

Learning Journal: A Tool to Help Students Grasp the Course Content

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ABSTRACT

When all students assume that it is a difficult subject to understand, it is a teacher's duty to find a way to solve that problem. Teacher needs to provide a tool or media to make students able to grasp materials easily, express ideas freely, and participate actively in class discussion, and learning journal could be an alternative to achieve those purposes. This paper will discuss of how learning journal can help students grasp the course content and how students respond toward the implementation of the journal in learning process. It is a descriptive research-based while the instruments used to obtain the data are observation sheet, students' journals, and reflective forms. The results of the research show that students engaged actively in classroom discussion. They also considered that journal help them to prepare the materials being discussed, so they could express their opinions well. However, the feedback of the teacher was still needed for it did not draw attention on the language errors only, he could focus more attention on the course content, especially to ensure that students had found the answers of their questions.

Keywords: *Learning Journal, Grasp, Course Content*

1. INTRODUCTION

Problem arises when students assume that it is a difficult subject because there are too many information they have to keep in their mind. As a result, when there is a class discussion, they just keep silent, do not know what they have to talk about, do not have any opinions, and the worse is they do not have any questions. As stated in Government Decree [1, p. 3] that the cognitive level of 'understanding' has a straight line with 'questioning': students are considered to be able to grasp the materials if they have questions related to the materials discussed. On other words, if there is no question from students, teachers can assume that students do not know the topic being discussed. As a result, the class will be passive. To overcome that, teachers are usually be the one who will take over by giving questions or explaining the topic, and the students merely become good listeners. It could be said that teachers' role will be more dominant rather than learners' role in class. It is contradicting with the theory of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) that teaching learning process must give greater attention on the role of learners, and language techniques are designed to engage learners in functional use of language for meaningful purposes [2].

It happens in Analysis of School Curriculum and Government Policy class as a subject taught in English Education Program of Universitas Negeri Surabaya (UNESA). The subject has a description as follows;

This subject introduces the kinds of curriculum, the historical background of curriculum development, the principles of curriculum development, and the government policy of recent curriculum (2013 curriculum). Then the curriculum are analyzed based on the competency (core competence and basic competence), kinds of syllabus, the indicators of receptive and productive skills, and kinds of texts. The teaching and learning activity is conducted through lecturing, discussion, and presentation [3].

It is obvious that this subject contains many concepts and needs deep understanding to be able to analyze the components in curriculum and also the government policy. Therefore, it cannot be denied that this subject is assumed as a difficult subject for students.

To make students participate actively in classroom discussion, they must have confidence in asking questions and expressing opinions. This condition could be created if the teacher can encourage students to prepare or read the material being discussed before the class meeting. It aims when students come to the class, they have already had something in their mind that could

be questions, problems, or opinions. Therefore, teachers need to provide a tool or media to help their students able to grasp the materials well, and learning journal could be an alternative tool or media to achieve those purposes.

A journal is a place where students' thinking can become visible, they can make connections between new and prior information, manage their own strategies, and also judge their own learning [4]. Moreover, Wilcox classifies journal according to content and language of thinking, journal keepers' contents include interpretations, reactions, questions, and comments; and through them, students will illustrate, express, describe, select, justify, deduce, suppose, and sort. In short, it could be said that journal writing is a process of recording students' insight, reflection, and questions on assigned or personal topics. For assigned topics, it may include students' thoughts about reading assignments or science experiment. Furthermore, journal entries are a form of reflective writing that students use to respond something they have read or learned. However, in journal entries, students do not merely summarize what they read and learned, they also demonstrate their ability to employ a critical inquiry. A critical inquiry means that students take some steps involved in analyzing ideas or information. The different forms for different purposes are also supported by Castellanos [7] that journal writing can take different forms and responds to different purposes in order to support their learning process. Moreover, Fulwiler [6] states that journal can be used for different purposes, such as a means to pose and solve the problems, to summarize important aspects of a lesson, to monitor students' progress, and to give students the opportunity to write about concerns and questions raised in class.

By seeing many benefits of journal writing for students, this paper will describe of how learning journal can help students grasp the content of Analysis of School Curriculum and Government Policy course. In this case, students write a journal of what they have read or learned, and they also make a summary and pose the questions and problems. They effort to get the answers of the problems or questions from classroom discussion. Moreover, this study will also describe the students' responses or reflection toward the implementation of journal.

