

USING THE PLACE MAT TECHNIQUE TO IMPROVE WRITING SKILLS

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ABSTRACT

This research was to find out whether teaching descriptive writing by using the Place Mat technique would be effective to improve the writing skills of students and to find out their responses to the implementation of this technique. The sample for this research was 56 students from the first grade at SMAN 4 Banda Aceh in the academic year 2014/2015. A true experimental design was used in this research in which two classes were selected at random, one to be the experimental class, and the other the control class. The instruments used to collect the data were tests and a questionnaire. There were two steps in collecting the test data, namely the pre-test and the post-test. To get the students' responses to the implementation of this technique, a questionnaire was used. The results revealed that there was a significant difference in achievement in writing descriptive texts between the students who were taught using this technique and those who were taught by using the individual writing activity. This was proven by the score from the t-test on the post-test which was 3.27 that was higher than the t-table score which was only 1.684. Furthermore, based on the result from the questionnaire, the students responded positively toward the use of this technique for teaching writing.

Key words: *Place Mat Technique, Writing Skill, Descriptive Text.*

INTRODUCTION

The 2013 Curriculum for English in Basic Competence 4.10 says that first grade (year 10) students at senior high school should be able

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to construct a simple descriptive text in oral and written form about people, tourism places, and popular historical buildings with regard to proper and appropriate contexts in terms of social function, generic structure, and language features.

However, students in schools still have many problems writing in English. During preliminary research done by the researcher with the first grade students of SMAN 4 Banda Aceh, she found that most of these students had much difficulty in writing in English for several reasons. First, most of the students had limited vocabulary, so that they did not know words to write while they were writing and the words they produced were very limited. Second, there were many grammatical errors produced by the students in their writing. For instance, they made mistakes in subject-verb agreement, word order, and passive voice. Due to these grammatical errors, they could not produce good writing. Third, most of them could not organize their ideas well, so it directly affected their writing performance where poorly organized writing was clearly observed. Fourth, most of them lacked motivation to learn writing since they perceived that writing was something difficult to learn or master, particularly English writing. The last reason was from the teacher herself who rarely implemented interesting techniques or strategies to get the students' active participation in the writing class. Based on the results of the interview, she usually used the normal individual writing activity technique for teaching writing. In other words, she rarely implemented collaborative learning in teaching writing skills. Therefore, all of those factors directly interfered with the students' ability in writing; their average score in writing was only 65. This score did not meet the Standard of Minimum Competence which was 67.

To overcome or minimize the problem faced by the students, an effective and efficient solution was definitely needed. The researcher believed that using a suitable technique during the teaching-learning process would help the students to lessen their problems. According to Fattah (2006: 5) applying an appropriate technique in classroom practice is crucial to get students' active participation and to achieve learning goals. Therefore, it is a must for every teacher to use better methods and techniques to intensify the teaching-learning process in every language skill.

Moreover, Mandal (2012: 96) has said that it is more effective to teach students writing skills using co-operative learning strategies. In addition, the same idea has come from Harmer (2002: 260). He has

claimed that in language classes writing skills should be taught in co-operative activities where students can work together in a small group. In that group they can evaluate or review questions to find solutions and the generation of ideas itself is frequently livelier with two or more people working on it, thus it can motivate them to write better.

The researcher, then, found that one of the co-operative learning strategies which were suitable to be applied for teaching writing skills was the Place Mat technique. The Place Mat technique, also called the Round Robin technique, was first introduced by Spencer Kagan in 1994. The Place Mat or Round Robin technique is a kind of co-operative learning method which requires all the members of a group to participate to solve a problem on a single place mat paper. Bennet and Rolheiser (2001: 6) have said that the Place Mat technique is a collaborative form of working together which allows students to think about, record, and share ideas in a group that can be done Round Robin (in teams, students taking turns to respond orally to solve a problem). It involves groups of students working both together around a single piece of paper and then discussing it together to reach a consensus.

