Students' Learning Engagement in Writing Class: A Task-Based Learning

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Abstract
Students' degree of interest, attention, and curiosity are some indications of students' learning engagement which are very important to be noted down by every teacher. Knowing what makes students focused on what they are learning or doing in the class will be a great assistance for teacher in creating meaningful activities which at the end promotes their engagement and motivation. This study was intended to find out students' learning engagement during a writing class which was designed as a task based learning. The students were assigned to some collaborative activities in composing writings. The researcher observed students' activities especially during the pre and while writing and found out that one reason among others that made students unable to actively engaged at the beginning of the activity was failing to understand the teacher's instructions. This problem, however, was solved once they understood the tasks clearly and able to enjoy what they were doing in class. In other words, students' engagement could happen if the activities are meaningful for them.
Keywords: Classroom Action Research, students' engagement, Task-Based Learning, writing class.

1. INTRODUCTION

Students' engagement has been the focus of research in recent years. It was derived from the basic assumption that students' engagement in the teaching and learning process is very important because it is a main focus in stimulating students to become active students and more engaged in their process of learning. Engagement is essential to convince students that they already required for their cognitive development as well as their ability to create their knowledge in the meaningful learning activities such as participating collaborative group work, doing some discussions, giving comments or suggestions based on their knowledge, and sharing ideas both in groups and whole class. In other words, meaningful learning activities will make students develop engagement through their participation in the activities.

In the process of writing, the teacher plays an important role in materializing students' engagement to solve the problems raised in writing. The result of diagnose test indicated that most of them were difficulties in developing and organizing ideas. In other cases, the result of the observation presented that only no more than half of the students were active in the writing class. In solving these, the researcher and the teacher agreed to implement a Task-Based Learning (TBL) in teaching writing. It was expected because (1) Task-Based Learning (TBL) provides some supporting materials to help students in developing and organizing ideas, and (2) Task-Based Learning (TBL) activities can reduce the students' passiveness by participating them to exchange personal information, make collective judgments with other students and gain their engagement in the terms of discussion.

Many previous studies had justified that the use of Task-Based Learning (TBL) can engage students' learning engagement in writing class circumstances. Yan (2014) explained how the researcher could teach students English writing more efficiently through a series of well-designed tasks that could help students in solving their problems. In the process of doing the tasks, they would be responsible to take apart with their friends. In short, the tasks could help students to actively engage in meaningful activities and to concentrate more on the process of developing and organizing ideas. As stated by Yan (2014), further researchers might be recommended to apply the three stages of well-designed tasks namely pre-task activities, during-task activities (pair work, group discussion, first draft, and discussion of the product), and post-task activities in the writing class section.

The other research was conducted by Marashi and Dadari (2012). According to them, since imagination and creative thinking were central concepts of writing, students should be facilitated to develop their process of task-based writing. This research inspired the researcher that the students would be benefited from many kinds of supporting materials such as reading models, picture prompts, audio CDs, and discussions over the writing topics before and after the writing in applying Task-Based Learning (TBL). Essentially, the result showed that supporting materials could help students' positive engagement in organizing and developing ideas, learning some new vocabularies, and also helping them to select appropriate words and grammar usage in writing.

Hismanoglu and Hismanoglu (2011) observed that Task-Based Learning (TBL) could sort out the students' passiveness and boredom in writing class. Being a learner-centered approach, Task-Based Learning (TBL) emphasized students' active engagement in the

process of learning. When students have undertaken a writing task, they would be responsible to take their unconsciousness active parts to achieve their outcomes. This research justified a Task-Based Learning (TBL) can handle students' passiveness by performing a task in pair work, group discussion, or teacher-student interaction. It increased students' active participation in learning cooperatively as well as their positive motivation to finish the task well. Abas (2015) also assisted that fostering students' positive engagement can be easily built by inviting them into meaningful activities such as discussion and interaction.

Furthermore, Hashemi, Azizinezhad, and Darvishi (2012) through their findings convinced that the use of Task-Based Learning (TBL) can be used in the process of observing students' writing activities. As stated in their article, the specific aim was to encourage students' participation in the task specifically for those poor learners when they felt shy, speechless, and confused. The positive engagement can be seen and came out in the process of discussion since some unexpected questions and surprising answers will be discussed and observed together. It affected students' imagination to critically answer the task, to develop their creative ideas, and foster their positive interest in the process of finishing the tasks. It is in line with a study conducted by Robinson (2011) in which every sequence of Task-Based Learning can successfully engage students' interest by having some collaborative learning that promotes their active roles in the process of finishing the tasks.

