

## **THE IMPLEMENTATION OF USING "PEN PAL" IN TEACHING WRITING OF DESCRIPTIVE TEXTS TO THE SEVENTH GRADERS OF AL-FALAH JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL**

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### **Abstrak**

Menulis adalah keterampilan yang sulit bagi siswa SMP karena penulis harus menyeimbangkan beberapa isu seperti unsur menulis untuk menciptakan produk tertulis yang menunjukkan penguasaan dalam semua elemen menulis dalam bahasa baru yang jarang digunakan oleh mereka. Oleh karena itu, guru harus kreatif dalam mengajar untuk membuat suasana belajar yang menarik untuk meningkatkan kemampuan bahasa Inggris siswa, terutama dalam keterampilan menulis. Menulis surat kepada sahabat pena memberikan siswa kesempatan untuk berkomunikasi secara efektif dalam bahasa Inggris untuk mengekspresikan gagasan, pikiran, dan keyakinan tentang topik tertentu.

Saling bertukar surat dengan sahabat pena merupakan suatu kegiatan yang dilakukan satu orang dengan yang lain untuk berteman dengan seseorang belum pernah dia temui sebelumnya. Dalam studi ini, para siswa bertukar surat melalui e-mail dengan siswa lain di luar negeri. Ini memotivasi para siswa untuk menulis dalam bahasa Inggris dan juga mempromosikan pembelajaran lintas-budaya antara kedua siswa.

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengetahui implementasi dari penggunaan sahabat pena untuk mengajar keterampilan menulis teks deskriptif untuk siswa kelas tujuh. Selain itu, tujuannya adalah untuk mengetahui respon siswa terhadap teknik tersebut setelah pelaksanaan pertukaran surat sahabat pena. Metode penelitian ini adalah deskriptif kualitatif. Subjek penelitian dalam studi ini adalah siswa kelas 7-2 SMP Al-Falah. Sebagai pengamat, peneliti menggunakan lembar observasi dan catatan lapangan untuk mengamati pelaksanaan teknik sahabat pena. Sebuah wawancara dengan guru bahasa Inggris juga dilakukan untuk mendapatkan lebih banyak data. Adapun dengan respon siswa, lembar kuesioner dibagikan kepada 26 siswa kelas 7-2 untuk dapat menjawab pertanyaan dalam penelitian ini.

Hasil penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa bertukar surat dengan sahabat pena dapat menyediakan komunikasi yang otentik dan memotivasi latihan menulis. Siswa secara aktif berpartisipasi dalam proses belajar-mengajar dan bersemangat menulis surat kepada sahabat pena. Ini member mereka motivasi lebih untuk mempelajari bentuk-bentuk yang benar dalam tanda baca, tata bahasa, dan kosa kata baru yang terkait dengan kehidupan mereka. Siswa juga memberikan respon positif terhadap teknik pengajaran ini dan setuju bahwa teknik ini membantu mereka dalam meningkatkan kemampuan menulis mereka.

Dari hasil dan analisis, dapat disimpulkan bahwa bertukar surat dengan sahabat pena dapat menjadi teknik yang efektif dalam pengajaran dan pembelajaran menulis terutama dalam teks deskriptif. Ini memotivasi mereka untuk menjadi penulis yang lebih baik dan untuk meningkatkan kemampuan bahasa Inggris mereka karena memiliki pembaca asli. Akhirnya, penulis berharap bahwa penyelesaian penelitian ini akan bermanfaat bagi guru bahasa Inggris dan peneliti lain.

**Kata Kunci:** *kemampuan menulis, sahabat pena, bertukar surat.*

### **Abstract**

Writing is a difficult skill for junior high school students because writers must balance multiple issues such as the elements of writing to create written products that show mastery in a whole new language that is rarely used by them. Therefore, a teacher must be creative in teaching writing to make an interesting and engaging learning atmosphere to improve students' English proficiency, especially in writing skill. Writing pen pal letters gives the students a chance to communicate effectively in English to express their ideas, thoughts, and beliefs on a certain topic.

Pen pal letter exchange is an activity which a person exchanges letters with another's to make friends with someone whom she/he has never met. In this study, the students exchange letters via e-mail with another student abroad. It motivates the students to have a habit to write in English and also promotes cross-cultural learning between the two students.

