IMPROVING STUDENTS' ABILITY IN WRITING DESCRIPTIVE TEXTS THROUGH A PICTURE SERIES-AIDED LEARNING STRATEGY

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ABSTRACT

This classroom action research was designed to improve the students' ability in writing a descriptive text through the use of a picture series-aided learning strategy. A class of tenth grade students of a public senior high school in East Java, Indonesia were used as the subjects of the study. The required data were collected through the use of a questionnaire, an observation checklist, and a scoring rubric. The data from the questionnaire indicated that the majority of the students had a positive attitude toward the use of the picture-series to learn descriptive text writing. Moreover, it was found from the observation data that the students participated actively in the learning process. Finally, the study also proved that the strategy improved the students' writing with their average score increased from 56.86 (0-100 scale) prior to the teaching-learning process to 77.87 at the end of the treatment.

Introduction

Among the four language skills taught in schools, writing is the most difficult skill to learn. It needs specialized skills that include the ability to express the writer's opinions or thoughts clearly and efficiently. These abilities can be achieved only if a learner masters some techniques of writing such as how to obtain ideas about what s/he will write on, how to express them in a sequence of sentences, how to organize them chronologically and coherently, and how to review and then to revise the composition until the writing is well-built (Ratnasari, 2004). The skill is even more complex due to its "distancing" characteristic (Samuel, 1989, p. 1). That is, the writer is required to be able to balance between what can be assumed to be the audience's private background knowledge of the communicative intent of the text and the audience's ability to make inferences, which depends on both knowledge of language and knowledge of the real world. The complicated process that a learner should go through must be learned.

The complexity increases in foreign language writing tasks as EFL students must write in English. Silva (1993) cited in Brown (2007) has found that the L2 writers do less planning, are less fluent (use fewer words), less accurate (make more errors),

and less effective in stating goals than L1 writers. They differ also in the use of appropriate grammatical and rhetorical conventions and lexical variety. Their lack of exposure to the language is obviously the main reason of these problems.

Considering the complexities and hindrances the students encounter, learning writing is the most avoided subject among other skill subjects in English. In fact, learning writing has been proven to give advantages to the students in the terms of enhancing their language learning strategies which has currently become a great concern of many experts in the movement of combining reading-writing instructions. The experts propose that by interconnecting reading and writing, students will develop a great deal in their literacy skills. Some researches, as reported by the Major English Language Arts Professional Organization (Yale, 2010), have found that when students read extensively, they become better writers. At the same time, as Yale (2010) says, practice in writing helps students build their reading skills, in the sense that practice in the process of writing their own texts helps them analyze the pieces that they read. As a result, they can apply their knowledge about the ways to use particular language (word choice, combining words into logical and grammatical sentence structures, appropriate registers, etc.) to better understand a professional author's construction of texts. It will also help students strengthen their vocabulary and language use which can also be applied in speaking. Foong (1999) claims that learning to write is important and useful for language and rhetorical practice for communication, and as a discovery as well as cognitive process.

It is the teachers' duty to help their students cope with obstacles in the learning process. This study is one of the efforts the researcher made to solve the problem of learning writing discovered in her teaching experience. From her everyday observation of her students, it was found that the major problem the students encountered, other than the language barrier, was idea generation. She found that it was difficult for the students to accomplish their writing tasks. Most of them would rather copy from other sources than write themselves or only have a few words to write whenever they are asked to write a composition. In other words, they lack ideas. These difficulties lead them to lose motivation in writing. Evidence from a preliminary study showed that the major aspects of the students' weakness in their writing were lack of ideas and poor ability to organize them.

It is obvious that the students need something concrete to elicit ideas such as going to the places they will describe, or presenting realia, or displaying photos or pictures. In other words, the students need a context. According to Walter (2004) providing visuals or realia helps contextualize instruction in the classroom. Context greatly enhances understanding and student engagement which in turn will help them develop their ideas to enrich their writing.

The Role of Pictures as Instructional Media

In general, according to Latuheru (1988) the use of instructional media can give rise to certain advantages in the teaching-learning process: (1) attracting and increasing students' attention; (2) helping to cope with the differences of the students' experiences due to differences in their social and economic backgrounds; (3) providing learning experiences that may be difficult to get in any other way; (4) helping arrange the experience the students acquire systematically to promote their cognitive development; (5) helping develop students' ability to do self-learning based on their experience and facts they learn; (6) decreasing verbalism (using verbal language whether oral or written) in the learning process.

