

# **THE INTEGRATION OF PROJECT-BASED TASK AND GROUP WORK IN EFL ACADEMIC WRITING: A MEANS TO PROMOTE LANGUAGE AND CONTENT**

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## **Abstract**

Writing is one of the English skills that have to be learnt by the students of the English department besides Reading, Speaking and Listening. For them it is not easy to write in English since they often feel that it is not an interesting activity especially if they are asked to write argumentative essay. Project-based task is one alternative that can build their motivation in writing. This project will involve the students starting from the beginning till the end of the process of writing. This paper presents the practice of integrating Project-based task and argumentative essay writing. It helps the lecturer and the students to create different and challenging activities in Critical Writing Class.

**Key words:** argumentative writing, Project-based task

## **INTRODUCTION**

Writing plays an important role which speaking cannot do in fulfilling our communicative needs. Halliday (1985) said that writing culture serves these following functions: for action, for social contact, for information and for entertainment. It means that writing is a crucial skill to complete for the students of the students. They learn how to write in order to be able to communicate. In addition, Hedge (2000) specifies the function of writing for the students: when the students write, they are engaged in the composing experience itself. In other words, they are learning to write through writing. Thus, in the process of writing, discussion, collaboration, and feedback are necessary to improve its result. In addition, Hedge (2000) states

Writing is the result of employing strategies to manage the composing process, which is one of gradually developing a text. It involves a number of activities: setting goals, generating ideas, organizing information, selecting appropriate language, making a draft, reading and reviewing it, then revising and editing.

The statement above means that writing is an accumulating of numerous activities that need a long process such as setting goals, generating ideas, organizing information selecting appropriate language, making draft, reading revising, and editing. These are such a long process; students have to do before it becomes a piece of essay.

For some students, writing is a difficult subject because writing is dealing with the fact that the audience is not right in front of there. The students have to write as clear as possible and in the correct way because If the writing is consisting of unclear idea, unclear sentences, incorrect writing organization, the audience cannot interrupt the writing as if they are speaking. Because of those complicated process, as a result, students often lose interest in writing and do not write properly. According to Nunan (1999) that creating a good piece of writing was considered as an extremely difficult skill, even in one's own native language. Thus for English teacher, he/she must create an effective and attractive technique to teach writing.

One important thing the teacher should do first is building students' motivation. It is naturally has to do with students' desire to participate in the learning process. Students who are motivated to engaged in school initiate action when given the opportunity and exert intense effort and concentration in the implementation of learning task; they show generally positive emotions during an ongoing action; including enthusiasm, optimism, curiosity, and interest. Less motivated or disengaged students, on the other hand, are passive, do not try hard, and give up easily in the face of challenges ([www.nwrel.org/request/octoo/motivated.html](http://www.nwrel.org/request/octoo/motivated.html))

One way to create/ increase a motivation is by involving the students during the teaching learning process, to design challenging task that presents with the opportunities for communication and direction. In this case students do not just listen, write and do some assignment. Nunan in Ur (1996) added that when the teacher develop language lesson based on the students needs and interest, they would respond it positively.

Project-based task creates such condition. A classroom project is one way to motivate students to write because it offers the opportunity to match with topics that are relevant to the students' needs. Besides, it represents much more than group work but viewed as a versatile vehicle for fully integrated language and content learning. For

example, in EFL Writing class, the students are supposed to write an argumentative essay, thus they can write about a topic about the teaching method or language learning, which is related to their study. The benefits that can be taken from this is the students will be able to learn something that they write and to learn how to write an argumentative essay correctly and in an interesting way. Thus the stressed activity in this class will not only be criticizing how the students write the essay as most of the teachers do right now but also what to write.

This paper is aimed at introducing the integration of project-based task and group work in EFL Writing, specifically argumentative essay writing in content-based instructional formats. Once this project was implemented in the writer's class, and she found that the students were enthusiastic with the activity of writing. Furthermore, the result that I noticed was very surprising.

## **DISCUSSION**

### **A. The Characteristics of a Good Essay**

An essay is a group of paragraphs about one topic and also has three main parts: the introduction, the body, and the conclusion (Oshima, 2006). There is no single formula for writing good essay. In fact, the very best essay often treats the same subject matter quite differently. There are, however, a number of characteristics that distinguish good essays from poor ones. In general **good essays**, according to Rainey (2003), are:

#### **1. Interesting and thoughtful**

An effective essay is the product of careful thinking and planning. The students do not have to express a "new" idea, but they must give their unique perspective. As they read, discuss, brainstorm, and draft, they will find information and ideas to mention in the essay. they can offer personal experiences, quotations, analyses, and so on that draw the reader in and help explain the main point.

