



Conducting Online Writing Exchange: A Reflection to Tell

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Abstract

There have been many researches on online language learning, especially online writing. Yet, research describing a reflection after experimenting with online writing to students is still under-investigated. To fill this gap, this paper aimed to inform the reflection of the researchers for the last three years conducting online writing exchange. The reflections came from the researchers' view and students' views regarding the writing exchange program. The research design was narrative inquiry. The data were garnered from the researchers' experiences and students' interviews. The results of reflection revealed Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT). The strengths are flip classroom, flexibility for the teacher, motivation to write, writing practice, and interaction. The weaknesses are able to write a post after the deadline, unaltered topics in stage, unavailable notification of reply, a difficult operationalized website, and a short deadline. The opportunities are adding other countries from other continents, extending the collaboration into a full semester, and adding online chat on the website. The threats are less active participation from students and less active buddy.

INTRODUCTION

The easiness of networking access allows teachers to use the internet as a way of instruction. The internet shortens the gap between people. People should connect each other irrespective of the national boundary. As networking developed, the attention on the potential and impacts of online language learning gain a greater interest. The use of the internet for learning was revealed in Yang and Lin (2010)'s study. They investigated student behaviors, self-efficacy, engagement, as well as the connection between student activity and success in learning. Their study revealed that students' online participation was affected by internet attitudes. The more positive attitudes are, the higher participations are. The students' writing improves as they frequently participate more in the online forum

(Yang and Lin, 2010).

Online language learning can be an alternative way of learning for students especially to support their writing skills. One of institutions in Malang has been implemented online learning for enhancing writing skills namely online writing exchange. It allows students to interact with other overseas students by posting their writing and giving replies to each other. This kind of activity facilitates students to practice their writing in a novel way because students never conducted this interactive writing with foreign students. It may also provide students with a good online writing environment and let them interact with their peers from other countries as well. The teacher monitored students' posts to ensure that the students write an appropriate post under the topic in each stage. As stated by Kuo (2008), the development of peer communication often characterizes a positive online writing climate. Online writing should not be an isolated path in which a student writer acts his or her own without realizing whether his or her peers think about and interact with a particular learning mission. It means that the students have readers (their peers) to give comments and interact in order to achieve a common understanding of others' cultures.

Some previous studies have been conducting on online writing, especially the students' involvement in online writing program. Virtue (2017) conducted a study on students' discussion in online courses through small groups and peer moderators. He concluded that a meaningful online discussion can be maximized using peer moderators and small groups. Stella and Corry (2016) investigated the correlation between students' involvement and motivation in the Online Writing Instruction program and students' engagement in the conventional classroom. It revealed that the students' participation in the Online Writing Instruction program is positively high. Another research investigated the online writing was Litterio (2018). He reviewed students' perceptions of Writing Program Administration (WPA) learning outcomes for first-year writing through a fully online first-year course. His study focused on technology and social media which gave an impact on students' learning. It showed that students got an interest in writing as a means of communication. While communicating through writing, students also had much time to emulate in the online environment.

Based on some previous studies mentioned above, it can be concluded that many researchers had already conducted various researches on online

language learning, especially online writing. Various studies such as students' behavior, engagement, perception, towards online writing, and also the effectiveness of online writing for students' motivation in writing practice had been conducted. Research describing a reflection after experimenting with online writing to students is still under-investigated. This paper aimed to inform the reflection of the authors for the last three years conducting online writing exchange.

Online Language Learning

Practitioners often used a computer as a medium of teaching and learning (Dillenbourg et.al., 2009; Antoniadis et.al., 2009). Nowadays, not only computers, but also other gadgets such as smartphones, laptops, and tablets are equipped via the internet. Frequently, people used it as communication media, such as sending an email, having a chat, involving in social media, making a call through video-skype, and so on. A computer has been used as a mediated communication (CMC) by instructors, students, and researchers. Lamy and Hampel (2007) stated that CMC could actually respond to two requirements at once for language professionals. First, it could be the mechanism through which teaching has taken place. Another point, it could be an end in itself. Learners have been able to exchange language online rather than conventional class, thus they can engage with the communicative aspect of their study.

