THE IMPLEMENTATION OF CONTENT-BASED APPROACH IN IMPROVING ACADEMIC WRITING SKILLS OF EFL STUDENTS

Dwi Fita Heriyawati, Teguh Sulistyo, Agus Sholeh

dwifitaheriyawati@yahoo.com
Kanjuruhan University of Malang
Alamat Korespondensi: Jl. S. Supriadi No. 48 Malang-Indonesia

Abstract: This study aimed at investigating the benefits of the implementation of Content-Based Approach (CBA) in academic writing of EFL settings. Therefore, the approach was implemented in writing class in which 35 students participated as the respondents of the study. They were treated with CBA and their essays were then analyzed to examine the effects of the implementation of the approach on their writing products. Besides, this study investigated further the grammatical errors made by the students as reflected on their essays. The findings of this study proved that CBA is beneficial to improve students' writing skills even though the students still produced grammatical errors.

Keywords: academic writing, content-based approach

INTRODUCTION

Academic writing classes are mainly considered as the most complicated activities to accomplish by EFL students. Commonly, the students' problems in writing appear because the students are not familiar with the theme and topic given by the lecturer. Unfortunately, the students do not understand some background knowledge related to the topic that they should write. Furthermore, writing an essay in English is not a part of their culture because most of the students prefer to express their ideas in spoken forms rather than in written ones. Most of them believe that writing is a demanding task dealing with the content of the paragraphs, organization, mechanism, diction, and complex grammatical rules.

Writing activities should not focus on products but process of writing. The activities of writing begin by brainstorming to get the ideas of writing which should be explained in written form (Allen, 1998, p. 16). Thus writing process is an essential ingredient in taking, retaining, and expressing information.

English Department at Kanjuruhan University of Malang offers writing courses from the second semester to the fifth semester. The writing courses include Writing 1 to Writing 4 which starts from the very basic of writing to the complicated ones. The lecturers of writing always train the students to write well in English, but the students still get confused to start their writing. In this case, they have to learn about sentences, paraphrase, summary, topic sentence, paragraph and body of the paragraph and also outline of the paragraph. Besides, the students also learn some genres of texts such as descriptive, narrative, expository, and argumentative texts.

Unfortunately, many students are not good enough at writing. For example, they cannot write a simple composition in writing class. They are still influenced with their own first language. The students consider that writing is one of the most difficult language skills because they are demanded to express their ideas in written English appropriately. This phenomenon is caused by many factors, and one of them is the way the lecturers teach

writing classes. They tend to focus on finishing the materials and ignore the results and they may also focus on one aspect only, such as the grammatical structure, so the students get less attention in the writing class (Wahyuni, 2003, p. 17). The lecturers have a very pivotal role not only to teach in the class but also to make some important decisions, such as selecting appropriate methods, materials, and media that will be used in teaching in the class. While, the students have their own proficiency levels and learning styles that affect their comprehension to grasp the materials.

A deep investigation conducted in a writing class for the fourth semester students of English Department at Kanjuruhan University of Malang found out that the students got difficulties to develop their ideas into a good argumentative essay. In addition, they did not have sufficient background knowledge about the topic given by the lecturer.

Based on the students' difficulty in developing their idea in a good essay, this research aims to help the students improve their skills to write and develop their ideas and knowledge into a good essay through content-based academic writing.

The Essence of Content-Based Approach (CBA)

In order to help the students solve their problems in writing, it is essential to employ CBA as one of the appropriate approaches in writing. CBA in academic writing emphasizes on the development of strategies for information compilation, synthesis, interpretation, and evaluation, as well as the correlation between information and existing experiences (Suppawan & Chuchart, 2010, p. 88-89). Moreover, CBA also aims to help students improve their communication skills, critical thinking skill, academic reading capability, and writing skills.