#### **2. Focused**

The focused essay expresses a clear main point in a thesis statement. Occasionally, you will see effective essay that only hint at the main point, or that give the main point in the end of the essay. However, usually writers offer their main point in a thesis statement at the end of the introduction. A focused essay then sticks to the main

point expressed in the thesis. Through revision, you will have to cut out all pieces of information that do not directly support the main point.

Each body paragraph addresses one part of the main point. The topic sentences in each paragraph are crucial tools that help the reader not only to stay focused on the main point but also to see connections between paragraphs.

### **3. Developed**

An effective essay is well developed. You must offer a significant amount of support – quotations with analysis, explanations, specific examples, comparisons, and so on. You may do research, draw from assigned readings, or offer personal experience as part of the support.

### **4. Organized**

The body paragraphs in an effective essay are organized in a logical pattern. There are many different organizational patterns. The students must think about which pattern works best with his ideas and then stick to that pattern.

### **5. Clearly written**

Sentences within the essay must be clearly written. The students need to read their work aloud and carefully proofread to avoid typing, spelling, and grammar problems. They must also look at sentence structure and vary the length and complexity of sentences, so that the writing does not become repetitive or boring.

**A good essay** contains three parts namely, introduction, body and conclusion

## **B. Argumentative Writing**

An argumentative essay is an essay in which the learners agree or disagree with an issue, using reasons to support your opinion (Oshima, 2006). Their goal is to convince the reader that their opinion is right. Argumentation is a popular kind of essay question because it forces students to think on their own: They have to take a stand on an issue, support their stand with solid reasons, and support their reasons with solid evidence. In addition, to convince the readers, the learners need some care and skill: they need to show respect for opposing points of view, they must choose vocabulary carefully, and above all, they must write clearly and logically.

Thus, what is unique about argumentative essay is that the students do not just give reasons to support their point of view. The students must also discuss the other

side's reasons and then rebut them. (*Rebut* means to point out problems with the other side's reasons to prove that they are not good reasons.). We do this because we want readers to know that we have considered all sides of the issue. When we show that we are reasonable and open-minded, readers are more likely to listen to our point of view.

To prepare to write logical argument, begin by defining and limiting the topic. Then explore opposing points of view and their supporting reasons before drafting the thesis statement (Fitzpatrick, 2005)

- **Define the topic.** Some topics require definition. For example, if the topic is *Should school provide moral education?* The students will have to explain what *moral education* means. They may find that some people define moral education as teaching students about values such as *honesty, kindness, and loyalty*, while others define it as teaching students how to make moral decision. As a writer, they have to decide how *they* define a term. Check a dictionary or other sources to see how the term has been defined before, and then draft their own definition. Remember that they can change their definition as you write your paper. Be sure record their sources because, if they use all or part of a published definition in their paper, they must include a citation.
- **Limit the topic.** Some argumentative topics require limiting. For example, if the students' topic is *letter grades* and their thesis says *Teacher should not use letter grades*, reader may wonder whether they mean *all teachers at all levels from kindergarten through college or just certain teachers* should not use them. They may also wonder whether they would allow teachers to use letter grades if students or parents requested them. Students can respond to such questions by adding limiting phrases to their thesis statement. The revised thesis would be: *Elementary school teachers should not assign letter grades to students work unless parents make a special request*, limits the topic to elementary school and states a condition, unless parents make a special request.
- **Analyze the topic.** Before the students decide upon a point of view, they should analyze the issue thoroughly. Most argumentative topics have two points of view, for and against, and can be stated as a yes/no question, such as *Should high school students work during the school year?* they can discuss a topic such as this with their classmates and friends to find out how those who answer yes support their opinion

and how those who answer no support theirs. they can also research the topic on the internet or in the library. Afterward, write down the two opinions, and list the reasons that support each one, as in the following examples.

- a. Opinion: High school students should work during the school year.
  1. They can save for the college.
  2. They can make new friends.
  3. They can learn responsibility.
  4. They may discover a career for themselves.
- b. Opinion: High school students should not work during the school year.
  1. They can get better grades if they don't work.
  2. They can participate in extracurricular activities.