This study aimed to find out the implementation of using pen pal to teach writing descriptive texts to the seventh grade students. Besides that, its purpose was to find out the students' responses towards the technique after the implementation of pen pal letter exchange. The research method was descriptive

qualitative study. The subject of the study was the students of class 7-2 of Al-Falah Junior High School. As an observer, the researcher used observation sheets and field notes to observe the implementation of pen pal. An interview to the English teacher and analysis to the students' written work were also done to get more data. As for the students' responses, questionnaire sheets were distributed to 26 students of class 7-2 to answer the second research question.

The results of this study showed that pen pal letter exchange provided authentic communication and motivated writing practice. The students were actively participating in the teaching and learning process and eagerly wrote to the pen pal. It gave them more motivation to learn correct forms of punctuation, grammar and new vocabulary related to their lives. The students were also gave positive responses towards the technique and agreed that the technique helped them in improving their writing abilities.

From the results and the analysis, it can be concluded that pen pal letter exchange can be an effective technique in the teaching and learning of writing especially in terms of descriptive texts. It motivates them to be a better writer and to improve their English proficiency as they have a genuine audience. Finally, it is expected that the completion of this study will be useful for English teacher and other researchers.

**Keywords:** *Writing ability, Pen Pal, Letter Exchange.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Junior high school is the crucial period when learners need to be more familiarized with higher level of written form of the language. It is the time when the organization of a text is introduced and is learned. Therefore, the habit of writing should be started at this stage. The simple way to make them use to write in English is by using letters. Exchanging letters with the other's will provide them with something to read then to write down a reply that is coherence with the letter they have received before. Writing pen pal letters allow students to share their personal interests and recollections as they build relationships with their pen pals. Particularly, pen pal is an activity which a person exchanges letters with another's to make friends with someone whom she/he has never met.

Among the four skills of English, writing is known to be the most difficult skill to be mastered. Since English learners need to use formal language to write, students sometimes feel afraid of writing. It is because they do not have enough vocabulary, afraid of making grammar mistakes, and do not understand the organization of the text they are going to write. Their tendency to make errors sometimes makes them feel afraid to write. Another problem is while they are trying to learn about grammar and the organization of the text, they forget to express their ideas in their writing. So in this sense, pen pal project will help students in solving those problems, because by using this technique, they are able to express their ideas freely about their own experiences without feeling afraid of making mistakes in their writing because they feel just like sharing stuffs with their peers. In addition, Harmer (2007:39) stated that young adolescents are in the stage of looking for identity and it has to be forged by classmates and friends. Therefore, it is considered important for such students to get more attention from friends than from the teachers.

A study of pen pal conducted by Vera Mello was effective to help the learners improve their writing skill. Students whose behavior interfere with their learning and interpersonal interactions had an opportunity to control their strengths and demonstrate their knowledge as they developed written communication skills. A letter writing project turned the climate of the class around as students eagerly wrote as their behavioral difficulties decreased and their written expression skills expanded.

The finding shows that this opportunity gives the learners a chance to practice and improve their reading, writing and a skill to interact with others. The project also gives them a chance to communicate effectively in English to express their ideas, thoughts, and beliefs on a certain topic. By considering the result of the above study, it can be suggested that pen pal project be implemented to seventh graders, because they can have more practice in writing and also they can be encouraged to write without forces.

To facilitate learners, teachers should encourage the students to have topics related to personal interests, comprising things, persons, and places. These are found in descriptive texts. Therefore, seventh graders are interested in and encouraged to write because they can describe anything around them from their own experiences. Having topics that a person cares deeply about, as a consequence of personal interests will certainly produce a fine writing. Letter writing can be an activity happening between two students from different school. They can work in pairs, so pen pal can be more personal and sound familiar to the students. Teachers may ask members of the pair to write and respond each other.

Based on the reasons above, it is necessary that a research be conducted on pen pal project to find out its implementation on the teaching and learning process in an EFL classroom. This study was held in Al-Falah Deltasari Junior High School not only because the school has a

proper facility needed to conduct this research but also the English teacher has already implemented this technique before. In the end of the study, not only the implementation of the use of Pen Pal to teach the seventh grade students, but also the students' responses toward "pen pal" was known.

