

Outdoor Education: A *Contextual English Learning* Activity to Improve Writing Ability of Young Adolescents

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Abstract—This paper reports an implementation of Outdoor Education as a contextual learning activity to improve the writing ability of young adolescents. It aims at (1) investigating how Outdoor Education is implemented in teaching English to young adolescents to improve their writing ability; (2) identifying the challenges faced by the teacher during the implementation; (3) finding strategies to overcome the challenges. A Classroom Action Research was employed as a research design that took 2 (two) cycles and each of those was divided into four phases namely Planning, Acting, Observing, and Reflecting. Moreover, the data were collected through three instruments, namely observation, interview with the students, and document analysis in the form of students' descriptive writings. The result of the study reveals that Outdoor Education has successfully improved the students' ability in writing descriptive text since they understand the linguistic features, content, and context of the text. It is proved from comparing the results of Pre-writing and final writing found in the second cycle shows some improvements especially in their varied vocabularies, correct grammar and their better score (from an average score of 56.16 to 80.17). However, the teacher found some challenges to implement it since the young adolescent students seemed to spend the time inefficiently. To overcome this, the teacher gave clear briefings before doing this activity and asked them to look up their dictionary for some unfamiliar words, so that they could finish their descriptive writing.

Keywords: *contextual learning activity, Outdoor Education, students' improvement, writing ability, young adolescents*

I. INTRODUCTION

Teaching English to young adolescents requires specific strategies because they have different characteristics from the adults. Cameron (2001) stated that young adolescents will lose their interest in the middle of the learning process if it is conducted in monotonous ways without involving students actively participated in the learning activity. This is also supported by Harmer (2007) who claimed that young adolescents generally display an enthusiasm for learning and curiosity about the world around them.

In addition, regarding the intellectual characteristics of young adolescents, Caskey and Anfara (2007) explained that young adolescents tend to be highly curious and display a broad array of interests. They are typically eager to learn about topics, they find interesting and useful, favor active over passive learning

experiences, and prefer interaction with peers during educational activities.

Young adolescents also develop the capacity for abstract thought processes (Elkind, 1974, as cited in Caskey & Anfara, 2007). During early adolescence, youth typically progress from concrete to logical operations and problem-solving to acquire the ability to develop and test hypotheses, analyze and synthesize data, grapple with complex concepts, and think reflectively (Manning, 2002, as cited in Caskey & Anfara, 2007).

Regarding the characteristics of young adolescents explained previously, *Contextual Teaching and Learning* (CTL) can be implemented by the English teacher in the classroom. Sears and Levy (2003) stated that CTL motivates learners to take charge of their learning and to make a connection between knowledge and its application to the various contexts of their lives. In addition, Zahorik (1995) also stated that CTL can be used as an alternative to learning approach where the students are directed into "experiencing" not "memorizing". As one of the learning activities which categorized into a contextual approach, *Outdoor Education* can be implemented by the teacher to teach young adolescents.

According to Gustafsson, Szczpanski, Nelson, and Gustafsson (2012), *Outdoor Education* is a learning activity purpose to foster learning through the interplay between experience and reflection, based on practical observation in an authentic situation. This kind of learning activity also facilitates students to connect the material they are learning to the contexts that they find in their daily life.

The concept of *Outdoor Education* is specified in several categories, they are *adventure education, field studies, nature studies, outdoor play, heritage education, environmental education, experiential education, and agricultural education* (Rickinson et al., 2004). While for the foci of *Outdoor Education* according to Dillon et al. (2005) can include learning about nature, society, nature-society interaction and one-self. It means that *Outdoor Education* involves working with others, developing new skills, undertaking practical conservation and influencing society. Dillon et al. (2005) further stated that the intended outcomes of this learning activity hopefully can encompass: knowledge and understanding, attitudes and feelings, values and beliefs, activities or behavior, personal and social development.

