Training of Academic Writing for Senior High School English Teachers: Formulating Research Questions

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Abstract

This article reports a community service activity conducted to give training to Senior High School English teachers in Bantul Regency, Yogyakarta, Indonesia, on academic writing, especially on formulating research questions of their Classroom Action Research (CAR). The training was a part of series of training conducted by the lecturers of the English Language Education Department of Universitas Kristen Duta Wacana (UKDW) at regular Senior High School Teacher Professional Development Forum (MGMP) meetings. It was conducted to answer the teachers' needs to conduct educational research for their professional development and career advancement as regulated by the government. The training on formulating research questions in CAR was divided into two sessions. The first session was lecture session in which relevant theories, practical suggestions, and examples regarding research questions were presented to the participants. This session, despite resource-person-led, could be interrupted with immediate questions from the teacher participants, allowing a more dynamic discussion. The second session was workshop session in which the participants practiced formulating research questions based on their respective teaching contexts with a close guidance from the resource person. Based on a reflective evaluation on the training, several conclusions on what had gone well and what needed to be improved are also presented along with several suggestions regarding possible follow-up trainings in the future.

Keywords: community service; research questions; classroom action research (CAR); academic writing.

Abstrak

Kegiatan pengabdian kepada masyarakat (PKM) ini dilakukan untuk memberikan pelatihan kepada guru Bahasa Inggris SMA di Kabupaten Bantul, Yogyakarta, tentang penulisan akademik, khususnya dalam merumuskan pertanyaan penelitian pada penelitian tindakan kelas (PTK). Pelatihan ini merupakan bagian dari serangkaian pelatihan yang dilakukan oleh para dosen Program Studi Pendidikan Bahasa Inggris UKDW pada pertemuan rutin Musyawarah Guru-Guru Mata Pelajaran (MGMP) Bahasa Inggris SMA Kabupaten Bantul. Pelatihan dilakukan untuk menjawab kebutuhan para guru untuk melakukan penelitian sebagai bagian pengembangan profesional dan syarat kenaikan pangkat sesuai ketentuan pemerintah. Pelatihan tentang bagaimana merumuskan pertanyaan penelitian ini dibagi menjadi dua sesi. Sesi pertama adalah sesi *lecture*/pemaparan yang berisi pemaparan teori yang relevan, beberapa saran praktis, dan contoh pertanyaan penelitian. Meskipun narasumber berperan dominan dalam sesi ini, para peserta

dimungkinkan untuk bertanya secara langsung sehingga diskusi dapat berjalan lebih dinamis. Sesi kedua adalah sesi lokakarya di mana peserta berlatih merumuskan pertanyaan penelitian berdasarkan konteks di masing-masing sekolah dengan bimbingan dari narasumber. Berdasarkan hasil evaluasi, disampaikan beberapa kesimpulan tentang apa yang telah berjalan baik, apa yang masih perlu ditingkatkan, serta beberapa saran mengenai kemungkinan pelatihan lanjutan di masa depan.

Kata Kunci: pengabdian kepada masyarakat (PKM); pertanyaan penelitian; penelitian tindakan kelas (PTK).

A. INTRODUCTION

The quality of education depends on many factors such as the educational infrastructure, students, teachers, and the educational management. Among these factors, teachers play a very pivotal role as they are the ones becoming the spearhead of education, directly dealing with students in class (Mangkunegara & Puspitasari, 2015; Saragih, 2008). Considering the importance of teachers in improving the quality of Indonesian education, furthermore, the government of Indonesia has been doing several efforts to improve the quality and capacity of its teachers (Saragih & Dewi, 2017). Teachers are encouraged to pursue further studies, join seminars related to their subjects, and writing scientific articles (Raharjo, 2012; Saragih & Dewi, 2017).

Specifically related to the demand for teachers to write scientific articles and get them published, the Indonesian government considers teachers having to possess good skills in writing and researching as a part of their professional competence (Undang-Undang Nomor 14 Tahun 2005 Tentang Guru Dan Dosen, 2005). These research articles can be about their day-to-day teaching practices in the form of classroom action research (CAR) (Mills, 2007). Conducting CAR also enables teachers to reflect their own practices, finding what is working, what is not working, and what needs to be improved (Mills, 2007). Thus, by demanding the Indonesian teachers to write research articles, the government may have a hope that teachers do not only teach as mere routines, but they begin to reflect their own practices towards improvement of their teaching quality and their students' learning in general.

