The Use of Reflective Writing to Improve Students' Writing and Critical Thinking Skills

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Abstract: Writing represents individual's way of thinking. Grammar and style are important in writing, but it is also necessary to focus on the value that flows through every sentence and paragraph. Both writing and thinking could be practiced through Reflective Writing (RW). RW facilitates the individual to sharpen general writing and writing reflection. The research aims to describe and analyze the students' writing skill by making RW. Specifically, this research is conducted to find out whether or not Reflective Writing (RW) could improve students both in the aspect of general writing and writing reflection. This is qualitative research, particularly a case study. The three participants are selected purposively by considering the first draft of RW. The instruments to collect the data are document analysis and interview. The result shows that all participants improved in their general writing, especially on content, organization, grammar, vocabulary, and mechanics. In making reflection, two participants improve to the higher level of reflection. The research is necessary for teaching EFL writing in Indonesian context in which RW is still considered a new way to teach the students writing and thinking skills.

1 INTRODUCTION

Writing depicts someone's mind and attitude about something. At the same time, writing forms thinking. This complex activities of representing individual thought and shaping individual thought (Beed, 2005) about something in writing makes it a challenging activity. Moreover, this writing activity is found to be more challenging for EFL (English as Foreign Language) learners who need to consider both content and linguistic aspects of English language in their writings at the same time (Adas and Bakir, 2013; Faraj, 2015; Mohammad and Hazarika, 2016). Therefore, the continuous writing practice is necessary for EFL students not only to improve their writing skills but also to promote their thinking capacity.

To practice writing, Reflective Writing (RW) is considered to be the gate to sharpen general writing skill and encourage thoughtful and balanced level of thinking ("Students - Reflective Writing and Thinking," n.d.). RW helps students to process and explore ideas, and analytical skill about their own thoughts, opinions, and experiences (Moon, 2006a, p. 36). Moreover, making RW involves students in doing self-assessment (Yazım, 2014) and evaluating their experiences, beliefs, values, and behaviors (Roberts and Westville, 2008). In the scope of education, involving the students in writing reflectively opens widely a chance to reflect and record concrete experiences, to improve writing ability, to encourage observational, critical and creative skills (Dyment and O'connell, 2003).

In addition, thinking reflectively is considered as important as writing reflectively. For the university students, thinking reflectively or doing reflection is an important activity (Burdina, 2013) that helps them find out meaningful learning based on their daily experience (experiential - learning) (Benne et al., 2016). Thinking by writing is an effective way to make decision carefully and deeply, and it can also improve awareness to the environment, situation, experience, and themselves in order to act better in the future life.

A number of research regarding RW have been conducted. However, this research is focused on the students' general writing skill that could be assessed by making RW. In addition, this research tries to find out whether RW facilitates students in making a reflection by focusing on the students' improvement in the level of reflection.

2 WRITING SKILL

Writing becomes an incisive weapon for the writer in expressing oneself and conveying thought through words. Writing enables the writer to share meaning and understanding (Hyland, 2002). There are three ways of evaluating writing. They are teacher evaluation, self-evaluation, and peer evaluation (Rothschild and Klingenberg, 1990).

Rubrics are used as alternative instruments for evaluation because it helps the students to understand expectations, it provides the students to evaluate own performance, and it establishes a range of performance categories (O'Neill and Gately, 2014). In this research, the rubric from (Brown, 2007) is used as an instrument to assess students' improvement in general writing aspect. This rubric consists of Content (topic and details), Organization (identification and description), Grammar (Agreement), Vocabulary, and Mechanics (spelling, punctuation, and capitalization).

3 REFLECTION

Brockbank and McGill (1998:94) define reflection as a part of reflective practice, and it is divided into two parts. First, reflection takes the cognitive and affective experience into consideration. Second, the reflection is the process of converting and creating the meaning of experiences. According to Illeris (2007:65) reflection is defined as an afterthought activity.

Four scheme of (Kember et al., 2008a) could be used as a rubric to identify students' level of reflection. The four level of reflections are from the lowest is non-reflection level, the understanding level, reflection level and the highest level is a critical reflection. Each of the levels has its indicators that help the identification.

4 REFLECTIVE WRITING (RW)

The use of RW in education is not a new case. It facilitates students to practice writing. Reflective writing formed from the process of reflections or reflective thinking. Moon (2006) considers the reflective writing involves a conscious and stated purpose, a specified learning outcome, and an action or clarification. The outcome is mostly represented in a written form that can be seen and assessed by others. Meanwhile, according to Chinniah and Nalliah

(2012), the common types of assignment that have been used for reflective writing are portfolios, learning journals, log book, case summary, web-based learning, peer review, and self-assessment. Reflective Writing helps the students in personally engaging in the learning process through writing.

The form of Reflective Writing is based on the reflective cycle theory by (Gibbs, 1998). In a classroom situation, the structured RW is preferable because it keeps students on the topic and guides the students decide what to write. In the Reflective Cycle by Gibbs, there are seven steps in making the reflection. They are Description, Feeling, Evaluation, Analysis, Conclusions (general), Conclusions (specific), and Personal Action Plans. In addition, every step has detailed description that could guide students in making reflection from their real-life experiences.

5 METHODS

This qualitative research particularly a case study research aims to focus on students' general writing skill improvement such as in term of grammar, vocabulary, and mechanics. In addition, this research tries to identify students' level of reflection. The rubric from (Brown, 2007) is used as an instrument to assess students' general writing skill and the four-category scheme from (Kember et al., 2008a) is used as a rubric to identify students' level of reflection.