Some benefits can be gained by the students through *Outdoor Education*. According to the Office for Standards in Education (2008), *Outdoor Education* gives depth to the curriculum and makes an important contribution to students' physical, personal and social education. It is also stated that first-hand experiences of learning outside of the classroom can help students to make objects more vivid and interesting for pupils and enhance their understanding. This is also contributing significantly to the pupil's personal, social, and emotional development.

In the end, *Outdoor Education* is believed as a kind of learning activity that helps students to remember much longer because it will impress the students very much. As stated by Dierking and Falk (1997, as cited in Dillon et al., 2006), 96% of a group could recall field trips conducted outside of the classroom and it stimulates their mind to memorize much longer.

II. METHOD

This research was conducted by using *classroom action research* because it consisted of two cycles where each cycle was divided into some phases namely *Planning, Acting, Observing, and Evaluating*. According to Kemmis and McTaggart (1992), *classroom action research* is proceeding in spiral steps, then the results of the actions united into a cycle. This study took place of two meetings with eighty minutes' duration for each meeting. So, there were four meetings altogether to implement *Outdoor Education* as a contextual learning activity for the students.

This study involved a class of seventh-grade students as research participants. The class consisted of 22 students, 10 of them are boys and 12 of them are girls. The students involved in this study are categorized into young adolescents because they are in the age of 13-14 years old. The instruments employed in this study, observation, students' writing, and interview. According to Hamied and Malik (2014), during the fieldwork, the behaviors, actions, and communication patterns were observed and write in more detail.

III. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

A. Planning Phase

There were some activities done by the teacher before implementing the learning activity of *Outdoor Education* such as designing a lesson plan, designing research instruments, choosing the topic for the students' writing, and determining the Minimum Mastery Criterion for the students' writing.

This phase was started by designing the lesson plan that would be implemented in *Acting Phase*. It aimed at providing the guidelines for the implementation of *Outdoor Education*. In designing the lesson plan, some aspects should be determined such as the standard of competence, the basics of competences, the learning objectives, the appropriate media, and also the procedures of the assessment.

After the lesson plan was designed, another activity conducted in this phase was designing the research instruments. There were two research instruments required in this cycle namely

observation guides to observe the students and the teacher, and also students' worksheets.

B. Acting Phase

In this phase, *Outdoor Education* was implemented as a contextual learning activity for the students. This acting phase took two meetings and based on the lesson plan that has been created in the previous phase.

The first meeting was begun by assigning the students to write *descriptive text* on a piece of paper. When they have finished their writing, the students were asked to submit their writing and analyzed by using the scoring rubric of writing proposed by Brown (2007).

The result of the students' writing done in this meeting revealed that the students did not have a good ability to write a descriptive text. From their *Pre-writing*, it can be seen that there were still a lot of mistakes made by the students, namely they could not differentiate between "they are" and "there are", identification of their text was not complete and arranged with inappropriate connectives, they could not use the correct punctuations, and there were many unsuitable vocabularies and some word forms which were not understandable.

The second meeting was started by distributing the worksheets that had created for the students. Then, the students were given some instructions related to worksheets and activities that they have to do in the learning activity. After that, the students were invited to go outside of the classroom to conduct *Outdoor Education*. This learning activity took 40 minutes for the students to identify and observe the objects around their school environment. The students also required to write the objects that have been identified onto their worksheets.

From the result of the students' writing in this first cycle, there were some improvements in students' writing. Most of them have described the objects in detail. The number of objects described also increased from their previous writing. If in their *Pre-writing* the students only wrote a few objects, in their writing in this first cycle, the students wrote more objects which they have discovered outside of the classroom.

C. Observing Phase

In this phase, the students were observed while doing *Outdoor Education*. The students were observed of how they pay attention to the explanation, the way they identified and observed the objects around them, their motivation to the learning activity, and the questions asked related to the learning activity.

From the observation, most of the students kept busy with their activities without listening to the explanation given by the teacher. When they were explained about the steps of *Outdoor Education* and how to fill the worksheets given, the students who paid attention to the explanation were those who sat in the front seats. While those who sat in the back seats were just drawing a picture on a paper, talking with his/her friend, and reading another book.