The same with all the other Indonesian teachers, the Senior High School English teachers are facing the same challenges. They are urged to continuously improve their ability to produce scientific articles. Producing such articles does not only mean that they are expected to continuously update and upgrade their own practices through classroom-based research, but it also means career advancement as regulated by ministerial decree (see Kementerian Pemberdayaan Aparatur Negara dan Reformasi Birokrasi, 2009). The decree further dictates that teachers need to accumulate certain level of points in order to have a promotion and they can obtain a large number of points if they can get their articles published in journals (Kementerian Pemberdayaan Aparatur Negara dan Reformasi Birokrasi, 2009). In other words, their ability to publish articles in journals will greatly boost their chance of being promoted. This, for some teachers may be quite a horror as they were not accustomed to writing scientific papers (Ardiansyah, 2018). They may not have conducted any research before either, contributing to their fear and resistance on conducting research even if it was beneficial for their career advancement.

Facing all these challenges, the teachers are luckily supported with, among others, Teacher Professional Development Forum (MGMP) in which teachers of the same subjects have discussions on how to develop their practices and have various

teacher development programmes (Saragih & Dewi, 2017). Such teacher development programmes as workshops, trainings, or talks conveyed by resource persons within the MGMP itself or from outside are normally conducted in an MGMP meeting which is usually conducted regularly (Saragih & Dewi, 2017).

In a similar vein, Senior High School English teachers teaching in Bantul regency, Yogyakarta, also regularly meet at the MGMP meeting which is conducted in various Senior High School in the region in turn to discuss educational issues at hand related to English instruction and their career as English teachers. These Bantul MGMP English teachers are committed to develop their ability in producing scientific articles, despite their tight schedules in teaching alone. Besides, these teachers also realise that in general they are still struggling to write scientific articles just like relatively common phenomena in many other places in Indonesia (see also Fahdini et al., 2014; Kartowagiran, 2011; Sumartini et al., 2019).

Hence, an MGMP representative contacted the English Language Education Department (ELED) of Universitas Kristen Duta Wacana (UKDW) to see any possibility of its lecturers giving some kind of workshops to equip the English teachers to write scientific articles in the framework of community service programme, one of Three Pillars of Higher Education comprising education, research, and community service (Eniyati & Noor, 2010). These MGMP teachers' needs were also seen as an opportunity to implement one of UKDW's core values, which is "service to the world" encouraging all the people within the institution to share kindness and give service to people around and society in general (Subekti & Susyetina, 2019; Subekti & Wati, 2019). Besides, it was fully realised that sharing knowledge to teachers was very important and worthwhile for English lecturers teaching at such an education major as the ELED. Hence, it was agreed that the ELED of UKDW would give workshop

series on academic writing for the English teachers at the MGMP meeting. The series included introduction to CAR, formulating research questions, and reporting results of CAR. The second meeting in the series, on formulating research questions, is the focus of this article.

B. PRACTICE AND METHODS

This training was conducted in the framework of community service activity. Before the training, the MGMP representative expressed the teachers' need for training on how to improve their academic writing skills. As this need entails very broad materials to cover, the training was conducted in three separate meetings. The first meeting was on introduction of CAR, the second one was about formulating research questions, and the last one was on writing reports.

The second meeting, on formulating research questions, which I am reporting in this article, was the meeting in which I became the resource person. A week before the training, the information about it was published through social media accounts for the readership of the Bantul MGMP English teachers who would be the participants. The publication about the training could be seen in Figure 1.
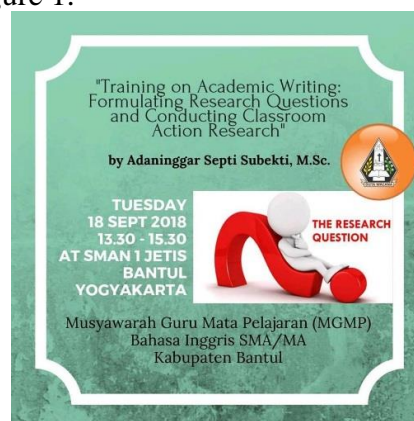

Figure 1. Publication about the training

As seen in the publication in Picture 1, the meeting was conducted on Tuesday, 18 September 2018 from 13.30-15.30. However, the venue was, for some reasons, changed from SMA Negeri 1 Jetis, Bantul,

Yogyakarta to SMA Negeri 1 Sewon, Bantul, Yogyakarta. Hence, the training was opened by the Principal of SMA Negeri 1 Sewon, which became the host school. Figure 2 shows the opening session of the training.