The basis for CBA to teaching writing skill is the concept of Second Language Acquisition (Krashen, 1985). The concept maintains that, in order to learn a language well, one must also learn context in which language is conventionally used to attain the language and the course simultaneously. It focuses more on the "meaning" than the "format" of the language as the ability to understand the language would motivate the learners to continue with learning. The main purpose is the students are able to communicate in the target language; they will be able to understand the contents; and subsequently see improvement in their writing skill (Suppawan & Chuchart, 2010, p. 88-89).

It is also in line with Shih (1986), who states that CBA in academic writing is connected to the study of specific academic subject matter which is viewed as a means of promoting understanding of the content. In addition, Suppawan and Chuchart (2010) argue that CBA emphasizes the development of strategies for information compilation, synthesis, interpretation and evaluation, as well as the correlation of new information and existing experiences. In this case the lecturer can employ the treatment of matter of form including organization, grammar, and mechanism.

The CBA in academic writing can be an effective means to develop the requisite skills because it deals with writing in a manner similar (or identical) to how writing is assigned, prepared for, and reacted to in real academic courses. In this method, the implementation to teaching writing still follows the four stages of teaching writing; prewriting, writing the first draft, revising, and publishing (Shih, 1986). In this approach, the contexts of the various contents are transformed into language learning tool. The instructional activities revolve around writing from sources, with integration of reading, listening, and content discussion.

CBA in teaching-learning process of the second language (L2) settings emphasize more on the importance of mastering the contents of the materials rather than on the philosophy of the language itself. Accordingly, CBA merely focuses on the contents which automatically will lead the students to acquire L2 or the target language. Basically, students in general will learn effectively if they are motivated since the materials are challenging and contextual. Thus lecturers or teachers are strongly suggested to activate students to discuss the topics of their essays to facilitate students to be more active in the classroom.

The implementation of CBA, hopefully, enables students to be more effective language learners and help them to acquire their writing skills since they realize the challenges

and benefits of mastering an L2 or target language better.

METHOD
Participants

The participants of this study were 35 fourth semester students majoring in English at Kanjuruhan University, Malang. The research design was implemented to examine the improvement of the students' writing ability and students' difficulties in writing an essay. The students were taking Writing 3 course focusing on argumentative essay and they were treated with CBA.

Instruments

The measuring instruments employed in this study consisted of pre-test, post-test, interview, and observation. Since scoring in writing products is very subjective, this research applied analytical scoring rubrics for students writing adapted from Cohen's analytical scoring of writing assessment. The scoring rubric which measured content (30%), organization (30%), vocabulary (20%), grammar (15%), and mechanics (5%) was used by two raters when scoring students' essays. The scores given by the two raters were then totaled and divided by two as the final score of each student. Pearson Product Moment Correlation SPSS 18 is used to analyze inter-rater reliability level. In addition, interview and observation were conducted to find out other supporting data related to the implementation of CBA in the writing class.

Procedure

The implementation of CBA was conducted in seven meetings, each of which consisted of 100 minutes. The first two meetings were employed to investigate the problems dealing with writing faced by the students and to take the first score of the students (pre-test). Meanwhile, the other five meetings were used to implement CBA.

The implementation of CBA focused on the activities of reading and discussion on the contents of the topic to write. Also, CBA was done through process of writing consisting of pre-writing, drafting, revising, and writing final draft activities. The students merely read texts dealing with the topic of their writing, namely "Corruption in Indonesia and its impacts" before they wrote their essay. The main text they read was "The effects of corruption" (See Appendix 1). In addition, they discussed anything related to the topic which was intended to enrich students' schemata. After obtaining enough schemata, they started writing the first rough draft. Then they revised the draft by themselves and exchanged the draft with their friends in order to do proof reading and to get comments or suggestion to make the draft better. The last step to do was writing the final draft before submitting it to the lecturer.

Then the last meeting was intended to provide the lecturer's comments and to find out the students' opinion about the implementation of CBA through follow-up interview.

