IMPROVING STUDENTS’ WRITING SKILLS ON DESCRIPTIVE TEXT USING FOUR SQUARE WRITING METHOD

Ita Mahfudzoh
English Education Study Program
Sebelas Maret University
Surakarta

Email: ita.mahfudzoh@aiesec.net

Abstract: The aims of this research are: (1) to investigate the extent to which Four Square Writing Method improves the students’ writing skills on descriptive text; (2) to describe what happens to the classroom situation when Four Square Writing Method is implemented to teaching writing. The research data were collected by using observation, questionnaire, interview, and test. Techniques of analyzing data used in this research are qualitative data and quantitative data analysis. Qualitative data analysis involved data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification; quantitative data analysis was done by using formula. The research findings have shown that Four Square Writing Method can improve the students’ writing skills on descriptive text. The students were able to generate the ideas, organize their descriptive writing with cohesiveness and coherence, use the correct vocabulary, improve the grammar mastery and use the correct mechanism in their descriptive writing. Besides, Four Square Writing Method can also improve the writing class situation. The students were getting motivated and interested in the writing class, they were fully engaged in the classroom activity, and they more paid attention to the teacher’s explanation.

Keywords: Four Square Writing Method, Descriptive Text

Abstrak: Tujuan dari penelitian ini adalah: (1) untuk meneliti sejauh mana Four Square Writing Method meningkatkan kemampuan menulis siswa pada teks deskriptif; (2) untuk mendeskripsikan apa yang terjadi pada kegiatan belajar mengajar di kelas ketika Four Square Writing Method diimplementasikan pada ajar menulis. Teknik pengumpulan data yang dilakukan adalah dengan menggunakan observasi, kuisioner, wawancara, dan tes. Teknik analisis data yang digunakan dalam penelitian ini adalah analisis data kualitatif dan analisis data kuantitatif. Analisis data kualitatif meliputi reduksi data, display data, dan penarikan kesimpulan dan verifikasi. Sedangkan analisis data kuantitatif dilakukan dengan menggunakan rumus. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa Four Square Writing Method dapat meningkatkan kemampuan menulis siswa pada teks deskriptif. Siswa dapat dengan mudah menemukan ide-ide sesuai topik untuk menulis, menulis teks deskriptif dengan kohesif dan koherensi, menggunakan kosakata yang benar, secara tidak langsung meningkatkan tata bahasa, dan menggunakan mekanisme menulis yang benar dalam menulis teks deskriptif. Selain itu, Four Square Writing Method juga dapat meningkatkan
situasi kelas menulis. Siswa menjadi termotivasi dan tertarik untuk menulis, mereka berpartisipasi dengan baik dalam kegiatan kelas, dan mereka lebih memperhatikan penjelasan dari guru.

**Kata Kunci: Four Square Writing Method, Teks Deskripsi**

English covers four main skills which are needed to be mastered by the learners. They are reading, listening, speaking, and writing. This is as what Celce-Murcia (2001:8) states that “Skills are integrated from beginning; a given activity might involve reading, listening, speaking, and writing (this assumes the learners are educated and literate)”. Learners who acquire English could not be apart from these four skills. Thus, teaching English also means teaching reading, listening, speaking, and writing. From those four skills, writing is considered as the most difficult one. Writing in English, where English plays as a foreign language, is somehow frustrating for the learners in Indonesia. Moreover, it also happens to the native speakers as well. Celce-Murcia (2001:205) states that the native speakers also find it difficult to truly master writing skills.

Writing is considered as important as speaking, listening, and reading. Writing needs sequence of process such as outlining, drafting, revising, editing, and rewriting. According to Harmer (2004: 5), process of writing begins from planning, drafting, editing, and final draft. This means that teaching writing may probably be done over several times to fulfill all process. Based on Bell and Burnaby (in Nunan, 1991: 6), “writing is an extremely complex cognitive activity in which the writer is required to demonstrate control of a number of variables simultaneously”. Hence, it can be stated that writing should be best taught properly with process.