The computer and the internet provide an opportunity to create a new environment of teaching and learning processes, especially language learning (Peterson, 2013; McCarty et.al., 2017). The process of language teaching and learning utilizing the internet is usually known as Online Language Learning. In some cases, the online learning system has made great progress and has played an increasingly important part of language learning. Online learning is suitable for language learning and looks a flawless medium of instruction because of flexibility and efficiency. Yet, Li (2017) argued that there were several weaknesses in the existing online learning models used in language learning: (1) inefficient organization of learning resources, (2) complex module analysis, and (3) a model of a good user profile.

As a digital technology, online language learning provides a great medium for teachers to give meaningful tasks in order to improve students' language learning especially related to the text such as grammar, reading, or writing. Stickler

and Hampel (2015) asserted that digital technologies has shifted language learning and teaching, and offer a potential for learning through online spaces. Such spaces provide "multicultural" and are able to serve learners creating individual and collective texts.

Online Writing

Online writing is one of the online language learning. It promotes a chance for the students to post their writing through the online forum by using websites, blogs, or social media every time and everywhere (Rodliyah, 2016; Vorobel and Kim, 2017; Mabuan, 2018). This kind of activity could increase students' positive participation in learning writing. Yang and Lin (2010) found that students' online participation was affected by internet attitudes. Their study found a positive correlation between internet attitudes and participation. The students' writing improves as they frequently participate more in the online forum. Active participation in the online forum implies that they practice more writing and generate more ideas about what to write. Practice alters perfection. In other words, online writing provides a great learning environment for students to enhance their writing in a different way.

In addition, online writing usually utilized a tool for facilitating students in delivering or posting their writing. In 2000, Davis from University of California once created RC (Remote Collaboration) to facilitate interaction among humans via internet connectivity (Curran, 2002). This incorporates various features such as "chat; annotatable images; compressed audio messages for transmission; mutual sharing of web pages and a collaborative writing method". Aid mate varies primarily in the interactivity of the camera, live audio and remote control of the Collaborator's computer.

Furthermore, online writing may offer media for online peer assessment or peer review. Peer review enables other students to check their partner's writing and leave some feedback on it. It also a part of students' interaction in which they can share their writing and then give feedback to each other. Kline, Letofsky, and Woodard (2013) revealed that virtual peer feedback to writing is logistically easier to manage than offline instruction, as it removes many of the operational problems teachers face, such as handling student articles. As a result, teachers may be more likely to use peer response to writing online. Yet, not only about writing feedback but also students can exchange their stories or information to other students

especially from different countries when they use online writing. Patterson, et.al. (2012) state that connecting students online offered intercultural exchange through sharing ideas and learning from others.

On the other hand, a different result about students' perception of peer review during online writing was revealed. Rendahl and Breuch (2013) found that peer interaction did not give significant learning, yet interaction with the instructor and course content did. Online writing still provides two sides either positive or negative. Those works of literature inform the positive and negative perception from students' perspective only. A little evidence was found about the positive and negative side of online writing from the teacher's perspective. Therefore, the present study analyzed the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats of conducting online writing exchange from the teacher and students' view in order to know whether it is worth conducting or not.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study used a descriptive narrative inquiry. It reflected the author's view and students' view on conducting online writing exchange for the last three years. This study arose from the researchers' own experiences. The researchers (two researchers) have conducted an online writing exchange in their classroom for three years (6 semesters) as a part of regular class. There were around 80-120 Indonesian tertiary students participated in the online writing exchange in each semester. They were all freshmen of Agribusiness and Agroecotechnology study program. Agribusiness students joined during an odd semester, while Agroecotechnology students joined during an even semester.

The Online writing exchange was named as Online Cultural Exchange Program. The administrator and creator of the website was a lecturer from one of universities in Japan. The number of countries joined in the Online writing exchange was varied in each semester, at least 2 countries participated. The countries which had participated were Indonesia, Japan, Taiwan, China, and Turkey. A pair system or we called it "buddy system" was used during the online writing exchange. One Indonesia student had one student from other different countries as his/her buddy. The online writing exchange lasted for 6-7 weeks.

Online writing exchange provides students a bridge to communicate with other students from different countries. There were four stages with different topics in this program. In these stages, they can interact and share some topics based on the given instruction in each stage. The four stages in this online writing exchange were: 1) Self-introduction and our places, 2) Natures and cultures, 3) Discussion under common themes, and 4) Local Environmental/Agricultural issues. Each stage had certain minimum words and time allocation. Every student also had to post their writing and reply to the overseas students' posts.

