

Integrating Online Blogging into EFL Writing Instruction: Exploring Students' Perceptions

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Integrating Online Blogging into EFL Writing Instruction: Exploring Students' Perceptions

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Abstract—Increasing numbers of EFL teachers have integrated blogging as their classroom practices. Research has also shown that blogging is an effective tool for students to improve English writing skills. However, the use of online blogs in EFL writing classes in Indonesia seems still relatively few and students' perceptions of its impacts on their writing has not been much explored. This research study reports on Indonesian EFL learners' perceptions of the use of Blogger (formerly known as Blogspot), an online blogging platform as part of their learning practices in a Creative Writing class. A qualitative study using questionnaire and semi-structured interview was applied to explore the students' perceptions. Thirty students took part in this study by writing their reflective journals on Blogger weekly over 8-week period. The findings revealed that the students responded positively to the use of Blogger as a learning tool in EFL writing classroom. Furthermore, they also reported that online blogging is effective in promoting their writing fluency as well as increasing their awareness of writing for audience. This study recommends that online blogging be part of EFL writing classes and be incorporated into school curricula in Indonesia.

Keywords—Blogger, blogging, English as a foreign language, perception, reflective journal, writing instruction

I. INTRODUCTION

Despite the fact that English is the only mandatory foreign language subject for Indonesian students from secondary up to university level, the teaching of writing has not yet a priority in English classrooms in this country [1]. English writing itself has been considered among the most difficult skills to master for EFL (English as a foreign language) learners in Indonesia as it deploys different patterns than those in Indonesian composition. Furthermore, English writing becomes very challenging as students need to organize their ideas in those new items they might not familiar with [2]. In addition, they also need to transfer their ideas from their first language, Indonesian to English. In addition to this reason, the difficulty may stem from the fact English writing instruction in most Indonesian classrooms do not provide students with authentic task that they can closely relate.

From the teaching approach point of view, English writing instruction is usually dominated by teacher-centered activities with the stereotype pattern in which the teacher provides a topic on which the students write their paper on it. This type of activities causes students to focus more on how to get good final grades than on how to produce good writing

piece for their readers. Furthermore, classroom activities also focus on reinforcing the learning of grammar and vocabulary [1]. This preference of traditional teaching approach may also be closely related the objectives of writing instruction in most EFL settings, including that in Indonesia. Fithriani [1] stated that English writing instruction in Indonesia is still "very high stakes examination oriented" (p. 28). Mostly Indonesian EFL students learn writing skills to prepare themselves in taking such writing tests as found in TOEFL and IELTS tests. This orientation could be understood since many educational institutions in Indonesia, especially higher education ones use TOEFL or TOEFL-like tests to measure their students' English language proficiency, which is further used as the requirements for graduation.

All those challenges facing Indonesian EFL learners in learning writing skills call for teachers and instructors to find better ways to make English writing class skill more interesting and authentic to learn. One method which has been increasingly much used in EFL classroom settings is technology integration in the teaching of various language learning skills. In EFL writing class itself, the use of online blogging, also known as blogs has gained its popularity in the last few years.

Blogs, which is a blending of two terms 'web' and 'blog', can be defined as a publicly-accessible online platform in which a user can save and share their ideas, thoughts, opinions, and experiences through various media such as texts, photographs, and videos [3] [4]. Because one of its strongest features is allowing interactive communication among the users, blogs have been gaining more popularity as a tool for supporting language learning [5], particularly in writing classes. It is also reported that blogs can be effective in motivating students and improving their writing skills as they provide students with the opportunity to writing for real audience [6].

A large body of research has also shown various positive impacts of using blogs as a classroom practice. The use of blogs as a classroom practice helped improve students' writing quality and performance [7] [8] [9]. Furthermore, blogs are also empirically proofed to foster collaboration among students [8]. Finally, research also found that the use of blogs could enhance students' motivation to write and promote learner autonomy [10].

