) what they knew about the topic. Meanwhile, in BKOT, the students were equipped with knowledge about kinds of chart, genre, theme, and rheme. Although Emilia (2016) insists that this step is intended to provide students with knowledge about the topics rather than with knowledge about the text, the combination of BKOF and BKOT seemed to be necessary for these students for two reasons. First, the topic presented is an everyday topic which is presented in a bar chart and relatively easy to understand. Second, the students in the research site

lacked knowledge about the genre and SFL concepts such as theme and rheme. These conditions made the combination necessary. This decision is in line with what Emilia (2016, p. 44) states, that the SFL GBA model allows for adaptation in the learning process and cycle based on students' needs.

Step 3 involves Modelling in which the students learn about descriptive texts using a prepared text, and analyze the generic structure and linguistic features of the text based on the theories that had already been explained in BKOT. While Emilia (2016, p. 62) still puts comprehension checks of the content of the text in Modelling, the research activities in this stage focused on 'building up students' understanding of the purpose, overall structure, and the linguistic features of the particular text type' (Gibbons, 2002: 61; see also Derewianka, 1990 cited in Nurviani, 2013).

Steps 4-9 are Joint Construction that consists of drawing an idea map, writing an identification, and then a description, and providing teacher's feedback. Almost all the activities in this stage were done individually. In addition, the teacher's feedback was given to the whole class. The last stage is Independent Construction in which they wrote a different text individually as homework (Step 10).

In Meeting II, Emilia's Small Group Model (2016)—divided into 9 detailed steps—was employed. In this small group model, grouping was conducted at the beginning of the class (Step 1). Steps 2-4 belong to Building Knowledge of the Field (BKOF) and Building Knowledge of the Text (BKOT) in which the students' knowledge about (a) content of the bar chart discussing transportation system (Step 2), (b) genre of descriptive writing (Step 3), and (c) SFL theory of theme-rheme (Step 4) was built. Steps 5-7 belong to the Modelling Stage in which the students examined descriptive writing based on a bar chart (Stage 5-6). A review of the purpose, the generic structure, and linguistic features of descriptive texts was done before and after the students analyzed them in class discussion (Stage 5-7). This was to provide the students experience of using theories of the genre to analyze a text. In Stage 8-9 named Joint Construction, the students wrote a text together in a group of three (between students). They began with (a) sharing their understanding of the content of the bar chart, (b) outlining the idea map, (c) writing an identification and (d) writing a description. They worked together in small groups. Assessment of the students' progress was conducted by the teacher during the writing process. The teacher visited every group, and gave them advice and correction (Stage 9). In this stage, comprehensive scaffolding in Modelling did not feature strongly as Emilia (2016, p. 78) states 'when students actively participate in the writing process, comprehensive scaffolding in BKOF and Modelling may be reduced'. The participants were found to be involved more actively in this second meeting. Feedback was provided once in the group. The activities in this joint construction stage can be categorized as one complete process since they cover the steps that should be undertaken by the teacher and students; namely: researching the topic, pooling information, jointly constructing a text, and assessing the students' progress (Derewianka, 2003; Hasan & Williams, 1996; Nurviani, 2013). The effectiveness of the teacher's feedback will be further explained in Section 2.2.

In Meeting III, named Alternative Joint Construction (AJC) with the Group-Class-Group-Class (GCGC) model, the steps were shorter than those in Meeting II, especially in Building Knowledge of the Field and Modelling. This is because re-explaining the materials such as theme-rheme to the students was considered unnecessary due to their understanding of the materials presented in previous

meetings. In this AJC, as in Meeting II, comprehensive scaffolding in Modelling did not feature strongly. This happened due to the students' familiarity with the concept of genre and SFL theme and rheme. In addition, in contrast to activities in Joint Construction in Meeting I and II, teacher's feedback was provided (a) two times—after writing group identification, and after analyzing theme and rheme in identification and description, and (b) in two modes—group feedback, and class feedback.

In terms of the process of equipping the students with writing skills, the activities in Alternative Joint Construction in Meeting III or the GCGC Model are considered more enriching and empowering for the students for three reasons. First, the students were involved in group and class activities at the same time. This exposed them to more comprehensive thinking processes: they read the text to understand, shared with group members to share their understanding, and confirmed their understanding with a teacher in class discussion. Second, the students were receiving more feedback from the teacher. Third, they were also involved in collective decision making in selecting idea maps. These three aspects in the Joint Construction stage provide alternative ways to conduct Joint Construction Stages to enrich and empower students and their writing skills.

2.2 Data from Students' Writing

This section elaborates on data taken from the students' individual writing in the diagnostic test before the implementation of traditional Joint Construction, the individual constructions after the implementation of traditional Joint Constructions, and the individual construction after the alternative Joint Construction.

A Diagnostic Test was given to the students before the teaching-learning process. In this test, the students were asked to write a report describing the information about 'Online Sales for Retail Sector in Jakarta,' illustrated by two pie charts. The students' texts were then assessed based on the scoring rubric postulated by Rose (in Emilia, 2016). This involved five aspects: genre (involving purpose and staging), register (involving field, tenor, and mode), discourse (involving phrases, lexis, conjunction, reference, and appraisal), grammar, and graphic features (spelling, punctuation, and presentation).

