

# IMPROVING THE STUDENTS' ABILITY IN WRITING DESCRIPTIVE TEXTS THROUGH COLLABORATIVE WRITING TECHNIQUE

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**Abstract:** The main objectives of the study to improve the students' ability in writing descriptive texts and know the strengths and weaknesses of the implementation of collaborative writing technique in improving students' writing ability of descriptive texts. The Classroom Action Research was employed in this study. The subject of the study was 28 of eighth grade students of the SMP Negeri 1 Pelaihari in the Academic Year of 2011/2012. This action research was conducted in two cycles. Each consisted of planning, implementing, observing, and reflecting the action. In collecting the data, the data are obtained from the questionnaire, interview, and observation and also from the writing tests. The result of this study shows that collaborative writing technique can improve the students' ability in writing descriptive texts. This is proved by the significant increase of the mean score of the post-test cycle 1 and post-test cycle 2. Besides, the students have become more motivated to study English especially in writing.

**Keywords:** Collaborative writing technique, descriptive texts, writing ability

Writing is one of the four skills- listening, speaking, reading, and writing- that plays an important role in a daily international communication. It is estimated that 75% of all international communication is in writing, 80% of all international information is the world's computers, and 90% of internet contents are in English. This can be seen in the development of email, facsimile, short message service (SMS) via a mobile phone as increasingly popular forms of communication. Most developed and developing countries use them as a medium for transferring information and technology from one to another. Moreover, there are many books, magazines, and newspaper written in English. Since English has great importance in daily interpersonal communication, Indonesia, as a developing country, does not have much choice other than to teach students to be able to write in English.

The mastery of writing is used for preparing students to acquire knowledge and technology in the globalization era.

Based on 2006 School Based Curriculum (KTSP) writing is one of the obligatory language skills. The teaching of writing is aimed at enabling students to master the functional texts and monologue texts or paragraphs in the form of descriptive, narrative, recount, procedure, and report (Depdiknas, 2006). The work of writing is presented in the form of text types, usually known as genres, which are closely related to the purpose of each type. For especially the eighth grade, it is limited on descriptive, recount, and narrative. In writing descriptive text, the eighth grade students are expected to be able to write a simple descriptive text correctly. They should be able to make sentences in the form of present tense and develop main idea into short descriptive text.

In the teaching and learning process, Ur (1996: 162) states that writing can be used as a means, as an end, and as means to an end. As a means, writing is widely used in foreign language courses as a tool for involving aspects of language other than writing itself. The objective of writing itself is used as a means of getting students to attend and to practice a specific language point or more frequently as a method of testing it. As an end, the writing itself is the main objective of the activities. Even though writing is an important skill, most English foreign language students are not interested in writing and the performance on writing is unsatisfactory (Mukminatien, 1991: 130). The students regard that writing is the most difficult language skill to master (Richard and Renandya, 2002: 303; Widodo, 2007: 116). The difficulty in writing also happens among Indonesian students, especially at a Junior High School.

Related to the difficulty in writing, the students of eighth grade of SMPN 1 Pelaihari have similar problems. Based on the preliminary study of the students of eighth grade of SMPN 1 Pelaihari, the researcher finds the results of the pre-test were unsatisfactory. The students sometimes got difficulty in expressing the ideas into their writing and they always got difficulty in organizing them to become good paragraphs. They often got difficulty in choosing and using appropriate words or vocabulary. So they did not know the meaning of words, it makes them difficult to explore their ideas. Moreover, their sentences were influenced by their mother tongue. They always got a difficulty in grammar to make sentences into paragraph. And the last, they always had a difficulty in determining mechanics (punctuation and spelling). Therefore, it could be concluded that writing is regarded difficult.

In addition, the writing class before the study was also described in several conditions. The students' attitude and motivation toward writing was still low. It appeared that

the students were not active and enthusiastic to ask questions about writing to the teacher. They were shy and afraid to present their writings in front of the class. It means that they did not want their writings being read or known by other friends at the class. Then, the students did not pay attention to the teacher's explanation; they looked bored or sometimes made noise. When the teacher was explaining, the students tended to do their own activities. And the last, they needed a long time to write a composition.

The causes of the problems above were: (1) the teacher did not give adequate time, models, and practices for the students to write because the teacher thought that for revising the students' compositions needed a long time while the other skills might be discussed not only for writing but also the others as well. (2) Writing got less attention from the teacher. This was because the teacher tended to underestimate writing rather than reading. She argued that writing was less important to help the students in National Examination (UN) which was usually dominated by reading items. (3) There were no creative or varied techniques used by the teacher in exploring the students' ability in writing. The techniques used were monotonous. Monotonous writing activity caused the students' motivation in writing to be low and not interested in learning English especially writing. As the result, the students did not have any strategies about how to find ideas or explore them. Consequently, the students could not revise their drafts because they thought that it was a final writing. In fact, the students' drafts still had numerous errors.