In stage 1, the students introduce him/herself as well as described, for example, their place or their hometown at least 100 words. The students may describe popular places, art, monument, or culinary in their hometown. The time allocation for posting their writing was one week. Then, in the next stage, students were assigned to write about nature and culture. In this case, they were allowed to choose either "Nature" or "Culture". If they chose Nature, they explain about animals or plants. If they chose Culture, they described either modern or traditional culture in Indonesia or their hometown. They had to write at least 150 words within one week. After that, the students continue to stage 3. In this stage, there were three videos. The students could choose one out of three videos, and then discuss any topic related to that video. They had to post their writing at least 150 words within two weeks. It has a longer time because they need time to discuss the video freely. The last stage, stage 4, allowed students to take one issue related to agriculture, then they discussed it. In this stage, they may attach some figures, diagrams, or charts to support their discussion. They wrote at least 200 words within two weeks. Overall, all stages in the Online Writing Exchange begins with easy writing and end with a difficult one. It can be seen from the minimum words required in each stage, the topics, and also the time allocation given.

Every student had an account and password to log in to the Online Writing Exchange website in order to access every stage and the buddy list. The buddy list informed the students who their partners were. Each student was paired with one of the students from a certain country. One student was assigned with one partner from overseas that was called a buddy. Still, the students were allowed to interact not only with the buddy but also with the other students. During the online writing program, students were assigned to 1) write a post in each stage 2) read their partners' posts then gave some comment/reply on it, and 3) respond to the

comment. In order to make the students active in writing, the lecturer asked them to make at least three replies to other posts in each topic.

Data of this study was garnered from students' interviews and the author's experiences. A semi-structured interview was used to know students' views on the online writing exchange. The interview inquired students' obstacles, interest, involvement, and interaction. The interview was conducted on the students joining the online writing exchange in the last semester. 9 active students were willing to be interviewed. The interview was recorded in Indonesian in order to get richer data from students and did not hinder the students to express their opinions. Then, the recording was transcribed, translated, and analyzed. The data obtained were analyzed using Strength, Weakness, Opportunity, and Threat (SWOT).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

This section elaborates from the researchers' view and, then, the students' views on the strength, weakness, opportunity, and threat regarding the online writing exchange.

Strengths

Based on the authors' view, the online writing exchange offered a flip classroom. The teacher can elucidate the writing theory in the class. Then, the students can practice the theory of writing obtained in the class through the online. The online writing exchange was a good platform for students to practice their writing. As they practice more along with the teacher's guidance and feedback, they improve their writing skills. Mohamadi (2018) confirmed that the online learning environment successfully improved students' writing performance. His study involved 130 Iranian junior university students. His study focused on essay writing and was conducted in 9 sessions with one session for pre-test and one session for post-test. In addition, the readers of the present study were foreign students. The students can really practice writing with wider readers. It informed whether the students' post was easily understood or confusing. The students considered that the writing they made was understandable by looking at the number of comments. If there are several comments in their post, it means that the post is easily understood. To reply, a student should understand the text beforehand. If the text was poorly written, it is hard to understand and, then, no reply was obtained. Before the students gave comments, they indeed

comprehend the post. It is impossible to give comments without comprehending the post. The students wrote the post more seriously because they possibly feel embarrassed if the post made was not good. The online writing exchange provides students with the real atmosphere of writing because they write for real readers i.e. their foreigner readers and the teacher.

The online writing exchange offered, undeniably, flexibility for the teacher. The teacher can check whether the students have written a post or not anywhere and anytime as long as the internet is connected. The teacher can check students' posts at home, office, or cafeteria and in his/her free time. Deerajviset and Harbon (2014) supported that the impact of e-learning was greater flexibility in teaching. The flexibility offered is time and place. A teacher can teach everywhere and every time as long as internet is connected. Moreover, the teacher also can read students' work without bringing home piles of students' papers. It consumes some of the energy to bring piles of students' papers. The teacher only used his/her smartphone to read the students' posts. In addition, the teacher can also assess the students writing faster on the weekend because the teachers do not need to wait until Monday at the campus to give the assessment. The flexibility of online writing exchange made the teacher assessed quickly and lose the weight of bringing piles of students' papers.