In the scope of English teaching-learning in Indonesia, the government has already established the curriculum and designed the syllabus where the writing skill is mostly and usually connected with genre-based text. There are some kinds of genre-based text which are supposed to be learned by the students from junior to senior high schools. In junior high school level, the students are supposed to comprehend some kinds of genre-based texts such as descriptive text, recount text, narrative text, procedure text, and report text. It has been stated in the syllabus of Curriculum 2013 for the seventh grade students that the students are supposed to not comprehend the text only, but they are also supposed to be able to write in the form of text.

The researcher conducted a pre-research which covered observation of teaching-learning process, questionnaires, interview, and pre-test of writing. The classroom observation
was conducted by the researcher to investigate the circumstance of teaching-learning process, to identify what kind of method used by the teacher in his teaching writing, and to find out the problems happened in teaching-learning process and classroom situation, especially in writing class. Secondly, the researcher piloted the questionnaires to the students in order to gather some information to research issues related students’ response or attitudes towards writing skills, the method implemented by the teacher, the media, and the materials used by the teacher when teaching writing.

The researcher also conducted test for the students. Based on the result of pre-test of descriptive text writing which was carried out in the class VII G of SMP Negeri 4 Surakarta, the researcher found the students of class VII G of SMP Negeri 4 Surakarta lacking writing skills. They mostly lack of all indicators of writing skills which include content, organization, vocabulary, language use, and mechanics. It can be seen from the mean score of each indicator and mean score of students’ score. The mean score of the students’ writing on descriptive text is 69.92. The number of the mean score is still low. Whereas, the passing grade of English subject in the seventh grade of SMP Negeri 4 Surakarta is 80 since the school is one of pioneer schools in Surakarta. Regarding the passing grade, it means that the whole of students are supposed to be able to reach the score of 80 in minimum to pass the English subject. The result of assessment of pre-test showed that there were only four from thirty two students who were able to pass the passing grade. They are 81.5; 81; 81; and 80. The lowest score is 53.5.

For gaining further information, the researcher held interviews with the students and the teacher. This is undertaken to find out the deeper information which is directly coming from them. The teacher stated that the students of the seventh grade students were usually asked to make some sentences in form of sentences list only; it was not to build a text. The case is that the students are supposed to write a text considering the generic structure of what kind of text they are writing. While from the students’ point of view, they assumed that writing is difficult and it does not seem to be important to them unless they are asked to write as an assignment or for examination.

After doing further clarification towards all those problems, the researcher found that the problems are derived from several causes. First cause is from the material, media, and technique or method. There are several aspects spotlighted by the researcher. They are: (a) The current sources of material are not interesting enough and monotonous—starting with reviewing text book (text book from the government), next with
giving assignments without further real process of writing, and ending up with submitting to the teacher; (b) The media being used in teaching learning is sometimes boring; (c) The technique or method being used in teaching writing is not really attractive and it needs more creative one. The second cause comes from the teacher. The teacher did not give enough guidance to teach students writing a text in English with a process and feedback upon the students’ writing. The third cause is coming from the students themselves. The researcher found some problems indicating that: (a) the students had no interest in writing class; (b) the students lacked practice in writing.

Regarding the situation and issue in the Class VII G of SMP Negeri 4 Surakarta, especially in writing skills, the researcher would like to hold a classroom action research focusing on the method to teaching writing skills aimed to improve the students’ writing skills and the writing class situation. In this classroom action research, the researcher would use Four Square Writing Method as a method to teaching writing skills in order to improve their writing skills and writing class situation. It can be assumed that implementing Four Square Writing Method in Class VII G of SMP Negeri 4 Surakarta can conclusively improve the students’ writing skills and the writing class situation.