D. Reflecting Phase

This reflecting activity was based on the result of the observation and the students' writing. According to the result of the observation to the students, some of them were shown some positive behavior and some of them were not. Most of the students were already enjoyed the learning activity of *Outdoor Education*. They looked enthusiastic during the implementation of this learning activity. This is in line with the statement of Harmer (2007) who stated that the children generally display an enthusiasm for learning a curiosity about the world around them.

On the other side, the observation results also revealed that some of the students were looked confused when they have to complete the worksheets which had been given. The confusion was derived from the column of note written on their worksheets. It was also proved by the number of the students who asked about what they have to write in the column of note and the function of the column itself. So, it means that the worksheets made for the students were less specific. According to the external observer, the teacher also did not give clear instructions, so it made the students still confused about the steps of doing this learning activity.

From the result of the students' writing, there was a slight improvement to the students' writing. It can be seen from their writing scores in Pre-writing and writing in the first cycle. Based on the result of the students' Pre-writing, there were only 2 out of 22 students or 9.09% whose scores passed the Minimum Mastery Criterion (KKM), with a score of 87.5 and 77.5. It showed that 20 students were still not being able to write a good descriptive text which was indicated from the content of their writing.

As the percentage of the students' number whose scores have passed the Minimum Mastery Criterion only 27.27%, it can be concluded that *Outdoor Education* implemented in this first cycle has not reached the success criteria which determined before, so it was necessary to conduct another cycle to improve the students' writing ability by considering the weaknesses found in the first cycle.

E. Second Cycle

As the first cycle of this research has not exceeded the success criteria of this study, another cycle of this study was necessarily conducted. The process of this second cycle included the same four phases with the previous cycle (*Planning, Acting, Observing, and Reflecting*) by considering the weaknesses found in the first cycle.

F. Planning Phase

This phase was started by designing a lesson plan used for the second cycle of the research. Similar to the previous lesson plan, it consisted of the basic competence, the standard of competence, the learning objectives, the steps of learning and the procedure of the assessment. Some improvements were made while designing this lesson plan which realized by clarifying the learning objectives and indicators of learning as well as the media and stages of learning.

G. Acting Phase

This phase was begun by distributing some worksheets that had been created to the students. Then, the students got an explanation about what they should do relating to the worksheets given. The students were explained more clearly about the learning activity conducted in that cycle.

The next activity was the students had to go outside of their classroom. The scope of the space used for the learning activity in this second cycle was different from the previous one (outside of the school fences) because the first the students just observed the limited objects.

Then, the students were assigned to write a *descriptive text* based on the objects found and written on their worksheet. In this activity, some of the students were better to write *descriptive text* and employed more vocabulary from the objects identified compared to their first writing.

H. Observing Phase

In this phase, the students were observed while doing *Outdoor Education* and writing a *descriptive text*. The way the students observed was the same as in the previous cycle by concerning some aspects written in the observation guide.

From the result of the observation in this second cycle, there was an improvement in the number of students who paid attention to the explanation given. It was indicated by the response of the students while they were explained about the learning activity that will be conducted. They asked some questions related to the steps of *Outdoor Education* and told the difficulties faced by them in the previous cycle.

I. Reflecting Phase

After the learning activity of *Outdoor Education* was implemented, the whole process of the implementation in this second cycle was reflected. There were some improvements made in the second cycle which started with the students writing in this second cycle to the students' behavior during the learning activity.

In terms of the score of the students' writing in this second cycle, there was an improvement compared to the previous result. The mean score of the students' writing increased to 80.17 from their writing in the previous cycle. The class percentage of the students whose scores have passed the Minimum Mastery Criterion also increased to 81.81% or 18 out of 22 students.

From the data gained from students' writing, it can be concluded that the number of students who passed the Minimum Mastery of Criterion (KKM) increased from Pre-writing to the second cycle. In Pre-writing, there were 2 out of 22 students or 9.09% of the students whose scores have passed the Minimum Mastery of Criterion (KKM). Then, after conducting *Outdoor Education* in the first cycle, the number of students that reached the Minimum Mastery of Criterion (KKM) increased to 6 out of 22 students or 27.27%. Finally, the score of the students' writing in the second cycle increased to 18 out of 22 students or 81.81%.

