

EXPLORING EFL STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES ON ONLINE-BASED WRITING PORTFOLIO

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study was to explore students' experience towards online-based writing portfolio. As the use of information technology evolved, the penetration of online lifestyle into youths' life has inevitably come deeper. In order to get the students engaged with their lesson, it was decided to make use of some online platforms for the students to work with their tasks in writing course. Utilizing qualitative method the study involved 30 students of English Department in Universitas Muhammadiyah Kalimantan Timur. The instrument for data collection was a questionnaire with open-ended questions. The results showed that in general students were motivated to use the platforms as learning media for writing. They found it easy to write their essay assignments with these facilities since it could develop creativity.

Keywords: online learning, writing, technology

1. Introduction

Online platforms that facilitate people for writing had developed artfully. They provide numerous features that promised the user interesting experience of editing and publishing. These platforms offered different and fruitful experience in writing down people's ideas in online world. Developed at the end of the 20th century (Blood, 2000) weblog has influenced the way people turn their ideas into publication. Traditionally, when people wanted to publish their writings, the only way was to write an article or a book and then published it on a newspaper or through book publisher. Now, the people could be possibly easily published their writing by using a blog where it is free and could be accessed by anyone who had internet access.

Defined as a form of journalistic expression, characterized by chronological order of posts, authored by one or more individuals (Dieu, 2004), Blogs could bring many benefits for facilitating writing activities, especially in this digital era. In this era, internet has become a

crucial facility (Gilchrist, 2016). Everybody, without exception, is an internet user. People use the internet for almost everything. In finance, for example, people started to leave the conventional ways of banking that they need to come visit the bank in order to get their banking business done. At the moment, all transactions could be done in just one click on their smartphones that are connected to the internet. Not only in the financial services, the penetration of the internet has also changed the way people communicate, the way people work in office, the way lessons in education are delivered, etc. In education, specifically in English language learning, writing is one of the crucial productive skills. Writing has various aspects that need to be the concern of the teacher because it has long process from igniting the ideas and putting them into words and sentence to writing them into an essay that are ready to publish. The teaching method had long history and had utilized various tools. Now with the internet of things, accommodating the students' writing activities with available online platforms seemed promising.

There are many kinds of blogs and other online writing platforms that can be used for writing lessons. Some of them are blogger, Wordpress, Google Docs, etc. These platforms can be very useful for learning writing. Tekinarslan (2008) argued that blogs are user friendly and convenient tools for publishing. Furthermore, Wu (2005) had explored that that the blogs are very useful supplementary aids for teachers. Blogs also opened opportunity for the students to explore other writings as it allowed the user to explore with available search engine. The students can peer review and peer edit their friends' works. The students are also allowed to utilize its facilities such as image upload, video upload, and text management that these cutting-edge writing tools could make the writing to become more lively and interesting to read.

Some research in this field has been done, Wu (2005) found that the use of blog in EFL writing class. In her study, she got her students of two classes involved. She surveyed how the students experience of using blogs from Blogger for learning writing in English. She explored the study from the perspective of visibility of blogs, creation and operation of blogs, the application of blogs in English class and the effectiveness. She found out that first blog was not very popular in Taiwan. Second, more than half of the subjects got it easy to use blog as their writing media. Third, the students found that it was a good idea to have Blogger as a media to publish their writing, yet not many of them write frequently. Last, in her article Wu (2005) did not give explicit answer about the effectiveness of Blogger. Wu's study did not explore what kind of difficulty found by the students. Furthermore, the instrument of the study contained mostly closed-ended questions that did not allow the researcher to get wider

answer about the benefit of the blogs experienced by the students. From this perspective I try to explore more so that the data of the students' experience can be collected more in-depth.

Tekinarslan (2008) also conducted a study in similar field; he argued that the study about instructors and students experience in utilizing online platform is of importance. Especially when most studies were conducted in English-speaking country that the penetration of the internet was undoubtedly wider than other country like where he lived, Turkey, he believed that his study would be a significant contribution. Employing a qualitative approach with field observation, document analysis, and interview, he found that Blogger was easy to use, for both students and teacher. When learning by using Blogger to write ideas, students might get feedback and help from their peers which was good for their development. Yet, some students encountered technical difficulties and also there were some issues related to copy-and-paste articles that may lead to plagiarism. This was, of course, a serious matter. The current study would elaborate confirm about the students' feedback, the technical issue, and also how to get over with the plagiarism issues.