According to Ansley (2007), educational experiences that involve the learner physically and give concrete examples are retained longer than abstract experiences such as listening to a lecture. Instructional media help add elements of reality, for instance, including pictures or highly involved computer simulations in a lecture. She further states that media can be used to support one or more of the following instructional activities. First is to gain attention. A picture on the screen, a question on the board, or music playing when students enter the room all serve to get the students' attention. Second is to recall prerequisites. Media can be used to help students recall what they learned in the last class so that new material can be attached to it and built upon. Third is to present objectives to the learners. It can be used to hand out or project the day's learning objectives. Fourth is to present new content. Not only can media help make new content more memorable, media can also help deliver new content (a text, movie, or video). Fifth is to support learning through examples and visual elaboration. One of the biggest advantages of media is to bring the world into the classroom when it is not possible to take the student into the world. Sixth is to elicit student response. The use of media can help present information to students and pose questions to them, getting them involved in answering the questions. Seventh is to provide feedback. Media can be used to provide feedback relating to a test or class exercise. Next is to enhance retention and transfer. Pictures enhance retention. Instructional media help students visualize a lesson and transfer abstract concepts into concrete, easier to remember objects. The last advantage is to assess performance. Media is an excellent way to pose assessment questions for the class to answer, or students can submit mediated presentations as classroom projects.

Meanwhile, Brown, Lewis, and Halcleroad (1983) state that the functions of media are: (1) to save time; (2) to stimulate interest; (3) to encourage students' participation; (4) to provide a review; (5) to help students to learn communicate ideas visually; (6) to provide a medium for individual or group reports; and (7) to make a classroom dynamic, relevant, and attractive.

The importance of using pictures as learning media can be seen from the enthusiasm of people for pictures. They stimulate students' imagination. Munadi (2008) says that pictures make it easy for people to catch ideas or information conveyed in them clearly, more than if merely expressed verbally. When the students observe pictures, they are able to speak more, interact with the pictures and their friends, make good relationships among paradoxes and build new ideas. In line with this, Harmer (2004) adds that pictures are often used to present situations to help students work with grammar and vocabulary. But their potential to bring students to different worlds also means that they can be used to encourage students to fly in their creative imagination.

Evidence is given by Youra (2009, p.1) who developed a writing and photography project. He views photography as an encouraging aid for students to explore new possibilities in their writing. He says:

> Students' comments and actions reflected increased insight as they began to see photography as rhetoric, as language, and to see the analogies between photographic and verbal expression. That understanding expanded their concept of literacy and encouraged them to explore new possibilities in their writing.

Furthermore, Kellner (2009) urges teachers to use photographs in teaching writing rather than other types of pictures since, according to him, using photographs will help students overcome their reluctance to write. Photographs are powerful teaching aids that can inspire students at all levels to create both expository and creative compositions.

Based on the review of the existing literature on the advantages of using pictures in the teaching of writing, the present study was carried out to investigate how a picture series-aided learning strategy improves the writing ability of senior high school students in Indonesia.

Research Method

Design
This study is a Classroom Action Research with four stages, namely, planning, implementing, observing, and reflecting. In planning, the researcher designed the instructional media intended, i.e. the picture series, which consisted of some photographs arranged according to the spatial order of the original objects. In this study the researcher focused on a description of places; therefore, the photographs

taken were those which portrayed some parts of an interesting place. The photos were then printed on a banner to be displayed in front of the class (on the wall) and on papers to be distributed to the groups of students. The subject of the photos was Lamongan Town Square. Then, the steps on how to use them were designed into a lesson plan.

In the implementation stage, the picture series aided learning strategy was applied in which the writing process that covers prewriting, organizing, drafting, revising, editing, and writing the final draft was done in three meetings of 90 minutes each. The first meeting was devoted to prewriting and organizing steps, the second meeting to drafting and revising, and the last meeting to editing.

The picture series-aided learning strategy was applied primarily in the prewriting stage in the first meeting. The picture series which in this study used photographs was implemented with some consideration of its attractive nature to evoke students' imagination.