### C. Project-Based Task

It is the task in which the students involves themselves in deciding together what they want (the topics, the data collections) whilst the teacher plays more supporting role. It has some characteristics according to Stoller in Richards and Renandya (2002);

1. The project based task focuses on content learning rather than on specific language targets
2. The project-based task is student centered, though the teacher plays a major role in offering support and guidance throughout the process.
3. Project-based task is cooperative rather than competitive. Students can work on their own, in small groups, or as a class to complete a project, sharing resources, ideas and expertise along the way
4. Project-based task leads to the authentic integration of skills and processing of information from varied sources, mirroring real-life tasks.
5. Project-based task culminates in an end product (e.g., an oral presentation, a poster session, a report, or a stage performance) that can be shared with others, giving the project a real purpose. The values of the project, however, lie not just in the final product but also in the process of working towards the end point. Thus Project-based task has both a process and product orientation, and provides students with opportunities to focus on fluency and accuracy at different project-work stages.

6. Project-based task is potentially motivating, stimulating, empowering and challenging it usually result in building students' confidence, self-esteem, and autonomy as well as improving students' language skills, content learning, and cognitive abilities.

#### D. Some principles of Project-Based Task

Project-based task contains many features that are inherently motivating for the teaching of writing. Arrends (1998) in <http://eca.state.gov/forum/vols/vol43/no4/p22.htm> stated some Project-based task criteria that are very important to create students' motivation:

1. Tasks are organized around socially important problems and questions that are personally for students. In this case, the students should select the topics, which are important in their lives or surrounding.
2. Students should conduct authentic investigation that finds real solution as real problem. When students are given a task that needs a challenge and contribute to solving a problem, they will feel more involved in the composition process.
3. Students should investigate many subjects such as politics, history, education, science, etc. The nature of much writing is multidisciplinary, as a theme can be approached from a variety of perspectives represented by various field of knowledge. While they are using different subjects to analyze a problem, their motivation and interest will increase.
4. Task should require students to create artifacts and exhibits that represent or explain solutions to a problem. A piece of essay that the students should write is about some ways to find solution of a problem, thus it is an artifact in the sense that it is something people can touch, hold, and apply in a useful way. Such kind of writing is naturally motivating.
5. Tasks are characterized by students collaborating with each other in pairs or small groups. Usually writing activity is done individually, in which the students struggle with their own problem in writing. While they do it in groups, it will be stimulating for them, especially when they have a chance to freely express themselves.

6. In Project-based task, the students will exercise all four skills although the final product is the essay. A writing project offers opportunities for the students to engage in reading, speaking, and listening. It involves reading, when the students have to read some printed sources to support the ideas that they want to write. It involves speaking and listening when the students make discussion with the lecturers or their peers.

With these principles of Project-based task, teachers or lecturers can apply a successful writing project.

#### E. Students' Problems in the Writer's Writing Class

Based on the observation during the learning activities in Critical Writing class, mostly, students have some problems as follows:

##### 1. Generating Ideas

Generating ideas for content-based essay writing is the first problem found in critical writing class because they are not supposed only to choose topics related to the core subjects at English department such as literature, linguistics or teaching but they should choose various topics outside the core subjects the students learn in their department. This is done in order the students learn the content and the language.

Some students felt that this was challenging since they have to discuss something they do not learn before but for some other students, it is also a difficult task since they had no schemata at all about anything outside the teaching or language issues. To help them, the writer provided some ideas that they can copy and suggested them to read some books, journals or to make an observation related to the problem they would discuss.

##### 2. Making a thesis Statement

The sentence that expresses the main idea of an essay is called *the thesis statement* (Broadman and Jia F, 2002). A thesis statement, by expressing the main idea, prepares the reader for what is to follow. In this way, it performs the same function as the topic sentence but covers an entire essay rather than a single paragraph. Thus, a Thesis Statement is the main idea of the whole essay, and it frequently shows (directly or indirectly) the number and the content of the body paragraphs of the essay. It tells the reader what the essay will be about, and what



point you will be making. Clear thesis statements are essentials for good essay writing in English. Although it is certainly possible to write a good essay without a thesis statement (many narrative essays, for example, contain only an implied thesis statement), the lack of a thesis statement may well be a symptom of an essay beset by a lack of focus.

The problem that emerged in the writer's class was how enable students to express their personal voice in an argumentative essay writing. Majority, the students wrote the thesis in a weaker tone, not very strong such as *there are several ways to cope with the students' anxiety in learning English, there are many interesting things about.....* Such thesis statements are representing an explanatory rather than argumentative essay because such thesis statements are describing not arguing on a case.

### 3. Structuring the Essay

Writing an argumentative essay is always a problem for students because they have to have a topic and be a critical observer about it, so that they can write it. When the writer checked the students' works, she found that most of students in her class forgot to write the thesis statement, start the body paragraphs without topic sentences and the conclusion was lack of pattern and examples or evidences. Though she had reminded them many times about this, most of them still neglected.