Figure 2. Opening session (left to right: an MGMP representative, me, and the principal of the host school)

The meeting was conducted in the form of semi-workshop style with the combination of talk or lecture on theories and practical examples and hands-on practices in which the teacher participants practiced writing possible research questions based on their own classroom contexts and problems (Mills, 2007). As the follow-up, the participants were asked to send me drafts of their research article for feedback after the training at their convenience and their own pace of conducting research. There were in total 36 English teacher participants attending the training.

C. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The training was opened with self-introduction from me as the resource person. It happened that I graduated from SMA Negeri 2 Bantul, Yogyakarta and two of the participants used to be my teachers. So, the self-introduction section became the arena of nostalgia where I shared that my passion of writing had been nurtured ever since my earlier days at High School. Then, I showed them my academic profile containing a list of articles I had been written and published. This self-introduction brought to the forum the idea that sometimes people just liked writing and they were good at it.

However, I then also invited them to realise the idea of one of the quotes from Coelho's the Alchemist, "When you want

something, all the universe conspires in helping you to achieve it". It simply means if we need to do something or we need to get something, somehow we will find a way. Some teachers might think that they were not good at writing and they may never going to be able to publish any articles in any journals, but if that was what it took to "survive" in the sense of career advancement, they may find a way somehow.

The next activity was to invite the participants to reflect on what they had been doing so far by filling self-observation form. This was intended to promote reflection on day-to-day experiences regarding teaching practices (Subekti, 2019). In this session, teachers shared how they felt overloaded and overwhelmed with so many classes to teach and administrative jobs in between them. A participant even reported that even if she did intend to conduct a CAR in one of her classes, she could not have time to write the results of her class observation because after she finished teaching in that class, she needed to teach the next class without any break. When she finally had a break, she had difficulty to recall what happened in the first class she observed. This finding may resonate several same phenomena in other places in Indonesia where teachers were struggling to conduct any research while teaching (Fahdini et al., 2014; Sumartini et al., 2019).

Going to the main materials of the training, I explained them about research questions in more detailed. It was conveyed that research questions are the most important things in research and they determine the methods of data collection and the research design of the research (Creswell, 2014). For examples, research questions on students' engagement in class can be answered through class observation or research questions on students' views on the use of jigsaw learning can be answered through conducting interviews to students. Figure 3 shows me explaining about research questions.

Figure 3. Lecture on Research Questions

The next material was on the principles of research questions. The participants were told that a good research question should be about one issue only as well as specific and focused (White, 2009). For example, a research question "To what extent does the use of picture cards affect learners' vocabulary mastery?" only focuses on one issue, vocabulary mastery, and this issue is specific enough. If "vocabulary mastery" was changed into "English learning", the research question would cover too broad a scope. The second principle was that a research question should be free from assumption (Creswell, 2014). I shared to the participants that before ones try to ask question about certain problems, they should make sure that those problems exist in the first place. Thus, the first question is usually in the form of Yes/No question, for example, "Does the use of picture cards affect learners' vocabulary mastery?" However, typical Yes/No questions would just require a straight Yes/No response, which may not be desirable in research which necessitates in-depth elaborations. Thus, researchers should "modify" this original Yes/No question to "To what extent + Yes/No question" to enable researchers to expand their results in an elaborative manner instead of answering with a straight "Yes" or "No", hence the modified research question "To what extent does the use of picture cards affect learners' vocabulary mastery?"