Referring to the case above, the researcher takes one of techniques for solving the problems of writing that is collaborative writing technique. According to Alwasilah (2004: 108) collaborative writing is the ways in which students work in a community of readers and writers and negotiate meaning and symbols used in the text. Students are required to

jointly discuss a topic, plan an outline, and contribute elements of the text (paragraphs, sentences, phrases, words) in a collaborative writing. By working in groups, students enjoy more opportunity to see how their peers think and create new ideas. Moreover, discussion in group can provide less anxiety-producing context in which learners are likely to feel free to try out new ideas. Harmer (2002: 261) adds that generation of ideas is lively with two or more students involved than it is when the writers work on their own. In addition, Lyons and Heasley (1987: 2) state that collaborative writing provides a co-operative relationship between writer and reader and makes the writing task more realistic and interactive.

## METHOD

The method which is used in this study is a Classroom Action Research. In this case, the researcher wants to improve the students' ability in writing a descriptive text through collaborative writing technique. Here, there are some definitions of action research. Kemmer (2000: 25) states that action research is portrayed as a cyclical or spiral process involving steps of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting. Action research methodology offers a systematic approach to introduce innovations in teaching and learning. It is normal for a project to go through two or more cycles. Improvement is brought about by a series of cycles, each incorporating lesson from the previous ones. The cycle of Kemmer is the simplest and tidiest form.

Elliot (1991: 69) states that action research might be defined as the study of a social situation with a view to improve the quality of action within it. It aims at feeding practical judgment in concrete situation and the validity of theories or hypothesis. It depends not so much on scientific test of truth, as on their usefulness in helping people to act more intelligently and skillfully. In action research theories are not validated independently and then applied to practice. They are validated

through practice. Furthermore, Ebbut (in Hopkin, 1993: 45) argues that action research is the systematic study of attempts to improve educational practice by groups of participants by means of their own practical actions and by means of their own reflection upon the effects of those actions.

Besides, the design of classroom action research used in this research is a cyclical process adapted from the model proposed by Kemmis and McTaggart (1992: 11). It consists of four main steps namely: planning, acting, observing, and reflecting. Here is the Spiral Model by Kemmis and McTaggart:

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The implementation of collaborative writing technique could improve the students' writing ability. Collaborative writing technique deals with writing process in which a process was done in pair (writer and helper) to create a descriptive text based on the steps of collaborative writing. It is also a natural step that writers take to create a finish piece of work. (<http://www.danielcraig.wikispaces.com>).

After doing the study, it can obviously be seen that collaborative writing technique which was applied in the writing class successfully improves the students' writing ability. It can be seen from the improvement of mastering writing a descriptive text, content, organization, vocabulary, grammar, and mechanics. In collaborative writing, students in pairs write a composition. Each student contributes at each stage of the writing process, brainstorming ideas, gathering and organizing information, and drafting, revising, and editing the writing as stated by Elizabeth, et. al (2005: 256) that working together can help students to learn and perform the stages of writing more effectively.

In implementation of the collaborative writing technique, the students work in pair as a helper and a writer in which a helper started by generating ideas through pre-writ-

ing step. In this case, every student was actively involved in answering questions from the teacher and made a list to the questions. Then, a helper developed their own questions to stimulate the writers' ideas which led their ideas about the topic they chose. The number of the students who shared, asked, and answered questions was increased. This occurred since the technique encouraged the students to share ideas, asked questions as well as answered questions between the pairs. Through this technique the students could dig up the content easily. Then, they put their ideas down into sentences and also they organized the sentences into good paragraphs. Harmer (2002: 261) states that generation of ideas is lively with two or more students involved than it is when the writers work on their own. After that, they had a chance to edit all aspects of writing. And they also checked and evaluated their writing by sharing with the other pairs and the teacher as it is stated by Tompkins (1994: 26) through this sharing, students communicate with genuine audiences who respond to their writing in meaningful ways. Finally, the students could write and create good writings.

Furthermore, here the students were also drilled to focus on aspects of writing, then they were given opportunities to correct and revise their written work in the pairs. After that they practiced the language knowledge of structure or grammar, vocabularies in meaningful context, and mechanics and also they did interaction in order to finish their activities in writing. In this case, the students gained their own satisfaction as they had a willing to revise their own grammatical errors, correct the choice of words and the mechanics, and then rewrote them in the best version of the corrected drafts of writing. It is line with the opinion of Murcia et. al (2000: 100) that a writing class should bring the students to the point where they are willing to revise and feel comfortable about revising what they have written. Therefore, they needed to write their

work correctly as Harmer (1991: 53) states that a piece of writing should be correct. If it has mistakes and half-finished sentences, it will be judged by native speakers as illiterate.