Results and Analysis

The final product of the students, in the form of an essay, showed that they made progress, especially dealing with content even though they still produced grammatical errors. As a whole, there was statistically significant difference between the scores of pre-test and post-test. Somehow, among the five components of writing, the components of mechanics did not indicate significant difference between pre-test and post-test. Then the results and analysis of the study are described in details in the following discussion.

The mean score of pre-test was 71.4 and that of post-test was 75.76 (scaling scores from 0 to 100). Table 1 shows the statistical computation on the scores of pre-test and post-test.

Table 1. The Results of Statistical Computation on Pre-test and Post-Test Scores

Paired Samples Statistics

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	VAR-pre	75.7571	35	6.51172	1.10068

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	VAR-pre	75.7571	35	6.51172	1.10068
	VAR-post	71.4286	35	5.93239	1.00276

Paired Samples Test

	Paired Differences								Sig. (2-tailed)
		Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference			t	df	
	Mean			Lower	Upper				
Pair 1 VAR-pre –VAR-post	4.32857	3.45973	.58480	3.14011	5.51703	7.402	34		.000

Paired Sample T-test was used to measure the difference between the mean score of pre-test and that of post-test. Since the real probability .000 is lower than .05 at 5 % level of significance, it means that there is a significant difference between the two means. It implies that CBA is beneficial to improve students' academic writing skills.

Meanwhile, Table 2 shows the mean scores of the students both in pre-test and post-test dealing with content of the essay. Based on the inter-rater system, it was found out that there is improvement of the students' mean score. The mean score of the content of the essay in pre-test was 22.97 and 24.63 was the mean score of post-test (scaling scores from 0 to 30).

Table 2. The Result of Statistical Computation on the Content of the Essay
Paired Samples Statistics

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	VARpost	24.6286	35	2.52442	.42670
	VARpre	22.9714	35	2.43124	.41095

Paired Samples Test

	Paired Differences								Sig. (2-tailed)
		Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference			t	df	
	Mean			Lower	Upper				
Pair 1 VAR00003 – VAR00004	1.65714	1.52803	.25828	1.13225	2.18204	6.416	34		.000

Paired Sample T-test was used to measure the difference between the mean

score of pre-test and that of post-test dealing with the content of the essay. Since the real probability .000 is lower than .05 at 5 % level of significance, it means that there is a significant difference between the two means. It means that CBA is beneficial to improve students' academic writing skills dealing with the content of the essay.

Then Table 3 provides the results of the statistical computation dealing with the difference between the two means of scores related to the organization of the essay. Based on the inter-rater system, it was found out that there is improvement of the students' mean score. The mean score of the organization of the essay in pre-test was 21.49 and 23.04 was the mean score of post-test (scaling scores from 0 to 30).

Table 3. The Result of Statistical Computation on the Organization of the Essay

Paired Samples Statistics

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	Post VARp	23.0429	35	3.18861	.53897
	VARp re	21.4857	35	2.76928	.46809

Paired Samples Test

	Paired Differences							
				95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	Lower	Upper	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Pair 1 VAR00005 VAR00006	-1.55714	1.81404	.30663	.93400	2.18029	5.078	34	.000

Paired Sample T-test was used to measure the difference between the mean score of pre-test and that of post-test dealing with the organization of the essay. Since the real probability .000 is lower than .05 at 5 % level of significance, it means that there is a significant difference between the two means. It means that CBA is beneficial to improve students' academic writing skills dealing with the organization of the essay.

Table 4 provides the results of the statistical computation dealing with the difference between the two means of scores related to the vocabulary of the essay. Based on the inter-rater system, it was found out that there is improvement of the students' mean score. The mean score of the vocabulary of the essay in pre-test was 15.57 and 16.20 was the mean score of post-test (scaling scores from 0 to 20).

