



Proceedings of the 1<sup>st</sup> English Education International Conference (EEIC) in conjunction with the 2<sup>nd</sup> Reciprocal Graduate Research Symposium (RGRS) of the Consortium of Asia-Pacific Education Universities (CAPEU) between Sultan Idris Education University and Syiah Kuala University

November 12-13, 2016, Banda Aceh, Indonesia



## IMPROVING STUDENTS' WRITING SKILL THROUGH MIND MAPPING

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### Abstract

*This study is aimed at examining if the use of mind mapping technique can improve students' writing ability at Secretary Class of LP3I College, Banda Aceh. Writing skill employed in this study is focused on how students are able to generate and organize idea and write well two types of business letters (making inquiry and replying to inquiry letter). Those two types are selected as they are part of the core business letters studied on the subject of Business Correspondence. A classroom action research has been carried out using students' writing tests. Analytical scoring rubric and descriptive qualitative procedures were used for the analysis. The findings of the study proved that the application of mind mapping technique in writing business letters was effective as the students' results of writing from cycle one had improved in cycle two and the students' understanding of the writing concept got improved as well. The results from students' writing tests showed that 78% of students (above the determined criteria of success) improved their writing ability. It obviously means that the application of mind mapping technique has given a significant impact on the improvement of students' writing ability to write business letters.*

**Keywords:** *Mind mapping, writing skill, correspondence, business letters.*

### INTRODUCTION

#### Research Background

Writing for most students is still considered as the most complicated language skill to be learned compared to the other language skills. Writing in English is especially not an easy activity to be performed by the students. It takes study and process to develop this skill. Harmer (2007, p. 79) clearly states that the ability to write effectively is not innate, but it must be learned and practiced. In addition to this, Oshima and Hogue (1999, p. 3) mention that many students have the mistaken idea that being able to write well is not a talent that one either has or does not have. This idea is not necessarily true. However, they can learn to write effectively if they are willing to learn some strategies and practice them. It means that the ability to write is acquired through a learning process as a result of certain characteristics that a written product should have.

Related to the statement above, the researcher who had been teaching Business Correspondence and English for Writing and Presenting subjects at LP3I College Banda Aceh for almost two years found that the students still had difficulty writing in English, especially in getting started and expressing their thoughts and ideas into a piece of writing. They tended to spend much time only to think about what should be written for the introduction sentence and longer time to express and organize their ideas into a good order of writing.

The researcher was used to applying product approaches to the teaching of writing, especially in the teaching of writing business letters, which focused on the product or final outcome, such as; patterns of organization, spelling, punctuation, grammatical structure, and the production of neat. Based on the researcher's record of the last two years, the students' achievement of English proficiency, especially in the area of writing skill was still below standard (only 35 percent of them who got score more than 75 or most of them got below 75).

This study was conducted in the Secretary class since the writer taught in this class. Furthermore, she also considered that these students should be able to write in English well because their real work is more related to many kinds of writing activities, such as taking minute, making reports, writing business letters (correspondence in English) and so on. The students of Secretary Major need those competences as later they probably will work as a secretary or an admin officer.

Considering to the experiences and reasons above, in this study, the researcher was interested in applying the mind mapping technique in teaching writing to help the students to understand what they actually did when they wrote. Besides, she also wanted to bring the students into a deep understanding that writing in English could be easier to be mastered if they knew and followed the steps of writing as suggested in this technique. Besides, the researcher as the lecturer has a great intention to improve the quality of her own teaching performance and consequently the students' ability can be improved as well. Therefore, the researcher was interested to conduct a classroom action research on the application of the mind mapping technique in teaching writing business letters.

### **Research Problems**

Based on the background stated above, the problems of this study can be formulated as follows: "To what extent does mind mapping improve the writing skill of Secretary students of LP3I College Banda Aceh?"

Besides, the objective of this research is to find out the improvement of students' writing skill (especially in writing business letters as this research is focusing on the ability to write business letters) of Secretary students of LP3I College Banda Aceh through mind mapping.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Teaching Writing**

For most students, the difficulties of writing are in generating and organizing ideas. Therefore it is very important for a teacher to find an appropriate strategy to overcome these problems. Stanley (2007, p. 1) offers five steps in teaching writing: 1) pre-writing, 2) writing, 3) revising, 4) editing, and 5) publishing. Writing is a step by step process that everyone needs to learn and by following each step above, a writer can produce a successful writing. Each of these steps is important to have in a successful writing. When a writer follows these steps, he/she will achieve the goal of an interesting and successful writing.

