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## Applying Internet-based Writing Course to Improve the Banyumas Tourism Office Staff's Ability in Writing English Informative Texts

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**Abstract:** Attempts at introducing Indonesian tourism attractions to the world are often hindered by the lack of ability to provide proper information. This problem is apparent in regional tourism offices, like Banyumas Regency's, where the personnel are usually not highly trained in English. Therefore, a research was conducted to identify the ability of Banyumas tourism office staff in writing descriptive texts and to investigate whether applying internet-based writing course to the staff can improve the ability. This research is experimental in which a group of Banyumas tourism office staff participated. The group got a treatment, i.e. writing course blended with internet as a medium of writing. Pre-test and post-test were conducted to compare the level of writing ability before and after the experiment. Observations, interviews and questionnaire were also employed to obtain data. The results show that the participants' ability in writing descriptive texts before the treatment is average. The common problems found were wrong choice of words, incorrect sentence structures, insufficient topic sentences and poor cohesion and coherence within the paragraphs. Comparison between pre-test and post-test indicated that the writing ability of the respondents increased by 30 % in general. Further analysis to the supporting data revealed that the increase is highly attributed to the use of references on the internet, and higher motivation and awareness in writing and revising drafts as they were publicized on-line.

**Keywords:** Internet-based writing, tourism staff, descriptive paragraph

### 1. INTRODUCTION

As a country with rich natural and cultural heritage, Indonesia should wisely use its resources for the benefit of its people. Attempts at introducing its abundant tourism attractions to the world should be done extensively, taking the advantage of recent media and technology. The Tourism Department is the most obliged institution to provide tourism information for the customers;

however the attempts are still hindered by technical problems i.e. the lack of skills in writing foreign languages and in using communication technology. This problem is apparent in regional tourism offices where the objects they organize have limited access and are well-known only by local customers. As their focus is on domestic customers, they pay less concern to international market. Even when English information is made, it is still

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limited in number and quality.

The problem with Banyumas tourism office staff's writing is that many of them do not have good English basic skills. This is worsened by their daily duties that require them to spend most of their time outside to manage tourism objects or to organize events. As they are busy with practical day-to-day problems, there is lack of concern to their foreign language ability. This is ironic, since their role as promotion agents will be much affected by their communication skill.

The preliminary analysis done to Banyumas tourism informational materials, in printed and digital versions, reveal that most of them still have problems with diction, structures and paragraph building. This finding becomes our concern, since errors in writing will lead to misunderstanding or low interest to visit the region. As a further consequence, the tourism industry in the region may fail to get international recognition, while it can actually be a vehicle for other tourism-related industries to flourish. Therefore, intervention is required to improve the tourism staff's writing ability.

Communication technology has developed so rapidly, and they should be used for informational and promotional purposes. Most staff in Banyumas tourism office own smartphones, but their use is limited to basic functions. It is common especially among respondents above 40 who think the older technology suits them better, as they do not feel the need to be frequently active in social media. Therefore, treatment to such learners

should combine writing tutorial and practices with the use of latest communication media, to not only improve their writing skill but also their interest and motivation.

The treatment given was Internet-based Writing Course (IBWC). IBWC belongs to blended learning which is defined by Colis and Moonen (2001) as a hybrid of traditional face-to-face and online learning. It actually started not so long after the birth of digital technology, but rose in popularity only after the communication technology becomes much advanced. In the latest years, communication devices become more reliable, multifunctional, portable and affordable so it is not a surprise that they become parts of today's learning process, although not all educational institutions use them in high intensity and frequency. IBWC is a combination between a writing course focusing in building descriptive paragraphs and the use internet as a medium of communication. The internet is used not just to practice writing descriptive paragraphs, but also to make them accessible for the customers. Therefore, the output of the practice can also serve as informational and promotional media.

## **2. METHODOLOGY**

This research uses quantitative-experimental design. The samples are the staff of Banyumas' DISPORABUDPAR (Tourism Office) taken using purposive sampling, i.e. those who are responsible for information and promotion of Banyumas tourism attractions. The techniques of data collection were (pretest and posttest), observation, questionnaire and interviews from which the information on

respondents' writing ability, their attitudes and opinions were gained. The qualitative data were analyzed non-statistically to get final description, while the quantitative ones were analyzed using T-Test.