Table 4. The Result of Statistical Computation on the Vocabulary of the Essay

Paired Samples Statistics

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	Post VARp	16.2000	35	1.70725	.28858
	VARp re	15.5714	35	1.70269	.28781

Paired Samples Test

	Paired Differences								
Pair 1 VAR00005 - VAR00006			Std.	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference					Sig. (2-tailed)
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Error Mean	Lower	Upper		t	df	
Pair 1 VAR00007 - VAR00008	.62857	.94979	.16054	.30231	.95484	.915	3	34	.000

Paired Sample T-test was used to measure the difference between the mean score of pre-test and that of post-test dealing with the vocabulary of the essay. Since the real probability .000 is lower than .05 at 5 % level of significance, it means that there is a significant difference between the two means. It means that CBA is beneficial to improve students' academic writing skills dealing with the vocabulary of the essay.

Table 5 provides the results of the statistical computation dealing with the difference between the two means of scores related to the grammar of the essay. Based on the inter-rater system, it was found out that there is improvement of the students' mean score. The mean score of the grammar of the essay in pre-test was 7.57 and 7.96 was the mean score of post-test (scaling scores from 0 to 15).

Table 5. The Result of Statistical Computation on the Grammar of the Essay

Paired Samples Statistics

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	Post VARp	7.9571	35	.68996	.11663
	Pre VARp	7.5714	35	.81478	.13772

Paired Samples Test

	Paired Differences								
		Std.	Std.	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference					Sig. (2-tailed)
	Mean	Deviation	Error Mean	Lower	Upper		t	df	
Pair 1 VAR00009 - VAR00010	.38571	.70800	.11967	.14251	.62892	.223	3	34	.003

Paired Sample T-test was used to measure the difference between the mean score of pre-test and that of post-test dealing with the grammar of the essay. Since the real probability .003 is lower than .05 at 5 % level of significance, it means that there is a significant difference between the two means. It means that CBA is beneficial to improve students' academic writing skills dealing with the grammar of the essay.

Table 6 provides the results of the statistical computation dealing with the difference between the two means of scores related to the mechanics of the essay. Based on the inter-rater system, it was found out that there is improvement of the students' mean score. The mean score of the grammar of the essay in

pre-test was 3.83 and 3.92 was the mean score of post-test (scaling scores from 0 to 5).

Table 6. The Result of Statistical Computation on the Mechanics of the Essay

Paired Samples Statistics

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	Post VARp86	3.92	35	.43963	.07431
	VARpre86	3.82	35	.45282	.07654

Paired Samples Test

	Paired Differences								Sig. (2-tailed)
			Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference					
	Mean	Std. Deviation		Lower	Upper		t	df	
Pair 1 VAR00011 - VAR00012	-.10000	.43386	.07334	-.04904	.24904		1.364	34	.182

Paired Sample T-test was used to measure the difference between the mean score of pre-test and that of post-test dealing with the grammar of the essay. Since the real probability .182 is higher than .05 at 5 % level of significance, it means that there is no significant difference between the two means. It means that CBA is not beneficial enough to improve students' academic writing skills dealing with the mechanics of the essay.

Meanwhile, the products of the students showed that there were 142 grammatical errors made by the students. The errors covered 49 misformation (35%), 41 omission (29%), 37 addition (26%), and 15 misordering (10%). Besides, the errors were resulted from two sources: 122 (86%) interlingual transfer and 20 (14%) intralingual transfer.

DISCUSSION

To begin with, comparison between the mean score of pre-test and post-test indicated that the results of the study statistically proved the positive effects of the implementation of CBA on students' writing skills (see Table 1). It was also showed that there was significant difference between the mean scores of pre-test and post-test dealing with the components of writing: content, organization, vocabulary, and grammar. In contrast, there was no significant difference between the mean score of pre-test and post-test related to mechanics.

CBA and Students' Writing Skills

Based on the statistical analysis, the implementation of CBA was able to facilitate students to improve their writing skills as reflected on the improvement of their writing scores after being treated with CBA. These findings were similar to those found by Pessoa (2007) which concluded that there was a significant correlation between students' writing ability and the activities focusing on content and language discussion. It shows that discussion related to the topic enabled students to enrich their background knowledge before writing. Having sufficient background knowledge or schemata, the students are able to express their ideas since it deals with content familiarity or knowledge on the content of the essay.

