

POSTCARDS TO JAVA ENCOURAGES STUDENTS TO WRITE

Siti Aisyah and Matthew Borden

English teachers at MAN Lumajang

Abstract: Writing is assumed to be an individual activity, one which is done in silence. Writing activities are time-intensive and, unfortunately, they can often be boring for both EFL teachers and students. Writing can also prove difficult to teach due to the complicated issues involved, namely, linguistic, psychological, and cognitive issues. Considering these factors, EFL teachers often avoid writing activities in class. Consequently, Indonesian students of English graduate within adequate training in English writing. Common challenges students face include: word choice, grammar, organization, and generation of ideas or creativity. Due to their limited knowledge, students often feel stuck and stressed when writing. Due to students' low proficiency and motivation, writing remains a challenge. To make writing interesting, and to promote better writing at school, we proposed a project called *Postcards to Java*. The project uses a collaborative and interactive educational model. Students work in pairs to write responses to postcards, authentic materials, received from native English speakers. This study aims to describe the project in depth and analyse its effects on EFL students' motivation as well as the quality of their writing.

Keywords: *Postcards to Java, cooperative learning, authentic material*

Introduction

Learning English is a must for Indonesian high school students due to the fact that English is an international language. For Indonesian students in remote areas like Lumajang English is considered a foreign language, not a second language. This means that our students will typically use English only at schools and in other particular settings. Consequently they do not have many practical opportunities to use English outside the classroom compared to those who live in big cities. This condition makes English teaching challenging. Having little contact with other English speakers our students are not motivated to master spoken or written English.

It is commonly known that there are four language skills any foreign language student must experience, namely reading, speaking, listening, and writing skills. Unfortunately writing activities at high schools are often neglected by most English teachers at remote schools due to several reasons. First, the Indonesian national examination uses a multiple-choice form which does not assess students' writing abilities. This means that there is no test item in the national examination which measures students' writing abilities. This discourages both teachers and students from teaching and learning writing.

As a matter of fact that the national examination becomes the target of high schools which makes them to focus their teaching and learning much on achieving the target. As the result most of teachers try hard to enable their students to pass the national examination. Next, the Competency Standard Graduates (*SKL*) does not include writing materials. This leads the teachers more concentrate their teaching on other materials that are included in the *SKL*. English materials include in the *SKL* are reading and listening in which these materials are commonly integrated into speaking activities. Both of these factors cause both teachers and students to believe that English writing is not important.

Other factor is there are very limited references for the English teachers which can inspire them to teach writing creatively. Consequently the teachers often use conventional methods in teaching writing which is often done in a silent atmosphere. Thusly, students often feel bored and stressed during writing activities. They rarely feel engaged. The vast majority of students are unable to produce satisfactory writing samples. As the result both teachers and students cyclically neglect English writing year after year.

In reality, writing skills are crucial for students. Good writing is essential to think and express opinions and feelings clearly. Even at the university level students' writing abilities are much emphasized during lecturing. That is another reason to develop students' writing skills at high schools before studying at universities. To achieve this successfully English teachers of high schools at remote areas with limited support facilities for teaching, English teachers must have good strategies for their writing classroom activities. One such strategy is using authentic writing materials which bring real practical language into the classroom. This is how we started "Postcards to Java" in our English classes. As a matter of fact that spoken or written learning materials that were created with some real-life goal for native speakers were called as authentic materials.¹ Thus, these materials were obviously not designed for language learning purposes such as magazine advertisements,

¹ Charlene Polio. Using authentic materials in the beginning language classroom. *Clear News. Volume 18 Issue 1 Spring 2014 pp. 1-8*. Michigan: Michigan State University.

movie reviews, television shows, conversations between native speakers, train schedules, nutrition labels, postcards, etc.

Postcards to Java

Postcards to Java was first initiated by Mathew Borden, a volunteer of English teacher of Peace Corps at MAN Lumajang. He intended to use it for the students enrolled in *Lembaga Pengembangan Bahasa Asing (LPBA)*, known as the “Foreign Language Center” in English. The *LPBA* lessons was held after school on Monday and Tuesday each week. During *LPBA* lessons students developed English and Arabic skills.

Matthew Borden developed a website of Postcards to Java in order to invite native English speakers to send postcards to our students. He started by inviting his friends to send postcards to the *LPBA* students. Eventually there were hundreds of postcards not only from his friends but also from other Americans and English speakers from around the world.

Surprisingly, not only *LPBA* students were interested in responding to the postcards but so were other students who did not belong to the *LPBA*. In response to this interest we took the postcards into the classroom. We began using postcards as learning materials for writing class. Our students learned writing by replying to the postcards.