In fact, by writing collaboratively the students' ability in writing a descriptive text increases. It could be seen which the students' final draft is better than before. They feel that before using collaborative writing in writing is difficult in writing a descriptive text, but after using it, they can write and develop their knowledge easier and effectively as stated by Nunan (in Murray, 1992: 103) collaborative writing was essentially a social process through which writers looked for areas of shared understanding. To reach such an understanding, participants functioned according to several social and interactional rules; they set a common goal; they had differential knowledge; they interacted as a group; and they distanced themselves from the text. They know not only about content, organization but also they know much more about word choice, grammar, punctuation, and spelling included their criteria's. The criteria to develop the descriptive text cover of language elements, Steve Peha (2003: 1) says that there are six having simple phrases to describe the good writing that the writers do make learning easier, namely: (1) ideas that are interesting and important, it means ideas are the heart of the piece-what the writer is writing about and the information he chooses to write about it; (2) organization that is logical and effective, it means organization refers to the order of ideas and the way the writer moves from one idea to the next; (3) voice that is individual and appropriate, it means voice is how the writing feels to someone when they read it, it is formal or casual, it is friendly and inviting or reserved and stand-offish, voice is the expression of the writer's personality through words; (4) word choice that is specific and memorable, it means that good writing uses just the right words to say just the right things; (5) sentence fluency that

is smooth and expressive, it means that fluent sentences are easy to understand and fun to read with expression; and (6) convention that are correct and communicative, it means that conventions are the ways, we all agree the use punctuation, spelling, grammar, and other things that make the writing consistent and easy to read.

### **The improvement of the students' behavior**

The changing of the students' behavior could be seen at the beginning of teaching learning process. Most of students looked unwilling to follow the English lesson and kept talking with other friends. Then, when the teacher introduced the collaborative writing technique in teaching writing, their learning attitudes changed gradually. At the first time, the technique was not familiar for them; they got confused to implement the steps of CWT. After that, the teacher explained clearly, finally they could use the technique well as stated by Grabe and Kaplan (1996: 306) that the goal of the teacher is to model strategic behavior, facilitate group interaction, monitor progress, and clarify the problems and the means to solve them. Furthermore, Richards and Renandya (2005: 213) state the teacher is the sole source of input and feedback and often a dominating participant in the practice, exemplifying a typical pattern of teacher stimulus followed by student response, further followed by teacher evaluation of students response.

By following the steps of CWT, the students felt happy and interested in learning English focusing on writing. Besides, the students changed into active to answer the teacher's questions whereas they were so passive before the research done. Then, the teacher asked the questions about the difficulties the students met. In addition, the atmosphere of the class was more alive because there were many interesting activities. The students gave attention to the lesson when the teacher explained the lesson to them. They did not

look bored anymore. In other words, the students were enthusiastic to follow the steps of the writing process in collaborative writing technique. According to Alwasilah (2006: 15) through collaborative writing practice in groups, students were empowered to develop confidence, authorship, and enjoyment of being part of the writer community.

### **The improvement of the students' motivation**

Before the technique was applied, most of the students had low motivation in learning writing. Even, this tendency of having low motivation was still seen in the initial meetings of cycle 1. Then, the teacher explained clearly about the technique, finally they started becoming more motivated in learning writing, following the activities, involving in discussions, and doing the provided exercises. Moreover, in editing and evaluating steps in which the students involved in checking their own pair's works will create a much more positive attitude than the traditional technique of the teacher correcting students' text. This sharing of the work helped them to keep motivation and concentration at high level. According to Roger, Oslen, and Kagan as stated in Kessler (1992: 3) cooperative learning classes are often relaxed and enjoyable than traditional classes. This creates a positive environment, with more students attentive to assigned tasks (Kagan, S. 1992. Cooperative learning. San Juan Capistrano, CA: Resources for Teachers, Inc.

Finally, their motivation continued increasing as they learned writing by using the newly introduced technique - collaborative writing technique. It can be seen from the fact that most of the students got actively involved in discussion, joined the discussion eagerly, and did the tasks seriously.

### **The improvement of the class situation**

Before conducting the research, the teaching-learning process was not alive as the teacher used to apply the conventional tech-

nique. The students showed low participation on writing class as they were seldom taught to make a better writing by using various techniques because the teacher was monotonous in teaching writing. After implementing the collaborative writing technique, the class situation showed improvement. It could be seen at the atmosphere of the class was more alive and better than before. The students gave attention to the lessons and they were active and creative to develop and do the activities in the writing process. And also they were not bored anymore in writing as the teaching technique in general is not monotonous anymore. The teacher used the collaborative writing technique more creative, attractive, and interactive for the students to write. According to Lyons and Heasley (1987: 2) state that collaborative writing provides a co-operative relationship between writer and reader and makes the writing task more realistic and interactive.