Among the components of writing, it was also found that there were four components which statistically verified the positive effect of CBA on writing skills. They were content, organization, vocabulary, and grammar. The improvement was resulted from the activities of discussing the content of

the essay before writing even though they still produced grammatical errors. In addition, being treated with CBA, the students also did borrowings or adapted some words or phrases from the texts they had read.

In contrast, there was one component of writing which did not demonstrate statistically significant values between the mean score of pre-test and post-test dealing with mechanics even though there was a small improvement. It probably happened because the improvement was too small to detect and or the students were not careful enough when writing. They did not pay attention on punctuation and capitalization.

In language learning of English, as a second or foreign language, CBA helps students to improve their skills of writing as stated by Early (1990) "this approach is valuable in that it enables low English proficiency students to work with academic context and discourse." In addition, Madrid (2001) stated "those related to the context and the natures of language instruction are decisive. The effect and value of the language used for classroom instruction is of paramount importance." Also, Shih (1986) believes that "such instruction develops thinking, researching, and writing skills needed for academic writing tasks and does so more realistically than does traditional instruction that isolates rhetorical patterns and stresses writing from personal experience".

Another research by Sulistyo (2014, p. 257) also proved that the activities of reading, as the application of CBA, helped students enrich their background knowledge but also know a good text model. It means that discussing content in writing activities was really beneficial to enrich their schemata related to the topic being written.

Grammatical Errors on Students' Essay

Grammatical errors based on surface category taxonomy which were produced by the students were categorized into addition, omission, misformation, and misordering. Misformation category took the largest percentage compared to the other categories. The errors existed because of two different sources: intralingual and interlingual transfers. They had not mastered the English grammar rules or they were still in the developmental process of acquiring L2 rules.

Intralingual transfers originally come from the facts that the students had not acquired the complete rules of L2 or they were still in the development process of acquiring L2. It basically happens not only to ESL or EFL students but also children of native speakers. In contrast, interlingual transfers happen because of the influence of L1 into L2. The students brought along the rules of L1 into L2 resulting on the production of mixed utterances. These two kinds of errors happen to every person learning a certain language naturally. Parodi (2007, p. 240) notes that it is important to emphasize the fact that the teaching practices currently in use do not seem to lead to the expected levels of language performance.

Meanwhile, the influence of L1 into L2 was also investigated by Hussein and Mohammed (2011) which came up to a conclusion that learners tended to compose words and sentences in L1 at first and then translate them into L2 thus making negative transfers. Thus the influence of L1 into L2 or vice versa happens because of a contact between two different languages with different rules.

CONCLUSIONS

The implementation of CBA in the teaching of writing really helps the students in improving their writing skills. The students find it easier to compose their essay because they got sufficient knowledge related to their topic. Their writing content, organization, and language use were improved significantly because they had the good models through the texts they read. In addition, these parts of writing were not distracting their time to write.

On the other hand, in the implementation of CBA, the students got not only the adequate knowledge related to the content of the text but also the vocabulary use. Overall, the students' writing skills were improved as it can be seen from the result of the students writing test. It means that the students really enjoyed and got the benefit in the implementation of content-based approach in the academic writing. Somehow, it was not found statistically significant influence of the students' mechanics in

writing. It was probably caused by the careless habits of students when writing punctuation and capitalization. The result of this research explains the useful strategy in the teaching of academic writing and it describes the implementation of the strategy. This is supported by the result of the students writing score and their opinion about the implementation of this strategy in the teaching of writing.

Overall the implementation of CBA was conducted in several steps. The first step was deciding topic and texts to be discussed. The second step was reading some texts related to the topic which would be written. Thirdly, the lecturer discussed with the students the importance of process of writing. The students then wrote their draft and the teacher or lecturer provided individualized help with course-related writing.

