THE CHARACTER BUILDING IN ESSAY WRITING PROJECT: A QUALITATIVE INQUIRY ON STUDENTS' EXPERIENCE

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ABSTRACT

This research paper shares the inquiry on the character making detected from students' experience in the process of completing their collaborative essay assignment in English as Foreign Language Class (EFL class). As a qualitative work, this research gained the data by carrying out in-depth interviews with respondents are advanced students in writing class at English department. This research was conducted before the covid-19 pandemic. Before doing an interview, students are given assignment with one semester writing project particularly collaborative essay writing on particular given topics. The data analysis method of this research applied the grounded theory prescribing the open, axial and selective coding. The results reveal that students as foreign learners stated that collaborative essay writing assignment in English engaged them with several characters, such as leadership values, learning responsibility, self-initiative values, self-regulated learning, and trust. These findings highlight the contribution of essay writing assignment in a foreign language toward character education in Indonesia.

INTRODUCTION

Writing ability is seen as one of the vital competencies in determining the success of learning in university. This relates to frequent assessment of students' level of understanding as well as critical and analytical thinking conducted by assessing students' papers, articles, or essays. The ability to express ideas into essays related to the elaboration of topics in certain disciplines is interpreted as a form of competence and knowledge that students have achieved. In the middle demands for forming and strengthening characters in national education, writing ability, especially essays, is expected to be able to build important characters that mark the personality and to identity of Indonesian nation. In other words, the learning process is characterized by the achievement of academic competence and character building. The application of the 2013 curriculum was initially

intended to enable efforts to build characters in students by instilling basic values essential for social interaction and national life. This curriculum is designed to stimulate and encourage students to follow and to enjoy the learning process, to discover and to apply religious and socio-cultural values (Manalu & Marpaung, 2018; Putri et al., 2017). The learning process is not complete without strengthening learners' characters. In a broader scope, character education not only helps students to have competence in certain fields of study but also teaches awareness of values in social life. Therefore, education process is a comprehensive effort so that students have motivation to learn, good competencies, and a strong character for global competitiveness (Muttaqin et al., 2020). In addition, in line with the rapid development of technology, educators are required to be able to respond to current conditions with innovative, creative, and fun approaches (Sophan et al., 2018). The learning process is expected not only to hone students' academic abilities but also to form social competencies characterized by the building of positive characters that are beneficial for social interaction and national life.

In this context, writing ability is a part of the process in learning foreign languages, especially English. It aims to make students enable to develop communication competencies, and to build the character. This research discusses students' perspectives regarding with the writing assignment in EFL class in terms of character building.

This research was conducted based on the assumption that writing integrates opportunities for the development of language skills and knowledge as well as gives reflection of values mastered by the authors. Furthermore, an article reflects students' critical abilities and analysis of issues in a particular field of study or subject. In this case, the task of writing an English essay as a foreign language is done as a group project, it is done within one semester used as a basis for learning activities. This way of thinking is in line with the view that writing essays cannot only be conducted individually but also conducted in groups . This means that a writing assignment as a group project enables interaction and gives linguistic and competence value. A writing assignment can be stated as a collaborative work (Habulembe, 2007). The task of writing requires an active participation of students where there is a room to build the character through the process of the emergence of values in group interaction as an important element in character education. Topkaya & Yavuz argued that "To evaluate is related to the value pinned by a student and teacher to a particular object, phenomenon or behavior". This means that the task of writing English essays is a phenomenon which allows the instilling of values towards character building which is expected to strengthen the nation's identity and the competitiveness of learners. Therefore, the results of writing assignments reflect a combination of language skills related to expressing ideas and various knowledge as well as character values.

Writing activities as collaborative activities, in this context, allows interaction each individual to accomplish the tasks given. Thus, giving assignments to students can also open a space for meetings or intrusion of characters of each member intensively. This is where the question about how the relationship between the assignment of essay writing in foreign languages with character building arises. Students' emic perspectives of the situation are interesting to explore. This will be important both as an assessment of the benefits of learning,

especially those that are collaborative and independent projects, and as an effort to get input to identify the relevance of writing course especially essay writing in English with innovative efforts to build characters in the curriculum of English study programs or foreign languages in Indonesia. In other words, this study focuses on students' perspectives as foreign language learners about behavioral experiences in completing group essay assignments in relation to character building

METHODS

This research used a qualitative paradigm. Data collection was carried out by using classroom observation and in-depth interviews with thirty students in fourth-semester of English Education major taking advanced writing and creative writing courses. Respondents in this research were divided into six groups doing collaborative writing projects on essays. Interviews with respondents were conducted during and after they completed the essay assignment. This interview was designed and conducted as an effort to formulate students' perspectives on essay writing assignments and character building. This research lasted for one semester. Analysis was carried out using grounded theory, involving an open, axial and selective coding phase (Strauss, 2004; Strauss, 2009; Thornberg, 2012)

Participants in this research were students in the advanced writing and creative writing classes. The selection of these two courses is based on the idea that students who take these courses are superior and creative. It indicates that their language skills and knowledge are sufficient for their field. Participants selected and whose statements were analyzed in response to interviews were coded M refers to the students' initials and coded G refers to their group. This was done to maintain the privacy of respondents as the primary data source.