Four Square Writing Method (FSWM) was developed by Judith S. Gould and Evan J. Gould in 1999. According to Gould et. al. (2010: iv), FSWM refers to a method to teaching basic writing skills using a graphic organizer which is “applicable across grade levels and curriculum areas”. This method is suitable for teaching writing to any graders and significantly useful for the descriptive, narrative, persuasive, and expository writing. According to Bartholomae et. al. (2011: 2), FSWM is writing method by using a graphic organizer as a good tool for prewriting which enables students to organize thoughts, idea, and facts and allows them to focus on detail and word choice. They add that this kind of tool allows students to find it useful in building structure and writing some kinds of genre-based texts such as descriptive, narrative, persuasive, and expository form. They agree with why the Four Square Writing seems to be the best way for students and fits in all across grade levels since it is a simple writing tool.

The other definition of FSWM comes from Lestari et. al. (2013: 95) who note that FSWM is teaching basic writing skills method using “step by step approach that is built around a simplified graphic organizer as a visual framework for assisting students with formulating ideas in an organized manner prior to write texts”. They add that this method
allows students to focus on what they are writing, improves word choice, and provides detail and step by step approach which is useful for them to enhance the terms of cohesiveness, coherence and transition words.

From those overviews about the nature of Four Square Writing Method, we can conclude that Four Square Writing Method (FSWM) is a method to teaching writing using Four Square Graphic Organizer which helps students to go through the effective writing process—planning, drafting, revising, and editing—in order to produce a desired writing. This method eases students to focus on one writing section and allows them to have obvious revision from the first to the end of writing steps.

Four Square Writing Method is suitable for teaching writing to the first to twelfth graders and significantly useful for the descriptive, narrative, persuasive, and expository writing. The use of graphic organizer itself involves planning, organizing, and writing process which enables the writers to see their thought. When they use a graphic organizer in their writing, they “may see the need for greater depth as a more natural revision process” (Li, 2007; Mundy & Coleman, 2012; Mueller, 2015: 2). By using graphic organizer, students can “conceptualize, understand, and structure a piece of written discourse successfully” as well as provide coherence and cohesiveness in writing (Houston in Bartholomae, Sekyra, and Sibigtroth, 2011: 7).

There are some other action researches which implemented Four Square Writing Method as the solution to improve students’ writing skills. Hence, the researcher believes that writing skills on descriptive text of the students in class VII G of SMP Negeri 4 Surakarta can also be improved by using Four Square Writing Method to teaching them writing.

RESEARCH METHODS

In conducting this research, the researcher used action research as the research approach. Mills in Hopkins (2008: 48) describes action research as a systematic procedures undertaken to collect insightful information in term of educational context, such as dealing with the way of how the teacher teach and how the students learn, with a view to bringing about positive outcomes or changes. Furthermore, another expert, Burns (2010: 2) notes that action research as a “self-reflective, critical, and systematic approach” undertaken in educational context involving the participants—they could be the teachers and students or even including managers, administrators, and parents—in order to “identify a ‘problematic’ situation or issue” which would be examined, and then deliver a better change or improvement. In short, the point of doing action as part of action research
is to get involved in problematic situation with the purpose of bringing better changes or improvement in educational practices.

In other words, action research is a systematic procedure attempted to examine a classroom practice by doing practical action towards the subject and upon the concrete problematic issue found in its educational practices which is meant to be solved or improved. The procedures of action research are problem identification, plan, action, observation, and reflection.

In this research, the researcher used four techniques: (1) Observation. The researcher did observations in pre-research and during the research. The data were obtained by taking field notes and records; (2) Questionnaire. In this research, the researcher used the closed-ended question using Likert scales for questionnaire. The questionnaire was given twice. The first was distributed before the action research; the other one was distributed after the research; (3) Assessment. In this research, the researcher used testing as an assessment as the one of the more convenient methods in collecting data in action research. Testing used in this research is to assess the students’ performance on writing skills. The researcher conducted writing test for the students. There are three students’ writing tests: students’ writing preliminary test, students’ writing post-test I, and students’ writing post-test II; and (4) Interview. The kind of interview used in this research is an individual interview which belongs to free-guided interview using open-ended questions. The researcher developed the questions to gain more detailed information. The interview was carried out in pre-research and after the research. The researcher recorded the interview session and transformed them into form of transcription.