### **Writing Business Letters**

Different from usual letters, business letters and other formal letters have some certain rules which a writer should follow if he/she wants to write the business letters. According to Agoestyowati (2008, p. 1), the business letter is the principle means used by a business firm to keep in touch with its customers. She then added that good business letters should follow some rules such as study the reader's interest, adopt the right tone, write naturally and sincerely, write clearly and to the point, be courteous and considerate, avoid wordiness, avoid commercial jargon, write effectively (use simple language, be consistent, be precise, use concrete words), avoid monotony, plan your letter, pay attention to the first and last impression, and check your letter.

Therefore, when a writer is writing a business letter, he/she gets right to the point since people expect to be told immediately. Also, if the writer has a lot of information, he/she breaks it into short paragraphs and underlines essential information. The writer should also consider that the more specific his/her subject is, the easier it is to write his/her letter. Then if the writer is unsure of his/her readers, he/she should assume they are well educated people.

## Mind Mapping

One of the teachers' techniques in teaching writing is mind map. It is a diagram used to represent words, ideas, tasks, or other items linked to and arranged around a central key word or idea. This technique was popularized by author and consultant, Tony Buzan. According to him, mind map is used to generate, visualize, structure, and classify ideas, and as an aid to studying and organizing information, solving problems, making decisions, and writing. This technique can also help students to associate ideas, think creatively, and make connections that might not otherwise make (Buzan, 2006). The mind map technique can be used to explore almost any topics in writing and also used in every kind of writing including the writing of a formal outline and business letters. As Young (2009, p. 10) stated that mind map is an alternative strategy to write formal outline, it forms of brainstorming that allows people to get ideas down in a quick and spontaneous way.

Mind mapping is an interesting model to be used as tool for students especially for those who had difficulty in understanding the concept of writing business letters. Moreover, it is also beneficial for those who got accustomed to imitating the product of the business letters from the internet or books without actually understanding how to write effective business letters.

## METHODOLOGY

### Research Method

The method of research conducted to answer the research questions is Classroom Action Research (CAR). This method was chosen since it has similar characteristics with the problems and the objectives of this research. These characteristics match what the researcher wanted to do in this research that is to apply the mind mapping technique in order to improve the ability of the students' writing (especially in writing business letters) and to determine how effective the approach is.

Action research is a form of investigation that enables teachers to examine their own practices (Tomlinson, 1995). It means that action research is an applied research in which the researcher is also the practitioner and attempt to use research as a methodology for identifying what they do and make activities in doing it better.

In doing this research, the researcher collaborated with another English lecturer as the observer of the class activities. The observer had responsibilities to observe the action and to discuss the result of the observation together with the researcher to get the information about the effect of the action on the students' writing skill.

The researcher, in conducting this study, followed the kind of cycles modeled by Elliot (1991) which consists of several phases; planning, acting, observing, and reflecting (in Parsons & Brown, 2002). Elliot (1991) as cited in Parsons and Brown (2002, p. 158) called this action research as an action research spiral in which the researcher: 1) Selects the general and decide on his or her first action, 2) Takes the action as well as monitors it, 3) Examines the information collected, 4) Evaluates both the process and outcomes, 5) Plans the next action, 6) Takes the action, and 6) Returns to step 1. This cyclical process of action research is illustrated in the following flowchart.

