Send Kids to the World: A Study on Using Postcards to Improve Students' Writing Skills

Af'idatul Husniyah, University of Edinburgh, UK,
Universitas Negeri Malang, Indonesia
Sri Andreani, Universitas Negeri Malang, Indonesia

The Asian Conference on Education & International Development 2016
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract
This research was conducted to improve the skill of the eightgraders in writing recount texts through the use of postcards portraying tourism objects in Malang and other places in East Java and Central Java. The postcards were used as media to write recount texts using Tompkins' process approach(2010). This research employed a Classroom Action Research (CAR) with four steps, i.e., planning, implementing, observing, and reflecting. The findings of this research show that postcards improved the skill in writing recount texts. These media also added fun to the class atmosphere, so the students were encouraged to write.

Keywords: writing, *postcards*, writing ability, recount texts

iafor

English Learning and Teaching (ELT) deals with four language skills, i.e., reading, writing, listening, and speaking. Of all these skills, writing is often considered as the most difficult one (Widiati & Cahyono, 2006). Mukminatien (2003) finds that many problems arise with regard to the development of productive skills, especially in the area of writing as it involves the process of composing message, thinking of the language to use, taking care of the diction, managing textual organization, and using mechanics. She states further that teaching writing in English needs careful preparation as this skill is not automatically or naturally acquired by second language (L2) learners, and therefore should be learned.

Regardless of the fact that writing is a difficult skill, it is important as it is a tool to communicate across time and places. Written messages offer several advantages. They can be delivered without the presence of the writer. In addition, they last longer than the spoken ones as they are recorded on paper or other media. They also spread widely once they are published in mass media. In school, writing is taught because the School-Based Curriculum *(Kurikulum Tingkat Satuan Pendidikan=KTSP 2006)* requires that students be able to express and understand meaning either in functional, recount, narrative, descriptive, procedural or report texts. They are required not only to understand texts, but also to produce the texts to express their understanding.

Although the skill to write a recount text is required by the curriculum, the students' skill in writing is not very satisfactory. A preliminary study conducted in VIII G at SMPN 18 Malang showed that most of the students (82%) did not achieve the minimum passing grade of 75. Other results showed that the students got difficulties in getting the idea. When asked to write a recount text, they needed more than 10 minutes to come to a topic. Even when they had already decided on the topic, they did not know how to put it in writing. They had no ideas of how to arrange their sentences into a good text. They seldom used time connectives. Furthermore, in terms of grammar, they did not use the simple past tense. They also forgot to use 'were' and 'was' in a nominal sentences. In terms of vocabulary, they used some inappropriate terms in their writing, making it difficult to understand.

The interview with the English teacher reveals several facts. First, writing was taught once in two weeks. Second, she sometimes used drilling in teaching vocabulary and question and answer technique. Third, she seldom used media in teaching English. Fourth, she got some difficulties in implementing the teaching technique as the students had very limited vocabulary. Fifth, the students had low motivation in writing. Sixth, the students also had low ability in writing. Seventh, when teaching writing, she usually asked the students to write a recount text and submit it to be checked.

Meanwhile, the results of the observation showed that in the writing session, the teacher explained the generic structure and the language features of recount texts and asked the students to listen to the explanation, read the workbook by themselves, answer some questions related to the texts, and create a recount text based on the material they had just learned.

From the results of the observation, it can be concluded that the students' low ability and motivation were quite probably the results of learning which was neither enjoyable nor meaningful for them. As the teacher did not create enjoyable learning,

the students gave up the writing task easily. Students also did not find writing meaningful as the teacher did not present the real use of writing in English. The students had low motivation to write, and were confused about the audience, and the steps to produce a good writing.