In the organization stage the teacher asked the students to select their ideas which they thought appropriate to go into their composition based on the topic of the description. In the second meeting the students were asked to develop their outlines into a rough draft. The teacher reminded them not to pay too much attention to grammar to keep them writing and expressing ideas fluently. Then, after they finished making their draft, the teacher guided them to revise their rough draft. The last stage was editing and this was carried out in the third meeting. The editing included the language aspects of the writing and was mainly in spelling, punctuation, vocabulary, and grammar. When the students had finished their editing, they had to submit their work to have the teacher's feedback.

Subjects of the Study
This Classroom Action Research project was conducted in a public senior high school in East Java, Indonesia. The subjects of this study were students of Class X.2 who were in the second semester of the academic year 2010. The class consisted of 28 students, 13 males and 15 females with an average age of sixteen years old.

Procedure of Data Collection and Analysis
The data were collected by means of three research instruments: First was a questionnaire which consisted of six questions assessing the students' opinions or perception about the media as well as their attitude toward the teaching-learning process. Second was an observation checklist which assessed the students' learning

behaviour (see Appendix 1). This checklist was filled in by a collaborator who observed the students' activities during the learning process. Third was a scoring rubric which was adapted from Harris' scoring rubric (1969) and Brown's analytic scoring scheme (2004). The students' writings were rated in terms of their content, organization, and language by two scorers. An analysis of the inter-scorer reliability of the data resulted in indices of .93, .78, and .90 for content, organization, and language respectively.

Results and Discussion

The data obtained from the questionnaire and the observation checklist showed that the picture series-aided learning strategy was able to improve the students' attitude toward the learning process as well as their learning behaviour in doing the writing task.

The questionnaire data indicated that the majority of the students (94%) were interested in the pictures and 82% of them thought that the learning activity using the picture-series was joyful. Almost all of them (90%) found it fun to use the picture-series as an aid to writing; and the majority (85%) of them agreed that the media could help them focus their description. All of them (100%) said that the pictures were helpful in generating ideas. Therefore, the majority of them (82%) would like to have picture aids to do writing assignments. All in all, the study proved that the picture series-aided learning strategy was able to enhance the students' interest and preference to do writing activities. The full data of the questionnaire can be seen in Table 1.

The use of the picture series also promoted the students' positive behaviour toward the learning process. This is supported by the observation checklist data showing that the students' degree of seriousness was considered high according to the criteria stated in the description of the instrument. It was found that almost all the students paid attention to the teacher's explanation and instruction. Most of them (approximately more than half the class) were actively involved in the learning process, making comments or asking questions about the instruction as well as about the picture to either the teacher or their classmates. Almost all of them observed the pictures closely.

Table 1: The Students' Attitude toward Learning Process

Questions	Options			
	Very Good	**Good**	**Very Bad**	**Bad**
How joyful was our learning activity today?	8 (29%)	17 (59%)	3 (12%)	0 (0%)
How interesting is the picture-series?	5 (18%)	21 (76%)	2 (6%)	0 (0%)
How much do you think the picture series helps you generate ideas?	10 (35%)	18 (65%)	-	-
How much do you think the picture series helps you focus your description?	10 (35%)	14 (50%)	3 (12%)	1 (3%)
How fun do you think it is in using the picture-series to write?	10 (35%)	18 (65%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
How much would you prefer to use pictures in doing the next writing assignment?	23 (82%)	5 (18%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)

The study also found that the students were enthusiastic to do the writing task except that they took some time in forming small groups, i.e., about five minutes. This was considered moderate in terms of degree of enthusiasm. Generally their degree of enthusiasm was considered high. It was noted that almost all the students actively examined the pictures to elicit ideas, trying to understand the instruction by using various learning aids (dictionary, text book, etc.) or asking the teachers or their friends whenever they did not understand. More than half the class seemed active in taking notes on some important information they got from the teacher's explanation or some other important things pertaining to their task. Almost all the students used various aids (dictionaries, text books, work-sheet, etc.) to accomplish their task. There were many students who actively had discussions with the teacher and their friends.