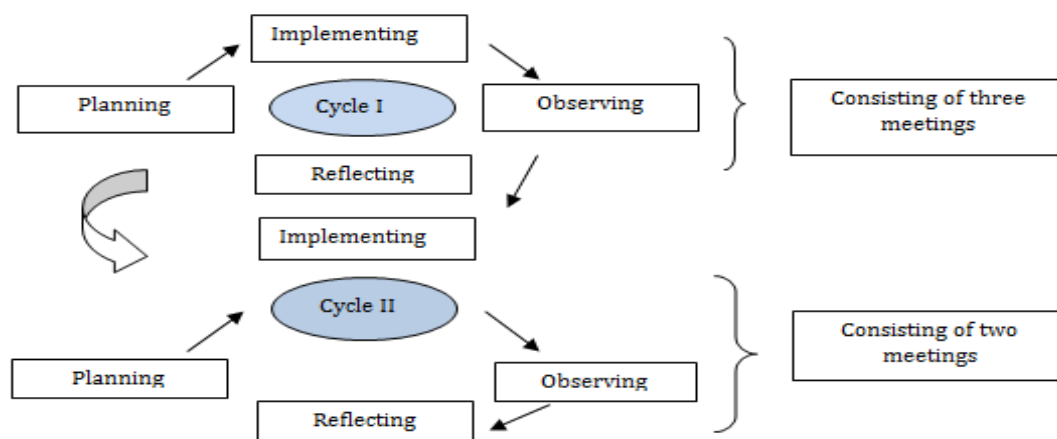
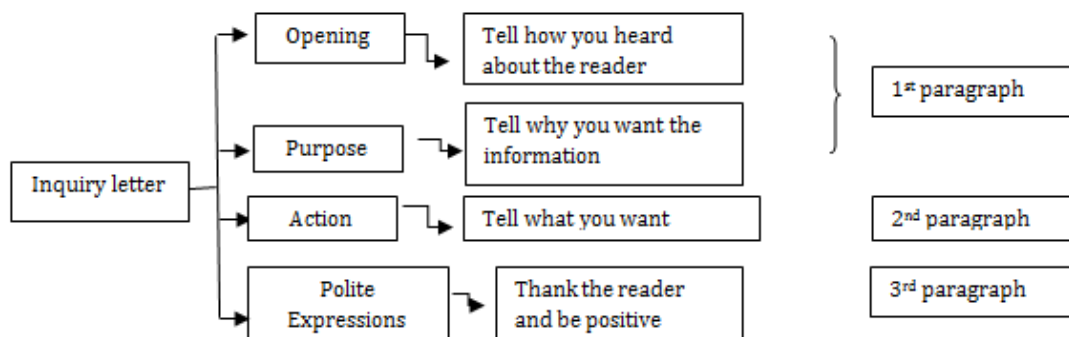


Figure 1. This cyclical process of action research proposed by Elliot (1991, as cited in Parsons & Brown (2002).

Furthermore, before implementing the technique itself, the researcher initially made sure that the students had understood the structures and the forms of business letters. Having ensured the students' understanding, she continued with pre-writing activities. The researcher used the following spider diagram to help students generate ideas of what to write on their letter.



**Figure 2.** The spider diagram example of mind mapping technique in teaching how to write inquiry letter.

From that spider diagram, the researcher asked them to organize the ideas into the paragraphs of an inquiry letter. As Alamsyah (2009) explained that mind maps work well as their visual design enables students to see the relationship between ideas and encourages them to group certain ideas together as they proceed. She then put the students in pairs to make it easier for them to collaborate with each other before they finally wrote their own letter independently.

### Subject of the Research

This research was conducted at LP3I College Banda Aceh located at Sulthan Hotel Street No. 36-38 Peunayong, Banda Aceh. This college has five majors; Informatics Computer, Computerized Accounting, Financial Syariah Banking, Secretary, and Office Management. In this research, the researcher chose Secretary students in the 2014/ 2015 academic year as the subject of her research since she taught there. The researcher chose this major because during her several years teaching there, she found that there were some difficulties faced by the students of Secretary in English writing, especially in composing English business letters. In fact, those students are indeed expected to be able to perform many kinds of writing activities, such as; writing business letter (correspondence in English), taking minutes in English, writing reports in English, etc. Moreover, English correspondence is one of the core competencies that should be mastered by every Secretary student. That is why the researcher is interested in implementing mind mapping in teaching the students writing business letters.

### Research Instrument

Writing test was used as the instrument of this research and the samples of the tests were taken from the students' book entitled "How to Write Effective Business Letters" composed by Redjeki Agoestyowaty (2008).

### Procedure of Data Collecting

The researcher tested the ability of students' writing by having them write an inquiry letter (1<sup>st</sup> cycle test) and reply of inquiry letter (2<sup>nd</sup> cycle).