A survey research conducted by Wonglorsaichon, Wongwanich, and Wiratchai (2010) revealed that students' learning engagement plays an important role in promoting students' learning and achievement. In sum, the researchers reported three factors such as parent, teacher, and friend that should be emphasized in the process of learning since they can affect students' level of engagement. They further showed the factors would be responsible to motivate students' positive feeling such as dedication to study, solve the problem, realize the value of study, as well as to monitor and evaluate their own study. Similarly, DeWaelsche's (2015) mixed-method study also found that team-mates in discussion will affect their positive engagement.

Another survey research study also revealed that learning engagement was rated as the most important point in the process of learning. As stated by Miller, Rycek, and Fritson (2011), there were some reasons as well as factors that might lead to promote students' engagement. They were students' academic effort, active participation, motivation to foster their intrinsic interest, and make collaborative learning. In highlight, the most affected factors can be found in the process of learning communities that can be built by having a collaborative learning or discussion. It was in line with the study by Samson (2015) in which fostering students' engagement by using powerful activities that involving collaborative and incorporate investigations. It might increase students' self-motivation to learn best.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW
2.1 Students' learning engagement

The concept of student learning engagement is based on the constructivist assumption that learning is influenced by how an individual participates in educationally purposeful activities (Coates, 2005). According to Mandernach (2009), student engagement results from intrinsic motivation or individual needs which makes students have positive feelings and

continue their practices with perseverance and self-confidence. In other words, student engagement refers to students' expression of opinions or attitudes and behaviors (Taylor, Hunter, Melton, and Goodwin, 2011). It is in line with Bloom (1959)'s idea that student engagement is referred into three dimensions. (1) Behavioral engagement. Students who are behaviorally engaged with behavioral norms, such as attendance and involvement. (2) Emotional engagement. Students who engage emotionally would experience affective reactions such as interest, or enjoyment. And (3) Cognitive engagement. Cognitively engaged students would seek to go beyond the requirements and would relish a challenge.

A review of the literature reveals that teachers must have the ability to design contexts and tasks that encourage student engagement (Parsons, Nuland, and Parsons, 2014). According to Charles, Bustard, & Black (2009), meaningful learning activities would make students develop engagement through their participation in the activities. This is where teacher factors in selecting materials and learning activities play a vital role in students' significant academic outcomes. Teachers have to create an engaging environment by fostering cooperation, positiveness, and tasks that are collaborative and challenging (Parsons, Nuland, and Parsons, 2014). In this research, engagement strategies are aimed to provide students with meaningful learning opportunities, such as participating in pre-task activity, during-task activity (pair work, group discussion, first draft, and discussion of the product) and post-task activity through Task-Based Learning (TBL).

2.2 Task-based learning

Task-Based Learning (TBL) follows the principles and effectiveness of experiential learning introduced by John Dewey (1859-1952) and real-life situations are rehearsed in the language teaching classrooms (Ellis, 2003). History of Task-Based Learning (TBL) goes back in the early 1980s as it emerged out of the Communicative Language Teaching task in India by Prabhu (1987). The rationale behind its origination is the lack of performance in the target language production. It was assumed that students could master a language if they only mastered the grammar of the target language. It proved wrong because students master the target language more powerfully when being exposed to meaningful task-based activities in a natural way (Nunan, 1989; Prabhu, 1987).

Task-Based Learning (TBL) is a learner-centered approach, based on the constructivism theory of learning. Wang (2011) stated that constructivism emphasizes students' autonomy, reflectivity, personal involvement, and active engagement of the students in the process of learning. More recently in modern theories of learning, Task-Based Learning (TBL) is a technique that gets students engaged in meaningful activities to exchange personal information, solve problems, or to make a collective judgment (Hai, 2014). Besides, Task-Based Learning (TBL) offers some supporting materials to relate students' background knowledge with the useful vocabulary or important functionality sentence patterns to complete a task easily and naturally. In this research, the students may be encouraged by participating in pair work, group discussion, or teacher-student interaction through Task-Based Learning stages.

2.3 The steps of writing by using task-based learning (TBL)

This research adapted from Hai (2014) steps of teaching writing. According to Hai (2014), to teach a lesson practically with Task-based learning (TBL), it involved three principal phases: pre-task, during-task (pair work, group discussion, first draft, and discussion of the product), and post-task. They were as follows:

I. Pre-Task Activity

1. The teacher gave 2 reading models and picture prompts (supporting materials).

II. During-Task Activity

a) Pair Work

2. The teacher divided students into pairs (with their desk friend) to discuss the supporting materials then the teacher asked the students to choose a topic based on their interest/ preference.