Furthermore, what makes Place Mat technique more suitable for teaching writing is that every member's ideas in the group has the same opportunity to be heard, so it becomes an enjoyable activity for the students (Regier, 2012: 15). This means the writing produced by each group relies on the collection of the ideas from each person in the group. Furthermore, the technique will give positive feedback to students in groups since their opinion will be praiseworthy by other members in the group. For instance, they are going to be more confident and active in voicing their opinions or ideas to solve a problem in writing. In other words, the Place Mat technique is a genuine way to build and increase students' confidence in writing skills. Within the Place Mat technique, students collaborate; they work together to make sense of what is going on, and then represent what has been learned.

Based on the explanation above, the researcher formulated two research questions. First, will there any significant difference in the achievements in writing descriptive texts between students who are taught using the Place Mat technique and those who are taught by using the normal individual writing activities technique?. Second, what will the students' response be to the implementation of the Place Mat technique for writing a descriptive text?

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Definition of writing

Writing is an instrument of thinking that allows people to express their thoughts. It is a progressive activity that can make students active in learning because writing requires several steps and processes in thinking, namely getting an idea, writing a rough draft, organizing the ideas, revising and writing the final draft. As a result, students will understand how language is used by editing their own writing until they get the final draft (Oshima, 1997: 70).

Aspects of Writing

There are five aspects of writing which writers should be concerned about. The first one is vocabulary. According to Summers (1985:674), a vocabulary list is a list of words, normally in alphabetical order and with explanations of their meanings, less complete than a dictionary. Moreover, Al-Kufaishi (1988:42) has said that learning vocabulary aims at expanding and enriching the learners' knowledge of words, developing their reading ability, promoting and fostering their listening comprehension and enhancing their communicative skills.

The second one is grammar. Harmer (2002:12) has stated that the grammar of a language is the description of the ways in which words can change their forms and can be combined into sentences in that language. If the rules of grammar are not followed carefully, miscommunication may occur.

The third one is mechanics. It is an important element of writing because it is one factor that makes writing easier to comprehend and to minimize vague or ambiguous meaning. Oshima (1997:10) divides mechanics into three parts – i.e. capitalization, punctuation, and spelling.

Fourth, content is a very strong element of writing. Heaton (1988:148) mentions that content is the idea or information stated in writing which must be relevant to or in accordance with the topic; it must not run off from the topic. For instance, if the topic is about describing people, the writer should tell everything about a person by describing the physical appearance and characteristics of the person, not an object or an action.

The last is organization. According to McWhorter (2005), organization concerns how a piece of writing is ordered and structured.

An author organizes or orders her ideas by using transitions or signaling words or phrases between sentences and paragraphs.

Writing a Descriptive Paragraph

According to Doddy, Sugeng, and Effendi (2008: 119), the structure of a descriptive text is divided into two parts, namely:

1. Identification. This is the part where the writer of a descriptive text identifies the phenomenon to be described.
2. Description. This is the part that describes the parts, qualities, and characteristics of the object of the text, whether it be a person, a place, a thing or even a phenomenon.

Definition of the Place Mat Technique

The Place Mat technique was firstly introduced by Kagan in 1994. He, then, defined the Place Mat technique as a team-building activity which allows group members to become familiar with each other. In addition, Alberta Education (2008) has said that the Place Mat technique is a kind of co-operative learning method which allows students to work both alone and together in a group around a single place mat paper to reach a consensus or group idea. According to Bennet and Rolheiser (2001: 6), the Place Mat technique is a collaborative learning technique that combines writing and dialogue to create accountability and participation from all the students in a group.

Steps in Using the Place Mat Technique

First, divide the students into groups consisting of two, three, or four members. Then, pass round place mat papers to each group (one group gets one place mat paper) that have been divided into several spaces (based on the number of members in the groups) drawn around one space in the middle of the paper to put the group's ideas in.