Furthermore, the next material was the example of CAR cycles, each of which consists of planning, action, observation/monitoring, and reflection (Mills, 2007). CAR cycles are basically what a teacher does in cyclical way to solve a specific problem in his/her class and the cycles focus on improvement teacher can make for her class' betterment (Dikilitas, 2015). At this point, several participants asked such questions as how many CAR cycles they should employ in the class and what methods they could use in a CAR apart from class observations. I explained that normally a CAR needs at least three cycles to really know to what extent certain innovation works. I, however, also mentioned that this is not a fixed formula but rather a suggested practice. Hence, if the participants could only afford to conduct three cycles of CAR remembering their heavy schedule keeping in mind the hard work put during the research and the relatively sufficient results of the research, getting the article published was arguably more important. Thus, they were suggested that conducting two cycles of CAR might be enough for them. Figure 4 shows several participants having discussions with me in the middle of the lecture session.

Figure 4. Discussions Between Me (Right) and The Several Participants (Left)

Furthermore, the last material in the lecture session was an example of a possible title of a CAR along with the possible corresponding research questions. This example was presented to give an illustration that the title of research should somehow correspond the research questions, again highlighting the importance of research questions as the core of an empirical study (White, 2009).

The next session was workshop in which all the participants practiced making research questions based on the problems in their respective classes. I walked around assisting the participants in formulating research questions and in thinking of possible

methods on how to answer the research questions they posed.

In general, as I observed during the training, there were several factors supporting the participants in their pursuit of their goal of writing and publishing research articles. First, they have the support of MGMP in which fellow English teachers could share challenges related to their teaching contexts and professional development. Second, they had, to a certain degree, an open-minded perspective of learning new things evidenced with the regular professional development training they joined including this training on academic writing.

However, I also observed that there were also several inhibiting factors and these inhibiting factors may overwhelm the supporting ones. During the training, the teacher participants shared that their administrative and teaching workload was too much that they should go to one class to another without a break and once they did not teach, they had to do administrative work, leaving no chance to do reflection necessary for CAR. Secondly, teachers' grits to conduct any research were relatively low with "It's difficult and complicated; I can't do it" attitude already set in mind. It could be seen from their sharing focusing on problems and challenges they faced instead of on ways to overcome them.

From 36 participants, one participant, or 3% of the total participants, sent me the abstract of her research article draft quite a while after the training. Feedback was given to further improve it. Though only one participant out of 36 visibly made progress, this should be appreciated as conducting research and writing the report needed time and process. Hence, the output of the training may not be directly measured in such a short time.

D. CLOSING
Conclusion

There are several important points to sum up in regard with this training. The

Bantul MGMP English teachers were in general struggling to conduct CAR, let alone writing a research article about it. This struggle could be attributed to several factors. Firstly, they had to fulfil many hours of teaching alone aside from administrative jobs. This hindered them to properly plan for and conduct well-documented research in their classes. Secondly, they might not get enough exposure of academic writing prior to the implementation of the government regulation in regard with the requirement to publish scientific research articles for their career advancement. These rather unfavourable conditions, however, may have contributed to the enthusiasm of the English teacher participants to join this training. It could be seen from the attendance, the attentiveness of the teachers during the training, and the fact that many teachers asked questions in relation with their respective teaching contexts. Though only one participant sent the draft of their research for feedback sometime after the training, it should be realised that conducting research and writing the report needed process. Hence, expecting an immediate result might not be reasonable.

Suggestions

With regard to their relatively lack of experience in writing a research report, furthermore, it is highly recommended that these teachers have further training on several detailed aspects of writing a research report. Familiarisation of various websites or search engines, such as Google Scholar, Garuda Ristekdikti, DOAJ, for example, can enable them to find as many relevant academic sources as possible in the internet. They should also know how to actually search for these relevant academic sources using those websites, for examples using various relevant keywords. As these first steps to build a literature review in a research report may not be an easy quest for these teachers, conducting a specific training on this is highly recommended. Next, they also need to know how to organise these academic sources and put them in a sound

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narrative of research articles. In this case, a training on the use of reference and citation manager such as Mendeley will be very relevant and important to be conducted in the future. This is because not only does a reference and citation manager help writers to organise their in-text citations and references, its use has been increasingly becoming a mandatory requirement of articles submitted to many scientific journals (Pahmi et al., 2018). The above mentioned possible trainings can be conducted in the MGMP regular meetings and English language lecturers could be the resource persons in the framework of community service activities. This kind of training can be highly relevant and reciprocal for both sides as through the training English language lecturers who teach pre-service English teachers could help facilitate in-service English teachers to improve their ability in classroom-based research in order to improve their current practices (Mills, 2007).

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