Applying Postcards to Java in the Classroom

Postcard activities were done during only one period of the second meeting of English lesson every week. Each session took 45 minutes. First the teacher made groups of two based on the students’ English proficiencies. The teacher combined higher achieving students with lower achieving ones. Thus, the groups of students did the postcards only for one period of teaching learning activities every week.

The group works in this postcard activities basically was the cooperative learning. Basically cooperative learning, according to Roger and Kagan (1992), is “a group learning activity which is organized in such a way that learning is based on the socially structured change of information between learners in group in which each learner is held accountable for his or her own learning and is motivated to increase the learning of others.”² In this case, the group learning activity is designed by the teacher based on various learning aspects such as the students’ competencies, learning objectives, learning materials, and so forth.

However, the cooperative learning applied in the postcard activities was in the form of peer learning. This was because we believed that peer learning could enhance the optimal interaction of student-student in discussing every single thing that they needed to accomplish replying the postcards such as solving their language barriers dealing to new vocabularies or new terms that they found in the postcards and their anxieties in expressing their feeling to respond the postcards. As the results, all students would participate meaningfully in their groups. This was because, according to Johnson & Johnson (2000), when the students communicate one another, they were involved in face to face interaction which provided one another with feedback, challenged reasoning and conclusions, and teaching and encouraging one another.³ Moreover, the peer learning done by the students in the postcard activities were resulted from their optimal team building spirit, supportive relationships, and communication skills.

Next, the teacher distributed postcards to each pair. The pair who could answer the teacher’s English-language trivia questions would have first choice of the postcards. The distribution activity took 5 minutes. The students would translate the postcards onto a piece of paper. They enjoyed this activity because there were new terms that they found in the postcards related to the writers’ personal lives. From postcards the students got to know new cultures and ways of life. During the translation activity, they could consult with other groups about their doubts before asking the teacher.

After translating the postcards, the students would draw the outline of a postcard onto a piece of paper to use as a rough draft. The outline had two parts which were drawn into two boxes. The first box was for address. The second was for writing a response. In writing the address, the teacher explained how to properly write an address. The students learned that the first line was for the name, the second was for address, the next line was for province or state and so forth. These were new lessons for the students because the structure of foreign addresses are different from Indonesian addresses.

In replying to the postcards, the students wrote in English. They did not translate from Indonesian to English. They replied to the postcards based on the content of the postcards that they received. In this activity, the teacher might offer some help with English idioms and expressions. The students submitted drafts to the teacher before replying to the postcards. The teacher would give feedback directly to the group in spoken and

² Roger, E.WB. Olsen, & S. Kagan. 1992. About Cooperative Learning: Cooperative Language Learning. Kessler, C. (ed.). *Cooperative Language Learning: A Teacher’s Resource Book*. New Jersey: Prentice Hall. Inc.

³ Johnson, D. W., & Johnson, R. (2000). Cooperative learning, values, and culturally plural classrooms. In M. Leicester, C. Modgill, & S. Modgill (Eds.), *Values, the classroom, and cultural diversity* (pp. 15-28). London: Cassell PLC.

written forms after they submitted their drafts. In this case, the students in their groups got direct feedback from the teacher for their drafts. This activity took longer than other activities. At last, the students would write their final drafts on real blank postcards. The blank postcards were created by Matthew Borden outside the classroom. The teacher later mailed the postcards from the post office.

Advantages of Postcards to Java

Postcards to Java provided fun and interesting writing experiences for the teacher and students. The students felt excited to be engaged during writing class. No teacher or students would feel bored doing postcards during writing class.

Both teacher and students learned new terms from the native English speakers that they would not find them on their own in text books. They felt challenged to look up the meanings. They were also challenged to understand what their pen pals wrote about in the postcards. They were active and curious in knowing the new terms well. They did their best because they felt happy doing so. Consequently, both teacher and students would do the postcards totally and happily including making blank postcards. They felt that it was necessary to create their own postcards which showed their local cultures of their home town to the pen pals. We and students took a picture of Mount Semeru for creating blank postcards because Semeru was one of well-known local icon in addition to bananas and batiks.

Suggestions

In fact, Postcards to Java provided authentic learning materials not only for writing activities but also for other activities such as reading, listening, and speaking activities. For the new 2013 curriculum, different teaching-learning activities will become integrated. Postcards to Java could be used as a meaningful and fun learning material under the curriculum.

Smaller classes allow for more flexibility when appropriate, the students can first read the postcard out loud in front of the class while the teacher writes the vocabulary words on the blackboard. In this case, the students learn a reading skill. The teacher stimulates the students to guess the meanings by analysing the context. After that, the teacher can ask them some comprehension questions based on the content of postcard that they have just heard. In this activity the students are learning listening. Next, the students will answer the questions orally which indicates that they are learning speaking.