Second, ask the students to sit around the place mat and ask them to write their own name in their space. Later, pose a topic for students to consider.

Third, ask each student to write their own personal idea or decision in their own space on the place mat paper. No discussion is to occur in the groups at this stage. Give the students a few minutes to finish writing their own ideas down.

Fourth, ask them to share, discuss, and clarify their personal ideas with the other members of their group in turn to reach a consensus or group idea. The group ideas are then written in the middle section of

the place mat paper. Next, these group ideas are shared with the class and discussed further to enrich the learning.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research was designed as a true experimental research study in which the researcher manipulated the independent variable (the Place Mat technique) to observe its effect on the dependent variable (the students' writing skills). The researcher selected two classes; one class was assigned to be the experimental group (EG) which was taught writing descriptive texts by implementing the Place Mat technique and the other one was the control group (CG) which was taught to write the same type of text by using the standard individual writing activity technique.

The population for this research was the first grade students from SMAN 4 Banda Aceh which has nine classes. Each class has approximately 32 students, and there were 288 first grade students in the school altogether.

The sample of this research was randomly selected by using simple random sampling. There were 56 students who took part as respondents for this research (28 students in the EG and 28 students in the CG).

Procedure

Moreover, to collect the data in this research the researcher used two instruments, namely tests and a questionnaire. The tests used as instruments in this research were written tests which were divided into the pre-test and the post-test.

The pretest was the first test, given to the students to find out the students' initial ability in writing a descriptive text before implementing any treatment. In the pretest the students of both groups were asked to write a descriptive text individually. The researcher then gave them three topics for descriptive texts via: *My Favorite Idol*, *Historical Building*, and *Tourist Resort*. Each student had to choose one of the topics and develop it into a descriptive text with a length of about 80 words. These writings by the students were then analyzed using an assessment rubric for writing skills.

In the treatment sessions with the EG, the researcher implemented the Place Mat technique when teaching descriptive writing. The researcher divided the students into several groups with four students in each. Afterwards, she passed out Place Mat papers to each group and

asked each student to write their own name on their own place. Later, she gave them a topic and reminded the students to write their personal ideas first in short sentences or phrases on their own place. Next, she asked them to discuss and share their personal ideas orally in turn. The personal ideas gathered, then, should be developed into a single descriptive text. In other words, they should construct a descriptive text (group writing) based on combining the individual ideas. Finally, one representative from each group was called on to present their group's writing in front of the class.

A drawing of the Place Mat paper that the EG students used is shown below:

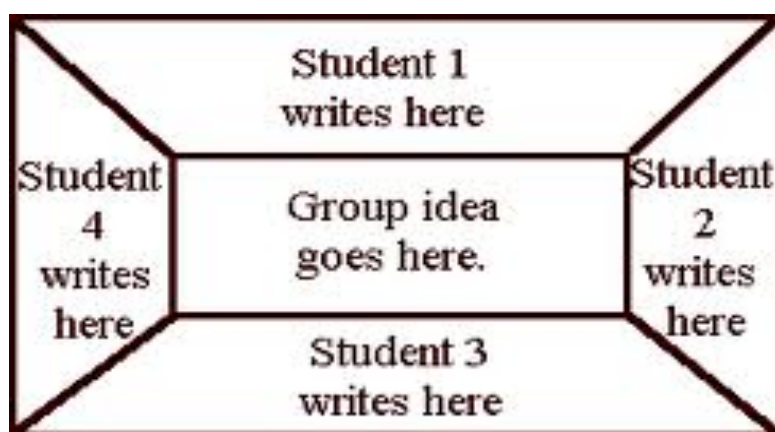


Figure 1. Place Mat paper.

By contrast, during their sessions, the students in the CG were taught how to write a descriptive text by using the individual writing activity method. They kept learning and producing writing by using this technique for each session of the treatment.