2. METHODS

This paper is a descriptive research-based paper that describes the implementation of learning journal that can help students grasp the course content and students' responses or reflection toward the implementation of the journal. According to Wiersma [8], descriptive research

is a research that describes condition of a phenomenon in a particular time. Besides, this research searches some variables naturally in a particular time. The subjects of the study are the undergraduate students who are in the fourth semester. While the objects of the study are students' journal and reflection forms. The data of the study are the result of observation, students' journal, and reflective forms. The instruments used in this research are the observation sheets that are used to observe the students participation in classroom discussion. Besides that, students' journal are also used to describe of how students utilize their journal to grasp the course content and how the lecturer gives response. While students' responses or reflective forms are used to describe of the students' perception toward the implementation of journal in their learning process.

To obtain the data, the researchers conducted some procedures, those are: (1) the researchers came to the class and distributed the basic course outline, materials and weekly preparation learning journal. (2) the researchers started to collect the data that is by observing the students' participation in discussion, (3) the researchers collected the students' journal, (4) the researchers gave responses to the students' journal, (5) the researchers collected the reflective form. After the data were obtained, the researchers then conducted the next step, that is analyzing and describing the data by conducting the steps as follows: (1) the researchers read the result of observation, students' journal, and reflective form; (2) the researchers analyzed those data by using the provided instruments; (3) the researchers discussed together the results of analyzing the data; (4) the researchers drew a conclusion; and (5) the researchers started to present the result.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. The Implementation of Learning Journal to Help Students Grasp the Content Course

Students got the materials and journal form a week before the classroom discussion. They were required to fill out the journal form of the materials they have read and learned. There are five components of a journal that they have to fill out, those are; learning sources, chapter title/topic, pages, content descriptions, and questions/problems. It is based on Fulwiler [6] statement that journal can be used for some purposes, those are a means to pose and solve the problems, and to summarize important aspects of a lesson.

For content description, students had to write the content or summarize the content of a certain chapter.

What the students' understanding of the materials could be seen from their summary or description. They also had to write their problems or questions as stated in Government Decree [1, p. 3] that the cognitive level of 'understanding' has a straight line with 'questioning'.

From all journals submitted, it could be seen that all students had read the materials that would be discussed in class. Almost all students summarized the content well and expressed that they got the points of the materials well. In short, they made a summary in detail. However, few of students made a summary short, or they only wrote the subtopic of the chapter. Then what they have written in the component of content description was reflected to the question/problem they arouse. When they were able to make a good summary, their question were also good enough. The questions are considered as good questions because the questions need critical answers, or students need to think critically to be able to answer them. It proved that students really analyzed and were able to analyze the content or materials. Another students' good questions are as below;

"I'm still confused about Competency-based Program Outcomes (CBLT). Can you explain simple, what does it mean by stating curriculum outcomes? Why is it important and must be included in curriculum?"

"Sometimes we do not know about the problems to solve in curriculum development. What should we concern in developing the curriculum?"

"Is curriculum able to solve the problem of gender stereotyping in education? If yes, how?"

"Indonesia has many cultural differences. As a result, there are often upheavals that can effect students' view of other cultures. How the curriculum planners provide materials and strategy that can neutralize students' view and continue to uphold the value of Indonesian national unity?"

However, when they only made a short description, the question was also not really good, such as; Are goals and learning objectives also used in Indonesia?, even they did not write any questions.

Learning is a kind of process to know or understand something [2]. By writing learning journal on every meeting and getting teacher's feedback on every journal they submitted, students who made a short summary before were able to write a better one for another topic. As a result, they were also able to pose good questions that showed they were able to analyze the content well.

On every meeting, students brought their journal and tried to get the answers or the solutions of their problem

or questions stated in their journal from the classroom discussion. The discussion began and all students were ready with the journal in their hand. When the researcher opened the discussion by asking what they got from the topic, almost all students could explain about the topic quite well. Then it was followed by questions and answers. Students looked very enthusiastic in delivering questions and expressing ideas or opinions. It was obvious that they had understood the materials quite well, so they could participate actively in classroom discussion. It could be seen as below;

Yuli: "As we know that the changing of curriculum make uncertain situation in Indonesia's educational system. Does this situation also has a great positive impact than the negative impact?"

Naufal: "Yes, it does, there are some positive impacts of changing the curriculum system. First, completing the shortcomings that exist in the previous curriculum. Second, and adaptation to the changing of new era."

Paula: It gives a positive effect because as Mam Ririn has ever said that 2013 curriculum is the revision of 2006 curriculum."

Natanael: "I agree with you all guys that it gives a positive effect but government has to prepare the teachers well before applying it."

Paula: "Yes, you're right!"

Ravita: "As we know that students cannot adapt or increase the quality of education because of the high targets on the curriculum that make students overwhelm to follow it. What is your perspective on students that is made as a curriculum experiment for the government? Thank you."