RESULT

Essay writing assignments in foreign languages especially in English encourage students to concentrate on the quality content and language accuracy. This assignment is an independent and collaborative drill which gives freedom to the students in managing their time to finish it. Lecturers require to evaluate the development of the assignment and give written or oral feedbacks every week in a meeting. The feedbacks included grammar, writing style, idea development, language accuracy, and knowledge development.

When the assignment finished, each group in a discussion forum represents the result of a group work which comprises a theoretical and generic structure of each essay type and its examples. The finishing process of the project manifests the making of several characters.

A. Leadership

After the assignment is distributed, students make a group to choose a topic. As a team, everyone must be initiated to decide who becomes a team leader of the writing project. It implies the rise of a team leader in a group. This is stated by a respondent in the following "We will start to do the assignment, work in a group, and distribute the assignment. Each of us will complete one part". (M2, G3) This recognition indicates that in the beginning, the students consider that the essay writing assignment has encouraged the initiation of leadership. This

assignment determines who will be the group leader. Students who are proactive will directly become the team leader to do the assignments. Distributing assignments to each group member represents the leadership capacity.

The character of leadership and subservience may appear to ensure work distribution for each group member and to investigate the successful collaboration. It confirms that the lead character of a team leader can facilitate the achievement of the goals, manage the human resources, maintain the focus on group goals, and make sure the target accuracy (Bogar, 2019). It indicates that the essay writing assignment develops a group leader's spirit and character. Determining the right group members requires leadership ability. It represents that writing assignment encourages students to think and act like a leader. At this point, the formation of a character occurs when students stick to organize and strive for the achievement of a group target. Leading a discussion in a group and between friends has made students comprehend various perspectives, challenge them to think critically, and develop the ability of collaborative reflection. It is essential when they participate to learn organization (Roberts, 2008). This statement indicates the development of leadership in a group assignment. In addition, each group member must take apart to follow the instructions and work as stated in the following statement, "We work on our parts, and the work divisions are at the first meeting which continue to discuss in WA group" (M25, G4). This statement explains the situation of group members after receiving their work parts. The willingness to organize and be organized is a symptom of a character development process. On the other hand, it is recognized that several students refuse to be a group team leader and left the group. They even do not participate in completing the assignment. It indicates that there is no character of leadership in themselves. "V (name) refused to become the leader, Sir. He said that he didn't know and didn't want to work with us". (M12, G3). This attitude represents the assignment has formed the small value of leadership in a group, it is called leadership negotiation. The election of a chairperson occurs simultaneously with the selection of duties. Selecting the leader or group members represents a process to accept and understand a leadership value in group interactions. Therefore, it involves a social and emotional dimension of intelligence of a lead character which is signed by having the ability to react properly in a certain situation, for example, group interaction and ability to respect others (Tamengkel, 2019). These two dimensions are important as the intelligence dimension. Therefore, attitude and interaction in a learning group can achieve the target in finishing essay has instilled the emergence of whole leadership character. The essay writing assignment in English, as a foreign language, has opened a room for character education such as reflected by the spirit of leadership. On the other hand, this assignment as a collaborative project creates an opportunity for the negotiation process. There is a character to determine the achievement of process and result. The demand to complete assignments together and succeed in getting the expected value has defined and fostered the character of leadership. The statements from respondents describe their perspectives about an obvious relationship between the assignment and the emergence of leadership character. Therefore, it concludes that the development of leadership value may occur in the completion process of writing assignment in foreign languages in a group.

B. Responsibility in Learning

The writing assignment completion also facilitates students to perform several activities which have purposes to fulfil all requirements. It indicates that the learning process is performed by students. Everyone can do something for the group's success as stated in the following statement, "Doing this assignment is different from the other homework or group assignment which only take a maximum of two weeks. So, we consider that we have to complete the assignment as a part of the team" (M17, G4). Successful completion of this assignment requires the responsibility of all group members. Assignment demands can affect the performance of each group member (Mendo, 2019). The willingness to be able to complete essays appropriately and to achieve a high score can encourage students to participate and share responsibility. Every group member is willing to share responsibilities as a form of activity. This condition accustoms students to learn responsibly. Efforts to build theories, generic structures and make essay examples provide concrete evidence that all group members learn to share responsibilities.