The study aimed generally to find an alternative technique to teach writing descriptive to the seventh grade students of Al-Falah Deltasari Junior High School. The specific objectives are to describe the implementation of pen pal that can be used in the classroom and to find out the students' responses toward the implementation of the technique.

Puchta and Schratz (1993) as cited by Harmer (2001:90) said that teachers often make mistakes in teaching as there is bridge between what they want to teach and students' world of thought and experience. Therefore, it would be better to make a link between these distinctions by creating a more engaging language teaching that close to students' everyday interests like pen pal. Vygotsky (1981:146) established that children learn more effectively through experiences that are meaningful and relevant to them. Through letter exchanges with others, students have an authentic opportunity to develop their ability in determining the meaning of written language. As stated by Lenhart, Arafeh, Smith, and Macgill (2008:3) that "Teens are motivated to write by relevant topics, high expectations, an interested audience, and opportunity to write creatively", students were very interested and engaged in the teaching and learning process because the topics were very close to their lives.

Pen pal friendships can support cross-curricular learning. Lemkuhl (2002) engaged her students in Toledo, Ohio, in a pen pal writing project with students from Tucson, Arizona, finding that the students made learning gains that cut across all of the curriculum areas: reading, language, spelling, writing, math, social studies, science, and technology. In writing, the students were motivated to learn correct forms of punctuation, grammar, and spelling. After they began the pen pal project, the students became interested in reading about the areas in which their pen pals lived and they gained related new vocabulary.

Pen pal project motivated the students to develop the learners collaboration, to facilitate literacy, and to introduce them the cross – cultural understanding. It also served the purpose of providing safe arrangements in which children can form close and open relationships with peers (Shulman, Seiffge-Krenke, & Dimitrovsky, 1994).

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

Dealing with the research questions stated in the previous chapter, descriptive-qualitative was chosen as the design of the study. According to Bodgan and Tailor, as

cited by Moleong (2002:3), descriptive qualitative method is the method used to do a research which produce descriptive data in a form of written or verbal data from the people or the behaviors observed. Moleong (2002:6) also stated that the characteristic of descriptive qualitative research is that the characteristic of words, pictures, and not numeral. In descriptive qualitative, the researcher acted only as a non-participant observer. James H. McMillant (1999: 214) stated that in qualitative studies the investigator will act as an observer in the setting that is being studied. So in this study, the researcher did not take part in the class which was observed. The researcher played as a non participant observer. In the process, the researcher observed the teaching- learning process in order to get the data in detail. She observed the implementation of using pen pal in teaching writing of descriptive texts in the classroom by the English teacher to the students. Furthermore, the researcher also observed the students' responses to the technique used by the teacher.

The subject of this study is the seventh grade students of Class 7-2 of Al-Falah Deltasari Junior High School. The research was done in three meetings. The instruments used to get the data were observation sheet, field notes, interview guidelines, students' written work, and questionnaire. Observation sheets were used to find out the whole teaching-learning process about how the teacher taught descriptive texts and applied pen pal. Field notes were used to record the classroom activity during the activity of pen pal project. It was used to monitor any changes that probably happened in the classroom. It was also additional information which the researcher did not find in the observation sheet. An interview to the English teacher, Ms. Ichwati Yuliani, was done to take deeper details and gain more information towards the implementation of the pen pal project based on the teacher's responses and opinions. The researcher also obtained the data from the questionnaire to know the students' responses toward the implementation of the technique. It also includes questions related to the students' activities to gain information about students' understanding, motivation, and interests.

The researcher analyzed the students' written work using a rubric proposed by Jacobs (1981) based on elements of writing. ESL composition profile is used to measure the students' written work which was described based on each category, namely excellent to very good, good to average, fair to poor, or very poor. It was used to know how the students' writing ability after the implementation of pen pal project in terms of elements of writing which are: organization, vocabulary, language use and mechanics.

## **RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

### **Result**

Exchanging letters with pen pal via e-mail was held in three meetings. At the first meeting, the teacher explained about descriptive texts. After the teacher explained, there were some questions from the students. Apparently, the students can get the material easily. Then the teacher gave an example of descriptive texts and asked the students some questions. The students could answer them well. Then the teacher also explained about pen pal and how to use email. Students seemed unfamiliar with the activity explained but for the email, they knew it very well. What the students must do in the project is to write a letter as a first draft which then revised based on peer or teacher's correction. A final letter then sent to an email address to which a pen pal belongs to. The researcher has already provided the pen pals for the students to be paired-up. After explaining that, the teacher showed the students the example of writing pen pal letter. There were no questions from the students. It meant that the material were quite clear. Then the teacher gave the students a guideline to write a letter and a checklist to make sure that they wrote it correctly.