In addition, in the post-test, the students in both classes were also given three topics for a descriptive text via: *My Mother*, *Historical Building*, and *Amazing Place in Banda Aceh*. The researcher, then, asked them each to write a descriptive text individually based on the topic they chose with a length about 80 words. These writings were then analyzed using the assessment rubric for writing skills. The researcher gave the same post-tests to both the EG and the CG to find out whether there was a significant difference in achievement in writing a descriptive text between the students from the EG who were taught

using the Place Mat technique and those in the CG who were taught using individual writing activity.

Furthermore, the questionnaire was designed to find out the response of the students toward the implementation of the Place Mat technique in learning writing. There were five categories for the statements in the questionnaire which were ranked – via: Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), Neutral (N), Disagree (DS), and Strongly Disagree (SD). There were 15 statements on the questionnaire to measure three variables, via: Academic Achievement, Positive Relationship, and Psychological Effect.

Data Analysis for the Test

According to Heaton (1988:146), there are five major items in scoring writing – i.e. content, organization, vocabulary, grammar, and mechanics. Each of the student's writings was analyzed by using a rubric.

After grading the writing tests by using the rubric the researcher put their scores into a table of frequencies (frequency distribution). Three factors had to be determined before arranging the scores into the frequency distribution table, via: Range (R), Class of data (K), and Interval (I). After the scores were put into the table of frequency, the researcher did the calculations for mean, standard deviation, normality test, homogeneity test, and t-test (Sudjana, 2002).

The t-test is the core statistical formula used to prove the hypothesis. It was used to find out if there was a significant difference in the achievements of the EG compared to the CG both in the pre-tests and the post-tests.

The t-test hypotheses for this research study were as follows:

H_0 : there was no significant difference in achievement in writing descriptive texts between the students who were taught by implementing the Place Mat technique and those who were taught using the individual writing activity method.

H_a : there was a significant difference in achievement in writing descriptive texts between the students who were taught by implementing the Place Mat technique and those who were taught by using the individual writing activity method.

According to Sundayana (2010), the criteria for the t-test at the 5% level of significance ($\alpha = 0.05$) are:

If $t_{obtain} < t_{table}$, H_0 is accepted

If $t_{obtain} > t_{table}$, H_a is accepted

Data Analysis for the Questionnaire

The researcher used a Likert Scale in the questionnaire which was ranked into five categories of answer, via: Strongly Agree (SA) which was ranked 5 points, Agree (A) ranked 4 points, Neutral (N) ranked 3 points, Disagree (D) ranked 2 points, and Strongly Disagree (SD) ranked 1 point.

Then, the data from the questionnaires was analyzed by using the formula below:

$$p = f \frac{100}{n}$$

Note:

p = percentage, f = frequency of answers, n = total students, 100 = constant

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Table 1. Summary of independent t-test of the pre-tests of both the EG and the CG.

	EG	S_{gab}	t_{test}	df	t_{table}	CG
N (number of students)	28	12,37	0,54	54	1,684	28
$\bar{x}$ (mean)	54					52
S (standard deviation)	13,55					11,06

There were 28 students in each class selected as the sample for this research. Thus, there were 56 students altogether. Moreover, the mean score of the EG was 54. This was slightly higher than that of the control group which was 52. However, the mean scores of the two groups were not widely scattered. Next, the standard deviation for the EG was 13.55, the CG was little bit lower, i.e. 11.06.

In addition, the S_{gab} of the two groups was 12.37 which was obtained from the analysis of variance in both groups. For the t_{test} , it was obtained 0.54. Later, to find out the score of the t_{table} the first step to do is to calculate the score of the degree of freedom (df) at the level of significance (α) 0.05. The degree of freedom for this research was 54 ($n_1 + n_2 - 2$) or 1.684. Hence, the t_{test} (0.54) was lower than the t_{table} (1.684), which means the null hypothesis (H_0) was accepted and H_a was rejected. In other words, there was no significant difference in

the ability in writing skills in the pretest between the students in the EG and the CG. The results from the post tests of both groups are in Table 2.