One of the respondents explains, "S (name) has the duty to find all sources related to the definition theoretically, and I look for the rubric of writing score. Anything we find must be discussed in group meetings", (M3, G1). This explanation represents that the results can be achieved since students decide to learn responsibly. Razeq (2014) found that "Being responsible for the progress of their own education will strengthen these students and prepare themselves for life-long learning". The sense of responsibility will be developed if students choose to participate and interact actively with other group members to seek more knowledge about the assignments. Furthermore, this will stimulate students to learn and to prepare themselves with any possibilities that occur in the learning process. Learning to be responsible not only affects academic achievement especially in acquiring score but also increases awareness of shared values. Therefore, it is also able to develop individual learning as the process of character development.

Therefore, it can be identified that the formation of character especially responsibility arises in response to the assignment of essay writing in foreign languages. The willingness of each group member to take part maximally to meet the standard and deadline of the task confirms the understanding that giving students the freedom to do their work has the potential to foster and strengthen a sense of responsibility. A crucial character in a nation's situation that is vulnerable to the threat of radicalism and national disintegration.

C. Self-Initiative Learning

The development of group work cannot be separated from intensive meetings among members. Besides, responses towards lecturer's feedbacks also become the stimulus of group activities. Feedbacks on the content quality and structure of the assigned topic determine the stages of task distribution and frequency of discussion. One of the students stated that "Lecturers gave us feedbacks every week. They checked our development and correct some mistakes. Therefore, we were initiative to check before and after weekly meetings without waiting for others". (M27, G6). This statement describes that students come forward to be responsible for their development of group assignments. Having a sense of learning responsibility and self-initiative marked the emergence of positive values in the process of doing essay assignments. Self-initiative assigns to

"directions of min goals in understanding the problems and initiating actions" (Genç, 2015). The attitude of self-initiative exists in each group when they are asked to revise their assignments. The expectation of completing assignments with satisfying results becomes the propulsive factors of initiations. Each group member takes learning steps such as searching, gathering, selecting, and arranging material to perfect the writing product. Another respondent stated that "Waiting for friends to respond sometimes made me worried since time keeps running. Therefore, it forced me to revise and correct it by myself" (M5, g1). This statement confirms that completing tasks may trigger the emergence of self-initiative from each member for mutual success. Essay writing indicates the importance of the initiative. Students involve themselves by working on each of them such as brainstorming, drafting, editing, revising, and the final results. Theorizing phase to write. On the other hand, this assignment is a stimulus which can develop the initiative. This character is required in this disruptive era. The initiative may initiate creativity and innovation. On the other word, the proactive attitude accompanied by creativity will have a positive impact on the achievement of target groups (Cahyani et al., 2018). It is important in the maturity of emotional intelligence in character. Furthermore, this indicates the relationship between the task completion process and the formation of positive character in students. In this context, the task completion process is a broad arena for the emergence of student initiatives to innovate.

D. Self-Regulated Learning

Self-regulated learning is illustrated as "an active and constructive process where the students set the goals for their learning, and they try to monitor, manage, and control their cognition, motivation, and attitude with guidance and limitation by their goal and environment" (Pintrich, & Greet, 2000).

The point is students as learners successfully adjust to group assignments and manage relevant learning behaviors. The context of the group assignment defines the intensity and the attribute of self-regulated learning. In this condition, students understand the need to regulate the dominant values, in this case, the tendency to be obedient to the group's efforts to succeed. One of the students stated that "The different opinions often existed in a group, and sometimes I felt angry but I knew that the group assignments are important. Therefore, we tried to complete the task in mutual collaboration" (M24, G5). Variations in the level of competence and character determine self-regulated learning in a group. The previous statement explained about self-regulated learning. "We need grade", said one of the students (M29, G6). Therefore, having a good score or the highest score assigns as a reference to solve the problem and cope obstacle in the group work process. The willingness to complete tasks with satisfying achievement makes students regulate themselves, so it can avoid conflicts in a group. "There was no debate if we didn't get an A in a subject", continued the student (M29, G6). It indicates that students' activity becomes a basic. This thought imposes their attitudes in interactions and taking a role in a group. Every individual in a group must be able to self-regulated as an adaptation to achieve the common goals. This working attitude which always be regulated can be a positive indicator to develop social character in a broader scope. If in a workgroup, students feel the impact, the character built from the assignment may be implemented in a larger and heterogeneous social domain. In short, the student perspective indicates that there is a process of essay writing completion not only grow initiatives in the

sense of taking parts but also grow a character of self-regulated to achieve the goals. The complexity of assignments in foreign languages allows students to encounter new challenges for themselves related to efforts to organize self-regulated learning in achieving expected value.