Techniques of analyzing data used in this research are qualitative data and quantitative data analysis. The qualitative data obtained in this research are the field notes of observations, the field notes of interviews, and questionnaires. There are three stages to analyze the data according to Miles and Huberman (1994: 10-11): data reduction, display, and conclusion drawing and verification. While the quantitative data were obtained from the score of the students’ writing test—it includes preliminary test, first post-test, and second post-test. Students’ writing test was assessed using writing scoring rubric. After assessing, the researcher calculated the scores to find the mean using a formula.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The final result of action in implementing Four Square Writing Method (FSWM) to teaching writing in the seventh grade students of SMP Negeri 4 Surakarta distinctly shows
that FSWM has brought better changes or improvement in their writing skills and the writing class situation. The use of FSWM to teaching writing—descriptive writing—to the seventh grade students of SMP Negeri 4 Surakarta is able to improve their writing skills which results in improving their achievement in writing score. In the pre-test, the mean score was 69.92 with 53.5 of the lowest score and there were 28 students who did not pass the passing grade. After implementing FSWM to teaching writing in Cycle I, the mean score became 84.05 with 79 of the lowest score and there were only 2 students who did not pass the passing grade. Meanwhile, there was none of students in the post-test II who did not pass the passing grade. The students have better improvement in every aspect of writing.

FSWM improves the students’ writing skill in generating the ideas

To start writing can be difficult; by FSWM using FSGO, the students find it useful to start writing. The first and second step of FSWM are brainstorming and adding supporting details. The research finding shows that use of FSGO in the first step of FSWM allows them to categorize the topic in the center box and subtopics in the two top boxes and the bottom left box, and also write the wrap-up sentence in the bottom right box.

After that, the second step allows them to add some supporting details of each subtopic by writing on every subtopic box. In short, the first and second step of FSWM is the useful mapping activity which helps them to generate the ideas and make them focused on every box they have. This activity deals with the process approach in writing which is pre-writing step or planning step.

FSWM improves the students’ writing skill in organizing cohesive and coherent writing

FSGO used in FSWM is as outline tool for helping the students to produce a well-organized writing. In other words, their writing becomes cohesive and coherent. The research finding has shown that they were able to write a descriptive text with an appropriate generic structure. Besides, the third step of FSWM which is adding connecting words helped them to bridge the gap between the sentences or ideas and to provide a smooth reading when changing paragraphs. In addition, the fourth step of FSWM, adding vivid language, made the students write a descriptive text with full of imagery as it should be since the vivid language is quite important to descriptive form of writing. This way makes them able elaborate their ideas to build imagery or picture for the readers.
FSWM improves the students’ writing skill in using correct vocabulary

FSWM is one way to enrich the vocabulary, especially in the step of adding supporting details of the second, third, and fourth box of FSGO which enforces the students to explore and find the appropriate vocabulary aligning the subtopics. The research finding has shown that the students’ vocabulary mastery was improved. They were able to use varied and appropriate vocabulary in their writing descriptive text.

FSWM indirectly improves the students’ writing skill in using correct grammar

The research finding has shown that FSWM allowed the students to arrange words into sentences, and then sentences into paragraphs. They were supposed to use the correct grammar. Moreover, at the end of FSWM step which is editing step, it helped them to correct their sentences. In addition, the whole step in FSWM represents the process of writing such as planning, drafting, revising, and editing which means that FSWM has brought the students to go through every step of writing. It somehow helps them to ensure whether or not their sentences are grammatically correct. In short, Four Square Writing Method indirectly improves the students writing’s skills in using correct grammar although, of course, it still needs teacher’s hand to be part of this improvement. The teacher needs to explain the students about the grammar within the step of brainstorming, supporting details, and arranging sentences into paragraphs.

