**The Effects of Topic Selection on Students' Writing Performance**

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**ABSTRACT**

The research aimed at finding out (1) the different effects of using students’ self-selected topic and teacher assigned topic on students’ writing process (2) the different effects of using students self-selected topic and teacher assigned topic on students’ writing performance.This research applied a quasi-experimental method to two groups. Experimental group 1 practiced writing using students’ self- selected topic while experimental group 2 practiced writing using teacher assigned topic. The subject of this research was the second year students of MAN Bontoharu Kabupaten Kepulauan Selayar. The sample was chosen by applying cluster random sampling technique. In collecting data, the researcher used writing test in pretest and posttest and students practiced using writing process portfolios. The results were tested by t-test and analyzed using SPSS version 20 Program. The results of the analysis of the data showed that (1) there was significant different effects of using students self-selected topic and teacher assigned topic in writing process of second year students of MAN Bontoharu Kabupaten Kepulauan Selayar; probability value was lower than alpha (0.05) 0.00<0.05.(2) there was significant different effects of using students self-selected topic and teacher assigned topic on the writing performance of second year students of MAN Bontoharu Kabupaten Kepulauan Selayar; probability value was lower than alpha (0.05) 0.00<0.05 and the use of students’ self-selected topic improved writing performance of students better than practicing using teacher assigned topic.

***Keywords:*** *students’ self selected topic, teacher assigned topic, writing performance.*

**INTRODUCTION**

## In a debate in the Forum section of the *TESOL Quarterly,* Jones and Silva (1998) exchanged views about the merits and demerits of teacher-assigned themes and topics in tertiary-level EFL/ESL writing classes. Jones (1998) argues that using teacher-assigned comprehensive course themes and specific writing topics could assist in teaching students about the processes and the conventions of writing an academic paper. Jones idea here is that having an entire class has the same theme or topic would provide a common experience for the group, a point of departure that all would share. As students would share reading materials and participate in discussions and debates about the theme or topic, they would develop their own reasoned views, which would help them in the drafting and revising of their papers. The reason above can be valid pedagogical reasons for teachers to assign themes and topics in writing classes, because in a writing class that lacks shared subject matter or not knowledgeable about language, it would be more difficult for students to work together as a community of writers when they should revise kinds of topics. Besides, the teacher is the first one who know the need practice, prior knowledge, and points of grammar which appropriate with the students ability at that time. However, most scholars have ignored it. Some researcher have suggested that students should have considerable control of the content of their EFL/ESL language learning ( Kenny, 1993; Nunan 1994), including in the control of topics and themes for writing classes (Kenny, 1993; Silva, 1997, 1998). Silva (1997) argues that teachers should focus more on the process, location and timing of writing, leaving the reason and the content to the students.

For many years students have been written on topics assigned by the teacher. Based on the observation at MAN Bontoharu Kabupaten Kepulauan Selayar on 11th December 2014, the researcher found that the teacher there also usually assigned the topic in writing class. The teacher assigned the topic based on students’ need of practice and their prior knowledge of English. However, topic assigned by the teacher makes the students write for the teacher not for themselves. This is results in a mentality in which students fail to think carefully and deeply about their writing, student creativity and activeness are hindered, and their motivation and performance in writing remain low. They may not be presented with opportunities real and lasting purpose of writing. Therefore, writing may become a producing task of students rather than means of expression. Thus, for students who have not discover purpose for writing, writing activities may become difficult and frustrating experience without meaningful purposes. The researcher also found that the students showed little knowledge about how to write a contextually appropriate paper. When they do write, they confused with word choice, grammatical use, organization and generation of ideas.

Related to the students’ problems and controversial issue above, the researcher conducted an experimental study in order to be aware of the potential discrepancy between these two different instructions students’ writing performance and to know whether the teacher especially in MAN Bontoharu Kabupaten Kepulauan Selayar should continue their practice of assigning topics for writing or allowing the students to select their own topic.

Many studies performed concerning in the issue of topic selection, however those studies are focused on writing skill in general. The novelty of this research is this research focusing the issue of topic selection and how the effects of those topic selection on all components of writing and also the effects of topic selection on students’ writing process. This research is very important because all English teacher can use the finding of this research to ensure that the students practice writing as best as possible. This is due to the fact that students especially in MAN Bontoharu Kabuaten Kepulauan Selayar face a lot of problem in their writing. This research is feasible to do because Writing is a part of English skill which is included in English curriculum and syllabus at MAN Bontoharu Kabupaten Kepulauan Selayar. Based on the background above, the writer conducted a research under the title “The Effects of Topic Selection on Students' Writing Performance”.