Regarding the complexities of writing, teachers need to engage the students in activities that are easy and enjoyable to take part in, so that writing activities not only become a normal part of classroom life, but also present opportunities for the students to achieve success (Harmer, 2007). Harmer (2007) says that in the teaching of writing, teacher can focus on either product of writing or the process itself. Many educators, however advocate a process approach to writing (Muniroh, 2013). A process approach enables teachers and students to interact more meaningfully with a purpose in mind. Moreover, it is important to make students aware of how to get started by encouraging them to start thinking and produce ideas as well as feedback. Students can discover new ideas, sentences, and words as they work through the initial draft. Process approach proposed by Tompkins (2010) consists of five stages, namely pre-writing, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing.

Besides, ELT needs a meaningful context, in which students know not only the language, but also how to use it in real life contexts. To create both enjoyable and meaningful process of learning, teachers can use authentic materials. Peacock (1997) states that authentic materials have a positive effect on learner motivation. They also provide exposure to real language and relate more closely to learners' needs.

Real postcards are examples of authentic materials which can be used as media to teach students how to construct real messages to others. Through postcards, people write their experience, express their feeling, and send the postcards to others from whom they can get replies. Instead of letting the students write without knowing the real use of their writing, the researcher offered postcards in which students had real audience and a purpose for writing.

Postcards also provide pictures portraying tourism places, annual events, and sometimes people's activities. These pictures provide another reason to use it as learning media. Pictures in postcards as visual media can increase interest in a lesson (Smaldino et al., 2012). They can motivate learners by attracting and holding their attention while generating engagement in the learning process. Motivation helps students solve problems and respond to challenges raised in the learning process (Muniroh, 2013).

Besides, pictures can help students to recall their memories. Students can look at the pictures, identify every detail in the pictures, and build a framework based on the details. Therefore, the postcards used had to portray pictures of tourism objects which had been visited by the students, such as the tourism objects around Malang, Batu, East and Central Java. The postcards also had to portray the whole landscape to help the students recall their memories of a particular place. Their memories would provide something to start writing recount texts.

In the study, students used the picture in their postcards as a basis to construct their composition. The researcher gave a model of a recount text using postcards as the media and let the students identify the generic structure of recount text. Then, the

teacher guides the students in the pre-writing, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing stages.

The studies conducted by Mareitha (2004) and Apprilianto (2009) prove that the use of pictures can improve students' writing skill. More specifically, Arief (2011) proves that the use of pictures in a contextual teaching and learning can help students in writing recount texts. Since pictures proved to be effective in the previous studies, they are used in the present study to improve the ability in writing recount texts for the eighth graders of SMPN 18 Malang in combination with Tompkins' process approach.

Method

This research employed a Classroom Action Research (CAR) design with four steps, i.e. planning, implementing, observing, and reflecting. The study started with planning the action. The next stage was implementing the action according to the lesson plans and observing the action using the research instruments. Then, in the reflection stage, the data collected in the observation stage were analyzed, interpreted, and compared with the criteria of success to decide whether or not it was necessary to conduct the second cycle. The criteria of success in this study refer to the product and process. The criteria of success for the writing product was that 70% of the students reached the minimum passing standard *(SKM)* of 75 in writing recount texts by using postcards. The criteria of success of the process refers to the students' positive attitude and feedback after the implementation of the action. If the students could achieve the criteria of success through the use of postcards, the cycle ended. Otherwise, the next cycle had to be conducted.

In this study, the researcher and the English teacher planned the action. Then, the researcher implemented the action, analyzed the data, and wrote the report. She also evaluated the students' works. The English teacher acted as a class observer. The subjects of the study were 38 students of class VIII G at SMPN 18 Malang in the second semester ofthe 2013/2014 academic year. The school is located at Jl. Soekarno Hatta No. 394, Malang.The school used the School-based Curriculum. English was taught twice a week, while the writing skill once in two weeks.