Regarding the students' participation, it can be said that the students were active in doing their writing task. The observation data show that more than half the class participated in asking questions and giving ideas. There are many students who participated in taking the initiative to do the task, helping their friends in examining the pictures, in generating ideas and in finding vocabulary needed to do the task. Many of them were actively involved in group discussions. Unfortunately, there were not many, only a few, students who were willing to help their friends to understand

the instruction as well as to motivate their friends to do the task. Table 2 presents the full data from the observation checklist.

The meaningful achievement is also shown by the improvement of the students' writing ability in which the students' average score increased significantly from 56.86 prior to the study to 77.87 after the treatment (21 points), spread out among three scored aspects content 9 with a 10.43 increase), organization (with a 5.28 increase), and the language aspect (with a 5.29 increase). The increase in the students' scores is summarized in Table 3.

Table 2: The Students' Behavior in the Learning Process

Learning Process	Meeting 1			Meeting 2			Meeting 3		
	H	M	L	H	M	L	H	M	L
1. **The seriousness of the students during the learning process:**							√		
a. Giving attention to the teacher's explanation and instruction.	√			√			√		
b. Making comments or asking questions about the explanation and instruction.	√			√			√		
c. *Giving attention to the pictures, examining them seriously.	√								
d. *Making comments or asking questions about the pictures (to the teacher or their friends)	√								
2. **The enthusiasm of the students in doing the tasks.**									
a. Trying to understand the instruction by using various learning aids (dictionary, text book, etc., asking the teacher or their friends whenever they do not understand).	√			√			√		
b. Moving to form small groups.		√			√			√	
c . Taking notes on whatever they think important.	√			√			√		

d	Using various aids to accomplish their task, for example: dictionaries, text books, work-sheets, etc.	√	√	√
e	Actively observing pictures to elicit ideas	√	√	√
f	Actively having discussions with the teachers and friends.	√	√	√

Students' Participation

1	The students' participation in asking questions.	√	√	√
2	The students' participation in suggesting ideas.	√	√	√
3	The students' participation in group work			
a.	Taking the initiative to do the task	√	√	√
b.	Helping their friends to understand the instruction	√	√	√
c.	helping their friends in examining the pictures	√	√	√
d.	Helping their friends to generate ideas and to find the vocabulary needed to do the task	√	√	√
e.	actively involved in group discussion	√	√	√
f.	helping motivate their friends	√	√	√

Note: H = High ; M = Medium ; L = Low
 *Items 1c and 1d in Learning Process are especially observed in the first meeting.

Table 3: The Increase in the Student' Writing Ability

Stage	Writing Aspects			
	Content	Language	Organization	Total
Pre-treatment test	20.86	11.79	24.21	56.86
Post-treatment test	31.29	17.07	29.50	77.87
Increase in scores	10.43	5.28	5.29	21.01

Discussion

Improvement of the Students' Ability to Write Descriptive Texts
The use of photographs which are capable of depicting the real objects promoted the enthusiasm of the students to examine the pictures because they were vivid, colourful, authentic, and therefore, more attractive. This in turn helped the students to be productive in generating ideas. It can be seen from the increase in scores that the students were able to improve.

The students were able to write not only one or two paragraphs; they were able to express many ideas and write more than they had done before the study was carried out. Their work also showed more vivid descriptions of the topic. The presence of the realia gave them certain advantages in that, by examining the pictures they were able to obtain more detailed and descriptive information such as the colours, the position, the shape, etc. of the object. The presence of the pictures also enabled the students to focus their description on just the object they were supposed to describe, jumping to any other parts of the place or describing other unrelated parts. This means that the presence of the picture series was able to enhance their ability to focus and concentrate on the lesson material, in this case the writing assignment. The attention function of visual media is that they attract and focus students' attention to concentrate on the lesson material (Arsyad, 2002).

In the language aspect the improvement can be clearly seen in vocabulary use. The students used more words compared to their work prior to the study or in their regular writing activities. Among others, they used more adjectives to make their description more alive than before. This finding is in line with |Harmer (2004) who says that pictures are often used to present situations to help students work with grammar and vocabulary. But their potential to bring students to different worlds means that they can be used to encourage students to fly in

their creative imagination. However, Harmer's opinion can be reinterpreted in a slightly different way by viewing this study's findings. The findings show that along with the variety of ideas the students want to express in their writing, they are encouraged to write more and longer sentences even though they may not be t grammatically correct. This means that the use of pictures is capable of encouraging students to explore language to express more ideas rising from their imagination, stimulated by the pictures. Their willingness to explore language is a good starting point for gaining further progress in language use in the future.