### Techniques of Data Analysis

To evaluate students' writing performance, the researcher employed portfolio assessment as suggested by Heaton (1988) with some modifications in it. The data obtained from the students' writing test were scored using analytical scoring rubric and reported in words.

## RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

This research had been conducted for two cycles and each cycle consisted of the planning of the action, the implementation of the planning, reflection, and analysis. The first cycle had been conducted for three meetings including one day for pretest or preliminary study while the second cycle was conducted for two meetings only.

Having completed the action for each cycle, the researcher and the collaborative teacher did reflection to know whether the action was successful or not. The reflection was done by analyzing the implementation of the procedure of the mind mapping technique in teaching writing business letters based on the information obtained from the observation and the students' final product of writing as the result of the action in order to know if their writing ability was improved or not.

The researcher, helped by her collaborator prepared the observation guides that contained the aspects of what the students and researcher should achieve in each stage. By using these guides, the collaborator lecturer could observe the whole process of teaching and learning. Besides, she also noted the weaknesses and the strengths found during the class as additional information.

To measure the achievement level of the students for each cycle, the criteria of the success indicator was set based on the institute passing standard (LP3I National Standard) where students were considered successful if they had already achieved the passing score of 75. Referring to the criteria of success, the students did not meet the criteria yet in the first cycle. Therefore, the researcher considered to continue the implementation of this research to the second cycle by revising and improving several parts which were unsuccessful yet. However, generally most of the students had understood the writing concept implemented in this technique even the criteria of success did not meet yet. Increasing point from 35% in the preliminary to 50% in the first cycle proved that this technique was effective in improving students' writing process.

Finally by seeing the achievement of the students in the second cycle that had achieved the criteria of success where 78% students were in the level of good to excellent, the researcher decided to end the treatment with the conclusion that applying the mind mapping technique in teaching writing business letters had a significant influence toward the students' ability. The following graph shows the improvement of the students' writing score from each cycle.

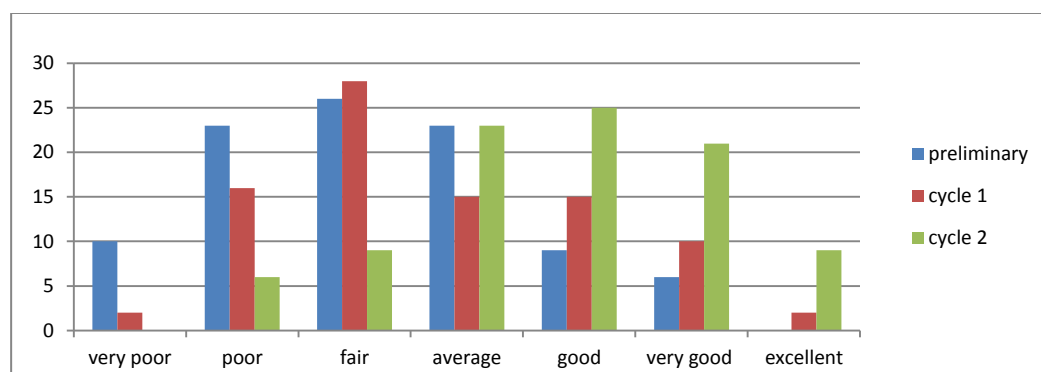


Figure 3. Students' writing results in each cycle.

The graphic above shows that there is a fairly significant influence of applying this technique toward the students' improvement from the preliminary stage to the next cycles. The graphic also shows that in the second cycle no more students who get very poor scores. On the other hand, the level good to excellent scores of the students show increasing point which mean that this technique has given a significant impact to improve students' writing ability in writing business letters.

## CONCLUSION

Based on the findings and the discussions presented above, the researcher concluded that the implementation of mind mapping technique could give significant influence toward students' ability in writing business letters as the students' results of writing showed there were some increasing points in each cycle. Results of the study found that 78% of students (above determined criteria of success) improved their ability of writing which indicated that this technique could be one of the

alternative solutions either for the teacher who taught Business Correspondence subject or for the students who found it difficult to write effective business letters without always copying the final products from the books or internet. Moreover, the strategy used in mind mapping also made the students understand the concept of writing and this of course could help them to be able to write every kind of business letter in their job later either as a real secretary or staff.

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