The data of the study concerned two issues: the students' writing ability in writing recount texts and the use of postcards in the teaching of writing. The data of the students' writing ability were collected by calculating the individual scores of the writing product based on the scoring rubric in terms of content, organization, grammar, vocabulary, and mechanics by using the scoring rubric adapted from Hartfiel et.al. (1988). The data of the implementation of the postcards were gathered through questionnaire, field notes, and observation guides. The observation guide and field notes were used in Cycle 1 and Cycle 2. The questionnaire was only used in Cycle 2. The result of the field notes and observation guides were used to monitor whether the steps of implementation were done as planned and to see if there were any problems in the implementation of the media. The questionnaire was used to see the students' responses towards the use of media and towards their writing ability. The field notes, observation guides, and questionnaire were analyzed by seeing whether the implementation of the postcards were done as planned.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The findings of this study are presented in two sections, i.e., findings in cycle 1 and those in cycle 2.

Cycle 1

The first cycle of this study consisted of two meetings, each of which lasted for 80 minutes. The first meeting was conducted on Monday, January 13, 2014, in the first and second periods. It consisted of three main activities: pre-, whilst-, and post-writing.

In the prewriting, the researcher greeted the students and checked their attendance. One student was absent. After a short introduction, the researcher showed some slides portraying pictures of tourism objects in Indonesia which were taken from www.visitindonesia.com. Next, the researcher asked the students how they shared their experiences with their friends. The researcher offered postcards as the tools to share their experiences. The researcher introduced parts of postcards to write messages and the address, and to stick the stamp. The researcher also told the students the functions of the postacards and how to get them. Then, the researcher asked the students what kind of text should be written on postcards. Most of them said it was a text telling experience and only a few knew the name of the text, which was recount text.

The next step was distributing blank paper for the draft. Then, the researcher distributed the handout which consisted of a sample text, the language feature and generic structure of recount text, and also the tips how to write recount text. The researcher also distributed the real postcards to the students, one for two students. The researcher, then, showed the sample recount text, entitled "Wonderful Bromo" through the power point slides and a real postcard in front of the class and discussed the language features and the generic structure of recount texts of the sample text.

The researcher introduced the first step in writing a recount text, namely pre-writing stage. In this stage, the researcher let the students make clustering based on the postcards they got by answering *what, where, why, who, when,* and *why* questions. The students carefully observed the picture and found things that were related to their experience. After completing the clustering, the students were guided into the drafting stage, where the students created sentences based on the ideas they got in clustering phase. The researcher asked the students to submit their draft and dismissed the class.
The second meeting was conducted on Thursday, January 16, 2014, in the first and second periods. The researcher began the lesson by checking the attendance. Then, the teacher showed some slides containing questions about the previous lesson. The students enthusiastically answered the researchers' questions. Next, the researcher distributed their first draft with her feedback on it. The researcher also distributed the postcard on which the students write their final version. Students' task was to revise these draft based on the researcher's feedback. After revising this draft, the researcher asked the student to edit their draft in terms of mechanics, including capitalization, punctuation, and spelling. The researcher guided the students during the editing stage by explaining the use of punctuation and capitalization as well as the importance of

using correct spelling. The researcher dismissed the class when the students finished their final version and submitted their works.

The students' writing product at the end of Cycle1 was good in terms of content and organization.Yet, in terms of grammar, vocabulary and mechanics, the students' works were unsatisfactory. More specifically, none of them got 'very good' and almost all of them were 'fair' category (See Table 1). The results of the observation guide showed that the students were very interested in the use of postcards as a medium to write recount texts. The students' enthusiasm appeared when the researcher showed them the postcards. Most of them knew postcards, but none of them had ever written on them.

Some of the students did not know where to put the stamps, the address, and the message. They were more excited when the pictures portrayed in the postcards were familiar to them as they had visited those places before. When the researcher distributed the postcards, they quarreled over which picture they should take. The field notes show that postcards were interesting media as only very few of them had ever used them. Second, power point slides which contained many pictures were interesting for them. Then, students were guided throughout the process. This made it easier for them to create the text.