Improvement of the Students' Attitude towards the Learning Process

Pictures are an effective means to arouse students' interest as well as to attract and increase students' attention (Ansley, 2007; Brown, Lewis, & Halcleroad, 1983; Latuheru, 1988). This fact is supported by the findings of this study which reveals that the students' interest in the pictures brought about a positive attitude toward learning. The writing activity became more interesting when pictures were presented. Pictures – especially photographs as in this study, as Kellner (2009) stresses, are able to help students overcome their reluctance to write. The picture series not only stimulated the students' interest but also attracted and increased their attention. This resulted in their enthusiasm toward the instruction and the whole learning process.

In this study the students' interest is shown by the 94% positive students' response to the question: "How interesting is the picture-series?" All the students would like to use pictures to do the next writing assignment. Their interest in the picture series, and their serious attention and enthusiasm toward both the pictures and the instruction is indicated by the observation checklist data. Their enthusiasm, in |turn, led them to being serious in doing their writing activities. Their attention also reflects the students' degree of seriousness and, as shown by the observation checklist data, almost all the students paid attention to the teacher's explanation and instruction as well as to examining the pictures. They were actively involved in the learning process, making comments or asking questions about the instruction and the pictures.

The Role of the Picture Series-Aided Learning Strategy in Increasing Students' Participation

The use of pictures increased interaction among the students. This is indicated by the observation data showing that more than half the class participated in asking questions and giving ideas. There were many students who took the initiative to do the task, and helped their friends in examining the pictures, in generating ideas

and in finding the vocabulay needed to do the task. Frequently, they examined the pictures together with one or two friends in groups, asked questions or making comments pertaining to the pictures, responded to their friends' questions or comments, and were actively involved in group discussion. These all happened just because they had something real to see, observe, and discuss. Their active participation created a good class atmosphere that was dynamic, relevant and attractive. The realia presented was able to generate ideas and spark their imagination that in turn enhanced their engagement and participation. This is in line with the argument of some experts (Ansley, 2007; Latuheru, 1988; Brown, Lewis, & Halcleroad, 1983) that instructional media are able to elicit students' response, encouraging their participation and creating a dynamic, relevant, and attractive classroom.

The Role of the Picture Series in Supporting Teacher-Students Interaction

The presence of the picture series as interesting realia in this study also facilitated the interaction between the students and the teacher. The observation data show that more than half the class participated in asking questions and giving ideas. Most of them (approximately more than half the class) were actively involved in the learning process, making comments or asking questions about the instruction as well as about the pictures, whether to the teacher or to their classmates. Based on these data it can be inferred that there was dynamic interaction between the teacher and the students in which the students could discuss with the teacher the results of their examination of the pictures, their difficulties in expressing their ideas based on their observation, and so on. This dynamic interaction between the teacher and the students was made by because of the presence of the concrete object to be observed and to be discussed, i.e., the picture series. As stressed by Heinich, Molenda, and Russel (1990), instructional media can enhance and promote learning and support teacher's interaction with students.

Conclusion and Recommendation

This study revealed that the use of the picture series succeeded in promoting the students' positive attitude toward the learning process. It proves that the presence of the picture series as interesting realia increased the students' attention and seriousness in doing the writing task. The pictures also enhanced the students' participation and interaction during the learning activities. This study also proves the efficacy of using a picture series aided learning strategy to improve the students' ability in writing a descriptive text. Their average score increased from 56.86 to 77.87.

On the basis of the results of the study, it is suggested that teachers use picture series to enrich ideas, promote students' attention, help them focus on the learning process, and enhance participation. As the present study does not take into consideration such variables as learner learning style (visual, auditory, or tactile), it is recommended that future researchers measure the effect of students' learning styles on the effectiveness of a picture series-aided learning strategy using a more sophisticated design such as an experimental design.