Table 2. Summary of independent t-test from post-tests of both groups.

	EG	S_{gab}	t_{test}	df	t_{table}	CG
N (number of students)	28	12,07	3,27	54	1,684	28
$\bar{x}$ (mean)	70					59
S (standard deviation)	12,8					11,3

In Table2, the mean score of the EG was 70. This was much higher than that of the CG which was only 59. Next, the standard deviation for the EG was 12.8, whereas for the CG it was a bit lower at 11.3.

In addition, the S_{gab} of the two groups was 12.07 obtained from the analysis of variance of both groups. The t-test, was 3,27. While the t_{table} was 1.684. Therefore, as the t_{test} (3.27) was higher than the t_{table} (1.684) the alternative hypothesis (H_a) was accepted and H_0 was rejected. Thus there was a significant difference in achievement in writing a descriptive text between the EG students who were taught by implementing Place Mat technique and those in the CG who were taught by using individual writing activity. To support the data, the percentage results from the pre-tests and the post-tests for both groups are shown in the bar graph below:

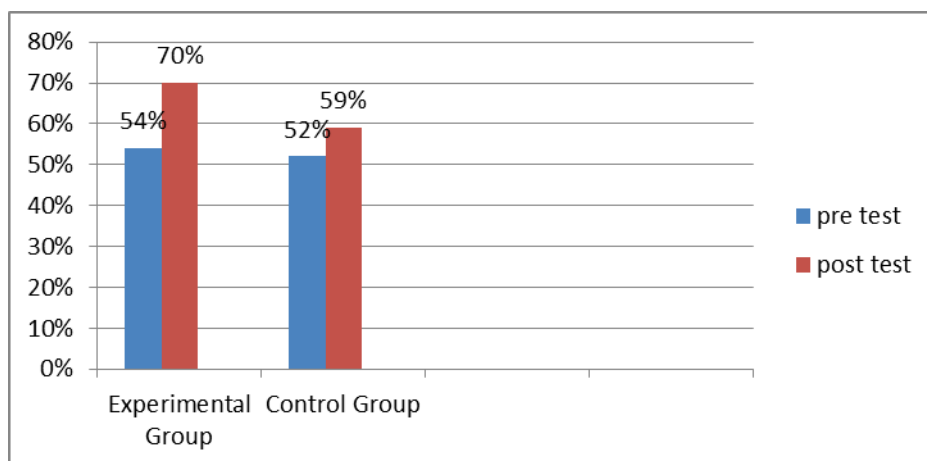


Figure 2. Results of the pre-tests and post-tests from both groups.

In addition, analysis of the EG and the CG students' improvements in each element of writing (content, organization, vocabulary, grammar, and mechanics) are shown in the figures below:

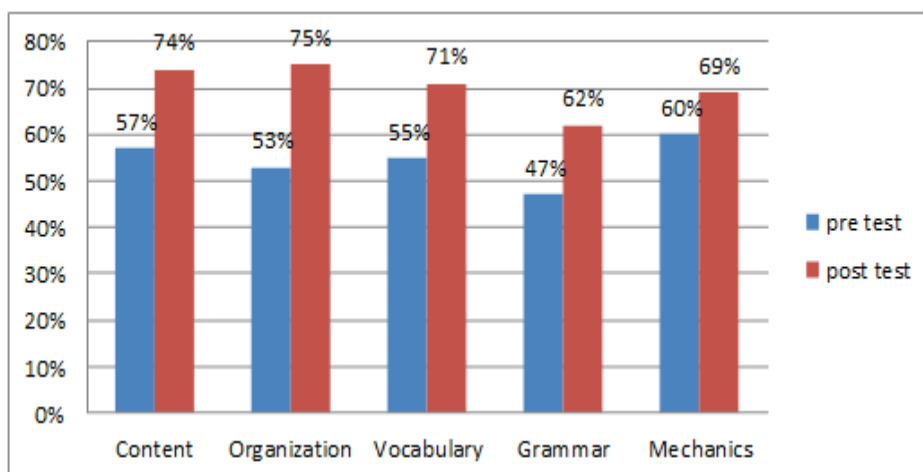


Figure 3. Results from the EG for each aspect of writing.