The participants of the research are three students that selected purposively from the first draft of RW. They are Andine, Tari, and Fia and the students come from one of the Islamic University in Bandung, Indonesia. The participants were given the template, the example, and the explanation related to the process of making RW. They have been making RW for three weeks, and three RW was collected. The first and the third of RW became the source of data.

6 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

This section explains the purpose of the research that is to find out the students' general writing improvement and the level of reflection in Reflective Writing.

6.1 Students' General Writing Skill

The purpose of this section is to know students' improvement of writing skill in general aspects. The

rubric from (Brown, 2007) is used and three assessors are chosen based on their skill in writing to assess the participants' general writing skill. They are A1, A2, and A3.
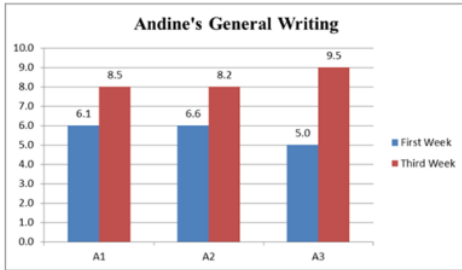

Figure 1: Andine's general writing skill.

The first participants, Andine gains an improvement in general writing. A1, A2, and A3 agree that Andine improves general writing skill in term of content, grammar, and mechanics.
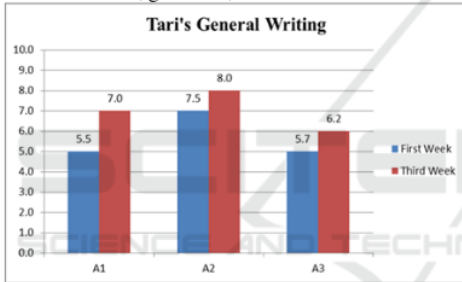

Figure 2: Tari's general writing skill.

The second participant is Tari. A1 gives an improvement in content and vocabulary. A2 increases score in the organization. Moreover, A3 gives an improvement in grammar.
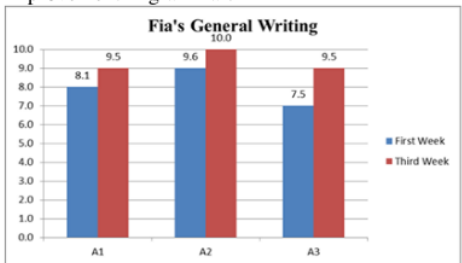

Figure 3: Fia's general writing skill.

The third participant is Fia. A1 gives an improvement in grammar and vocabulary aspect. A2 gives the improvement in mechanics. A3 gives an improvement in mechanics, organization, and vocabulary aspects. Fia can write properly from the first week making RW.

All the three participants gain an improvement in general writing skill by making reflective writing. The result shows that students improve in content, grammar, mechanics, organization, and vocabulary.

6.2 Students' Level of Reflection

This section would reveal whether or not students increase their reflection after doing reflective writing during three weeks. In this research, four-category scheme from (Kember et al., 2008a) used as a rubric to analyze students' reflection and to reinforce the identifications.

6.2.1 The First and the Third Week of Doing Reflective Writing (RW)

The three participants did not describe and develop their experience in detail. This situation creates the limitation to their reflection. According to the indicators from (Kember et al., 2008b), the three participants are in the level of non-reflection because of not showing evidence that they are trying to understand the topic and they are not seriously thinking about the topic. This attitude could be seen from their vague sentences in RW. This situation makes them difficult to realize new knowledge from experience. The vague sentences show the writer's inability to gain the essence or core point of learning activity (Ash and Clayton, 2009).

Table 1: Level of reflection on the first RW based on (Kember et al., 2008b).

No	Participant	Level of Reflection
1	Andine	Non-reflection; there is no evidence that the writer tries to understand the topic and interpret the experience into the new knowledge.
2	Tari	Non-reflection; there is no evidence that Tari is trying to understand the underpinned topic and she is not interpreting the topic seriously.
3	Fia	Non-reflection; there is a sentence showing that Fia tries to do introspection, but there is no details evaluation from her understanding of the underpinned topic.

In the third week of RW, the participants show the different result in making the reflection. Andine and Fia move to higher level. However, Tari is still in the same level. Unlike Andine and Fia, Tari did not write weakness or negative side of the experience that limit her reflection. According to Wilson et al. (2001) negative experience provides individual to think and recall about the weakness in doing something and this activity is useful to prevent the similar bad event happen in the future.

Table 2: Level of reflection on the third RW based on (Kember et al., 2008b).

No	Participant	Level of Reflection
1	Andine	Understanding; there is evidence that Andine understands the topic by mentioning the details of the underpins topic.
2	Tari	Non-reflection; the evidence of understanding the topic could not be found in the text.
3	Fia	Reflection; the personal perspective appears that is related the subject matter or information.

In conclusion, Andine and Fia improve reflection. Andine improves from non-reflection level to understanding level, and Fia moves from non-reflection level to reflection level. However, Tari did not show improvement. She keeps in non-reflection level in the first and third RW.

7 CONCLUSIONS

Reflective Writing could be the alternative tool to assess general writing aspect and reflection. By gradually making RW, students sharpen general writing skill such as grammar, mechanic, and vocabulary. In addition, they practice making the evaluation and doing the assessment. This attitude helps students to strengthen writing and thinking skills. RW also becomes a witness of self-improvement.

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