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

**Writing**

According to Haorston (2002) writing is a tool for discovery. We stimulate our thoughts by act of writing and tap into information and image we have in our unconcious mind. Lorc in Mulyani (2006) states that writing is kind of activity where the writer expresses all the ideas in his mind in the paper from words to sentence, sentence to paragraphs and from paragraphs to essay.

There are many kinds of text in writing. The kind of text to write which is selected for this study is analytical exposition text. Analytical exposition text is a text that elaborates the writer’s idea or topic about the phenomenon surrounding. The purpose of this text is to persuade the reader or listener that there is something that, certainly, needs to get attention or to analyze a topic and to persuade the reader that this opinion is correct and supported by arguments. Examples: argumentative essay, exploratory essay.

**Component of writing**

Writing is a complex skill. In building up a composition, the students have to know the five components of writing that must be integrated to make good writing so writing becomes useful and meaningful. Jacob, et. al (1981:31) pointed out five main components of writing. They are content, organization, grammar, vocabulary and mechanism.

* + - * 1. ***Content***

The content of writing should be clear to the readers. So that the readers can understand the message conveyed and gain information from it. In order to have a good content of writing, its content should be well unified and completed. The term usually that was known as unity and completeness, which become the characteristics of a good writing. The writing is regarded to have unity if it has some ideas and the sentence contained in it developed idea. The main idea is stated in the topic sentence and every supporting develops it and related to that idea.

* + - * 1. ***Organization***

The process of organization in writing involves coherence, order to importance, general to specific, specific to general, chronological order, and spatial pattern.

* + - * 1. ***Language use***

Langage use in writing involves correct language and point of grammar. In order to have a good grammar in writing, writer should attention to the use of grammatical rules concerning tenses, preposition, conjunction, clause (adjective and verbal clause), articles, etc. the lack of knowledge of grammar will make the content of writing vague and lead to misunderstanding

* + - * 1. ***Vocabulary***

Ones cannot write anything if she or he has nothing to express. He or she should express the ideas in form of words or vocabulary. The lack of vocabulary make someone fails to compose what he or she are going to say because she or he fells difficult to choose word appropriate vocabulary will helps the writer to compose the writing and also make readers easy to understand.

* + - * 1. ***Mechanic***

The use of mechanism is due to capitalization, punctuation, spelling appropriately. This aspect is very important since it lead readers to understand or recognize immediately what the writer means to express definitely. The use of favorable mechanism in writing will made readers easy to group the conveying ideas or massage to writing material.

**Writing process**

Writing, like reading, is in many ways an individual, solitary activity: the writing triangle of ‘communicating’, ‘composing’ and ‘crafting’ is usually carried out for an absent readership. However, it should be remembered that our students are language learners rather than writers, and it would not be particularly helpful to have them spend all their time writing alone. Although process research points to a need to give learner-writers space and time to operate their own preferred individual strategies, the classroom can be structured in such a way as to provide positive intervention and support in the development of writing skills.

Placed in the Indonesia EFL learners school context, one of the disadvantages of getting students to concentrate on the process of writing is that it takes time: time to brainstorm ideas or collect them in some other way; time to draft a piece of writing and then, with the teacher’s help perhaps, review it and edit it in various ways before changing the focus, generating more ideas, redrafting, re-editing and so on. This cannot be done in ninety minutes.

From the above reasons, the researcher proposes a working process-oriented writing model which is used as a framework for the lesson plans in this study. The classroom can provide the following stages adapted and modified from Seow’s process model (2002):

*Stage 1: Pre-writing: helping students to generate ideas*

One of the hardest tasks in writing is getting started. Therefore, the teacher needs to stimulate students’ creativity, to get them thinking how to approach ideas to write. In this stage the most important thing is the flow of ideas, so the teacher should help them to develop words or ideas about the writing. Sometimes, they can be asked to read the model text to explore ideas. This raises students’ awareness of the features of different genres of writing in English. Each member also can make a plan of the writing. This helps student’s focus on the audience as they consider what the reader needs to know and then share and discuss their ideas in groups. To gathering information to write the students can freely and quickly write down words and phrases about the topic (Rapid free writing) or they make an outline related to the topic.