It showed that the learning activity of *Outdoor Education* has been improved the writing ability of the students.

Based on the result of the interview, the students were happy when joining the learning activity because she was being able to adapt to the environment. This was different when the student learned in the classroom, she admitted that she was freer in learning English and helped her to gain some vocabularies. This condition was supported by the statement of Halliwell (1992) who stated that young learners tend to learn indirectly rather than directly.

In the first cycle, the challenges found in the *Acting phase*. From the result of the observation conducted by the teacher, the challenges faced were the difficulty to explain the instruction to the students before the learning activity was started and the difficulty to stimulate and encourage the students to be actively involved in the learning activity process. Then, the second challenge found in the first cycle was the difficulty to stimulate and encourage the students to be actively involved in the learning activity process. Some of the students did not respond to the learning activity conducted in this first cycle.

Some challenges also faced by the teacher in the second cycle to discuss the learning activity which has been conducted previously to the students and the difficulty to answer students' questions during the learning activity. It was because the students were looked too enthusiastic when they were taught the learning activity of *Outdoor Education*. It was related to one of the characteristics of young adolescents explained by Harmer (2007) that young adolescents tend to be more enthusiastic during the learning process.

The teacher also felt it difficult to answer the questions asked by the students. This was because most of the students asked the questions continuously so that the teacher felt confused to answer which question first. It was related to one of the characteristics of young adolescents described by Brown (2001) that young adolescents have a high curiosity about the environment around them. They need adults as the source of information to answer their curiosity

The strategies done by the teacher to overcome the challenges found such as translating the instruction into Bahasa and supervising frequently the students who did not respond to the learning activity. Since the teacher felt it difficult to explain the instruction to the students before conducting *Outdoor Education*, the teacher used the strategy which was translating the instruction into Bahasa. By using *Bahasa Indonesia*, it facilitated the students to gain the meaning of the instruction given by the teacher.

Then, the teacher was supervising frequently the students who were not responding to the learning activity taught. Supervision was conducted intensively by the teacher to direct the students and stimulate them to participate in the learning activity. To overcome the challenges found in the second cycle, the teacher gave rewards for the students to be actively involved in the discussion and used the dictionary to find the questions related to the name of the objects in English.

Regarding the challenge faced by the teacher in this second cycle, the teacher used the strategy by awarding the students to be actively involved in the discussion. At first, the teacher persuaded the students to get into the classroom. Then, when the teacher realized that some of the students were still staying outside, the teacher explained to them that there would be a discussion. Then, to overcome the challenges of the second challenge faced by the teacher in this second cycle; the teacher used the dictionary as a tool to help the students answering their questions. Regarding the questions asked by the students, they asked many questions about the name of the object that they have found in English.

IV. CONCLUSION

The study showed that *Outdoor Education* as a contextual English learning activity has been successfully improved the writing ability of young adolescents. First, *Outdoor Education* as a contextual English learning activity can be implemented to improve the writing ability of young adolescents through some steps, namely designing a lesson plan, designing research instruments, choosing the topic for the students' writing, and determining the Minimum Mastery Criterion for the students' writing. Second, the improvement of the students' writing ability in writing descriptive text could be seen from the mean scores. Third, the reason for the improvement was because *Outdoor Education* was implemented by using *Contextual Teaching and Learning* approach. Through CTL, the students associated their prior knowledge with the new knowledge that they encountered in their daily context.

Finally, there were some challenges faced by the teacher during the implementation process of *Outdoor Education*. The challenges were faced by the teacher in each cycle of the study. However, the teacher can overcome the challenges by translating the instruction into Bahasa Indonesia and supervising the students who did not respond to their learning activity. In contrast, to overcome challenges met in the second cycle, the teacher gave rewards to the students to be actively involved in the discussion and used the dictionary to find the questions related to the name of the objects in English.

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