Another study was conducted in Saudi Arabia, investigating Saudi learner perceptions and attitude towards the use of blogs in teaching writing. In this study Aljumah (2012) elaborated the data of the students' perceptions and attitudes from the perspective of students' motivation and their personal justification of the students' interest of using the blog for writing inside and outside the classroom. Similar but with different approach, Arslan & Şahin-Kızıl (2010) had experimented with two classes of EFL students, one as experimental group and another one as control group. The findings suggested that when the teacher utilized blog in classroom instruction, the students had better performance than traditional classroom instruction. At this point, the use of blog in classroom instruction gave prominent promises. However, there is still a chance to dig deeper from the view of how the students got feedback. In the study conducted by Aljumah (2012), for instance, students were given the only choice that whether or not they like to get feedback from their peers. It closed other possibility that the students might also like feedback and guidance from their instructor. The current study tried to investigate this perspective.

A further investigation was done by Cahyani & Cahyono (2012) in Indonesia. The study investigated the types of technology-based teaching aids teachers used in the classroom, reasons for using them and teachers' attitude towards the use of technology in English language teaching and which types of technology-based teaching aids promised students' achievements. Surprisingly, from many of the tech-aids mentioned blog was one of the least favourable. The frequency was only once. It was unclear why but it might be

because the bog was not very popular in Indonesian context or the teacher might have not known that blog promised different learning experience in EFL writing course. Therefore, the current study would reveal that the teacher could actually use this for Indonesian classes.

Other study was conducted by Cahyono & Mutiaraningrum (2015). In this study, they revealed that almost half of 17 Indonesian teachers have benefited from internet-based teaching of writing. Furthermore, the teachers believed that they could get better writing quality, more quantity, more flexibility, and confidence of the students. The study also indicated that Indonesian teachers have used some online platform for the teaching of writing such as mailing list, yahoo messenger, Google docs, and Facebook pages as well as Facebook notes. From all of the previously mentioned platforms, Facebook and mailing list were some of the most popular answers among the teachers. It was challenging to study the least popular ones such as Google docs and Blogger.

2. Methods

This study was conducted with qualitative approach investigating the students' perceptions towards online based writing portfolio. The study was conducted at Universitas Muhammadiyah Kalimantan Timur. The participants of the study were 30 freshmen of English department taking Writing for General Purposes course. The data was collected through questionnaire with open-ended and closed-ended questions. The collected data was analysed descriptively.

3. Findings and Discussion

First, the students' experiences on using Google Docs as part of their portfolio assignment media would be explored. Although it was apparently the students' first time in using the media of Google docs in their writing, they were excited to use this platform as the media for writing. On the researcher's observation, since when shared the file of Google docs can be seen by everyone who had the link, the students were excited to explore the facilities it provided. They tried various fonts, editing features, renaming, sharing, some of them even tried to give comments on their friends' work. It was interesting because this would not happen in the classical paper-and-pencil assignment. From individual survey, when asked about what are the advantage the students got in using this platform as the media for writing the students' assignment for portfolio, the most common answer were:

Table 1. Students' answers on benefit of Google Docs

No	Answer	Frequency
1	It was flexible, efficient, easy to access anytime-anywhere	12
2	It could help save the environment, paperless	5
3	It could help to see example from friends' works	11

The answers as displayed in the table above were not collected with closed-ended question but the students could answer freely based on what they experienced. Yet, the results showed that three points above were the majority of the students' answers. It was somehow interesting to see the results as presented above because the results demonstrated promising results of enabling the students in using this platform. The two majority of the students answer was about the flexibility and the availability of models from their peers.

The flexibility was undoubtedly the feature Google docs promised. In this platform, users can use all the facilities for creating a working document and it was compatible for other office suites. Besides, the use of this shared document also provide a great help for the students to learn writing independently since they could see as many model as possible from their peers.

In other studies (Tekinarslan, 2008; Cahyani & Cahyono, 2012; Cahyono & Mutiaraningrum, 2015) the use of Google docs was not very popular amongst EFL teachers in Indonesia. It was assumed that it maybe because they did not know how to use it but again it was only assumption. There should be further studies to confirm this issue.