Another strength was to trigger students' motivation to write. Writing is considered a difficult and boring activity because it is a monotonous activity. Monotonous means that students do a repeated activity such as gaining ideas, writing the idea, and arrange the sentences using pen and paper. While the online writing exchange proposed a novel way of writing. It used a digital platform that caters to the students' generation as a digital native. The students can type a post using their laptops or smartphones anywhere. It is a novel way of enhancing students' motivation to write since it is pertinent to their generation. In Addition, online writing helps a shy student who is less confident in face-to-face teaching. Litterio (2018) posits that writing online provides an alternative vehicle for students who are uncomfortable with face-to-face.

Based on the students' interviews, online writing offered students to practice their English writing skills. When the students were interviewed about their motivation to write a post, a student said, "to challenge my English competence, how good my English is". Another student said, "learn grammar and the writing

process". Another student voiced "we think how to write a good story and how we can learn to write in English. Online writing exchange is the media to learn English". The student wrote something that they know well in order he/she can explain it well. As a student stated "I typed something which I understand most, therefore I can give information clearly" and another one "I take the topic from my experience because I already know about it and then I write it". Overall, students viewed the online writing exchange as media to learn and practice writing and to challenge their English competence whether their post can be understood by their counterpart or not. The consideration to choose what to write in a post, the student found a topic which he/she really knows about it and based on her/his experience.

Students preferred typing to writing a conventional paper-pen because it had a spelling check and the composition was neat without any correction pen. A student said "I prefer to type because I honestly do not like a lot of a correction pen. It looks a mess. Typing is neater". Vorobel and Kim (2017) concluded that online context is preferable among the students. While, conventional paper-pen writing is boring. Another student stated, "I prefer online writing because conventional writing is boring". In addition, online writing offered flexibility for students to write a post because almost all of the students wrote a post and gave a reply in their boarding house or outside the campus. Students stated, "I post outside campus or my boarding house". Another student likes to write at home because it is more conducive and focused. Writing a post or give a reply in a relaxed atmosphere e.g. boarding house, café and park can wane students' boredom.

Online writing created interaction with other students. As one student said, "I like online writing because we can interact with others". Another student asserted "I like online writing because I can exchange my story with other people whose culture and language are different from mine". The interaction was constructed through post and reply activity. Students asked in-depth about their counterparts' posts by asking clarification using reply. Students can expand their insights on cultures and possibly change their perspectives regarding the counterpart's cultures. Furthermore, the number of replies that a student got can affect her excitement. She felt excited if there were a lot of replies in her post, it means that she succeed to write an interesting post. "I really like when a lot of replies in my

post. It means that what I wrote is very interesting for others". It shows that an interesting post ignites more interaction and filled students' excitement to write a more interesting post in the following stage.

An uploaded photo related to the post was another strength. The student can upload a photo accompanying the post. The photo depicted the food or the cultures that the student wrote on the post. Moreover, the photo aroused other students to put a reply. A student said, "I firstly looked at the photo, and then I read the post and give a reply". It revealed that a photo of the posts triggers other students to read and give a reply. A visual image attracts students' attention at first glance before they read the post.

Weaknesses

The online writing exchange also had several flaws. The first flaw was a deadline issue. The students still can write a post after the deadline. The students were required to write a post within the deadline i.e. one week for stage 1 and stage 2, and two weeks for stage 3 and stage 4. The system still enabled the student to write the post on 1 or 2 weeks after the deadline. This clement system made unfair among the students because the teacher cannot identify whom student posted late and posted on time. As a result, several students wrote all stages (stage 1-4) at the end of the online writing exchange program. It is not what the online writing expected. The deadline was still an unresolved issue because the online writing exchange collaborated with various countries that had a different academic calendar. It is difficult to close the stage on the deadline, whereas the other country still within the deadline.

The topics in each stage were unaltered for 3 years. The topic was possibly obsolete. It needed an update and more intriguing topics. It made the authors as the teacher who assessed the students' posts felt bored. Students just wrote a similar topic for 3 years. Although, the students were different, what they wrote was similar. In addition, the topics were not evaluated therefore the teacher did not know whether the topic attracted students' interest or not and whether the topic was too difficult or not for the students. An evaluation was needed to obtain a suitable topic. Zheng, et. al. (2015) suggested that topic selection should be suitable for learners' abilities. Ideally, the topic should be dynamic. It is altered annually referring to the result of students' evaluation of the topic.

The students were not notified if there was someone replied to their post.