E. Trust

Another character recognized by students which appears in the process of completing writing assignments is trust between friends. In this process, it is not easy to believe the comments and perspectives of peers. Students tend to receive feedbacks from lecturers than from their peers. However, writing assignments encourage students to rely on feedback from their friends. This situation was recognized by a student who stated, "After receiving task parts among friends, we must believe in feedbacks from our peers" (M7, G20). This recognition indicates that trust in peers is a basis to complete the assignments. Trust is necessary due to the time limit is quick and accurate. Trust serves as a requirement for collaboration on a group assignment. In the other hand, trust can refer to the comfort of interaction between members including lecturers (Nova & Sukyadi, 2014). Trust creates freedom from being humiliated by others in the group. It supports the process of giving and receiving opinions during work. The development of trust in-group members provides an environment conducive to learning where students find opportunities in interaction and developing both socially and academically (Nova & Sukyadi, 2014). A respondent stated that "I came from an unpopular school, so the first time I felt shy to speak up in a group, but after a while, I started to feel confident with my friends. Then I could be easy to tell what I thought about the assignment" (M21, G5). This statement implies that essay writing completion is an activity to build mutual trust. The different ability and background which sometimes become obstacles to communicate and to share an idea, it can be reduced with a trust created from the intensity and responsibility among members in completing a task. Trust between peers annunciates open-minded attitude to learn and share in a group. Furthermore, this character may overcome inferiority and reluctance to communicate and discuss. Trust may open a way for students to involve in taking the group decisions, sharing a thought, and ensuring the beneficial learning activity. Trust can be an important character in social activities which is broader than work in a group. Therefore, the recognition which appears as the depiction of the student perspective also signs the potential of trust as an important character in social interactions. Trust can overcome any hesitation in communication to achieve common goals in a group and can combine various steps from every individual in a group to achieve expected results. The pressure in the process of completing an essay writing task seems like a path to grow mutual trust among group members apart from their differences. It can be said that the response to the challenges of group task completion implies the potential to present characters associated with trust ranging from fellow group members to larger social spaces such as society or nation. It means that assignment to students is a potential means to build positive character in a social context. It needs to be emphasized that similar to the integration between educators and students which will continue (Warsono et al., 2019), as well as the interaction of students with society in which trust is one of the key characters.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION
The task of writing an essay in this context is a collaborative work.

Perspectives of students show that the activities in groups to complete assignments designed in the form of a semester project involving various interactions and arguments has encouraged the formation of characters which supports the success of teamwork. It can also be seen here that the assignment of essay writing can be categorized as one of the strategies for developing character building among students. Perspectives from responses to the experiences of Indonesian students working together in completing essay assignments in foreign languages have become a foothold in thinking about the role of the learning process or courses to be integrated with the efforts of character building. At this point, it can be synthesized that the learning process is an effective strategy for building students' characters, the course material including assignments given needs to be designed appropriately so that values or characters to be formed will be achieved, and lecturers as learning facilitators should have competency comprehensive in guiding the process both inside and outside the classroom and in creating an atmosphere or academic culture that is conducive to ensure the achievement of learning objectives. This is goes with what stated by Susanti (2013) that character building can be integrated and taught naturally through courses in each class although this will have an impact on different teaching methods and different ways of assessment (486). In learning activities including giving assignments, lecturers are expected to not only assess the cognitive aspects of students but also assess the affective aspects reflected in the application of noble values or characters. Regarding this, lecturers must also be a figure that can be role models both inside and outside the classroom.

Furthermore, it can also be found that interaction in groups while working on assignments has helped students to build and develop characters, such as leadership values, responsibility, self-initiative values, self-regulated learning, and trust. Basically, these characters cannot only be capitalized for task completion in group projects but they are also important in social interaction and communication. In other words, characters arising from this process contributes to strengthen the identity and personality of the nation as well as to strengthen the mutual life relationship. From the students' perspectives, it can be understood that even though essay writing task is done in a foreign language, its benefits for students' character building in the context of strengthening the noble national values cannot be ignored. Thus, in general, it can be concluded that the essay writing task can be a part of character education. Therefore, further studies should focus on whether or how English or other foreign language skills, namely speaking, reading, and listening, can influence character building needed to strengthen the nation's existence.

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