Moreover, the study findings also showed that the students spent effective time in writing and they were able to finish their writing process on time. It can be concluded that the technique had made the productive learning time increase. As Getting in Elliot (2000: 559) who identifies three aspects of learning time that could be increased. The first is the time used for instructions, the second is engaged time, and the third is productive learning time. The productive learning time means the more things can be done in a certain time. In

the other words, if the activity had been decided (writing a descriptive text), the productive learning time will be shorter.

The strengths and weaknesses of collaborative writing technique

There are some strengths and weaknesses of using CWT in writing class. The strengths of CWT could improve the students' writing competence especially related to the aspects of writing, such as content, organization, vocabulary, grammar, and mechanics. It was really able to improve the students' achievements from cycle to cycle. The students could explore or express and generate the ideas freely and they are able to produce the final product of writing better. This finding is line with Anshari (2004 cited by Alwasilah 2006: 15) experimented a four-cycle workshop model of collaborative writing in the Department of Indonesian Literature of UPI. His study shows that the students become more able to solve the writer's block, more productive, and mature in style. Besides, they felt happy and it gave a fun to do the writing process of collaborative writing technique.

The class situation was lively. On the other hand, the weaknesses of using CWT is time consuming because it took a lot of time in doing the writing process of implementing CWT namely idea generating, drafting, reading, editing, copying, and evaluating. In the process of implementing CWT, the students were noisy to do every activity

Table: The Summary of the Results of the Class Action Research

No	Pre-Study Findings	Before Action Research	After Action Research
1	Improvement in students' writing ability		
	Achievement of all aspects of writing:	Mean of pre test: 53.36	Mean of Cycle 1: 63.64 Mean of Cycle 2: 72.64
			Cycle 1:      Cycle 2:
	Content	61.43	71.43      77.86
	Organization	57.86	64.64      73.21
	Vocabulary	54.64	61.78      68.57
	Grammar	43.21	56.07      66.43
	Mechanics	49.64	64.29      77.50
	The students' writing ability.	Sometimes students could not express and explore the ideas. Students also got difficulty in organizing the ideas. They got many mistakes in choosing appropriate words, ungrammatical form of simple present tense and uncorrected punctuation and spelling.	Students could express and explore ideas. Students could organize the ideas. The students were able to use appropriate words and grammatical form of present tense and also correct punctuation and spelling. They as well could decrease the mistakes all of them.
	Mother tongue use.	Students used mother tongue in writing.	The use of mother tongue reduced.
2	Improvement in class situation	Not alive, boring and uninteresting writing activities.	Alive, interesting activities.
	Atmosphere		
	Students' participation in writing class	Low, the students did not give attention the lesson and they did not care of the lesson.	Higher, the students gave attention to the lesson and they cared of the lesson.
	Students' behavior	Passive, the students were lazy to ask and answer the questions and they looked happy when the lesson was over.	All active, the students were creative to develop their writing and always answered and asked if they did not understand.
	Students' motivation	Low, the students were not enthusiastic or not happy to learn writing.	All high, they were enthusiastic and they had high awareness and self-confident to learn writing.
	Teacher's behavior	Low, used monotonous technique, did not give adequate time, models and practices for the students to write.	The teacher used the collaborative writing technique more creative and attractive for the students to write. The teacher gave adequate time, models and practices for the students to write as well.
3	Students' perception about CWT	The students were not familiar with CWT.	The students were familiar with CWT and could run well in writing process.

## CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

Based on the findings of improving students' writing ability through collaborative writing technique in this research, the researcher drew some conclusions. The major conclusion of this research was that the implementation of Collaborative writing technique had many advantages to help the students improve their writing competence and encourage them to be more active in writing class. Based on the result of the research above, the conclusion could be drawn into three points as follows: (1) collaborative writing technique could improve the students' writing ability; (2) collaborative writing technique could improve the students' behavior and motivation; (3) collaborative writing technique could improve the class situation; and (4) Collaborative Writing Technique has some strengths and weaknesses in writing class.

Here, the researcher would like to give some suggestions related to the study. He hoped that the suggestions would be useful for English teachers, students, and other

researchers. For English teachers should be more creative and innovative in using this technique in teaching writing for the students to avoid getting bored and to empower their writing competence so that teaching writing will be more meaningful for developing their ability in writing. For the students should realize that writing is one of the language skills that is very important to be applied in daily life because expressing the ideas through writing bring a lot of benefits for the writers and the readers. They should build their psychology in expressing ideas to public bravely. So, they will be more motivated in writing something that is meaningful for everyone. And the last one is for other researchers which this study is just one effort to improve the students' writing ability through collaborative writing technique in teaching and learning writing in the classroom. The findings of this study are expected to use it as starting point to conduct the further research in the different field and different text types.

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