Wanda: "This is ironic but it can be said that students are made as a curriculum experiment for the government. Because curriculum changes after all affects students the most. Because students are the player in this changes. It is also proven in terms of material understanding and even the curriculum changes understanding which led students to work harder and learn harder in order to complete the curriculum's demands from time to time. However, we hope that curriculum change can bring the better of the students and affects more on the positive aspects rather than negative aspects."

Natanael: "As I said before that government needs to socialize the curriculum first before applying it."

Jalu: "I agree with Nat, so the students will not realize the changes of curriculum."

Ratna: "But I'm sure that 2013 curriculum is better than previous curriculum."

Lecturer: "I agree with you all opinions, just a little bit additional explanation for Paula's question. Do you still remember that in the curriculum development about teacher is the key factor and the student is the main participant? We will know whether the curriculum development is effective or not after implementing it."

Ravita: "Alright mam, I get the point."

It is in line with what Genesse and Upshur [10] says that journal enhance student involvement and ownership of learning. They also recognize the uniqueness of journals as a means for collecting data as journals that are a method of collecting information that is extensively under the control of students since they can write whatever and however they want.

After all students gave their opinions, the lecturer as a facilitator also gave opinions or reflection, just to give strengthening on students opinions. Moreover, when the discussion ended, students submitted their journals entries to make the researcher able to evaluate and give feedback to them. The researcher did not draw attention on the language errors, however focus more attention on the course content, especially to ensure that students had got the answers of their problems or questions. The researcher needed to do that as said by Castellanos [7] that journals are also places where students can try out their expressive voices freely without fear of evaluation. That the researcher needed to give feedback is also supported by Tuan [9] that through reading and responding to learners' journal entries, teachers are able to measure each learner's competence and understand their needs, thoughts, and feelings which gives learners appropriate assistance to their problem along the subject matters. At the next meeting, before the classroom discussion began, the researcher distributed the journal entries and required students to read quickly. If there was a problem, they could have a short discussion. Then they began to discuss the next topic.

3.2. The Students' Response or Reflection toward the Implementation of Learning Journal

The data was collected from the questionnaire distributed to students at the end of the semester. It was got the result that almost all students assumed that Analysis of School Curriculum and Government Policy was a difficult subject with various opinions, such as: there are a lot of materials which quite difficult to understand in Analysis School

Curriculum and Government Policy we talk about systems that there are so many components and they are related each other, When this subject is telling me about a part related to the curriculum that I have never known before.

Related to the opinions whether 'Learning Journal' that they had to write before the class began could help them to prepare the topic being discussed in class or not, all students said that the journal help them to prepare the materials being discussed. They also said that the journal could help them able to express their opinions well in classroom discussion because before filling the journal, we should read the materials first. So we can be more understand about the materials and we can deliver our opinion easily; because we read the materials and write down to the journal before class started. So, it will help us to remember the opinions then deliver it in class discussion; by making a daily journal, we will prepare, study the material to be discussed so that if there is a lack of understanding or differences in understanding, it can be discussed. Also, by writing a journal, I can deliver my opinion, develop my understanding of the materials in every chapter, and also stimulate me to questioning what I don't understand yet; journal helps me in a class discussion because I need to write down my understanding about the topic before the class. Therefore, I can prepare myself for the class discussion. From all students' opinions, it is obvious that journal can really benefit for students not only in grasping the course content and participating actively in classroom discussion, but also in motivating the students to express their ideas as said by Tuan [9] that journal writing as an extensive activity to nurture learners' motivation. It is also supported by Peyton and Reed [5] that when a journal focus on the content of a course, rich discussions can occur that supplement and extent information discussed in class. Students centered rather than teachers centered as one of the principles in CLT were also conducted well.

Moreover, all students agree that classroom discussion really helped them to make clear the course content, and they also agree that they could find their answers of their questions or get solutions of their

problems they had written in their journal throughout classroom discussion. It is based on Fulwiler [6] statement that journal can be used for different purposes, such as a means to pose and solve the problems. Moreover, the researcher feedback also could help students discover the solutions of their problems.

4. CONCLUSION

There was a battle to be fought and a great deal of learning was done. Analysis of School Curriculum and Government Policy subject that assumed as a difficult course could be defeated by students throughout the application of weekly preparation journal. What students wrote in their journal of they have read and learned could stimulate them grasp the materials easily, participate actively in classroom discussion and motivate them express ideas freely. Students center rather than teacher center and students' dominant while lecturer was only as a facilitator in class was carried out in class, as what suggested by CLT approach. The feedback of the lecturer was still needed for it did not draw attention on the language errors, however focus more attention on the course content, especially to ensure that students had got the answers of their problems or questions.

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