3. The teacher guided the students in understanding the materials based on the supporting materials that have been given.

b) Group Discussion

4. Students came together in a group that has the same interest topic. They re-discussed the topic selected.

c) First Draft

5. The teacher let students develop their ideas during discussion in their group.

d) Discussion of the Product

6. After the completion of the first draft, the students exchanged their first drafts with their friends. (Every student has to write their feedback on the checklist paper that was provided by the teacher).

III. Post-Task Activity

7. The teacher asked all of the students to display their work on the wall and discussed together in the class.

3. RESEARCH METHODS

This research used a quantitative research methodology since all of the processes had an aim to verify a theory of Task-Based Learning from Nunan (1989) as well as a theory of Learning Engagement from Bloom (1959). Besides, the process of collecting the data used a linear procedure that started with the planning section and ended with the reflection section.

3.1 Approach

This research was part of Classroom Action Research (CAR) which was conducted collaboratively with the English teacher of SMPN 2 Jember.

3.2 Subject

The research subjects of the study were the VII E students of SMPN 2 Jember in the 2017/2018 academic year. There were 37 students.

3.3 Instruments

Observation was done to see the students' engagement/participation during the teaching-learning process. The indicators of the students' engagement to be evaluated were as follow; 1) the students' participation in pair work session, 2) the students' participation in

a group discussion session, 3) the students' participation in giving friend's work feedback, and 4) the students' participation in sharing the topic in the class.

3.4 Data Analysis Technique

The results of the observation were analyzed by using the following formula:

$$E = \frac{n}{N} \; x \; 100\%$$

Note:

E = the percentage of students who actively participate.

n = the number of students who actively participate.

N = the number of students as the research subject.

4. FINDINGS

The first indicator of the students' engagement was the students' participation in the pair work section. In this stage, students were doing pre and during-task activity. From the field note collected, it could be seen that almost all of the students identified the text correctly and completely. They filled the generic structure of the text, underlined the simple present tense, gave a circle on the adjective, drew their conclusion of the descriptive text, learned simple present tense, gave example about the tense, then identified the example to formulate the simple present tense. Besides, during the observation, the researcher still found a few students who did the pre-task individually. In avoiding students' mistakes, the researcher and the English teacher as the collaborator guided them in understanding the instruction clearly and asked whether they did not know the application of the technique yet.

The second indicator of the students' engagement was the students' participation in the group discussion section. In doing during-task activity, all of the students indicated their interest and involvement that could be seen from their behavior that all of the students mastered the group discussion session that was based on the task-based instruction. Not only created a good cooperation in doing the discussion, but they also re-discussed what they got in pair work session with their group discussion and shared their knowledge about the topic that made their activity more meaningful in order to prepare their descriptive text writing. During this stage, both researcher and the English teacher did not see any indication that the students feel unwilling or stressed in doing the writing task. Some groups said that they were happy to have the opportunity to participate in collaborative work.

The third indicator of the students' engagement was the students' participation in giving a friend's work feedback. In doing during-task activity, almost all of the students involved in giving precious suggestions as their ability in writing achievement to their friend's descriptive text writing. They gave a thick on the peer-writing checklist, gave their comment or the explanation on the suggestion box, and praised their friend's good writing by giving emoticon or a picture of thumb. This showed that the existence of friend's feedback gives students opportunities to learn from one another, makes students more active to clarify their ideas as they explained their work to the students' who corrected their writing, relishes the challenge that was provided by the teacher and increases their curiosity in learning better writing by checking and comparing their products.

The forth indicator of the students' engagement was the students' participation in sharing the topic in the class. From the students' way in doing the post-task activity, almost all of them shared their ideas or arguments in the whole class discussion. They were confident in delivering their opinion on their friend's work, asking their difficulty, expressing their opinion without feeling shy, and gave suggestions regarding the error together. The researcher indicated that this indicator also could explore some aspects in detail that might be ignored when they did the previous indicator (in giving a friend's work feedback). This indicator gave some good impact for their writing by letting them in knowing the importance of certain ideas as well as information and inviting them to speak up as they had a chance to participate through a whole class discussion.

5. DISCUSSION

The research result indicated that Task-Based Learning (TBL) activities allowed students became active participants that got students engaged in the meaningful activities as they had a chance to have a discussion with their friends, deliver their ideas, present their work, ask and answer questions, and give some comments or feedback. As found in the pre-task activity, the students had some time to think and explore their thoughts in understanding the materials about the definition, social function, and generic structure of descriptive text through some supporting materials that were given by the teacher. The result showed that it could be used to help the students positive engagement in developing and organizing their ideas. It was in line with Marashi and Dadari (2012) idea that Task-Based Learning (TBL) can foster students' active participation in exploring their thoughts before writing processes.