There was no pop-up notification on students' smartphones. Thus, the reply cannot be responded to directly. Without notification, the students found it bewildered to know whether their post has been given a reply or not. As a result, several replies were possibly unresponding. The unresponding replies were not expected in the online writing exchange because it aimed that students can learn both culture and English competence from reply interactions. In reply interaction, the students can ask further about the post and got a response toward the question. The notification can help students to respond to the reply instantly.

The result of the interview showed that the website was difficult to operate and the website design was less interesting. A student said "make the website design more interesting, just like Facebook" and another student said, "I am bewildered with the website operation". The design of the website was less colorful and was not simply operated. If a student wanted to post, the student needs to click several links. It complicates the students. The website probably can be designed like social media in which the student can write a post directly after log in. Moreover, the students also found it difficult to find the buddy's post. As a student said, "search the buddy is often difficult because sometimes the names of buddy are similar". Since the students were required to reply to their buddy's post during the online writing exchange program, they need to search for the buddy's post. Although the website provided a search feature, it did not help the students because the buddy had a similar name.

The stage deadline duration which ranged from one to two weeks became another weakness. The deadline for each stage was short because the online writing exchange runs for a half-semester. Many students uttered that time management was their obstacle. There were other assignments from other courses making them sometimes forgot the deadline, thus they wrote a post on the last day. As a student voiced "time management is my obstacle because I like to procrastinate this assignment. The assignment is not visual, it is online. I sometimes forget the due date". Rendahl and Breuch (2013) argue that self-responsibility is needed in the online class. The students must be aware of the deadline.

Opportunities

There was still an opportunity to extend the collaboration with other countries on different continents. The online writing exchange has been collaborating with other Asian countries. The same continent country shares a

slightly different culture. It will be better if the collaboration can be undergone with different continents because the culture can be very distinctive and so is students' life. Indonesia students can gain knowledge about students' life in the four-season country e.g. students' activity during winter or autumn, the festivals held during certain seasons, and food. The opportunity can be implemented through the teacher's network. The teacher can attend an international conference or join in social media in order to make a network. After the teacher had the network, he/she proposed collaboration.

The collaboration duration can be extended into a full semester (12 weeks) in order the students have plenty of time to write a post and there will be more various topics used. The length of the collaboration was short (7-8 weeks) with 4 topics. Extending the collaboration duration into one semester-long can make students practice more writing with more topics.

Based on the students' interviews, the student suggested that the website can be refurbished using online chat. "I suggest an online chat. The reply can be directly responded to. Just like conversation or chat. It is very good". Online chat possibly helps the student to write frequently using daily conversation expressions. In addition, the students do not need to wait a long time for the response. They can discuss something in an online chat.

Threats

Students' active participation became a threat to the online writing exchange program. The program expected that the students actively wrote a post on a schedule, and frequently reply other's posts. Students were expected to learn from reply interaction. Less active students threaten the success of the program. Encouraging students to interact was not an easy task for the teacher, although the program is online and can be accessed at home. Yet, the students would better to check their social media instead of the online writing website when they were online. Pratama and Scarlatos (2019) found that students prefer to use social media apps in their mobile phones to any other app.

Less active buddy caused a threat to the online writing exchange. The purpose of pairing students, which was called buddy, was to generate interaction among students. Yet, the buddy wrote a post late. As a student uttered "I give reply to other students because my buddy is not active" and another student added, "I give a reply to other students because my buddy writes a post late". The

interaction with the buddy did not occur. It is a threat to the successful learning of online writing. The exchange is conducted between the student and the buddy. They exchange their experiences and cultures.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

Online writing exchange provides strengths and weaknesses. The strengths are flip classroom, flexibility for the teacher, motivation to write, writing practice, and interaction. The weaknesses are able to write a post after the deadline, unaltered topics in stage, unavailable notification of reply, a difficult operationalized website, and a short deadline. The opportunities are adding other countries from other continents, extending the collaboration into a full semester, and adding online chat on the website. The threats are less active participation from students and less active buddy. By looking at the strengths and opportunities it offers, it is worth conducting online writing exchange for a different level of education in Indonesia.

From the experiences of conducting online writing exchange, several suggestions for other teachers who want to conduct the online program are made. Firstly, the teacher should frequently remind the students regarding the deadline. Secondly, the website should be designed as attractive as possible e.g. colorful website, notification of reply, and online chat feature. Thirdly, the topic what the students write should be changed annually or biannually to avoid teacher's boredom of assessing similar compositions.

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