*Stage 2: Drafting: letting students write freely*

This stage involves thinking about which of the many ideas generated are the most important or relevant, and perhaps taking a particular point of view. During this stage, students write without much attention to the accuracy of their work or the organization. The most important feature is meaning. Here, both the teacher and students should concentrate on the content of the writing: Let students write as quickly as possible; if they cannot think of a word in English, they leave a space or write it in Bahasa Indonesia. Then in groups, they work together and compare what they have written. This collaborative writing is especially valuable because students can help each other with vocabulary and this gives confidence to students before they share their writing to the class. During this stage, the teacher can also give some advice on some useful structures or vocabulary or collocation. This gives students the helpful tools to better express their own ideas.

*Stage 3: Peer revision: enabling students to appreciate the criteria for an effectsive text*

During this stage, the products are interchanged and the revision is done by other students. They can move around, check the texts for spelling, look for errors, compare their ideas or find the differences or the best ideas, and so on. The teacher gives students some criteria for judging their peers’ written texts in the form of a revising checklist, asking them to reduce or to edit the texts concentrating on the most important information. The teacher may also respond at this stage by commenting on the content and the organization of ideas.

*Stage 4: Editing: helping students to develop crafting skills*

When writing a final draft, students should be encouraged to check the details of grammar, spelling, punctuation, capitalization, etc which may have been ignored in the previous stages. And once again, The teacher gives students some criteria for judging their peers’ written texts in the form of a editing checklist. The teacher may guide students how to deal with their own mistakes. The teacher only needs to choose the most common or serious errors for correction in front of the class. This will raise students’ awareness of their mistakes because it is a good idea that it would be better for students to learn from their errors rather than to be told about theirs. Finally, a period of writing may end with the presentation or display of some students’ written products.

**Topic Selection in writing**

Sometimes when students are assigned an essay to write, their teacher selects the topic. At other times, teachers may provide a list of topics from which students are to choose one. In some cases, selecting a topic is left entirely up to the students. However, it is believed that use of L1 may take place more when students write about a topic that does not fit the student‘s interests and knowledge; or is too narrow or too specific, for example writing about Mozart‘s symphonies. In fact, knowledge of the topic and awareness of cultural factors have a considerable effects on L1 use during L2 writing and text quality (c.f. Akyel 1994 and Friedlander 1990). In line with this, Friedlander (1990) found that writers wrote their best texts on familiar topics, related to their L1 cultural backgrounds, regardless of whether the plans for those texts were in L1 or L2. However, Kraples (1990) also concluded that tasks on L1 related topics generated more L1 use during L2 writing than other tasks.

**METHOD**

**Design and Samples**

This research applied a quasi-experimental method to two groups. The subject of this research was the second year students of MAN Bontoharu Kabupaten Kepulauan Selayar. The sample was chosen by applying cluster random sampling technique. In collecting data, the researcher used writing test in pretest and posttest and students practiced using writing process portfolios.

**Instruments and Procedures**

**Writing test**

To find out the different between using students’ self- selected topic and teacher assigned topic on students writing performance, researcher designed a pre-test and a post-test on English writing test. Kind of text to write which is selected for this research is analytical exposition text. Actually, the pre-test and the post-test on English writing are similar but not the same. They are similar in format, instruction, level of difficulty, and allotted time. However, the specific writing topics between the two tests are different, for this reason, researcher assumes that the participants would have no trouble.While tofind out the different in students’ process of writing between using students’ self- selected topic and teacher assigned topic, the researcher used writing process portfolios.Writing process portfolio is a collection of all the work that went into producing a final version of a paper.  The portfolios contain all the drafts and notes that led up to the final version of a paper based on stages of writing process by Seow (2002) they are pre-writig, drafting, revising and editing.

**Data Analysis**

The data was collected from each variables were analyzed by using the Statistical Package for Social and Science (SPSS) version 20.0 for windows. Procedure that taken in analyzing the test were:

1. For students’ writing performance

The data was collected from the students writing test are analyzed by using analytic writings (content, organization, language use, vocabulary, mechanics) by Jacob et all (1981) then classifying the score of the students

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| NO | Level | Criteria |
| 1 | 89-100 | Very good |
| 2. | 78-88 | Good |
| 3. | 67-77 | Fairly good |
| 4. | 56-66 | Fair |
| 5. | 45-55 | Poor |
| 6. | 34-44 | Very Poor |

In this case, the highest score is 100 and the lowest score 34 because the result of Jacobs’ rubric is there is none students get 0. After classifying the score, the researcher calculating the mean score, standard deviation, and the t-test.