In during-task activity, the students worked in group discussion and helped each other which resulted every student had responsibility to produce better writing because they reviewed and gave feedback on each other's work. This could help students who were confused in choosing the appropriate vocabulary, writing grammatically correct sentences, and applying mechanics of writing correctly by having discussion with their friends in the same interest/preference. Hashemi, Azizinezhad, and Darvishi (2012) through their research also found that when the students worked in group discussion in Task-Based Learning (TBL), they were encouraged to participate in the task especially for those poor as they felt secure to work in group. Basically, the result was also in line with Abas (2015), DeWaelsche (2015), Samson (2015), and Wonglorsaichon, Wongwanich, and Wiratchai's research results that students' interaction in a group discussion will boost students' positive engagement in the process of doing the tasks.

The post-task activity allowed the students to foster their positive engagement by sharing their ideas with the whole class. This could help all of the students could ask and report the results of discussion about their own and their friends' weaknesses and strengths on their writing. Based on the report, the teacher helped and guided the students in learning more how to write a descriptive text correctly in terms of five writing aspects, reviewed their work by displaying one of the students' worksheet, then discussed the most students' writing errors together to produce better writing in the next meeting. This was in line with Hismanoglu and Hismanoglu (2011) idea on their research result that Task-Based Learning (TBL) could sort out the problems that students encountered in writing process through a post-task activity.

Besides, from the data collected during the process of learning writing, a researcher tends to classify the research result through Bloom (1959)'s idea that student engagement is referred into three dimensions. They were as follows: behavioral engagement, emotional engagement, and cognitive engagement. The first dimension of students' engagement is behavioral engagement (Bloom, 1959). In terms of students' interactions, a researcher found that there was a positive higher behavioral engagement in students' interaction both in pair work section and group work discussion after they understood the instruction stated in each task. Students' involvement and attendance were more likely to be engaged when they were interacting with other students in demonstrating their ideas, accepting students' ideas and discussing the better ideas which made a distinction between students' positive behaviors and associated with their acted out in the process of learning after implementing what the instruction asked them to do.

The second dimension of students' engagement is emotional engagement (Bloom, 1959). It was true based on Robinson (2011) and Myller, Rycek and Fritson (2011) in which a teacher will also affect the successfulness of learning engagement. In the process of learning writing, a researcher has discovered that positive advice, kind words or reinforcements and rewards could develop students' enjoyment, interest, and satisfaction in the process of learning through Task-Based Learning (TBL). In every section of the discussion, the researcher offered a few more questions related to the topic that made almost all of the students had so much opportunity to share their ideas in a whole-class discussion. The researcher accepted every student's idea and appreciated their answers as well as enthusiasm by giving them some rewards. It affected students' self-motivation to foster their interest.

The third dimension of students' engagement is cognitive engagement (Bloom, 1959). In completing the Task-Based Learning (TBL)'s stages, students put in a lot of effort in understanding the descriptive text in which they were completing the tasks in the orderly stages. During the process of learning writing, both researcher and the English teacher pointed out that the use of supporting materials encouraged students to become interested in the topic appeared and helped them in gaining a deeper understanding of the processes better writing. It could be seen in every meeting, after discussing in a whole-class discussion, when the researcher asked about the materials that have been discussed in the class, students were able to implement it by identifying, describing and explaining what they have done.

Furthermore, the theory of Nunan (1989) that stated Task-Based Learning (TBL) has extremely popular because they all stress the importance of activity and the process of learning was true based on the observation. After conducting this research, it was convinced us that all the activities in Task-Based Learning (TBL) through pre-task activity, during-task activity, and post-task activity required the students to actively engage in the tasks and to complete the task. This could be seen from the discussion above, although the Task-Based Learning (TBL) consisted of several stages, they all emphasized the importance of activity and process of learning by doing the task. This was supported by the research conducted by Hai (2014) in Chinese that the three stages of Task-Based Learning could help students to actively engage in activities and concentrate more on the process of learning.

6. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Based on the results of the action research, it is suggested that when the English teachers use Task-Based Learning (TBL) in teaching writing, they should provide some supporting materials for the students to assist the students to write their composition. Besides, the future researchers or the other teachers who have the same problems are suggested to conduct further research with the same research design to improve the students writing achievement with different strategies and materials. It also can be used for the readers for their reference and help them to support or prove their arguments through the result of teaching writing by using Task-Based Learning (TBL).

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