### 4. Writing Conference

One of important activities in the writing process is writing conference; Reid (1995) defines writing conference as a face to face conversation between the teacher and the student, usually outside the boundaries of the classroom. The importance of writing conference lies in its nature, which is an event where both parties sit together, and through a dialogue, they discuss the students' individual problems in essay writing. It is should become a place to encourage the students to be responsible for their writing. However, such a plan did not always work well in my writing class

A problem that often happens in writing conference is that it does not become a place where the teacher and the student can discuss and exchange point of view. Unfortunately, it happened in my class that the students came to the conference mostly to ask my permissions upon what they would be doing with the topic. When

we met in a writing conference, the most frequent type of questions the students asked were a kind of questions that only needed to be answered “yes or no”. That is not a meaning or idea of negotiation.

#### F. The Implementation of Project-Based Task in Writing argumentative essay

Considering the problems above, the writer feels that she should find a teaching technique to help the students to solve their problems. Since most of her students always complain about their difficulties and their decreasing motivation to write, she offers an interesting technique to be applied in the classroom. In this case the students should do a research project and then reported in an argumentative essay.

The project proposed here is developed for an argumentative essay writing class. The objective of this project is to enhance students’ motivation through project-based learning to compose an argumentative essay. The activities done by the students are done in the classroom and outside the classroom and it is done in groups and individual.

In this project, the students develop an argumentative essay in several steps. The first steps is 1) describing the problem, in this step the problems of generating ideas can be solved with some discussion within the member of each groups. 2) the second step drafting and discussing the data the students get from the field, in this step, students also discuss about the thesis statement and the argumentative essay organization. 3) the last steps is develop the writing draft into a complete argumentative essay. The writing conference is done in this step. It is an important step because the students not only have show their essay but also to present it to the class in order to get inputs from other students and lecturer.

#### G. Outcome of the Writing Project

The aim of this project was to motivate the students to write using Project-based task, which included establishing an attractive topic and working collaboratively. The main focus of the writing task was to offer the students the opportunity to write about something authentic and relevant to their lives. In the course of doing and completing the Project-based task, the students seemed to be able to struggle with the up to date issue. During the process of completing the essay, they collected some information from some printed materials, developed and administered interview and questionnaires to some members of the college community such as lecturers, students, and the head of the

department. Thus, the students could collect some sufficient information to support the topic they were writing. .

Mostly the students felt that what they did was a new one since the writing class is usually done in a conventional way, namely the lecturers explain and then asks the students write an essay. Emotionally, they did not involve in the activity because they just listen and write as the lecturer's instruction. That is why, during and after the project, the response was very positive.

The difficulties such as being difficult to construct an outline because of the lack of idea could be eliminated while they are working in group and they have possessed the information from the interview, questionnaire and the printed sources that they read in the previous meeting. In the writer's class, the students' problems could also be eliminated while they discussed part of their essay either with their friends in group or with their friends from other groups since there were some revisions from their peers. Once in a while the students asked to me as the lecturer who in charge of this task although at first she plans to let the students to write the argumentative essay with their own capability.

Students' succeeded in writing project because they were motivated by the new and relevant topic and the opportunities for cooperation with their friends. The students' ability was reflected in their work, that in terms of essay organization, language performance and content, they have made an improvement.

In summary, the advantages that can be taken from these activities are 1) students can be well motivated because they are involved in the activity starting from the choice of topics until finding the data for the problem they are writing. It is different from the conventional way of teaching in which they should do the activity in the classroom, sitting and writing individually and if they finish, they should wait for the teacher's correction. With this Project-based task, students feel relax since the activities are done in and outside classroom, they have peer correction that does not make them under pressure. At the beginning of the activity, students can communicate their writing and problem with their friends in group, 2) students do not only learn how to write an argumentative essay but also what to write. Since they are pushed to write not only about something, they know but also something new to them. This leads to their motivation to write about they do not know such as technology, or health. Therefore, with the language they learn,

students can gain the knowledge and the English language, 3) for the teacher or lecturer himself, this project – based task reduces his work since he always controls his students' process of writing from the very beginning. Thus, the mistakes students make during the writing process can be avoided and there will be no more revision while the final draft is submitted. Therefore, all the students and lecturer are satisfied.

## CONCLUSION

Integrating Project-based task and group work in the EFL academic writing lets the lecturer integrate some elements that are to stimulate the students to express their idea on a piece of paper. This Project-based task can be quite effective to minimize the students' difficulties in writing an essay that from the very beginning activities has offered some problems such as how to generate ideas, write thesis statements, do writing conference. With Project-based task, students, not only learn English but also the subject they are writing.

