BENEFITTING PROBLEM-BASED LEARNING
TO (RE)VITALIZE STUDENTS' ACADEMIC WRITING

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Abstract

Academic writing has been a very long bug for most students. Though it is their life, they keep complaining about it. Most teachers' efforts seem effortless in solving their problems. This study aimed at finding out whether problem-based learning (PBL) could enhance students' accomplishment of the tasks given, and could raise their awareness to learn. Framed in an action research, the study involved 48 college students of an Indonesian public university taking Research Methodology Course. The data gathered through observations, questionnaires, and group interviews were analyzed mainly using Brown's theory (2001).

The study indicated that PBL could make students comprehend the tasks given very well; it could save their time in doing the tasks; it could improve their basic skills in reading and writing; and it could invest more time to accomplish the tasks given. In addition, some considered it could generate their synthesis skills, but it seemed it did not create a good atmosphere of cooperation and collaboration.

To conclude, PBL may benefit teachers to carry out their day-to-day activities since it may help them organize their classes. Not only may it increase students' awareness to learn, but it could also help them get better achievement.

Key words: problem-based learning, awareness, achievement, action research

Background

The problems of writing skills have been a long issue in EFL contexts. It has been an obstacle for most EFL learners. Regardless the production in academic setting, less qualified product has been a long wound for academicians. Only few are productive, and only few are considered good. It might be due to writing is considered the least language skill to practise and the most difficult one to adapt (Azies and Alwasilah, 1996: 128).

Many researches have been conducted researches to test the effectiveness of particular techniques or methods in writing, to see the final output of the pupils' achievement. But only few reveal the root of the learning process, diagnosing and nurturing the development of the basic skills of writing in order to solve their problems.

Identifying the fundamental problems of the skills and finding the solution independently will, somehow, not only solve the problem in mastering the written skill, but also fostering long-life skills. PBL may help teachers facilitate their students to find solutions of their own problems in writing class, academic writing in particular (Lieux, 1996). Therefore, the present study

investigated whether (1) problem-based learning (PBL) could enhance students' accomplishment of the tasks given, and (2) raise their awareness to learn.

Problem-Based Approach in Writing Class
This approach was firstly introduced in 1950s, and originated in universities, medical school education. The approach can be identified from the following characteristics.

- Student-centered approach (Oliver and Omari, 1999; Strobel and van Barneveld, 2009; www.edtech.vt.edu)
- Authentic tasks (Oliver and Omari, 1999; Greening, 1998; Strobel and van Barneveld, 2009; www.edtech.vt.edu)
- Interdisciplinary (www.edtech.vt.edu)
- Development life-long learning skills (Oliver and Omari, 1999; www.edtech.vt.edu; www.online.sfsu.edu)
- Fostering collaboration between student and teacher (Oliver and Omari, 1999; Greening, 1998)

The approach helps learners articulate their experiences in practice to solve a series of real problems through the application of knowledge and skills (Bligh, 1995 cf. Oliver and Omari, 1999). The learners are in goal oriented activities situated in authentic circumstances which are in the application of the learnt knowledge. The situated learning concerns the condition and the circumstances in which knowledge is learned are both demanding towards subsequent redeployment to other situations and settings (Brown, Collins and Duguid, 1986 cf. Oliver and Omari, 1999; Barrows, 1996 and Savery, 2006 cf. Strobel and van Barneveld, 2009).

Having elaborated that writing skills are the least language skill to communicate and the most difficult to practise, it is worth to investigate how people can learn the skills easier. The study is trying to find out whether the basic concepts of problem-based learning can help learners gain what they are expected to achieve in their academic setting.

In Indonesia, writing has been a very long problem since it has not been as popular as speaking. Even many linguists consider it as the second language to master and to produce. Therefore, it is rare finding good writings in academic setting though it plays an important role in language testing in many countries (Azies and Alwasilah, 1996: 128) and the worst, only few Indonesian intellectuals have academic writing skills (Alwasilah, 2005: 187).

Methodology
The study was conducted to 48-college public university students taking Research Methodology Course of an undergraduate program. Every two to four weeks within 16-meeting of the course (one meeting each week), the students were required to submit five written works representing the elements of a research proposal (background, research questions and aims of research, scope, significance, methodology of research, and theoretical foundations). The five written works were monitored using the basic writing aspects; organization of ideas, accuracy, vocabulary choice, and mechanics.

Employing a research action, the study used observations, questionnaires, and group interviews to collect data. The observation enabled to portray the class being observed, to analyze the responses made by the participants physically. The questionnaires showed their fundamental concepts investigated. Yet, the interviews were conducted to unpack the mental

state of the participants toward the issue raised. The data gathered were then analyzed by Brown (2001).

Findings and Discussion
The study specifies the following as the focus of its investigation.
- Understanding of concept of research and its elements
- Organizing skills
- Accuracy
- Clarity
- Motivational factors
- Investment of time and efforts
- Development of cooperation and collaboration

Having implemented PBL approach in the class, the following table shows what it was found in the study.

Table: The Findings of the Issue Investigated

Aspects	Participants	
	Improved	**Not improved**
1. Understanding of concept of research	48	-
2. Understanding of research elements	46	2
3. Organizing skills	48	-
4. Coherence	45	3
5. Accuracy	47	1
6. Clarity	37	11
7. Inner motivation	28	20
8. Time investment	31	17
9. Effort investment	23	25
10. Cooperation collaboration skills	34	14
11. Getting enlightment/inspiring	48	-

Through PBL approach, it seems that it supports the students understanding of the concepts of conducting a research and its elements, organization of their writing, and getting enlightment to precede the research. Through individual research, group discussions, individual and group presentation, and guided elaboration, students came to their understanding of what they were expected to gain and to be skillful at. By searching the materials themselves and extra efforts, they were encouraged to practise the skills to use keywords of authentic issues (Barrows, 1996 and Savery, 2006 cf. Strobel and van Barneveld, 2009). They had frequent practices of study skills with which they can stand successful in academic life. Greening (1998) proposes this as activation of prior learning to encode specificity and elaborate the knowledge. Brown emphasizes this as risk taking principle and making strategic investment (2001).

Despite minor mistakes made, the students were likely to perform higher accuracy. They showed eagerness to clarify accomplished tasks by giving verbal explanation and argumentation. They also cooperated and collaborated with their peers in order to accomplish the tasks given. It indicates that PBL approach encourages them not to avoid puzzles given but search for their solutions. They collaborate with others by spending more time out of their class in order to negotiate way out of a particular case. It promotes to deep learning in students (Greening, 1998).

More than 50% of the respondents showed that they are more motivated in conducting a research, searching for resources for issue discussed, spending time and efforts in tasks accomplishment, even for self study during and after the sessions. Moreover, they performed high discipline, neat and clean works, and showing attentive and joyful learning. PBL enhances student motivation towards learning tasks and providing no barriers of classroom conditions by means of student empowerment (Greening, 1998; Lieux, 1996). Besides, it mediates the teachers facilitate their students for scaffolding. They get feedback from their students about their perceptions of the effectiveness of the course (www.udel.edu/pbl/cte/spr96-nutr.html).

Conclusions

PBL may benefit teachers to carry on their day-to-day activities since it may help them organize their classes better. Knowing students' problems in a particular course may help teachers develop a more powerful class through empowering their own students.

PBL approach can not only increase students' awareness to learn, but it could also help them get better achievement. Eagerness to learn and fruitful class can be achieved through empowering student-centered approach and fostering collaboration through authentic tasks.

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