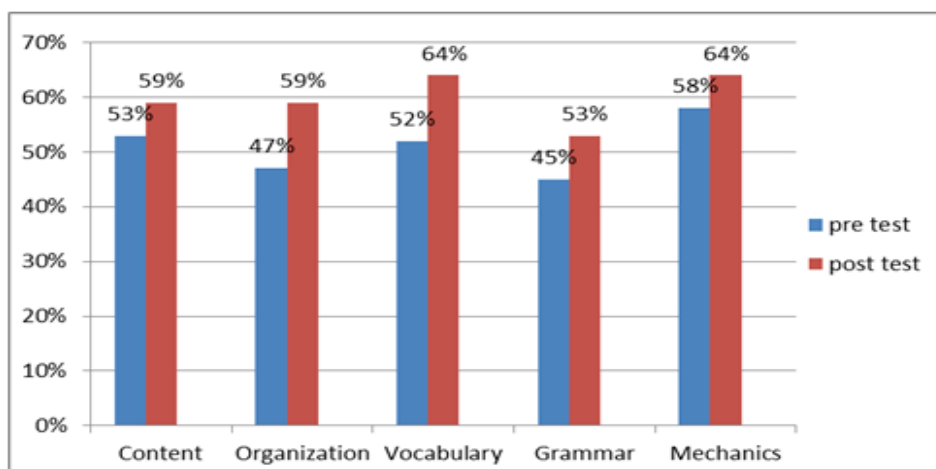


Figure 4. Results from the CG for each aspect of writing.

Furthermore, the results for each variable in the EG questionnaire are shown below.

Table 3. Results for the academic achievement variable in the questionnaire.

No	Variable Measured	Statements	Percentage of Statements				
			SA	A	N	D	SD
1.	Academic Achievement	1. I think learning writing becomes easier due to the implementation of the Place Mat technique	50	47	3	-	-
		2. My writing skill improves because of the implementation of the Place Mat technique	29	64	7	-	-
		3. The use of the Place Mat technique in learning writing truly helps me in finding ideas	47	50	3	-	-
		4. I think I can easily solve my problems that I face in writing by the implementation of the Place Mat technique	32	50	18	-	=
		5. I can understand better how to write well by the implementation of the Place Mat technique	36	46	18	-	-

Note: SA = Strongly Agree, A = Agree, N = Neutral, D = Disagree, SD = Strongly Disagree

Table 4. Results from the positive relationship variable in the questionnaire.

No	Variable Measured	Statements	% of Statements				
			SA	A	N	D	SD
2.	Positive Relationship	6. The use of the Place Mat technique facilitates us to cooperate each other in the group	57	36	7	-	-
		7. We have the same chance to give and share our ideas in the group	39	57	4	-	-
		8. The use of the Place Mat technique in learning writing gives a greater chance to students to correct each other in the group	50	47	3	-	-

Table 5. Results from the psychological effect variables in the questionnaire.

No	Variable Measured	Statements	% of Statements				
			SA	A	N	D	SD
3.	Psycho-logical Effect	9. I am interested in learning writing by using the Place Mat technique	32	50	18	-	-
		10. Learning writing by using the Place Mat technique is very interesting	50	47	3	-	-
		11. In my opinion it is good enough to keep using the Place Mat technique in the teaching and learning process in the future	29	50	21	-	-
		12. I am more motivated to learn writing due to the use of the Place Mat technique	39	47	13	-	-
		13. The process of learning writing by using the Place Mat technique makes me more confident to write	25	57	14	4	-
		14. I am more confident to share my ideas in the group because they are praised by others	36	46	18	-	-
		15. I turned into a more active student in the teaching- learning process of writing because of the implementation of the Place Mat technique	43	46	11	-	-

Based on all of the statements above, it can be seen that most of the students in the experimental class had an excellent experience from the implementation of the Place Mat technique during the treatment. Therefore, they performed better in the post-tests because they learnt more from the learning process for writing descriptive texts.