The result of the Cycle 1 had not yet achieved the criteria of success because only 26 students (68%) out of 38 students passed the *SKM*. Most of the students belonged to "fair" dan "good" category. More specifically, they got difficulties in mechanics as indicated by the fact that only a few of the students belonged to'very good' and 'good' categories. Most of them belonged to the 'fair' category (See Table 2).

Table 1   The Students' Score Distribution in Terms of Content, Organization, Vocabulary, Grammar, and Mechanics in Cycle I

Score Category	Writing Aspect									
	Content		Organization		Vocabulary		Grammar		Mechanics	
	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%
Very Good	13	34	15	39	10	26	10	26	0	0
Good	22	58	20	53	6	16	24	16	5	13
Fair	3	8	3	8	19	50	2	50	27	71
Poor	0	0	0	0	3	8	2	8	6	16

Note:
Freq= Frequency

Many problems occured during the implementation of the media. First, the students were a bit bored during the researcher's confirmation. Second, the researcher paid attention mostly on the right side and the center of the class. The students on the left side did not get researcher's attention. Third, the handouts and the slides which contained the sample text were merely copied and modified by some of the students

and the researcher spoke too fast so that it was hard for the students to understand the instruction and the explanation. Fourth, the time provided was not enough for some of the students to finish the task. The students' writing product at the end of Cycle 1 was good in terms of content and organization.Yet, in terms of grammar and vocabulary, the students' work were unsatisfactory. The students' works also medicated problems in mechanics. More specifically, none of them was 'very good' and almost all of them were the 'fair' category.

Therefore, it can be concluded that the process in Cycle 1 had to be re-implemented in Cycle 2 to get a better result.

Cycle 2

Cycle 2 was implemented in two meetings, each lasted for 80 minutes. Meeting one was held on Monday, January 20, 2014. It was in the first and second periods. This meeting, like those in Cycle 1, consisted of three main activities, pre-, whilst-, and post-writing. In the pre-writing, the researcher greeted the students and checked the attendance list. The researcher showed some slides containing the generic structure and language features of recount texts which were presented in the form of 'Who Wants to be A Millionaire' game. Then, the researcher announced the result of their works from the previous meeting. The researcher gave positive feedback to their composition and announced name of the students who wrote the best text.

The researcher showed some slides about the common mistakes they made in Cycle 1. The researcher explained how to make correct grammatical structure in their works. The researcher also introduced some vocabulary to replace the inappropriate vocabulary they used in Cycle 1. Then, the researcher explained the correct spelling, punctuation and capitalization as students made several mistakes in mechanics in Cycle 1. Next, the researcher distributed blank paper for their draft. The researcher also distributed the real postcards to the students, one for every two students. In this meeting, the researcher no longer allowed the students to look at the sample text in the hand out to prevent them from copying and modifying the sample text. The students wrote their own ideas by using clustering technique. The drafting stage began by arranging those ideas into good sentences. The teacher let the students check the meaning of the words they used in the dictionary. The researcher dismissed the class after the students submitted their draft.

The second meeting was conducted on Thursday, January 24, 2014 in the first and second periods. The researcher began the lesson by checking the attendance. No one was absent. The teacher showed some slides containing questions about the previous lesson. The students enthusiastically answered the researchers' questions. Next, the researcher distributed their first draft with feedback from the researcher. The researcher also distributed the artificial postcards to write their final version. Students' task was to revise these draft based on the researcher's feedback.

After the students revised this draft, the researcher asked the students to edit their draft in terms of mechanics, including spelling, capitalization and punctuation. The researcher guided the students during the revising and editing stages. The researcher dismissed the class when the students finished their final version and submitted their works. However, some students could not finish their works perfectly due to the event

held by the school commitee which required them to end the lesson 15 minutes earlier.

Some problems that occured in Cycle 1 could be solved. The researcher used "Who Wants to be A Millionaire" quiz containing questions related to the recount text to gain students' interest. The researcher paid attention to the students in the class by moving around the class. The researcher did not show the slides and did not distribute the handouts, so the students could not copy the sample text. The researcher also provided a longer time for the students to write their draft, so the students had enough time to create their draft.