After that, each student were paired-up with another student abroad and asked to start writing a letter. After that, each student were paired-up with another student abroad and asked to start writing a letter. The topic of the letter was whatever student wanted to write as long as it is in terms of descriptive texts. Nevertheless, the teacher gave the students a list of possible topics to be written down and she suggested that the students tell and describe about themselves in the first letter.

At the second and third meetings the students did the same things as the first one, but it was slightly different. In the second and the third letters they had not only write but also responded to the pen pal's letter. Before writing the letter, the teacher asked the students to make plan of what they were going to write and to respond to the pen pal's letters appropriately. In writing the letters, the teacher walked around the class to see if there was any students who needed her help. Some students consulted their difficulties such as in finding the correct vocabulary, words translation, and the correct grammar to the teacher, while the others just asked their peers. After writing the letters each day, the students sent the letter in the computer laboratory. Each student was given a pen pal's email address so they could send it by themselves.

In writing the first letter, the students seemed a little bit clumsy and confused of what they were going to write, hence the teacher provided them with the list of possible topics to talk about with the pen pal. In the next meetings there were some significant improvements of several

students in writing the letter. Some of the students flowed along the letter and found themselves enjoyed having conversation with the pen pal talking about certain things descriptively, while some others still struggling with the vocabulary and translation to be written down. But overall, the students did well in the project. It was supported by their enthusiasm in writing the letter and making new friend. They were more confident to write accurately. As exchanging more letters, they made fewer errors in grammar, mechanics and their idea development was getting better.

From the observations, the researcher can say that the topics were appropriate with the students' interest. Moreover, the text used was descriptive text which is in line with the government's curriculum stated for the seventh grade students in the second semester. As a result, the study gave some contributions for the students' competence. This technique made students' organization in writing skill better because by doing this project, students got used to writing especially in writing letters about anything that they like so they can even continue writing to their friends outside the classroom.

From the field notes, the researcher can say that there were barely any problems encountered in the classroom during the implementation of pen pal in the teaching and learning of written descriptive texts. The students paid attention to the teacher's explanations and instructions very well. Some students seemed very actively participating in the learning process. The researcher saw that most students in 7-2 class have a high average of English as seen in the letters, in receiving the instructions and explanations easily, and in participating during the teaching and learning process.

The teacher was also very helping in giving assistance to the students before, during and after writing the letters. The teacher applied the whole writing process in the teaching writing hence the learning process here was more important than the result. As many other teachers values grade more than values learning process, students become very familiar with cheating on exams. By implementing this technique, teacher valued learning process more than the grade or the result itself.

From the interview that the researcher done with the English teacher, it can be known that most students had already have high average ability of English, while some of the students are still need improvement. According to the teacher, the students face the difficulties in finding ideas, making a good composition, and using the correct grammar. The teacher thought that pen pal project can solve this problem, The teacher said that pen pal project was effective and interesting for the students in learning English especially in improving their reading and writing

abilities. But unfortunately, she has difficulty in finding the partner.

The students' written work showed that students' writing became better as they exchange more letters, they also got to know different culture where the pen pal lives. From the students' written work, it can be known that most mistakes came from their mechanics and their lack of vocabulary, in this sense pen pal can help them to solve this problem as they were getting used to write in English.

The students gave positive responses toward the overall of the study. The result of the questionnaire showed that students enjoyed learning English using pen pal technique. The technique which was used by the teacher can encourage them and motivate the students in learning English. The students also find that the technique was very helping in learning English and participating in the teaching and learning process in the classroom. They stated that the technique helped and motivated them in writing descriptive texts.