Some students are happy because they can write something based on the information that they try very hard to find from the field not because of their imagination. Therefore, the writer believes that some lecturers or teachers applying Project-based task in the classroom especially writing class will find something positive and certainly able to increase their motivation. Of course, the teaching and learning essay writing will be a lot more successful.

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## **Appendix**

### **Teaching and Learning Activities in Critical writing**

#### **Describing the problem**

This activity is done in group of three, first of all the students are introduced with the project because they did not hear about it before. In this case, they have to know that the activities will be done inside and outside that classroom. The supporting ideas will be taken from the bulletins, magazine, newspaper, outline, or interview. It is very important to do that because the activity this time is not just writing an essay but to find the truth problem and solution. Some information they get might be useful to support their writing.

The teacher needs to show to the students the example of argumentative essay. Some principles, the thesis statement that it has since this kind of writing is not as simple as the other essay modes such as narrative, descriptive etc. There should be much consideration while the students are making the thesis statement. Thus in my department in FBS-UWKS, argumentative essay is given to the students who have passed the paragraph and Essay writing subject.

After that, the teacher and students discuss the topics. In content-based argumentative essay, what the students must consider well is the selection of the topic. It is suggested that the topic is not too difficult, complicated but interesting. The most important thing is the topic should be familiar to the students, or the ones that is not but quite interesting to be acknowledged. And since the purpose of the class is to introduce the content through the language the students learn, the topic chosen should be discussed deeply and from various subject. Thus the students not only learn the language but also know the real problem they write. Meanwhile if the topic is too complicated, it will lead to the failure to achieve the goals in writing argumentative essay.

The discussion is choosing a single topic for the argumentative essay. Each groups has to choose one topic provided by the teacher or the ones proposed by the students. In this step, the teacher also plans the language instruction activities to prepare students for information gathering task as soon as the topic chosen. If for example, students are going to collect information or allow students to practice note taking or audio taping. If, on the other hand, students going to use a library to gather materials, the

teacher might review some steps for finding resources and practice skimming and note taking with sample text.

Having practiced the language skills and strategies needed to gather information, students then are ready to collect information, and organized it.

### **Discussing problems and information found in the field**

In the second meeting, the students start working to make an outline. This is done in a group. They make an outline based on the information that they collect. At that time, my students could make it well based on the information they got from the library, the result of interview with some informants.

From the data they collected from the field, the outline is then constructed. If the outline is done, they can consult it to the teacher. Usually there are some problems with the thesis that they write, so this time is used to deal with this problem. Group work at this stage also includes the development of interview and questionnaire instruments, which are prepared by using questions students have discussed and researched while thinking about the problems that they want to write.

The next session that the teacher and students do is discussing about the data that the students get from the field. This is still done in groups. Each groups should brainstorm about the suggestion to increase the learning activity quality. Building their research, they think critically about the ways, which can be used to increase the quality teaching activity in class. The data that the students get in each groups are collected and then each students exchange the data they they collect to do peer editing and revision. At this points, they also review their questionnaire or interview instrument they are developing. Then they compare their notes, and arrange them in order of importance with the member of the groups.

Each group joints another groups. They are discussing compare their notes. Usually in these steps, some students find the similarity or differences of the interview results that they collect from some sources. The comparison of some information from the written sources are also done in this steps.

### **Writing draft individually**

In the first and the second meeting, all the activities are done in groups. In this step, all the work should be done individually. The students start to write an

argumentative individually. Based on the research I did, in this step, the students started writing the introductory paragraph, which usually gives a problem for the students, either they start to write with the general performance, anecdote, or historical introduction. While they cannot collaborate with their groups, the students may consult their problems with the lecturer.

Since the outline has been discussed before, the students have minimized their problems, therefore they could finish two paragraphs of argumentative essay. The first part is the introductory paragraph and the second is the body paragraph. While they are finished with the paragraphs, each student should show them in the slide so that their friends can make revisions with the paragraphs she/he makes. The revisions are done immediately after the teacher and the peers criticize her/his work. It can be about the organization and the content of the essay.

#### **Checking the final draft.**

In the third meeting, the class continues writing their essay until the conclusion. Before the teacher distributes the students' work, she/he reminds the students that they still can make revisions of the previous paragraphs they finished at the previous meetings. The peers correction is also done here after each students makes presentation about their work and all the revisions is done at this meeting before the work is submitted to the teacher.