Since this research was only small scale classroom action research with the very limited time to implement the research due to content-based approach, the researcher suggests other researchers to explore more about the implementation of content-based approach in large scale research, with other various types of text, material to be explored, and also with the adequate time to employ. Future researchers can also implement content-based approach as one of the strategies for teaching other language skills. In addition, lectures should know the students' level of proficiency in writing, in order to help the students solve their writing difficulties in EFL classroom.

REFERENCES

Allen, D. (1998). *Foreword by Howard Gardner:Assessing Students' Learning From Grading to Understanding.* New York: Teachers College Press.

Early, M. (1990). ESL Beginning Literacy: A Content Based Approach. *Tesl Canada Journal!Revue Tesl Du Canada* Vol. 7, NO.2.

Hussein, A.A. & Mohammad, M.F. (2011). Negative L1 Impact on L2 Writing. *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science.* Vol.1 No.18

Krashen, S.D. (1985). *Writing: Research, Theory and Applications.* Oxford:Pergamon.

Madrid, D. & Sanchez, E.G. (2001). Content –Based Second Language Teaching. *Present and Future Trends in TEFL*, 101-134

Parodi, G. (2007). Reading-Writing Connections:Discourse-Oriented Research. *Reading and Writing*.20:225-250. DOI 10.1007/s 11145-006-9029-7

Pessoa, S. et al. (2007). Content-Based Instruction in the Foreign Language Classroom: A Discourse Perspective. *Foreign Language Annals • Vol. 40, No. 1*

Shih, M. (1986). Content-Based Approaches to Teaching Academic Writing. *TESOL Quarterly, Vol. 20, No. 4. December 1986.*

Sulistyo, T. (2014). Reading-Writing Connection: Maximizing its Benefits to Stimulate EFL Students' Writing Ability. *Proceeding of International Seminar in Jember*

Suppawan, S. & Chuchchart, A. (2010). Multidimensional Instruction Model for Comprehensive Academic Writing Capability Development: The Integrative Approach. *Journal of Behavioral Science. Vol. 5, No. 1, 88-89.*

Wahyuni, A. D. (2003). *The Students' Descriptive Writing as a Result of the Implementation of Document Portfolio.* Unpublished Thesis: State University of Surabaya.

Appendix 1. A Text on Corruption

THE EFFECTS OF CORRUPTION

The effect of corruption has many dimensions related to political, economic, social and environmental effects. In political sphere, corruption impedes democracy and the rule of law. In a democratic system, public institutions and offices may lose their legitimacy when they misuse their power for private interest. Corruption may also result in negative consequences such as encoring cynicism and reducing interest of political participation , political instability , reducing political competition, reducing the transparency of political decision making, distorting political development and sustaining political activity based on patronage, clienteles and money, etc.

In our society, the impact of corruption is often manifested through political intolerance, problems of accountability and transparency to the public, low level of democratic culture, principles of consultation and participation dialogue among others.

The economic effects of corruption can be categorized as minor and major. However, both in one way or the other have serious impact on the individual community and country. First and foremost, corruption leads to the depletion of national wealth. It is often responsible for increased costs of goods and services, the funnelling of scarce public resources to uneconomic high profile projects at the expense of the much needed projects such as schools, hospitals and roads, or the supply of potable water, diversion and misallocation of resources, conversion of public wealth to private and personal property, inflation, imbalanced economic development, weakling work ethics and professionalism, hindrance of the development of fair in market structures and unhealthy competition there by deterring competition. Large scale corruption hurts the economy and impoverishes entire population.

In Social sphere, corruption discourages people to work together for the common good. Frustration and general apathy among the public result in a weak civil society. Demanding and paying bribes becomes the tradition. It also results in social inequality and widened gap between the rich and poor, civil strive, increased poverty and lack of basic needs like food, water and drugs, jealousy and hatred and insecurity.

Closer home, corruption is said to have been factors for the down fall of past regimes byway of undermining the legitimacy of the governments and weakening their structures, reducing productivity, hindering development, worsening poverty, marginalizing the poor, creating social unrest and then to their downfall.