	Genre	Register	Discourse	Grammar	Graphic features
Students' average score in diagnostic test	0.875	1.13	1.35	2.05	2.45

Table 1: The Students' Average Score in the Diagnostic Test¹⁴

Table 1 shows the students' average score in each aspect. The students' texts are weak in the aspect of genre, register, discourse and grammar. This weakness subsequently caused three main writing issues: incohesive and incoherent flows of information exchange, the red herring of a personal perspective, and lexicogrammatical issues. The students failed to link their ideas and message cohesively and coherently. Their texts had unclear schematic structures or/and errors at discourse level. Forty-three students' texts did not have a main topic. Students started their text with excessive detail which did not summarize the overall

¹⁴ The maximum score possible in each individual band (e.g. Genre, Register) was 3 in all three tasks reported in this paper. Each task had a different topic.

information in the pie chart. This absence also meant that some themes of following clauses provided new information, which contributed to making the texts less cohesive and coherent.

In addition, by inserting their opinions in the texts using the modals ‘can’ and ‘must’, mood adjuncts, and first-person pronouns, student texts took an unexpected personal, argumentative perspective. Thus, the purpose of descriptive writing was not achieved. Another issue was accuracy in lexicogrammar, including issues of subject-verb agreement, tense, plural-singular, passive-voice and clause construction.

After the implementation of traditional joint construction in Meeting I and II, many but not all of the students’ writing problems were reduced. In general, the most improved aspects of the students’ individual writing were genre and register. Other aspects, such as discourse, grammar, and graphic-features, did not show any improvement. Table 2 illustrates the average score of the students’ individual writing on a second test after the implementation.

Two aspects of the students’ writing improved. First, the students’ texts had a clearer schematic structure, with identification and description. The identification introduced the topic by providing general information about the bar chart. The description, additionally, tried to be coherent with the identification. Second, the personal perspective also decreased. The use of English modals and first-person pronouns were reduced. These appeared in only four students’ texts and they did not significantly impact the stance, but only made the texts less formal. The presence of the students’ own opinion also declined. The students systematically outlined the information illustrated in the chart and did not include arguments in their texts. Unfortunately, themes with new information were still found, which caused the thematic progression to be less flowing. The most unimproved aspect was lexicogrammar. The lexicogrammatical issues, which were identified in the diagnostic test, were still present in all texts, including errors in subject-verb agreement, tense, plural-singular, passive-voice, and clause construction.

	Genre	Register	Discourse	Grammar	Graphic features
Students’ average score in diagnostic test	0.875	1.13	1.35	2.05	2.45
Students’ average score after traditional joint construction	3	2.11	1.35	1.3	2.45

Table 2: The Average Score of the Students’ Writings in the Diagnostic Test and in the Individual Construction after the Traditional Joint Construction

After the implementation of the AJC with GCGC Model, the students’ texts improved in some respects. This improvement is illustrated in Table 3. It shows the average score of the students’ individual writing after the Alternative Joint Construction, compared to the average score of their previous writing. The most improved aspects of the students’ individual writing were genre and register. Aspects of writing such as lexis, conjunction, and grammar also improved.

	Genre	Register	Discourse	Grammar	Graphic features
Students' average score in diagnostic test	0.875	1.13	1.35	2.05	2.45
Students' average score after traditional joint construction	3	2.11	1.35	1.3	2.45
Students' average score after alternative joint construction	3	2.48	1.6	2.175	2.16

Table 3: The Average Score of the Students' Writings in the Diagnostic Test, in the Individual Construction after the Traditional Joint Construction and after the Alternative Joint Construction

This improvement influenced the cohesion and coherence of the students' texts. Even though the texts became more complex, the students systematically outlined the information and compared the information. This progress did not interfere with cohesive and coherence ties. Their texts still had a clear schematic structure and smooth thematic progression. Additionally, the misleading clues were omitted. Students' personal arguments were absent from the texts. The use of English modals and mood adjuncts also declined. In only one student's text, the first-person pronoun 'we' appeared, but it did not significantly impact the stance. It only made the text less formal. Nonetheless, problems in sentence structure remained. Errors in subject-verb agreement, tenses, and passive-voice construction were still present in all students' texts, but the number of errors decreased.

3 Conclusions and Recommendations

This study has explored how the AJC process in the form of the GCGC model can improve students' descriptive writing using SFL GBA. It indicates that the students' writing improved to be (1) more cohesive and coherent, (2) to have a less personalised perspective, and (3) to have lexicogrammatical improvement in some areas of their writing. In sum, Alternative Joint Construction with the GCGC model is recommended for teaching academic descriptive writing in large EFL classrooms since it provides more opportunities for teacher feedback to students for writing improvement. Moreover, further research should be conducted to see whether AJC is able to improve student writing in other genres.

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