### **Discussion**

The results of this study indicated that there were three primary themes within the pen pal letters between the two students: daily life and culture, language, and connections. The students enjoyed sharing information about all aspects of their daily life and culture with their pen pals, and they were able to communicate meaningfully with one another on these topics, as stated by Lenhart, Arafah, Smith, and Macgill (2008:3) that "Teens are motivated to write by relevant topics, high expectations, an interested audience, and opportunity to write creatively" in the previous chapter. Nevertheless, some students still frequently made mistakes in writing the letters. The mistakes were dealing with the writing English components, those are: content, organization, vocabulary, vocabulary, language use, and mechanics.

Pen pal technique can enhance students' vocabulary as students will get a lot of input of new words from their peers in exchanging the letters. Teacher's comments and suggestions can also be the meaningful input for the students in improving their vocabulary size. In writing letters to their peers, students also unconsciously benefited from the project in activating their background knowledge. Thus students were broadening their perspectives and developed their ideas in producing their writing so they wrote a meaningful product of writing.

Finally, as students were getting used to writing, especially on their own willingness, their spelling and mechanics in writing improved because of the frequent activity. Their sense of structural sentences was gradually improved by itself as students frequently write.

Nevertheless, there were some weaknesses in the implementation of pen pal by the teacher. As the

researcher noticed that the teacher asked the students to submit their works after they sent the letter via e-mail, this means that students' works didn't go through a complete revision and didn't get enough feedback from the teacher which then turned into an unpolished product of writing.

On the other side, the result of the questionnaire showed that students enjoyed learning English using pen pal technique. The technique which was used by the teacher can encourage them and motivate the students in writing English. From the observations which were done in the classroom, it could be seen that the students were interested in writing English by exchanging letters to a pen pal abroad.

The majority of the students agreed that pen pal should be used as a teaching technique because it gave effective assistance, interesting, and very helpful in learning English especially in writing. It is because they like to find causal and correlative relationships as they are strongly influenced by peers and have the desire for peer acceptance as argued by Salyers and McKee (2009:3). The students had various opinions that the technique had enabled them in increasing their writing ability. For this reason, they agreed that the application of pen pal technique should be continued in the teaching and learning process.

Here are the helpful websites for locating potential pen pals; Intercultural E-mail Classroom Connections: [www.iecc.org](http://www.iecc.org), E-Pals.com Classroom Exchange: [www.epals.com](http://www.epals.com), Kids' Space Connection: [www.ks-connection.org](http://www.ks-connection.org), Kidlink: [www.kidlink.org](http://www.kidlink.org) International Pen Friend Service: [www.ipfs.org](http://www.ipfs.org), Epals Global Community, and Interpals: [www.interpals.net](http://www.interpals.net).

### **CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS**

#### **Conclusion**

From the analysis, it can be concluded that pen pal technique can be used to teach writing descriptive and go further to see the students' progress in writing. In the teaching and learning process, the students were paired-up with another students abroad to exchange letter in terms of descriptive texts. Students sent the letters to the pen pal via email in three meetings. If they wish to continue exchanging letters with the pen pal extensively it would be even better, so the teacher encouraged them to do so.

The students also found the pen pal project interesting as they never experienced one before. The implementation of pen pal helped the students to improve the vocabulary easily and unconsciously. It could also reduce the students' boredom so they could participate actively in the learning process. The majority of the students said that the application of pen pal helped them in learning English.

They said that the technique could motivate them because it was suitable with the topics. And the topics also had connection with their daily lives. The questionnaire which was given to the students also gave good responses toward the overall view of the study. The students were very keen to continue having pen pal in the teaching-learning of writing.

### Suggestions

The researcher formulated some suggestions for the English teachers to make the technique successfully implemented in the teaching and learning process. The teacher should be active in finding the interesting materials to teach writing. In teaching descriptive, the teacher should give the topic that is suitable with the students' writing proficiency. By definition, teacher should present the topic that can accommodate the students' knowledge as it is in line with the materials presented in their textbooks. Beside that, the teacher should give various topics related to the students' life, social norms and culture so that they can write optimally. It is also essential for teachers to always encourage the students in such a way that motivates them, such as by giving applause or compliments.

The researcher also suggest the teacher to make the pen pal project as a continually program. It would be better to be done extensively but applied for the whole semester or even a year. That way, students will make writing in English as a habit so they are no longer need to be asked or even forced to write in English.

In the end, the researcher realizes that this research is far from being perfect. So, she hopes that there will be other researchers who is going to conduct a similar research but in different perspectives.

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