The experiment, IBWC, was conducted in 10 sessions between July-August 2015. It started with the introduction of the program followed by a pretest to examine the respondents' ability in writing before treatment. For the next 5 sessions the respondents received treatment i.e. writing course on how to write descriptive texts on tourism attractions (places, products and cultural events) in four aspects of writing, i.e. text organization, grammar, cohesion, and vocabulary. The lessons in these sessions were conducted using traditional teaching-learning method with activities consisting mainly of lecturing, giving examples, practicing and evaluation. Besides blended learning there were other learning methods like drilling and group discussion applied occasionally depending on the focus of the lesson. On the 6<sup>th</sup>-9<sup>th</sup> sessions, there were internet-based lessons where the respondents received guidance and instructions, and did some practices on writing on-line, looking up online dictionaries, searching for references, participating in social media and using grammar-checking applications. The last session is a posttest in which the respondents were told to write a description on tourism attraction in their regions and put the text online.

### **3. RESULT**

#### **3.1 Respondents' ability in writing**

#### **descriptive texts**

The analysis to the data of pretest and posttest reveals that in average the ability of the tourism office staff in writing descriptive texts improved by 30% after receiving IBWC. The improvement was found in all assessed aspects i.e. paragraph development, cohesion, grammar and vocabulary.

The aspects that were analyzed concerning with paragraph development are opening, content and closing. The opening paragraph of a text should be attractive, clear and concise. It should draw the readers interest to read the complete text. Therefore, it should start with a thesis statement as a starting point to discuss and idea (Langan, 2000). Furthermore, the content of writing should contain the necessary details which elaborate the thesis statement in a logical sequence. In the end, there should be a closing that summarizes or restates the whole content and at the same time persuade the reader to do an action (in this case, visit a tourism attraction). The result of pretest shows that most of respondents still had problems in making opening paragraph as their thesis statements were either too broad, too narrow, or vague. The content had jumbled ideas and plagued by errors in grammar and vocabulary. Some respondents did not make closing paragraphs, and those who did usually fail to restate or summarize their ideas. Meanwhile, the posttest shows improvements of the respondents' ability in terms of paragraph development. Most of their thesis statements were clear, containing points that would be described

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further in a way that allowed sufficient elaboration. These improvements were attributed to the first sessions of IBWC which focused on text structure and building.

The coherence and cohesion of a text are also determined by sentence structures, choice of words and punctuation. Therefore, analysis to these aspects is necessary to describe how they affect the flow of ideas logically and structurally. The pretest result shows a high percentage of redundancy (i.e. repetition) which is closely related to the presence of choppy sentences (the sentences are short and repetitive resulting in jagged flow of ideas). Leki (2009) said the writer should use referents like ones or pronouns to connect the ideas, making them easier to follow. In general the respondents have known how to connect ideas using conjunction between paragraphs so few of them made mistakes (20%). However, they show poor ability to connect ideas between sentences in the paragraphs, such as writing complex sentences using logical order or connectors, pronoun, etc. Therefore, the frequency of short sentences, repetition and paralelism in pretest data were still high.

The result of posttest indicates improvement in coherence and cohesion, as there were more compound and complex sentences instead of the short, choppy ones, the use of sequence indicators (firstly, secondly, etc.) and connectors, more logical sequence of ideas, and more use of pronouns to avoid repetition. This is what Halliday (1976) and Leki (2009) said that the logical idea sequence is created not only by using transition signals,

but also correct pronouns. For Smoke (2005) the use of pronoun is very important as it can avoid repetition and make the idea flows better. In the posttest, the respondents had been able to create more specific and complete idea. Connective words like *'furthermore'*, *'on the other hand'* etc. were also used to smoothen the flow of idea between sentences or paragraphs. In general, there had been attempts at making more effective and efficient paragraphs.

Concerning the grammar, in the pretest, most respondents made grammatically incorrect sentence. The common mistakes were in sentence constructions, plural-singular forms, verb forms, concord, paralelism, relative pronoun, and preposition. The result of posttest shows that there is a decrease in the frequency of grammatical mistakes, by approximately 15% of all. This change were mostly caused by better understanding of grammatical rules after five consecutive writing lessons which put emphasize to both text structure and grammar. Another reason for this improvement is the respondents looked up references on the net, i.e. tourism information from which they got examples of correct sentences.

On vocabulary aspect, wrong word choice were found in all data, such as using a noun in the place of adjective, using words with different meaning, misspelling. The analysis also found some words or word combinations which sound unfamiliar in English, like 'front door ticket' instead of entrance ticket. These confusing words, as Oshima (2003) noted, are

caused by the learners' lack of exposure to English references. This should not have happened since the respondents are tourism staff who ideally should have frequent contact with foreign people or text material.

The posttest reveals that there is improvement in terms of vocabulary. The respondents used more accurate words, and made low count of spelling errors. This fewer mistakes can be attributed to the use of spelling checker, online and offline dictionaries, internet resources, etc. which offer them the meaning, spelling and usage of unknown words.