The second, the question of whether or not they faced obstacles/challenges in writing by using Google docs, the following table would display the answers:

Table 2. Students' answers on challenges of Google Docs

No	Answer	Frequency
1	No difficulty	5
2	Some friends might unintentionally delete the works of the others	8
3	The cannot make similar essay with their friends'	1
4	It required internet connection	14
5	The mobile app version sometimes crashed	2

The obstacles/challenges faced by the students were mostly the internet connection. This was in line with the finding of Tekinarslan (2008) that the most common problem in the developing countries was the internet connection. In this study, most students usually need to get to the campus in order to get free connection. However, this problem was solved because

the students could actually access the internet with cheaper internet package available in digital stores, it was proved by the students' answer in previous section about the benefit of Google docs, that many of them stated that it could be easily accessed anytime anywhere.

Another problem was the unintentional deletion. Because the document was shared with other students and it could be edited together real time, one mistake in clicking may affect to other's works. Therefore, the teacher needed to pay attention to see how the students worked.

In the third position was the answer of no difficulty. It was surprising that many of the students gave this answer indicating that Google docs was actually user friendly for EFL students. Although it was least popular among teachers (Cahyono & Mutiaraningrum, 2015), the use of Google docs for writing course' portfolio promised good environment for the students to work in the digital era.

One answer that was mentioned by the students and it was interesting was that the student was challenged to not duplicate others' work. The feature of document-sharing would make the work of one student can be seen by others. This made them had no chance to copy-and-paste the works of others because such action could be obvious. This could be the answer of the challenges faced by Tekinarslan (2008) where plagiarism acts were problems. Last but not least was another issue that was not substantially a big problem because the students found their mobile app was crashed. This could be solved by reinstalling the app to their smartphone.

The third was about the blog. In this study, the researcher involved the students to utilize Blogger for their writing task, together with Google docs. The students were asked about the advantages they got in the process of learning writing by utilizing Blogger.

Table 3. Students' answers on benefit of Blogger

No	Answer	Frequency
1	It has interesting features	4
2	It can be the media to publish the writing online	10
3	People can read, share, and comment on the blog posts	5
4	It is time efficient, environmentally friendly & easy	6
5	The students can be more creative in making creative posts	2

The most common answer was about publishing the writing online. It turned out that many students enjoyed publishing their writing online. It was actually related to the other point about reading, sharing and commenting on the blog posts. The students could see their

friends' works. Based on the experience of using Google docs, the students have positive attitude towards the use of the docs as a model in writing that the students were able to look at their friends' works as a model for writing their own. Furthermore, many of the students believe that the use of Blogger for writing their portfolio was time saving and effective since the works could be done anywhere without having to bring paper. What they needed was only their mobile device. Last but not least, the students found that using blogger as the medium of their writing task was generating creativity because the students were facilitated by the features to create a beautiful posts with various theme template, fonts, pictures, etc. One student confessed that it was totally not boring to write their post on the blog and it was satisfying to see the results. Although online platforms like blogger and Google docs were least favourable in Indonesia (Cahyani & Cahyono, 2012), it was clear that the students actually like these platforms. On the one hand it was motivating, on the other hand it could solve the problem of plagiarism and also triggered students' creativity.

Table 4. Students' answers on challenges of Blogger

No	Answer	Frequency
1	The students need to ensure the grammar	3
2	The students should write in appropriate context	5
3	The students have to be creative in order to make the posts interesting	8
4	The students sometime did not have internet package	5
5	The students experienced some technical problem in sharing the links	9

Table above has demonstrated the answers of the students when asked about challenges they faced when working with Blogger. The most common answer was about the technical problems. This was because it was the first time of the students working with Blogger. After some modelling and looking at other students' work, this problem was resolved. Another problem was actually common that they did not have the internet package. This issue was solved because the university provided free internet access. Points from number 1 to number 3 were interesting to see. These points have showed that instead of mentioning difficulty, the students tend to see the positive sides of the use of Blogger. They stated that they need to write in appropriate grammar and appropriate contexts. The urge of appropriateness appeared because the students felt that the writing they were working on would be published. They felt shy if they did not write appropriately. This phenomenon of course would help the teacher to solve the issue of students' motivation and classroom engagement.

4. Conclusions

From the results of the study, it could be concluded that despite some technical problem that was experienced by the students, online platform for writing portfolio such as google docs and Blogger could be very beneficial for students' experience. In brief, some of the benefits that made the students were motivated to use these two platforms because of the flexibility, efficiency, creativity, and the easiness they offered. Despite experiencing some technical problems and limited internet connection, Blogger and Google docs promise better experience for the students in writing class.

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