The results of the students' writing in Cycle 2 reached the criteria of success. Most of them belonged to the "very good and good" categories in terms of content, organization, and language use (vocabulary and grammar). Out of 38 students, 31 (81%) passed the *SKM* of 75. However, they still got difficulties in mechanics as indicated by the fact that only a few of the students belonged to 'very good' and 'good' categories. Most of them belonged to the 'fair' category in terms of mechanics (See Table 2).

Table 2 The Students' Score Distribution in Terms of Content, Organization,   Vocabulary, Grammar, and Mechanics in Cycle 2

Score Category	Writing Aspects									
	Content		Organization		Vocabulary		Grammar		Mechanics	
	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%
Very Good	18	47	22	57	16	42	15	39	4	11
Good	19	50	10	27	17	45	7	19	9	23
Fair	1	3	6	16	5	13	15	39	21	55
Poor	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	3	4	11

Note:
Freq= Frequency

The results of the observation guide show that the students' attitude during the teaching and learning process was good and cooperative which were shown by their enthusiasm in writing and asking about recount texts. The field notes show that students could write creatively when they were not allowed to see the sample text. They could write in more details and their writing were different from their friends. The students were not afraid of making any mistakes as they believed it was part of making a creative product. The students also learned a lot from the researcher's explanation about the use of correct grammar, appropriate vocabulary, correct punctuation, and capitalization.

The implementation of postcards from Cycle 1 to Cycle 2 had shown improvement although Cycle 1 had not yet achieved the criteria of success because only 26 students (68%) out of 38 students passed the *SKM*. However, the criteria of success was finally achieved in Cycle 2. It was shown by the fact that 31 students (81%) passed the *SKM*. In terms of students' response, they had already shown good response toward the use of postcards in Cycle 1 and Cycle 2. Postcards could motivate them and become the source of ideas. It was proven by the results of observation, questionnaire, and field

notes in Cycle 1 and Cycle 2. Figure 1 below presents the students' improvement in their ability in writing recount texts starting from preliminary study, Cycle 1 and

Passed SKM ■ **Did Not Pass SKM**
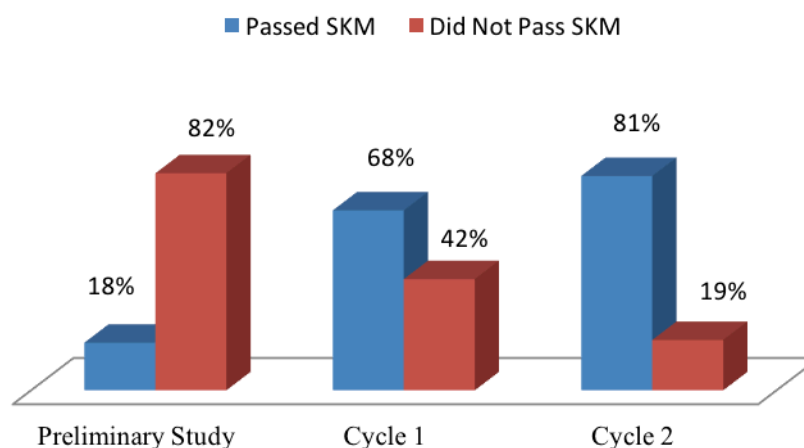
Cycle 2.

Figure 1 The Students' Writing Improvement from Preliminary Study, Cycle 1, and Cycle 2

Conclusions

The results of the study show that using postcards can improve the writing skill of the students of class VIII G at SMPN 18 Malang. The use of postcards can solve students' problem in writing recount texts as the pictures in the postcards helped them to recall their memories as a basis of idea to write a recount text.