### **3.2 The influence of IBWC to the writing practice**

After conducting observation, questionnaire and interviews, it is found that IBWC improves individual practice, self-revision, interest and confidence, idea developments and cooperation.

The result of questionnaire and interviews reveal that IBWC has significantly improved individual practice by 25 %. Most of the respondents only use English occasionally, i.e. when they meet foreign tourists or officials or when they are assigned to handle cultural events in which foreign guests are invited. Some barely speak English, as they hold positions dealing with internal administrative matters. IBWC surely put them in situation when they had to practice their language skills that some of them had put aside for years. It happened not only in class but also outside as they tried to write the task online. Most respondents said to complete the assignment

they had to revise their draft 2-3 times before completing the final draft. This means that the frequency of practice increased more than expected, with more time spent for working on raw drafts. They also said that their involvement in online social group also influence the frequency of their practice as they felt the need to revise their drafts before making them public.

Lack of vocabulary and grammar skill is the main problem in all ESL writing learners. Usually the learners will have their mistakes noticed and revised by their instructors, but self-correction is always better as the instructors are not always around for comments. The respondents of this experiment said the use of internet assisted them in writing and revising their drafts. Common writing software features like spelling checker and grammar checker are available on-line in the social media they used. As suggested by the instructors, they turned on the feature during writing and it helped them to notice parts having wrong spelling or constructions. They also used internet sites to check word definitions, and admitted of acquiring and using words previously unknown to them. This means that IBWC was effective in improving their vocabulary in terms of variety, spelling and usage.

In comparison to writing in papers, the respondents said that writing in internet is more engaging because they can do a variety of tasks at one time, i.e. writing, searching references (reading), checking dictionaries, looking up pictures and so on. They were also

directly connected to a web of friends or colleagues, which made their writing practice more interesting as approved by 100% of respondents. More than half of them also reported having more confidence in writing, as they knew how to write in better structures and words. The fact that their works were uploaded for others to see make them more motivated to write well. Few respondents felt writing online is intimidating, as they were insecure with their English writing ability. This opposite attitude was normal since some learners do need more experience and encouragement to leave their comfort zone. However, it is believed that if the experiment runs longer, all respondents will have more confidence to put their works for the world to see.

The respondents said that as they utilized internet in writing, they got better chance to look up references which gave them more ideas to find and elaborate the topics. Using internet means gaining more access to tourism ads and news that give them information, not only on tourism objects but also how they are represented in interesting details. The respondents said that examining tourism texts on the net helped them to develop their own writing. As suggested by the program, the respondents opened the site containing tourism attractions that they considered similar with the ones they have to write. Then, they learned how the features of the place/event/object were described in detail and tried to make the similar development. A couple of times they found texts about the place they have to describe, but paraphrasing was always

encouraged as they had to use their own perspectives, knowledge and experiences in writing the text.

The results also indicate that IBWC improved cooperation between learners. The respondents said, during writing in class or outside, they asked or gave assistance to fellow respondents. They requested clearer instruction, examples, revisions, clues and guidance, either in writing or in using the internet. In developing ideas, they also share their knowledge of the tourism attraction they know well. This cooperation took place not only in class but also in social media they shared, as they gave questions, answers, and comments about each other's. According to the respondents, the more they got comments, the higher their excitement and satisfaction they felt on their works.

At last, IBWC promotes the use of technology in writing, which means that the respondents can work with more efficiency and accuracy, and produce output that can be immediately put in use, i.e. information on tourism online. It improves individual skills in communication, and at the same time gives benefit to the country's economy.

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

IBWC is basically a blended learning which combines conventional writing lesson with on-line learning. One of the reasons this method is applied to Banyumas tourism office staff is because they need to improve their ability in writing informational and promotional texts on tourism and at the same time make those texts available for readers

around the world. After conducting IBWC for ten sessions and comparing the results of pretest and posttest, it is revealed that the program has been able to improve respondents' writing ability in all aspects i.e. paragraph building, grammar, cohesion and coherence, and vocabulary. Besides the conventional writing lesson (which mostly consists of lecturing, giving examples, giving exercise, assessing and reviewing), the questionnaire and interviews reveal that the on-line activities i.e. writing in social media, checking internet references, looking up on-line dictionaries etc. also contribute to the improvement. Therefore, this method is effective not only because it improves learners' comprehension on the aspects of English writing, but also promotes both independent and cooperative learning, increases practices, boosts interest and motivation, and improves their ability in utilizing on-line media for the benefit of their professional field. It is expected that the output of this program will provide information for the world about the vastness of tourism attractions in Indonesia.

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