FSWM improves the students’ writing skill in mechanics

Through the step of editing, the students could see their writing much deeper. This step is the final step of FSWM before submitting or publishing which is in line with the step by step approach of writing process. They are supposed to read the whole text to check the content, diction, punctuation, etc. They should ensure that their writing is clear, readable, and comprehensible. The result has shown that the students’ writing skill in mechanics was successfully improved.

The second improvement by implementing FSWM to teaching writing also happens to the writing class situation.

FSWM improves the students’ motivation towards writing

FSWM is a new way for them to learn and write a text using FSGO. The use of FSGO in writing class successfully attracted them. The research finding has shown that there were many students getting motivated and interested in writing since when using FSGO, the writing was not that boring and difficult. They were also confident about their writing. By every step in FSWM using FSGO, they could write confidently. The last
activity in the Cycle II has shown that there were many students wanting to be volunteers to read aloud their writing.

**FSWM improves the students’ engagement in writing class activity**

FSWM which was going along with pair discussion motivated the students in teaching learning activity. The discussion in pair during lesson made students well engaged in activity. They were active in discussion. Besides, going through every step in FSWM also has empowered the students to naturally get engaged with the activity in each step.

**FSWM improves the students’ attention to the teacher**

FSWM is done with full of steps. It demands the students to focus on every step they go through. It significantly makes them more pay attention and listen to the teacher’s explanation regarding every step carefully. They were also able to answer the teacher questions.

**CONCLUSION & SUGGESTION**

The classroom action research conducted in the Class VII G of SMP Negeri 4 Surakarta from 23rd of April to 23rd of May 2016 by implementing Four Square Writing Method to teaching writing on descriptive text has brought better changes or improvement in writing skills and writing class situation. The improvement of the students’ writing skills can be seen by the improvement of their writing score from pre-test until post-test II. In the pre-test, the mean score was 69.92 with 53.5 of the lowest score and there were 28 students who did not pass the passing grade. The passing grade of English subject in SMP Negeri 4 Surakarta is 80. After implementing FSWM to teaching writing in Cycle I, the mean score became 84.05 with 79 of the lowest score and there were only 2 students who did not pass the passing grade. Meanwhile, there was none of students in the post-test II who did not pass the passing grade and the mean score increased to be 89.88 with 84 of the lowest score. The students have better improvement in every aspect of writing including content, organization, vocabulary, language use, and mechanics. They are able to generate ideas, organize their writing with cohesiveness and coherence, use the correct vocabulary, use the correct grammar, and use the correct mechanism in their writing.

Besides, the writing class situation in the Class VII G of SMP Negeri 4 Surakarta was also improved after implementing the Four Square Writing Method. The students were getting motivated and interested in writing. FSWM is a new way for them to learn and to write a text using FSGO. The use of FSGO in writing class successfully attracted them. They were also confident about their writing. By every step in FSWM using FSGO, they could write...
confidently. Moreover, the discussion in pair during lesson made students well engaged in activity. They were active in discussion. Going through every step in FSWM also has empowered them to naturally get engaged with the activity in each step. In addition, they more paid attention and listened to the teacher’s explanation regarding every step carefully. They were also able to answer the teacher questions. It can be implied that Four Square Writing Method which uses Four Square Graphic Organizer is a useful, effective, and appropriate method or technique to teaching writing.

Writing is considered as the most difficult one. Writing in English, moreover English where it is as a foreign language like in Indonesia, is somehow frustrating for the students. In teaching writing, it is better for the teacher to implement an attractive method and process approach in writing since writing itself should be done with process—planning, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing. It is suggested for the teacher to implement Four Square Writing Method in his teaching writing. The steps of FSWM is relevant with process approach in teaching writing. Besides, it can improve both the students’ writing skills and writing class situation.

Furthermore, students must be aware to practice more and frequently when they want to have improvement in their writing skills. They should also understand that to produce a good written piece, they need to go through every step in writing including planning, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing. Four Square Graphic Organizer is one best tool for them to write a text as writing test or assignment and to practice free writing at home.

Bibliography