Discussions

As mentioned above, before the implementation of the Place Mat technique the students experienced many difficulties in writing. For instance, they had limited vocabulary and poor mastery of grammar that made them not know what to write and how to write in good English. In addition, the use of the conventional way for individual writing activity in the writing class by the teacher was another problem that caused the problems to get worse. All of those factors directly interfered with the students' ability to master writing skills. Therefore, action to overcome the problem was needed to improve the situation in the teaching-learning process for writing skills.

Implementing the Place Mat technique was then chosen as a technique to improve the students' writing skills. The application of the Place Mat technique was expected to help the students improve their writing ability by requiring all of the members of the group to participate to solve the problem proposed and in the Place Mat group, they could think about, record, and share ideas in turn (Bennet & Rolheiser, 2001:6). Furthermore, Regier (2012:15) mentions that every member's idea in the group is taken into account, thus it makes every member feel confident to share their own ideas within the group. And during the implementation of the Place Mat technique in the treatment sessions, the students got the same opportunity to share and discuss their personal ideas with the other members in their group since the group's ideas relied on the ideas from each individual, thus their ideas were written or recorded as part of the group's writing. Due to the frequent exercises of giving ideas in the group and every student could produce a different idea they could discuss their ideas from different perspectives, and this lead them to be able to write better in the post-tests. This situation was quite different before the implementation of Place Mat technique where they did not know what to write or how to write it.

Moreover, one of the characteristics of this technique is the deep group discussions to find a solution or a prompt for the topic. In the group, they can discuss everything related to the skills being taught (NSW Country Areas Program Team, 2011:52). This was proven in this study where the frequent use of group discussion in the Place Mat groups resulted in improvements in their mastery of grammar, usage of vocabulary, content, organization, and mechanics.

The results above clearly show that the Place Mat technique significantly improved the students' descriptive writing. The EG students made improvement in the post-tests in all aspects of writing via: content, organization, vocabulary, grammar, and mechanics.

CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

Conclusions

After the analysis of the research data, three major conclusions can be drawn from what has been found from the teaching of writing implementing the Place Mat technique with year 10 high school students.

First, the students who were taught writing using the Place Mat technique achieved a better performance in writing descriptive texts compared to those who were taught by using individual writing activity. This is shown by comparing the mean scores from the pre-tests and the post-tests of the EG and the CG. The mean score of the pretest of the EG was 54, whereas that of the control group was 52. The mean score of the post test of the experimental group was 70, while the control group was 59. This means that the use of the Place Mat technique resulted in a significant improvement in writing skills. This was also proven by the t-test result at 3.27 which was higher than the t-table (1.687), and hence H_a was accepted.

Second, the students in the experimental group showed a great improvement in the five aspects of writing skills including the content or idea in writing the descriptive text, the organization of the text, vocabulary, grammar and the mechanics of writing.

Third, the data obtained from the questionnaire showed that the students in the experimental group were interested in and gave positive responses toward the use of the Place Mat technique for teaching writing.

Suggestions

The researcher suggests that English teachers should consider using the Place Mat technique as an alternative way for teaching writing since its effectiveness or advantages have obviously been proven in this study. Still, English teachers who want to use this technique in teaching writing should follow the procedures of the technique in order to improve the students' performance and get the best results. Additionally, the researcher suggests other researchers who intend to conduct similar studies allocate more than four meetings for the treatment sessions since it is believed that the more treatments the students get the more the writing ability of the students will improve. Moreover, it is expected that this study can be used as a starting point for further studies at different levels and for different needs of students.

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