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APPENDIX 1

Descriptions of the Observation Checklist

		Learning Process	
Number of Items	**HIGH**	**MEDIUM**	**LOW**
1. The seriousness of the students during learning process:			
a. Giving attention to the teacher's explanation and instruction.	Almost all the students pay attention to the teacher's explanation and instruction, or at least not more than five students who are reluctant to pay attention.	Almost (or) a half of the whole class pay attention to the teacher's explanation and instruction.	Only several students pay attention to the teacher's explanation and instruction.
b. Giving comments or questions about the explanation and instruction.	More than a half class give comments or questions about the instruction whether to the teacher or to their classmates	Almost (or) a half class give comment or questions about the instruction whether to the teacher or to their classmates	Only several students who give comment or questions about the instruction whether to the teacher or to their classmates
c. *Giving attention to the pictures, observing seriously.	Almost all the students observe the pictures seriously.	More than a half class observe the pictures seriously	Only several students observe the pictures seriously

Criteria			
d. *Giving comments or questions about the pictures (to the teacher or their friends)	More than a half class give comments or questions about the picture whether to the teacher or to their classmates	Almost (or) a half class give comment or questions about the picture whether to the teacher or to their classmates	Only several students who give comment or questions about the picture whether to the teacher or to their classmates

2. The enthusiasm of the students to do the tasks.

Criteria			
a. Trying to understand the instruction by using some learning aids (dictionary, text book, etc.., asking the teacher or their friends whenever they do not understand.	Almost all the students try to understand the instruction by asking the teacher or their friends whenever they do not understand.	More than a half class tries to understand the instruction by using some learning aids (dictionary, text book, etc.), or asking the teacher or their friends whenever they do not understand.	Only several students try to understand the instruction by asking the teacher or their friends whenever they do not understand.
b. Moving to form small groups.	The students move to form groups within less than 5 minutes.	The students move to form groups within 5 up to 10 minutes.	The students move to form groups within more than 10 minutes.
c. Taking notes on whatever they think important.	More than a half class take notes on whatever they think important.	Almost (or) a half class take notes on whatever they think important.	Only several students take notes on whatever they think important.

d. Using some aids to accomplish their task, for example: dictionaries, text books, work-sheet, etc.	Almost all the students use some aids to accomplish their task, for example: dictionaries, text books, work-sheet, etc.	More than a half use some aids to accomplish their task, for example: dictionaries, text books, work-sheet, etc.	Only several students use some aids to accomplish their task, for example: dictionaries, text books, work-sheet, etc.
e. Actively observing pictures to elicit ideas	Almost all the students actively observe pictures to elicit ideas	More than a half seriously observe pictures to elicit ideas	Only several students seriously observe pictures to elicit ideas
f. Actively having discussion with the teachers and friends.	There are many students who actively has discussion with the teachers and friends.	There are some students who actively has discussion with the teachers and friends	There are only very few students who actively have discussion with the teachers and friends

Students' Participation

Number of Items	HIGH	MEDIUM	LOW
1. The students' participation in asking questions.	More than a half class participate in asking questions	Almost (or) a half of the whole class participate in asking questions	Only several students participate in asking questions
2. The students' participation in giving ideas.	More than a half class participate in giving ideas	Almost (or) a half of the whole class participate in giving ideas	Only several students participate in giving ideas
3. The students' participation in group working			
a. taking initiative to do the task	There are many students who participate in taking initiative to do the task	There are some students who participate in taking initiative to do the task	There are only very few students who participate in taking initiative to do the task

b. helping their friends to understand the instruction	There are many students who help their friends who need to understand the instruction	There are some students who help their friends to understand the instruction	There are only very few students who help their friends to understand the instruction
c. helping their friends in observing the pictures	There are many students who help their friends in observing the pictures	There are some students who help their friends in observing the pictures	There are only very few students who help their friend in observing the pictures
d. helping their friends to generate ideas and to find	There are many students who help their friends to generate ideas and to find vocabularies needed to do the task	There are some students who help their friends to generate ideas and to find vocabularies needed to do the task	There are only very few students who help their friend to generate ideas and to find vocabularies needed to do the task
e. actively involved in group discussion	There are many students who help their friends to motivate their friends	There are some students who help their friends to motivate their friends	There are only very few students who help their friend to motivate their friends
f. helping motivate their friends	There are many students who are actively involved in group discussion	There are some students who are actively involved in group discussion	There are only very few students who are actively involved in group discussion