However, despite its increasing popularity in many EFL writing class contexts, the use of blogs in EFL writing classes in Indonesia seems still relatively few. Furthermore, although there have been many empirical proofs of the advantages of integrating blogging in EFL writing classroom, most of the studies investigating this topic focus on students' quantitative improvement in writing. Furthermore, many studies investigating various aspects of the use of blogs in writing classrooms have put teachers at the center of the focus exploring their stances and perspectives of this practice. Meanwhile, students tend to be viewed as the objects of its implementation and are treated as a *tabula rasa* to be filled. Very few studies have been focused on how students perceive the use of blogs in EFL writing class. Considering the gap in the existing literature, this study was conducted to address the question "what do students perceive as the benefits of the use of online blogging on their writing skills?" It is hoped that this study contribute to filling the gap mentioned previously and provide more references to English language teachers, particularly those in Indonesian EFL context who would like to use blogs as their teaching practice.

II. METHOD

This study was conducted in a state university in Medan, Indonesia during the even semester 2017/2018 academic year. Thirty students taking a Creative Writing class took part as the participants of this study. As part of the class requirements, the students completed a series of tasks including writing at least six entries of reflective journals on their Blogger account and responding to at least six of their peers' entries in their posts' comment sections. Since most participants were not familiar with online blogging yet (as illustrated in Figure 2), it was considered important to address this issue prior to conducting the study. Thus, in the first meeting of the class, the students were introduced with Blogger, a free web blog service formerly known as Blogspot, and trained how to set up an account, post entries, and provide comments on a post.

A qualitative case study using questionnaire and semi structured interview was used in exploring students' perceptions of the benefits of online blogging in improving their writing skills. The questionnaire was distributed after they finished posting their last entry on their blogs (approximately in the eight meeting of the class). The data from the questionnaire when through the initial data analysis whose findings were used to inform the researchers of what questions to ask during the interview session. Ten out of the 30 students voluntarily participated in the interview session. Since the purpose of the interview was to explore each of participants' views and experiences on particular issues [11], the questions were individually crafted to obtain specific information related to previous comments on the questionnaire and that eliciting more opinions of each participant. Through three stages of coding, namely pre-coding, initial coding, and final coding, the data were analyzed using *thematic content analysis* whose focus is to answer a research question by identifying themes [12] from the data collected from the questionnaire and in-depth interview. Figure 1 illustrates the procedure of the study including data collection and analysis.

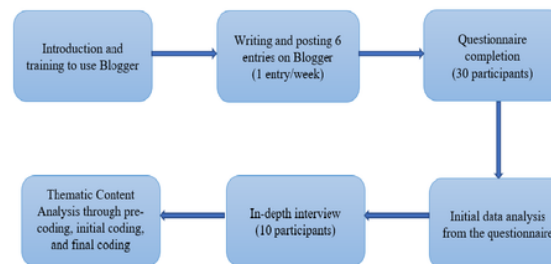


Fig. 1. Overview of the procedure of the study

III. FINDINGS

A. Participants' Demographic

The 30 students (18 females and 12 males) participating in this study were majoring in English Education and had had taken three writing classes namely *Basic Writing*, *Intermediate Writing*, and *Advanced Writing* in previous semesters prior to taking this Creative Writing class. In terms of experience with online blogging, most students ($n = 17$) reported that they were not unfamiliar with blogging, however they did not know much about it. Meanwhile, 8 students claimed that they had heard the term 'blogging' before but had no idea what it was actually. Out of 30 participants, only four students had experienced with blogging while 3 participants admitted that blogging or blogs was a totally new thing for them (look at figure 2 for details).



Fig. 2. Participants' experiences with blogs before the study

In terms of the frequency of blogging activities during this study, as it can be seen in figure 3 that most of the students ($n = 18$) seemed to blog for the sake of class requirement fulfillment as they reported to post an entry per week, which was the minimum requirement to pass the class. However, they are more active and engaged in reading and commenting their peers' blog posts.