In calculating the mean score, standard deviation, and frequency table to identify students writing toward students’ self-selected and teacher assigned topic, the researcher will use descriptive statistic. Descriptive statistic namely means score, standard deviation, and frequency table. The last is calculating the t-test value (at the significant level 0.05) and consulting t-table value to see the different between the effects students’ self-selected topic and teacher assigned topic on writing performance the researcher use SPSS program version 20.0.

1. For student’ writing process
2. Scoring students’ writing process using writing process assessment adopted by Chau (2002).
3. Classifying students’ writing process score

The classification range is made by using the following formula:

$$\frac{the highest score-lowest score}{number of classification}$$

 (Amin, 2004:32)

From this formula, the researcher decided the interval score is 75 (75 – 15) and the range is 12

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| NO | Level | Criteria |
| 1 | 63-75 | Very good |
| 2. | 50-62 | Good |
| 3. | 37-49 | Fair |
| 4. | 24-36 | Poor |
| 5. | 11-23 | Very Poor |

1. Calculating the mean score and standard deviation
2. Finding out normality of test
3. Calculating the t-test value

**RESULT AND DISCUSSIONS**

By comparing the frequency, percentage, mean score, standard deviation of the experimental group 1 and experimental group 2, it was found that there was significant difference between the result of the test in experimental group 1 and experimental group 2 in the process of writing. The mean score obtained by the students’ in experimental group 1 was 58.31 that classified into good classification with standard deviation 1.379, while in experimental group 2 the mean score was 49.71 that classified into fair classification with standard deviation 1.334. Drafts of writing process Portfolio in experimental group 1 and experimental group 2 showed that the students of experimental group 1 improved more than the students of experimental group 2 in each drafts of writing process portfolio.

In analyzing students’ writing performance, it was found that there was no significant difference effects between the result of the test in experimental group 1 and experimental group 2 in pretest. The mean score obtained by the students’ pretest in experimental group 1 and experimental group 2 for writing performance was classified into fair classification. However, after conducting the treatment, the researcher found significant difference effects between the result of the test in experimental group 1 and experimental group 2 for their writing performance. The mean score of writing performance obtain by the students in experimental group 1 was classified into fairly good classification, while in experimental group 2 was classified into fair classification. Certainly, it can be concluded that using students’ self-selected topic was more effective in the students’ writing performance than using teacher assigned topic. Since the percentage gained by the students in experimental group was higher than that Experimental Group 1, it implies that using students’ self-selected topic in writing class could improve the students’ writing performance more than using teacher assigned topic.

***Table 1*** *The Mean Score and the Standard Deviation of the Students’ Writing Process and Writing Performance Using Students’ Self-Selected Topic and Teacher Assigned Topic*

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Variables** | **Pretest** | **Posttest** |
| **Mean Score** | **Standard Deviation** | **Mean Score** | **Standard Deviation** |
| **WRITING PROCESS** | **EG 1** | 58.31 | 1.379 | 58.31 | 1.379 |
| **EG2** | 49.71 | 1.334 | 49.71 | 1.334 |
| **WRITING PERFORMANCE** | **EG 1** | 60.08 | 6.28 | 78.38 | 8.105 |
| **EG 2** | 63.75 | 7.32 | 66.63 | 8.870 |

The result above is supported by the significance t-test result taken from the inferential statistical data. It was found that for writing process, the probability value was lower than alpha (0.05) 0.00<0.05. It indicated that null hypothesis (H0) was rejected and alternative hypothesis (H1) was accepted. It can be concluded that there was significant different effects of using students self-selected topic and teacher assigned topic in the writing process of second year students of MAN Bontoharu Kabupaten Kepulauan Selayar. For writing performance, in pretest, P-value (0.91) was higher than alpha (0.05) the level of significant. This finding stated that there was no significant difference effects between the two groups before treatment. In order word, both classes are homogenous. In post test, P-value (0.00) was smaller than alpha (0.05) the level of significant. This finding stated that there is significant difference effects between the two groups after treatment. It also indicated that null hypothesis (H0) was rejected and alternative hypothesis (H1) was accepted. It means there was significant different effects of using students self-selected topic and teacher assigned topic in the writing performance of second year students of MAN Bontoharu Kabupaten Kepulauan Selayar.