The students' attitude towards the writing activities also improved. In the preliminary study, they were not eager to write. Many of them did not pay attention and were busy with their own when they were asked to write recount texts. In Cycle 1 and Cycle 2, they paid more atttention and were involved in the five stages of writing, i.e, prewriting, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing. Therefore, it can be concluded that the use of postcards in combination with the implementation process approach can improve the students' ability in writing recount texts.

Suggestions

Based on the findings of this research and the discussion, the researcher would like to offer some suggestions concerning the use of postcards in the teaching of writing to English teachers and future researchers.

In order to improve the students' ability in writing good recount texts, English teachers are suggested to use postcards to improve students' writing ability because postcards can help them to get ideas by recalling their memories and arouse interest in writing. This medium is better to be applied in combination with the process approach proposed by Tompkins (2010),which lead the students through the five stages i.e. the prewriting, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing stages. It is suggested that teacher gives a checklist to make sure students do the writing stage correctly.The teacher is suggested to use postcards containing pictures of tourism objects which the students have visited. Next, the postcards must portray the whole

scenery from the object, which can help the students to generate ideas by recalling their memories of the place in the pictures.

The researcher suggests that the future researchers who use the same media and approach to provide longer period of time for the students to write. Future researchers are also suggested to use more various postcards. In Cycle 1 and Cycle 2, the students were eager to get more various postcards to provide more choices for their ideas. The researcher also suggests that further researchers can investigate how postcards can improve students' skill in writing other types of texts, such as descriptive texts. Future researcher are also recommended to encourage students to write by combining this medium with games.

References

Apprilianto, R. 2009. Teaching Descriptive Texts Using Mind Mapping and Pictures.In Cahyono, B.Y. *Technique in Teaching EFL Writing Practical Guides for Teachers of SMP/MTs in Indonesia* (pp.123-126). Malang: State University of Malang Press.

Arief, S. 2011. Helping Students Write a Recount Text Using Postcards. In Cahyono, B.Y. (Ed.), *Teaching English by Using Various Text Types* (pp.131-141). Malang: State University of Malang Press.

Harmer, J. 2007. *The Practice of Language Teaching (4th Edition).* Essex, UK: Pearson Education Limited.

Hartfield, V.F., Hughey, J.B., Wormouth, D., & Jacobs, H.L. 1988. *Learning ESL Composition.* Rowley M.A.: Newburry House.
Kemmis, S. & McTaggart, R. 1988. *The Action Research Planner (3rd Edition).* Geelong, Victoria: Deakin University.

Mareitha, R. 2004. *The Effect of Using Sequenced Pictures on the Quality of Students' Writing.* Unpublished Thesis. Malang: State University of Malang.

Mukminatien, N. 2003. Engaging EFL Students in Indonesia with Authentic Task: Possibilities within Limitations. In H.W. Kam & R.Y.L. Wong (Eds), *English Language Teaching in East Asia Today: Changing Policies and Practices* (pp.187-194). Singapore: Eastern Universities Press.

Muniroh, S. 2013. Using Conferences to Develop Student's Writing Skill. In Cahyono, B.Y. (Ed.), *Englishes for Communication and Interaction in the Classroom and Beyond* (pp. 421-438). Malang: State University of Malang Press.

Peacock, M. 1997. The Effect of Authentic Materials on the Motivation of EFL Learners. *ELT Journal.* Oxford: Oxford University Press. Vol. 51 no. 2. (pp:144-156).

Smaldino, S.E., Lowther, D.L., & Russell, J.D. 2012. *Instructional Technology and Media for Learning.* New Jersey: Pearson Education, Inc.

Tompkins, G.E. 2010. *Literacy for the 21st Century, A Balanced Approach (5th Edition).* Boston: Pearson Education, Inc.

Widiati, U & Cahyono, B.Y. 2006. The Teaching of EFL Writing in the Indonesian Context: The State of the Art. *Jurnal Ilmu Pendidikan*, 13(3):139-150.

Contact email: afidahusniyah@gmail.com, sriandreani@yahoo.com