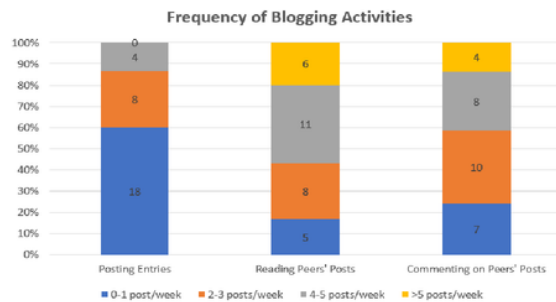


Fig. 3. The frequency of participants' blogging activities

B. Perceptions of the Benefits of Blogs

Theme One: Improvement of writing fluency

Based on the data from the two sources, most participants found that blogging activities help improve their writing fluency. They reported that writing on their blogs regularly allows them to practice their writing skills and as a consequence they found it much easier to find a topic and write it in a blog post, as seen in the following excerpts:

I used to spend a lot of time thinking of what to write or even if I already knew what topic I want to write, I didn't know how to start it...but now I think I can sit in front of my laptop and the ideas just come like that [snapping fingers] (Excerpt 1, interview)

It really changes my mind about writing. At first, I thought it was so difficult to write a topic on my blog. Now it feels like writing my diary I could share everything I feel on it (Excerpt 2, questionnaire)

Furthermore, they mentioned that responding to others' posts gave them ideas of what to write on their own blogs or what needs to add to make their writing more informative and comprehensive.

Student: I think I provided at least a comment on every single post that I read

Interviewer: wow! Good for you. Why did you do that?

Student: Not only for the grades although it's one of the reasons [laugh] reading my friends' posts gives me ideas of what to discuss in my blog. When commenting and giving suggestions [on their posts] I also learn how to be more specific and detailed in my own writing (Excerpt 3, interview)

Theme two: Raising awareness of writing for audience

Another benefit of blogging that most students mentioned was how they became more aware of whether their readers receive the message they try to convey in their writing. In other words, it can be said that the interaction through blogging raise students' awareness of writing for audience, not only writing for the teacher/instructor to get good grades as what most

students do in EFL writing classrooms in Indonesia [1]. This paradigm shift can be observed in the following excerpts.

One of my major concerns is whether the people (who read the blog entry) understand what I'm trying to say (Excerpt 4, questionnaire).

I check my blog like every hour just to see any new comments... it means a lot when people say they like my post (Excerpt 5, questionnaire)

This particular finding affirms Dalir, Jafarigohar and Soleimani's claim that blogging can provide the opportunity to writing for real audience [6]. In this study, writing regularly on Blogger seems to raise students' awareness of the importance of producing readable and understandable posts so their original messages can be well received by their readers.

IV. CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATION

The use of blogs in EFL writing in Indonesia is perhaps not as popular as that in other countries with EFL contexts like Korea, China, and Japan. However, it is gaining more and more attention from those willing to integrate technology, particularly online blogging as part of their classroom practice. The findings of this study suggested that Indonesian EFL adult students found the use of online blogging beneficial to their writing skill enhancement. Most students reported that posting and commenting regularly on Blogger helped them improve writing fluency and awareness of writing for audience. In other words, it can be said that the students had positive perceptions towards the integration of online blogging as an alternative activity in English writing classes in Indonesia. Thus, this study recommends that EFL writing teachers incorporate online blogging as part of their teaching practices.

This study may contribute to the growing body of literature discussing the use of online blogging in EFL classrooms, particularly in writing class. However, due to the limited scope of discussion in this study, it is suggested for further research to emphasize on other aspects of blog integration which include the effects and the challenges of integrating blogging in Indonesian EFL writing classroom. Furthermore, since the benefits of online blogging integration in this study were based on students' perceptions, it is also interesting to conduct a study analyzing whether these self-report benefits reflect the real condition on students' writing products or comparing the benefits of online blogging integration from the students' and the teachers' points of view.

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