For more detail, the researcher also analyzed the gain or difference score of pretest in all components of writing.The result shows in following table:

Table 2. *The T-Test of Pretest in Each Components of Writing*

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Variable** | **P-value** | **Alpha** |
| CONTENT | 0.135  | 0.05 |
| VOCABULARY | 0.002 | 0.05 |
| LANGUAGE USE | 0.245 | 0.05 |
| ORGANIZATION | 0.030 | 0.05 |
| MECHANICS | 0.152 | 0.05 |

Based on the result of data analysis as summarized in table 2, it can be seen that in content, the P-value (0.135) was higher than alpha (0.05) the level of significant. This finding stated that there was no significant difference effects in content between the two groups before treatment. In vocabulary, the P-value (0.02) is smaller than alpha (0.05) the level of significant. This finding stated that there was significant difference effects in vocabulary between the two groups after treatment. In language use, the P-value (0.245) was higher than alpha (0.05) the level of significant. This finding stated that there was no significant difference effects in language use between the two groups before treatment. In organization, the P-value (0.030) was smaller than alpha (0.05) the level of significant. This finding stated that there was significant difference effects in organization between the two groups before treatment. In mechanics, the P-value (0.152) was higher than alpha (0.05) the level of significant. This finding stated that there was no significant difference effects in mechanics between the two groups after treatment.

Furthermore, the researcher also found the gain or difference score of posttest both experimental group 1 and experimental group 2. The result shows in following table

Table 3*. The T-Test of Posttest in Each Components of Writing*

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Variable** | **P-value** | **Alpha** |
| CONTENT | 0.00 | 0.05 |
| VOCABULARY | 0.00 | 0.05 |
| LANGUAGE USE | 0.001 | 0.05 |
| ORGANIZATION | 0.007 | 0.05 |
| MECHANICS | 0.382 | 0.05 |

Based on the result of data analysis as summarized in table 3, it can be seen that in content, the P-value (0.00) was lower than alpha (0.05) the level of significant. This finding stated that there was significant difference effects in content between the two groups after treatment. In vocabulary, the P-value (0.00) was smaller than alpha (0.05) the level of significant. This finding stated that there was significant difference effects in vocabulary between the two groups after treatment. In language use, the P-value (0.001) was smaller than alpha (0.05) the level of significant. This finding stated that there was significant difference effects in language use between the two groups after treatment. In organization, the P-value (0.007) was smaller than alpha (0.05) the level of significant. This finding stated that there was significant difference effects in organization between the two groups after treatment. In mechanics, the P-value (0.382) was higher than alpha (0.05) the level of significant. This finding stated that there was no significant difference effects in mechanics between the two groups after treatment.

The findings of the present study are in line with previous qualitative and quantitative studies indicating that providing the EFL students with academic choices would assist them in their struggle for EFL learning. In particular, the findings supported the idea that providing EFL learners with self-selected topics would result in a satisfactory performance on EFL writing. We can refer to the findings of the study conducted by Bonzo (2008), Leblanc and Fujieda (2012), Bonyadi et al. (2014). This supports the results of the present quantitative study which indicated that self-selected topics did have statistically significant effects on EFL students’ writing performances. Referring to the findings of the reported quantitative studies such as Bonzo (2008) and Leblanc and Fujieda (2012), we can claim that there is a strong consistency toward significant effects of topic selection on students’ writing performance. The results of studies such as Gradwohl and Scumacher indicated that students had significantly more knowledge on the want topics than on the teacher topics. However, as Jones (1998) stated that the teacher is the first one who know the need practice, prior knowledge, and points of grammar which appropriate with the students ability at that time, EFL writing instructors or teacher also should realize the idea that in some cases, teacher-assigned topics would be needed. In other words, teachers should try to establish a balance between assigning their topics and providing the students with the opportunity to self-select the topics, because some students often need practical, simple, and versatile tools for getting started in how to interpret and develop topics. In short, the teacher should be a facilitator--not a director--of the content of the writing course, letting the students control the content of their papers.

**CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS**

Based on the research findings and discussions, the researcher came to the following conclusion: The findings of the study indicated that providing students with self-selected topics had statistically significant different effects with providing students with teacher assigned topic on writing process and writing performance of second year students of MAN Bontoharu Kabupaten Kepulauan Selayar. Both of instructions have a positive effects on students’ writing performance and students’ writing process. However, allowing students to write based on their own topic writing would help them in achieving a greater level of writing process and writing performance.

Based on the conclusion above, the researcher puts forward the following suggestions:

1. EFL language curricula and English teacher should afford the language learners increasing the amount of choice in students’ writing.
2. Researcher also suggests for teachers to realize the idea that in some cases a teacher-assigned topics would be needed because the teacher knows the need of practice and their background knowledge.
3. The teacher should be a facilitator--not a director--of the content of the writing course, the teacher should allowing students to control the content of their writing.

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